

ISSUE 3

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SANCTUS



*“STUDENT REFLECTIONS
ON FAITH AND RESILIENCE”*

Saint Anthony's High School

SANCTUS

The Theology Journal

of

Saint Anthony's High School

“Resilience”



Glory to You, O Christ,
Glory to you!

PRINCIPAL'S REMARKS

Greetings,

Sanctus means **HOLY**, Sanctus means **HOLY**, Sanctus means **HOLY!!!**

At every mass, we use these words, **Holy, Holy, Holy**, and that is exactly what this publication is: an act that is **HOLY**.

As you read each entry, place yourself in a **HOLY** place, go with the author to seek that **Holiness** and enjoy the peace that it will give you.

I am ever so grateful to everyone who took the time, effort and courage to write these **Holy Words** for all of us to enjoy and seek a place of comfort.

May the God, who is so good, continue to bless us with **His Holiness** today and every day.

Praying for you now, I ask that when you have a moment say a prayer for me.

And Remember, Brother Loves Ya !!! Simply because we are all called to be **HOLY**

Peace,
Brother David Anthony, OSF
Principal
Saint Anthony's High School

**Greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ
and our Seraphic Father Francis,**

As we approach the close of another wonderful and successful school year, I am pleased to offer these few words by way of introduction to our third annual publication of *Sanctus*—a compilation of spiritual and theological reflections penned solely by our students here at Saint Anthony's.

Each day it seems, we hear and read of war, violence, dissension and discord in many places and contexts. At times it may seem overwhelming. Such a steady diet and stream of darkness and negativity can cast depressing shadows upon its recipients. Such is the opposite of what you will read in the pages that follow. These are testimonials from our cherished students. They are pages filled with hope, love, faith and the indomitable beauty of the human soul.

For myself, I never fail to be edified by the depth of faith, love and hope that our students' writing evinces in the hearts, minds and souls of the readers. They are truly amazing, and reading their words never fails to fill me with hope for a better and brighter future despite all the forces that try to militate against the same.

Please be sure to read these reflections from our students, and know that what is written above the entrance to the General Office: "Give us your child for four years and we'll return to you an Apostle," is no mere slogan or platitude.

God bless each and every one of you, and may God hold us all in the palm of His hand.

Bro. Geoffrey P. Clement, O.S.F., Ph.D.
Chairman, Department of Theology
St. Anthony's High School

My beloved family in Christ,

This year's issue of *Sanctus* is certainly our most ambitious yet. It demonstrates that Saint Anthony's truly is a community where God is *first*.

Every word and image in this book is *by students and for students*. As editor, I merely offered guidance to allow the students' intentions to shine out clearly: edits were made in collaboration to preserve each student's unique voice. I published some pieces anonymously, per request, due to their profound vulnerability. Finally, I carefully composed each page with the intention of visually framing the students' work. The result is the longest *Sanctus* issue to date.

The image of the San Damiano Cross is central to Franciscan spirituality. I selected this image to adorn our cover because it is an icon of *resilience*, which is the theme of our issue. It is an icon of resilience because Jesus reminds us that our suffering is *never* meaningless and that God's love eventually transforms *everything* into glory. When, at last, He comes again, we believe "He will wipe away every tear . . . there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Rev 21: 4). Ours is a Lord who says, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21: 5).

The students whose stories you will read have, on some level, heard Christ say those words in their hearts. The most valuable lesson that a teacher learns is that he has much to learn from his students. The students who have generously offered their reflections here have inspired me to be a better man and disciple. I pray that you draw similar inspiration.

In Christo Rege,
Marwan Radi Bishtawi
Editor, *Sanctus*

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FAITH STRENGTHENS ME

Maya Anselmo

My faith helped me to be resilient after my father passed away in 2022. His sudden death left me lost and heart-broken, leaving me with overwhelming grief and uncertainty about how to navigate life and move forward without him. In those dark moments, my faith became an anchor, not only guiding me to a place of solace and strength but also deepening my relationship with God. I came to understand that while my father is no longer physically here, his presence always remains with me in spirit. I believe our bond transcends time and space, and his love continues to surround and uplift me.

Prayer became my refuge, a lifeline connecting me to God. I turned to Him in my despair, asking for strength to endure the pain and peace to quiet the storm of emotions within me. Even now, I continue to pray, seeking comfort and resilience as I process my grief. Through prayer, I have come to feel God's presence more closely, like a steady hand guiding me forward. Reading scripture has also been a source of healing and has helped me to grow in my faith. One Bible verse that particularly resonates with me is Romans 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." This verse reminds me that love is eternal, unshaken by even the finality of death. It also strengthens my connection to God, as I realize that His love always surrounds me, carrying me through the hardest moments. Holding to this truth has given me the resilience to face each day, knowing I am never truly alone.

My faith has not only helped me to endure my grief but has also transformed my relationship with God into a source of enduring strength and hope, allowing me to move forward with love and trust in His presence.

EVERYONE FOR A REASON

Emily Kall

The saying, “people come into your life for a reason” holds deep theological meaning, particularly when we consider our relationship with God. This idea suggests that the people we encounter are not random, but rather a part of a divine plan. Each person serves a purpose in our spiritual growth and journey. From a theological view, these interactions are not random but are arranged by God, contributing to His greater plan for our lives.

In Christianity, the belief that God is sovereign and controls the events that happen in our day-to-day lives is fundamental. Scripture provided numerous examples of God using relationships to fulfill his purposes. One notable example is the story of Ruth and Naomi (cf. Ruth 1-4). After the death of Naomi’s husband and sons, Naomi returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, who remains loyal to her. Ruth’s faithfulness leads her to Boaz, who she marries, making them ancestors of King David and, ultimately, Jesus Christ. This story highlights how God places people in our lives to fulfill his greater plan, even when the reasons are not immediately clear. The Apostle Paul also emphasizes the body of Christ and the interdependence of believers within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). He describes how each person has a unique role within the community of believers. This idea solidifies the concept that the people we meet are divinely arranged to help us grow in faith, support us in our struggles, and challenge us to become more Christlike. These connections are gifts that we receive from God, designed to nurture our spiritual growth and draw us close to Him.

The life of Jesus further demonstrates the significance of divine appointments. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus meets various individuals whose lives are transformed through their encounters with Him. Whether it be the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42), Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-

10), or the disciples He called to follow Him, each meeting serves a specific purpose in God's saving plan. These encounters show that God uses relationships to reveal His love, grace, and truth, drawing people closer to Him.

When I reflect on my own life, I can recognize how certain people have come into my life for a reason, shaping my faith and understanding of God. A friend who supported me during a difficult time might have been placed in my life to demonstrate God's love and care. A mentor who challenges me to grow spiritually could be God's way of purifying my character and deepening my faith. Every relationship, whether positive or challenging, can be viewed as an opportunity to better understand God's nature and His plan for my life.

In conclusion, the belief that "people come into your life for a reason" aligns with the theological understanding that God is actively involved in our lives orchestrating encounters and relationships to fulfill His purposes. The relationships are crucial to our spiritual journey, providing support, encouragement, and opportunities for growth. By recognizing God's hand in the people we meet, we can deepen our faith and trust in His plan, ultimately strengthening our relationship with Him.



THINKING IT THROUGH

Michael Reilly

I have a long history of not thinking. Actually, if they gave out gold medals for “not thinking,” I would be on the podium every time. If you think you could beat me in the “not thinking competition,” I promise you: I would win every time. For example, I beat up a kid in the 1st grade for liking the Yankees. In middle school, I faked a COVID test. I could talk about how, in the 11th grade, I meant to email my buddy a remark about my teacher—but it turns out I sent it to her instead! You could even hear about how, when I went to Italy, I touched the Pope’s head just to be able to say that I did. Actually, in every single school I attended, I have had to write an apology note to my principal. (And yes, I even wrote one to Brother David.) But the one time I was not thinking and it really hurt me (well, in some way I guess they all hurt me) was when my sister left for college. I thought it would have been just another moment in my life where I could just not have to worry about it and I would just get by. Turns out I was wrong. I should have thought about it a little bit.

I didn’t know how my life would be affected when my sister left for college. I did not think that moment would hit me as hard as it did. I did not think that when my best friend left for college I would feel so alone and what a void would be left. It was the first time I really cried out to God. It was the first time I prayed a real, sincere prayer.

At an early age, I did not think I needed God in many moments of my life, and I did not rely on Him a lot. I did not think He needed to be such an important figure, and I did not think there were moments in my life where I could turn to Him and ask Him for help. I was good where I was. No, I did not attend church on Sundays or have a prayer life at the time: I received all of my Sacraments, but that was about it. I believed in God but didn’t care enough to grow closer to Him and didn’t see a reason to. When Eddie, my older brother,

went to Cortland, it was sad, and there were rough goodbyes. When the time came for my sister to go up to Sacred Heart, however, I was unable to go up to campus with her and say my goodbyes there because I had football practice that day. I woke up that morning expecting just to say “goodbye” like I did for Eddie, as if it were nothing. I walked into her room and said, “Alright, Megan, I am going to practice. Good luck at college.” She sprang out of her bed and gave me a big hug. As I walked out, I was fighting back tears. Once I hit the stairs, the tears won. I sat there on my stairs and then I got up after a couple of minutes and drove to practice. I was finally thinking – thinking, “How did I not see this coming? And who am I going to drive to school with every day? And get Dunkin’ with? Who am I going to make fun of people with when they try to park? Who am I going to die laughing with at dinner? What am I supposed to do now that I am not with my best friend every day?”

“Having a closed mind with God is a terrible way to live.”

I felt as if a part of me went missing that day. I realized that every single year I had been in school, Megan was there with me. Whenever the first day of school came around, it was always Megan and me. Standing there for the first day of school by myself while my mom took the picture was rough without Megan. Going to a family gathering, sitting in the back row by myself in the car, and getting there and not being able to ask her, “Who am I saying hi to right now?” was rough without Megan.

