

“With heart, honesty and humor, Laura Kelly Fanucci’s offering of a peek into her quest for God in the midst of the craziness of parenting will help inspire you along your own path to God. Full of tender moments and truth, this is a book that every Catholic who ever lived in a family will appreciate.”

—Lisa M. Hendey, Founder of CatholicMom.com and author of *The Grace of Yes*

“*Everyday Sacrament* is a gift to every parent everywhere. Whether she’s writing about giving a newborn a bath or flying with a cranky toddler, Fanucci reveals the holiness that lives right in the mess of parenting. Her writing is graceful, sensitive, and honest in its portrayal of the highs and lows of motherhood. This beautiful book is a feast for the mind, the heart, and the soul.”

—Ginny Kubitz Moyer, author of *Random MOMents of Grace: Experiencing God in the Adventures of Motherhood*

“*Everyday Sacrament* is a gift to any of us seeking God in the messiness of life and raising kids. With refreshing honesty, Laura Kelly Fanucci shares her home and heart to reveal the sacred in everything from changing diapers to rocking a child to sleep. Along the way, she develops a real-world theology that brings the sacraments to life and honors parenting for the holy vocation that it is. As with any encounter of grace, gratitude is in order for this powerful testimony to the messy grace of parenting.”

—Jeremy Langford, author of *Seeds of Faith: Practices to Grow a Healthy Spiritual Life* and father of three



# Everyday Sacrament

*The Messy Grace of Parenting*

Laura Kelly Fanucci



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

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

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

Fanucci, Laura Kelly.

Everyday sacrament : the messy grace of parenting / Laura Kelly Fanucci.  
pages        cm

ISBN 978-0-8146-3768-5 (paperback) — ISBN 978-0-8146-3793-7  
(ebook)

1. Parenting—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 2. Sacraments—  
Catholic Church. I. Title.

BX2352.F36 2014

234'.16—dc23

2014011976

*For our children*

It was easy to love God in all that was beautiful.

The lessons of deeper knowledge, though,  
instructed me to embrace God in all things.

—St. Francis of Assisi, translated by Daniel Ladinsky,  
*Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from  
the East and West*

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❧ *Introduction* ❧

## Before Beginning— An Unexpected Story

*The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith.*

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1210

I never expected to be here.

I never expected to have children at all during our years of infertility, as I plunked box after box of pregnancy tests into my shopping cart, only to have them turn up negative again and again, month after month.

And even when a baby miraculously arrived and it seemed our prayers had been answered, I still never expected that parenting could change everything I knew about seeking God. Especially when I was so overwhelmed

by new motherhood's demands that I could barely string two coherent thoughts together.

When my first son was three months old, I read a magazine article by a mother who sang praises of the beauty of babyhood and practically squealed about how close to God she felt when she gazed into her newborn's eyes. I glanced up from the magazine's glossy pages to the foggy mirror of the bathroom where I had locked myself to treat my raw, bleeding breasts with the slather of ointments my doctor promised would clear up the latest round of an agonizing thrush infection passed to me by my nursing babe.

I hadn't slept more than two hours in a row for twelve weeks, a stupefying stretch of sleep deprivation that threatened to violate the Geneva Convention. And the shrieking screams from the next room reminded me that it was time once again to grit my teeth and curl my toes as I tried to nurse the hungry baby through shooting pain.

I tossed the magazine in the wastebasket as I left the bathroom. I had zero interest in finding transcendence through motherhood.

But months slipped by, as months do even in that early stretch of dragging days. Gradually I started to sleep a little more. The evil thrush finally healed. The world shifted back into focus like the slow turn of a telescope. Parenthood wasn't pretty pastels and it wasn't an easy elegy, but eventually I found myself settling into mothering.

Then I began to wonder where God might be.



For a lifelong Catholic with a freshly minted degree in theology, trying to find God in the midst of my new life as a parent should have been easy. It was decidedly not.

