Down at the Cross

Elena Perez-Zetune
Gettysburg College

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Down at the Cross

Abstract
For the first thirteen years of my familial life, I walked a block to devoutly pray to statues with open arms, promising open gates- my radiant mother walking with once thin father, hand in hand like a teenage couple. My sister, with her thick night-black curly hair, skipped and fell every other step, not due to young age but simply an unfortunate quarrel with gravity. Always trailing close behind was my brother clutching his precious cards shouting, “I choose you Pikachu” along the way.

From kindergarten through eighth grade, I walked through the hallways of my Catholic primary school. The walls were decorated with images of quintessential heavenly salvation held up by blue sticky tack; the images portrayed old breaded white males sitting upon a throne surrounded by fair winged women. Although the perfect Kodak moment of God had never been captured, I was taught to kneel to these images that resembled many around but never my own. [excerpt]

Keywords
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Disciplines
Latin American Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Religion

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Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.
For the first thirteen years of my familial life, I walked a block to devoutly pray to statues with open arms, promising open gates- my radiant mother walking with once thin father, hand in hand like a teenage couple. My sister, with her thick night-black curly hair, skipped and fell every other step, not due to young age but simply an unfortunate quarrel with gravity. Always trailing close behind was my brother clutching his precious cards shouting, “I choose you Pikachu” along the way.

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On one of these typical school days, I walked into my classroom only to be greeted by a girly voice explaining, “Yes, I’m racist. I hate Mexicans. It’s my choice and not afraid of saying it.” Thoughts raced through my head: Listen, I’m not too fond of you either or oh yeah, well you’re a fat buttface and lastly, the one that remained present inside my heart for many years, I hate my brown skin. Of course, being the only outspoken forward thinking Latina in my class, I went forth…walked right past my classmates and hung my jacket next to the chaotic mix of colorful 7th grade coats in silence.

In order to snag the perfect seat and avoid the dreaded front row in which eye contact with the priest was possible, my family arrived to the noon service punctually at 12:15pm. Michoacán stood in the back, sporting baldheads and baggy jeans. Thick eyelashes and painted eyebrows of Guanajuato remained seated in the back. The dark complexions and petit framework of Estado de México gathered in the middle. The guitars of Hidalgo sang praises in the front. My parents were home.

In order to establish a fashionably appropriate egalitarian environment, we were required to wear blue slacks with white collared shirts at school. Mi mami would rummage, journeying store to store in order to find an affordable price for those blessed uniforms, only for me to hear, “Elena, that isn’t our uniform, no where does it have our
school logo. All children are dressed appropriate, see. There is the second hand uniform shop downstairs – go now and find a shirt there and later after school buy some of your own.”

Catechism class was the moment that mis hermanos and I awaited not so patiently. We sat clumped in a mix of pale and brown arms and legs intertwined on the borrowed library carpet steps – Crayolas scattered, drawing and cutting out paper Davids while listening to his story of bravery in the slaying of Goliath.

The daily special class was the highlight of my day, whether it was running around under a rainbow colored parachute in gym class or enjoying the literary pleasures of The Librarian from the Black Lagoon by Mike Thaler in the time allotted on library day. Once while surrounded by bookshelves, I felt my stomach begin to do somersaults. I could not handle the strange feeling, so I inquired in the manner in which most children do: “Teacher, Teacher I have to go to the bathroom!” After denial upon denial of my request, I ran as fast as I could to the doorway. The librarian, quickly turned acrobat, intersected and sat me down amongst of my peers. In no less than a minute or two, poor little Mary felt my regurgitated lunch drench her nicely combed hair.

To remember El Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe and Las Posadas, the congregation coordinated a service in celebration: hymns of gratitude sung (“oh madre querida, oh madre adorada que Dios te bendiga aqui en tu morada”), reproductions of Juan Diego’s journey to the bishop acted, and traditional steps danced. On holy days like this, I would nervously stand in front of my congregation to recite a poem I had written precisely for the occasion, as my parents sat listening among eight hundred others.

So as to not forget the teachings of God, each month a different grade was responsible for leading a church service during school. The offspring of teachers sang in angelic screeches “Ave Maria, gratia plena. Maria, gratia plena. Maria, gratia plena. Ave, ave dominus.” The advanced reading group smoothly recited, “And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.” Altar servers assisted the priest in the holy ceremony, boys circled the church receiving alms, and others in procession handed the body of Christ to the priest. It was a beautifully put together service, with children participating actively. I found myself in the rear handing out pamphlets ten minutes before the service would commence.

Little in this world is black and white, my childhood revolved around these religious traditions; I was shaped by these experiences. I read the list of moral obligations: do not steal, do not kill, do not commit adultery, love your neighbor, etc. Other than a few lollipops I’ve permanently borrowed and other venial sins committed, I have lived like a decent Catholic. I was taught to honor my mother and father; therefore, I do dutifully request and receive my mothers blessing before parting, the sign of the cross mimicked upon my forehead to heart. With fingers crossed behind my back, as if she could see me thousands of miles away, I continue to bless my Abuela over the phone reciting the ingrained words, “por la señal de la santa cruz, de nuestros enemigos…” I deceive by attending Christmas and New Years Eve mass.

In the midst of a church sermon my Abuela once prematurely forewarned me, “m’hija, don’t be sad when I die. We will find each other and unite in heaven”. I very much hope there is something greater than the earthly, but until the day on which I can blindly follow and turn the other cheek, I ask: Abuelita mía, can we still be together in heaven?

Elena Pérez-Zetune ’14
Contributing Writer

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