

FROM THE PEWS IN THE BACK



# **From the Pews in the Back**

Young Women and Catholicism

*Edited by Kate Dugan and Jennifer Owens*

*Foreword by Mary Ann Hinsdale*

*Afterword by Donna Freitas*



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Photo by Monica Haller.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

From the pews in the back : young women and Catholicism / edited by  
Kate Dugan and Jennifer Owens.

p.        cm.

ISBN 978-0-8146-3258-1 (pbk.)

1. Catholic women—Religious life—United States. 2. Young women—Religious life—United States. I. Dugan, Kate. II. Owens, Jennifer.

BX1407.W65F76 2009

282!.7308422—dc22

2008054743

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# Foreword

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When Harvard Divinity School students Jen Owens and Kate Dugan contacted me a few years ago to ask my advice about a book project they were mulling over I was immediately eager to hear more about it. Having taught young Catholic women in undergraduate theology and graduate ministry courses for the past twenty-five years, I am often asked, “Are young people still interested in the Catholic Church?” When the question is posed even more specifically, as in, “What are *young Catholic women* thinking about the Catholic Church today?” it gets even trickier.

Since I am no longer a “young Catholic woman” (at least by the calendar’s calculation), I resolve to fend off these invitations saying, “Why not ask *them* yourselves?” But many people who ask me such questions either don’t have much contact with young adults (especially not with young Catholic women), or I soon learn that what they really want is for me to tell them what can be done about the fact that their son, daughter, or grandchildren don’t go to church anymore.

So, I proceed to give an anecdote or two from my teaching experience and finally end up saying something like, “Well, you know, according to the social scientists who study the ‘millennial generation,’ the cliché ‘I’m spiritual, but not religious’ captures the attitude of many young people.” I tend to agree generally that young people do not seem to be as “invested” in religious institutions as were previous generations; however, I also am

convinced that social scientists have tended to neglect the *female* segment of millennials and hardly anyone has been listening to younger *Catholic* women.

I confess that I have “weakened” and have twice committed my thoughts to print on the subject of what young Catholic women are looking for from the church, but in each case my attempts to answer that question always end with an insistent, mantra-like “they simply want to be heard. But no one seems to be listening!”<sup>1</sup> Thus, it brings me great joy to see Jen and Kate’s project come to fruition in *From the Pews in the Back*, and I am honored to be asked to include a few words here. But perhaps what is most exciting is that now, young Catholic women are saying it for themselves.

The collection that Jen and Kate have assembled rings true with the countless conversations and stories I have heard from young Catholic women. As Jen and Kate note, they are simply presenting a snapshot of young female voices within U.S. Catholicism. What I find especially appealing in these reminiscences, however, is that they are giving voice to the experience of a new, post-Vatican II generation of progressive laywomen who desire to claim their rightful role in the church they call home.

These essays shine a light on an underrepresented segment of that James Joycean version of Catholicism where “here comes everybody.” The women whose reflections are assembled here—single, married, lesbian, straight, Anglo, Latina, Asian-American—are most of all *real*. Yes, they are a highly educated and theologically sophisticated group. Their religious identity has been forged in honesty, unflinchingly facing both the “beauty and the beastliness” of Catholicism. I am glad that their bushel baskets have been overturned so that my generation can see the bright, shining

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Is Anybody Listening? Catholic College Women Talk about the Church,” *The Catholic World* 233 (1990): 54–56; “What Do Young Catholic Women Want (from Their Church)?” *New Theology Review* 20 (2007): 22–32.

light of their hopes for the future of the church. Reminiscences of family meals, the songs, prayer, and poetry that make up the rich sacramental imagination of Catholicism mark these reflections. In them we also read how the challenging, prophetic words of Jesus, reaching out to those most on the margin—the excluded, the vulnerable, the invisible—strengthen these women’s resolve to be Catholic role models for others, especially their own children. In every story, even the ones by women who have become angry and disenchanted, there is both a longing for and a refusal to give up the conviction that Catholicism is home.

This is a book that I would give to anyone who wonders what young Catholic women are thinking about the church today. To be sure, there will be some who will shake their heads and think, “These smart women are wasting their time,” or, “They’ll get over it” (some may even consider them “deluded”). I hope, however, that older, progressive Catholics of my generation will perhaps find in these younger women the courage to carry on and that young Catholics seeking a church that not only preaches justice but acts justly will be heartened to find they are not alone.

Jen Owens and Kate Dugan are certainly conscious that there is no one-size-fits-all young Catholic woman. But they have discerned well that the voices of young women living on the edge, those who constantly find themselves negotiating between frustration with the patriarchy of the church and the threat of forced spiritual eviction from their religious home deserve to be heard. I applaud the courage, hope, and passionate ambivalence of these young women.

