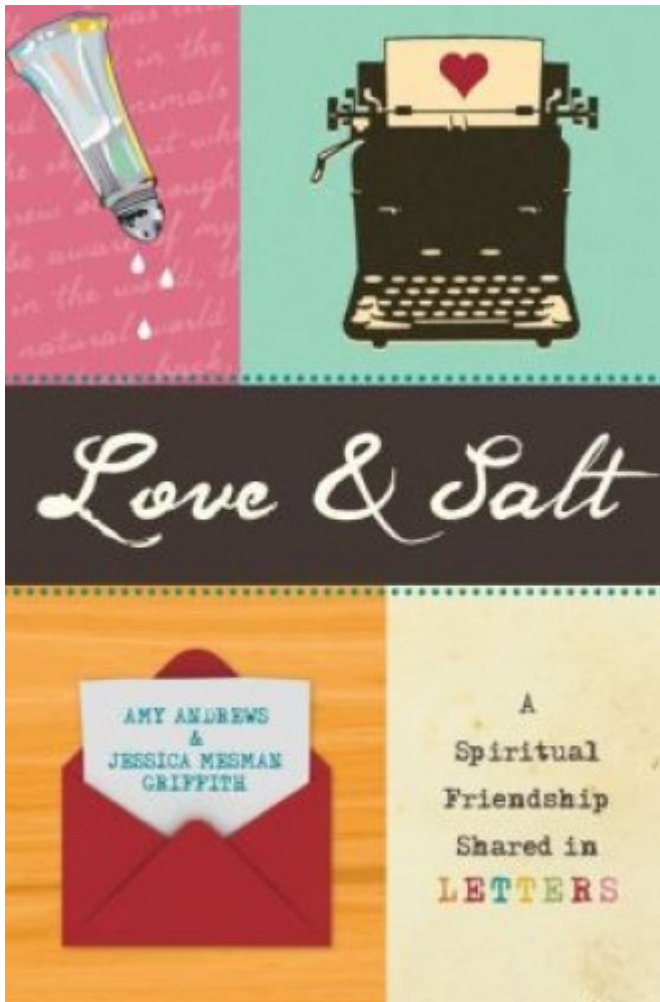


Sacrament of friendship

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Love and Salt

By Amy Andrews and Jessica Mesman Griffith
Loyola Press

I finished this epistolary memoir the same day that the conclave of cardinals chose the new pope. Watching that white smoke billow from the chimney of the Vatican, I and millions of other viewers were moved by this mysterious, ancient form of

communication. That lovely smoke both disclosed information and obscured it: it told us that there was a new pope and reminded us how little we knew.

Although writing letters is not as antiquated as sending smoke signals, reading letters between other people can feel a little like watching the Vatican chimney. Even as we learn about the correspondents, we are reminded that we stand outside a conclave of two. The reader becomes a silent correspondent of sorts, conversing with the authors as she reads but remaining ever on the outside looking in.

Love and Salt is full of sacramental imagination. Amy Andrews and Jessica Mesman Griffith render things like a walk through a graveyard, a dream about an elevator, and a Neil Young song into something else entirely.

“Seeing Catholicly” is how Catholic poet and scholar Angela Alaimo O’Donnell describes this type of literary envisioning. Catholic poetry, she writes, is

corporeal, perhaps even bloody-minded, in its insistence upon an embodied, incarnate faith; it is grim in its acknowledgement of the presence and power of real evil in the world; and it is ultimately hopeful in its assertion of the meaning of suffering and in its persistent search for God even when God seems absent.

Though they do not shrink from irreverence (Griffith at one point wonders whether the Eucharist is only “bread and wine, and a little man waving his hands over the table”), these writers are practiced at seeing Catholicly: casting a sacramental glance at the world and writing about what—and Who—they find there.

Andrews and Griffith met in a creative writing class, where they discovered that both of their writing lives revolved around faith. “We were both careful to conceal any current conviction, sensing we wouldn’t be taken seriously if we admitted to belief. But for a second our eyes met across the table: *What, you too?*” The biblical story of the love between Ruth and Naomi became a lodestar for their relationship. “In these two women—removed from us by centuries and cultures—we received a vision of friendship, a way of walking with each other toward God.”

Griffith grew up in New Orleans, with a Catholic faith marked by superstition, magic and sensory appeal. Her mother got cancer when Griffith was a young teen, and her parents, seeking a church that espoused faith healing, landed in a Pentecostal congregation. When her mother died, her father remained in the Pentecostal tradition, but Griffith returned to the faith of her childhood.

Andrews, who grew up in a close-knit agnostic family, converted to Catholicism and asked Griffith to be her sponsor. Their correspondence began during Lent 2005, in the weeks leading up to Andrews's full initiation into the church.

They pledged to write an old-fashioned, handwritten letter to each other every day. This discipline became the basis for a correspondence that framed their lives through the next several years of job transitions, marriage, pregnancies, motherhood and loss.

Grief edges many of the letters, and the grief that results from a tragedy that occurred during the time of their correspondence sometimes threatens to narrow the book's purview. But their talent as writers means that they know how to render the specific clothes of their grief into universal garments. They question how God intervenes in the world, what providence looks like and whether Christians are deluded about the whole thing. With their earthy descriptions of ashes on the forehead and the *linea nigra* on a pregnant body, with Griffith's distressing sense of evil in the room during a party, and with their refusal to surrender to the allure of agnosticism, it's as if they had read O'Donnell's definition of what it takes to see Catholicly.

The passion of the prose both elevates this book to a literary creation and is likely to leave some readers feeling the urge for a nap. One line by Andrews anticipates readers' sense of standing outside of a dyad, unable to comprehend the intensity within it. "It is almost impossible to enter into other people's love," she writes about a television show that has been panned for being sentimental. "From the perspective of a distant acquaintance, the emotion of a wedding or funeral always seems overdone." Still, through wide and intelligent references not only to their own lives and conclusions but to the writings of Catholic saints and literary giants, Andrews and Griffith turn *Love and Salt* into much more than a mutual navel gaze.

Although it is true that digital communication has almost completely obliterated the practice of letter writing, Andrews and Griffith do not turn their book into a screed against e-mail, texting or instant messaging. They don't have to. The length, breadth, depth and lyricism of their prose make their own case for the physicality of the authors' medium.

Andrews writes that their correspondence has helped to make God more explicit in her world. Having discovered that the Latin root of *explicit* means "to unfold, smooth

out,” she writes, “We press God out in the pages of our letters, ironing and ironing, like two old-fashioned women. We mail him back and forth, and pile him up, like a basket of linen.”

In one early letter in their correspondence, Andrews recalls their pilgrimage to see a large collection of relics. Andrews, who was still a catechumen, writes of walking with Griffith among the skulls and femurs and molars of saints—the “scattered, carved-up remains of holiness” that left them cold. She remembers that Griffith whispered to her that she might throw up, and she writes, “It was now upon us to see past the horror to God.”

What made it possible for Andrews to stay—among the relics and, ultimately, in religion itself—was her friend and the sustenance their relationship offered when her faith foundered. “Whither thou goest, I will go,” Andrews declares.

What showed it to me, that glimmer of holiness beyond the bones, was your presence there. At the time it took the form of a dare: *I’ll stay if you stay. If you can believe despite all this, then so can I.* We stood there, amid the skulls, in awe of our shared desire to still believe, the desire our unspoken dare seemed to reveal.

It is a moving inversion of Ruth’s promise to Naomi.