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A pre-dawn Austrian sky viewed from the cobbled lane just outside Nonnberg Abbey's walled garden (Sarah Southern)



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The alarm chirped somewhere near my head, a quiet but persistent sound rising from the space between the mattress and bedframe where my phone had fallen in the night. I sleepily hit snooze, willing my body to rise.

It was still dark beyond the large windows of our old hotel room, the streets quiet and still. I was exhausted from little sleep, days of travel from Denver to Munich, Munich to Salzburg, where we awakened far too early on our first morning in the charming city surrounded by singing hills.

My roommates and I moved slowly about the room with purpose, quietly brushing teeth, donning layers for a frigid 1-mile journey before dawn had even broken. In the wee hours of morning, we walked in silence like pilgrims on a holy road toward Fortress Hohensalzburg, a medieval castle situated atop a hill overlooking the city.



Art hewn into rock seen along the narrow lane leading up from Old Town Salzburg toward the hilltop abbey (Sarah Southern)

Modernity clashed with antiquity at every digital crosswalk sign marking centuries-old cobblestone streets. We walked beneath stone archways, through vacant squares, past closed bakeries, followed by the intoxicating aroma of baking pastries. My blistered feet moved in obedient succession, one foot at a time, up the hill, around a bend marked by two arched pieces of religious art (a crucifix and a centurion) lodged into the rocky cliffside.

The city opened before us as we hiked upward; the sky grew lighter as birds began to sing in the bare trees. Finally, we rounded our last bend to see the ancient Nonnberg Abbey to our right and the glorious indigo, snow-capped Alps spanning the horizon.

I'm not sure I've ever been more mesmerized by a sunrise, by low clouds and heavy skies and peaks reaching high into the heavens. But we were not here to see the sunrise. We were here to witness something holy and reverent, ancient and ethereal. We were here to usher in a new day with the prayers and Gregorian chants — a medieval Latin liturgy — of the Nonnberg Abbey nuns.

Salzburg's Nonnberg Abbey is the oldest nunnery in the German/Austrian region, built in the 700s, made famous by "The Sound of Music." Little of the original abbey remains today. Fire, war and economic crises throughout its nearly 1,300 year existence wreaked damage and decay.

But the original site remains, even in desecration and reconstruction, a simple hall of worship unlike the mighty golden cathedrals spanning Europe.



A small cemetery plot at Nonnberg Abbey, situated just beyond the doors of the sanctuary (Sarah Southern)

The abbey was once a place, at least for a time, of respite and safety for the poor and sick, offering holy hospitality, extending the sort of neighbor love lacking in historical religious institutions (and many modern ones today).

The abbey was dark, cold as a meat locker, eerily quiet and vacant other than our small group of five women. The stone room echoed our soft steps as we wandered in, sitting separately on worn wooden pews.

I'd half expected something out of "Sister Act," a group of nuns singing loudly on a center stage. At the very least, I'd expected performance. But no one else walked in; there were no ushers, pastors shaking hands, percolating Folgers coffee or tables boasting shiny brochures.

This wasn't performance, but ancient ritual passed down through generations.



The nave or sanctuary of Benedictine Nonnberg Abbey, featuring Gothic architectural design elements and the reflected light of early dawn (Sarah Southern)

This place was nothing like the elaborate cathedrals we'd toured in Munich or even Salzburg Cathedral just down the hill. It lacked lavish extravagance and excess. There was no gold, glitter or giant works of art. Just stone and wood and the subtle cadence of chants arising from somewhere beyond the sanctuary as the bells began to toll.

Sitting in the icey pew, I wondered if other wanderers have found sanctuary throughout the centuries in this same stone room (or one like it), a place not just for worship or reverence, but care and safe haven. I wondered if weary travelers found solace in the early morning chants of ancient nuns, congregating early to lift their voices long before the coffee is made and breakfast is eaten.

In Munich, Salzburg, Vienna and Prague, I wandered into every open cathedral I walked by, both awed and disturbed by the ornateness of gilded crucifixes, golden Madonnas, so unlike the small nondenominational church and culture I grew up in. I'd never tasted wine during Communion until moving out of the South, never heard a liturgy read to a congregation until visiting an Anglican parish a few years ago.

I am a product of familiarity like anyone else, convinced (at times) to know where the spirit of God is and isn't. But that morning in Salzburg, lulled by the subtle chants of anonymous nuns, I felt a presence I'd never felt before. Absent of wealth and glamor, structure and grape juice, peace and beauty spilled forth from a closed room, meeting each of us in tenderness.

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We humans are prone to overcomplication, tempted toward opulence because divinity is worthy of our best. But I wonder if our best isn't gold-crusted shrines or extended bank loans, but humble hearts, simple praise, honest awe for singing hills and indigo mornings.

At Nonnberg Abbey, anyone is welcome to begin the morning sitting in darkness, enveloped by holy repetition, a reminder of a rule of St. Benedict to welcome the stranger, no matter their status, no matter their beliefs.

As the chanting swelled, we turned our heads, attempting to pinpoint the direction of angelic voices. But they were hidden from us like God in the burning bush, atop the holy mountain. The nuns' voices reverberated around the empty stone room, echoed in conjunction with the pealing cathedral bells and flickering morning light wafting down from the high ceiling windows.

Dawn broke, words we couldn't understand settled upon our souls. The Spirit met us in our exhaustion, emotion and cold bones in the simplest of places, the most

ordinary of days.

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