A couple of days on, I read a quotation on Instagram that said, “There’s no bond stronger than a brother and sister.” I thought it was funny at first, and then it hit me. I realized that God put Megan in my life not just to show me true happiness and laughter, but to show me how special someone in my life could be. In other words, He showed me how much He loves me through Megan. At that point, the fact that He took her out of my daily life hurt me and made me think a lot of negative things about Him. In this selfish moment, all I could

think was, “Why me?” and “Why are you doing this to me? Did I hurt you somehow?”

But then (insert dramatic emphasis here) *I actually thought about it*. Then, it hit me: it wasn’t God’s fault. I should have braced myself for this parting and should have thought about it. Looking back, I think that maybe all those questions I pondered on my way to football practice were actually, without my realizing it, the seeds of prayers. After all, I can only thank God for giving me the time I had with Megan while she was home every day. He gave me opportunities with her that I could not experience with my brother or my buddies. Through that mix of confusion and anger, He showed me things in a different light. He helped me understand that life isn’t always just about me: constantly thinking “what can God do for me?” and “why did God do this to me?” is a selfish perspective. He taught me to see things from Megan’s perspective—to think, “how is this going to affect someone else?” After opening up to a “what about Megan?” perspective, I began to see how she is taking advantage of the gift God has given her to be able to go to an amazing college. God also showed me that I can FaceTime her every day, I can text her all day, and that she can come home once in a while. He showed me that while I am home living the high school life, I can see my best friend living her dream at the same time at her dream school.

Through all this, I learned that having a closed mind with God is a terrible way to live. If you do have a closed mind or relationship, work on changing your perspective on Him and be a little more open to Him. It never hurts to try, and in the end, you will be happy that you did. So if you think you don’t need God in your life, I was in your shoes and felt exactly the same. However, the reason I am writing this is to tell you: you do need Him. You might not realize it now, but a moment will come when you do.



SAINT ANTHONY'S HIGH SCHOOL

I am proud to say that, from the moment my sister left for college, I didn't just start thinking more, I also developed a better relationship with God. Being able to go to church and have no shame in saying you are and going with your buddies after school is one of the best feelings. So why not go to church? You worry about what your friends think about you? Welcome to the club. Big deal... There are a lot worse things to be judged on. What's the worst that could happen? I may not fully have gotten this whole thinking thing down, but I have gotten better with a change in my perspective. So try and think a little more, and I promise you that your mind will become more open, just like mine was.



HE WHO SINGS PRAYS TWICE

Christian Xavier Vedra

“He who sings, prays twice.” I never truly understood the gravity of this famous saying, traced back to Saint Augustine, until joining the Saint Anthony’s Schola. In retrospect, I can’t imagine my current prayer life being the way it is today without the enhancement that Gregorian chant has brought to it. Through Schola, learning the music has brought to me a more intimate understanding of the word of God. The beautiful hymns and chants we sing encourage meditation and reflection on the meaning of the scriptures. It almost feels as if I am living vicariously through the first disciples, looking at the face of God, when singing Gregorian chant.

Moreover, it is simply amazing to consider the legacy, heritage, and ancestry that singing ancient hymns unites you with. It is mystifying to think that the words that the Schola chants were sung by Christians centuries ago. Singing also helps emphasize the embodied nature of the Church. In Schola, men and women from different grades sing together in different voice parts. Even some of our Jewish brothers and sisters participate. The way that different people come together to produce one harmonious melody has deepened my understanding of the body of Christ being an interconnectedness and interdependence of His followers, each with unique gifts and talents contributing to the whole of the Church. It is even uplifting to think that one could sing a Latin hymn in unison with anyone, anywhere in the world, perhaps unable to understand each other in conversation, but beautifully able to understand each other in prayer and in the glorification of God.

He who sings prays twice, as it is an invitation to active participation in our liturgies, elevating our prayers with our whole beings, adding a sense of joy and emotion, both augmenting and deepening the spiritual experience.

MY FAVORITE SAINT

Mary Bisogno

When we are young we are taught of many saints, most of them being very well-known saints that we remember our whole life. However my favorite Saint is one that isn't talked about or taught about much, St. Sophia of Rome. I first came upon St. Sophia while searching for a Confirmation Saint. Her story captivated me through her loss but determination and resilience for God. Throughout everything she went through she refused to turn away from God or leave her religion.

St. Sophia lost so much, including her three daughters who were killed in front of her. Although she was not killed, witnessing her daughters' death broke her heart. She died three days later, making her a martyr due to the trauma and pain she went through even though she went through no physical torture. Throughout her losses, St. Sophia stayed faithful to God, never yielding to those who tried to punish her.

St. Sophia inspires me to be a better person and imagine how someone else's life can be going for it can be worse than I think. She teaches me that, no matter what, staying close to God is the most important thing. Throughout my research about St. Sophia, I learned more about how connections to God must be kept strong. My relationship with God grew stronger through her as I looked upon her actions and dedication to God. She inspires me to have the same dedication as her.



WHAT ADAM AND EVE TEACH ME

Elizabeth Cammarata

In the story of Adam and Eve, God gave them a beautiful garden and fertile trees with abundant fruit. From the beginning, God gave them the free will to make their own choices. God established specific instructions not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Both Adam and Eve were easily tempted by the devil and fell away from God; they chose themselves over their Creator.

In my own life, it can be very challenging to do the right thing that will please God. It is even more difficult when people around me are falling into sin. A specific example in my own life is falling into the trap of gossip. Throughout middle school, there was this ongoing tension between my two best friends. Instead of minding my own business and keeping out of it, I fed into the gossip and drama. Gossiping ultimately hurts the other person and their reputation. When it got back to my friend, and they became aware I was part of the drama, I was upset and disappointed in myself for being so easily dragged into something that brought me further away from God. Another example is social media. Often I witness things that would make God disheartened and it can be hard not to be

tempted to engage in these trends, especially when it is the social norm.

It can be a challenge to discern between the truths and evils of the world. The serpent tricked Eve by convincing her that God was not looking out for her, but rather felt threatened. This is a lesson to stand firm in your beliefs and follow God's guidance to live a happy life.



BLESSED ARE WE*Brooke Capuano*

Try as we might, nothing we could ever do holds the potential or possesses the ability to add something unto the majesty of God. We give Him nothing. Moreover, we take. "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Psalm 118:25). Of everything, that has been what's rung in my head most of all. But to begin with something else first, "So they put away the foreign gods from among them and worshipped the Lord; and He could no longer bear to see Israel suffer" (Judges 10:16). The first five books of the Bible-Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy span generations, but the four after Genesis cover one story. The journey to the Promised Land. The stubbornness of the newly freed Israelites, the penitence of Moses offered in the name of the stiff-necked people he had been given stewardship over, a wrathful God. A mourning God. A loving God.

Genesis, the beginning. God's covenant with Abraham, one that would endure till the ends of the Earth, beyond the passage of time. Exodus, and all of the Old Testament proceeding showcased the sometimes wayward, sometimes intimate, and sometimes gone relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham-those apart of and staked under the covenant in which he had come into with God. In Exodus, God sends the ten Plagues to Egypt, a story in which many have heard, by the hand of Moses in order to free the Israelites held under the bondage of slavery. Although quite difficult to imagine, the Israelites didn't much like this. Weren't as appreciative of their savior as one would expect them to be, weren't too fond of this new God, of this new place He bid them all venture into.

They were to leave Egypt, trek through the wilderness in a two week journey, and arrive in the land flowing with milk and honey in which this unknown God had promised them. But they resisted. Every statute writhed against, every law

broken, every commandment ignored and promise forsook. Though, all such things, of course, were on the side of the Isrealites, never Yahweh. No, the Lord of Hosts remained faithful. For God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. This stubbornness persisted all the way throughout the next three books, throughout the entirety of the Old Testament, really, until this very day.

*“Blessed are we, when we come in the name of the Lord.
How astounding is that? How undeserved?”*

Forty years the Isrealites wandered that desert aimlessly, blinded by pride, idolatry. So long, and so far into their unrepentance that God proclaims none of those who escaped Egypt to enter into the land in which He was going to give them, and that only the new generation of their children would walk into it once they had all died out. But finally, that day does arrive, and Deuteronomy is Moses’s final warnings and reminders to the Isrealites, of what not to repeat once they entered it. Moses dies before entering it, and his successor, Joshua, then leads the Isrealites. And so comes his book, the sixth of the Bible. Then the seventh, Judges.

The Isrealites had no earthly king, for God was their ruler, but He had appointed judges to dole out wisdom and settle disputes among the people. However, the Isrealites were disobedient, went and abandoned their God, served other demons claiming to be as such. There is a common theme in the Bible of God showing favor to a vast group of people thanks to just one leader or representative being faithful to God. As I said before, the Isrealites were not good people because they had abandoned their God. The book ends with, “In those days there was no king in Isreal; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Aka, whatever they wanted.

Now, to bring this around, I chose that verse, Judges 10:16 to pair with my favorite one, because we, as a race, are unimaginably wicked. Nowadays this world has been flooded with blasphemy, such as “follow your own heart, be true to

yourself, do whatever feels good, whatever makes you happy.” No! The heart is deceitful above all things. Back to my opening line: how we can never give or add anything unto God? Look at us, and look at Him. He, who is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the Last, the Lion of Judah.

We are enlivened dust. Here one day and gone the next. Yet, despite our filth, this perfect, holy God, who had no need of us, had no reason to ever want us, came down and shed blood for us. So that we might be given a gift we are wholly undeserving of. He could no longer bear to watch Israel suffer. What a thing that is. We are sinful, we are degenerative, we are the ruiners of His once perfect design, sinless garden, unmarred ground. Yet He loved us so deeply, our sins grieves Him to His heart. His lashes heal our wounds.

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. This verse has been morphed into something of encouragement over the years, which, in a way, is true. But it spoke of Jesus. Blessed is He, who came in the name of His Father, who came to rid us of our sins.

