

Growing Up...

As A Roman Catholic in an Italian Family or, How I Flushed My Virginity Down The Toilet

By Luciana Ricciutelli

Going to confession was always the worst. I hated it. I went to a Catholic elementary school and every first Friday of the month Mass was held in the gymnasium. Everyone was expected to attend. That meant everyone had to go to confession. It was always on a Wednesday. *That* meant you had to be good all night Wednesday, all day Thursday and all morning Friday. It was next to impossible. But the idea of not going to communion was even worse. Everyone would know you had sinned in between.

We would file along the wall of the hallway leading to the room where the priest was hearing confession. We weren't allowed to talk in line. We were supposed to be gravely contemplating the error of our ways. Being grave at the age of seven (that's when the grooming begins) wasn't easy, to say the least. It never got easier, either. Huddling together, hands clasped tightly in prayer, we would try very hard to look remorseful — especially when the teacher walked by. My hands, I remember, were always clammy. My mother used to tell me that God saw everything, and I mean *everything*, I did. She used to say it with this look that implied He would subsequently tell her everything, too. It used to really bother me. Throughout my childhood I could never quite shake this picture of an angry and menacing God, frowning down on me sternly, that translated into the figure of my mother chasing me with a broom (or a shoe, or a wooden spoon) around the kitchen table and ultimately, into the figure of the priest, dressed in long, flowing black robes, thick fingers clutching an oversized black rosary, waiting impatiently to hear my confession.

I was, needless to say, very intimidated and no matter how many times I rubbed my hands against my skirt, they insisted

on remaining clammy. "Bless me father, for I have sinned..." I would mutter hurriedly under my breath, trying to get the whole thing over with as soon as possible. Kneeling at his feet, I knew the only thing that could save me was keeping my eyes stubbornly fixed on the scuff marks on his big, black shoes.

It was time to recite the litany of sins I had committed. My heart would beat wildly. I was certain he could see it pulsating through my sweater. I always made sure to hold my hands, clasped as piously as possible, tightly against my chest, keeping my heart in. Now, I ask you, how many things can a seven year old do wrong? At first (too young to know any better), beads of perspiration surreptitiously accumulating on my now trembling upper lip, I would mumble that I didn't really think I had any sins to confess.

It didn't take long to find out that was a no-no! "My child, no-one, but no-one is perfect! You must have done something wrong!" Oops! Face hot, eyes welling with tears, gulping loudly, I would ashamedly admit to yes, I guess I did disobey my mother once, or twice; yes, I did fight with my brother, maybe more than once; and yes, I guess I did tell one little lie, sometime. That was my first lesson in the Roman Catholic religion: no-one is ever free from sin. (Unless of course you were lucky enough to be a saint, and even then, a few lapses, albeit minor, were never excluded). What follows, as a consequence, is that no-one is ever free of guilt. And there you have it. Guilt is what keeps Roman Catholics breathing.

Later, I learned it was much easier to make things up. It never crossed my mind to worry about the fact that I was "making things up" (that is, lying) because I was firmly convinced that even if I didn't

remember committing the sins, I *must* have, at some point. Of course, later still, I didn't have to worry at all about making things up.

The nice thing about confession is that you were always forgiven. I can't say I ever heard of someone not being forgiven. As long as I was "heartily sorry" for my sins, and did my penance with sincere remorse, my soul, which I imagined as a large, egg-like object, would be clear of the unsightly big, black splotches that sins tended to leave on it. What I worried about was how to be "sincerely" remorseful. Most often, as I recited my penance, which usually consisted of one *Our Father*, three *Hail Mary's* and a *Glory Be*, I would catch myself drifting off into a terrific daydream somewhere in the middle of the whole thing. Then, certain I had lapsed into real un-remorsefulness, I would have to start all over again. Sometimes it would take me hours to finish. Needless to say, as I got older, the penance increased. So did the day-dreaming. It took me years before I felt reasonably comfortable about not starting all over again. Of course, feeling reasonably comfortable about anything as a Roman Catholic is near to impossible under the best of circumstances. After all, no-one is perfect and you're likely doing something wrong almost all the time. Even *thinking* about doing something wrong is a sin. You can't win.