Although I had spent three years in graduate school studying how to understand God, I suddenly felt clueless about how to seek the presence of God that I needed to survive this overwhelming transition to parenthood. I knew plenty of ways to define God intellectually, but I was scrambling to feel God's strength surrounding me when I craved it most. I had thought motherhood was my calling—a way God was inviting me to give my life in service out of love—but now it seemed the rocky path I'd chosen was far from a smooth road to spiritual enlightenment.

For starters, motherhood magnified my flaws to the nth degree: impatience, irritability, an Irish temper that stomped its feet whenever I didn't get my way. Furthermore, every spiritual practice I'd been taught required peace, quiet, and time apart from the rush of daily life. Finding even one of these conditions—let alone all three at once—seemed impossible with a new baby at the center of my life. Most days I barely muddled through, but whenever I found a rare moment to reflect on how unbalanced my life had become, I knew I had to find another way.

So I began to ask what it might mean to approach parenting itself as a spiritual practice. Could these long hours heaped with burp cloths reveal some spark of God's presence? Could all those dirty diaper changes hold an encounter with the divine?

One afternoon, as I rocked and rocked my wide-eyed baby in a futile search for his nap, I started thinking about sacraments. Maybe we had just come home from Mass that morning, or maybe the mail had brought yet another wedding invitation from a college friend. Whatever the reason, the idea of sacrament stuck itself in my head and wouldn't let go.

In the Catholic Church there are seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and holy orders. In each sacrament, we receive a visible sign of God's love for us. We are invited to enter more deeply into our relationship with God. And we are welcomed and embraced by the church, a community that shares our celebration. Sacraments are moments of encounter when God touches, strengthens, and heals us. Through the tangible things of this earth—water, oil, bread, and wine—God comes to us, giving us what we need when we open our hearts to receive.

I started to wonder if sacraments might hold the key to my mothering muddles.

As a Catholic schoolgirl I used to tick off the seven sacraments on my fingers to memorize them for religion class. I mentally checked the ones I'd received—baptism, Eucharist, reconciliation, and confirmation. I calculated that I'd add marriage one day, maybe anointing of the sick when I got old, never holy orders since I wouldn't be a priest. Then my own list would be complete. Sacraments would always be the standard stuff of church, but nothing earth-shattering. Nothing to rock my world.

Until, as that bleary-eyed new mom rocking the baby over and over, I started to notice how the ordinary could be holy. And as I began to see the sacred in the everyday, I stumbled into the surprising truth of what the sacraments really meant: *that God was present always, even in the mess of new motherhood.*

When I first became a parent, I never expected that I would learn more about baptism from a baby's bath time—or about Communion from the chaos of family dinner, or about ordination from overwhelming loads of laundry—than I had from years of study that schooled me in theology or all those Sundays spent sitting in the church pews. But parenting proved to be an on-the-ground education in how sacraments spring from everyday life. Sacred encounters with God weren't limited to celebrations in church or a one-time date on the calendar. Baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and holy orders—these seven experiences were lived out each day that I washed and fed and cared for my family. Through the busy, blurry years of raising young children, I was learning over and over again how sacraments received in church were deepened and strengthened through ordinary life at home. God surprised me during the endless tasks of parenting with moments of undeserved love and deep joy, with the peace to forgive and the gift of being forgiven, with a profound sense of meaning and purpose.

Theologians call this truth the “domestic church”: that we first learn about God within our experience of family

life. Catholics call this perspective a “sacramental imagination”: that God is present throughout creation, all around us. I simply call it the story of how I met God as a mother: day-by-day, by surprise, and full of grace.



This book looks at each of the seven Catholic sacraments as a lens through which ordinary moments of raising children reflect a whole new—even holy—meaning. It is not the typical Sunday school catechesis, since it starts from the mess of lived experience rather than the beauty of church doctrine. But everyday chaos with little ones offers its own rich theology: a thousand chances to ask *who is God?* and *who are we?* as we stumble through learning to love each other at home.

Whether you are Catholic or not, whether you are struggling with the faith in which you were raised or searching for a new way to think about God, the sacraments invite all of us to open our eyes to a wider view in which every moment offers opportunities to encounter God’s grace. Since the seven sacraments celebrate what generations of Christians have learned of God’s love through their daily experiences, my hope is to help turn the spotlight from concentrated moments at church to a broader view of everyday life as sacramental.