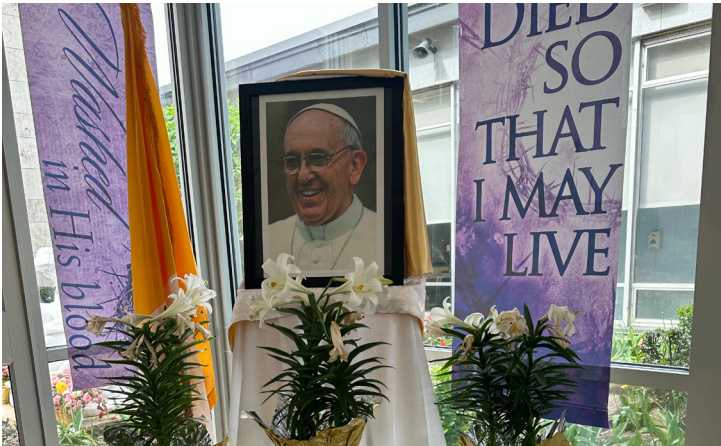
For me, that one verse encompasses the entire Bible because it was for Him, yet now speaks of us. Blessed are we, when we come in the name of the Lord. How astounding is that? How undeserved? How low is that bar? We sinned, we rebuked our God; He came, He bled, He died, all so that we might take something that was once His namesake, an utterance spoken in the hopes of His much needed coming that He gave unto His people – those who seek to do right by Him (as if such a thing were ever possible, what with how big the debt has now bloated to). He gives eternal life, and what do we have to offer? Gifts with which He endowed us, returned to Him in something of a lackluster manner. He grieves for us. We are blessed just in the very speaking of His name.

And yet: blessed are we for we have been given the chance to serve the God who mourns for us, the God who died for us, the God who rose for us.

THE LIVING FAITH OF POPE FRANCIS

Matthew Montefusco

Pope Francis's unbound faith is a very moving topic for many people. His passion for loving and wanting to reach others no matter their background is truly grounding. He consistently challenges individuals to grow in their faith through acts of kindness, social justice, and humility. His message reminds me that true faith isn't just about belief, but requires action. What stands out most to me is his ability to connect with everyone, no matter who they are or where they come from. He teaches that faith isn't about strict rules or judgment, but about showing compassion and mercy to others. To him, faith is a living thing, that reaches out far beyond the walls of the Church. It's a reminder that faith can be something that shapes our everyday actions, showing us a deeper kind of freedom, one that goes beyond the limits of what we often think of as freedom. His example has encouraged me to think about how I can live my faith more authentically, with a focus on love and understanding, and to embrace a deeper, more intensive relationship with God.



FATHER FIGURES

Could you imagine a reality where your own flesh and blood shouted “You are a failure to me and your mother, the worst son God could have given me!” I lived it: let me tell you about it.

In the months leading up to the pandemic, my parents’ marriage was falling apart. Even so, I never imagined that divorce was an option for my family. I went to a small Catholic school where everyone knew each other and each other’s business. Divorce was not common or talked about: whenever divorce was mentioned, that family was frowned upon and viewed as abnormal. In total, there were about three families in the entire school that were separated. In my eyes, I had no one to relate to or too even go to about my feelings. I feared that my family was going to be ostracized.

In the midst of my parents’ divorce, the Covid-19 outbreak struck worldwide, quarantining my family together under one roof. In one way this was a positive for me – my family’s issues would be kept secret – but in so many other ways this was draining and traumatizing for an innocent twelve-year-old to endure. I was raised in your typical Catholic household. I prayed before my meals and bedtime, I attended Mass on Sunday mornings with my family, I actively participated in my Parish’s activities, and I followed in the footsteps of Jesus through my everyday actions. When my parents began fighting every minute of everyday, I made the biggest mistake that I could have made. I let all of my beliefs and strong faith life go down the drain. I began to forget that God was in my life.

My dad has struggled with addiction for the vast majority of his life. The night of March 11, 2020, he broke his leg falling in a divet in the backyard while intoxicated. This was my mom’s last straw: she gave up on her marriage after forcing herself to stay with my dad to avoid backlash, judgment, culpa-

bility, and breaking up her children's family. After years of pain and hardships for us all, despite her best endeavors to preserve our family through counseling and therapy, she knew that she needed to put her needs and feelings first. Chaos ensued, leaving me, an innocent twelve year-old, to take care of my two siblings and dad with a broken leg.

My mom at the time had been working in the hospital at nights. I managed the house chores everyday by cleaning the house and making breakfast, lunch, and sometimes even dinner all while balancing my online classes. At first, I felt independent as I learned to cook and pick up on new methods of cleaning, but gradually I felt worse and worse about myself and my situation. I felt as if I was alone, I had no friends at the time. Growing up, I have always been bullied for my appearance since the age of eight. I had no one to communicate with over call or text. From my perspective I was trapped in this unprecedented state of hell, all by myself left to suffer in silence. Even on my thirteenth birthday, a milestone that I have dreamt of for years because I would now be a teenager, not a single person in my grade of forty cared enough to wish me a simple "happy birthday" over text. A few days prior to this, my father had some work friends over to prepare a spread of dishes to feast on. Initially, I was overjoyed because I had not been around other people in what felt like decades. Instead, this would be my ultimate nightmare. My dad was outside in the dark grilling with his friends from his chair while my siblings and I devoured my dad's friend's famous pizza pull apart bread. Outside my dad had been drinking away and when he came inside we finished eating and began to sing karaoke in unity.

Once the karaoke had come to an end, my siblings and I were instructed to go upstairs to get ready for bed. At this point, my dad just drank in gluttony. At 12:13 a.m, my dad's friends left the house. Because of his broken leg, I usually helped my dad upstairs at night. (Remember, Mom was working.) As my dad got up, he collapsed to the floor drunkenly, in front of my siblings and me. I attempted to catch him, but I could not manage to avert his fall. I yelled at my siblings to go upstairs as he beat me and screamed at me, even though I was

trying my best to be a helpful son. I called my mom in agony and tears. I could not comprehend how to respond, except through tears. My own father told me I was worthless.

My mom left work early and rushed home to rescue me from my drunken father's verbal, emotional, and physical abuse, and I was left to ponder the state of my life. Now more than ever, I could not fathom why God would do this to anyone. The past months were beyond excruciating. I felt like I had no purpose on this planet. I felt abandoned and stranded with no support system, but that was not true in the slightest. I prayed to God asking Him, "Why me?"

Little did I know, God would bless me with impeccable father figures in my life to truly exemplify how to be the best man I could be. They are: my best friend's dad, Brother David, Brother Joshua, Brother Vincent, and Mr. Farrell. They displayed through their actions how to be successful, responsible, respectful, humble, caring, honest, and most importantly resilient. God answered my prayers even when I thought He was just allowing this tragedy to occur. God was always by my side, holding my hand every step of the way to lead me out of this very dark and depressing place. I may have put God on the back burner before, but I now learned to embrace His presence and His plan. I started to join online Masses from home, read scripture passages on my own time, and pray more and more. I found God's calling and it was for me to just be the best version of myself because that was His intention when creating me.

My parents finalized their divorce at the end of my freshman year. My dad continues to struggle with addiction after deserting his own children. I may have lost the presence of my biological father in my life, but God, my Father, will never walk away from my life. My relationship with God is the most vigorous it has ever been. I could not be more grateful. God gave me the strength and courage to not hate my dad for what he did, but to forgive him as God has. To this day, I still struggle sometimes and I have my moments, but because of the father figures in my life I have learned to become resilient and make those bad days better. Now, I know that I will always have God to fall back on when times get tough.

THE SILENCE OF HONESTY

Connor Brancaccio

I never participated in a Holy Hour before and I did not know what to expect. To be honest, I thought sitting in silence for an hour surrounded by my teachers, peers, and strangers may be uncomfortable. Personally, for me it was a bit uncomfortable at first and I thought this is going to be a long hour.

Then, Brother Geoffrey Clement, my current philosophy teacher, related his vocation story and touched on the subject of honesty. At this point, I started to reflect on honesty and what it means to me. It is in my nature to be truthful. People around me have always been upfront and honest with me and I learned to reciprocate those values. Honesty and loyalty are two values that I am most proud of. However, I started to reflect that honesty is more than just “telling the truth” or “not telling lies.” During this reflection, I made a personal distinction between honesty and truthfulness. Truthfulness is more of a day to day interaction, but honesty is much deeper. Being honest is looking inward and truly understanding and learning who you are. It takes deep reflection to understand who you are and why you make the choices you make.

When I sat in silence, I became more in tune with who I am. If you are in tune with yourself, you enable yourself to have more open and honest relationships with yourself, God, and the community that surrounds you.

I now realize that silence creates peacefulness. It allows you to turn inward, open your heart and mind, pause outside judgement, and reflect. Inner reflection can help me get one step closer to living a truly honest life.



THE FRUITS OF REFLECTING

In recent months, I have begun reflecting upon the gospels, and participating in Lectio Divina at school and independently. I chose to enter into a daily reflection this past Advent, and it is one of the most beneficial practices for me personally, that has allowed me to enter into a deep understanding of our God.

Previously, there were many aspects of the Church that I would consider myself educated in, and that I would feel confident in my understanding of, until I began reflecting upon the deeper meaning and purpose of the traditions and teachings of our church. It was not until this moment that I realized that my understanding of my faith and of my religion in totality, was only surface level.

Sure, I knew that the Eucharist was the body of Christ, but what I failed to understand, and continue to struggle with realizing, is why the body and blood of Christ is divine. I did not understand that by receiving the body of Christ, I was uniting and binding myself to God, and he was entering into my spirit and my body, and that my body was now a temple where he resided.

“Reflecting upon the closeness of Jesus and Mary to us, has helped me realize that God is right here”

Similarly, I knew that sexual-related sins were wrong, but what I failed to understand was why; This is when my reflection and teachings became clear, that in all our relationships, we are called to love others as Jesus loved us, and sacrifice ourselves. We are to love selflessly, without looking for any pleasure in return, which, for me, is arguably one of the hardest truths I have had to come face to face with. This is the message God sends to us, through the life and ministry of his

SANCTUS

son, Jesus, and the Blessed mother and Saint Joseph. Reflecting upon them and the hardships they all endured, just to save us from our sins, is eye-opening.

