COUNTERPOINTS

I'm still faithful



Matthew Gonzalez
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

My Catholic faith is all I know, and I'm standing by it.

Trigger warning: Suicide

As a child, I was taught to combat personal hardships with my Catholic faith.

It was simple. Didn't get the toy I wanted? Say three Hail Marys. Not allowed to go to a sleepover? Two Our Fathers were in order.

Going to a Catholic middle school was a generally positive experience for me, attending Mass on Fridays with my church family was a blast and singing songs whose lyrics were much too complicated for my little mind to comprehend was a great time.

My worries were rooted in what game I was going to play at recess and what time my mom was going to drop off my Subway sandwich for lunch.

Inevitably I grew up and my hardships became more complex.

It was in my senior year at St. Monica Catholic High School that the not-so-well-kept secret of my homosexuality began to haunt me every time I prayed.

I was scared that God didn't accept prayers that came from the closet.

I was fortunate enough to be a part of a church that I believe to be welcoming, and will continue to pray to a God I know to be forgiving and full of love.

The overarching notion that being gay was a sin in Catholicism weighed heavily on my religious psyche in my teenage years. How could I find comfort in praying to a God who may not love or accept me?

As backwards as that might sound, I chose to believe that my faith, even if I was gay, was still valid in my personal God's eyes.

While I subscribed to the idea that my sexuality simply didn't align with the views and beliefs of the religion I grew up practicing, I continued to pray.

Comfort in my religion came with a lot of reflection.

The mantra of my high school's church was "All Are Welcome Here" and I have always found great solace in that phrase, and it gave me hope that my sexuality didn't completely negate the faith I had built since I was a kid.

Along with this, I didn't ever remember hearing teachers, priests or my church's monsignor condemn same-sex relationships or embrace homophobic or misogynistic viewpoints.

So much of my fear and doubt in my religion came from generalizations of Catholicism and the "man shall not lay with man" philosophy that I never personally saw.

Granted, I went to school in Santa Monica, so I am fully aware that my positive experience in Catholic school might be personal to me.

Just because I was never exposed to a cult-like, punitive form of Catholicism, I cannot disregard other people's negative experiences with the church.

My heart breaks for queer kids who have had religion thrown in their face as a way to scare, demean or invalidate them or their lifestyle.

At its core, I believe that true Catholicism should embrace diversity and censure belittling people for something they cannot control, including sexuality.

Juggling faith, identity and sexual orientation can contribute to the destruction of physical and mental well-being among religious queers according to a 2015 Polish study done by Igor J. Pietkiewicz and Monika Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek.

Queer participants reported having depressive moods, self-loathing and suicidal ideations in regards to religious identity according to the same study.

The dichotomy between growing up in a religious environment and being a gay man is something I struggle with everyday.

I am often uncomfortable when people around me bash religion, but I also understand that the center of one's conception of faith is their own experience.

Unfortunately more often than not, queer kids are subject to the worst parts of religion, the deep-seated hateful side that is present in many religions, not just Catholicism.

I was fortunate enough to be a part of a church that I believe to be welcoming, and will continue to pray to a God I know to be forgiving and full of love.

To me, the beauty of religion is its nuance. Scriptures are to be interpreted individually, everyone's vision of a "higher being" is different.

I continue to be steadfast in my faith, a faith based in Catholicism but shaped by me and my relationship with my God.

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ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY ESCOBEDO

I've lost faith



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Catholic elementary school pushed me away from the Church.

Trigger warnings: homophobia, transphobia and suicide.

Having to face your own mortality at the ripe age of six-years-old is not best for your psyche.

The Catholic Church's moral absolutism devastated me before I could even really understand the difference between "good" and "bad."

Try juggling the moral implications of your everyday decision making on top of realizing you're queer.

From second to eighth grade, I attended a private Catholic school in Sacramento. The nicest way I could describe my experience would probably be akin to being in a cult for six years of my life.

I remember how uncomfortable I felt in class when my seventh grade religion teacher said the only marriage valid in the eyes of the church was between a man and a woman.

I sank into the wooden church pew as the priest droned on about the shame our country was facing by legalizing same-sex marriage, a moment that should have been celebrated.

I would go to church twice a week, on Fridays with my entire school and again on Sundays with my parents.

If you've never been to a Catholic Church, it's a lot of sitting down, standing up, sitting back down again and thinking about the inevitability of death.

Church always made my chest feel tight.

So much of its teachings revolve around how your current actions will result in either paradise and oneness with God or eternal damnation in the flames of hell.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but it feels a bit obnoxious and counterintuitive to only do good things for the sake of avoiding punishment.

I have been depressed since the fourth grade and I was unable to get professional help until my sophomore year of high school.

Before getting help, I was told that I was ungrateful for God's blessings in my life, that I should just pray and find solace in "Him" instead of feeling sad.

While I might have had a genetic predisposition to mental illness, I largely attributed my distress to thinking about death so much because of the Catholic Church.

By the way, suicide and thinking about suicide is a sin too.

As a child, the idea of the end of the world, the second coming of Christ and judgment day, scared the absolute shit out of me.

In the Catholic Church, the second coming of Christ will happen instantaneously and without warning. Everyone will die and their souls will be judged by God directly according to the "Catechism of the Catholic Church."

The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" contains fundamental Christian truths formulated in a way that facilitates the Church's understanding according to the United States Conference of Bishops website.

Though the "Catechism" calls for gay individuals to be treated with compassion and respect, it refers to homosexual acts as "objectively disordered."

On top of rejection of homosexuality, the U.S. Conference of Bishops also reject gender transition.

Learning that your existence as a queer middle schooler is "objectively disordered" isn't the best news to hear while you're still trying to figure out who you are as a person.

I felt like a bad person for being queer and for thinking about death, a double whammy.

I have always been a curious child growing up, asking incessant questions about how the world worked to the annoyance of the adults that had to deal with me. Catholicism always left me with more questions than answers.

What was so bad about Eve eating the apple to know the difference between good and evil?

Was God really cruel enough to wipe out all life on Earth except for one family and their boat full of random animals?

Why do I feel guilty for existing?

If you've never been to a Catholic Church, it's a lot of sitting down, standing up, sitting back down again and thinking about the inevitability of death.

As I got older, I realized that some of the questions I had could not be answered by my religion.

I had to figure it out on my own.

When I finally received counseling for depression and anxiety, I was able to talk to others my age who went through similar struggles to me, as well as a professional therapist who never told me to just "pray it away."

I find comfort in talking about these feelings with my friends from elementary school who experienced growing up in the same confusing, hurtful environment.

Despite receiving baptism, holy communion and confirmation, I'd like to think I have now distanced myself entirely from the Catholic Church.

I have stopped attending church for six years now and I am more at peace without a religion than I ever was following a church that did not want me.

Follow Irene on X (formerly Twitter) @MilanezIrene