I wager that these first-person narratives will be a powerful spiritual resource for anyone who works with young Catholic women or who just wants to understand where they are coming from. I speak particularly to the ordained (bishops, priests, and deacons) who minister to and collaborate with women such as those represented in this volume. Whether one agrees with everything these authors are saying is not the issue. Listening to them, however, is vital to understanding an important segment of “generation next.”

So, if you really are interested in listening to young Catholic women, I invite you to open yourself up to the stories collected in this book. I guarantee that if you do, you will *learn* a lot, you will *laugh* a lot, and at times, perhaps simply *lament*. But my fondest hope is that these essays will serve as a springboard for much-needed intergenerational conversations about what the Spirit is doing among young Catholic women at the beginning of this third millennium.

Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, PhD  
Boston College  
February 1, 2009

# Acknowledgments

The Bantu-speaking people of South Africa recognize the spirit of *ubuntu*, the sense that, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes, “We are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence.” In countless ways, this project has been birthed by each of the Catholics who influenced us, encouraged us, and urged us to *be* Catholic.

We are Catholic through other Catholics.

Though we cannot thank enough people for supporting us, we mention a few in a vain attempt to express gratitude. Robert Orsi of Northwestern University was the first person to affirm that an idea hatched on the Boston subway could become a real, live book and provided ongoing support as that began to happen. Fr. Tom Rausch, SJ, of Loyola Marymount University was the first professor to encourage Jen to continue writing and has been a dialogue partner since then, graciously critiquing parts of this text throughout its development. Tim Muldoon of Boston College became a cheerleader for this project, literally since the first day we met him, and has shared his time, his energy, and the fruits of his experience with us along the way—even though we were, scandalously, never students at Boston College. Jim Nickoloff, formerly of the College of the Holy Cross and Weston Jesuit School of Theology, organized Dorchester’s Spirituality in the Pub and reminded us of the importance of conversation between the margins and the center. Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, of Boston College invited us in for tea, recommended reading,

and crafted a foreword. Kerry Egan of Iowa Wordwrights encouraged us to be proud and unapologetic throughout this project. Kerry Maloney of Harvard Divinity School advised us to tend our friendship, assuring us that the book would flow from there. Roberto Goizueta of Boston College offered Kate academic space to research this project. Susan Abraham of Harvard Divinity School carefully critiqued a draft of our manuscript, and Ryan Rivera's last minute read of the introduction helped us to assert our goals, finally. Thank you, all.

And thank you to Helena Fleig, Stephanie Almozara, and Christy Cummings, our friends, conversation partners, and fellow Catholics at Harvard. To Kate's mom, whose weekly read of *Our Sunday Visitor* helped us recruit authors. To Greg Skinner, who came to know this project as his "other wife." To Jen's brothers and sister—to David, whose openness about his experience of faith inspired Jen to write about hers, and to Dan and Janeen, whose spirit and imagination continue to bring light to Jen's life. To Jen's parents, who have instilled in her an appreciation for stories of all kinds.

Finally, to the more than one hundred young women who shared their stories of Catholic identity with us—thank you. You inspire us.

# Introduction

Two years ago, we walked into the back room of an Irish pub in Dorchester, Massachusetts. The room was filled with a group of Catholics eager to discuss Catholic identity in higher education. We found seats among women who could have been our grandmothers—women who experienced the renewal of the Second Vatican Council as adults. Some left their habits at the convent, many opened doors for Catholic women in theological education, and all found themselves attending Mass in the vernacular. We also sat down among women who could have been our mothers—women who weaned themselves from the *Baltimore Catechism*, reacted to *Humanae Vitae*, and encouraged their daughters to become altar boys. Yet only a few members of that first generation of girl altar servers sat among us, and we wondered why we didn't hear more women our age talking about being Catholic.

In front of us, a woman with kind eyes and graying hair wondered aloud why young people aren't at Mass, aren't *really* acting very Catholic. To our left, a woman in her fifties looked at us and wondered where young Catholics go after they graduate from Catholic colleges. A woman who didn't catch our eyes asked, Why don't they get it? They have to be patient with the church. They need to stay and make the changes we haven't been able to make.

It's hard to find the right words when asked to speak for an entire population. So, mostly, we didn't say much. At one point,

Jen talked about the need for more engaging catechesis, but the conversation quickly returned to worried anecdotes about absent-from-the-pews young adult Catholics. We sat there quietly, listening.