The role Mary plays in the church is pivotal, and the love she has for us is unfathomable. Reflecting upon the closeness of Jesus and Mary to us, has helped me realize that God is right here, and walking right along with us. Reflecting upon how strong and rooted my love and faith is in God, has continually helped me to determine where my weaknesses in faith are, and how I can strengthen them, through the help of Christ, and the intercession of the saints and the Blessed mother and Saint Joseph.



FROM TIKTOK TO DAUGHTER OF GOD

If you asked an adult what they thought about TikTok, they would most likely say it is a harmful app that is a threat to our generation. But if you asked me, a seventeen-year-old high school student, I would say that TikTok led me to God. At the age of ten, I recall spending hours in front of the mirror criticizing every part of myself, wishing I could change the parts I didn't like. Society's beauty standards screamed in my mind from a very early age. Being a ballet dancer added another level of pressure to achieve the "perfect" body type. My exposure to social media affected me negatively in ways I'd soon come to understand. I grew up in a Catholic household who would go to mass when we could. I attended St. Mary's, a Catholic middle school. I had always had a belief in and curiosity about God, but had never personally pursued a relationship with Him. I couldn't understand the concept of God as a Father, rather a distant powerful being.

Growing up, I'd watch movies with my family where the main character was a pretty, thin girl. In Disney movies, the main princess was thin and "perfect," and the villain was portrayed as ugly and fat. During family gatherings, I'd overhear family members discussing another's weight gain. I started to view anything other than being thin as ugly. This impacted my mindset because I started to notice all of this at a pivotal time of my life. Before puberty, I wasn't thin like the girls I had seen growing up. I couldn't understand that my body just hadn't matured yet. All I understood was that I needed to be thin in order to be pretty in society. I recall looking in the mirror and grabbing all of the parts of my skin I wish I could remove. I would focus so much on what I looked like that it would sometimes bring me to tears because I was filled with so much frustration.

This escalated during the COVID-19 Lockdown. Because I had virtually nothing to do, I decided I would start

working out in the home gym. I had high expectations that it would help me to lose weight so I could finally feel “pretty.” However, my workouts quickly went out of hand. I would spend hours in the gym every day, pushing myself to the point of exhaustion and tears. I began limiting my food intake. What I didn’t understand was how dangerous this was because my body was in the peak of puberty and growth. This continued to intensify for three years. I started to eat less and work out more. My eating disorder also affected my ability to dance. It became increasingly difficult to get through ballet class, and I danced five days a week at the time. My teacher would reprimand me for being lazy, but in reality I had no energy left to get me through class.

I vividly recall how I felt during the peak of my eating disorder. The hunger rang so loudly in my ears it was all I could think about, but eventually my stomach got used to the starvation. I was irritable and rude to everyone around me because I was so hungry. I lost many friends and hurt many relationships because of this. My body bruised easily, my period stopped happening, and I was tired all of the time. The only thing on my mind was food, and it was exhausting. I would “punish” myself if I ate something I shouldn’t have. Even my doctors were concerned, seeing the sudden drop in my weight. My blood work came back and my white blood cell count was dangerously low. My mother, out of a place of concern, would lecture me about it because she noticed my habits.

In 2022, I began seeing Christian TikToks show up on my For You Page. I would watch teenagers, people my age, read an excerpt from the Bible and explain it. This piqued my interest, and would be a healthy distraction from my thoughts about food. These videos filled me with feelings of hope and courage I hadn’t felt before. I decided I wanted to purchase a Bible for myself and learn more about my faith. I slowly came to understand that being a Christian is more than just being a part of a religion; it’s being in relationship with Jesus. In the past, I viewed God as a distant being, and I would treat him like a genie, only really attempting communication with Him when I felt I needed something. The TikToks I was watching, and reading Scripture for myself, completely shifted my view

about God. I was now able to see Him as more of a father figure. I began to have real conversations with Him, not just reciting words I know or asking Him for things. I talked to Him about my struggles and asked Him for strength. I found peace when I would spend time in His presence. I understood that God wants to talk to me; He wants to have deep, vulnerable conversations, as He is the only one who truly knows me inside and out. I needed someone to run to because my eating disorder left me feeling so alone and empty. I felt as if Jesus was someone I could come to without fear of being judged. Although I began building my relationship with Jesus, I still felt myself struggling with my eating disorder. It felt like I was trapped, and I was afraid this disorder would be a part of me forever. I then decided in the winter of 2023 that I was tired of being tied down by this disorder. It was taking a serious toll on my body, and it left me weak and lifeless. The enemy had a hold of me through it, and I didn't want to allow him to win time and time again. I was weak and unable to defend myself against the devil because my body was weak and hungry. I wasn't strong enough to fight myself, but I understood Jesus would be strong enough because He survived temptations in the desert for forty days and nights while starving. I learned that Jesus understood how I felt because He experienced it as well.



I slowly began to increase my food intake daily, having to face the fears I had developed over food. I stopped calorie counting completely, and worked out significantly less. My body was so exhausted during this process that some days it was difficult to get out of bed, but I knew that it had to be done. I decided to truly bring it all to Jesus and find refuge in Him, asking Him to provide me with strength on the days I felt I had none. I slowly felt my spark coming back, and felt like I finally had my life back. My dancing improved and I began to enjoy going to class again. I credited Jesus: I could've never done it on my own. I also gained amazing friendships and improved my relationships with those my disorder had negatively affected. I am now overjoyed to say that I have encouraged many people to turn to Christ, and have also helped others establish a relationship with Him.

There are still days when I struggle. Sometimes I still look into the mirror and dislike what I see, and some days it can be difficult to eat. But I know that I am never alone during these dark days because Jesus is my strength. I repeat to myself the verse Psalm 139:14; "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." I am learning that I don't need to listen to society's expectations because the only opinion that has value is Jesus's. I am made in His image, and He knitted me in my mother's womb.

I want each student to know that life is never guaranteed to be easy, as Jesus tells us. But through whatever trials they may face, whether it be an eating disorder like I struggled with, or anything else, they are never alone in the struggles they face. Nobody understands what they are going through like Jesus does. Jesus experienced suffering and death for our sake. He understands pain and what it feels like to be human. His love is able to carry you through anything you may face. He wants to help you and the only way He can is if they allow Him to. I also know that society can pressure us to be "perfect," but ultimately the only opinion that truly matters is God's. He is our creator and He knows us better than anyone else. I want to remind them that God is always a good Father, even on the bad days, and even on the days it may feel like He isn't there. He doesn't change with our circumstances.

DEUS MEUS ET OMNIA*Cormac Jameson Terry*

I was recently asked “What does ‘Deus Meus et Omnia’ mean?” As a scholar, I promptly responded: “My God and my all.” However, as I delved deeper into the meaning of this phrase, I realized that it is not simply a pious exclamation but a guiding principle for how we should approach life itself. “My God and my all” isn’t just a declaration of devotion, but an invitation to align our lives with God’s plan. When we center our lives on God, we acknowledge His omnipresence, opening ourselves up to the profound enlightenment that comes from this connection.

In a world filled with distractions, we often find ourselves lost, clinging to the cheap thrills that modern society offers. Pride, greed, vanity, and lust promise fulfillment, but leave us empty and hungering for more. The True Deliverance, however, is simple—God. Only by turning to God can we fill the emptiness the world leaves behind. When we make God our focus, we find that the distractions and pursuits of the world no longer dominate our lives. Instead, we discover a greater sense of purpose, peace, and fulfillment.

As I reflect on the question of what “Deus Meus et Omnia” truly means, I now realize “My God and my all” is not merely a phrase, but a guiding framework for how we approach life and understand our place in the world. It teaches us to center our lives on God, magnifying His presence in every aspect of our being. In doing so, we do not lose ourselves, but rather find the fullness of who we are meant to be.



HOW I CAME TO THE FAITH

On Christmas day in 2013, the beginning of my faith journey began. On this day, I attended my first mass. When I first stepped inside my parish, I was instantly intrigued. My eyes flew around the room as I observed each familiar face, every pew, and the beautiful Christmas trees behind the altar. However, I was particularly fixed on the fascinating stained glass windows on every wall. Although they were neither massive nor extravagant, they were especially captivating. In the minutes before the mass had begun, I studied the figures in each little window. Having no clue who each was, I became eager to learn.



During the mass, I sat constantly entreating my mother, pleading with her to tell me who the people in the windows were. She told me to quiet down and offered to teach me everything she knew after mass ended. I waited patiently and as the crowd started to shuffle out, my mother brought me over to the first window and each one after. Our conversations about Saints led to others about God, the Holy Trinity, and many aspects of the faith I had yet to discover.

Since that eventful mass, much of my childhood consisted of myself asking a countless number of questions about our faith whenever I got the chance. But as I grew older, my curiosity dwindled. I became more occupied with academics, sports, and other activities. At times I couldn't remember when I had last prayed or attended a mass. I had simply forgotten my sole purpose; to be in a communion of love with God.

That was until the beginning of my freshman year at Saint Anthony's, on orientation day. I sat down in the auditorium amongst all of my new classmates, awaiting a highly anticipated speech from Brother David. I listened carefully and was reminded of the one thing I had forgotten since that Christmas day. "God comes first," he said.

At that moment I realized that I had not been prioritizing everything that I should have. Years of my life had already been spent focusing on the wrong thing. I put everything possible before the most crucial element of my life, God. From then on, I set a few goals to improve my daily routine and better prioritize.

Praying became a regular part of my day, as I resolved to pray once every morning and night. Similarly, I began to attend Sunday mass with my family once again. Thankfully, I have been consistent in my efforts, and I am still working to improve my relationship with God, which continues to grow stronger every day. I look at life more positively now that I fully understand that everything that happens is part of God's plan for me. In reflection, my previous experience has taught me a lot about my growth as a Catholic and my story of coming to faith altogether. It truly amazes me how even a curiosity of stained-glass windows can start a lifelong relationship with our Father and can begin your journey of fulfilling the holy life as the servant you were intended to be. No matter how rocky or how smooth the road to faith is, it is always worth it to put God first.

