

Julia's Story: How to Live the Gospel Today

Kate Childs Graham | Aug. 12, 2011

Over these past five years I have changed and grown. My life's journey has made me think and live out my faith in a way I never dreamed when I first entered college at The Catholic University of America.

I now have different reasons for being Catholic, different hopes for our church. And I started to wonder if those I graduated with experienced a similar transformation.

So, I asked four of my peers to answer a few questions that speak to both their transformation and steadfastness as Catholics.

Here is part four in a series of reflections from 2006 graduates of the Catholic University of America. We continue with Julia.

NCR: Tell us your life story in 150 words or less.

Julia: I grew up in southern New Jersey with my Catholic Italian-American mom and visited my Jewish eastern European dad on the weekends. I originally received Catholic education covertly -- although the divorce decree between my parents stipulated that I could receive no religious education (either Jewish or Catholic), my mom arranged with our local priest that she could give me CCD at home. I had to keep it a secret from my dad.

Before too long, however, I had to "come out" to my dad and invite him to my first Holy Communion. Ever since then I've been really interested in learning about Catholic theology -- I've completed two degrees in theology and am in the middle of a doctoral program in systematic theology.

Looking back, I really wish that I had learned more about my Jewish heritage growing up, especially as I have learned more about the horrific history of Jewish-Christian relations, so that is something that I'm approaching gradually.

Why are you Catholic?

This is a hard question to answer. In many ways, I feel most at home in the Catholic Church because my spiritual life since childhood has been structured according to Catholic rituals and mythology. But, I also feel fairly alienated from the Catholic Church especially in regard to its treatment of women and LGBT persons. So I'm still trying to work that out.

How has your faith changed since we graduated?

Right before we graduated, I had come into a pretty strong feminist consciousness. It began because of my involvement with the anti-war movement in D.C. and culminated in a senior thesis project on a theological re-reading of Eve in Genesis's second creation narrative.

I knew that I wanted and needed to learn more about Catholic feminism and I went to Boston College to pursue a master's in theology. I don't think that I was sure whether I would meet many other Catholics like me -- at once both committed to and critical of the Church.

Since I've had the opportunity to dive deeper into a systematic study of theology I've met many people who have modeled to me how fidelity to the Catholic tradition can thrive alongside of a critical approach to issues of sex and gender. And this has allowed me to find refuge in some of the more "traditional" elements of Catholic piety which previously I wasn't sure I could turn to as a feminist Catholic -- namely, Mary and the saints.

What is the one thing you'd change about the Catholic church?

I would like to see a diversity of people able to preach during mass -- ordained people, lay people, elderly, children, men, women, disabled. I think this is the only way that we can really approach an honest understanding of how to live the Gospel today. No one person will get it all right, but if all present are treated as worthy to be heard, then I think we can get a better portrait of good news in our midst.

What is the one thing you'd keep?

The rich Marian traditions and the legends of the saints! Here we have so many diverse stories of resistance, fidelity, and creativity. I believe these stories can encourage us to live our own lives as stories of holiness.

What's the biggest challenge we face as Catholics today?

I think that the biggest challenge Americans face, whether Catholics or non-Catholics, is increasing alienation. Through the proliferation of mass media, the internet, texting, etc. we have less and less face-to-face communication with real people. We eat alone, we work alone, we shop alone, we recreate alone.

We entertain ourselves with artificial worlds imagined by corporations -- e.g. video games, social network websites, television and internet shows. This can shield us from the real needs in our communities and discourage us from imagining together social and economic alternatives.

Going even further, I think this dilutes the power of the Eucharist. How can we understand what it means to celebrate and eat together every Sunday if we've lost most of our everyday traditions of celebration and communal eating?

The bread and the wine we share at mass aren't meant to be something we only do there -- it is meant to recall and reshape our understandings of commonplace meals where family and friends gather together in equal communion.

If you could go back in time, what is the one moment you'd re-live from college?

I would love to relive a retreat from my senior year. I and some other Pax Christi members put it together. There was no official leader or organizer, we simply divided the time and all participants volunteered to lead one session each. It was a really beautiful experience and captured a lot of my hopes and dreams for an ecclesial community.

All the articles in this series

- [Julia's Story: How to Live the Gospel Today\[1\]](#)

- [Raul's Story: A stake in and a duty to the church](#) [2]
- [Erin's Story: Patience is key, with myself and with God](#) [3]
- [Kristine's story: The amazingness of this life](#) [4]

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[3] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/young-voices/erin%E2%80%99s-story-patience-key-myself-and-god>

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