

# Table grace: Returning to church

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

*By Nora Gallagher, Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith. (Knopf, 234 pp.)*

After leaving the Episcopal Church at age 20, Nora Gallagher found herself drawn back to church in her 30s. She began to visit churches, but kept her faith a secret. "I didn't know how to speak about it. My faith at the beginning wasn't coherent: What words came out were sentimental, defensive, distorted, like bulbs that bloom too early and are bitten by frost."

Eventually she wandered into Trinity Episcopal Church in Santa Barbara, California. The members weren't particularly friendly at coffee hour. The priest seemed discouraged. Attendance was dwindling. Yet Gallagher kept coming back. Soon she was helping set up a soup kitchen for the homeless--a ministry that became central to the church and to Gallagher's faith. She joined a candlelight vigil for Jesuit priests killed in El Salvador. She accompanied a group of women on a trip to Nicaragua and saw, in addition to economical and political turmoil, the depth of people's involvement in their communities. She realized that she wanted that kind of community in her own life.

These experiences are gradually convincing enough, or you have paid them so much attention they reach critical mass. The famous "leap" comes at the beginning, when there is not enough experience to justify the effort. Even then, something begins faith--a memory of a reality or of an experience that doesn't quite fit with everything else, the longing a soul has to find its shape in the world.

So she stayed at Trinity. "At Trinity, I cleaned up my act, stopped rebelling against everything in front of me (and/or leaving or hiding) and claimed my piece of the pie." In *Things Seen and Unseen* Gallagher shows how each tentative return to church led to another visit, then to a task and another task, and finally to full engagement in the congregation. She became a lay eucharistic minister (licensed to serve communion), soup kitchen manager, social activist and member of the vestry, the

congregation's governing body.

Gallagher continues to evaluate and assess the steps she takes. "What I wanted at the time I walked in the door . . . was peace," she says. "I believe I understood peace at the time as comfort." Later, she realizes that what she got was "the peace of God that passes all understanding, or "a peace that is no peace." She adds, "As I move more and more into the center of church activity, I often associate church not with God or peace, but with lists."

Gallagher is a journalist who's worked for *Time and Life*, and she trains her journalist's alert and discerning eye on the growth of her own faith and on the congregation that--warts and all--sustains and challenges her. Trinity has all the familiar woes: membership decline, budget crisis and the departure and arrival of pastors. She gives us glimpses of parish life and shapes them into a thoughtful and absorbing parish profile.

By organizing the book around the church year, Gallagher also invites the reader to meditate on the liturgical seasons, beginning with Advent and moving through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Eastertide and Pentecost. The book concludes in "Ordinary Time," a term she borrows from the Roman Catholic Church because she likes the idea of an "ordinary" season. Into these chapters the author weaves descriptions of members of the congregation, her family and workers and guests at the soup kitchen.

When Gallagher walked into Trinity, it was experiencing years of "dysfunction." Some of the laypeople were pressing for more dynamic leadership; the city was pressing the church to pay for an earthquake retrofit at the cost of \$1.5 million. Then the priest resigned and Trinity continued under lay leaders. It was an anxious time for those who remained, and yet the experience also revitalized the community and led members to reconsider its potential.

Ann Jaqua is one of the members who remembers those years. "We did an exercise in imagining what Trinity could be, both to us and to the city. There was a lot of energy and excitement. Then we came up with something beautiful: Trinity could be a well, a source of strength and sustenance for us and for the city."

As Gallagher observes, "We grew in worth and dignity . . . we were learning an adult form of theology, our own experiences reflected in the light of the gospel, unmediated by 'Father.' It felt as if the membrane between church and world was

becoming more permeable."

Trinity's members decided to call a priest who would support this development in community life, a person who would be an advocate for those traditionally left outside of the church: the homeless who came regularly to the soup kitchen, and the homosexuals and women traditionally excluded from liturgy and leadership. This squared with Gallagher's own priorities and tempered her skepticism. But even after she has become a full participant, she wonders at her involvement in the church. "I never expected to be a leader in an, uh, institution," she says. "I keep looking over my shoulder to find out if someone has guessed that I'm an impostor."

The congregation called Mark Asman as pastor. He, like Gallagher, had been out of the church for ten years and was now testing his own vocation by coming to Trinity. In a special experiment, the congregation and priest were allowed to "try each other out" for three years. The relationship provides another plot line for Gallagher's narrative.

At Trinity, as perhaps at most congregations, a kind of guided confusion reigns. Some issues divide the congregation, others unite it. The soup kitchen, for example, is a vital ministry that gives the church an identity. But it is also a constant source of conflict. There are always complaints about the presence of the homeless from some members, and from schools and businesses nearby.

Several characteristics of Trinity Episcopal give it a unique personality. Gallagher's account is saturated with suffering and the congregation's response to suffering. Her own encounter with this pain begins when she consents to serve as "alternate health care agent " for her friend Ben Nistal-Moret. She learns that the job requires her to help him as he dies of AIDS, and in the humiliation of that death, the fatigue of it, the messiness of it, Gallagher realizes that God has helped her to survive the experience.

