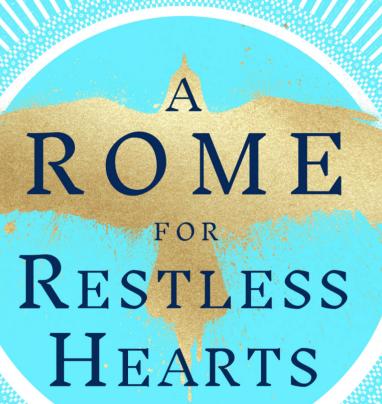
FINDING A SPIRITUAL HOME IN CATHOLICISM





Sister Lisa Hezmalhalch

A Rome for Restless Hearts

FINDING A SPIRITUAL HOME IN CATHOLICISM



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To God the Father,

the Author of all my Adventures,

Jesus, my Savior and constant companion,
the Holy Spirit, my Counselor and source of Truth,
and Mary for teaching me to keep my hands open to
what God has in store.

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INTRODUCTION

An Average Day in a Not-So-Average Life

The most common question people have when they find out I'm a religious sister is "What does your daily schedule look like?" and I have to remind myself that my life no longer looks like the life most people live.

I used to do whatever I wanted with my time. I mean, I had a job that dictated about forty hours of my week, but outside of that I was free—free to travel and visit friends in exotic places, free to binge-watch hours of *Doctor Who*, free to sleep in, free to go out to eat, to go antique shopping, redecorate my house, get a pet, or do nothing at all.

That used to be my life. And instead of using my freedom of choice to continue doing all that, I chose to live my life by the ringing of bells.

Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling!

It's 5:50 A.M. on a Sunday morning and the prayer bell is letting me know that I have ten minutes to finish what

I'm doing and get to morning prayer. Out of habit, I grab a few items off the desk in my room, loading up my pockets with keys, ChapStick, a handkerchief, and a rosary. Then I kiss my large crucifix necklace, putting the cord over my head and hiding the crucifix underneath my habit. I wear the same thing every day, so getting ready requires little thought, giving me more time for reflection and prayer as I begin my day.

The life of a religious sister is built around a daily schedule of prayers, which begin at 6:00 A.M. and continue in intervals throughout the day. By the time I crawl back into bed, I've paused my life to pray at least eight times.

The chapel is quiet except for the sound of the overhead fan. When it's summer, there's sunlight that comes through the large window behind the altar and tabernacle, warming the room with the Arizona sun.

The quiet ring of another bell signals it's time to stand and begin prayer. The silence I've kept since the close of prayer the night before is broken as I begin to chant the psalms. Morning prayer, also known as lauds, is followed immediately by prime. These make up the first two prayers of the day and will take about thirty-five to forty minutes to complete.

This leaves plenty of time for a simple breakfast after prayer. Breakfast is the only meal of the day that is optional, and therefore it's the one you make yourself. After a cup of coffee and a couple of scrambled eggs from our community's farm, I wash my dishes and finish getting ready for the day.

This particular morning, I'm making a breakfast casserole to bring to our fellowship potluck after Sunday Mass in a couple of hours. Once I've put it in the oven and washed the dishes, I have a little bit more time to prepare some food donations to be canned. This week we got a couple pounds of pickling cucumbers that are on the verge of going bad. So I sweep in to save the day by whipping up a quick pickling brine and cutting up the good parts of the cucumbers to be canned. The parts that have already spoiled are stored in a Tupperware container. Those scraps will be used by the brothers to feed the pigs and chickens.

It's 8:50 A.M. and the prayer bell is ringing again. I have ten minutes to get to prayer. Since Sundays are busy with mass and fellowship afterward, the prayers of terce and sext, prayed at 10:00 A.M. and noon, respectively, are joined together and prayed at 9:00 A.M. When I finish at 9:20 A.M., I load up the casserole and take it over to the parish hall and set up for fellowship.

At 10:45 A.M., it's time to head over to the church. I scan the small crowd to see if any of my usual volunteers are there so I can call on them to read the Scripture during Mass. Summer in the White Mountains of Arizona usually means many of our parishioners, especially the older and retired ones, travel to see their kids and grandkids. If they're gone, I become the default reader during Mass. Sure enough, I see that my usual folks aren't around, so I pick up the missalette—a book with all the Mass readings in it—and scan the readings of the day just in case there are any challenging words I need to practice beforehand.