After two hours of saying very little, we were anything but quiet on the subway ride home. Why, we wanted to know, is Mass attendance *the* trademark of Catholic identity? Why not include a commitment to social justice or service work? And was there a misconception in the room that because we grew up after Vatican II, we didn't grow up memorizing prayers or learning Catholic guilt?

We walked off the subway and, for the next couple months, kept wondering: What makes us say "I'm Catholic," especially when so many of our Catholic grade school friends no longer do? How do young women describe Catholic identity? How do we express our Catholicism? How would conversations like the one in Dorchester be different if young women had a significant voice? We have spent our Catholic lives learning from the experiences of Vatican II Catholics; what could these older Catholics learn from our experiences?

Our generation is the first to come of age without any experiences of pre-Vatican II Catholicism, and that makes us a bit of an anomaly to older Catholics who knew popes before John Paul II and can't imagine grade school Masses in English. Our Catholicism looks different from the Catholicism of women who grew up in the 1950s or 1960s. Nuns no longer surround us in our Catholic grade schools and we are invited to lead parts of liturgies. We grew up with first reconciliations rather than first confessions, and parish musicians played guitars, not just pipe organs. Our Catholic identity—filled with an appreciation for Catholic spirituality, supported by experiences of Mass in the vernacular, and flush with high expectations for the roles of women—is unprecedented in the history of American Catholicism.

Yet, as it did on the previous generation's women, being Catholic is having a powerful impact on our lives. Catholic social

teaching is the reason many women decide to commit themselves to lives of service. A lifelong appreciation of the depth of the Catholic tradition inspires a new generation of scholars to work for change from within the institution. Despite the church's position on gay marriage, the pull of Catholic identity keeps lesbians attending Mass. And a realization that Catholicism can be written into our DNA, ingrained in our bones, is part of why Catholic women called to priesthood have not become Episcopalians.

This collection—twenty-nine memoirs about being Catholic and young and a woman written by authors born in the 1970s and 1980s—is our attempt to explore these often conflicting, sometimes complementary, realities.



We both grew up in Catholic families, came of age in Catholic communities, and graduated from Catholic universities.

We met as students at Harvard Divinity School, where neither of us had ever felt so *Catholic*. Studying at a largely Protestant divinity school taught us that young Catholic women have unique perspectives on religious identity. We encountered an unspoken assumption that religious expression should be quiet, subdued, interior. In contrast, our religious lives were shaped by parading through our hometowns as we prayed the Stations of the Cross and by receiving birthday gifts of Catholic trinkets—statues filled with holy water, crucifixes, rosaries, illustrated copies of *The Lives of the Saints*. Hearing classmates profess an Emersonian personal consciousness or describe their Buddhist quest toward Enlightenment was startling in contrast to our own experiences of memorizing Vatican-proclaimed moral dictums as teenagers. At a time when it is hip to write your own spirituality, we can recite Mass parts and the rote prayers of our childhood without skipping a beat. And perhaps most jarring, at Harvard we studied with women who will be ordained leaders in United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, and Lutheran

congregations, acutely aware of just how closed the door to ordination is to us.

Reflecting on our first year at Harvard, we realized our Catholicism made us distinct, in both our pluralist academic environment and in our Catholic community. Our religious practices seemed quaint and old-fashioned to our peers; the exclusion of women from the collar, archaic. We were astonished to realize we were somewhat foreigners in a predominantly Protestant landscape. And, yet, as young women with unique perspectives on being Catholic, we also felt like foreigners among the Catholics in Dorchester.

So we started asking other young Catholic women how they talk, think, and write about being Catholic. In February 2007, we started a blog, [www.fromthepewsintheback.com](http://www.fromthepewsintheback.com), and began inviting women born in the 1970s and 1980s to write and send us stories about their Catholic identity. We designed a poster and sent it to college campuses, parishes, and intentional communities across the country. We printed playbills and carried them around in our backpacks, handing them to any woman who outed herself as under thirty-six and Catholic. We e-mailed any young woman we thought might be interested in writing about being Catholic, and anyone we imagined might know someone who would be interested. We contacted previously published authors who we hoped might write for this collection.

Two months later, we had received just over one hundred memoirs by women from around the country. The majority of the memoirs we received came from women who have, at some point, struggled to be Catholic and hold political or social positions against which Catholicism teaches—moms who have been on birth control, female seminarians who believe in women's ordination, lesbians who don't believe their lifestyle ought to be condemned.

Many of the young women in this collection push boundaries of the Vatican's definition of Catholic identity, and do so with profound respect. These women are high school teachers and campus ministers, HIV/AIDS patient caregivers and lawyers,

students and sisters, grant writers and journalists. These authors live committed lives, and they bring that same commitment to exploring and defining Catholic identity. We are forward-thinking women of faith whose reflections on our experiences of life are filled with hope, and we challenge our church to think carefully about how it can be even more faithful to Jesus' radically inclusive message.



