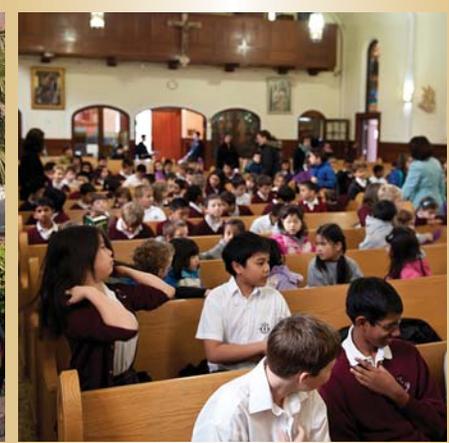


# A School Mass Reroutes a Mom's Heart

The sound of children's voices led  
a Protestant mother to become a Catholic.

TEXT BY TAMA WARD ■ PHOTOS BY JOHN SINAL





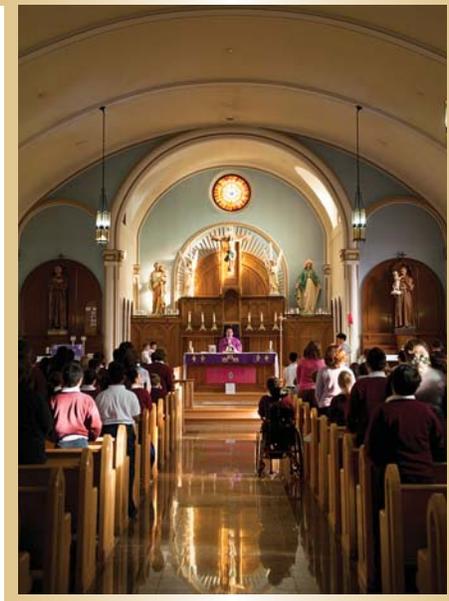
**N**ot wanting my awkwardness to be apparent, I sat as close to the back of the sanctuary as possible. A few empty pews separated me from the rows of fidgeting children, all of them wearing the burgundy cardigan of their school uniform. Seated shoulder-to-shoulder in orderly rows, the youngsters, with their pent-up energy, were kept from spilling out into the aisles by teachers strategically positioned at the end of pews.

The school maintained an open invitation for parents and caregivers of children enrolled at St. Francis of Assisi Elementary School to attend these monthly Masses in the parish church. On this particular winter morning I was one of a handful of adults who had made their way through a cold West Coast rain to participate in the worship.

Seated at the far end of my pew were three *nonnas*, Italian grandmothers dressed in dark wool coats and zippered ankle boots. Was it obvious to them, I wondered, that this was my first time ever in a Catholic church?

### Major Life Decision

My husband and I had enrolled our kindergarten-aged daughter at St. Francis of Assisi School the previous autumn.



On her first visit, author Tama Ward found St. Francis of Assisi Church in Vancouver foreign and uncomfortable. Now it has become her spiritual home and the source of ongoing sustenance.

It had raised a few eyebrows among our friends and colleagues, as we were considered a devout family within the Protestant community of our East Vancouver neighborhood.

The explanations we offered were as much to convince ourselves of the soundness of our decision as to respond to those who asked: The school was a mere half block from our house, and its unpretentious, neighborhood feel gave us the sense that it would be a soulful place for our children to spend the fledgling years of their academic careers. Besides, we had long been admirers of the saint after whom the school was named.

On this particular morning I had decided that I should attend at least one of these services to show my support for the school community despite my different religious background. Now here I sat in this strange building, taking in surroundings that were foreign to my churchgoing experience.

St. Francis of Assisi Church has an old-world feel to it: solid wood doors with iron hinges, a cavernous sanctuary with vaulted ceilings painted a pale blue, stained-glass windows with the names of church benefactors engraved beneath, a shining marble floor flecked in shades of gray over pink.

But it wasn't the overall ambiance of the sanctuary that caught my attention. It was the accoutrements.

## 'I Don't Belong Here!'

It's perhaps a well-known fact that Protestants have a running list of things that are "wrong" or "wayward" about Catholics and their forms of worship. "They pray to saints"; "they worship Mary"; "their prayers are rote"; "their services are scripted."

