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Emma Mcallister

University of Puget Sound, mcallister@pugetsound.edu

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Nuns In the 'Hood

Emma Mcallister

I entered high school at Convent of the Visitation School, a private, all-girls Catholic school in Mendota Heights as an obnoxiously vocal liberal. As I began my schooling there, I was intensely hypocritical, preaching tolerance and acceptance while being intensely intolerant of conservative values because I believed such views to be intolerant and outdated.

Over the course of those four years, I underwent a pretty remarkable transition, trading a stubborn, misplaced sense of righteousness in my ideology for a zeal in trying to better understand and love the people around me. I attribute this change largely to the spirituality that permeated my school (known specifically as Salesian spirituality) and the incredible people who lived out its principles.

A little background on this fairly obscure brand of Catholicism: it was started by a French bishop named Francis DeSales in the mid-seventeenth century. As a devout Catholic in the time of the Protestant Reformation, Francis encountered both joys and challenges in his ministry. He found a loyal companion in Jane deChantel, a widow who dedicated her later years to helping promote Francis' message. Elsewhere, he encountered violence for his commitment to an institution judged to be corrupt, materialistic, hypocritical.

That dismal estimation of the Catholic Church was an estimation I shared. I silently fumed as I walked into churches that seemed ridiculously opulent with gold leaf and marble, listening to exclusively male, pompous priests lecture congregations about poverty and humility. I called to mind the outrages perpetrated by this institution while it called for peace and love of neighbors—bloody Crusades against Islam, numerous religious wars against Protestants, and rampant sexual abuse of its followers' children.

To these frustrations, burning up within me every day I went to Mass or religion class, the words of Francis and Jane—urging gratitude, joyful optimism, gentle strength, and kindness—were like a soothing balm. My school’s culture—shaped by our patron saints’ teachings and the classmates, faculty, staff, and nuns who lived these teachings out—provided an antidote to my toxic paradigm of Catholicism. As I struggled with depression, I encountered affirmation and hope in oft-repeated quotations of Francis and Jane, such as “Be who you are and be that well” and “Nothing is so strong as gentleness; nothing so gentle as real strength.”

The final two weeks of my high school career cemented my respect and admiration for Catholicism, particularly the Salesian kind. The senior class spent these two weeks not in classrooms, but in serving many different communities and organizations throughout the Twin Cities. I decided to volunteer with the North Minneapolis Visitation Sisters, a community of nuns whose lives are dedicated to living out Salesian spirituality.

In addition to providing the opportunity to volunteer about twelve hours a day at a variety of organizations within the community, the two-week immersion into North Minneapolis introduced me to seven of the most amazing women I have ever had the privilege of knowing. The “Nuns in the ‘Hood” (as they are affectionately called by their neighbors) are singular personalities united in a shared, beautiful faith. I do not have words to express the depth of their compassion and love for every living thing around them.

These Sisters opened up their home to me, as they have to hundreds (if not thousands) of others, managing to make me feel instantly accepted and valued. I felt as though I had gained seven grandmothers who loved me and all of the world’s downtrodden, lonely souls with a boundless, unwavering kind of love. In doing so, they brought me great clarity: while I remain somewhat frustrated with the Catholic Church as an institution, I have absolute conviction that

the faith itself can be a powerful force for good. I am so grateful for the religion that inspires the Sisters to better the world every day, and for the strength it imparts unto them in this mission.

As I complete my first semester of college, I will strive to continue to carry the spirit of the Sisters and of Salesian spirituality with me. I will strive to show the same grace, compassion, forgiveness, and love that Francis and Jane preached, and that the two Visitation communities of which I have been a part have so beautifully lived out. I may not be willing to go to Mass or even to pray, but I anticipate that the remainder of my life will be shaped by the religion I once detested and have now grown to love.