

Kristin Gilger - How Writing a Book about My Son's Priestly Vocation Changed my Understanding of the Divine



The author with her son in 1981

I am not the kind of person who brings up God in conversation. I have trouble bringing up God even when convention calls for it. “We’re thinking of you,” I’ll write on a sympathy card to a friend or relative when someone more devout (or less self-conscious) would write: “We’re praying for you.”

My son, on the other hand, talks about God pretty much all the time. As a Jesuit priest, he is comfortable with God in a way that I find hard to understand. He relishes nothing more than a deep philosophical discussion about the meaning of life, the kind of discussion that makes me want to go elsewhere - fast.

But when it’s your child, flight is not an option.

For the first few years after my then-21-year-old son, **Patrick**, joined the Jesuits, I did my best to be patient. What other option did I have, unless I wanted to be like the mother of St. Thomas Aquinas, who has gone down in history as the woman who locked her son in a tower to prevent him from becoming a Dominican? With no tower available, I relied on time. I thought perhaps this whole religious thing was something Patrick just needed to get out of his system, and one day he would grow out of it. It would be like a love affair that he would look back on with a certain amount of nostalgia but little real regret. But as the years passed and he moved closer and closer to ordination, it became clear to me that my little scenario just wasn’t going to happen. Instead, I had a choice to make: Was I in or was I out?

I was comfortable being out. While I was raised Catholic, it had been a long time since I had been a member of the church, years since I had thought seriously about religion. But Patrick had changed that, and he wanted more from me than some kind of neutral blessing. He wanted a relationship that wasn’t possible unless I also made room for God—or at least the possibility of God.

The alternative, it seemed to me, was one of increasing distance: We would become the kind of family for whom the only safe topics are what teams have the best chance of making the World Series and what we should have for dinner.

I knew of just one way to change the ending. As a journalist and then a journalism educator, I often told my reporters and my students that nothing is more powerful than asking questions and then listening—really listening—to the answers. That’s how relationships are built and how they are sustained.

So I began a conversation—make that many conversations—with my son about what drove him to choose a life that is as countercultural as can be imagined in 21st-century America [*and in the UK too*]. What is it like to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience? What happens if you fall in love or get assigned a job you really hate? How can you live with a bunch of guys whom you might like a whole lot better if you didn’t have to share a bathroom with them or encounter their leftovers in the refrigerator?

These questions led to other, more serious, ones—about the all-too-obvious flaws in the church. About secularism and sacrifice and the search for meaning. About what it means to pray. And, yes, about God.

There was much that Patrick (better known to his friends as Paddy) and I agreed on, some we did not and some that required homework on my part. I became acquainted or reacquainted with Pedro Arrupe, S.J., St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Daniel Berrigan, S.J., Thomas Merton and St. Ignatius, and read everything I could find about this peculiar order my son had entered. I stayed as a guest in Jesuit houses, went on a spiritual retreat, interviewed other mothers of priests and reconsidered my own relationship with the Catholic Church.

In the end, I wrote a book about Patrick's journey to become a priest and my own, halting, journey toward spiritual growth.

At first, the book project struck Patrick as “exceptionally weird,” especially when he learned that I had dug up his old high school journal, reread his letters home and talked to his friends—and sometimes his friends' mothers.

Still, he signed on as a collaborator, reading and editing and rereading everything I wrote. He even contributed an epilogue in which he has the last say (thank you very much). There may have been an element of self-defence in all of this, but I think he mostly did it in the hope that I would begin to develop the kind of relationship with God that he has.

That's not exactly what happened. I'm still not what you would think of as the typical mother of a priest. But what did happen is almost as good, in my eyes at least. We—Patrick and I—have come to better understand and better love each other. The book, it turns out, was the bridge we needed between my world and his. Some things have not changed, of course. Patrick still thinks and talks like a scholar and priest, and I still approach the world as a sceptical journalist. I will never understand transubstantiation, and we almost certainly will never agree on the Oxford comma. Patrick will continue to use words like *subjectivating* and *distanciated*, and I will continue to insist they are not real words.

He will always be the absolutist and I the relativist; he the lover of mystery, and I the one who wants to count things and have them explained. But I no longer worry about what either of us has given up for him to be a priest. (The giving-up part for me largely revolved around grandchildren. But Patrick's two sisters have produced a total of five grandchildren between them, pretty much letting him off the hook.)

As for Patrick, what I had once feared would be a loveless and lonely life has turned out to be anything but that. He is a part of many families who treasure his place in their lives. Now a university professor, he adores his students and is a much loved “Uncle Paddy” to his niece and nephews. And, yes, he has God for company.

It has taken me a long time to accept that God fills a critical space in my son's life, and I'm even thankful for it. I remind myself that plenty of people don't have anyone—spiritual or corporal—to fill that space.

But what about God's place in my life? And where does God fit into our relationship, Patrick's and mine? Those are the questions he asks of me at the end of the book, the questions that linger between us. All I can say is that I have seen grace. I have seen the way my son and his brother Jesuits lift the people around them and give them hope and how they are lifted in return. I have experienced the favour of loved ones and witnessed the efforts of strangers who do things, who give love and mercy and unmerited favour, that would be inexplicable in a world without divine influence.

I know it isn't the answer he's looking for, but I hope that it's enough.

Kristin Gilger is professor emerita at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University in the USA and the author of the forthcoming **My Son, The Priest: A Mother's Crisis of Faith** (Monkfish Book Publishing Co.). Her son, Patrick Gilger, S.J., joined the Jesuits in 2002 and was ordained in 2013. He is currently an assistant professor of sociology at Loyola University Chicago and a contributing editor at *America*.