

A Place to Call Home

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Hand in hand, we slip as quietly as possible into the sanctuary to receive communion at the Saturday evening Mass. First, we stop at the baptismal font to bless ourselves. I carefully guide my daughter's hand into the warm Holy Water and, hand over hand; help her to make the sign of the cross.

Next is the more difficult part. We file in behind members of the congregation to walk down the aisle and receive communion. She makes a little noise here and there, but tries to be patient. It is almost our turn.

When she makes it up to our Pastor, she glances up quickly and then gazes away just as quickly, holding her hand up for the Eucharist. Although we have practiced many times, she rarely says the expected "Amen" after receiving communion, but our Pastor smiles anyway. He knows, as do I and many people in our parish, the beauty of the small miracle that has just taken place....

It was just over three years ago that I stepped into Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Norfolk, VA and asked to speak with the religious education director, Sister Regina Stupak about enrolling my three children; Jacob 4, Samantha 9 and Joseph 11, into their religious education program. Seated in her office, I began to tell our story.

"The only problem" I tentatively explained, "is that my daughter has autism." "Not only that", I continued even more cautiously, "She has very little verbal ability and her autistic behaviors make it difficult, if not impossible, for us to get to church at all." There, I had laid it all out as honestly as I could and I waited for a response.

Sister Regina, kind and wise, looked at me as my eyes filled with the tears and asked a simple question. “Has Samantha received her First Communion?” When I slowly and quietly shook my head, “no”, she continued, “Then we had best figure out how to prepare her for that, shouldn’t we?”

Thus, with no real idea of how we would proceed, but comforted in the unquestionable acceptance offered by Sister Regina, Samantha and our whole family embarked on an exciting adventure; to find a place for us all in the church.

My meeting with Sr. Regina had been in late spring, with the intention of getting started in religious education classes in the fall. She assured me she would be working on it over the summer and I began to slowly prepare Samantha for her religious education experience at Blessed Sacrament.

Several times throughout the summer we visited the church to just play on the playground. Sometimes we ventured inside to take a look around, explore the sanctuary or check out the classrooms. Late in the summer Sr. Regina called me at home with some astounding news. She had found a “helper” for Samantha. New to the parish, Emily had just signed her son up for religious education too. But Emily was not just any helper; she was a certified special education teacher who taught a class for children with autism in the Norfolk Public Schools. God had sent us exactly the help we needed for Samantha and we were on our way!

The first day of Religious Education class was difficult, to say the least. Overwhelmed by how many children were around, Samantha, at one point, lay down on the hallway floor and refused to get up. Not accustomed to 9 year old children spread out the hallway floor amidst other students trying to get by, our pastor stopped to see if she was okay. He quickly realized who she was and let me step in to help. That was the end of day one.

The year progressed, however and Samantha became more comfortable. The members of her 3rd grade class gradually became more comfortable too, as we educated them, at their level of understanding, about autism. They grew to accept Samantha and we ended the year on a positive note.

Year two began and we jumped back into the routine. As 4th graders, her classmates had begun to make an obvious connection with her, often pleased to have her join them for snack after her lesson with me. (At this point Emily had moved and I had taken over as her catechist).

I was pleased with the progress we were making but felt there was still a lot missing. For one thing, our family was still not attending Mass regularly and certainly not together. I knew that, if Samantha were ever going to receive her First Communion, she had to experience Mass in some way. Wouldn't it be great for us all, my husband, Scott and me and our three children, to go to church as a family?

It wasn't until January of that year that I decided to try the 5:00pm Mass. Much smaller and quieter than the Sunday Masses, I thought that Samantha might be more comfortable there. Although I did not plan to take her into the sanctuary for the whole Mass, (her loud vocalizations and constant movement would be very disruptive at this point) we would sit behind the glass partition where we could still see and hear the Mass while my husband and our boys would go and sit in the pews. And it seemed to work! Finally, we all were at church at the same time.

But what about taking communion? How was I going to get Samantha into the sanctuary filled with people, which I knew would be terrifying for her? And, what if she had a tantrum, dropped to the ground or made a lot of noise as we entered the quiet, peacefulness of the sanctuary? These were legitimate concerns and, in all honesty, I was probably more terrified about it all than Samantha.

Sometime in the spring, I got up the nerve to insist that Samantha walk down the communion aisle with me. I said a quick prayer for us both, told her we were going to see Fr. Joe and preceded into the sanctuary. Calmly, Samantha walked just ahead of me with my hands on her shoulders while many kind parishioners followed the journey with their eyes. Because of the work on autism awareness I had done in our parish over the past year, many people knew our story and were obviously moved to see Samantha in the communion line for the first time. It was

difficult to contain my emotions as we gradually made it through the church- I could feel the warmth and acceptance radiating from our church family.

After what seemed an eternity, we reached Father Joe, and he smiled as he blessed Samantha. I smiled too through my tears as I guided her back through the sanctuary. What a wonderful experience!

The next year would be filled with hard work, and even some setbacks, but I now knew that we were going to be okay. If God could bring us and the whole parish community this far, He would certainly not abandon us now. I also knew, without a doubt, that we had finally found a church family... and a place to call home.

Samantha celebrated the sacrament of First Holy Communion on Sat. December 10th, 2008, when she was 11 years old. She currently has religious education class with her own teacher, Jessica and participates with her classmates whenever appropriate. Father Joe has made friends with Samantha and loves to give her chocolate kisses treats whenever he gets the chance. Our story continues as we learn from Samantha and she learns from us.....thanks be to God.