Several Vatican II Catholics have researched our generation with devotion, working to understand how we express our Catholic identity. And to these, our teachers, we are grateful. Yet, with this collection, we are excited that young women are the authors—we do not speak through the filter of a researcher or a statistician, but from our experiences of being Catholic. By creating a place for ourselves in the conversation about young adult Catholic identity, we are shaping the story of our experiences within the wider Catholic tradition.

In *Speaking of Faith*, religion commentator Krista Tippett describes the power of “narrative theology”—the first person attempt to describe religious identity and ideas. There is, she writes, “a profound difference between hearing someone say this is *the* truth, and hearing someone say this is *my* truth.” Throughout this collection, women’s identities bump up against Catholic identities—and we explore the collisions and messiness. We speak honestly and carefully from our own perspectives, of our own truths, creating our own narrative theologies.

As editors, our individual experiences are rooted in our Catholic communities. So much so that even in our late twenties, we can still recite the rote prayers we learned as children—Guardian Angel; Bless Us, O Lord; Our Father; Hail Mary; Glory Be; the Nicene Creed. These prayers gave rhythm to our Catholic upbringings. We bowed our heads to them before meals and held hands to them each Sunday. We mouthed them quickly before tests and track meets. Their rhythms continue to have a

grounding effect on our transient, twenty-something lives. Hearing them echo off the lips of a congregation at Mass and reciting them alongside loved ones reminds us just how Catholic we are. Reflecting the power of these prayers in Catholic identity, we open each of the five chapters with a popular rote prayer.

Because this project is both personal and public for us, we have interwoven our own stories of Catholic identity. At several places in our introductions, we switch from this joint voice to Jen's or to Kate's individual one. While this project has been a life-giving partnership, our experiences of Catholicism are different, and the occasional shifts in voice throughout give us the chance to weave the chapter's theme and prayer into our own Catholic experiences.

The first chapter, "Growing Up Catholic," explores the powerful pushes and pulls of being raised Catholic. In their often-cited study, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*, sociologist Dean Hoge and his team conclude that there is a "Catholic glue," a firm, yet somewhat indefinable, imprint of Catholicism that keeps young adults saying, "I am Catholic." Three-quarters of the Hoge sample report that being Catholic is "special" and they cannot imagine themselves in another tradition, but only 31 percent go to Mass weekly. Even if young Catholics don't attend Mass regularly and don't participate in the weekly life of a parish, young adults baptized as children are still quite likely to say, "I am Catholic." The question lingers after reading Hoge: why are young Catholics working creatively to carve out a space in the tradition? For the authors in this chapter, the answer appears to be rooted in growing up Catholic.

The young women in chapter 2, "Faith in Action," explore the relationship between being Catholic and crafting lives committed to service and social justice. Thousands of young Catholic women spend their spring breaks doing service projects around the country and around the world. After college, many of these women commit to a year or two of service and social justice work in programs like the Colorado Vincentian Volunteers, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, or the St. Joseph Workers.

Jesuit priest and Catholic theologian Thomas Rausch, after years of observing the students in his classroom, worries that our generation's emphasis on service and social justice work threatens to reduce being religious into leading ethical lives. Rausch, in *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, describes a need for the majority of young Catholics to more intimately understand the relationship between social justice and Catholic identity. The women in this chapter understand that need. For many, a passion for serving others and striving for justice is fertile ground for growing healthy and dynamic Catholic identities. After being reminded of the power of a Catholicism that is lived for the poor, Kate Barch Heaton writes, "The knowledge that I *can* live courageously for God, sharing my home and comforts with friends rich and poor—this knowledge sustains me." This linking of social justice and Catholic identity keeps us saying, "Yes, I'm Catholic."

Our third chapter is broadly titled, "Being a Catholic Woman." The need for this chapter grew out of a theme we noticed in many memoirs—a tension between being Catholic and being a woman in the twenty-first century United States. Several women in this chapter are what we are calling conscientized Catholics. We're aware of the church's shortcomings and are in the midst of discerning how to work from within the church and our Catholic identity to address them. On the whole, we are more informed about the tradition than most members of our generation, having attended Catholic universities or attained advanced degrees in theology. Within the context of the Catholic Church, we are going through the process of what liberation educator Paulo Friere describes as conscientization, a process of reflection, awareness, and action. We are reflecting on their own experiences of exclusion from the hierarchy, like Meagan Yogi does with her childhood realization that she cannot be a priest. We are becoming aware of oppression as Margaret Scanlon does in asking why the Virgin Mary is regularly held up as her model for being a Catholic woman. And we are starting to make change in the church like Deborah Heimel who works, in

small ways, to have conversations about homosexuality in the church. All the while, the women in this chapter claim Catholicism as their own.