Henri Nouwen wrote in *Beyond the Mirror* that his “deepest vocation is to be a witness to the glimpses of God I have been allowed to catch.” As a writer and a mother, this is what I try to do: to notice God at work around me

and to nudge others to ask, *Do you see this, too?* Christianity has always been a faith of sharing stories, back to Jesus spinning parables about baking bread and sweeping floors and forgiving children. Through the stories gathered here, I hope that you, the reader, will find echoes of your own life, whatever your family's background, situation, or experience may be. Because sacraments do not exist apart from the complexity and diversity of our daily life: they are a part of it.

These stories of sacrament are tales from the beginning of one family's life together. The wise assure me that parenting's questions and challenges will only continue to change and become more complicated as my children grow. But this book honors the truths gathered along the way, between the new parents' pride in discovering how their three-day-old likes to be held and the third-time-around veterans' shrug that every child is different. While the stories I share are limited to my own experience of becoming a mother, I believe in the importance of telling truth about our individual lives. So this book offers what I have learned along my journey and invites you to explore how you have glimpsed God in your own life.

Before I had kids, I never expected any of this—how God could be found so powerfully in the exasperating everyday, how home could feel as holy as church, how seven sacraments could strengthen and transform parenting. But that's how grace gets spilled: right before our eyes.

If we only stop to see it.



❧ *Part I* ❧

# Beginnings: Baptism and Confirmation

*Beginnings shape us.* Each family's story opens with a first chapter: how the parents met and fell in love. Every baby has a birth story: how the labor began and when the moment of delivery arrived. A child's story of Christian faith starts with a choice made by parents and an action of the church: the cleansing ritual of baptism, whether by sprinkling with holy water or full immersion into the baptismal font, and a warm welcome into the community of believers.

*Beginnings take time.* Catholics celebrate three sacraments of initiation—baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation. Each is a step in the process of becoming part of the Body of Christ that is the church, with Christ as its head.

Typically the preparation and celebration of these three sacraments of initiation take place over the span of many years through childhood and youth. Becoming a Catholic Christian is no quick splash of water, but a process that unfolds slowly into a lifelong journey.

*Beginnings are complex.* Baptism is not a superstition that will magically save the child or an excuse to celebrate a new baby with another party. Confirmation is not a teenager's graduation from faith formation. Instead these sacraments are ancient rites of initiation that deepen one's relationship with God and with the church.

*Beginnings are unique.* Baptism and confirmation are unrepeatable, like witnessing the birth of a child or becoming a parent for the first time. But if beginnings are left in the memory of dusty photo albums, they fade to mere moments, confined to church or childhood. Only when we return to our beginnings, explore their importance, plunge into their depths, and watch their impact rippling out in widening circles, do we start to live out what they mean.

*Beginnings matter.* For the life of a family and the life of faith, the rest of the story cannot unfold without them. So we tell these tales over and over again, to remember how it all got started.

❧ Chapter 1 ❧

## Bathed in New Life— Baptism

### Softened with Showers

*You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it . . .  
You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.*

—Psalm 65:9, 10

Exhausted, I step into the shower, yanking the curtain behind me. The baby is sleeping at last. Silence on the monitor. I crank the silver handle to hot and slip back under the water's flow. I sigh. Alone at last.

As I suds shampoo through my greasy hair, long strands slide through my fingers and slip down the drain. Yet another postpartum perk to add to my sagging stomach and tender scars. No one told me the exhaustion of new motherhood would make me feel like a stranger in my

own skin. Or that a daily shower would become a dream of the past. Or that hours to myself would be reduced to minutes.

Under the spray of the showerhead I start to wallow in self-pity. I'm tired and aching and overwhelmed by all that my newborn demands of me. I know it's the oldest story in the book, but it's the first time it's been my story. And it's hard.

Until, soft and steady as the warm water rolling down my tired shoulders, another presence whispers. Something reminds me I am not alone.



