Opinion
Spirituality



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September 20, 2018

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I always come back to the question in times of scandal: Why am I a Catholic? Why stick around? Two reasons — one practical, one ethereal — go back to Katherine "Roma" Jacobson, my Irish-Catholic grandmother who was born 100 years ago this week.

We called her Roma because her oldest grandchild couldn't pronounce "Grandma" as a toddler, and apparently said something like "Roma" soon after she started talking in the early '70s. "The eternal city!" Katherine exclaimed, and it stuck, all the way up to her death in 2004. She didn't have a drop of Italian blood, but her adopted name revealed her faith, just like Karol became John Paul II and Agnes became Sister then Mother Teresa.

There's one difference, though, between my grandmother and those other holy people: Roma didn't choose the name for herself. She heard a tiny child say it by mistake and, instead of laughing it off or offering a correction, she said "Yes, absolutely, I will be Roma."

This shows you one defining thing about her — Roma loved kids and took them seriously. She had 10 of them herself — seven boys to start, my mom and her sister, then the eighth boy — and 18 grandchildren. One of my uncles has said that despite the insanity of the house growing up and financial challenges, they all felt like only children. She sent them off to school each day from top of the stoop, calling "*Dominus vobiscum*," to which they replied, "*Et cum spiritu tuo.*"

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At our raucous family parties at the same sprawling urban home where she and Pop-Pop had raised the 10, you could reliably find Roma chatting with a grandkid or two in "Cozy Corner," a table shoved over to the wall in the kitchen near a small reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper." There were a few votive candles, which she might occasionally use to light a cigarette. Maybe she'd have three enormous scoops of Breyer's coffee ice cream, even after emphysema had sapped her energy and appetite. She dispensed Hershey's Kisses with an accompanying "germ-free kiss" on top of our heads.

Her voice was full of surprise and joy and wonder, as if she couldn't believe how lucky she was to be spending time with you. I remember that same tone mixing with sadness when she asked me to be an altar server at my grandfather's funeral — heartbroken but genuinely so grateful that I would help out in that one seemingly insignificant way.

So the practical reason I'm Catholic is that Roma was Catholic — very, very Catholic. My grandfather had been raised Episcopalian and converted, developing a love of the faith for himself that must have been inspired at least somewhat by his vivacious wife. My mom married my Jewish dad with the understanding the kids would be Catholic.

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The more ethereal reason I'm Catholic thanks to Roma is that she introduced me to the communion of saints. I don't think we ever talked about the communion of saints or any other theological topic. But if this broken church was good enough for Roma, it's good enough for me. I want to value what she valued, pray as she prayed. When I don't have the energy for Catholicism myself, I lean on Roma and thousands of other examples of faith, living and dead, canonized and not-canonized.

I heard someone say recently that they're staying Catholic because it's about Jesus, not human beings, and the bad actions of some human beings shouldn't get in the way of faith. Sure, faith is about Jesus, but if it were just about Jesus I could sit alone in my bedroom and have a conversation with Christ, and that'd be good enough. That'd just be an exercise in imagination, though. I have found the Body of Christ to be real only in community. I guess I could look for another Christian church to join, but I'd miss the huge family dinner party that is the Eucharist. And I'd miss Roma too damn much.

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