In the fourth chapter of this collection, "Vocation," young women describe their journeys of understanding how they are called to live. Vocation can be a tricky thing for young Catholic women. In our lives outside the church, we have more career opportunities than Catholic women before us—and we expect that same expanse of opportunity in our church lives. As the women in this collection illustrate, our generation grew up playing Mass in the homes we were raised in, exploring an expansive variety of ways to pray in Catholic school, and traveling around the country doing service work. We seek active roles in our faith communities. Many of us attend seminary with laymen and priests-in-training, ever aware that we are unable to answer calls to ordained priesthood. So we find creative ways to live out our vocations. Laywomen study to become Catholic theologians, a twenty-something English major discovers a calling in caring for HIV/AIDS patients, a feminist uses her Catholic life to change unjust structures, and an artist finds that her call to write connects her to God.

Chapter 5 is called "Spiritual Identity" because the memoirs in this section challenge the assumption that so many young Americans are drawing a thick line between being "spiritual" and "religious." Certainly, many of us, including many Catholics, do. Even so, the Hoge study suggests that when young Catholics look for more in their spiritual lives, we actually tend to look within the Catholic tradition to find ways of being spiritual—to Thomas Merton's contemplative practices, to biblical stories of faith, to Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist. There is something inescapable about Catholic ritual that becomes a part of us. Our identities are bound up in Catholic spirituality. We sit in the pews in the back during Mass, our babies laugh and talk and fuss from the crying room, our eyes scan the crowd for potential friends or partners. We explore other traditions, and they expand our understanding of Catholicism. Being Catholic is

not a side note to these women's identities—the women in this chapter are in the midst of figuring out how to be *both* spiritual and Catholic.



During a high school trip to confession, Emily Jendzejec waited in line behind her lifelong best friend, Natalie. As Emily prepared to tell the priest her sins, “Natalie opened the door and with her head hung low, made her way to the altar to do her penance, flashing that same annoyed grin only a best friend can understand.”

Emily giggled after a frustrating experience with the sacrament of reconciliation, all the while fully participating. This is the spirit of Catholicism alive in these memoirs—young women who wink and cross their fingers at parts of the tradition, while they stake a firm claim in their Catholic identity. Here are twenty-nine women who acknowledge the pushes and pulls of being Catholic in this generation, and who do so for at least twenty-nine different reasons. No two stories in the pages that follow are the same, though some common themes emerge.

We find these stories engrossing—some make us laugh, some make us pause, and after reading others, our eyes well up. But perhaps what we find most powerful in this project is the emerging sense of solidarity. We feel a sense of community that comes from knowing that other young women are talking about and thinking about and figuring out how to be Catholic and young and a woman. And we find kinship here.

Inspired by this kinship, we bring together the voices of twenty-nine women who further the dialogue about what it means to be Catholic—and their perspectives are only the beginning. The breadth and depth of the experiences of young Catholic women offer a wellspring of faith-filled wisdom. We invite Catholics of all backgrounds, perspectives, and histories to join us in a dialogue that Catholic women lead and the full Catholic community facilitates. And we invite men and women

from many faith communities to join us. We do not know where these women's voices will lead, yet we are filled with hope that this collection will expand, cultivate, and challenge a conversation about shifting religious identities. Welcome.

# Growing Up Catholic

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,  
To whom God's love commits me here,  
Ever this day be at my side,  
To light, to guard, to rule, and guide.  
Amen.*

A distinct Catholic birthmark is an inescapable part of the identities of the women in this chapter. We had guardian angels and rosaries at bedtime. And Catholic school uniforms that required creativity as we squeaked out our individuality. We knelt during Sunday morning Mass, and we have ex-nuns for moms, ex-priests for dads. We celebrated Folk Masses, crowned the Virgin Mary in May, and made first reconciliation.

We are undeniably Catholic, by birthright.

