Columns
Spirituality



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Late one night several years ago as my mother lay dying in my arms, I told her it was OK to go. We would take care of each other and of Dad. "You taught us how," I told her. She died the next morning.

My mother was a person of deep faith, and the Catholic Church was the bedrock of that faith. The parish was our second home and "Father said" ended all arguments. We all participated in parish activities, and Mother beamed with pride as I marched in procession, strewing flowers, and her sons carried the poles with red votives on top. In our home we took pride in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church

As for Mum: Stations of the Cross every Friday in Lent. Confession every week. Catechism memorized. Her famous nut bread in every bake sale. Never missed a PTA meeting. And, of course, Mass on Sunday, dressed up, never missed. Staunch in her faith, she never wavered. We were all glad that we could count on being saved. But my mother grieved that the children of her Lutheran neighbor could not.

During my teen years "Father said" had disappeared. Replaced by "Mum said" even though Sunday Mass, confession and our Rock of faith continued.

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Adulthood brought questions, and I realized that I was losing my grip. There is a sense of loss in letting go of those sacred childhood memories, and the search was on to find a replacement. It is not easy to let go of certainty. Not being sure has a haunting and painful effect.

Certainty has been replaced with longing. There are so many things I long to know and understand. What is grace? Really. What does everlasting life mean? Please tell me what heaven is. Where is the source of the moral code? Why do people continue to hurt and kill each other? How do prayers get answered? Do prayers get answered? Is there a perfect way to worship? And, of course, who is God? And does God really know my name?

The "Rock" — the rigid church hierarchy — did not give me much help. If only those at the top would mingle, really mingle, with those of us on the bottom there might be some hope. If only those at the top would embrace those of us at the bottom with

some warmth, there might be some comfort. If only the playing field could be leveled. If only the *praying* field could be leveled. If only there were no top and no bottom, perhaps hands and hearts could be joined in a grand circle of love and life and hope. In the meantime, I am left with an emptiness that was once filled with loyalty, pride and a deep sense of belonging. It is an isolating feeling.

I want to know. My only way through this is to trust mystery. Even though I don't want to. And to trust the theology that I was taught. I was driven back to my comfort zone: "Mum said." Mary is her name. She is my moral compass. My North Star.

My mother was well known for a lot of things, but perhaps the thing that most captures her is the coffee always ready to serve to the multitudes that knocked on her door. She would always have a smile and never felt interrupted when a visitor arrived without notice —including the hobos, who she welcomed with warmth and sincerity. And food.

She gave her children a wonderful gift that is now on its way to another generation. Come on in. Stop over. Don't be a stranger. Her bottomless coffee pot was only a symbol of her generous heart. No need to guard your heart. No need to measure your generosity. Many a burden was released as so many people confided in her.

She had no tolerance for racists or bigots long before it was politically correct. She had a capacity for anger for anyone who hurt or mistreated children. Hers — or anyone else's.

This was the other "theology" that raised me. And my mother's theology has made it to the next two generations. I believe that some young people who go astray today do not have such a moral compass in their lives. But not to worry. If any of the lost souls of this world meet those she left behind, they will not be taken to church. But they will not be judged. They will be fed. They will be clothed. They will be met with kindness.

It was not easy to surrender allegiance from Rock to heart. Letting go brought sadness, as the search for what would replace it continues. My focus on what I *don't* believe shifted to what I *do* believe, with the Gospel as my anchor and my mother as my guide.

Mum would be heartbroken today to see her Rock of faith crumbling. But she would support what I now hold close: my new way of trusting mystery. My theology is a

reflection of her. So I hang on to her on a daily basis and hold close what I do believe. She was my teacher. She would approve.

I believe in love, in kindness, in generosity, in laughter.

I believe in the words of a young carpenter. That we are called to love one another, to share our bread, to beam our light, to care for the children, to be not afraid.

I believe in gratitude for being alive, for being loved, for being healthy, for being challenged.

I believe in loyalty. In ties that bind, in family first, in friends forever, in unconditional love.

I believe it is possible to hang on, to let go, to endure, to carry on.

I believe in life. My life, your life, any life, all life.

I believe in peace. In swords into plowshares, in hatred-free hearts, in service to others, in embracing differences, in shared dreams.

I believe in mercy. In compassion, in empathy, in concern, in forgiveness.

I believe in beauty. The stars on a clear night, the work of an artist's hand, the sunflower fields in bloom, the words of a poet, the whisper of the wind, the roar of the ocean, the sound of a symphony, the face of a baby.

I believe that we are meant to lean on each other. To give a hand, to share what we have, to stand side by side, to live heart to heart.

I believe in courage. To change, to listen, to dare, to challenge, to trust, to dream.

And in the end, I believe that to be in the presence of a holy person is to know the face of God. Of this I am certain.

For now, that is enough for me.