Mass ends around noon, and about half of the parishioners from Mass head with me over to the hall. After we all have our fill of the potluck-style brunch, it's time to clean up. By 1:30 p.m., I'm back at the convent. My first task is to put away the leftover casserole as well as some of the other food that people sent with me. There's a lot of leftover watermelon that I'll be bringing to share with the brothers for dinner.

I then spend the next hour or so focusing on my online ministry on TikTok. First I check for any private messages asking for prayer. There's one from a follower in Australia asking me to pray for a family member. After I've said a prayer for them, I check the latest video comments: Someone is asking for an update on the new community. With the time I have left I decide to work on recording a video in response to their request.

Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling!

It's 2:50 P.M. and time to pray nones. With that tenminute prayer finished, I pack up the food scraps I've been saving for the pigs all week (along with the extra watermelon), hop in the car, and drive twenty minutes to the next town, where our community farm is located, as well as the brothers who run it.

I get there in time to hear another bell: *Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!*

Our community Holy Hour is from 4:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M., followed by vespers, also known as evening prayer, then dinner. Tonight, Brother Eric is making homemade chicken potpie along with a salad of veggies from the broth-

ers' garden; and, of course, we'll have the leftover watermelon.

We're a small community, consisting of four brothers and myself, the only sister. While we'll see each other off and on during the week, Sunday nights are our main evening to relax and catch up. Tonight after dinner, we decide to play a game, Throw Throw Burrito, while we enjoy a cheesecake one of the locals made for us.

Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling!

It's 8:50 P.M. and the bells let me know that it's time to get home to pray the last prayers of the day. Matins and compline, also known as the office of readings and night prayer, complete our day. Once we finish praying compline, we practice what's known as the grand silence. We won't speak again until prayer the next morning.

Sometimes it feels like people think religious brothers, sisters, and nuns are just sort of born living like this, but I can assure you I certainly was not. Not only did I used to do whatever I wanted with my time—I wasn't even Catholic. In fact, I didn't even think Catholics were Christians at all. Catholicism was just some weird spin-off cult to be avoided at all costs.

Yet here I am living my life as a Catholic sister by the ringing of the bells, and loving every minute of it.

THE ADVENTURE

The voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

—MARCEL PROUST

In June 2015, I bought a journal to keep track of a new adventure. I had spent the first thirty-four years of my life as a devout and on-fire Protestant Christian. I had always dreamed of doing big things for the Lord: I was willing to go anywhere and do anything to serve Jesus, and to help others grow in their faith. But I never suspected that the Lord would invite me on this voyage that, as Proust so astutely observed in the quotation above, would require me to see everything anew—this voyage to Catholicism, Tik-Tok fame, and a life of founding a new religious order of Catholic nuns.

For me, growing up, Catholicism was an unknown that existed in the background religious landscape. My stepdad was raised Catholic, and his parents still practiced their Catholic faith, but my interactions with them were infrequent, and what little of their faith I saw didn't seem to be anything more than images of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. When I was twelve, I toured Catholic cathedrals in France. While their beauty was astounding, I saw them as extravagant wastes of money that could have been used to help those in need. From my perspective, Catholics didn't

love Jesus as much as they loved rituals, rules, and rosaries. The only good Catholic experience I had was watching the *Sister Act* movies, but as much as I loved those singing nuns, I came away with the impression that nuns were so set in their ways, they needed an outsider to come in and wake them up.

I had no interest in the Catholic Church, but I loved the Christian faith I knew! From childhood, Jesus was my everything. I attended church every chance I got, soaked up Sunday School lessons, attended vacation Bible schools, Awana,* camps, and mission trips. I volunteered in different ministries at church, served food to the homeless, delivered Christmas gifts to needy kids, and even sang in the choir at a Billy Graham crusade. All the while I was reading my Bible, praying to Jesus, and striving to live a life of love and service. I was in love with Jesus and obsessed with my faith. I even got a full-time job as a janitor at my church! I was over the moon; I was getting paid to serve the Lord!

So it's no surprise that I chose a college where everyone majored in Bible and theology. My desire to help others led me to a master's degree in pastoral care. I had no idea what the future held, but I knew that with this new degree I'd be even more prepared to serve God and to help others grow in their faith.