*For as long as I (Jen) can remember, Sunday Mass has been a regular part of my family's routine. If I ever doubt that I should study theology, my mom reminds me how much I loved going to Mass when I was small. She describes how I would try to sing along, standing as best I could atop that wooden pew, my arms outstretched, waving and clapping in time with the cantor's; how I would bow my head with the rest of the congregation as they recited communal prayers, my own lips moving with the rhythm*

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*of theirs, not quite shaping the same words but sensing that something holy was happening in these people coming together and wanting to be a part of it.*

*I have fond memories of Masses at St. Irenaeus. The nubbiness of the ratty brown carpet over the cold linoleum in the parish hall where we had children's Mass, how privileged I felt to sit with my brother so close to where the priest gave the homily. The almost overwhelming smell of incense that seeped into our clothes during Lent; how it made those dresses and skirts I so resented having to wear each Sunday slightly more tolerable. The procession of candles and the pilgrims who carried them on Holy Thursday; how small I felt walking out of the church amid all those flickering lights. What it was like to be a part of the chorus of voices—Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom—echoing through our neighborhood as we made our way to reverence the Eucharist before Good Friday. I was only beginning to understand what it meant, knowing that it was bigger than me, than my family, than our community. Something in all of that made it transcendent.*

*Mass was a part of my family's routine, but it was more than that too. It was a holy deep breath that readied us to plunge back into our day-to-day lives.*

Nelle Carty's family inhaled that holy deep breath most evenings at their dinner table. With her family each night, Nelle learned how to pray and how to enjoy family time. At that table she also learned that her dad used to be a priest and her mom a nun before they started the Carty family. Watching her parents devote themselves to both family and Catholicism inspires Nelle—she realizes that being Catholic “will always remain an integral part of who I am.”

Angela Batie can relate. Her former-nun-turned-mom always knew a lot more about eucharistic theology than she did about the social cues of 1980s moms. Together, they stumbled through everything from skating parties to First Communion. Growing up with her mom, Angela is realizing, formed her Catholicism; her

mom, Angela writes, gave “me Catholicism just as much as she [gave] me thick hair and the strange shape of my instep.”

Like Nelle and Angela, part of Sr. Julie Vieira’s Catholicism feels genetic, like it has been passed on through bloodlines as much as any other way. As a daughter of a faith-filled guitar player, she spent countless rehearsals for Folk Mass running through church pews, exploring holy sites, tiptoeing into the sacristy. This appreciation for the sacred infuses the way she looks at the world—now, holiness is all around her, not only in church.

*Growing up in my (Kate’s) family implied Catholicism—we lived a block away from the Catholic grade school and a half block from the church. I was eighteen and in college before I realized most kids don’t grow up with a guardian angel watching out for their souls, lots of families skip religious observations while on vacation, and not everyone tries to understand what the priest is saying when he turns off the microphone during the Benediction.*

Eileen Campbell’s family shared that sense of implicit Catholicism. Her grandma was born in Knock, Ireland, in the year the Virgin appeared there. Pictures of JFK and Bobby hung next to pictures of the pope on the walls of her grandparents’ home. Even as Eileen has repeatedly tried not to be Catholic, being Catholic is, she surrenders, “in my blood and bones and sinews and inner world, despite what seemed like my best efforts to keep it out.”

In many ways, these women are describing the “Catholic glue” that Hoge and his team observed in young adult Catholics—and it certainly sticks for Sarah Keller. She fondly remembers the drama of her “first real date,” both of them dressed in their Catholic school uniforms and eleven-and-a-half-year-old Sarah convinced they’d marry. And that drama seems appropriate—after all, we had angels watching over us and we learned math and transubstantiation in the same room. Of course we’d marry our first kiss.

Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello's glue looks different—it is mired in the yawning gap she feels between being Catholic and being feminist. Ever since her confirmation, Elizabeth has been looking for creative ways to hold these two pieces of her identity together. Growing up under the wing of her mother's activist Catholicism and her father's former priesthood has kept that process dynamic.

This chapter is full of memories like these—formative ones that help us make sense of why we continue to claim Catholicism as our own.

# The Communion Dress

Angela Batie

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The information packet sent to parents in preparation for First Communion stressed that dresses did not have to be fancy. Simple and pretty would suffice. The parish was trying to shift the focus of the special day from frilly dresses to the actual sacrament. My mother's greatest error was believing it. To be fair, it wasn't her fault that she didn't know better. In the decades when her sisters and friends were raising children, my mother was Sister Helen in a Benedictine convent.

By the time she had me, she was twenty years older than the other mothers, hardly privy to their inside information—birthday party locations (the Tacoma Soccer Club, of course), the correct bicycle brand (Huffy), and the *de rigueur* in plaid uniforms (the jumper with the bib top that could be removed upon entering sixth grade). My mother was a working mother at the Catholic hospital, my parties were in the backyard, and my uniform was a throwback to 1951, the one-piece shapeless v-neck version. Mom might have had a better grasp of eucharistic theology than any of the other mothers, but she wasn't quite sure how to dress her daughter for the occasion.

