

My First Lover

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I live a complicated relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. Much like a once promising love affair, I wonder some days if I have lingered too long, chasing after a bygone feeling, a remembered dream.

In my earliest memory of church, I kneel in the pew on a Sunday morning as the sun throws rainbow-coloured patterns across the bowed heads and clasped hands of my brothers, sisters and parents. I am mesmerized. I suppose you could say this was like that first awareness across the room of a handsome stranger - or is that devil? Our eyes meet, and hold. But this early vision of Church is limited to the superficial and immediate. It looks good. It feels right. It fits with where my life is then. I am very young.

Very quickly after that first encounter, my fledgling desire turns to outright passion. I experience true love in the arms of my Church. It lifts me up, shows me higher places, reveals me to myself, brings me to God. And I learn. My Church has charisma, but it also has depth. Like an older, more experienced lover it shares with me both the wisdom of its years, the wealth of its knowledge, and the depths of its heart.

In those middle years, I don't really mind its paternal attitude. Of course father knows best. The failings are mine. I push niggling doubts aside, and suppress my own subversive thoughts. Good girls don't question. Good girls just behave.

But the more I learn about Christ, the more I explore the truth, the more I follow the Church's own teaching to study, reflect and pray, the less sure I become. Even so, I tell myself that I can make my Church change. Just give me time.

As I get older and experience life on my own, I begin to see more of my Church's faults and fewer of its virtues. Perhaps I had fallen in love too young. The stories that once thrilled me now appear one-sided and old-fashioned. My lover is riddled with prejudices, flaws, blemishes, imperfections, and an uncertain past. I learn of the Crusades, I study the Inquisition, I reel at the sex abuse cover-ups. And not once do I hear a woman preach. I could live even with this, maybe, if only my Church were willing to discuss it with me. But this relationship demands my silence.

We have fights. My role as a woman, our relationship to other faiths, even the tedium of the music, all these can trigger a battle. Our disputes start rationally enough but by the end I am making accusations, and shouting invectives. Finally I launch myself screaming at my Church, hurling myself against its cold stone façade, sobbing at its unyielding walls. My lover stands there immovable, pitying my disordered displays of emotion, raising eyebrows at my feminine weakness. And as I beat heavily on my lover's armoured chest, only my hands bleed.

We separate for a while, my Church and I. In that empty space, I enter other relationships, and find love in other communities. But there is always something missing. I have grown accustomed to the face of my first lover. I miss the way we danced, and yearn for the weekend magic that is such an important part of love affairs. My other lovers, good honest Churches, just don't speak my language.

So I go back. On a trial basis you understand. But what is meant to be a short 'exploration of our potential compatibility' stretches from weeks into years, and I suppose you could say that at this point my Church and I are living together. As a Catholic lay chaplain in a Catholic school, people sometimes even mistake me for my Church.

And so we come to today. People who know me know also the depths of my dissatisfaction with my living arrangements. But somehow I stay. You see my Church, like all good lovers, is mercurial and multi-faceted. Just as I finish packing my bags, just as I prepare to walk out the door, it shows me another side. It may be blind to its own faults and deaf to my needs, but it is not silent on injustice in the world.

Beneath that public exterior there exists a complex network of interconnected dreamers, striving to follow in Christ's footsteps to create a better Earth. The Catholic Worker movement, San Egidio, the Franciscans, the Benedictines, my own school community - all these quiet dimensions of my Church - show me a way to stay with my lover and live at least some of the time that old dream of true love. When the abusive gargoyle in the abbey threatens to drive me away, I surround myself with angels in the streets.

But the gargoyle has the power in my Church it seems, and I wonder how much longer it will put up with me. Will I find my bags packed for me and waiting at the door one day? Perhaps. Rather than mellowing with age and softening its harsh edges, my Church is hardening into a chauvinistic, cantankerous and judgemental old man. With each passing year, it becomes more jealous of those who could woo me away, more particular in how things should be done. More and more it seems even to mistake its own image for that of God.

I am not sure how long I can live with this. I am not sure on the bad days why I still cling to this damaged, destructive, dismal excuse for love. Perhaps I still see the good inside. Perhaps I think I can fix it. Perhaps it is a matter of faith. But faith, without hope and love, becomes a pale shadow of its own true magnificence. In any relationship, the future is dim, hidden, unpredictable. I pray mine becomes one of love once again.