Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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She's old, quite old, well into her 90s, and a lady, so you don't even dream of asking her age. And when you first met some three years ago, you would bring her Communion every week, because she is housebound, but wants, needs the Eucharist. She is bright and funny, though somewhat forgetful, at least when she would repeat her stories time after time.

She tells many stories about growing up in the parish, when Masses were held in the school, because the church itself had not yet been built. How her parents and grandparents were original members of the parish. How she went to school there through grade 8. How the kids would run home from school, change clothes, and come right back to play on the school grounds. The girls jumping rope and playing hopscotch. The boys playing catch, or just running up and down, chasing each other around. Sometimes the nuns would come out to play too. The younger ones were nicer.

Father M. might stop by too. He'd have handfuls of candy for the kids. Sometimes, he'd throw them in the air and the kids would scream and scramble for them. Other times, he'd have them line up and hand out the candy, one by one, the kids solemnly standing, waiting for their treats.

There would be dances in the school hall and people would come from all over because the floor had been specially shined and polished and it was the best dance floor on the North Side. Big bands would play, and boys and girls would dance, and it was good, clean fun. Then the outsiders got wind of it and started to show up. The public was trying to muscle in and the priests found whiskey bottles in the boys' room trash. And Fr. M. said, no, no more, we can't have this, and shut the dances down. Everyone is sad and suffering because of the actions of a few.



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But there were still so many good times. We practically lived here, she said, and our moms always knew where we were and that was fine. So many of us kids, so much fun. When it was time to play, we played. When it was time for school, we studied and learned at least, most of us.

It was beautiful.

And there are more stories about when she is older, and dancing at the Aragon, and meeting her future husband, and all of them told with her eyes glowing bright, reliving the past, bringing it to life for her here and now. It's like she can see it, hear it, palpably feel it. The past, alive, the past, present.

She is present too, for the Eucharist, knowing she is receiving the body of Christ. With you, she prays an Our Father, a Hail Mary, a Glory Be. She is old enough that she will receive only on the tongue, and she is old enough to always say "the Holy Ghost."

Gradually, a slippage. She is still bright, still funny, but the memory is going, the stories becoming less and less frequent. Words escaping her, thoughts trailing off into nothingness. She is aware and asks, "What is wrong with me?" and you reply, "That's OK, no worries." She sighs. Still, you pray together, still she says "the Holy Ghost," still she receives on the tongue.

More slippage. Her stories leave the long ago and focus on the present. The dining room table at which you sit is a mess. No, it's not, you think, it looks the same as always, and it's neat. You don't contradict, but you don't make a big deal out of it. And there are happier stories where she is at the mall with her caretakers. She sits in her wheelchair, and little kids, boys and girls, run up to her and ask her why she is in the chair. One little boy asks her if it's a stroller and why does a grownup have to be in that. Children smile and wave until their moms come and get them. It is the cutest thing.

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These stories, too, begin to fade. And she starts to have trouble saying the Our Father, and the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be. Words and thoughts drop in and out, escaping into the void of her forgetfulness, her frustration visible. So you wait for her, and try to prompt her, and again she says "What is wrong with me?" and you try to soothe her.

It seems like the harder she tries to remember, the more she actually forgets. And you think, this is wrong, she is upset at a time when she should be at peace. You decide to print out the prayers and you bring them with you to your next call. Show them to her, and her eyes light up, and you pray together. Isn't the brain strange?

She can't remember the words, but she can read them perfectly. She receives the host with a smile.

Every week, you visit and talk. Read the prayers together and then she receives Communion and you tell her you'll be back next week. She tells you the prayers are beautiful and she is so glad you brought them. Every week she does not remember that you prayed the week before, every week is like a new week with unknown prayers. One week, the two of you pray, and after Communion, she looks up and says, "Can we pray these again?" Of course. And you do.

For her, the prayers are like a sunrise, rays of light illuminating the darkness, each prayer a fresh and beautiful grace. What does it mean to always hear these prayers as if they had never been heard before? Forgetfulness seems a diminishment, a decline, yet here it is a grace, her innocence childlike, a wonder in the face of her shrinking world. Jesus touching her through the prayer he gave us. She smiles at the Hail Mary. The Glory Be, for us, past, present and future, but for her an eternal now, forgotten almost immediately, but a blessing and power in each fresh, new recitation.

And God's grace and beauty upon her, radiating through her ancient body, glowing in her eyes.