

The Masses

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I am not what you'd consider a churchgoer. My family and I haven't shown up for Christmas or Easter in years. Sitting in a pew makes me uncomfortable. I make mental maps of my neighborhood and memorize grocery lists to ease my nervousness. I will attend services on Ash Wednesday now and again because I dig on the dramatic effect of the forehead ashes. But the priest and I both know that I'll never make it to the other side of Lent.

So attending the services of the Compline Mass at St. Mark's Cathedral in Capitol Hill was something of an occasion for me.

The spare architecture of the place was almost as unexpected as the dense crowds who gathered there for the event. An unfinished cement floor spans the enormous room, closed in by walls of white-washed brick, unremarkable but for their towering height. Four stories above me, bare wooden beams lace the ceiling that is absent of frescoes or arches or even insulation. Saint Mark's is a far cry from the wall-to-wall rose-colored carpeting of the country church I attended as a kid, and it is a looming shadow of the ornate cathedral where my grandparents attend their Polish masses.

Instead, the room is a simple, vacuous study in wood and concrete, shadowy white pillars framed with grays and dusty browns. The windows are tall and the dark glass panels are mismatched in patches. There is neither stained glass nor Stations of the Cross on the walls, no elaborate baptismal monuments. There is no decadence, really, of any kind.

Suspended behind the wide altar is a steel and glass sculpture about a dozen men tall, and deep with complex angles and hinges. The arrangement of the glass plates and steel beams is reminiscent of a giant Celtic cross, or a pale grey carnation in full bloom. For all its noble lines and perfect triangles, the sculpture too seems to be a statement for simplicity on a grand scale.

I am impressed by the crowds of people already filling the enormous hall. There are people lining the circumference of the church. The pews too full, they sit on the floor and on the altar. They lean against pillars or sit cross-legged in the high-backed wooden chairs presumably meant only for the clergy. I am quietly shocked and a little tickled by the irreverence of it all.

I have a desire to sit down front with the throngs of teenage girls in scarves and sneakers, delighted, giggling and gesturing wildly with their hands. I recognize some younger, brighter self in them, and I catch their contagious enthusiasm like an old habit. I scan the benches and spot men in business suits sitting across from single women with expensive watches and dark roots. There are young people in black leather jackets with black leather gloves sitting among white-haired men with sweatshirts and reading glasses who look blankly over their noses to the soft women beside them.

Swarms of children circle the pillars and climb over laps, clearly glad to be awake so late on a school night. I feel surrounded by resonant variations of pasts and futures, unified somehow in each other's presence.

When a line of men begins to file into the hall, we all quiet down and stop flipping self-consciously through our hymnals. Dressed like Picasso's early sketches of altar boys, they enter from the front of the room and solemnly make their way to the music stands set up in the back. The entire church seems to take a collective breath.

In delicate unison, they sing in Latin and English. The sounds fill the heaven-height ceiling, clear and light. The regular rhythms of the Gregorian chants convey simple, melodic unisons. The resonant space in the octaves lull me, steady my heartbeat. I am calm and have a sense of the day slowing down behind me. Just as we have all softened into the steady lullaby, the choir breaks into a celestial harmony, what sounds like eight parts or more. After tuning to each other in unisons and sharing small, conservative triads of notes through the entire program, their voices split into crystalline complex harmony, like light through a prism.

I glance up at the great stainless steel crucifix, a blossom of space and angles, and can feel each individual voice lift through me. The chord fills my lungs with something brighter than air, something completely devoid of dissonance, something that seems to come close to divine.

In that moment, I realized the Compline Mass is the first service I've ever attended that I've been eager to return to. A holy place that doesn't make me second-guess the holes in my jeans or my big earrings. I return, for the heightened perfection of the harmonies and for the eclectic collection of company. I am drawn back to that place, to that half hour every week, to the colorful and diverse masses of strangers. A churchfull of unusual suspects gives me a sense of belonging and the assurance that I don't have to pray, only listen. We all listen together.

I always sit on the right, towards the front, exactly opposite the back-left where my mother always insisted on planting us. Against the wall to my right, there are three adolescent girls who bring blankets every week. They cuddle together; one girl sits cross-legged in the middle with each of her friends resting against her, one pony-tailed head on each of her knees. She strokes their hair gently and closes her eyes as we listen to the voices. I find comfort in them, and in the pews filled with lovers holding hands, with families the size of basketball teams and with twenty-somethings slowing down from fast weekends.

I am always most struck by the young kids who sit along the altar and who sometimes lay down on their backs when the listening is loudest. Some of them are gutterpunks, of the street-corner variety. I recognize them from the gangs of kids who camp out in front of the drugstore on my block, with chains stringing their clothing together and ropes leashing their skinny dogs to thick belt loops. They have sloppy tattoos and dirty dread locks. Their faces are perforated with piercings. I find myself envious of them. Sometimes the smell of their youth and rebellion rushes me back to skipping high school to smoke pot in parked cars and play cards over truck-stop coffee.

I think of who I was and what that girl knows, the loud one with a hoop through her nose and

purple streaks through her hair. She's running for class president in hopes of leading a revolution. And I wonder, considering all her hormonal laments and lofty dreams and spiked-punch dances and journals full of firsts, would that girl feel as connected to this place and these people as I do? What would have to happen in her life or in the world to get her to step foot in a church? I wonder if she would recognize me as her octave.

When my brother Adam committed suicide three months ago, I found myself suddenly back at church and inundated with condolences in the name of Jesus Christ's unconditional love. I attended the funeral service and collected dozens of Prayer Cards from distant relatives and schoolteachers. I wore every holy medallion, cross, pin, and locket that my mother passed to me. And I found myself kneeling at the foot of some great mystery, inhaling slowly and trying to be calm as I demanded where my brother's spirit has gone to now, now that it has abandoned his body and my world.

Now the words to the Lord's Prayer have returned to me and I have begun to encourage my mother's belief in angels. I have studied John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and I have perused *Revelations*. I have turned to gravestones and started digging. For faith.

I haven't come up with anything by way of answers or reasons or sense, but I am drawn to hear those men sing. They provide a key center I can build on, a lullaby I can rest with. I sit quietly, a twenty-something recovering from a long weekend and a dissonant three months, three months like a diminished triad, echoing relentlessly through every hiding place and hollow hope. I return to the Compline Mass to listen to the perfect harmonies and to cry. Softly. I keep grateful company with the business suits and the families and the lovers and the gutterpunks. We all sit together and listen to the unison voices, and then we all separate into our various cultural harmonies.

I don't think I'm the only one who comes looking, listening for faith. We can hear it in the music, in the way the chords resolve.