During my graduate studies, a friend of mine became Catholic. I was horrified! By this point I saw Catholicism as

^{*} Awana is a Bible club designed to help students memorize portions of Scripture and learn about the Christian faith.

a perversion of the Christian faith that led people on an easy road to life apart from God—hell. I was worried for my friend's soul. I tackled each issue I had with the Catholic Church, doing research, reading Scripture, asking questions, and constantly praying.

After all that investigation, I came to realize that the ideas I'd had about Catholicism were plain wrong. I no longer had major issues with someone else choosing to be Catholic—but I still wasn't interested in Catholicism for myself.

But the Lord had other plans. In my final semester of graduate school, I felt the Lord quietly tap me on the shoulder and let me know: He was indeed calling me to become Catholic. As I perused the shelves at a local bookstore, looking for a journal, I saw one with the Proust quotation on it. I'd found the blank slate I needed to document my discoveries. I had no idea what lay ahead, but with Jesus firmly grasping my hand, I knew He would lead me where He wanted me to go.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AND TIKTOK

I downloaded TikTok in the spring of 2020, at the start of the Covid-19 outbreak while living in northern California. It could help me connect with the outside world while we were all in quarantine, I figured, and at the very least make me laugh a little. At that point, I had only been Catholic for four years and wasn't a nun yet. But that adventure was

waiting just around the corner. I wondered if perhaps religious life—that is, living as a Catholic nun—was part of God's plan for me.

I'd been exploring different religious orders (the general term used for groups of sisters and nuns) since I'd become Catholic, and had even talked with a group of seminarians (men studying to be priests) about starting a new one. But when Covid-19 hit pause on the world, I had to trust the Lord. If He was leading me into religious life, He'd show me when and how. Not so long afterward, my seminarian friends let me know they were leaving the seminary and entering an existing men's religious order of priests and brothers in southern California, and that their order was interested in founding a women's religious order to mirror their own. I had asked the Lord to show me when and how, and apparently His answer was *now*—during a global pandemic.

It was truly invigorating, learning what it meant to be a Catholic sister and how to found a new religious order of sisters. Because everyone was quarantined in their homes, we had lots of time to pray, study, and learn; but our interactions with folks were severely limited. When the community heard me talk about how people were using TikTok to stay connected with the rest of humanity, they suggested I start posting videos as well. My meager following grew as I posted videos about movies I'd watched, meals I was making for the community, and a few funny trends.

It was when I started answering questions about religious life that my engagement soared: I discovered just

how many people were hungry to learn about this mysterious and ancient tradition. The thing that surprised me was how many Catholics, Protestants, Jews, agnostics, pagans, witches, atheists, former Catholics, and everyone in between had questions. I was limited in my in-person interactions, but thanks to a little phone app I quickly found myself engaging with over 140,000 people from all over the world and all walks of life.

People sent me letters and messages with prayer requests and questions about life and faith. One asked me how it felt to know that there was a group of people in the world now that considered me "a bit of a celebrity." The weight of responsibility grew as several people recounted bad experiences with the Catholic Church, or with nuns. I was sobered by the realization that, as an imperfect human, I could either help or hinder the faith of those who watched me. The potential to do good was amazing; the potential to harm was terrifying.

After about a year, the seminarians-turned-brothers and I left the established community we had joined: we still felt called to establish a new religious order. We followed the Lord to Arizona and, to my surprise, my TikTok community followed along for the ride. The commenters were curious about the new order, our growing farm, daily life, and my work in the Church and the local Catholic school. After mentioning in a few videos that I hadn't always been Catholic, I began getting questions about that journey: How could I go from being a Protestant to becoming a Catholic nun?

So many people connected with those videos in which I talked about my journey into the Catholic Church, but I needed a format that didn't confine me to a few minutes at a time, and that would allow me to explain more thoroughly the doubt, confusion, joy, peace, and overall paradigm shift that one experiences in having new eyes. Hence, this book!

INTO THE UNKNOWN

This book is an invitation: for you to embark on a journey, to look at your faith with new eyes. This opportunity may intrigue you or terrify you—or both! My own journey required me to look for God beyond the safe confines I'd kept Him in all my life. It required a huge paradigm shift that caused real emotional vertigo. But what is a leap of faith without fear, risk, and hope?

