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Walking Away From Religion Into the Heart of Faith

Andrea Syverson

### What Others Are Saying About Alter Girl

*Alter Girl* is a tour de force of learning how to abandon preconceptions of the life of faith and embrace what is so generously given. Beautifully and honestly written.

-Eugene H. Peterson Pastor and author of *The Message* 

You hold in your hands an epic tale through religious disillusionment into a discovery of a more personal and vibrant faith. With refreshing wit and candor, Andrea Syverson invites you inside her Catholic upbringing, her marriage outside that faith, and her efforts to live out her faith with a community of believers. Not everyone finds their way through this journey with their faith intact. She did, and what she discovered along the way can be of real help to you.

—Wayne Jacobsen

Collaborator on The Shack and author of He Loves Me and Finding Church

Jesus would love this story. So will most Catholics and Protestants. It's about a cradle Catholic who grows in her faith through high school and college and eventually changes her Christian denomination because of her husband's faith. Thus, she is an "alter girl." This story is for anyone trying to understand young adults who take their spiritual searching seriously—no matter where it leads them.

—Gregory F. Augustine Pierce Author of *The World as It Should Be: Living Authentically in the Here-and-Now Kingdom of God* 

*Alter Girl* is a must-read for any church leader who is serious about the question of why faithful people leave the church. Syverson's story is vulnerable and honest, raw, and layered with significance. Like many who struggle with the institutional church, Syverson's decision was thoughtful, discerning, and deeply reflective. This is a story of love seeking an even Greater Love that could only be found by leaving something behind.

—John M. Vitek President and Chief Executive Officer, Saint Mary's Press, Inc.

Andrea Syverson has written a gripping book that is equal parts memoir/thriller/ confessional/spiritual call-to-arms. Henri Nouwen wrote, "That which is most personal is most universal," and this book proves his point. In her journey from a Catholic upbringing as sure and expected as gravity, to the open expanse of an evangelical adventure in the wild West, she offers an emotionally raw peak into her gathering intimacy with Jesus. This book could have been a polemic; instead, it is



shot through with affection and an eager and unselfconscious honesty. The cherry on top is her sense of humor, which creeps onto every page. If you are searching for God, or trying to make sense of the deeper longings of your life, Andrea is your new best friend.

-Rick Lawrence, author of *The Jesus-Centered Life* and editor of the *Jesus-Centered Bible* 

The world needs books like Andrea's that bring to life the experiences and potential of those who live faithful lives outside the institutional church. This powerful personal account brings comfort to and insight into the growing phenomenon of Dones.

-Josh Packard, Ph.D.

Author of Church Refugees and director of The Dechurched Project

With insight and candor, Andrea Syverson chronicles the heartaches and joys of her faith journey. Some people have "Paul" experiences (sudden and dramatic conversions), and some have "Timothy" experiences (lifelong, steadfast obedience). Andrea's story shares features of both—a devoted pursuit followed by a gracious awakening. A faith-full pilgrimage well told.

—Timothy J. Beals President, Credo Communications

In the pages of this enduring work, Andrea Syverson has articulated the foremost issue of Christianity, religion verses relationship. *Alter Girl* stands alone in this regard, clearly revealing the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus, as well as knowing and trusting in the Word of God at an intimate level.

—Boyd Bailey Pastor, Spruce Hill Community Church

Sadly, organized religion often erects hurdles that hinder or block our faith walk. In *Alter Girl*, Andrea Syverson enthusiastically leads readers over and around those hurdles to reach a life of true, exuberant faith.

—Nancy Parker Brummett Author of *Simply the Savior* 

The journey toward Christ is one of ever-increasing freedom. Sometimes what binds us are the chains of our own religious pursuits. But there are no chains grace cannot break. Every testimony to the grace of Jesus adds to God's glory. This book will inspire many to find freedom again.

—Tim McConnell Pastor and author of *Happy Church* 



Walking Away From Religion Into the Heart of Faith

Andrea Syverson



MyLifetree.com



### Alter Girl

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### For Dean

Thank you for asking me all those hard questions long ago and for sharing life since then as we live into the answers and continue exploring new questions side-by-side. I give thanks to God for putting us together in this faith adventure.

## For All Those Desiring More

May our story lead you into a faith adventure of your own and draw you into a new or deeper friendship with the One who knows your name and is crazy about you.





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All believers, come here and listen, let me tell you what God did for me.

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Psalm 66:16

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# INTRODUCTION



"Done. Done. Done. No more, Dean. I'm not having this conversation again! I told you. Two things: I'll always be Catholic. I'll never leave Miami. Stop trying to change me."

