

The bread of angels and a hug from heaven



When I was about to make my first holy Communion, our Catholic school offered the opportunity to purchase religious items to mark the important sacrament. They turned one of our larger classrooms into a mini religious goods store filled with all sorts of items, including white gloves, white rosaries, holy Communion remembrance books, religious jewelry, along with small religious statues of the saints, the Blessed Mother and Jesus.

I can remember walking into the room and my mother encouraging me to buy something that I really wanted – something special that would help me recall this special time in my life. I think we were both surprised by my choice. I have always been a girly girl who loves her share of bling. But I didn't make a dash toward the delicate bracelets or lace gloves. Instead, it was a statue that caught my eye and tugged at my heart. It was Jesus holding a chalice. At the bottom of the statue were two adorable angels and below them the words "*Panis Angelicus.*"

I still have that statue decades later and was thinking about it not too long ago during Mass. My husband and I are blessed to be back in our home parish. It's the same parish where I went to school. As I was looking up at the altar and the image of the resurrected Christ – the same image I saw walking up the aisle to receive Jesus in the Eucharist for the first time – an upcoming talk that I'm giving in the spring also came to mind. While I have never mentioned my statue when I share my reversion story, in reflecting on the journey of this statue and its impact on my life and faith, I just felt I had to somehow work it into my presentation. After all, even though it's now in two pieces, the main part of the statue is still

under my pillow. That's the same place it has been since I walked into that makeshift store and insisted that I had to have it. It traveled with me to college, our first apartment, our first home and our current home where my husband and I have lived now for 26 years. Despite falling away from the Church for some time, I still received comfort and encouragement knowing it was there. And once I came back home to my religious roots, I realized the statue was a reminder that, no matter what, Jesus was and is always with me.

It is a miracle that I never lost the statue despite all the packing, unpacking, cleaning and the regular day-to-day activities in a busy household that cause many treasured items to disappear every now and then. And this was what I was pondering and praying about during Mass: how to incorporate this little miracle into my presentation. I wanted to express how God can use all sorts of things, images and experiences to let us know that he means what he says.

It was then that I suddenly noticed the hymn being sung. It's not one that we hear very often anymore at Mass, and if we do hear it, it's usually during the holidays or at weddings, but this was before the beginning of Advent. It was none other than *Panis Angelicus*. The hymn was given to us by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century and, of course, is Latin for "bread of angels." It was written in honor of the feast of Corpus Christi connected to the Eucharistic miracle in Orvieto, Italy.

It was hard for me to maintain my composure. What are the chances of that beautiful hymn, one not heard very often, being sung right as I am thinking about my *Panis Angelicus* statue? Oh, and did I mention that this was just days before I was heading back to Italy to lead a pilgrimage with my first stop being none other than the beautiful Etruscan town of Orvieto? It was no coincidence, but another "Godcidence" or "God-wink." Indeed, it was a hug from heaven and an early Christmas present – one that I will never forget. *Buon Natale*.

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