And on it goes. As I sat in my pew taking in my surroundings, I was surprised that all these stereotypes seemed to be bearing themselves out: the towering statue of Mary, the prayer books on the racks, the array of plaster saints looking heavenward from their pedestals around the church, people bowing and genuflecting and crossing themselves as they came and went, the red glow of votive candles inviting silent prayers in a corner.

I had hoped in coming here this morning that the stereotypes I'd been raised on would prove exaggerated. I had hoped that I would find the sanctuary to be much like the one in our unadorned Baptist church eight blocks down the street.

But no, this was different, *very* different. I concluded within minutes of taking my seat that I didn't belong here.

From the front of the sanctuary the priest began to lead the gathered congregation in one of "those" rote Catholic prayers rattled off at such a speed as to make what is being said more or less incomprehensible to the uninitiated. A few audible phrases surfaced over the general murmur, and I gathered that it was some form of confession. I picked up the prayer book in front of me and looked randomly at a page in an attempt to appear informed and involved.

My gesture proved futile, for the murmur of prayer stopped as abruptly as it had begun. I despaired that the rest of the service would leave me feeling increasingly and conspicuously lost. I longed to make my way back outside into a world that was far more forgiving of differences between Catholics and Protestants than this sanctuary was proving to be.

## Forward in Faith

But then something happened that changed everything: The children began to sing. The entire student body, 200 voices strong from kindergarten to grade 7, their only accompaniment an acoustic guitar played by their music teacher, Mr. Sudar, who stood facing them.

Tender yet robust, their sounds rose upward from the varnished wooden pews and the cold marble floor and filled the far reaches of the high-arched ceiling.

*Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.*

It was a moment that was to completely reroute the orientation of my heart toward the Catholic faith. It was not that I had never heard children sing before, nor were the abil-

ities of these children on the exceptional side of normal. What was significant was the effect their young voices had on my spirit.

Their song abruptly suspended—as though in midair—all the prejudice and awkwardness that I had been carrying in my heart. It was as though the collective voice of these unsuspecting children took my fears and judgments and, together with the rest of the congregation's murmured confessions, carried them off on some invisible wave of song.

*Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.*

In and of itself, that single moment would have been gift enough. Yet I soon realized that this was only the beginning. The chorus of 5- to 12-year-olds wasted not a breath in moving on to their next liturgical assignment.

## Notes of Gratitude

*Glory to God in the highest, sing glory to God.*

The youngsters belted out the lyrics in the way that children will do when a song is so well-rehearsed that volume is uncompromised. Their near-shouts of praise gave fitting expression to the gratitude of which they sang:

*Lord God, heavenly King, Almighty God and Father, we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.*

When, as a young adult, I was embarking on my own career in theological studies at a Protestant seminary in southern Ontario, I read the Catholic mystic and philosopher Meister Eckhart. In one of his characteristically succinct



Good music and good liturgy go well together. John Sudar, music teacher, leads a practice before the weekly student Mass.



*I was carried forward by their voices to a destination beyond my knowing.*



statements, he observed that if the only prayer we ever say in our lifetimes is “Thank you,” it will be enough.

The clarity of his insight seized my attention at the time. If everything we have and are is a gift from God, then, yes, the final and fullest response of the human heart must be one of thanksgiving.

I determined then and there all those years ago that for any spiritual path to be worthwhile and true, it would have to prove itself capable of guiding its adherents into a place composed of infinite gratitude.

For the next hour I began to experience firsthand the great training ground of the heart that is a Catholic Mass. The overall movement of the liturgy toward gratitude is profound. The momentum builds progressively with each stage carrying the worshiper forward—from confession to praise, from petition to consolation, from resolve to reassurance and, at the end, from intimacy to thanksgiving.

On that first morning of my own exposure to a Catholic Mass, I experienced this progression as wavelike, with the sung responses of the children being the surge of the wave. No sooner would one swell subside than the next one would be on the rise. Feeling like a small ship on a great sea, I was carried forward by their voices to a destination beyond my knowing.

*Alleluia, alleluia*, they sang in anticipation of meeting



What is it about the voices of singing youngsters? Their innocence and beauty touch us and teach adults about our faith—even though they are not yet fully aware of its priceless value.

the altar. Surely they could not fully understand the role they were playing in this greatest of all spiritual dramas.

