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Religious Life



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by Amanda Carrier

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Editor's note: *A version of this column previously appeared here on the author's personal blog.*

"You know what would be good? A retreat on how our relationship with God energizes us," Sr. Katherine said as we chatted away, sorting out the details for the then-upcoming Giving Voice retreat.

Katherine and I talked about the key relationships that energized us, the friendships that sustained us, and especially our personal relationship with God. We knew that the wealth of energy, love and mutual support of these relationships depends on sharing what is deep and most true about ourselves, bringing our whole authentic self into all our relationships. We also knew how hard that level of vulnerability can be, even in community, even with God.

"Deep sharing is no easy task; it seems like people learn to only show the parts we think others want to see," I wondered. Then, thinking about it another way I asked myself if I felt *worthy* to be seen fully. Am I enough just as I am, with all my limitations and failings? I thought of my own experience in community and felt the ways I held back parts of myself. I couldn't answer my own question.



Young sisters are pictured at the Giving Voice retreat in Phoenix, Arizona. (Courtesy of Amanda Carrier)

That unanswered question followed me to the annual Giving Voice retreat in Arizona. In the monastery chapel I was met by the motherly gaze of no less than 26 images of Our Ladies of Guadalupe. I sat in our opening circle, one of 30 young sisters gathered for the weekend, and we began our time together by sharing the story of a meaningful object we had each brought. I listened to others share their symbols, why it was important, how it related to the theme, and how it spiritually connected them to God. Holding a pile of old greeting cards tied with a ribbon, my nerves tightened into little knots, but I knew that I could share something so personal to me with this circle of community.

"I've received these cards over the past nine years, mostly at my entrance and first vows ceremonies. I keep the cards that are touching and supportive, ones from family and friends." I could feel my voice starting to shake a little. Speaking slower with a frog growing in my throat I continued, "When I'm having a hard time, I pull out a card and reread it. That keeps me going because it reminds me of the love and

support of my friends and community."



Sisters attending the Giving Voice retreat go rock climbing in Phoenix, Arizona. (Courtesy of Amanda Carrier)

To be honest, those cards keep me grounded in the reality that I am enough and worthy of love and mercy because of the presence of so many loving people in my life. The support of community, family, and friends remind me of the sacred truth of my belovedness in God's eyes.

Sitting in the circle, I thought back to some of those hard times when ministry hadn't been life giving, or things in community were challenging. I thought of the year I moved three times before finally settling into a new house and ministry. The death of a dear friend. The long-distance nature of many of my closest relationships. I knew if I tried to say any of that out loud that I would begin to cry. So, I stopped and let others share their struggles and joys, all the while holding a line from the evening's opening prayer in my heart: "Do not press me to go back and abandon you" (Ruth 1:16).

These words were not the ones I had gravitated towards when Katherine and I pored through readings and Bible passages, collecting resources for reflection on the retreat. I had a nice quote from Henri Nouwen all picked out for my weekend, nothing as challenging as this one line from Ruth. Yet, Ruth's words reached me that night as if God were asking me why I kept God at a safe distance, all the while protesting to God that I had not yet earned such a deep relationship. As if I could earn it. As if God was asking me to. As if The One did not already know everything about me.

"Do not press me to go back and abandon you. … I will go where you go" (Ruth 1:16).

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The realization flooded me, not for the first time in my life, that God has gone wherever I have gone. God's faithfulness at my most triumphant moments and my lowest lows has never failed, even when I felt wholly unworthy. The realization made me laugh out loud. I thought one day I would say Ruth's words to God, but here the Beloved has used her words to reach me … to let me know of God's deep and abiding presence in my life.

A true Friend was proclaiming the words I most needed to hear that weekend, a Friend who has never asked me to earn the love that has been so freely given. That weekend, held in the arms of the community of sisters from around the country, God reminded me again that I am enough, that I am loved, that I am worthy just as I am. Soaking up the warm Arizona sun, I remembered something I wrote in my journal years ago:

"You don't want my words or my work, You just want to sit still so You can hold me close to You."