Only a few weeks into a calling that will last the rest of my life, I am still clueless in many ways about the challenges that motherhood will bring. While I'm already learning that parenting is not about self-fulfillment—that babies aren't all bliss, that our culture's pursuit of happiness does not equate with the deeper joys of raising children—there is still much I do not know. I don't know about the depression that lies ahead, or the unexpected loss of an unborn child, or the day-to-day drain of caring for multiple children around the clock.

But I do know the heartache of wanting a baby. I know the struggle of carrying a pregnancy. I know the pain of labor and delivery. I have learned what it means, in the words of a Caribbean saying that a friend told me, that in bearing and birthing a child, you go down to hell and wrestle with death and come out with new life.

So even now, amateur and overwhelmed, I understand a sliver of what this new life and love will demand. Over and over I will have to face my deepest fears, I will take a deep breath, and I will push through again.

Maybe we are always remembering ourselves back into this same truth that Christ taught: dying to self, rising to new life. Maybe this is what makes transformation sacred.

Maybe this is the strength of a sacrament.



I have no memory of my own baptism, more than thirty years ago.

Faded photographs show a wide-eyed baby bundled in a long white gown, my grinning siblings-turned-godparents standing next to my parents near the baptismal font. As a teenager I discovered my yellowed candle tucked in the back of a kitchen drawer. Baptism was never something special that we commemorated growing up. You were simply baptized, and that was that.

But when it came time to have my first baby baptized, everything changed.

Suddenly the sacrament loomed as a daunting prospect: a living, breathing, lifelong commitment I would be professing on behalf of a squawking six-week-old. What would initiation into the church mean for my little son? Was I ready for this? Was he? Could any of us embrace what it really means to follow Christ?

Hosting fifty friends and relatives for the brunch after Mass quickly seemed like cake by comparison.



When I think of baptism in centuries past, I picture cavernous pools in cold stone churches. Catechumens stepping down into the cool water of the font, climbing up drenched and dripping, and then clothed in clean white garments like a newborn wrapped in blankets after birth.

Over the years I will watch as each of my babies gets plunged into those same waters, wailing from surprise at the shock of cold on their naked skin. In our parish's tradition of baptizing babies by full immersion, strong hands will lift them from my arms, dip their wriggling bodies into the font, wrap them in soft white towels, and smear their smooth foreheads with sweet-smelling chrism—a mixture of oil and balsam blessed for use in sacred rites.

An ancient tradition that makes them new Christians.

Perhaps it is echoes of these memories—baptisms of earlier believers, the baptisms of my own children—that will continue to draw me back to the water, reminding me of my first and deepest identity.



As months pass and motherhood starts to feel less foreign, I stick to my practice of starting the day—OK, every other day, if I'm lucky—with a hot shower.

Sometimes I bumble through the routine of washing my hair, still bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. Sometimes I take an extra five minutes to shave my legs, trying to ignore the baby who starts to fuss in the next room. Once

in a while I cry quietly when the exhaustion is too much and I'm overwhelmed by the demands of another long day dawning.

But no matter the mood, I steal time for this ritual because—strange as it sounds—the shower bubbles up memories of baptism. These few moments to myself, wrapped in water and warmth, remind me I am a child of God before I am a mother of anyone else. Something deep in the memory of my bones craves this comfort in the simple wash of water on skin.

It might sound silly—a shower as spiritual exercise?—but whenever I close my eyes and dip my head back to meet the water, I hear echoes of belovedness, of acceptance, of forgiveness. I let yesterday's failures slip down the drain. And if I'm lucky, when I crank the handle to stop the water's flow, even the baby's whines on the monitor will not grate on my nerves as before.

I step out renewed.

## Prelude to Baptism

*Through the Holy Spirit, Baptism is a bath that purifies, justifies, and sanctifies.*

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1227

Terry washcloth. Hooded towel. Plastic bathtub. Baby shampoo. Water warmed to a perfect ninety-eight degrees. Even a camera to capture the quintessential moment. We have everything we need for our baby's first bath.

I am completely terrified.



Bathing kids was always the babysitting chore I skipped if the parents didn't care. I feared I'd break them, let them fall, or slip shampoo into their eyes, and they would dissolve into tears or tantrums or worse.