"I'm afraid of what I'm risking if I follow you / Into the unknown." When I first heard this lyric in the song "Into the Unknown" from *Frozen II*, all I could think about was how I felt taking that leap of faith the Lord asked of me. But what encouraged me was the beauty I saw along the way, the positive growth I experienced, the love for Jesus that grew deeper—and the deeper love I discovered He had for me.

My goal in this book is to help you bravely take your own leap of faith into whatever the Lord is calling you to. Your leap may be talking to Him for the first time, or the first time in a while. Your leap may be to ask more questions about the faith you've always had, or a faith you've long since rejected. Your leap may seem simple to some, but terrifying to you. No matter what your leap is, I hope there is something in my journey that may encourage you in your own.

CHAPTER 1

Who Is Jesus?

I love You, beloved Jesus; I love You more than I love myself. With all my heart I repent of ever having offended You. Grant that I may love You always; and then do with me as You will.

—Saint Alphonsus Liguori

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

hen I was about eight years old, I was in a Bible club called Awana. We met weekly, played games, and heard Bible stories. Much like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, in Awana you received little merit badges and moved up in rank when you completed tasks like attending meetings, memorizing Bible verses, or reciting Christian teachings.

On one occasion I was on the verge of earning my next achievement award and only had one verse left to memorize. I read that verse over and over again, trying to get those ancient words to stick. For some reason, this one was more challenging than all the other verses I had memorized. Try as I might, I couldn't seem to get any of those words to stay in my head. Every time I'd ask my mom to quiz me, I'd forget words and even whole sections.

The day of our next Awana meeting was quickly approaching, and I didn't seem any closer to having that verse memorized than when I had begun! Frantically I asked my mom if she had any advice. She suggested I pray about it. She said that since the verse was about Jesus, He might want to help me remember what it says. I hadn't considered asking for Jesus's help, but what she said made sense.

So the night before my next Awana meeting I decided to give prayer a try. As I lay in bed, I asked Jesus for help to memorize this verse. I told Him how hard I'd worked and how much I wanted to move forward in the group. I ended the whole prayer with a little "Amen" as I dozed off to sleep.

That night, I had a simple yet profound dream. I couldn't see anything, but I heard a man's voice reciting the verse I'd been working so hard to memorize. What made this dream so indelible was how I felt at the sound of this man's voice. I felt safe, at peace, comforted, loved, seen, and excited. Even those words can't fully describe the feeling brought by that voice. And though I couldn't see anything, and I'd never heard that voice before, I knew Jesus was the one speaking.

As quickly as the dream began, once the verse had been recited the dream ended. I woke up the next morning and knew the verse by heart! I was so excited! Jesus had heard my tiny little prayer and helped me out!

Through the years, the verse ended up fading from my mind so much that I can no longer tell you what it said, but I have never forgotten that voice. I've walked through many seasons where I've wavered in my faith and wrestled with

doubts: *Is God real? Did Jesus really exist? Do I actually believe any of this?* Each time I crept close to giving up on my faith, the memory of that dream would come back to me like a lifeline, pulling me out of a sea of doubt and reminding me of the tangible reality of that voice and the existence of the one who spoke.

MY BEST FRIEND/SAVIOR

I'd been taught by my family, Bible clubs, camps, vacation Bible schools, and the churches I attended that Jesus was the Son of God who came down from heaven, lived a holy life, taught divine wisdom, performed miracles, and was condemned to death on a cross to save us from our sins. He rose from the dead three days later, and then forty days after that ascended into heaven. I was also taught that He would return again at some unknown moment to judge all humanity.

The way I was raised to engage with Jesus was to ask Him to be my personal savior, ask His forgiveness when I sinned, and talk to Him as often as possible. I was encouraged by pastors, youth pastors, and Sunday School teachers to read the Bible daily in order to learn more about Jesus.

I did all this and more. When I was a little girl I would lie in bed and talk to Him about my day. Sometimes I'd even pretend my pillow was His lap as I lay there in the darkness believing that the Light of the World was ever by my side. As soon as I learned to read, I was reading the

Bible. I wanted to know everything there was to know about Jesus and see what He had to say as well.

In my teen years I began to see Him as my best friend: an epic best friend who had died to save my life, one who knew everything about me and loved me, and would never leave my side. My family went through some difficult seasons of extreme poverty, and I saw His hand in providing food and even a car, just when we needed those things the most.

