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The Saint of Worcester

Why Pilgrims Visit Audrey Santo

Mathew N. Schmalz

I first noticed John when I overheard him talking about his robot collection. He had thirty-one of them, all blessed by a priest. My eyes were drawn to the tattoos on John's neck: CHRIST inscribed in black, BIBLE in blue, SOUL in red, and HOLY in yellow. John and I had come independently to the home of Audrey Santo in Worcester, Massachusetts. For over a decade, the home of this twenty-two-year-old woman has been a pilgrimage site, often crowded with visitors drawn by stories of Audrey's stigmata and healings attributed to her intercession. Statues in her home have been reported to weep tears of blood and oil, and several eucharistic hosts have been found bloodstained after being consecrated in her presence.

When Audrey was three years old, she accidentally fell into her family's backyard pool. Paramedics revived her, but she never regained the ability to move or speak. Doctors describe this condition as "akinetetic mutism." Pilgrims believe that she is fully conscious and able to pray for those who seek relief from their afflictions. John credits Audrey's prayerful silence, along with appropriate medical attention and his family's support, for bringing a restful silence to his troubled mind. Diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, John was tortured by the voices in his head for over a decade until they stopped ten years ago.

Around that time, John learned about, and began praying to, Audrey. But it wasn't until a year ago that he was able to make the pilgrimage from his home near Boston. As he explains it, Audrey possesses a sacramental power that drew him to her Worcester home. For others who have made similar pilgrimages over the years, Audrey is a "victim soul" who

not only prays and intercedes for the afflicted, but also offers up her own sufferings in restitution for sin. Even before the reports of bleeding hosts and weeping statues, people had been drawn to Audrey's home to pray for her healing and to help the Santo family.

After John's overnight bus ride to Worcester, he arrived at the Santo home and stopped in the family's small chapel. The chapel walls are streaked with oil stains, as are the many statues of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. This oil, along with that leaking from numerous other statues, is collected, infused into cotton balls, and sent to people like John who request it for their personal rituals of anointing and healing. John says the chapel is a taste of "the bliss of heaven," for evidence of God's presence is all around. The walls also display pictures of Audrey with priests who have visited. But most arresting is another display on the wall that contains Audrey's pink rosary beads, a tissue touched by her tears, and a handkerchief stained by blood from her stigmatic wounds. Behind the chapel's altar, there is a large photograph of four hosts that were found bloodstained after being consecrated near Audrey. Now that another bloodstained host has been discovered, many pilgrims believe the set is complete: five hosts representing the five wounds of Christ.

After a half-hour in the chapel, John and I joined several other pilgrims to see Audrey. As always, she lay in her bedroom, attached to a respirator and a feeding tube, with a nurse at her side. The religious images on the wall behind her bed were arranged in a semicircular pattern resembling a halo. On one side of the bed were relics of several saints, and opposite her bed was a tabernacle. John approached the clear



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PHOTO COURTESY JOHN BUCKINGHAM

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plastic curtain that screened off the entrance to Audrey's room and bowed his head, as did the other pilgrims.

I visited Audrey's home and met John as part of my academic research. But as John began to share his life story with me, our relationship changed into something different from the traditional pairing of observer and informant. John discussed his upbringing in a traditional Catholic family, and his years as a gunner's mate in the Navy. He told me how the voices in his head began as whispers and later became screams. He wandered across country, taking buses or hitchhiking, to escape the voices, spending nights sleeping under cars and in abandoned buildings. The voices led him to set fire to his parents' apartment; after that, life became a seemingly endless series of hospital confinements. But in reflecting on his ordeals, John reported that he never asked himself the most obvious question: "Why has God made me this way?"

This was what I asked immediately after being diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder. While I never heard voices, my strong compulsions and obsessive ruminations were akin to hearing voices because they had an independent and often irresistible power. But as disabling as my disorder was, I came to realize that it could be empowering, at least when the obsessions and associated depression began to relax their grip. In the academic world, the ability to follow an idea relentlessly, to check and recheck scholarly work in ritualistic fashion, is a sign of professional commitment. In the classroom, as I came to understand my own anxiety-fueled obsessions, I became more attuned to the fear and mental chaos many students struggle with. Mental afflictions are strange things: along with strong bouts of suffering, they may also bring a measure of unconventional insight and abilities.

The tattoos on John's neck are only a hint of the series of thirty-one that cover his body. For him, thirty-one is not just a number, but a symbol of completeness that should be read as $3 + 1$ or $3 = 1$, indicating "three persons and one Lord." The number 3 is the structuring element in much of John's discourse: at every meal he says three prayers, one before, one during, and one after; in his letters to me, significant words are underlined three times; when he describes periods spent in the hospital, he presents them in multiples of three: a confinement of nine months, followed by one of twelve, and another of fifteen. John's name for the Trinity and the saints is "God's Teams"—an ever-expanding relationship in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seek to bring all within their divinely balanced union-in-diversity. John's tattoos display the names of God's Teams' members: Jesus, Mary, Moses, and, of course, "Saint" Audrey Santo. These intercessory figures, John explains, are responsible for maintaining the silence and calm in his mind and heart. He links various aspects of his identity to members of God's Teams, which allows him to integrate these characteristics into a more coherent sense of self.