When we registered as expectant parents for the requisite tiny washcloths and ducky towels, it never registered with pregnant me that I might one day be responsible for bathing the recipient of such adorable bath-time gear. Not until the stern head nurse in the level 2 nursery led me over to the giant baby warmer—where our tiny son lay, with the pneumothorax trap of air caught in his lungs, with every scrawny limb taped to twisted lines leading to an army of

looming monitors—and announced to me brusquely, “He needs a bath. Are you ready?”

Oh no, I thought. This baby is three weeks early. He’s not even supposed to be here yet, let alone hooked up to all these giant beeping machines while I’m stuck in an empty recovery room at the quiet end of the maternity ward.

No, I am not ready.

But I gulped down the lump of fear rising in my throat, forced a meager smile, and started helping the nurse unwind Sam’s skinny arms and legs from his tangled web of IVs. I was convinced one wrong move would jeopardize his life. But the nurse seemed exasperated enough with my cautious clumsiness that I tried to trust this bathing business would be safe.

She handed me a small square of gauze and a basin of warm, soapy water. “Just a sponge bath for now,” she directed. “Start with the head and move down. Don’t take too long or he’ll get cold.”

Then, catching the terror in my eyes, she added, “You’ll be fine.”

I nodded. And as I wet the cloth and began to dab gingerly at Sam’s soft blond hair, his tiny swirls of ears, his miniature nose, I marveled at how he accepted my offering. Sure, he squirmed, even though he lay under the red glow of heat lamps hovering above the bassinet to regulate his temperature. But with each dip of the cloth back in the bubbly basin, his limbs relaxed with the touch of warm and wet.

Of course, I realized—one of those new-parent moments of obvious insight. The bath reminds him of where he's been for nine months: warm, wet, and safe.



Much to my shock, the hospital staff eventually let us take our baby home. It seemed a wildly reckless move as we slowly inched the car out of the hospital parking lot without a single professional in tow. I panicked that his heart rate would suddenly plummet without the warning chorus of monitors around him, that he would starve without the nurses making regular rounds to check his cries, that he would stop breathing without the whole staff of specialists waiting to leap into action. Thank God, my husband Franco was blessed with a calm, collected presence, and he settled us comfortably into our home, tenderly unwrapping the baby from his car seat, setting up the bassinet and baby monitor still stashed in their boxes, bringing me glasses of ice water as I tried to figure out how to nurse the hollering newborn. When the sun peeked over the horizon, I was stunned to find that we had all survived the first night by ourselves. I started to ease into the idea that Franco and I might actually be able to do this parenting thing on our own.

Until it came time for baby's first real bath.

I dragged my feet, putting it off for well over two weeks after we brought Sam home. Sponge baths were fine, his pediatrician had assured us. But once his umbilical

cord fell off, she gently suggested that a real bath might be in order.

So we gathered the necessary provisions. I mustered all the courage I could summon. I even faked a smile for my mother, who was present to photograph the moment for his baby book.

And then I quickly handed the baby off to his father.

Without a single worry Franco slid Sam's small body into the splash of the bathwater. I marveled at how their eyes met in quiet consent. They were both at ease, undisturbed by my nervous hovering above them. I stepped back to let them be, to let them relax together in the comfort of the warmth where their hands met.

From that day forward, bath time became Franco's domain. He never worried that the water was too cold or the baby too cranky. With a calm confidence, he would rest the wriggling, slippery newborn in the crook of his strong arm, gently swabbing him with a soapy washcloth. He held Sam with the same certainty on the day he was baptized, grinning down at the baby in his arms while the priest prayed a blessing over the father of this child. Such simple, sure support.

As time went on, I learned to share the bathing responsibilities, supporting Sam's wobbly neck, tending to his delicate skin, keeping shampoo suds from streaming into his eyes. And Sam learned to relax into my arms, too. Floating peacefully in the warm water that felt like home.



