Sanctuary

BY HANNAH HALTER

June 1993-August 2011 – Good Shepherd, State College, PA

I sat between my mother and father on one of the wooden, cushioned chairs that Good Shepherd used instead of pews. Words came floating into the air from a lectern I was too short to see, and soon, I stood in a sea of singing people. Instead of joining in song, I would flip through the thick, green songbook or stare at the ribbon of stained glass windows that wrapped around the point of the wall meeting the ceiling. The colorful, translucent circles, crescents, and diamonds of the windows seemed less abstract and more pictorial, as music wound its way into the words of the Introductory Rites.

Church was a very sensory affair for me as a child. I did not typically understand the bible stories or the collection of signs the priest and the congregation made. Even so, I listened to the music and saw the slow, measured dance of ritual embedded within a Catholic mass. I would pick out a new detail to observe every week, like the positions of the microphones scattered across the creamy cinderblocks or standing high and bent like shepherd's crooks in the choir sections, or the thick, colorful lines and shapes on the priest's seasonal garb turning to disconnected waves when he moved his arms in a certain way. I loved these details, and as I grew, my eye still sought them while I mulled over concepts and pulled lyrics from my memory.

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Much like my connection to weekly mass, Good Shepherd Church kept developing throughout our twenty-two years – I say "our" because I am only a few months shy of the church's age. Looking back, I feel that it has developed much like a musical canon, where simple melodies entwine, layer, and grow as the song goes on. Each new addition to the church harmonized with its basic structure and extended its reach. It never seemed to change; it just grew richer, fuller. It heightened and sprawled, but remained faithful to its airy, foursquare gathering spaces and sandy-white color schemes. Like a tree growing on stable, fertile earth, its careful growth entwined with its staunch sameness and mirrored my own aging.

When the topic of churchgoing came up among my friends from middle school onward, the major consensus was that church was something to eventually grow out of. Telling them that I still went every week and got a lot out of it would garner responses that ranged from, "Oh, I didn't know that about you," to, "But you're, like, really smart," the latter of these luckily coming from only one mouth. The worst aspect of such conversations was not their generally low opinion of church but my inability to defend myself. My mind would swim away and hone in on the stained glass and bounce from buzzword to buzzword. Sin, forgiveness, love, salvation. I did not know how to explain why I was so drawn to church, and attempting to do so never flowed like the music in the voice of the priest, or the sweet piano marching down the lines of "Canticle of the Sun." My explanations did not pour out as my prayers did. I stopped seeking out venues to defend my faith when a former acquaintance of mine said I was crazy. My response to her question about why I believed in God was, "Because I know what it's like to miss someone I never met." I thought this was clever; she thought it was psychotic.

If I were to ask my agnostic friend why I kept going to church, she would say something to the effect of me being physically and mentally trained to be there fifty-two days out of every year and establishing channels of brain activity through repeated behaviors. I would furrow my brow and give her look of faux anger. She would shrug and say, "No offense."

My time at Good Shepherd spanned the periodic wonderings of my friends and the more-than-periodic wonderings of my own, but it remained a safe harbor. I believed in the basic tenets of Christianity and tried to apply them to my life, but church felt more like a haven than a school.

After Father Bender passed away, Father Charlie took over and began the tradition of opening masses with this statement: "Let's take a moment to drop all the baggage we dragged in here." Sometimes he would list a few things, like future plans, stress, family issues, and even doubts. I did exactly that through the later part of my school-aged years, even before Father Charlie began saying his weekly piece.

All I know is that I felt something far more powerful and real than anything I could muster in the blur and push of daily, secular life.

As I adapted to adolescence, I gradually stopped honing in on minute characteristics of the church as I used to when I was a child and began exploring the details of my fears, failings, and hopes. I could truly reflect on myself there. In a way, the church was a place to drop off baggage and have it hauled off somewhere I no longer had to look at it. At the same time, mass offered me a free bag of tools I would need for the week.

I knew these things by high school, and I was soon able to articulate my fondness for churchgoing to those who wandered into questioning me. Church gave me strength to approach life's issues gracefully, offered me a code of ethics that benefits the greatest number of people I interacted with, and promoted a mindset of peace. I do not always put all this into action, but I understand it well enough to put in on paper. Understanding my connection to church in these ways marked the beginning of a spiritual trajectory, as I allowed the things I learned within Good Shepherd to set the tone for my everyday life.

Even so, the very center of my love for churches and masses, all of which took root at Good Shepherd, retains an air of ineffability. I had my litany of benefits carefully printed behind my eyelids, but something was still missing. Church slowly began to be less about rest and learning and more about a presence I felt.