Most of the time, my mother and I stumbled through these things together, like two sleuths without all the clues. And we *were* able to make just enough sense of the social mores to stave off complete disaster. The times we missed the mark were

close misses, a general approximation of the right answer: a Trapper Keeper in the wrong color, pet mice instead of kittens. The communion dress might have been a close miss too if the stakes had not been so high. Even here, Mom got quite a few things right—the veil, haloed by small, synthetic white flowers, and lace-trimmed ankle socks with white patent leather shoes whose heels click-clicked when they bounced against the linoleum in our kitchen.

But the dress was one mistake after another. We found it—my rainbow dress—at the Kids' Exchange, a consignment store we frequented. It wasn't a rainbow of primary colors, but it was most certainly a shocking palate of pastel pinks, purples, greens, blues, and yellows in a vertical striped pattern. It even had a snappy white jacket, making the whole ensemble one of the prettiest outfits I had seen in my life. As I stepped out onto the front porch of our house, Mom stood beaming at me and Dad took out the camera, his Protestant baptism and skepticism about the divinity of Jesus not dampening his pride. My little sister shyly fingered the delicate lace at the hem, gazing reverently at the thin fabric. In all honesty, I was crazy about that dress. I felt beautiful.

Until I got to the church.

The first person I saw was Natalie. Her dress was shiny and satiny—all white, all Nordstrom. All I knew of Nordstrom was that there was a piano on the first floor with a small man playing it and that we didn't go in there. Sarah, who was similar to Natalie in all things, had a similar dress. I was accustomed to being the odd one out in our tenuous threesome, so my sense of mild disorientation was not unfamiliar. But then I saw Anna, and her dress was all white with a bell-shaped skirt. I could almost hear it ring as it swooshed back and forth. I started to worry.

The final straw was Jane, who was usually as socially clumsy as I was, but whose mother was a seamstress. Her dress had a full skirt with bits of tulle underneath and was adorned with layer upon layer of lace trim and pearly beads. Her short sleeves were full and puffy, she had thick white tights under her gown—and

the gloves! She even had lace, wrist-length gloves, just like a lady. I took notice and looked every direction on the church steps, realizing that I was adrift in a gleaming sea of white, my rainbow like a bold stroke upon a blank canvas. I saw my mom gazing at the crowd. Her face looked like it did the time we hit a baby deer with our car at Mount Saint Helen. I saw my dad, hand on my mom's shoulder, his camera now dangling from his wrist, abandoned; documenting this moment no longer seemed such a good idea.

Natalie's unruly kinks and Sarah's sporty ponytail had both been coaxed and persuaded into gentle waves that, though they looked soft, didn't budge beneath the thick veneer of Aqua Net. Even *their* mothers couldn't have done that, a fact they confirmed when they boasted about the family friend who had come by the house to do their hair and paint their nails. I touched my practical, stick-straight bowl cut and was disappointed that it hadn't spontaneously curled without my knowledge.

Somewhere between the final bell on Friday and the Saturday morning eucharistic celebration my friends had become fluffed and meringued, and the parish hall looked more like a glossy sheet torn from a grocery checkout bridal magazine than the place where I had eaten maple bars after Mass so many times before. They looked the part even more than my sister and I did when we were make-believe brides pacing evenly down the garden path in our backyard, roses from Mom's garden clutched in our grasp. No one had said anything about getting married today.

We gathered in the foyer in the rear of the church, forming two lines like dominoes, each bride walking alongside one of our male counterparts. A man I had never seen before dodged to and fro down the aisle with a big camera, but I knew that you weren't allowed to walk around during the procession, and the priest wasn't even stopping him! My friends (or so I thought—I couldn't really recognize them from behind any more) stepped forward one-by-one into this suddenly unfamiliar sanctuary, picture-perfect brides of Christ pacing delicately forward. My cheeks felt hot and my stomach felt like it was pulsing, threatening to pop

right out of my belly button, the same way it felt the time I was scolded for talking during silent reading. My shiny new shoes were bolted to the worn carpet.

This wasn't what I thought I was getting into.

I had been practicing for First Communion at the Catholic hospital, where Mom and I carried out secret communion ceremonies. I "helped" Mom at work by staying underfoot as she prepared the chalice and paten for Sunday morning Mass, laying out carefully ironed linens, each with a tiny red embroidered cross front and center. In the privacy of the sacristy, Mom (the priest) would reverently administer the sacrament (host, unconsecrated) to my piously outstretched hands. The twinkle in her eye was the only hint that we were frauds.