In my early twenties I read a book, *Your Knight in Shining Armor* by P. "Bunny" Wilson, that talked about going on dates with Jesus, and I didn't have to think twice about incorporating that into my life. I'd plan picnics, walks, movies, and long drives all with the purpose of spending alone time with Jesus. Just before the first of these dates, one of my best friends had a couple of roses delivered to my house. Jesus seemed to coordinate the timing of their delivery: They showed up just as I was about to leave.

STRAINED RELATIONSHIP

As beautiful as my relationship with Jesus was, I knew His deep love wasn't just for me but for everyone. The more I learned about Him, the more I loved Him and wanted to be like Him—especially in how He loved others.

By the time I was 23, while all my friends were graduating from college, I felt that Jesus was finally calling me to *go* to college. I picked a Protestant Christian college where I

planned to major in the Bible and theology, because I knew that however I served the Lord, those two subjects would be helpful. I also wanted to write books that would help people grow closer to Jesus, so I tacked on a major in journalism to sharpen my writing skills.

I saw this time as a huge adventure—setting out into the world to begin a life of learning more about Jesus and ministering to others in His name. The hardest part was leaving all my friends and especially my family behind, but I trusted that living life for Jesus was worth the sacrifice.

My first semester was amazing, but by finals week things with my family were falling apart. I'd grown up in a broken home full of divorce, poverty, and neglect, and as the oldest of my siblings I felt a great responsibility to take care of everyone. I was convinced that if I had stayed everything would have been fine, and I grew to feel a new emotion toward Jesus: anger. I began to blame Him for my family falling apart. After all, He was God, which meant He had known what would happen to my family if I left. And yet He had asked me to take a leap of faith and go to college.

Since I now found myself angry at the very person I was studying, I considered quitting school, but I felt like Jesus was asking me to stay. Despite my anger, I remained. I now found myself pretending to have affection for Jesus while harboring deep anger and resentment toward Him.

I lived with this inner conflict for a couple of years: studying the Bible, going to church, and serving in ministry, all while being unable to let go of my anger toward Jesus. I even began daydreaming about quitting school and

starting a brand-new life that didn't involve Him or Christianity. I couldn't imagine letting go of my anger, and I figured quitting would be easier. Then I would no longer feel like a hypocrite and wouldn't have to think about my broken relationship with Him—the former love of my life.

Of course, Jesus knew what was in my mind and heart. I still talked to Him, but I avoided addressing my anger with Him, which made my relationship with Him extremely uncomfortable.

And then the unexpected happened. Jesus gave me permission to leave Him. I had been daydreaming, per usual, about leaving school and living my non-Christian, non-Jesus life when that still, small voice spoke into my heart.

"You are free to go."

It's easy to get lost in a daydream about the grass being greener on the other side of a fence that you think you'll never cross. But when given the opportunity to actually cross the fence, you'll find out whether or not the dream has substance. In being told I was free to go, my real feelings were immediately revealed.

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach—not at the very real thought of leaving everything behind, but at the thought of living my life without Jesus.

My response to Jesus was immediate: "Where else would I go, Lord?! You alone have the words of eternal life! Wait . . . did I just quote Scripture?"

I burst out laughing. My heart was revealed. I wanted to complain, but I didn't actually want to go anywhere. This reality sunk in even more as I reflected on the passage of Scripture I had quoted. They were the words of Saint Peter

in the Book of John, Chapter 6. Jesus had just talked about the importance of eating His flesh and blood only to have a bunch of His followers, understandably horrified and confused, leave Him.

Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67–69, NABRE)

In that moment, the bitterness I'd been holding on to for years faded away. In His deep love and compassion for me, Jesus had held up a mirror for me to see my heart. I knew that I didn't want a life without Christ, and that I needed to work through my feelings in order to heal my relationship with Him.

The next Sunday, I made Him a promise—one that I have made every Sunday since: "I love You, Jesus . . . and I will continue to follow You . . . no matter what." I had made it through a season of doubt, and found my faith in Jesus to be more sure, and our relationship to be stronger than ever.

JESUS AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

And then Jesus led me to the Catholic Church.

By my early thirties my impression of Catholicism was that it had little to do with Jesus, and given how important He was to me, that meant I wanted nothing to do with Catholics.

The Catholic Church seemed to be all about the pope, Mary, the saints, priests, monks, nuns, rituals, rosaries, and extravagant churches. I saw pictures and statues of Jesus here and there, but they seemed to be obscured by everything else, like He was a forgotten mascot.