When I had first entered the church that morning, I had absolutely no intention of participating in the Eucharist. I had determined that I would sit respectfully in my pew and “just watch.” Yet now that the moment of invitation had

Jesus in the words of the Gospel; and *hosanna, hosanna on high* in celebration of the union with God through Christ that is offered in the Eucharist; *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again* in contemplation of the mystery of the self-giving love of God.

At every turn throughout the Mass, the children were primed and ready to meet us. By their song they carried the rest of us in the congregation from our places of longing and need to God’s places of hope and provision.

### **Moment of Initiation**

The time came in the service for the students to go up to the altar for Communion. I knew that here we had reached the high moment of the Mass where they would leave the anonymity of the group and step forward, each in turn, to be met and known before God. The teachers stood and, one pew at a time, released into the center aisle the stream of burgundy-clad youngsters under their care.

Sporting ponytails, bobs, crew cuts and cowlicks, the children approached

come, it was as though I were being compelled forward by something larger than myself.

Almost without knowing it, I had taken my place in the slow-moving line of worshipers preparing to receive the Eucharist. As we advanced, the only noise to break the silence was the soft clatter of kneelers being raised or lowered as the children and adults circled around and settled back into the pews.

Just as I was beginning to resign myself to the end of the children's sung accompaniment that had brought me this deep into Catholic territory, Mr. Sudar rose. Facing the students, he struck a set of chords on his guitar. Once again, children's voices surged upward, overflowing the silence the way a river floods its bank in springtime.

*Make me a channel of your peace.*

*Where there is hatred, let me bring your love.*

While the children sang the familiar words of their school hymn, those of us at the end of the Communion line continued our frontward journey—the gym teacher, a nanny juggling two toddlers, a grandfather making eye contact with a granddaughter sitting with her first-grade class, other parents and grandparents, the three *nonnas*, myself.

*Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord. And where there's doubt, true faith in you.*

As I passed through the sea of singing voices, I wondered to myself what these children could possibly comprehend of the deep mysteries of which they sang. What could they know of God's mercy that even as adults we only catch glimpses? What of the hard-fought battles of the heart? How much can they fathom of the difficult work of forgiveness? How much of the struggle of faith over doubt, of peace over strife? They have been asked to carry a treasure, not fully aware of its priceless value and worth.

*O Master, grant that I may never seek, so much to be consoled as to console.*

*To be understood as to understand, To be loved as to love with all my soul.*

At the front of the Communion line I crossed my arms over my chest, following instructions I had previously been given. In response to this gesture, the priest put down the wafer he was ready to offer; instead, he raised his hand and pressed the sign of the cross onto my forehead.



It was the vision of burgundy-clad students approaching the altar for Communion that helped lead Tama Ward to enter the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, the chorus of children continued their song, a retaining wall of blessing behind me:

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;*

*In giving of ourselves that we receive;*

*And in dying that we're born to eternal life.*

### **The Children Shall Lead**

I realized in that moment that this is the beauty of children leading us through the Mass. It is not because of what they know, but because of what they don't know, that they make such perfect guides. It is precisely because they comprehend almost nothing of the breadth and depth of which they sing that they hold the treasure so perfectly.

They stand as a metaphor, an icon even, of the truth that none of us really knows anything of the fathomless depths of God's mercy and grace—that *all* we receive surely is gift and that, in the end, if all we can think to say is "Thank you," it truly will be enough.

Since that cold winter day four years ago, I have participated in many Catholic Masses in a variety of settings:

a large cathedral where a trained adult choir provided the sung responses, a church where another cultural tradition had drums and tambourines and flutes leading the worship, a monastery with Mass sung *a cappella* by a group of cloistered monks.

Through these encounters I have come to love the diversity and depth of expression that can be given to the basic form of a Catholic Mass, and I have grown in my appreciation for the call-and-response format that seems to touch all the places of the human heart before God.

And yet I maintain that a school Mass, led as it is by the voices of children, holds out the best opportunity for encounter with grace. For it is here in the presence of children that we are reminded of a most basic spiritual truth: What counts in the end is not how much we have brought to God, whether in knowledge or in accomplishments, but how much God, in Christ, has brought to us. ▲

---

Tama Ward studied theology at McMaster Divinity College in Hamilton, Ontario, and served on the pastoral staff of Protestant churches 1992-2007. She and her husband, Loren, completed the RCIA program at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in East Vancouver and joined the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 2010.