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Love, Lent and sidewalk chalk

Nicole Sotelo | Feb. 27, 2014 Young Voices

He probably has no idea what joy he brought us. Children rarely do.

I saw him every Wednesday morning the year my college friends and I decided to make daily Mass our Lenten practice. This young boy named Lawrence that I have never seen again.

Even though he was probably eight or nine years old, he rose only to the height of a seven-year-old. An altar server at the morning Mass we attended, he seemed to be a child?s incarnation of Friar Tuck, complete with a knotted chord around his waist and a halo of pride as he ambled into church. Without knowing it, it was his joy that helped sparked a Lent I would never forget.

When you are learning to take on your own faith, apart from family traditions and routines, it can feel like taking on religion for the first time. As a sophomore in college, this was my second Lent ?on my own.? The decision to go to early morning Mass each Wednesday with my friends was one of my first chosen Lenten practices.

As a college student, having usually gone to bed just three hours prior, it was a Lenten practice that felt truly sacrificial. It was also one of those Lenten practices that felt truly sacred. The weeks turned into a rhythmic ritual. Rise before dawn. Step into the grey-fog morning. Walk quietly into a church basement pew. Sit snuggly between friends, those who knew my faults and my flights of fancy; who loved me for all of them. This was true communion before Eucharist had even begun. This is what it felt like to belong.

As the weeks passed, everyone who attended those early morning Masses became regulars to us and together we seemed to inhabit a greater whole: the parishioners, the priest, and, yes, young Lawrence. We were blessed. We were broken. And we belonged.

Lawrence and this community, probably unknowingly, had welcomed us a little further into our new adult faith. As we neared Holy Week, we knew our Lenten practice would come to an end, the rush for finals would come, and summer break would take each of us home. We wanted to somehow celebrate our little Lenten community and it was decided sidewalk chalk would do.

After our last Wednesday Mass, we sprung outside with the colorful sticks in hand. In large letters we inscribed loving messages on the asphalt outside the church doors.

I don?t know if Lawrence or most of the regular parishioners ever saw our little love letters in chalk. Perhaps he stepped out of another door or perhaps looked up at the sky that day, instead of looking down. Or perhaps he saw it and also felt that he belonged to something bigger than himself.

This Lent, I think of people my parents? age who only attend Mass twice a year. I think of my peers who no longer cross the threshold of a parish parking lot. And I wonder who will be the next generation of Catholic priests, parishioners and altar servers like Lawrence who will welcome a young group of college-age women into their adult faith.

So this Lent, despite some problems in my local parish community, I am choosing to stay. I am making a Lenten practice of belonging. Not only for myself, but for the person who may walk into the parish this Lenten season and need to know they are welcomed into something bigger than themselves. For the person who needs to be reminded that the church isn?t the hierarchy that may have wounded them, but it is the people of God who day in and day out, struggle in our brokenness, rejoice in our blessedness. The church is the people of God who belong to one another.

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