

Saving Grace by Becky

Monday, February 5, 2018 1:32 PM

Literary

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Antioch #14 took place during August 1995. The retreat only lasted three days, but those three days have had a more lasting impact upon my life than any other event. It was funny how I came to be there. I had just finished my final year of religious instruction with the elaborate, traditional ceremony of Confirmation, which meant absolutely nothing to me. I was like most of the other kids whose parents sent them to CCD year after year with the hope that their children would become good little Catholic boys and girls. I had never been particularly inspired by any of the holy old women who taught us, so instead of growing up spiritually, I spent an hour and a half every week for ten years doodling and writing "This Sucks" in my "Coming to God's Love" workbook. The Confirmation class especially un-intrigued me. By the time I reached high school, I had decided that God was only for people with nothing to do on Saturday nights and therefore no reason to sleep in on Sunday mornings. I was so happy when Confirmation was over I could hardly stand it. (Everyone assumed the joy showing on my face was due to my becoming a Soldier of Christ-- if only they knew!) As I left the Parish Center on the night of Confirmation, though, the youth minister jumped out in front of me and wouldn't let me leave. She invited me to come to this "dynamic, spiritual retreat" hosted by the Senior High Youth and showed a low-budget xeroxed registration form in my face before I could explain to her that I wasn't planning on setting foot inside the church ever again. So I took the form and told her I'd consider it (yeah, right). Unfortunately, or so I thought, my mother got hold of the little yellow registration sheet, filled it out, and sent it in along with a \$20 check before I

had a chance to, ah, file it away for consideration. So there I was, signed up to spend three entire days of my valuable summer locked up in a stuffy old church with a bunch of dorks. I was thrilled, let me tell you.

As the weekend of the retreat approached, I dreaded it. None of my friends were going to be there, and I was honestly very scared about the whole God issue, even though I wouldn't admit it. For along time leading up to that weekend, actually for the better part of my life, I had been working on convincing myself that there was no such thing as God, and if there was, that he was a Grade A jerk. All my life I had heard people say how loving and merciful God was. But what kind of cruel joke was that? Sure, He might be merciful to you, but what kind of God curses an innocent girl like me with this crippling disease that I have? That was really the root of it--it simply pissed me off that everyone else had life so easy, but here I was suffering every day, with no one to blame except Him. While all my friends were at the beach with their boyfriends, I was home taking painkillers, feeling sorry for myself, and crying my eyes out. Gee, thanks, God. That summer was really difficult on my... in fact, at one point I actually considered taking my own life, just so that I wouldn't have to deal with everything anymore. Obviously, that didn't work out, basically because I just didn't have the balls to do it. But my relationship with God only continued to worsen, and by the time August 11 rolled around, church was the *last* place I wanted to be.

Despite everything, I couldn't talk my mother out of sending me to the retreat. Of course, she didn't have a clue what I was going through-- no one did. I perfected one of my greatest gifts, my smile, to the point where everyone believed it was genuine. And as I entered the Education Building the day Antioch began, you had better believe I was smiling. I carried on like everyone else, singing the songs, praying the prayers, playing the games, but crying inside. All these kids are my age, I thought. They know what's going

on in the world, so how can they fall for this crap? But it started to dawn on me that they weren't "falling" for anything. They actually believed every word they said, and they were truly *happy*. That blew my mind.

The first day of Antioch, nothing impressive happened. They sent us in little groups of four or five to "Host Homes" for the night, where we sat around and talked and ate. I did more listening and eating than talking that night. The girls in my host home--Yvonne, Lisa, and Bridget--seemed to be really cool. But they all talked about God as if they had lunch with Him every day, and I couldn't identify with that, although I wished I could. So I sat and listened.