I cannot define "holy," but I know how holy feels, because I have felt it so often in church. It feels like emptiness but with a rising motion. The only other feeling that came close to rivaling how holy feels suddenly materialized when I fell in love. Falling in love is like an ecstatic, nauseous version of that feeling I call holy. It made me much more aware of my reeling brain and churning guts than holy ever did. Holy is more buoyant and less messy, yet it is more complicated as it tips from sedation to elation. Thinking about this comparison I carefully constructed years ago still makes me laugh. It's a silly way to try to understand emotional responses and rank them, but it was and still is all I can offer to explain it.

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Any legitimate Catholic would pay lip service to the reality of God. We say things like the church is sacred ground and that the Holy Spirit resides in us and in our world. I would say this too, although I sometimes quefelt God is much more complicated, second only (in both complication and risk) to saying you heard or (God forbid) saw God.

I do not know what to say.

All I know is that I felt something far more powerful and real than anything I could muster in the blur and push of daily, secular life. I was afraid that leaving Good Shepherd, the church of my nativity, when I went to college would tear that feeling down.

September 2011-December 2014 – Saint Boniface, Williamsport, PA

I rushed into Saint Boniface Church with a damp jacket and a rain-pecked face. A squall had unfolded halfway between my dorm and the church, and I hunched my way toward the apex of the structure that stuck out over the trees and buildings like the prow of an ark. I could still hear the swoops of surging air as I stood inside the dark lobby, shedding my jacket and letting my eyes adjust to the soft light barely lancing the windows.

I had been to Saint Boniface with my family on a few occasions, since my mother grew up in Williamsport, but the years strained my memory as I tried to remember the church's exact design. I missed the first two masses I had meant to attend, so I forcefully talked myself into making a visit to the church at some point during the week. I ignorantly did so in the middle of a historic flood.

I moved through the heavy double doors to the worship space, and the weather quickly faded from my mind. In the front of the church, a massive, cylindrical structure hung from the ceiling, its hollow center serving as a skylight. The pale glow of storm-light flowed down upon the altar and dwelled upon the tops of the pews, reminding me of St. Elmo's fire. The whole front of the church had a soaring height supported by the sharply sloped ceiling that descended at an angle toward the entrance. The ceiling was made up of wooden planks set between broad beams, and the pattern of the planks looked like long, leaning ladders that reached the shadowy apex. The silhouette of a dove, sculpted in something that resembled plaster, pointed its beak toward the skylight, and beneath it hung a stylized crucifix with a bronze Christ.

I entered the second row of pews, eyes shifting from the skylight to the crucifix to the seemingly infinite number of brown bricks forming the front wall, when I remembered that this church burned down years ago, and my former visits occurred long before its destruction. I knelt in its resurrected form when I saw the thick, wine-red book bound in gold trim standing on the marble altar, swathed in pale light.

I had been staring at books all day beneath the anemic light of a lamp in my small dorm room. As a student of English, it was my job to be greedy with words. I was supposed to toss them around in my head and interpret their patterns. While my secular education expanded my ways of thinking, so did Father McGough's way of interpreting Scripture. In class, I would be tasked with interpreting texts, and in church, I listened to Father McGough do the same. Father McGough interpreted deeply. He looked past the platitudes many priests latched onto for homilies and said things so utterly new to me. Despite his frail frame and slow walk, he made dangerous claims.

"You think Jesus physically healed people? No!" His words started a ripple in the congregation. "He knew people's hearts and could gauge their faith. He mended spirits and healed the inner wounds brought on by sin, through his words and, finally, through his death." A few elderly people in my line of sight shifted and a tiny "hm" came from a man in the pew behind me. I smiled. Father McGough was fluent in the type of metaphor I swam in every day, the very metaphors that pervaded the church's physicality and urged me onward to faith during my youth.

He talked about the value of suffering. He said if anything in the world made you suffer or sorrow, rejoice and be glad, because you are not of this world. I thought about how strange it would be to go through life rejoicing in one's suffering. The ideas he drew from Scripture were always challenging. They demanded mental expansion, at least for someone like me. In masses past, I often responded to homilies with a softly accepting attitude, thinking, Sure, that's something great to be reminded of. I never felt that way at Saint Boniface. I always had to make room for Father McGough's wisdom.

On the day of the flood, before I attended a single homily or took my first college exam, "holy" came back, with all its expansiveness. I sat in the half-light, drifting between prayer and contemplation, wondering if the strange, audible fluttering in the shadows between the thick ceiling beams was a sign of that winged feeling approaching. It was a hint that whatever presence I felt in church would only expand during those years. I would go on to shift words around again and again to frame that presence, only ever circling it and drawing up metaphors in attempt to close in on it. For one of my many creative writing classes, I wrote a short story about a girl who ran away from home during a flood, snuck into a church at midnight, and slept in a second-row pew, as if that would help me articulate my thoughts. I remember Father McGough's explorations of metaphor as I tried to frame the presence my runaway character felt. Images of feathers gently falling and light streaming through glass found their way into that story.

