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A nun is seen near a crucifix July 17 at a church in Rome. (CNS/Tony Gentile, Reuters)

by Dani Clark

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You gaze at your son's sleeping 10-year-old face all chubby and smooth, and you growl with anger over the clerics who conjured and conned heaven and hell to get their abominable gratification. You wonder how much soul-squashing agony could have been spared had these men and the ones who protected them not abused the power we bestowed on them as absolvers, as intercessors, as consecrators, as part of an exalted caste, when, in fact, they were capable of eating the apples just like everyone else.

It's woeful, because this Catholicism has filled you with so many good things, too many to enumerate. It has stuffed you with cobblestone piazzas in Rome's pink light and the memory scent of incense, with kneeling on cracked wood beams, your hands clasped, always, always in hope, and always trying, trying to be good. It has bequeathed to you the psychic inheritance of being the descendent of immigrants who drank their sorrows down and clung to beads and wept under saintly effigies.

Then there you are, next in line, a 7-year-old praying to Mary Queen of Heaven repeating Hail Mary after Hail Mary, and Sister Gaetana and Sister Filomena, immigrants themselves, and all the other silver-cross-wearing ladies are telling derring-do stories of levitating saints while you wonder what their hair looks like underneath the polyester white.

You are filled to the gills with this Catholicism; it is a mother and father you cannot renounce. Because you are not filled so much with creepy priests (there are some, yes, although none ever harmed you) but instead with weepy cathartic confessions before compassionate hearts, and of course, not to mention, this goateed desert-man God you can't quite imagine but don't really have to because he shapeshifts so easily into all the images made of him. That's the beauty of him, beaten, bloody, hanging there like you see happening to people all over the world; he is blond and blue-eyed or Arabic and dark — let the little ones come to him, all the little ones, and all ye who suffer and yearn for rest.

Then there are the peaceniks you have broken bread with, marched with and wanted to emulate, the Dorothy Days, the Helen Prejeans, the Jean Vaniers, the Francis of Assisi, the communities, the composters, the Catholic Worker friends who never have two coins to rub together but whom you secretly believe have more courage than anyone you know.

And right in the space where your heart beats are the mentally and physically disabled friends you helped get dressed each day in an L'Arche community for a year in the '90s and all the others who are weak in the way of the desert man hanging on that wood beam, his rib cage popping out. The prisoners on death row. The old people in the nursing home. The homeless man named John who hangs out by the church hoping for a dollar and who says he's from Syria even though you're not sure that's a name they use there.

You are attracted to weakness and want to fix it, save it, stop it, but you hide your own these days behind 40-percent-off Ann Taylor suits and PowerPoint presentations, and that is how this human empathy works, and the desert guy's paradoxical response is spot on: The weakness is what binds us. The vulnerability is our strength.

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So wherever it is, in whomever it is, stay with it, tend it, love it. You could go on and on and on. Catholicism is your marrow, the thread that connects; it is the gnarly tree root of what's inside you, and people pontificate (ha ha) on how bad and weird and creepy it all is, and you get it, you do, but you can't help being astonished and grateful for all this rainbowness in your life.

You are awed at this brightness inside you, a beam of light on a Caravaggio painting, real but not real, like everything else on the blue and green ball we all live on. And you know very well that someone else could tell an opposite story just like there's an opposite story for anything, but you won't say you're blessed because maybe it's just good luck. We know so little. We hope so much.

And so you cross yourself and say thank you to St. Patrick, patron saint of wobbly drunks and people like you who go around doubtful and faithful and hopeful all at the same time. And still Catholic. Because there's a baby in this dirty bath water, and we must save her. Because she is that desert man hanging on those wood beams showing us how to forgive. Now — at the most painful moment imaginable.

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