GOD'S CLOCK IS NOT LIKE OURS

Samantha Esposito

God has the perfect plan for every single person. Although it is difficult to realize at times, God does everything for a purpose. Recently, I experienced this lesson of sitting back and allowing God to take the driver's seat. The day before the first day of my sophomore year, I was at a softball tournament in New Jersey. In the last elimination game, with two outs, I got hit by a sixty mile-per hour-pitch and broke my arm.

At the time, I felt so alone, confused and lost. Despite all of my stress and worries, I knew that God was with me through every step of my recovery process. This setback brought about a greater good, as I was able to learn how to put my complete trust in God. In addition, I was able to visit and hang out with my sister very often. My older sister, the "built-in best friend" that God gave me, is a freshman at Fairfield University, in Connecticut. With softball tournaments on the weekends, there was not much available space on the calendar to take long drives up to her college. My setback, breaking my arm, led to a greater good: being able to see my sister.

We must trust in God's plan because He does everything for a reason. Afterall, it is God's clock, not our own.

**HE MUST INCREASE;
I MUST DECREASE**
JOHN 3:30

MAKE HEAVEN CROWDED*Caitlyn Gilmartin*

Matthew 5:16 is my favorite Bible verse because it sets a standard for how we as Christians are called to live each day. In it, Jesus says, “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” This verse influences the way I go about my day to day life. I live by this verse from the moment I open my eyes in the morning to the second my eyes close at night. Ever since I read this verse for the first time, I have felt a special connection to it. I just feel like it sums up our whole purpose on this Earth. We are called to live like Jesus and lead the way for others to do the same. “Make Heaven crowded” is an impactful quote I have heard that directly relates to this verse. Our mission is to lead as many people to Christ as we can during our life here on Earth.

We must evangelize. God wants us to go out into the world and tell others about His goodness and mercy. Jesus calls us to be like a lamp. This might sound a little weird, but hear me out. Light represents truth, knowledge, hope, and goodness. People do not buy lamps just to hide them and conceal the light. Lamps are meant to illuminate and brighten a room. God calls us to radiate His love throughout the world by what we do during our day to day lives. We are called to act like Jesus did and illuminate other people's path to Heaven. We are called to be the reason someone finds God.. By “letting our light shine before others,” we show people God's goodness. We need to offer kindness to people that have yet to know God because He pours so much love into us.

However, we need to shine without the desire to be seen. We can't let our pride take over: doing good works egotistically and pridefully is wrong and ultimately drives us away from where we want to be, which is in communion with Christ. We shouldn't do good works just to draw attention to ourselves, to get recognized and make ourselves look good, or

to earn salvation. We should do good works out of our faith and belief in Christ because we know it is our true purpose. Doing good works and acting kindly reflects a life transformed by God's love and mercy. Jesus showed kindness, compassion, and empathy for all people regardless of gender, race, or any other quality our world today deems as a dividing factor. Christians should be humble, forgive, give generously, and act like Jesus Himself. Our actions are a testament to our Christian faith. We need to order our good works to God. We need to shine without the desire to be seen. Being a display of how God calls us to act illuminates the way for others to find Christ and ultimately live with Him eternally in Heaven.



We need to live outwardly for God. We have to be all in. Sometimes, it can be scary to proclaim our faith in fear of judgement or persecution. Jesus reminds us, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." (John 15:18). Why do we live to impress a world that persecuted our Savior? The same world that we are trying to impress, killed the Son of God. We can not let the fear of man stop us from worshipping. Our only mission on this earth is to live and serve God and spread the good news. The physical world is temporary, but life in Heaven with God is forever.

We need to let our actions speak louder than words and live a consistent life according to our Christian values. By living righteously, we reflect God's love and grace. Everything we do should be glorifying God. We are called to be the light that leads people to a life of faith, devotion, and love. Lord, let them see you in me. Amen.

GOD'S CURVEBALLS

Sarah Bielski

Softball has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. The second I played my first little league game, I knew I loved this sport and was in it for the long run. Though, there is a conflict when you commit your whole life to a sport: it becomes more like a job than the fun game you played as a kid. When I was younger, being a pitcher was the dream. When the pressures of performance and anxieties of college recruitment arrived, pitching became a nightmare. The overwhelming need to perform and impress – the ideal of absolute perfection – consumed every inch of my body every time pitching came into my mind. I was so much happier being a third baseman and a hitter, but I didn't let anyone know that. Although I soldiered through these mental struggles, I knew deep down that this life as a pitcher wasn't for me. I knew that I wanted to continue to pursue softball in college, but I wanted to do it playing a position that I loved. Little did I know that God's plan for my happiness was set from the beginning.

Looking back, I wish I were raised to be more knowledgeable about prayer, especially at the start of college recruitment for softball. My sister and I were baptized when we were both a year old, but other than this first sacrament, I felt that there was little to motivate to progress my relationship with God. My family did not go to church, or even pray. Although my grandma was very religious, my father's family practically pushed away the idea of God. As I look back on this, I feel almost guilty for not taking my faith seriously like my grandma did, but it was how I was raised, and unfortunately, I didn't know any better.

That little girl who stepped on the mound for the first time was unaware of the struggles she would endure as a pitcher for years to come. When I was younger, I loved being the center of attention (just like any other kid) but as I got older, the pressure became too much to handle. The white

chalked circle began to feel like a cage, where I felt the entire weight of the game on my shoulders – the outcome entirely based on my performance. This anxiety manifested mostly from the high expectations I placed upon myself in order to make my parents, coaches, and teammates proud. Even though I was a great pitcher, I still wasn't happy. Everyone would ask me "But you're so good at pitching, why do you hate it?" I felt alone and lost in a world where no one understood what I was going through. Even with my lack of faith experience, I knew that God was the only one who fully understood my situation. I kept learning about God and prayer in Theology class, but no one taught me how to actually find Him. I was lost, and I needed someone to guide me on what path to take in my softball career.

"I trusted God's plan for me. This experience opened my heart to a new life of faith."

In my sophomore year, I found myself at the beginning of a crossroads. My anxieties about pitching were mounting and the reality of college recruitment was looming closer. My decision, if I were to stop pitching and solely be a third baseman, would not only affect me, but everyone around me, including my teammates, coaches, and parents. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint the people who had supported me all of these years. Up to this point, I have never had to make such a life-altering decision, and I felt conflicted. Although I was unsure how to connect with God, attending St. Anthony's began to teach me things about my faith that I didn't know before. A big topic that stood out to me was the idea that God always has a plan for me, and I needed to trust His direction. So that's what I did. Surprisingly enough to me, I began to lean into my faith for the first time in my life.

After much deliberation, I knew God was guiding me not to be a pitcher any longer and, when I finally admitted that, it felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. I felt a deep sense of peace that I have never felt before, which I believe was God's approval of my decision. He was calling me

toward a greater purpose as a softball player, and although I knew it would be harder to get recruited as only a third baseman, I trusted God's plan for me. This experience opened my heart to a new life of faith. Now, I always see Him with me through my everyday struggles, supporting and guiding me through life. I started attending Mass multiple times a week, and as soon as I walk through the chapel doors, I feel an immediate peace and calmness, which I know is God welcoming me. I began opening my mind and heart to God, and although I still have a lot to learn, I am so excited to progress my faith.

Yes, I know life can be stressful and it can hit you with many tough decisions, but my biggest takeaway from this part of my life, and what I invite you to place into your beliefs, is that if you need guidance, God will provide. Now that I am no longer pitching, I have never been happier. My love for softball is just like it was when I was a kid, and because I trusted God's plan, I am now committed to play Division 1 at an amazing school playing the position that I truly love. Just as Psalm 32:8 says, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."



ANTHONY'S MIRACLE

John Parpis

This past year, our brother, classmate, and friend went through something that no one should ever go through. When we all heard the news about Anthony, we were too stunned to speak—it was pure and utter shock. The first thing we all did was turn to our faith, to God Himself. At that point, Anthony needed a miracle, and he needed us. And we all showed up, packing masses, visiting, and praying, hoping he would be alright. People who didn't know Pags joined in on all of this, bringing us together not only as a community but as brothers and sisters in the Lord. And it worked—a pure miracle. Pags playing baseball and continuing to be himself every day shows true resilience. We all kind of needed to see this miracle: his story motivates us all to be resilient, better, and stronger, truly showing how beautiful our faith and God are.



ITALY CHANGED MY FAITH

Anthony Casimano

The choral pilgrimage and concert tour to Italy was the most spiritually awakening school event I've ever experienced. We visited so many breathtaking basilicas, churches, and religious monuments, which gave us a broader view of the roots of our faith. We also met many religious people on our journey through Italy, including Pope Francis himself, which provided an insight into the vastness of the Catholic faith and the loving kindness of those who live by it.

Among all the amazing experiences, such as walking through the Holy Doors during the Jubilee Year and singing at a Mass in Saint Peter's Basilica, one had such a profound impact that it left me speechless. Walking the *Scala Sancta* was a defining moment in my faith life. The *Scala Sancta* are the very stairs that Jesus walked on the day he was sentenced to death. As I climbed these stairs on my knees, I felt a true sense of peace. There was no noise, no worries, just prayer and reverence.

This experience was only possible through the choral Italy pilgrimage, and it has remained a defining moment of my faith. This singular moment, combined with all the other incredible experiences unique to this pilgrimage, deepened not only my faith but also my understanding of the foundations of the Catholic religion and how it can genuinely bring true peace to one's life.



GOD IN ALL THINGS

Kiera Cameron

God is in everything and everyone. This concept is deeply rooted in Christian theology, emphasizing the presence of God in our hearts and the interconnectedness of creation. As stated in Jeremiah 23:24, “Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth?”

No place is beyond God’s reach; He fills all of creation, leaving nothing hidden from His sight, reminding us of His constant and unshakeable presence in the world. The person who gave you money for lunch—God revealed Himself through them. Your brothers and sisters in Christ—you encounter God every day through them. In your parents’ unconditional love, your teachers’ guidance, the poor’s resilience, the rich’s generosity, and even in the lepers’ suffering—God is present. God’s essence shines through every act of kindness, every moment of learning, and every shared struggle.