I often think that, without guilt, the whole structure of the Roman Catholic religion would collapse. It is, in fact, the only religion in which an infant is born with sin. We enter this world with original sin, that is, the sin of Adam and Eve. Thus the need for baptism. Up until the second Ecumenical Council, if you were unfortunate enough to die without having been baptised, you were condemned to limbo, a place where you had to stay for all

eternity, without a prayer in the world of ever getting to heaven! I always used to imagine it as a mishapen grey cloud full of screaming babies who didn't know where they were. The second Ecumenical Council took care of that, however, and now, babies who die without having been baptised can go to heaven. I wonder still, what happened to the ones who died before that decree? Are they still there, screaming away?

The other important thing to remember about original sin is that it was all Eve's fault. She succumbed to temptation. She dared to desire knowledge and thus fell prey to the wiles of seductive Satan. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, she enticed the pure and noble Adam, created in the image of God himself, into her web of deceit. The fall of mankind thus rests on woman's depraved shoulders! As punishment, she was condemned by God to a life of eternal subjugation to her lord and master, man.

This was my second lesson. Women are evil and purity (read: *chastity*) is our only salvation. Mandatory virginity is considered the only way of ensuring a measure of control over woman's "inherent" wantonness, which can only lead to no good. We are told to screw no-one but our husband and even then, certainly not for pleasure, but only to bear his children (that was also part of God's punishment). You think I'm joking. In Sicily you can still find women's nightshirts hand-embroidered, just above the breasts, with the following quotation: "*Non lo fo per piacer mio, ma lo fo per piacer di dio*" (I do not do it for my pleasure, but for the pleasure of God). Sound like fun? That's the Roman Catholic church for you.

I have to admit that my mother was no prude when it came to sex. It was all part of God's great plan. The important thing to remember was that it could only take place with your husband, and even then, only after you were married. My mother used to insist that my future husband, whenever he happened along, would "test" me, several times furthermore, by trying to entice me into having sex with him before marriage. I was not to be fooled. For, should I succumb, not only would he promptly leave me, never to be heard of again, but I would be "spoiled" forever, and never be able to raise my eyes to a man again. "Sex," I might add at this point, did not merely refer to penetration — the mere suggestion of which was enough to inspire shudders of abject horror through the body of any Italian mother — but included kissing, petting, and slow-dancing! However, if I waited for

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Cartoon by Christine Roche

the right time, she assured me it would be a great and beautiful thing. That, of course, only piqued my curiosity. Sex was just one of those things that I found much too intriguing to ignore. I didn't think I could wait for the guy on the white horse.

I was in grade five the first time I allowed someone to kiss me. I didn't like him too much but I was really pleased finally to have a boyfriend after all the years of being too pudgy and too bookish. Suddenly, I developed breasts and *voilà*, there he was! It never fails to amaze me how breasts can do that for a girl. I think my mother knew that, too, and this was just about the time that all our sex talks began. Anyway, it was a very wet and sloppy kiss on the cheek in the middle of the park behind our house. Nothing to brag about, really. Suddenly, all the stories I heard at school about the girls who

let guys kiss them in the park rang loudly and incessantly through my ears. Heart a-flutter, without even saying goodbye, I turned around and ran home as fast as I could. Then the guilt kicked in. Oh my God! I had gone and done it. That's it, I was RUINED!!! I would never be able to look a man in the face again! God would never forgive me and for sure would relay the information not only to my mother, but to my future husband, whoever he was, as well!

After I recovered, I promptly recorded the entire event in my diary which, even then, was at the best of times half-fact and half-romanticized fiction. Some days later, upon returning from school after a leisurely walk through the park with the newly-acquired boyfriend, I unsuspectingly entered the house to face a raging mother who, without a moment's hesitation, unleashed a varied array of flying objects at my sensitive head. "*Puana*" (whore), she screeched unmercifully. Jesus, Ma, it was only a little kiss! Afterwards, I discovered my diary, which I thought safely hidden under my mattress, open to the exact page on my dresser. The next day at school I told my new friend I could never walk home with him again. I never kept a diary again, either.

Sex, as you might have guessed by now, is an obsession with Roman Catholics. Although men are allowed to fuck, and it is even encouraged, joked and boasted about, parents have to make sure that it isn't their daughters they're fucking.