But when I set aside what I thought the Catholic Church was and started looking at the Church objectively (though still skeptically), I began to see Jesus everywhere and central to everything. I saw Jesus in the life of my friend who was becoming Catholic. I saw Jesus in the devout Catholics who talked about Him with affection. I saw Jesus in the lives of the saints who lived and died for Him. I saw Jesus in art, architecture, liturgy, mass, prayer, the sacraments—especially Communion.

I had been afraid that all these "extras" would distract me from my relationship with Jesus. What I never anticipated was that they would only deepen my understanding of Him and my relationship with Him.

Until I became Catholic, my relationship with Jesus felt like it was all on me. I had to make time for church, read and memorize the Bible, make sure I prayed, surround myself with friends who would encourage me in my faith, read good books about Jesus, and so on. All of these things were good and helped me in my faith—but they were all up to me. This might sound funny, but it was almost like I had a one-sided relationship with Jesus. Oh sure, He would reach out—like with the arrival of my roses for our first date, or

providing food for my family when we were poor—but it still felt like I'd had to put in a lot of work for Him to do those things.

There's this scene in the movie *Hitch* that kept coming to mind as I noticed this shift in how I related to Jesus as I became a Catholic. The character Hitch, played by Will Smith, makes his living teaching awkward guys how to be more charming in order to "get the girl" they're interested in. His main client in the movie is Albert, a shy accountant played by Kevin James. The scene that kept playing in my mind was when Hitch was teaching Albert how to get ready for his first kiss. Hitch explained that you need to lean in for the kiss 90 percent of the way, and then hold and let the girl come forward that last 10 percent.

An odd analogy, I know, but it's exactly how I felt! My whole life, I'd felt like I'd been leaning in that 90 percent in my relationship with Jesus while hoping and praying that He would show up and make up that last 10 percent. Now, granted—He did. So many times! But in retrospect, it felt like my relationship with Jesus was a lot of work. I had never questioned it, though, since it was all I'd ever known.

Enter the Catholic Church. I came to learn that all those things I had perceived as distractions from my relationship with Jesus were actually gifts from Him to aid in our relationship!

His mother, Mary, was the first to believe that her son was the savior of the world, and not only did she put her faith in Him, but she sacrificed a lot to do so, which made her an inspiration for me to love Jesus more sacrificially.

The saints were friends whose love and faith in Christ inspired me to be more like them as they strived to be more like Him. Written prayers, like the one at the beginning of this chapter, put words to the cries of my heart and often taught me more about my faith as well. And then there were the religious and the priests—people whose love for Jesus led them to abandon everything to serve Him.

These were all amazing new aids to encourage me in my faith, but the two places I met Christ most intimately were in confession and in Holy Communion. After years of ministering to others, confession was where I was ministered to. I had always confessed my sins directly to God, but then had to rely on my own faith and self-talk when I'd doubt if I was actually forgiven. In confession I was given the gift of an ear and a voice ordained by God to act *in persona Christi*: to hear my list of sins and then let me know that God forgave and absolved them, speaking to me on Christ's behalf.

In persona Christi is a Latin phrase meaning "in the person of Christ." Catholics don't believe that the priest is an intermediary between God and mankind (a common assumption among non-Catholics), but that he stands in the place of Christ as an authorized representative. This happens in two specific instances: in confession and during Mass. It is a grave responsibility and has to be taken seriously by those who are ordained, because the eternal consequences of acting counter to Christ in these two contexts is condemnation to hell. Good and holy priests are aware of this and take those roles very seriously, and with great humility and reverence.

Holy Communion at Mass was the second place I intimately met Christ. Catholics have believed from the beginning of Christianity that the piece of bread the priest prays over (consecrates) and then distributes at Mass becomes the very body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ Jesus. In the Communion services I participated in as a Protestant, whatever spiritual benefit I was supposed to receive from Communion had to do with how strongly I believed or focused. In Catholicism, we believe that Jesus literally gives himself to us in Holy Communion, and that He is present in that little piece of bread no matter how we feel or if we are distracted or battling doubts. Once I accepted this truth about Holy Communion, I was at the church anytime the doors were open.

