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Title

Absolution

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Journal

The Vernal Pool, 1(2)

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Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/V312022513

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

**SAMANTHA ROSE D'MORIAS
ABSOLUTION**



THE VERNAL POOL

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2015

His body sagged against the cross while his head was tossed back and pointing upward. His skin was pale and taut against his bones, his ribs jutting out painfully against the nearly translucent tissue. Nails pierced his hands and feet as a crown of thorns cut his head. Blood dripped from each open wound, including the long gash that ran parallel between his ribs. The skin around his eyes was sunken, dragging down his sharp cheekbones. His eyes wide with red veins seeping in from the corners as the pupils aimed upwards, pleading to his father, God, to spare the ones who have put him there. His mouth hanging open, you could almost hear his screams.

The purpose of the crucifixion as a strong symbol of Catholicism still remains extreme to me. Its purpose is to make sure I remember that Jesus died for my sins by showing me his traumatic death. It's suppose to make me understand that I should blindly worship this sacrificial son and his seemingly benevolent father. It all seems so...*drastic*.

My mother made sure that we went to church on Sundays and prayed the Rosary once a week during Lent. I was expected to know all the stories, rules, virtues, vices, and prayers. It became so ingrained that even after years of not practicing, if someone simply says, "...with you," my first impulse is to say, "and also with you." As a child, I believed fully in my God and the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Attending Catholic school from kindergarten to eighth grade skewed my perspective on reality. They taught me abstinence, the sacredness of marriage, and the very basics of science that didn't allow me to question Creationism. Things became foggy when my mother sat me down and explained to me what contraceptives were and what sex exactly was while explaining to me that pre-marital sex wasn't as bad as I had previously thought. I began to struggle with my thoughts between what my mother taught me and what my teachers taught me.

During my eighth grade year I began learning about other, more *sinful* things. Words that shouldn't be uttered. Acts that shouldn't be dared. Cursing so vile that it had the old white

women in my church clutching their pearls. Drinking alcohol that I was obviously too young for. Engaging in sexual conversations with boys that held devious glints in their eyes. Immoral behavior that occurred at a time in my life when I found myself the most religious. I was faithful to God, that's what really mattered. This was at least the balance I found between what I was learning in school and what I was learning outside of school.

Once I entered high school, my first experience at a public school, my beliefs became even more muddled. Just being in my freshmen Biology and Health classes caused me to learn about things that had nothing to do with Creationism and Abstinence. Charles Darwin was a person that was a staple in all my sciences classes. I was captivated by his teachings and became utterly convinced by his findings that humans became the way they are through Evolution. In high school, I began to learn that the world wasn't black and white, but rather it was a gray. I started to doubt my previous teachings about whether or not Catholicism had it right when it came to the world and people.

Despite being confirmed while I was in high school, I still had my doubts. I actually started to doubt my faith more because of Confirmation. Confirmation being the Catholic sacrament where you are admitted into the church as a complete member. Confirmation is a year process and you have to learn a lot about what it means to be "Catholic." Admittedly, it was nice seeing the kids I attended elementary and middle school with because we were no longer awkward preteens dealing with puberty, but it was such a drag. Night classes, retreats, tests? I hated everything about it. Another necessity that hardly seemed necessary.

I specifically remember a time when I was in San Diego for a Catholic retreat that was required for my Confirmation. We were at the University of San Diego with dozens of other church groups. There were performances by a cover band that played popular gospel music and speeches by relatively young people about their journey as Catholics and their connection with God. At the end, a priest came out with the monstrance for the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, a task that blesses the

congregation after they worshiped the body of Christ. The priest began to walk through the stadium aisles, holding the monstrance above his head as an altar server followed him swinging a container of burning essence. It was a time meant for silent worship and blessings, but it began to change into a series of melodramatic breakdowns. People were sobbing hysterically, screaming through their tears in pure agony and distress. I watched in horror as people got carried out of the auditorium, their bodies' limp and completely knocked unconscious.

All I could think was, "What the hell is going on? This can't be normal." I simply couldn't comprehend how people could be so moved that they passed out or mentally broke down. I never, *ever*, felt so out-of-place and awkward in my life. But a part of me was jealous. How did all these people feel so strongly about something that wasn't even tangible that they felt this overwhelming wave of emotion? Why didn't I feel this way? Wasn't I supposed to? I mean, if God and Jesus are these generous beings, shouldn't I love them unconditionally?

My entire family believes these things and I don't understand how I am the only one to really question it. My brother and sister went through college and still, they remain Catholics. My brother ended up even *more* religious than he was before. I asked hypothetical questions about atheism to my extremely liberal and open-minded mother, and she told me she has her doubts about it. She explained to me that she doesn't believe there are any true atheists, that those people who claim they are, are going through a phase. I remember sitting with her dejected and insecure. Was what I was thinking wrong? Was I just going through a phase? I *should* believe in God. I *should* follow his teachings. I *should* not doubt him.

I stuck with it for the remainder of high school, but I started to have my doubts about the actual church and its teachings. Mass seemed incredibly unnecessary and no matter how much I groaned and complained, my mother dragged me out of bed and into church where I spent an hour alternating between sitting, standing, kneeling, muttering the prayers and sayings that

could be said without conscious thought, and listening to a priest drone on about how we should be acting or how we might be living in sin. I would stare at the various stain-glass windows and silently disagree with the priest. Who was he to judge my choices and my life? He wasn't God. I would scold myself immediately after and quickly forced myself to believe that his intentions were good and I should listen to him and the word of God, but I began to lose the motivation to.

It was in my freshman year of college that my beliefs started to disintegrate. I was roped into a Christian club on campus and it changed me. I sat with them through their bible studies and their club activities. The judgment that poured from their eyes when I told them I was Catholic was hard to miss. They would subtly comment about how strict and rigid the religion was. They failed to even begin to understand why Catholics believed in Saints and implicitly mocked the religion for it. They never explicitly told me that I should believe in Christianity, but I could hear it laced into their polite words like a snake in the grass. They would kindly suggest that I go to church with them and pray with them, but rather than a suggestion it came off as an ultimatum: Do this or be ostracized.

This club left me feeling in a constant state of embarrassment and wariness. I wanted to say the right things as to not upset them, but everything I said was just another lie slipping through my teeth. I prayed and worshiped, but I could feel my own deceit slither down my spine. Every murmured prayer, every half-hearted song sang, every downturned head and falsely closed eyes, it was all a lie that I kept spouting just so I didn't have to be embarrassed any longer. I let them string me along to all their events that I didn't want to go to, I let them drive my friend to tears just because she didn't want to lead prayer, I let them force me to agree with whatever righteous thing they were spitting at the time. I was their puppet and my voice held no worth.

I stopped going to that club. I didn't belong and I started to think that I didn't want to belong. My thoughts and beliefs continued to collide in the confines of my mind, the sounds

of their impact reverberated off the sides of my skull. It was begrudgingly that I finally acknowledged that what I was thinking and what I *should* be believing were opposite. As much as I wanted to believe that there was someone out there for me—that *God* was out there for me, I couldn't bring myself to fully do so.

I can't deny that there might be some supreme being out there, but I know now that I can't completely believe there is one. I found that the feelings that I was experiencing, were not how religion is supposed to make you feel. The feelings of misguided duty that gnawed at my skin, the feelings of insecurity that swam beneath the surface, the feelings of shame that sank on my shoulders, no, religion is not supposed to be like that. In that moment of utter surrender, it was then that I understood religion is not for everyone and with that realization, my freedom followed.