By grade seven I had managed to quash the pervasive sense of guilt that my curiosity about sex inevitably gave rise to. I, at last, had a real boyfriend whom I was crazy about. He had failed three times and was therefore the oldest boy in the school. He drove a hot car, had long hair and sported the very first, sole earring. And, he respected me. He never "tested" me, you might say. (By that point, I was firmly convinced that kissing didn't count). One day, however, my teacher caught us walking up the stairs to class together, doing the forbidden — holding hands. She asked me to stay after class. Only "sluts" behave that way, she calmly explained. Tears of shock streaming down my face, I sputtered something about the piddling and trivial nature of our offence. Holding hands, she insisted, could only lead to worse things. "Good" girls did not allow themselves to be touched, period, stop, end of discussion! God, how I hated her in that moment. She, by the way, used to come to school dressed in mini-skirts without, however, anything underneath except her pantyhose. She had a habit of

bending over a student's desk to help with school work, giving the entire class an unrestricted view of her buns. It took me a long time to perceive her behaviour as typical of Roman Catholic hypocrisy.

In high school, the preoccupation with sex became an even greater concern. I went to a Catholic all-girls' high school and the nuns who taught there knew that anything was now possible. The skirts of our uniforms had to be no more than four inches above our knees, lest we provoke male attention. Every month we were subject to an inspection. All the girls had to kneel in a row while the nuns would come by and, one by one, measure the distance between the hem of the skirt and our knees on the floor. Anything over four inches meant you had to go home and redo the hem (which took forever because the skirt was pleated) and were condemned to detentions for a week. If you were caught outside school grounds with your skirt hoisted up to mid-thigh (as was the common practice), detentions for a month. If you were caught speaking to the boys of the pagan, public high school next door to ours, execution was recommended.

This wide-spread, general concern for our hymens never failed to amaze me. We were to be kept from losing *it* at all costs. Although physically you can't be controlled forever, the gradually accrued sense of all-pervasive guilt that the Ro-

man Catholic church is so good at, never goes away. I still know girls today who married the first guy they slept with because they were convinced no-one else would. As for me, I was brazen. I was insatiably curious. And I didn't like to be told what to do. A healthy dose of cynicism didn't hurt either!

When I finally did it, to my dismay, the big event, was not big at all. Let's just say it didn't live up to the daydreams. Particularly disconcerting was the absence of a hymen. The gentleman involved, of an older generation, paused to comment, with undisguised regret, that in keeping with Italian tradition, he had hoped to carry the proof of my deflowering for all his days on the meticulous, perfectly folded, white handkerchief he pulled out of his pocket. Dumbfounded, I rose to go to the bathroom. I had to pee. Suddenly, what should I see floating obtrusively, ostentatiously, and quite unabashedly in the toilet, but the missing proof of my innocence. Ah yes, the "prize," there it was, in living technicolour. I looked at it for some time. I had always wondered what it looked like. I considered offering it to him in my defence. Maybe he could fish it out of the toilet with his handkerchief. I must have been in there for quite some time because he eventually knocked on the door. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Nothing," I replied, flushing my innocence unceremoniously down the

toilet to run amok in the sewers of Downsview forever.

It wasn't until recently that I really appreciated the dilemma that women face in the Roman Catholic church. The woman Roman Catholics most revere is the Virgin Mary, who is both a mother and a virgin, something that no woman on this earth can ever hope to be. Again, in typical Roman Catholic fashion, you can't win. Although the Virgin Mary does hold a privileged position, in that if you wanted something, you could ask her to beseech her son, on your behalf, for some small favour. Jesus, I was assured, could not refuse His mother anything. As a child, I was convinced it was the most direct route to getting your prayers answered. Later, it occurred to me that, in fact, she had no real power at all. She personally couldn't grant you a thing. That was an exclusively male domain. This really upset me, for a long time.

When the questions started coming, they didn't stop. I'm still looking for the answers. The funniest thing is that I still can't banish from my head the picture of a menacing and imposing God, perennially frowning, looking down on me, angry and stern. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I think, He'll get me for this. And if He doesn't, my mother will! They say, once a Catholic, always a Catholic. It's true.

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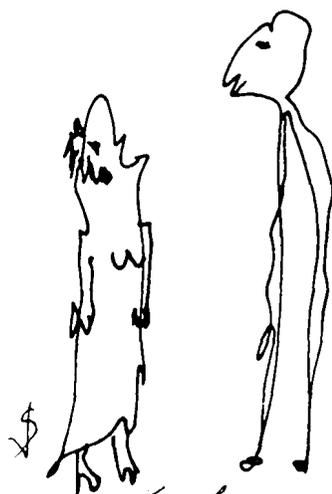
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