The next day was Saturday, Day 2 of the retreat. As the day progressed, I grew weary of the endless inspirational talks and discussion groups. Everyone else seemed to be getting into the weekend, but I didn't feel any more spiritual than when I had arrived. If anything, I felt even more lost and left out of this great happiness that all the other kids were experiencing. Toward evening, though, all that changed. Big time. After dinner they herded us into the TV Lounge, which had been converted into a makeshift chapel for this weekend, complete with the Blessed Sacrament and lots of candles. None of us participants had a clue as to what was about to happen. Soon the team members handed us each a large white envelope stuffed to the brim with envelopes and folded papers. As I began to read, I realized that these letters had been written to me *personally*. Every member of the team had taken time during the weekend to write me a personal note telling me what they liked about me, or some spiritual thing. Even though some of the letters bordered on corny, I really appreciated the thought that went into them. Then I got to my mother's letter.

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I've always had a harmonious relationship with my mother, but not what I would consider a close one. I mean, I trusted and respected her, but I felt a distance from her, as from everyone else, because she just didn't understand what I was going through. The letter she wrote me, however, was the beginning of the turning point in my life. In it she told me how proud she was of me, and she also shared with me *her* anger at God for what he had "done" to me. But she went on to say that I had to forgive God, and forgive myself, if I was ever going to share my gifts with the rest of the world. By the end of her five-page letter I was bawling. For so long I had thought myself to be unlovable, and unloved, because of my disability. Her words completely broke down that wall I had built around my heart, and I began to understand the love that everyone had been gushing about all weekend.

After the letters ("*palancas*"), we walked over to the main church for a Reconciliation service. After Friar Dave led us in a short examination of conscience, we were turned loose to go to Confession. I freaked out for a minute, since I hadn't gone in almost eight years, but I soon knew that I just had to go talk to a priest. I slowly made my way to the back of the church, tears of confusion and fear clouding my eyes and heart. The queue waiting to go into the confessional seemed to be the fastest-moving line I had even been in, and before I knew it I was sitting in front of Friar Sean. Friar Sean is an elderly Irish priest, a total sweetheart with a twinkle in his eyes rivaling Santa's. I could barely get the words out, I was crying so hard, but little by little I told him the whole story. I told him how I had turned my back on God even though I knew I needed His help. I told him how I had become blind to others' problems because I was so preoccupied with my own. And most importantly, I told him how sorry I was, and how very much I wanted God to forgive me and help me to be strong. Friar Sean then took my hands in his own, and told me to pray. I thought he was kidding, but he told me to tell God everything I had just told him. So I did. I prayed as I had never prayed before, from my heart, and for the first time I really knew that Someone was listening.

I left the confessional feeling as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, but I still didn't understand what I was supposed to do. I sat in the back of the church for a long time, praying, crying, and just looking at the crucifix. I began to see how selfishly I had been acting, when this Great Man had given His *life* for me. A few minutes later a woman I had heard referred to as Mary went over to some kids who were praying near the altar. She placed her hands on their heads and began praying with them. Soon a crowd gathered around the group, and a whisper began to spread through the crowd. "They're speaking in tongues!" was what I heard, but I didn't know what that meant, and honestly I didn't care. At that time I had never heard of the charismatic movement or of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, except for the Pentecost story. All I knew was that something very

strange appeared to be going on, but it didn't frighten me in the least. As the night wore on, more and more teens received gifts of the Spirit—everything from the gift of tongues to the gift of healing to being slain in the Spirit. I sat back and watched all of this in awe. It never occurred to me to doubt what was happening before my eyes.

I was still feeling the presence of God very strongly, and I continued to pray for His guidance with all my heart. At one point I opened my eyes to find Mary praying over me. "Sssshhh," she whispered, "just keep talking to Him." So I did. As I prayed, I became conscious of a warmth in my heart which spread throughout my entire body. It was as if a solid light was being poured into me, not leaving room for anything but pure love. I stayed in this state for a while, and I felt that I was in direct communication with God. I felt His total forgiveness and love. In return, I completely forgave him for all the crosses He had given me in life. In fact, it was clear to me that my disability wasn't meant as a cross. What I lacked in physical strength I was given double in emotional and spiritual strength, and I realized at that moment the blessings in my life.

I eventually opened my eyes, but I have never lost my awareness of Christ's love for me. The past year has been a wonderful journey for me, as I anticipate the rest of my life will be. As I have grown spiritually, I have received other gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of tongues; none will ever be as precious to me, however, as that night I first felt His saving grace.

— Becky Blitch



Photography by Amy Bennett