John's robot collection functions similarly. Since the main



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PHOTO COURTESY JOHN BUCKINGHAM

schizophrenic voice he heard was robotic, having his collection of thirty-one robots blessed by a priest helped John to reintegrate aspects of his schizophrenic experience into a religiously meaningful whole. Catholicism is often thought of as static in both its institutional structure and its emphasis on doctrinal conformity. But in John's vision, Catholicism is about motion: the motion of the Trinity and God's Teams toward a greater encompassing union—the motion of people through life toward union with God. For John, robots and tattoos have an almost sacramental power. They express, connect, and sanctify not only the diverse aspects of human experience, but also the diverse voices of the restless mind.

In thinking of robots and tattoos as religiously meaningful, it is tempting to cultivate a detached fascination, such as that wryly depicted by the avant-garde writer J. G. Ballard. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard describes a showing of paintings by schizophrenics who themselves were not allowed to attend the display. In addition to suffering the illness itself, schizophrenics experience social exclusion and isolation: as human curios, as clinical exemplars of illness, or, most simply and painfully, as objects of fear or pity. John describes his own isolation as a "purgatory" of internal chaos filled with sound and fear. During the most severe phase of his illness, John felt that only he was real, while all others were phantoms. It wasn't until the voices stopped that he finally grasped

that the world around him had a reality of its own. Still, his sense of isolation remained because the voices had been his only friends. So his colorful tattoos became his way of reaching out to others by giving visual testimony to his identity and inviting conversation about God's healing power.

Over the past few months, John has added three more tattoos, bringing the total to thirty-four. As John explained it to me, thirty-four means 3 + 4, which equals seven, the number of the sacraments. John understands his flesh not only as a witness to the sacraments, but also as an embodiment of them. Indeed, John often links significant moments in his life to individual sacraments: the silencing of the voices becomes both a "baptism" and an "anointing," the tattoos a "confession," talking about his illness a mission or "holy order," his devotion to God's Teams a "matrimony," and the publication of an article about him a "confirmation." While John certainly does not understand his body as sacramental in the sense of representing Christ's body, he does understand it as giving witness to the many ways the divine touches the human.

The observation that Catholicism is "sacramental" has become an almost empty slogan, given the wide variety of contexts in which it's made. But a fundamental aspect of the Catholic understanding of sacramentality is that symbols "make real" what they symbolize. John's robots and tattoos not only symbolize the healing of his fragmented self, but also contribute to—make real—the healing process itself.

In 1998, thousands attended a Mass in Audrey's honor at the College of the Holy Cross football stadium. Pilgrims could view Audrey through a large window in a specially designed room resembling a small house that had been towed to the service. (It was built by a relative of the man who made the Popemobile.) Some faculty objected to the public display of a disabled woman, and many voiced concerns that Holy Cross would become associated with a particularly ostentatious form of Catholic supernaturalism. Some commentators have raised questions about claims of supernatural phenomena and healings associated with Audrey. In 2000, the Diocese of Worcester published an initial report on the case, which stated that the real miracle was the dedication the Santo family has shown to Audrey's care. The report held that, while there was no evidence of fraud, more investigation was needed, especially concerning the nature of the oil stains and the state of Audrey's consciousness. The diocese has not made any further comments about her case. Audrey's medical condition has recently worsened, and only family members and medical professionals are allowed to see her.

The Audrey Santo phenomenon raises a series of complex religious and ethical questions, but there is no denying the powerful effect Audrey has had on those who have made the journey to Worcester. John told me about a dream he had in which Audrey presented him to thousands of cheering people in a football stadium. For John, Audrey and the devotion



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Two Poems

by Margaret Peters Schwed

Rescue

O Salamander, sunken leaf
at the bottom of the pool's drain,
dark frond
swept by hazard from summer grass
into a chlorine chamber—
I couldn't but admire
the clawed stars of your feet,
your almost liquid tail,
black and, drying,
quick thrashing,
brightly flecked with blue;
and you too, Frog,
narrow waisted,
legs stippled green and tan,
elegant as spats,
taking the cup of my hands like a hurdle.
Didn't I find you in time?
Or was it too late
once the baby
made up his mind
to carry you
one in each hand
on a journey into the grass?
*Softly. Softly, do go softly,
Baby, and put them
in a shady place
so they can build a little house
and eat a tiny meal.*

And all was almost well
I thought
except how still you became
laid down,
putting even the shadow
under the hydrangea
into darkness.

It's Not the Same for Me

The yellow-littered roads at summer's end
are summer skinned of beauty, goads to grief.

For you, the reaching limbs, the rising dark,
bring joy. Pilgrim, you know such night will lift.

surrounding her opened a space for community he otherwise would not have experienced. Although her family has now barred outsiders from seeing Audrey, John continues to travel to the Santo house because it is one of the few places he feels accepted as a full person. He is not alone in understanding Audrey herself as a focal point for acceptance and community. The Apostolate of a Silent Soul, the ministry that has grown up around Audrey, publishes a newsletter containing letters from people touched by her. Some are petitions, and others testify to healings and other supernatural experiences. But most are intended simply to express moments of anxiety and suffering along with the unexpected consolations that everyday life often brings. John and other pilgrims have found in Audrey a way beyond the silence of their own suffering.

