

GETTING
DOWN
TO
CASES

Emily R. John

A Letter to a Young Catholic Woman

Dear Emily,

Hello from your long lost niece! When I called my mom to get your address, she said you had moved to Chicago. I suppose I should have known that but I have been in a funk for the last year. Sorry! How is Chicago? Do you have a neat apartment? How do you like your new job? Maybe we could celebrate our birthdays together next year because we are so close. Even though I am not very good at writing, I am always glad to get your birthday cards. I am proud you are my godmother. I really admire what you have done with your life. I hope I can do as well.

I am writing from Frenchburg, Kentucky. I am in my second week of volunteering with Habitat for Humanity through Campus Ministry at Marquette University. I thought I was going to be a law clerk for the summer but I was so miserable last year in pre-law I decided to do something totally different. I sure picked it. I have never been in such a small town. The people are really poor. And imagine me working with my hands! I have only hit my fingers instead of the nails four times. My old piano teacher would be very nervous if she knew what I was doing.

Being here has been a wonderful and strange experience. For the first time in my life, I feel useful. We have been putting in indoor plumbing. I don't think I have ever visited an outhouse in my life, but for some of these people, that is all they have ever known. There is so much to be done to help them. The campus minister who is with us keeps challenging us to think about a life of service. That is why I am writing to you. I am seriously considering changing to a theology major at Marquette so that I might be prepared to serve God in some way. I don't expect to change the world. I just want to make a difference in one other person's life.

When I called my boyfriend, he was stunned and maybe a little angry. I guess I was not surprised. We have talked about having a law practice together. I kind of figured he wouldn't understand. But something he said still troubles me. He wondered why any woman in her right mind would want to do ministry in the Catholic Church. "For women, the 'glass ceiling' of the Church is made of lead," he said. That is why I am writing to you. My mother has told me about some of your struggles to find a place in the Church. I feel God is calling me to serve people through the Church and the Catholic Church is all I know. Am I being foolish? Are the possibilities so limited for women in

the Catholic Church that I should look elsewhere? I hope you have time to answer this letter. I really need to hear from you.

*Your Goddaughter,
Suzanne*

Dear Suzanne,

How wonderful to hear from you! What an adventure you are on. You have asked me if there are possibilities for women in the Catholic Church. Ah Suzanne! You get right to the point of the matter! I have been asking myself this question for most of my adult life. It was about time for me to think about this again, so I took your letter with me on a recent backpacking trip to the Rockies and I thought of what you asked. Is there a place for women in the Catholic Church? I cannot answer your question with direct answers. But I can talk about what I have faced because I have decided to work within the Church. Ultimately it is up to you to make a decision that is right for you.

As I read your letter, I was reminded of my own service experiences in high school and university. They were some of the most life changing experiences I have ever had. I too spent time with some very poor people in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky. With people my age from all over the U.S., we helped build homes for those people who had no money for housing. I remember the hot sun and my blistered hands. I remember the frustration at bent nails and split wood. But somehow we managed to complete some helpful projects together.

The operative word here is together. I was with others as young and idealistic as me, and it became clear to me after the first day that I would not be able to get very far working alone. When in my ineptitude I split a 2 x 4, my new friend, Tim, would come over to help me try again, laughing at my inexperienced, fumbling hands, teaching me gently how to pound in nails. I still have pictures of all of us at night, our limbs bruised, and some singing together around a fire and accompanied by a guitar. I imagined I fell in love with the guitarist. We were from all different states, but we knew the same songs and we made beautiful harmony together. We fed one another's spirits; we held one another up.

Sometimes the Catholic Church is like this to me. I struggle in my life, I suppose, with the normal challenges in jobs, relationships, family, and alone. I feel I cannot successfully resolve everything. The many different people that make up the Church nourish my spirit, reminding me that there is more than the drudgery of everyday life, more than the struggles I face. I find God in the being together.