Years after those first baths I watch Sam, now towering as a towhead over his brown-haired younger brother Thomas. It is the Sunday after Easter, and both boys peer over the pew as our pastor rolls up his long sleeves to dip a pine branch in a bowl of water and fling its drenching spray across the congregation. Sam and Thomas shake in shock when the water splashes their faces. I laugh to myself—not just at their blinking, bewildered reaction to being showered with holy water, but at the memory of those same squinched faces as newborns, ready to let loose a howling protest at the surprise of being undressed and undiapered in the cool evening air before a bath.

But just as quickly as they blink in surprise at the sprinkling rite that celebrates Easter's new life, the boys turn to each other and chuckle at the water drops across their foreheads. As we sing songs of baptism and blessing while the priest winds his way around the church, soaking all the parishioners with his spray of holy water, I watch as young and old smile with the recognition of this simple sacred sign.

I remember those first baths we gave our boys: the sudden relaxation, the instinctual release of tiny tense limbs into warm water, the surrounding presence so familiar that the body cannot help but sink into deep memory. This is how baptism must feel—immersion into the all-surrounding love of God. This is what our Easter renewal of baptismal vows is meant to evoke: not the tired recitation of faith's facts to which we mumble our assent, but

the earliest memory of a love so vast and safe around us that we relax and release into its presence and promise.

I wonder if I trust in the promise of my baptism in the same way. So often in this life of faith I wrestle with questions and ponderings and doubts that tense my limbs like a nervous newborn bracing for the bath. But watching Sam and Thomas giggle in the pew with traces of baptism dripping down their foreheads, remembering their own transformations from fear to trust, I pray once again to live into my own calling as a Christian.

With the same calm of a child held in warm water by strong hands.

## Parenting toward Possibility

*Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?*

—Rite of Baptism

When Thomas was six weeks old, my mother and I dressed him in the long baptismal gown that four generations of my family have worn. As she did when Sam was baptized two years earlier, she told the story of how her mother had been the first to wear the garment, how her sister had to let out the neck seams for her plump babies to fit comfortably, how one niece had used OxiClean (to everyone's horror) to brighten the white, but how the gown remained unspoiled through a century of baptisms around the world.

I watched my mother's hands carefully guide Thomas's tiny arms through the linen sleeves, and I wondered where this baby's journey of faith would lead him. Would his be a straight and certain road? A dark and winding path? Or would it be a way he refused to follow at all?

I had no idea. I had only hopes.



The summer Thomas was born was one of the hottest on record in Minnesota.

For weeks I sweated through the sweltering heat and camped out in the cool of the basement, venturing upstairs only to refill the ice in my glass. Sam was nearly two, full of toddling energy, pressing his pudgy nose up against the steamy glass of the sliding door, begging to play outside. I sighed at every eager request, heaving my giant belly off the couch to indulge him in a rare romp in the backyard before the jungle heat overwhelmed me and I had to drag him back into the air conditioning.

I couldn't wait for the baby—and a cooler autumn—to come.

To amuse myself as the due date approached, I wrote a daily “Dear Baby” letter to inform the child within my womb how we were waiting impatiently for his or her arrival. Sometimes the short notes were sentimental: *I know you will come in your own sweet time.* Sometimes they slid toward snarky sarcasm: *Still not here yet? Swell. Oh wait, those are my ankles.*

But the letters were always full of the wonder that waiting for a child wraps around expectant parents. Would this baby be a boy or a girl? Would he or she be healthy? What glimpses of budding personality would we see when we held our baby after birth?

As August ripened and the skin across my stomach stretched to taut, the hopeful tone in my letters began to tip toward doubt. Could we handle another child? Was our family ready for this transition? Would I be a good mother to two?

I had no idea. I had only hopes.

Then one humid night as I tossed and turned in bed, thrashing the sheets I complained were too hot for sleep, I abruptly sat up and stared at Franco.

“I think my water just broke,” I said. “Are you sure?” he asked with surprise.

But before we could debate the question, contractions started coming quicker than I could count. While I tried to catch my breath on the couch downstairs, he called his mother to come watch Sam. Suddenly my legs started shaking, my teeth began to chatter, and an unmistakable nausea seized my contracting belly. The telltale signs of the transition stage in childbirth that signals baby’s imminent arrival.