She joins one of the church's two support communities that meet weekly to reflect on the lectionary readings and encourage each other in faith and prayer. One of the members of the group is Lois Hitz, whose cancer has returned. Then Gallagher discovers that her brother Kit has cancer, and she accepts the support of the church as she and her brother move through the year. "Being faithful to God means being faithful to others, in sickness and in health, for better or worse," even if, "like your family, it presents you with people you would not normally choose."

Members pass each other in homes and hospitals as they call on and pray for one another. They talk about those who are not with them, thereby holding the absent friends and family members close. One woman admits that pain has "obliterated my sense of humor, my confidence, my joy in other people, even my easiness in prayer. Through it all I have held on to one message--'I will be with you.'"

The church members are with each other, and in carrying one another's pain they keep returning to worship and to the communion table. The congregation sees a powerful connection between the Eucharist and the soup kitchen. The two tables are in adjacent rooms; they are replenished day to day and week to week; they are open to everyone. A kitchen Christianity begins to shape Trinity. "I was learning things in the soup kitchen I could not learn anywhere else," says Gallagher. Ann Jaqua says the serving table is like the altar. "The two go together. I don't think the Eucharist makes sense without the soup."

In the sanctuary, Gallagher follows the priest with a chalice. "I like the rhythm of serving, cleaning and turning (the motion is like that of a bartender polishing a glass)." As she serves communion, Gallagher sees Lois, who will succumb to cancer. She sees "the halos of balding men, strands of white, showing through dye, the fallen-down helplessness in people's eyes." She also sees "bits of hidden life, something about to emerge, like the look of a child just before she makes her first dive."

The next morning she is at the other table, the soup table, solving a crisis, calling restaurants to beg for leftover vegetables, calming a guest who is yelling at the volunteers, or accepting a guest's recipe card for "noodle! Veg! Cheese! Meat CASSEROLE."

Finally she sits down to eat a bowl of soup. "The kitchen is like one of those early churches where everyone was welcome," Gallagher decides. "Women, slaves and artisans were welcome, those people who didn't have authority or even personhood in public life. Here we may be re-creating the original Eucharist, a feast for the marginal, while there, in the church, is its reified progeny." She quotes Esther de Waal on Celtic Christianity: "Ordinary people in their daily lives took the tasks that lay to hand but treated them sacramentally, as pointing to a greater reality which lay beyond them. . . . We have been in danger of losing this sense of allowing the extraordinary to break in on the ordinary."

Both the book and congregation are sustained by a sense of humor evoked by the tension between the sacred and the profane. One day a preoccupied Gallagher steps outside the church and sees a line of people where five minutes before there had been none. "Where did you guys come from?" she asks in astonishment. "You're so good-looking, honey," says one of the guests. "You're drawing a crowd." Serving communion on one Sunday, Gallagher spills wine on a parishioner. She is mortified. "I spilled wine all over this guy," she tells Asman after the service. Asman pauses, wipes off a paten and responds, "That's too bad. I guess we'll have to burn him."

Then there's the day that she finds the courage to join the homeless for lunch. She sits down awkwardly, then remembers that the World Series has begun. "See the game last night?" she asks. One man responds, "I don't actually watch TV. I prefer reading." Gallagher realizes her error immediately, but the men enjoy pressing their point. "Yeah," another one continues. "Or I watch PBS. There's a good series on German expressionism on right now." Gallagher soon loses her discomfort, and eats often with these men.

I would sit down at the table with Alan, Greg and the boys and I would feel free, as if all of me were there, including the parts I normally hide in company, and the parts so marginalized inside myself that I didn't even know who or what they were, and then I would drive around in my new red Volvo 850 and feel contemptuous toward someone driving a Honda. At those times, as Anne Lamott writes, "I know Jesus drinks himself to sleep."

*Things Seen and Unseen* is in some ways a '90s spiritual soup pot. Gallagher is a skeptical, irreverent and determined seeker. She sorts through experiences before investing in the Christian faith. Her theology is influenced by an eclectic mix of figures: Margaret Drabble, M. Scott Peck, Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan and H. Richard Niebuhr jostle for space; she reacts to an essay on Van Gogh, a poem by Theodore Roethke and the writings of Dorothy Day. Nothing is taken for granted or simply accepted as tradition; everything must be reconsidered.

But Gallagher energizes the congregation and her readers with her honest scrutiny of what she hears and reads. She refers to the Holy Spirit, for example, as a "scatterbrained woman at a very large computer in heaven. She may or may not give a damn about results, but cares about the human process of getting there. Each time we met at Trinity to plan a worship service, to balance the budget, to decide

how to decorate for Easter, we ran up against envy, pride and sloth. And we felt grace, learned compassion--for ourselves and for others--and sometimes, even sensed rebirth."

Her scrutiny of Trinity results in a portrait that is raw and rough enough to convince us that the congregation really exists. And it is beautiful enough to convince us that the Holy Spirit is really at work, stirring up new and startling possibilities.