Truly, God is in all of us, showing Himself in everyday moments and small acts of love. We can see God in everything—in the beauty of a sunrise, the crisp fall leaves, and the vastness of the night sky.

The beauty of God’s creations helps us recognize His immense love and care for us. Each element of creation reflects His glory and reminds us of His constant presence. By recognizing God in everything, we are reminded to live with gratitude and love in all that we do.



HOW TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE

Carina García

I was lucky enough to recently come into possession of the book, *The Three Ordinary Voices of God*, by Matthew Kelly, and I have to say that I would highly recommend it to everyone. This book came at a particularly good time for me: I was struggling with feeling God's presence and voice in my everyday life. As Kelly says, "God hasn't stopped speaking. We've stopped listening." This book is truly a masterclass in listening and identifying God's voice.

The first idea that I found particularly striking in this book was the characterization of listening itself. Kelly asserts that listening is a fundamentally selfless thing: to listen and comprehend completely, we have to let go of ourselves for a moment. If we are to truly listen to God, we need to put aside our agendas, our assumptions, even our replies in order to hear fully the voice of God. Listening to anyone, but especially God, is intrinsically humble in nature. In all of our relationships, we must listen, reflect, and comprehend in order to get the most out of those relationships. This includes our relationship with God.

Kelly clearly states what he believes to be "the three ordinary voices of God": needs, talents, and desires. Kelly maintains throughout this book that by truly and deeply reflecting on each of these aspects of our life, we can glean an understanding of God acting in our life. For example, God created us with needs—and not just physical needs. Physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs all contribute to our lifestyle and the lifestyle that God calls us to. Everyone's needs differ, which



makes everyone's vocations and callings unique. I personally found myself called to the aspect of intellectual needs: I knew immediately that my need for philosophical knowledge was coming directly from the Lord. I made a promise to myself to uphold this necessity in my life.

Second, Kelly identifies how God speaks through talents. Here, he highlights an important insight that connects back to humility. It is easy to fall into the assumption that a talent is so great, that it must be self-obtained. Consequently, it is always necessary to remember that all gifts and talents come from God and God alone. With these gifts comes God's calling to fulfillment and service. If we truly reflect on the talents God places within us, we can come to find our true calling. How we use these talents for the service of others is of utmost importance. Personally, I have been praying on this subject a lot. I struggle with vocation: what I am meant to do in life, and how to discern my talents for the service of others? This chapter of the book provided much needed insight into the voice of God's talents.

The final voice that Kelly identifies is desire. This, in particular, is a harder voice to discern. It should be noted that not all desires are directly from God. However, in this chapter, Kelly is not discussing momentary earthly so much as the deep and God-given desires placed within us to guide us in life. These desires play a role in vocation as well. Perhaps someone desires an intimate relationship with another person: this person would be called to married life. Or perhaps someone's soul thirsts for God so deeply and completely that they are called to religious life. By focusing on the true soul-centered desires that we as children of God have, we can identify a clearer direction in life. I also found this chapter useful. It encouraged me to separate the desires that the world has placed in me from the desires God has inspired in me.

In conclusion, through these three ordinary voices—needs, talents, and desires—God speaks to everyone in different ways. With true and deep reflection and listening, we can gain some of the greatest gifts in our lives: personal clarity, and a stronger relationship with our Lord.

A SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My spiritual journey has been like a rollercoaster. Like most Catholics, I was born and a few months later was baptized. Being baptized started my life in the faith. My whole family is Catholic, so that helped with my life in the Church and my love for God. Through my ups and downs, my family, but most especially my mom and grandma, showed me through their generosity, courage, love, and unwavering trust in God. Going through the sacraments inspired me to keep growing in my faith. For most of my childhood, I would go to mass maybe every few weeks and didn't really understand what I was saying or why I was doing a certain prayer or action. This is understandable since I was a child and did not grasp things as I do now, but I always knew that faith helps people get through tough times. Going out of my comfort zone and changing from public to Catholic school, learning more about scripture, prayer, and trusting in God, all led up to where I am today in my spiritual journey.

“Through all of my ups and downs, I realize that God is always there for me and it will forever be like that.”

Going to Saint Anthony's High School has changed my life for the better, even if I have only been here for about a year. Before going here, I would describe myself as being a little carefree and less responsible. I was not praying and not being close to God. When my grandma passed away a year before my freshman year, I was in a difficult place with my faith. I kept listening to my parents and family members talking about how she is in Heaven, but I just did not understand why she had to go. I couldn't say a Hail Mary for months after she died because I just knew that it was one of her favorite prayers. On the other hand, once I started school here, it was a big step for

me: my G (what I called my grandma) was so proud of me for going. She was a big part of my spiritual life, and I felt like I was coming to Saint Anthony's for her.

After I graduated from middle school and started school here, I immediately felt close to God again. The next big event in my spiritual journey was learning how to pray the rosary. My mom prays it every day and also prays the seven sorrows of Mary. Over this past year, I prayed the rosary increasingly. This summer, I was on a fifteen-day streak of doing it, and that was a big step in broadening prayer in my life!

Because I was learning so much from my theology class, I would go home and tell my family what I was learning. This had ripple effects at home. I am not the only person in my family who is growing in faith! After only being at Saint Anthony's for a few months, my dad has started coming to Mass with me and Mom. Dad currently hates to miss Mass and makes it a point to go. One weekend, my parents and I were in Connecticut for a lacrosse event, and we thought it would be difficult to get to Mass. My dad looked up mass times on the internet, and we made it to an afternoon mass at St. Ann's Church! It was a great experience, one that really opened my eyes to how much this amazing school has affected my family.

This is just one example of how God has changed my life and the people around me. Through all of my ups and downs, I realize that God is always there for me, and it will forever be like that. I am just getting started in my faith journey, and I am excited to see what will come next!



SOMEDAY YOU WILL UNDERSTAND

This talk is for those of you who are going through something that no one else knows about, those who keep yourselves isolated and make areas of your life unknown to others. St. Paul's letter to the Romans tells us that "God works all things together for the good of those who love Him." I used to struggle with that. I didn't understand how that could be true. But over time, and through one very personal experience, I began to see it differently. We go through life assuming we have time, that the people we love will always be there. But all of that can change in a second. I'm going to tell you a story that not only shaped me into who I am today but continues to remind me of the strength I carry within. On December 16, 2020, just a week before Christmas, my family entered what felt like a revolving door that never stopped turning.

At this point, my public school was still doing cohorts due to COVID. I woke up at around 8 am and started doing my school work when I heard the sliding screen door that leads out to my backyard slam close. It was slammed so hard that I even heard it ricochet back to its opening position. I heard the slightest muffle of my dad on the phone, but I couldn't make out exactly what he was saying. His tone of distress made me realize something was wrong. I got up and stepped out of my room, and as I walked down the stairs, I saw my brother. He was holding onto the railing, crying. I froze. Everything in me knew something was wrong. And then my dad, completely distraught, started throwing things; not out of anger, just out of pure heartbreak. I asked what was going on, and through tears, my brother told me that my uncle had passed away.

Receiving news like this leaves you with feelings like no other. My dad's brother—his best friend and my favorite "cool uncle"—was gone. My heart just stopped. I couldn't make sense of it. One moment he was here, laughing with us, showing up to everything, being that person who made you feel not

just seen but heard. The next, he was gone. At fifty-four years old, he died in his sleep from a heart condition called arrhythmia. That day was the beginning of what felt like the end.

I had to get changed to go to my uncle's house and see my two cousins, his sons. But what are you supposed to wear when you go visit the house your favorite uncle just passed away in? Nothing felt right. My cousins are older than me, and I figured maybe they'd handle it better. They'd been through more, lost people before, so I assumed they weren't as shaken as I was. But I was wrong. This wasn't just a loss for them: this was their dad – the man they admired, leaned on, and looked up to. Everyone was reeling from this loss. That day, my family lost a huge piece of who we were. And from that moment on, things were different. We weren't whole anymore. I remember walking into my uncle's funeral and seeing my grandma, one of my best friends, sitting just feet away from my uncle's casket, her face full of heartbreak. She was praying the Rosary with such quiet strength. Her prayer was so heavy but also so full of love. I wasn't sure what she was doing at first as I wasn't raised in a religious household (I grew up in a moderated version of the Catholic tradition). I had never prayed the rosary before coming to Saint Anthony's. While confused, I was inspired. I admired my grandma's dedication to her faith. For some reason, when I saw my grandma praying, I felt drawn to it. From that moment on, I attempted to grow myself; not through friends and family, but through God and my faith. I didn't know it at the time, but this was God calling me. This was the Lord telling me that He was here, and He would guide me through it. At that time, I was so mad at God. I would ask Him why He did this to our family, why He broke us apart.

“How could God do this to us?”

Shortly after my uncle's death, my dad was in and out of the hospital suffering from severe anxiety and stress from losing his brother. The impact of his brother's death affected him mentally, and this mental exhaustion turned into physical complications. Within one week, my dad had been in and out

of the hospital multiple times. It truly is the hardest, scariest thing: watching someone you love so dearly fight the largest battles. To add to this family stress, my grandma, my dad's mom, my best friend, became completely depressed. She loved my uncle more than anyone else on this earth and was understandably struggling to move forward. Watching a son die is something I would never wish upon a mother. While in this state of depression, my grandma developed a severe case of dementia. She would constantly forget things, even things like where she lived, where she was, and that my uncle had passed away. As her dementia got worse, she developed habits like forgetting to eat, which made her become even more weak than she already was. She started falling over and over again until one day, February 3, 2025, she fell and broke her pelvis. In screaming pain, she was brought to the hospital where she soon was transferred to a rehabilitation center. I would go and see her often in the rehab center, where I was reminded that through everything, God was not only by her side but by my side as well. When my grandma was finally admitted to come home on April 1, I went to visit her. It was the most beautiful, heart-wrenching experience. Although she seemed like herself, she was far from it; she doesn't always remember who I am.



