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Girl meets God: a modern love story

Nicole Sotelo | Feb. 14, 2013 Young Voices

I adore a good love story. Some of my favorite ones are origin stories: how boy meets girl. Or girl meets girl. Or girl meets God. This is a story of the latter.

I have a friend who became Catholic during our college years together after a childhood absent of any religious upbringing. I recall asking her what led her to choose Catholicism.

Speaking honestly, she said she found herself crying while attending her first mass, joined RCIA to learn more and never looked back.

I remember her standing in the campus lake after her baptism and the small cross necklace that rested on her collarbone ever afterward.

There was Mass together in the unheated church in the small Austrian town while studying abroad. And the Sunday she had her tongue pierced and couldn't sing in choir.

We love the story about the morning a group of campus ministry friends journeyed to a nearby city and met the person with whom she had fallen in love.

The new couple journeyed together through the rest of college, a law degree, a civil union and, on Sundays, my friend still sang in the choir, now joined by her wife.

Last year, after moving to another city, before even finding a job, she found a church.

Now this is love. This is one of those girl meets God stories.

A lot of Catholics think they don't happen anymore, especially among young adults. The prevailing attitude among many Catholics I meet is that young adults aren't joining or staying Catholic, whatever "staying Catholic" means to them.

However, I have the privilege of meeting scores of young adults who are Catholic. No matter if they attend a parish on Sundays or keep prayer at home because they have been too wounded by church officials to attend Mass. They are still Catholic.

I have often wondered what it is among my Catholic peers that causes them to stay. While they may have varying characteristics and personalities, I realize that one thing unites them all: They have a mature relationship not only with God, but with the church.

They have gotten beyond the superficial courtship phase. They have made it past the seven-year itch. Most have even contemplated divorce at one time or another from the institutional church. But in the end, these young adults have a relationship with the church -- the people of God -- and one feels confident in remarking, "That's a relationship that is going to last."

What these young adults have is what I would call a modern Catholic romance, and yes, "it's complicated," to borrow the Facebook label.

I call it "modern" because many of us have a choice about whether to stay in the relationship or not. A lot of our older relatives were Catholic because one's last name was McGinty or Giannini or Gonzalez. They wouldn't think about leaving because they would be leaving their entire community. They had a relationship with their faith that was akin to living in a country without divorce laws. Leaving was unthinkable, but then again, staying didn't necessarily mean they were in love.

What seems different about our generation of young adults who remain Catholic, however, is that most of us, despite some familial or cultural pressures, do have a choice, and many have chosen to stay.

I remember a hospital chaplaincy colleague who remarked, "A relationship becomes a real relationship the first time you want to leave but decide to stay." The young adult Catholics I know who have stayed have seen the church at its worst, but we've also seen the church at its best.

From its social justice tradition to its deep spiritual heritage, we have an adult relationship with our faith that knows the church is not just about a small circle of men at the top. We recognize that the church is a breathing body of humanity that believes in a man who pointed us toward a better way of being God's people together.

We know that through it all, our relationship with the church is not a summer fling that comes and goes. It is not the perfect match we dreamed about when we were younger. But on our better days, it is a deep source of life for us to which we are committed. For all its complexity, our relationship with our faith is, quite simply, a love story.

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