As you know, I love to hike and camp, and I have climbed many mountains in my time. I carry my food and necessary equipment on my back. Things are greatly simplified when backpacking. All I need

is reduced to a forty-pound pack: my tent, sleeping bag, clothes, stove, rain gear, and bread. As I climb, my legs become wobbly with fatigue and my back aches with the weight of my pack. After a couple of hours, I would wonder when the climb would end. Seemingly at exactly the right time, the peak would appear, and the glorious scenery of the surrounding range and glaciers would embrace my weary body and soul. The strain of the climb then takes a back seat to the glory I behold. We would stop to eat simple bread, water, cheese, and apples. At home perhaps I would have eaten vegetable soup, a tuna fish sandwich, and a coke. But on the mountain, simple bread and water is a veritable feast and nourishment plenty. Simple bread, simple wine, the most basic of food.

The Catholic Church offers us a simple meal of bread and wine and asks us to eat together. And as we eat we recognize the one who is often so invisible to us in our daily lives. Like my arduous climb to the peak of the mountain, the weight of the world seems to cut deeply into my spirit. I have to remind myself: Sit. Eat. Pass a piece of your bread to your hiking partner. "Do this in memory of me."

I am sure you know what I am saying. The meals you ate there with your new friends nourish your weary body and spirit. And as you eat them, in a special way God is with all of you then. The Church gives us the opportunity to eat together, and to find God in eating together, in sharing our lives together. I find God in the eating together.

But, let me give you one more image, dear Suzanne. There are numerous difficulties on a backpacking trip. A hiker knows that the water on the mountain provides essential sustenance, but it is not safe to drink. It must be boiled or treated with pellets we have carried with us. Of course there is also the threat of encounter with bears. At night we must hang all the food high in the trees. And if that is not enough, the path is often mired in mud or so rocky that our ankles are constantly strained. The ground is not always flat for our tents. And often my traveling companions have their own way of doing things which might not be the same as mine. I mean to say, dear Goddaughter, that our lives are imperfect. I do selfish things, make mistakes, and must ask for forgiveness more times than I care to admit. So too the Catholic Church is imperfect. Composed of fallible humans, the Church is also fallible and sinful. In the theological world, we call this human brokenness or lack of consciousness. Throughout history, decisions have been made at all levels of the Church which are sinful and alienating. I wish it weren't so, because then it would be easier for me to belong to this institution.

I have become angry with many church stances as I have become angry with my hiking partners. The Catholic Church, however, can be a place of dialogue. My anger and the anger of others is often righteous and good when this anger is generated by serious infractions of justice and peace. So, we are challenged to address the important issues and

perhaps take a prophetic role, confronting the issues and working for change. Amazingly, I have discovered that God is right there in the struggle; in the giardia-infected water, in the fear of bear attacks, in the struggles with my hiking partner, in the prophetic working for change in a Church that is imperfect, sinful, needing forgiveness, and love. And where there is forgiveness and love, there is God. I find God in the struggle.

You might ask me, why not join a service club instead of the Catholic Church? My heritage is Roman Catholic. My experience of religion has been Catholic. I am most familiar with Catholic symbolism; the sacraments feed me. I am in love with the Eucharist. It is a world I know and understand. I love the music, the richness, the art. Langdon Gilkey once told me that Roman Catholicism is a religion of the people. I am edified when I participate in the Eucharist in Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris or a hotel room in Japan that the very same Eucharist is being offered by all types of people throughout the world. I am also in love with the monastic Prayer of Christians. The morning prayer I say is being repeated in various languages throughout the world at the same time. This to me is the glory of being Catholic: the universality of religious expression, my religious expression. I am not alone as I pray; I am part of a greater body comprising the body of Christ, at once holy and sinful, life-giving and broken. It is a challenge to live the paradox!

I know, dear Suzanne, that I may not have adequately answered your question. I can only share with you why staying in the Church has made sense to me. As they say, take what you need from what I have written and leave the rest.

Remember these wonderful days, little sister! There is a place for your critical mind in this Church. Belonging to the Catholic Church sometimes feels like climbing a high mountain with blistered feet or building a house while scarring your hands with splinter and misplaced hammer blows. But you have found God in the whole process, in the good and the bad, the pain and the joy, the saint and the sinner. God is here with us, in the center of it all; in the being together, eating together, in the struggle. For me, the Church is like the arduous trail and the magnificent mountain, the calloused hands and the completed home.

I am proud of your compassionate and serving spirit, Suzanne. Please write soon again and visit me anytime you can. You always have a home here.

Lovingly,
Emily

Emily R. John, Ph.D., is director of institutional advancement at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.