After my uncle's funeral, I went on with my life. As sad as it sounds, it's reality. We move on, we get older, but we never forget. I went about 4 months before it all started again. We got another call, another moment that didn't feel real. This time, it was about my cousin, my uncle's son. He had been in a car accident only a mile from home, and just three miles

from where we held his dad's funeral. A sports car had hit him head-on at an intersection. Again, all I could think to myself was why? How could God put one family through so much pain? My cousin survived but not without lasting damage. He's now paralyzed from the waist down. He'll never walk again. Four months and four days after we lost my uncle, it felt like we were being punished all over again. I couldn't understand it. None of us could. And during that time, I felt so far away from God. I was angry. Not just sad. I was furious, frustrated, and hurt. Whatever little faith I had was shattered completely. I couldn't see how any of this could be part of some greater plan. It felt cruel. It felt like betrayal.

I went every day for a year asking myself that same question, "How could God do this to us?" It took a while, but I realized that at this time I was moving away from God when I should've been moving towards Him. Instead of being angry with Him, I should've gone to Him for guidance, for guidance through this emotional journey. I've learned that it is okay to be angry with God; He can handle it way better than us as humans can. When I came to this realization, I started talking to God. I prayed to Him and went to Him to bring me light during these dark times. Now, when I go through these times of discouragement, I hear the Lord, and I go to Him for guidance. As He speaks to me, I recall my favorite quote from scripture, "You don't understand what I am doing now, but someday you will." John 13:7. You will never know why God does the things He does in the moment, but I am now open to looking for the good in a situation. I might not know all the answers and all the good He has yet to bring out of this tragedy, but I do know now that I am willing and open enough to ask. I now know where to go. So, I am going to encourage you: If you question what God is doing in your life, where He is... ask Him. I promise you: He will answer. Believe me, I know it is hard, but be patient. He will work all things for good.

THE LIGHT IN THE DARK ROOM

Gianni Pipia

Attending a mass in honor of fallen peers and heavily wounded close friends is something that no one should have to experience. Although this was not something anyone considered a good thing, as Catholics, it is our duty to do the best with what we are given.

I've never participated in something so tragic, yet so beautiful at the same time. Seeing entire communities—at Saint Anthony's and all of Long Island—come together to pray and support one another has changed my faith forever. Before this incident, my faith was in a good, but not great place. I was involved in my community, but not to the best of my abilities.

This incident really showed me that when a community comes together, the strength built in that unity is unmatched. I have never been a part of such a powerful and moving gathering then the night of September 24, 2024. Since that day, my faith has been stronger, closer, and more authentic than ever before. This experience of seeing an entire community together is something that will resonate with me for the rest of my life.



HE WAS NOT IN THE WIND

Karolína Mercado

I love the verses in 1 Kings 19:11-12, which say, “There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound.” In this scripture, the Lord is not in any of these mighty and formidable occurrences. Yet these great forces of nature declare His presence in a powerful way. After the chaos, God is found in the peaceful quiet.

One of my favorite ways to pray is in complete silence. There is something about the stillness that allows me to detach myself from the world. Away from all the loud noises and distractions, I can better enter into the presence of God and turn my ears to His promptings. Today, there are so many influences that flood our senses daily, making it harder and harder to hear the voice of God through it all. For me, the silence makes it easier to be open to the influence of God and ready to receive Him with a calm and clear mind.

In that silence, like in the Scripture, I can find God. There is peacefulness even in just sitting wordlessly with Him. Merely being with Him is nourishing to my soul. The outer calm seems to seep into me and quiet my inner restlessness. When that silence comes, it is like God entering in. He is the hand which calms the storm and stills my troubled sea.



MY FIRST HOLY HOUR

Ruadhán Campion

At my first holy hour, I had a beautiful experience that helped me connect with my faith better than I usually do. I was not expecting to go to a holy hour; I knew that I was going to *A Night of Fraternity* at the Franciscan Brothers' Friary, but my plan was to go to basketball practice directly after that. You can imagine my nerves when we got to St. Elizabeth's for adoration! At first we had the Eucharist in front of us while the pianist sang, but I spent that time worrying about my practice. Then we were told to kneel and it took me a while to focus but once I started praying I felt peaceful. In the beginning I really did not want to miss my practice but at one point I had switched from wanting to go to practice to wanting to stay here because it felt good to be in front of my Lord. The whole time I did not know a single song the pianist was singing and then finally the last song I knew and I began to sing, then around me I could hear not just myself but my friends too singing and at that time I had known it was the right decision to stay.



BROTHERS IN FAITH

Liam Curley

As a member of the Kolbe Society, I help lead religious retreats at Saint Anthony's. Oddly enough, my inspiration to engage with students came from a Rabbi. At age nine, I was chosen to be a part of my Jewish cousin's wedding. During his Dvar Torah (which is like a sermon), the Rabbi discussed how both the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are nourished by the river Jordan. The Sea of Galilee receives water, but does not keep it. The Dead Sea "selfishly" keeps all of the water that drains into it.

Quickly, I understood his message and how it related to my life. At that time, I was into Pokemon cards. A crucial part of the card game is to trade them with friends. As I had an opportunity to receive a highly coveted card from my friend, I remembered Rabbi Lucas's lesson: I must resemble the Sea of Galilee and give something equally valuable in return. Noticing that I was able to take advice given to a newly married couple and convert it into a relatable lesson for myself, I realized that when someone is engaging, his lessons can span age, religion or any other factor.

Looking back, I have always gravitated towards teachers, coaches, and peers who were able to engage me in that way. As I grew older and started to become the leader, mentor or teacher, this insight about the way I learn encouraged me to present myself similarly. I learned to make my encounters with others meaningful by finding the common thread.

I *still* recall the manner in which Rabbi Lucas made his impression on me. During the retreats, I put his teaching into practice. Engaging people in relatable ways proves to be significantly more effective (and enjoyable) than simply lecturing them. Looking for common threads helps me to connect with and motivate others. I hope to continue refining these skills so that I can be more effective in presenting, sharing ideas, and working with all types of people to achieve a common goal.

PLAN FOR IT ALL

Julia Judge

I have never been a strong believer in the phrase “everything happens for a reason.” Something about the commonly coined expression has always left me unsettled. Such a claim implies that everything in our day-to-day lives is part of God’s plan. Does that mean destruction, death, devastation are part of His plan? Our God is a God of love, peace, and comfort. Therefore, it cannot be the case that He plans out destruction, death and devastation. God first initiates His relationship with us out of love, because He is love. Our job is to respond to Him with the free will He gifted to all. This free will gives us the ability to do what we “ought to” meaning the liberty to choose right relationship with God, however, we may also choose isolation. This can raise the question of: Am I following God’s plan, or my own?

“There is no path we can take that God cannot follow.”

While God does not plan out evil, He does have a plan for everything. Throughout the Bible, we witness God heal the broken, the lame, and the blind, yet we often forget that He has the ability to heal our burdens as well. Perhaps God did not plan for that friend to walk away, for that boy to choose someone else, for that bad test grade, or for that injury. He may not have planned the many struggles that we are plagued with. However, He always planned to save us. God inspired the Old Testament to foretell the coming of Christ, with you in mind. He has always planned for our redemption. The Lord does not ask us to walk through life blindly and accept when bad things happen. Rather, He asks that we surrender our shortcomings to His plan.

I often feel pressure, both from myself and others, to question whether I am where God wants me to be in life. We are taught not to dwell on the past and to look to the future,

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yet it is more comfortable to live in the memories of what could have been than to face the uncertainty of what could be. It's ironic that one of my favorite Bible verses is Jeremiah 29:11, where God assures us of His plan for us, while I struggle to remind myself that there is no path we can take that God cannot follow. There is no amount of destruction in our lives that the Lord cannot rebuild, because God wants to meet us where we are and call us out of our lowliness to share in His glory. Therefore, while God does not plan the evil in our lives, He has a plan for it all.



LED BY LOVE: MY JOURNEY TO SAINT ANTHONY'S

For me at least, middle school has certainly lived up to its reputation as “the worst years of your life.” However, as I look back on my life, I realize that through every single moment of hardship or peace, God was always with me. Especially in those rough moments, he was carrying me... I'll explain this more in the end.

Growing up I was taught how to pray at a young age, we attended church, and I was always encouraged by my parents to maintain a strong connection to God, for example, by praying daily, attending church every Sunday, and having trust in Him and His path for me. However, when entering middle school, this began to change. At this time, I grew incredibly insecure, quit soccer (a sport to which I had devoted years of my life to), and didn't have many friends. Like a turtle, I withdrew into my figurative shell, hiding myself from anyone by solely wearing hoodies and black tights, hoping no one would see me. This was a difficult time as I did not know who I was, what I was meant to be, or even if God was with me. It felt as if he had abandoned me as I constantly struggled with my self image and was often very fearful of “embarrassing myself” in front of others. I was even too scared to raise my hand to go to the restroom in fear of drawing attention to myself in class. I stopped praying and attending church thinking I was “punishing” God for doing this to me.

The pandemic had eventually occurred during the middle of seventh grade which allowed me to focus more on my spirituality and self image. I was led back to taekwondo, a sport I had been doing since six years old, which had helped to boost my confidence and self image. I also began repairing relationships with my family members as before I became incredibly introverted and did not talk to anyone.

Thankfully, the pandemic began to “end” around the end of eighth grade when classes would now be fully back (no

hybrid or online options) and I had to decide where to attend high school. Living in the middle country district, Centereach was my default option, however, I longed for something else. That is when my mom suggested I take the TACHS exam and apply to Saint Anthony's. In January when I had received my acceptance letter I was still unsure if I should even attend.



That is when something weird began to happen. I began seeing signs everywhere of St. Anthony. For example, sometimes I would be driving by and see a sculpture or a banner with “St. Anthony’s” on it. My grandfather even called one day when he found an old memorable: a plate with the words “St. Anthony’s” on it. Unbeknownst to me at that time, my family had actually built a church and named it St. Anthony’s in Canada about a century ago to avoid being forced into the residential schooling system. Even though at this time my connection to God was rocky, as I previously mentioned, I still took this as a sign from Him and had hope that He was with me.

