

One Religious Quest

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I walked down the second floor corridor a nervous wreck, my stomach tangled in knots. I did not speak; we were told to remain silent. I blended into the sea of plaid skirts and green sweaters, a lowly freshman still trying to find her way. My classmates looked tired, bored even. I wondered how they could remain so calm, so unaffected. Then I remembered that for most of them, this was old-hat, something that came as easily as walking. Perhaps you could not tell by looking at me, but I was a newcomer, an outsider. I didn't know what lay before me, with the exception of a few confused hand motions and mumbled words.

I walked out of the front doors and into the building that housed the auditorium. The freshmen were directed towards stairs that led to the balcony. It was early September and stifling hot in the nosebleed seats of the auditorium. I sat between two classmates, hoping they wouldn't think I was a fool during this whole ordeal. Friends chattered quietly until they were shushed by teachers. Finally, our principal came to the front of the stage and welcomed us to the opening liturgy of the new school year.

Who knew that church was so scary?

I was raised what I called “quasi-Catholic.” Both of my parents grew up Catholic, but they chose not to have me baptized. My mother made every attempt to teach me bits and pieces about this strange thing called religion. She bought me picture Bibles and tried to teach me simple prayers (something about a lady named Mary?), but, like most five-year olds, I was more interested in Barbie than the Bible. I knew who God was and I believed in Him, and I knew that Christmas and Easter had something to do with a guy named Jesus. I also knew that many of my friends were often picked up early from sleepovers on Sunday mornings to go to church, so I

considered myself lucky to be able to spend my Sundays as I pleased, sitting in my pajamas playing Junior Scrabble with my dad.

Come second grade, my outlook on religion began to change. My classmates continually talked about this thing called “First Communion” where they would be in a big ceremony and get to have parties and desserts and presents after. They also complained about CCD - a lot. Intrigued, I asked one of the boys in my class what CCD was; he laughed at me and called me stupid. “Everyone knows what CCD is ... you must be really dumb!” Defeated, I anxiously awaited the end of the school day so I could finally ask my mother what these strange terms meant. Mom explained that CCD is a type of school for kids who go to church, and that first communion is a big step in "getting older" for Catholic kids.

I felt left out. Why did all of my friends get to go to another kind of school? Inclined toward nerd-dom early in life, I actually liked to go to school. It didn't seem fair that they got to learn more than I did. And what really bothered me was this whole first communion thing. As my schoolmates made their first communions, they brought in pictures. They got to be in a big ceremony, have big parties after, and, best of all, the girls got to wear big, puffy white dresses and crowns like Disney princesses. From that point on, my interest in religion, however twisted it was, grew and grew. Each time I went by a church, I wondered how many kids were in there going to CCD or wearing those elusive white dresses that I could only admire from afar in JC Penney.

So here I was, seven years later, getting ready for my first real church experience. I chose to attend a Catholic high school which, like many, celebrates a welcoming Mass at the beginning of each year. Upon hearing that I would get to go to church, I first got really excited-I was finally going to figure this religion thing out! Then I got scared ... I had no idea what I was supposed to

do. All of the responses, prayers and hand motions were foreign to me. I hastily learned the Our Father and Hail Mary a few days prior but still got confused when I made the sign of the cross - was it the left shoulder first or the right? But there was no escape; I asked for all this and I was about to get it.

The music began and everyone rose to sing. Luckily, I had a sheet with the words and I sang along. I observed diligently throughout the liturgy, hanging on to every word in the readings and prayers. Everything about religion began to make sense. It wasn't just about CCD or first communion parties or how many prayers you knew. It was about a relationship, a friendship, with God. I was sad when the liturgy ended and found myself looking forward to the next one. I brought home my Bible and religion book that night, the nerd that I am, anxious to learn more.

As freshman year progressed, I began thinking about what it would be like to be Catholic and participate in the liturgies. Bored during history class one January day, I flipped through my religion book and stumbled upon a page entitled "RCIA," with a picture of a woman holding a baptismal candle. I read the page carefully, learning that the RCIA, or Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, is a process in which adults can be baptized, confirmed, and receive the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil each spring, at which point they are fully recognized as Catholics. I marked the page in the book, my mind once again set on religion.

I began attending 8:00 a.m. Mass each Sunday with my mom during the beginning of my sophomore year, and in October, I joined the RCIA program and became a candidate for baptism. After Mass on Sundays, I attended a two-hour class that taught the history and tradition of Catholicism with three other candidates, all a good deal older than me. The year flew, and before I knew it, the day had come: April 10, 2004. That night, at the Easter Vigil Mass, I finally became a Catholic. Twenty of my friends and family members attended the ceremony and

watched as I was baptized, confirmed, and received Communion for the first time. The strange void that had once been only partially filled with thoughts of white dresses and concocted images of what a church looked like was now gone. As I exited St. Mary's Church that night, I felt complete.

Looking back on my confusion and fright towards religion, I laugh at myself. It had been God's plan all along for me to choose Catholicism for myself. My interest in religion blossomed during high school, landing me here as a theology major. I fully embraced this new part of me, reading at the liturgies that once made me too nervous to speak and teaching CCD classes that I never attended but that kids everywhere still complain about.

Speaking of complaining, though, I never did get to wear that white dress.