When I left the church during the flood, I was surprised how quickly the water flowed down the streets and pooled in any place it could. The deepening pools of water I had to slog through on the way back to campus barely registered in my mind. I relished the deluge, my senses sharpened from my time in the church's silent dimness. I remembered the story of God's covenant to never again destroy the earth by water. I could not foresee the floods to come in those four years I spent in Williamsport, but I knew I had found an ark. The very brick and mortar of the church with its every symbol revealed what I cannot justly articulate and led me back to holy with new connections – safety, wisdom, metaphor, covenant, and most memorably, grace.

I began thinking of that recurring holy feeling as grace, and I did not fully realize the magnitude of that shift in mindset. Feeling some sense of holiness, however powerful, is broad and general. In the flow of metaphor and the push and pull of wisdom I searched for in school and in church, grace is what spilled into my midst. Grace demands a clearer, stronger faith. Grace acknowledges that the presence of God is real and immediate. Grace is what I dared to call that feeling that drew me to church. It returned when I attended a performance of Durufle's "Requiem" at the church. It lived in the heft of the air at Saint Boniface and fringed Father McGough's words. I began noticing it slipping into my everyday life, mostly in fellowship with friends and private learning and prayer. I learned how to carry it beyond the church doors, and it carried me.

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January 2015-July 2015 – Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, Indiana, PA

Grace needs to be nourished, sometimes as often as moment by moment. It can starve as soon as one sets it aside to attend to life's demands. I killed grace again and again, but it would always rise once more, never quite the same as it was before. With grace, nothing ever seemed to happen the same way twice. When I moved to the town of Indiana for about half a year, my sense of grace waxed and waned against the backdrop of a new church.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux is a fortress on the highest hill in town. Its prow-like apex cut into the sky, much like Saint Boniface's. The entire town was visible from the edge of the property, and a new swell of wind curled around the stony walls every few minutes, even on the calmest day. At that time, I lived in an apartment at the foot of that hill. In order to attend a mass or visit the church on my own, I would have to take the steep road that snaked through the belly of the church's cemetery. I usually walked, so by the time I slipped into a pew, my heart was hammering from my chest to my fingertips.

I went to confession for the first time on my own around the same time I became a regular, though temporary, parishioner at Saint Bernard. I never made an effort to go often, as I was supposed to. The mechanics of confessing to a mediator, the priest, never meshed with me. But that did not stop grace from living there. Grace never truly needed my blind belief as much as it needed my openness. My mind could deny grace easily with skepticism and qualifications, but often it blew right past my thoughts and took over, whether it confirmed my efforts or fought against them. So even if I began a confession cynically, grace would still come blasting through those strange, spiritual radio antennas lodged somewhere in my ribcage and flanking my spine. So I went, and I was glad that I went.

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To me, a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward turn. Even if I did not believe exactly what the church taught about the sacraments, I understood them because I have been tuned into the physicality of church since I was young. Signs portrayed meaning, metaphor translated concepts. Words, sounds, colors, and forms were never meaningless in church, and I sought them. Sacraments are exactly like that. They were human efforts to turn the physical world – objects, symbols, actions – into instruments of spiritual understanding.

My understanding and appreciation of sacraments never disappeared, but my belief in them wavered. As I sat in mass one evening, my hands and lap flecked with the colors of the sunset flowing through stained glass, my mind stepped out of the worship space as the priest held up the bread and wine for blessing. I half-sung, half-whispered the amens of the doxology, pinning my gaze to the red fleck on my hand and thinking of myself as a liar because I did not believe.

One of the most common pieces of evidence cited against the Catholic mass, from Protestants and atheists alike, involves the transubstantiation of the Eucharist. The church teaches that, during the Eucharistic blessings, the substance of the bread and wine physically and spiritually changes into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. It is not an easy thing to believe, and I doubted I was the only member of the church who struggled with it.

Yet we all professed it, and that made me feel like a liar. Before that evening, I had come to terms with multiple points of disagreement between myself and the church's teachings. My analytical bent was quick to dress itself in doubt, relishing it like a fine robe. But grace won every time, whether I called it holy in my naive understanding or dared to call it grace, as I did for a while. I was comfortable as a devout doubter because that feeling gave me reassurance that God was greater than human conceptions, including the church's teachings.