I'd spent a lifetime following Christ, going 90 percent in our relationship, always hoping in faith that He'd go that last 10 percent. I found in the Catholic Church that He'd set up an entire system where I didn't have to do all the work in my relationship with Him—I just had to show up. A lifelong burden fell off my shoulders, one I hadn't realized I'd been carrying. He was going the 90 percent now and I was going the 10 percent. I just had to show up and be. He would minister to me through His mother, through His saints, through His priests, through His sacraments—through His church.

And just around the corner, after I became Catholic, Jesus was about to open my eyes to another level of intimacy with Him. One that it seemed He'd been hinting at my entire life.

MARRIED TO JESUS

On August 14, 2016, I was camping near Crater Lake in Southern Oregon with some friends when I woke up early one morning from a recurring nightmare. The dream was always the same: I was in a church, dressed in a wedding dress and ready to walk down the aisle. All my friends and family were there but the groom was nowhere to be seen. In fact, I never knew who I was about to marry! I'd anxiously stand there in my wedding dress filled with fear and doubt. Who was this guy? My friends and family seemed to approve, but I wasn't sure that I did. I'd be sick to my stomach as I walked down the aisle, dreading the vow I was about to make. The dream would always end before the groom ever got there.

I'd been having that same dream a couple times a year since my early twenties. When I woke that morning, I lay in bed and reflected on this nightmare that had plagued me for over ten years. It had been almost a year since I'd become Catholic, and I had been trying to figure out what Jesus wanted me to do with my life. I noticed that it was 4:30 A.M., so I decided to get up and go for a stroll to watch the sunrise.

I used to joke that I'd had a crush on every guy I'd ever met. Some crushes lasted a minute or two and others quite a bit longer, with the dream of marriage always on my mind. And yet, since becoming Catholic I couldn't stop thinking about becoming a sister. In the Catholic Church, sisters who make their vows are married to Jesus and will often even wear a wedding ring showing their commitment to Christ. I had learned that nuns were married to Jesus while I was in high school and loved the idea, but since I hadn't been Catholic I'd had to settle for my little dates with Jesus.

However, I was Catholic now. That shifted the idea of being married to Jesus into the realm of reality, and I couldn't shake the thought.

My stroll took me to a dock sitting on Diamond Lake, the sight of our campgrounds. I walked out and sat at the end of the dock as traces of light began to fill the summer sky. Why did I keep having this dream? I'd never had any issues with marriage, and yet this dream haunted me. I thought back over my life and mused about my many crushes. All of them had something in common: They all loved Jesus and, on some level, they all *reminded* me of Jesus. While that wasn't a surprise to me, I felt like I was seeing it in a brand-new way. Just as slowly as the sun shed light while rising, so Jesus began to shed light onto my heart's true desires. I saw in my desire for romance and marriage and love a deeper desire—for Him. I reflected on my relationship with Jesus through the years: His faithfulness, His protection, His guidance, His comfort, His love.

The thought struck me that I was like the leading lady in a romantic comedy. There was always some guy I was interested in, and all the while my guy-best-friend who was head-over-heels in love with me waited in the friend zone for the moment He could finally sweep in and be with me.

"Oh, Jesus." I laughed out loud, breaking the silence of

that cool morning. "Here I am, interested in every guy out there while You're the patient best friend who is actually in love with me."

My laughter faded fast as I realized the statement I'd just made wasn't a joke. I felt as though Jesus was suddenly very real and very present on that dock—very lovingly and seriously agreeing with what I'd just said.

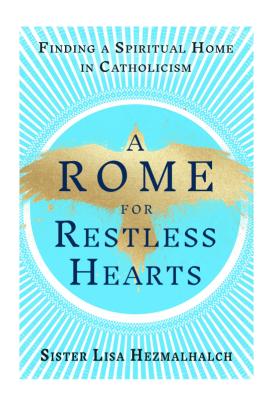
"Oh my..." I whispered. "You really *are* the patient best friend who is in love with me."

I was quiet again. I knew at that moment Jesus was inviting me on another journey—He was calling me to seek Him further in religious life. I still had a lot to work through before I'd be ready to make any big decisions about being a sister or a nun, but I now knew this was the path He was asking me to take. I felt like I was being proposed to.

Soberly, I said yes.

On August 14, 2020—four years to the day that Jesus proposed to me on a dock on Diamond Lake, I officially entered religious life—freely following my patient best friend and the many adventures He had in store for me.

The wedding nightmares never returned.



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