

# Letters of ENCOURAGEMENT

God Loves You  No Matter What

August 3, 2022

A Note from Pastor April

**Dear Friends,**

*“When life brings you full circle, pay attention.  
There’s a lesson there.”*

~Mandy Hale

I was eight years old the first time I remember attending Catholic Mass with my grandmother.

While some of the rituals felt different from the Methodist church I was used to (why did people keep touching their foreheads and shoulders?), others seemed familiar.

I knew you were supposed to stand up when the songs started, and most of the words of the Lord’s Prayer were the same. When it came time for communion, I was already standing in line before my grandmother realized what was happening.

I was confused when she came up behind me and started gently escorting me out of the line.

“Don’t worry Grandma, I’ve got this! You take the bread, and you dip it in the cup. No problem.”

I wasn’t expecting what came next.

“No April. You aren’t allowed to take it. You aren’t Catholic.”

My eight-year-old mind simply could not make sense of this. I was indignant. Not allowed? What was the meaning of this?

It was on that day that I decided I would have nothing to do with the Catholic church. During each visit, I found a way to get out of going to church with my grandmother. I

quietly protested this injustice by refusing to say the part of the Apostles Creed that said, "I believe in the holy catholic church." (I didn't realize until seminary that the word catholic in this context actually meant universal!) I managed to avoid attending another Catholic service for the next twenty years.

In seminary, I discovered some of the great Christian mystics, all of whom were Catholic. In the writings of Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, and Julian of Norwich, I felt a connection across space and time with these extraordinary monastics whose hearts were so filled with God's love. I wanted to learn more.

When I was invited by a friend to go with her to a monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania, I jumped at the chance. It didn't dawn on me until we were well into the first service of prayer with the sisters... wait, this is Catholic worship!

Worshipping with the Benedictine sisters felt different from the experience at my grandmother's church. I felt welcomed and included. The prayers and chants were participatory. There was a lot of silence for me to be with God. The worship space felt peaceful, inviting, and filled with love.

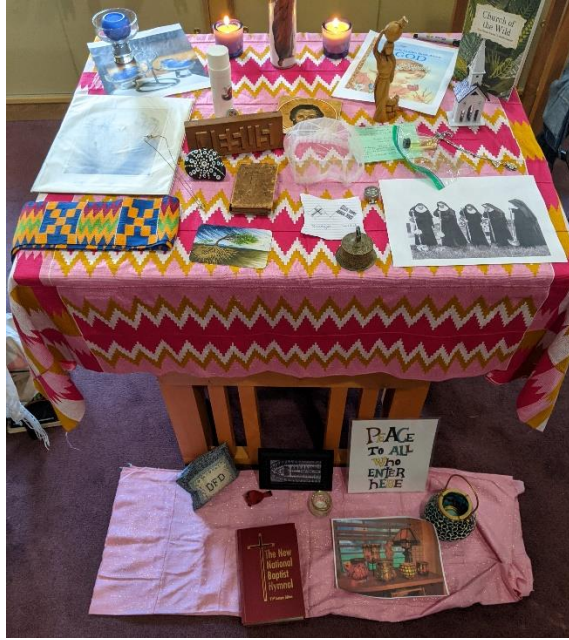
Over the years, I kept going back. I visited multiple monasteries across Ohio and Kentucky. Each place had its own rhythms and particularities, and in each sanctuary, I felt drawn in and invited into a deeper place with God.

At some point along the journey, someone introduced me to Father Richard Rohr. A Catholic and a Franciscan friar, his writings and teachings provided further space for me to discover the depths of God's love alive in my own heart and body.

As my soul and spirit were coming more and more alive, I began to talk about this with my grandmother. She was eager to hear about what I was learning, and she joyfully shared some of the ways this intersected her own journey of faith.

As time went on, I began to understand and appreciate the rituals that held such meaning for her as a Catholic woman. These rituals weren't just performative. They were a way of practicing and embodying this love of God, something my grandmother did especially well.

By the time she passed away in 2018, my heart felt only gratitude for her church community as they led a beautiful service honoring her life, even inviting me to say a few words about her. Months later, I was humbled when my father passed down to me the beautiful gold cross necklace that she used to wear to church on Sundays.



Two weeks ago, it was my privilege to spend a week on retreat with the Benedictine sisters at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Indianapolis. One of the things we were invited to bring to the retreat was an item that represented our spiritual heritage.

I didn't have to think twice about what to bring. As I shared about my grandmother with the other women and laid her cross necklace alongside the other items people had brought, I had to smile. I had come full circle.

**The work we do in the church will always be far from perfect, our rituals offering us just a taste of the beautiful story and love of God. Sometimes we'll get it wrong entirely.**

**And yet, somehow... God keeps showing up. In our churches. In our less than perfect rituals. In our feeble attempts to tell the story. In the love we pass on to those who come after us.**

Last week would have been my grandmother's 98<sup>th</sup> birthday. As I look back at my favorite picture of her, I imagine her smiling and delighting in the fact that I spent her birthday week laughing, worshipping, and praying with a bunch of Catholic nuns.



Grateful to be on this humbling and beautiful journey with each one of you,

Blessings,

Pastor April



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