Even in the midst of labor’s mental fog, I knew this unexpected, early transition was coming way too soon. Franco and I had joked about having the baby in the car en route to the hospital, but now I began to doubt that we could make the twenty-minute drive.

There was no way I was ready for this.

My mother-in-law appeared on our front step as I was inching my way to the door. Clutching Franco’s arm to keep myself upright, I winced with each slow step we took toward the car. He called the hospital’s birth center as we sped through stoplights with warm night air racing in the open windows. While he consulted the nurse, I hollered through a huge contraction.

There was a pause on the phone. “Are you sure there’s no closer hospital you can get to?” I overheard the nurse ask him.

“Are you kidding me?” I wailed as we raced on.

Franco calmly coached me through fourteen miles of winding highway, and then squealed the car up to the emergency room doors, where two nurses stood waiting with a wheelchair. As they sprinted me through the hospital halls, I couldn’t gasp out a single answer to their questions. And when the elevator doors opened into the birth center, I stared into the receptionist’s wide eyes as she dropped the paperwork she’d been holding. “I guess we’ll just check you in later?” she called after us as they hurried me down the hallway.

Before they had time to slap an ID bracelet on my wrist, Thomas Andrew was born.



One year after his fast and furious birth, I look down at my stocky toddler, thrashing and kicking the floor in frustration. A typical tantrum for our strong-willed Thomas.

We are in the gathering space at church, where I have exiled us to wait out the latest cranky spell until he can return to the pew in peace. For a new walker eager to practice and an almost-talker eager to be heard, Sunday Mass is nearly impossible at this stage. Franco and I take turns trading off Thomas-duty so at least one of us can be present during part of the service.

While I wait for him to work out his latest frustration on the carpet, I watch through the windows as our pastor prepares to celebrate a baptism. Standing next to the parents

and godparents near the font, he asks the familiar questions I've heard hundreds of times before:

What name do you give your child?

What do you ask of God's Church for your child?

Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?

(Rite of Baptism)

Then the priest pauses and turns with a smile. "I always laugh when I ask parents that question. As if they have any clue."

The congregation chuckles quietly. I look down at my dark-haired boy kicking at my feet. Do I clearly understand what I am undertaking? Trying to raise him in the church when all the headlines and surveys scream that faith is becoming more unpopular every day?

I have no idea. I have only hopes.

But deep in my bones I believe this is the most important thing I'm trying to do as a parent, to awaken my children to the possibilities of faith and a life lived for others out of love. Isn't that what all mothers and fathers do—parent toward possibility? No matter children's age or ability, no matter their stage or situation, we dream of their potential, what they might do and become.

Baptism is the same. We are welcomed into a community that has great hopes for us. We are called by God who dreams of all that we might become. But this first sacrament also celebrates the simple fact of being beloved. Of knowing that we do not need to achieve to be worthy

or succeed to be faithful. My hopes for my children and their faith hang between this tension: I hope it will inspire them to do and remind them to be.

I watch as the priest dips his hand into the bubbling water and the parents lean over the font, holding their baby wearing a long white gown, just like the one that my babies wore, that my siblings and cousins and aunts and uncles wore, with the hopes and dreams of our families wrapped around us in the clean white promise of what our new life might become.

As Thomas kicks at my ankles, I think back to the night before his baptism when I wrote him another letter, this time of the hopes I had for him: that he would not take his baptism lightly, that he would spend a lifetime growing into what it means to be loved by God. The simplest summary of my answers to the same questions our pastor was posing to new parents today: what I ask of God's church for my child and what I believe about what I am undertaking. All the challenges I will face as his mother—from toddler tantrums to teenage rebellions—will be wrapped up in these same hopes of faith, just as they were bound up in the story of his baptism and the story of his birth.

When I lay shaking and quivering on the basement couch the night Thomas was born, overwhelmed by a labor that was coming too fast and too hard, I learned all over again that as a parent, I am never fully ready for the transformations I am called to face. I may never clearly know what I am undertaking. But I do know this: that life

is made up of the leaps we take toward what God desires for us. Leaps of faith as we plunge into the unknown, gathering our hopes around us.

Trying once again to trust toward possibility.