Of course, when I said “yes” to God and entered Saint Anthony’s for the first time I was very shy, however, due to the amazing people here, the clubs offered, and emphasis on faith, I began to change. I grew more confident, made so many incredible friends, and my connection to God had been restored. This is when I realized that God had never “abandoned” me. That all this time, through times of both hardship and joy, he was always there providing me guidance and love, I just was

not open to it due to my stubbornness. It was only when I opened my heart to Him that I began to hear his encouragement and see his signs. During this time frame here at St. Anthony's I learned to love myself and by doing so truly came into my own. For example, four years ago I had to work up the courage to raise my hand and ask the teacher to go to the bathroom, however, now I am the president of three clubs not including several other leadership roles. This school has helped me find my passion in business and technology as well which is what I plan to pursue in college. Coming to Saint Anthony's was so transformative to me and helped lead me out of depression all due to God's guidance.

After this experience, I have grown in my spirituality and see God everywhere especially if I am in distress. Even if someone gives me a compliment that I needed to hear, I know it was God sending them to me to tell me everything will be alright. I know there may be some of you who feel lost spiritually, are going through a hard time, or completely feel as if God has left you stranded. I invite you to please do as I did and open your heart to Him. I understand that it may be hard to acknowledge your feelings, fears, and struggles, however, by giving them to God, he will take this load off of you and guide you on the path you are meant to be on. You and I are so lucky because we have all been led to this amazing school, focused on boosting our faith and connection to God which should be a major sign to you alone that He wants to help you.

I want to end with one of my most favorite quotes from a poem which occurs when a man and Jesus are walking alongside one another on the beach. The man looking back on the footprints, essentially looking back on his life at certain points, only sees one set of footprints, not two. Thinking Jesus abandoned him, he asked why this occurred. In response Jesus says "When you see only one set of footprints, it was then I carried you." As I stated, God is always with you, especially in hard times, you just need to open your heart to see it. Never feel abandoned because it is at the most difficult moments that God will be carrying you.

THE SAINT THAT INSPIRES ME

Morgan Garvey

St. Veronica is most well known for her role in the Stations of the Cross when she wiped the face of Jesus during His journey to Calvary. As Jesus travelled to Calvary St. Veronica noticed His suffering and wiped His face with her veil. In response, Jesus left behind an imprint of His face left on the veil. This veil is now kept in St. Peter's Basilica. This generous act is the reason St. Veronica is the patron saint of photography, laundry, and those suffering from skin disease.

St. Veronica has always been a role model in my life. Every year my elementary school would go through the Stations of the Cross around Easter, and for as long as I can remember I would always be impressed by the selfless act that St. Veronica performed. The idea of her being a stranger witnessing Jesus' suffering and trying to help Him even though she could be horrifically punished astonished me. The compassion she showed towards a man she hadn't even met before shows that she really was a caring person. She was willing to face horrifying

consequences just to help a man that to many was considered a criminal. These actions show that she was truly a kind and caring person. I have always admired St. Veronica and that is why I chose her as my confirmation saint. I have admired her compassion and her humility my whole life and I try to follow her footsteps every day.



OUR TRUE IDENTITY

Vincent Sorrentino

God uses change to help us realize our true identity: that we are His. We should not hate change and run from it, but rather open our eyes to the lessons we can learn and try to become the people Christ wants us to be. Undergoing hip surgery this year was a change that had a tremendous impact on my faith journey. As an athlete, my surgery made me realize that my identity is not of anything worldly, but rather that I am Christ's child. We are all broken in our own ways, either inside or out. If we base our identity and happiness on something worldly, it will fade and no longer give us the same joy. We must rely on something bigger than ourselves—and that is Christ. Lean on Him as the source of your joy and identity! Relying on ourselves or on anything worldly that is not of Christ as a source of identity and happiness will let us down. Christ created us and overcame death in this world for us. We should rely on Him because He knows what is best for us. Everything we do must be rooted in Christ.



HIS WILL

Anna Gross

If I had been told years ago that I would stand in front of high school students, sharing my witness talk, I would have been very doubtful. In what world would a person diagnosed with Selective Mutism at the age of three ever be able to speak in front of her peers?

Growing up, I was raised a faithful Roman Catholic. I have attended Catholic school all my life. From an early age, the values and teachings of our faith were instilled in me. My faith holds utmost importance in my life as I apply it in acts of service, dedication, and love. It is that which has allowed me to recognize God's presence in my life. However, The doubt I carried inside of me spread much farther than simply being "shy." With the diagnosis of Selective Mutism at the age of three, I spent my early childhood rarely speaking: nothing. Just mute silence. Anxiety and nerves are familiar to all, yet the experience I had with this was at an extreme and debilitating level. Though I did not recognize it at the time, it was this anxiety that enveloped me that acted as the restraining factor in my ability to speak. It was also this same anxiety that acted as the catalyst for who I have become. Anxiety holds us back and causes our fears to take over. Most often, we become overwhelmed by the thought of something new and succumb to our nerves. Thus, it is when we learn to control this anxiety that we are let free.

It was not until September 30, 2011 that I would break free of my silence. I will never know what allowed me to speak that day. However, I do know that it was the day that God opened the gates to a whole new world of opportunity and possibility for me. I distinctly recall the freeing weight off my shoulders; a newfound sense of freedom. It was both chilling and unnerving to feel so exposed, yet I knew at that moment I had been given a clean slate on which to grow. It is very easy to fall back into darkness, however it is God's light that guides

us and allows us to do things we cannot do on our own. I often experience situations where it would be easier for me to succumb to being shy. Despite this, I recognize the beauty in overcoming such battles. Though I do not consider myself an extrovert, I believe that in comparison to the shy elementary school girl, I have truly evolved.

Thus, the message I am hoping to convey is that God has a plan for each and every one of us and will give us every grace to accomplish it. Being united to His will is how we flourish. I firmly believe that my childhood silence was a part of His plan. Had I never experienced silence, I would not recognize the value that lies in speaking out and leading my peers. My journey has allowed me to become who I am today: a voice for my school, compassionate words to a friend in need, a faithful disciple, and most importantly one who speaks Truth. I believe that the journey we each experience is one of everlasting opportunities. Though my story changed earlier in my life, I recognize growth each and every day, whether it be speaking from the heart or leading school prayer. Both feats would have been unachievable in my world of silence. I believe that allowing God to work within us is the first step needed to experience His grace. He is capable of doing in an instant what would take a lifetime for us to attempt ourselves. Thus, we must give ourselves to Him wholeheartedly.

“God has a plan for each and every one of us and will give us every grace to accomplish it. Being united to His will is how we flourish.”

I invite you to allow God to free you from chains of your own fears and anxiety so that you can open the floodgates. Imagine your smallest moment of stress and now apply that to every second of your day. This was my reality as a young girl. So, we must recognize that each and every individual experiences this feeling to some degree. Though my anxiety was extreme, I learned to cope. It is through His will that we evolve. Simply leading a retreat such as this would not have

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been possible had God not guided me through my anxiety. This is not to say that I do not experience anxiety today. I am often overcome with worry and the overwhelming stress of life. However, even in the smallest moments of anxiety, I reflect upon the grace I received in 2011. I was released from my silence for a reason and for that reason, I handle each obstacle with a similar mindset. For if the Lord freed me from my most prominent battle, His grace is never far. His blessings are what protect me in times of unease and allow me to pursue growth. It is through this that I witness the Lord's presence in my life. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).



WHY I LOVE THE BIBLE

Maximilian Marciano

The Bible plays a very important role in my life. On a fundamental, utilitarian level, the Bible is a book which outlines right moral conduct, and teaches me how to lead a proper life. The Bible serves as a history book for me to more thoroughly understand the origins of my Christian faith. It is a teacher of complex theological concepts as well. Among all of these roles that the Bible fulfills, I feel that the Bible serves an even higher purpose for me. I understand the Bible as a channel through which God communicates with me. I am willing to read any book in the Bible, as I believe that they all can be used by God as a means of this communication. I do my very best to listen to what God is saying to me through Scripture and to act accordingly in my words and actions. I often pray for courage to do so.

Although I sometimes do not want to read my Bible, I feel that the discipline I have developed in this practice has been essential as my relationship with God develops. I continue to pray for this discipline. The Bible is not easy to interpret. I feel blessed to have an aunt, "Auntie G," who possesses the strongest relationship with Jesus I have ever experienced in my life. She is always available to help me as I navigate the complexities of scripture and its meaning. From a secular view, I find it amazing how influential the Bible has been throughout history, and the scale to which it has impacted many facets of society for centuries. I enjoy observing how God's word continues to be present in the everyday society of modern times.



STRUGGLING WITH GOD

Maya Williams

I find my struggle with God helped me create a relationship with God. I may not worship as hard as others or play gospel music in the car, but that doesn't mean my relationship with God does not have value.

I struggled with God all through middle school. I was surrounded by atheists and Christians who did acts that were frowned upon. I was with kids who wanted to use ouija boards in the dark and crosses in the light. Although I didn't know what I believed in, I knew I did not believe in that. My great grandmother, bless her soul, taught me a lesson in creole when I was young. She said "Though your relationship with God may change, don't access other religions that read palms, cards, or call upon the dead. Keep your soul open to God and closed to spirits."

My struggle with belief connects to Israel because part of their Exodus was turning away from the idols of Egypt. Similar to how the Israelites let go of idols, like the Egyptian gods and control, I have a lot to let go of. I still may have idols I need to let go that I do not realize yet. I was called to give in to God and let go of my fears and wants. I wanted to be accepted.

I wanted friends I did not need. I lost myself chasing others who truly did not care for me and my beliefs. Studying the book of Exodus helped me put in perspective the conversions I went through after middle school. I still need to grow in my confidence and not let people affect my opinion on myself and how I live my life. The only way I will grow is through time and faith and that is okay.



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