"John" is a pseudonym of his own choosing. "It refers to John the Baptist—the man who lost his head," he explained. *To lose one's head* is an appropriate metaphor to describe the experience of mental illness. But losing one's head can also mean being dis- and re-oriented: to see things differently, beyond the ordinary categories that shape our perceptions of the world. After all, as John reminded me, John the Baptist saw beyond the external appearance of Jesus to recognize him as the messiah. Part of the sacramental quality of Catholic spirituality is an openness to a reality that may lie behind external appearance. In part, the Thomistic understanding of "transubstantiation" explains how the presence of Christ is realized, literally "made real," under the external appearance, or "accidents," of bread and wine. Likewise, the "external signs" of John's tattoos and robot collection help him to "realize" rich and complex religious and spiritual meanings.

There can be a tendency to romanticize mental illness by portraying it exclusively as an altered state of consciousness without acknowledging its often overpowering pain. John would have none of that. Nor would I. Like schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder can be a horrible and imprisoning experience. There is a famous print by M. C. Escher depicting ants on a Moebius band: they walk on and on, forever looping back on an endless journey to nowhere. That's what it's like when you cannot "turn off" your mind. Yet, by going over the same ground again and again, the mind becomes sensitive to subtle changes in the shape and texture of thought and feeling. Sacraments and sacramentals also take form within a very circumscribed set of ritual parameters. Still, in their constant, formalized repetition and presentations, one can find ever new meanings and imaginative possibilities.

Audrey Santo does not speak and only her eyes move. Still, pilgrims have realized a powerful range of religious meanings through the "sacramentals" of suffering and silence associated with her. Of course, many view the Audrey Santo phenomenon as yet another example of Catholic exoticism. But the exotic and the familiar, not to mention the holy, are often the same thing refracted differently through the prism of our expectations and experience. The power of the Catholic sacramental imagination is that it allows us to see all three at the same time. ■

Why I Stay Catholic

The Bonds of Belief & Friendship

Jerry Ryan

Some time back, I got an e-mail from an old friend with whom I had lost contact many years before. He was an ex-seminarian from Argentina who had been imprisoned and tortured during the “dirty war” of the military dictatorship. That he had gotten out alive bordered on the miraculous.

His scars were real and permanent. Not the least of them were psychological wounds caused by the silence of most of the Argentine hierarchy and the active collaboration of some of its members during that period of brutal repression. So I was not overly surprised when he told me he had left the Catholic Church. His faith was intact, but he had lost all confidence in the institution. Initially, he found a home in the Episcopal Church, but there was no Episcopalian community where he was now living. He had also been attracted to the spirituality of Orthodoxy, but there was no Orthodox church near him. So he was praying alone with icons—as if it were only in the church triumphant, free of all ambiguity, that he could find his community. He could do much worse. He sent me a long list of grievances against the Catholic Church—most of which are very well founded. Far be it from me to judge my friend. I understand him all too well. He made me question my own motives for remaining in the church.

The most obvious and simple reason is that I’m used to it. I was born and brought up Catholic. I happen to be Catholic just as I happen to be American. It’s an empirical fact—the rather prosaic underpinning of my fidelity.

Because I’m a Catholic, I go to Mass on Sundays (or Saturday evening), and I’m relatively at ease. I know when to sit, stand, and kneel, and I know the responses. I am deeply aware of Eucharistic theology, and I want to respond to this gift with all my being. Yet I often feel as though I’m just going through the motions. The people around me are strangers, the music is led by a choir singing a couple of octaves above what most of us are capable of, the songs themselves are sickly sentimental, and the sermon is often insipid. It has occurred to me that I feel more “at one” with the people on the 5 a.m. bus I take to work every morning than with the peo-

ple at church. We at least know one another, however superficially, and we are on a similar adventure. At church, I have the impression that we are a motley crew fulfilling an obligation. There is a clique of dedicated people in the parish who keep things rolling, but I’ve never been tempted to become part of that group. I simply don’t have a vocation to lay ministry. These are very good people who are trying their best. The worst of it is that I haven’t a clue as to how things could be improved.

So I can’t stand outside and throw stones. The very things that pain and disappoint me in the church exist in myself, and I don’t like them there either. Often I feel like a hypocrite among hypocrites—all of us pretending to live something we are constantly contradicting.

That is the nitty-gritty level. In the larger context, there is a whole litany of complaints: the church’s obsession with micromanaging the sexual life of the faithful and imposing its one-size-fits-all regulations; its courtship of the rich and powerful (who are the laypeople who sit on diocesan boards and consulting committees? Are they representative of the people of God?); the political posturing (morality must be legislated). The litany could go on and on.



“And for those of us still waiting for our ship to come in, let us pray.”

Jerry Ryan, a frequent contributor, lives in Winthrop, Massachusetts.