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Feeling comfort from the Cross for the first time

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Apr. 19, 2011 NCR Today

There are some things you should know about me and Jesus.

I was twelve years old in 1964. On Good Friday of that year, I was just about ready to set out on my bike for the services at St. Rita?s Church when my mother mentioned in passing that Jesus wasn?t Catholic. What a shock!

If Jesus wasn?t Catholic, then why all the fuss about having Protestant friends? And why hadn?t anyone told me before that he was Jewish?

I felt like I had been scammed and now I?d have to recalibrate everything I knew and believed about Jesus and religion to that point. That Jesus wasn?t Catholic, or that he was Jewish, seemed like really important information to hold back over all my years of CCD classes When, exactly, was someone going to mention this?

I got over it as I matured and learned more about my faith and the scriptures but I still wonder that I never connected the dots. Or that no one realized in those days that kids needed help connecting the dots.

I have always appreciated the beauty of the crucifix, especially on an artistic level. But it was hard to connect with the image of Jesus on a personal level because Jesus? death on the cross has always been about my sin and guilt and this irritated me.

Even as I listened to the Palm Sunday homily this week, I noticed that no matter how hard he tried to get to the idea of mercy, Father couldn?t get past the dominant connection between the crucifixion, sin, guilt, and reparation for salvation.

When I entered the high school aspirancy of my community in the 1960s the theme of our spiritual practices, prayer, and life was to rid oneself of, stay away from, and atone for sin. Jesus? death on the cross for our sins was the motivating principle for everything, or so it seemed to me.

The triple examination of conscience every day was a matter of keeping tabs of sins for weekly confession on Wednesdays after supper that was de rigueur for years.

First the novices went, because they had kitchen clean up, then the postulants, and then the aspirants. Certainly the first step in the spiritual life is to avoid sin, but it seemed it took a very long time to get to the next step.

Confession became rote and the whole sin thing got old fast. I remember one priest complaining that it was a waste of time to hear our confessions when there were other things to do.

?Sins of holy water!? he used to yell to the superior as he sipped his espresso in the parlor.

One day, a few months into convent life, I was feeling discouraged and the director of aspirants suggested that I read ?the Royal Road of the Cross? from the 15th classic The Imitation of Christ by the monk Thomas à Kempis.

As I settled into the pew in chapel I began to read. Was she kidding? I felt more depressed than ever.

Then came the first Easter triduum in the community, my first total-immersion liturgical experience. From the Mass of the Lord?s Supper until Easter morning it was filled with all the drama, pageantry, beauty, music, smells, and silence imaginable to a teenager. Each time we entered the chapel it seemed that a new scene had been created in the sanctuary.

And each time we entered the chapel from after the Good Friday service until noon on Holy Saturday, we would walk to the sanctuary and kiss the wounds of Jesus on the incredibly beautiful crucifix that lay on a purple satin cushion.

Over the years I have loved icons of the Crucifixion as I rejected the bloody statues of Jesus? head, crowned with thorns and blood pouring from his eyes that many people seem to favor.

Mel Gibson?s 2004 film ?The Passion of the Christ? did not reach me emotionally either; in fact, I appreciated it more on the level of a horror film (it used all the conventions of the genre) than as a way to grow in relationship with Jesus.

Once you realize the extent of Christ?s suffering for one?s personal sins, and those of generations before and those to come, where do you go with that? How do you open up the meaning of Good Friday beyond one?s self?

There was something I just wasn?t getting.

Fast forward to this past Jan. 26 in Los Angeles. I was invited to the premiere of ?The Rite? that I attended with my younger sister Emilie who is married with two young children.

Based on the true experiences of an exorcist-in-training as described in the book by author Matt Baglio, ?The Rite? shows a skeptical seminarian, Michael, played by Colin O?Donoghue, learning about exorcism from an older priest, Father Lukas, played by Sir Anthony Hopkins.

Toward the end of the film, Fr. Lukas is taken over by the devil and it is only when Michael begins the rite of exorcism, prays the Creed, invokes Mary and the saints, and finally commands the demon to leave the priest in the name of Christ as he holds forth a crucifix, that the priest is released. It is a very intense and powerful scene. http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/rite-devil-back-and-he?s-still-mad

Emilie and I attended the after party where we met Sir Anthony Hopkins and then Fr. Gary Thomas, on whom the character of Michael was based. As Emilie and I chatted with him, Emilie said, ?When the seminarian held out the crucifix and commanded the demon to leave, and he did, I started crying.?

Fr. Thomas, who served as a consultant on the film, replied, ?As many times as I have seen this film, this is the first time I did not cry. It?s very moving for me, a priest.?

I could only look at them, momentarily speechless: ?Wait you two, what am I missing? I didn?t feel anything.?

Fr. Thomas explained, ?The whole purpose of the rite of exorcism is to relieve suffering. Many people don?t realize this about the crucifixion and the power of the crucifix. Yes, Jesus died for our sins, but he also died to relieve our suffering and to heal us from the effects of sin.?

Jesus died to relieve our suffering. I felt washed over with a new understanding of mercy. I felt comforted in a way I had never experienced before -- at that after party for a film about the devil. Like that Good Friday of long ago, I had to recalibrate everything I knew about Jesus and his death on the cross. I finally felt something and I

have not looked at a crucifix the same way since.

Should it have to take being a life-long Catholic and a religious for more than forty years to ?get? that, yes, Jesus died to redeem us from sin but also relieve our suffering in this life that is so often a valley of tears? To connect all the dots about Good Friday? Must we do a theological quickstep, checking in with sin and guilt, before understanding the breadth of all that Jesus? death on the cross means?

I am sure I have heard all this before, but not in this way. Or perhaps I wasn?t listening.

I asked Fr. Gary yesterday to comment further and this is what he sent me:

> The Cross heals the estrangement between the Father/Creator and the human race caused by sin. The Cross is a symbol of mercy. Yes, the Cross leads to salvation. But, it expresses mercy because our sins condemn us. Mercy forgives us.
>
> Mercy, I believe, is the most difficult virtue to attain for Christians and everyone else. If we exercised more mercy, wars would be far less frequent and lawyers and judges would not need to be so often used to settle disputes.
>
> I preach on the Cross often. I begin all of my public talks on exorcism using the Cross as the chief reference point in explaining Satan and Satan's place in the story of salvation and the reason and value of the Cross.

This morning I checked in with my sister Emilie about her memory of the conversation with Fr. Gary and she texted me, ?The word ?solace? keeps repeating in my mind.?

During this Holy Week I am praying that more people will experience awareness of the unconditional healing of the love of Jesus from the cross and share the peace and mercy of that comfort with others.

Christianity is theologically structured on the reality of sin; it is the ultimate explanation for Jesus? birth, live, death, and resurrection. But the grace that poured forth from Jesus? side so long ago, continues in the sacraments and rituals of the Church, to strengthen us to live the Christian life fully, and to heal and comfort us when we, or others, fail.

This Holy Week, I feel comforted by the Cross for the first time in my life. I am grateful to a Hollywood movie about exorcism and mercy and all the people who made it happen.

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