She was the first lay chaplain to be hired by that hospital, a position that eventually led to her promotion as the pastoral care director for the whole Franciscan healthcare system in our area. The colleagues I met as she went about her work were all distinguished by "Father" or "Sister." I tried to imagine my mother with the same white-brimmed veil as the nuns, but all that I could envision was Mom in the blue velour bathrobe that she wore while watching the Seahawks with me lodged under her arm, my forehead on her shoulder. Even the patients didn't quite know what to make of a lay chaplain, and when she was pregnant with me they addressed her as "Sister" in spite of her seven-months-pregnant physique.

Tales of her ministry at the hospital were never privy to my sister's and my probing. She shielded us from the grief, illness, and death she witnessed daily. The only time she talked with me about her work in any detail, I was a high school student filled with aspirations to be a math teacher or lawyer. I asked how her day was when she stepped into the living room, a question of formality rather than curiosity. Her thick tone alerted me that her answer would be anything but rote. She sat down next to me and described a chapel service that morning. One of the women interns, a Protestant minister, preached a beautiful sermon,

she told me. Mom described her poise, her wit, her wisdom. As I listened, she told me, confessionally, that she had started to cry at the end of the sermon, but not because its content moved her. "I realized that you would never be able to do that in our church." She took off her glasses and rubbed a lens with the crumpled tissue in her hand.

Her observation seemed strange at the time. I had never considered that I would want to preach, much less that it would be painful to be prohibited from doing so. That moment stewed and simmered for years, though, and carved a space in me where I became receptive to the ways God was drawing me into a vocation to serve the church. Mom saw something in me that I couldn't identify for myself until much later, when the roundabout road of discernment led me first to a lay service program, then to a part-time job in ministry, and finally to Yale Divinity School.

Now, when she tells curious acquaintances about my graduation and my new job as a campus minister, they often speculate that I'm following in her footsteps. It isn't that I have mimicked her choice of profession, though. It was the way she lived that cultivated a place where the seeds of vocation could take root and sprout. My sister and I didn't fully understand what she did from nine to five, but we received the ministry that took place in our household, the way she presided over our conversations and was priest to our confessions. She treated *us* like vessels of the altar, reverently and gently. We would turn to her words of encouragement as though they were Scripture. Her affirmations, like pieces of psalms, her insights gospel. In life's dire circumstances, we clung to those words like rosary beads.

She bestowed one of these verses while we stood at the Sea-Tac airport at 4:30 in the morning, waiting for my flight to graduate school. Dad circled the airport in the family car to evade parking regulations while Mom walked in with me, neither of us quite ready to let go. I asked her, voice wavering, why it was so hard to say goodbye. She bit her lips and opened her teary eyes wide, "Love makes you want to be with your beloved."

The security officer pounced and shuffled her away, and I was left alone, her words making it hard to swallow.

Years later, awakening to feminism and desperate for guidance, I asked my mother why she had stayed in the church. There was no pause. "Because it's home," was all she said. I realized that this home of hers was, unexpectedly, home for me too. She had given me Catholicism just as much as she had given me my thick hair or the strange shape of my instep. It's my inheritance, a home with a roof that leaks sometimes, and a basement that smells musty, but that has strong beams and stands against the wind. She is unapologetic about it, even when I wrestle with some of the issues that loom over the church, particularly when I open ordination invitations from my classmates. She doesn't see my future as one of heartbreak and struggle, but one full of promise, deeply enriching and meaningful.

We laugh, now, about my First Communion wardrobe fiasco, and I am mischievously proud of the dress I wore that day in second grade. From the back of the sanctuary I had paused and scanned the congregation for my parents, finding their heads turned expectantly in the roped-off pews at the front of the church. As my mother's gaze locked on mine, I finally found the familiar in that suddenly foreign place. The photographer and these strange children walking alongside receded from view until it was just Mom and me in the sacristy of the hospital chapel.

And just like that, the thumping in my stomach became excitement and my bolted-down shoes released their grip on the floor. Even the rainbow First Communion dress couldn't interfere with God that day. I fidgeted quietly through the service until the big moment, then walked toward the altar just as we had practiced. My family stood slightly behind me when I stepped toward the priest, hands outstretched and eager to receive what was given. An unfamiliar warmth settled in the place where I figured my heart was. In those moments, I understood why we were supposed to kneel after Communion. I understood that I was participating in something greater than myself. As I retreated

to the pew, I saw my classmates bathed in the light from the stained-glass windows, a rainbow of colors—honeyed oranges, Lenten purples, passion reds—tinting their white dresses and dancing in their curls.

*After a year of service with the Holy Cross Associates, Angela Batie earned her Master of Divinity from Yale Divinity School. She now works as a campus minister at St. Louis University.*