Doubting the Eucharist, however, went beyond those previous occasions in a way I struggle to grasp. Once I doubted that, I felt as if I was a few steps away from doubting everything. Once I proved myself a liar, I began building walls I never built before. I felt small sitting alone in my pew, peeking over rows of ashy, snowy, and sandy-haired heads. The prayers blended, my attention wavered, and the flecks on me disappeared as the sun dipped beneath the mountain. I partook in communion without thinking, and when I sat back down, I wondered just how often I had mindlessly received this sacrament. My thoughts came back to the feeling of grace, absent that evening. Without that sensation, I thought, this would all feel empty. Is that really the only reason I went? Because I craved the satisfaction of the feeling mass happened to give me? Wasn't I supposed to deny myself and take up my cross?

Twice I missed mass. I took walks in the cemetery and on the road that skirted the church property, but I never made it to the doors. I lingered in the mausoleum on some days and by the statue of the Virgin Mary situated within a dome of jutting rocks on other days, but I always started down the hill toward home before even considering the climb to Saint Bernard.

The sum of everyday life's faithlessness compounded itself with the twinge of disbelief and self-doubt that began during the Eucharist. I soon found that grace, a term that had become as remote as the absent feeling it represented, is able to surmount criticisms and doubts born of a rational yet faith-filled mind, but it does not so easily reach a soul that has willfully blinded and deafened itself.

On a cloudy, unremarkable Tuesday in Indiana, I took a walk, beginning in the surrounding neighborhood, through the cemetery, and up the road around the church. I walked by the woods, the church's hill sharply sloping on the other side of the road. I was answering some new messages on my phone when the wind began tossing through the underbrush and whistling past trees. Its power grew as I walked along, and I ignored it after making the quick assumption that it was normal for the hill to be windy. But it only picked up. Dark, heavy clouds were sweeping over the quiet, slate-gray haze that had ruled the earlier part of the day. I tore my attention away from my phone and decided to turn around where the sidewalk ended a short distance ahead. When I neared the top of the hill, at a crossroads between the edge of the church property and the steep road that led away from it, the wind had possessed the hill's natural debris and began pitching it down the hill toward the woods. Pirouetting leaves gathered into cyclones and sticks skittered across the pavement. Rain fell in short, uneven spells, noisy gusts muffling the patter of its landing.

I stood atop the hill in the heart of a compass, pivoting between the low road to the neighborhoods, the way to the cemetery from where I came, the grassy knoll leading to the woods, and the church. The wind tore me out of my wondering, and I ran for the church. Between gusts, the rife smell of springtime rose from the rain, thrilling my mild fear into excitement. In the sky beyond the church, stretching across the town hunched below, the clouds swirled into thick, folding forms tinged with deep blue and that rare shade of green that only appears in the sky during nature's more tumultuous fits.

As I neared the church, I started laughing. The wind swallowed up my laughter the moment it passed my lips, but I was overjoyed. I looked up, said, "Alright, you have my attention!" and stepped into that lovely fortress.

In my joy, I turned the storm into a sacrament and nearly regarded it as divine, but when I calmed down, I knew I still lacked the boldness to court grace in the way I used to. I regarded my response to the storm as almost funny. But even so, the walls were gone. What I had built from my unbelief and maintained for weeks was taken down by a single moment of awe.

August 2015 – Saint Philip the Apostle, Lancaster, PA

Father Sherdel finished his closing prayer with a blessing and a charge to take the love of God into the world in prayer and action. After a "thanks be to God" from the congregation, the closing hymn commenced and the procession exited.

My first mass at Saint Philip's had ended, and I lingered in my pew as the worship space emptied out. I was glad to have found the church. My father, having grown up in the Lancaster area, tipped me off to the "circle church." I had never seen such a unique design. Having been accustomed to arks and fortresses, the glassy circle with thin, white beams surprised me and made me feel at peace.

When the church was nearly empty, I stayed to admire the Stations of the Cross, beautifully depicted in the stained glass that enclosed the entirety of the room. Each piece of glass glowed like a gently flickering ember as the sun began to set. The deceased members of the parish were honored during that mass, and an assemblage of candles near the steps to the altar blazed in memory of them. Even when I walked through the dark parking lot, I could see the flames ripple and contract behind the glass. I ended up making a habit of lingering, the gentle glow of the space seeming to manifest within me during those quiet moments.

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Although my time at Saint Philip's will most likely be short, spanning the time of another English degree, I have found a home there. Feeling at home in four different churches proved to me that I never really left any of them behind. Holiness, awe, and even grace wove their way back into my life, both inside and outside church. Those feelings, however elusive, have diversified into new meaning. I strive for holiness in my conduct, I seek awe in the beauty of creation, and I fall down before grace with profuse gratitude. Churches are vessels of that life-changing trinity, a trinity which continues to transform me into a walking, breathing cathedral.

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