Throughout our courtship, Dean asked me hard questions about my faith. Questions such as "Why do you do that?" and "Why do you believe this?" and, most frustrating, "Where in the Bible does it teach that?" I was challenged and offended. I also felt at a loss to articulate answers other than "because." I had never fielded these types of questions and was determined not to start.

Though exasperated, I was very much in love with my wonderful Protestant boyfriend. I thought it was simple: If he really loved me, he'd become Catholic. Catholics don't become Protestants. That's how I was raised. End of story.

With Dean, nothing is ever quite that easy.

This is our story. The story of how a devout Catholic girl got shaken and stirred in ways she never anticipated by the mountain man who became her husband. Of one Catholic girl's Protestant field trips and all she discovered on her bumpy, off-road adventure. Of how God showed up as her traveling companion and of all he taught her outside the pews she was used to. Of a holy untangling and an excursion into wide, spacious territory. Of questions that continue to arise. Of the process of "unorganizing" religion.

Perhaps some of it is your story, too. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Friendship is born at the moment when one says to another, 'What, you, too? I thought that no one but myself...'"<sup>1</sup> Throughout the years, Dean and I have befriended so many people who resonate with our confoundedness about church and the Church. I agree with these words from Catholic priest and author Henri Nouwen: "The great paradox of the spiritual life is, indeed, that the most personal is most universal, that the most intimate is the most communal."<sup>2</sup> I'm learning that sharing what I had thought was my singular personal experience may help others.

On our journey, Dean and I have met many former Catholics. We have friends who refer to themselves as "extraordinarily lapsed." Others, such as former monk Thomas Moore, are "Catholic without a church" and "waiting for a community modeled on the community around Jesus, who...didn't intend to found a religion but to inspire a sane and beautiful way of life."<sup>3</sup>

This story isn't limited to the Catholic experience, however. We've met Christians of many denominations who share similar tales. Pew Research Center studies reveal that "the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing...These changes are taking place across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups."<sup>4</sup>

Amid all these shifts, what's truly painful is the number of people who, in leaving the church, have also left God.

That's the real loss—and a main reason I want to share our story. I'm neither a theologian nor a Bible scholar. This is simply a deeply personal account of two people who never left God. It's a freedom story. Pastor Eugene Peterson teaches that "every Christian story is a freedom story. Each tells how a person has been set free from...the chains of what other people think, from the emotional cages of guilt and regret, from the prison of self, separated from God by sin. We're free to change. The process of that change is always a story, but it's never a neat formula."<sup>5</sup>

This is, indeed, a messy story. But it's also a joy story. A love story. A story of transformation and befriending. I offer it to you as a gift.



# PART ONE Not So Messy

and and and





# ALTAR GIRL

## Growing Up Catholic

"Is he Catholic?" my mother asked after hearing of each new beau during my dating days in south Florida. The answer was always yes. I dated only Catholic men. My sisters and I joked that the guys we brought home could be ax murderers as long as they were *Catholic* ax murderers. (That's only a slight exaggeration!)

Why wouldn't the men be Catholic? Until my early 20s, the only people I knew were Catholics. My world was *all* Catholic, *all* the time. Catholic was my nationality. Like delicious ricotta in lasagna, it was baked into my being. I was surrounded: Catholic school. Catholic sports. Catholic carnivals. Catholic scouting group. Catholic you name it.

Our parents and their parents and their parents' parents from Italy

and Slovakia were all devout Catholics who sacrificed to provide a solid Catholic education for their children. Besides the fact that it was the right and holy thing to do, sending us to Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school assured that we were surrounded by good Catholic future mates.

Passing down their faith to us wasn't just a core value to my parents; it was the *single* most important thing they could do as parents. Their faith wasn't a casual "this is how we've always done it" kind of faith. It was real. It was lived. It was our family's center. We were saturated in Catholicism, and we loved everything about it, just as we loved being Italian.

As a practicing Catholic family in Trenton, New Jersey, in the 1960s and '70s, our entire life revolved around the church. Catholics went to the church designated as their neighborhood parish. There was no such thing as "church shopping" or "priest shopping." My parents were actively engaged as leaders and volunteers at St. Anthony's, our parish and school. Our parents' friends were Catholic; our friends were Catholic; our holiday traditions were Catholic. Being Catholic kept us focused and busy.

Weekends revolved around Mass. Every Sunday morning, my family dressed up and went to the 8:00 service. Our parents positioned themselves strategically in the pew between the three of us young girls, and we were on our best behavior. We didn't talk, eat candy, play with toys, read books, or color. As we filed out, people often complimented my parents: "Mr. and Mrs. Bertolini, your girls are *angels*." We were compliant and obedient. I'm not bragging; this was just what was expected of us.

After Mass we went to Eet Gud Bakery. (Yes, "eat good" in some language—it's a Trenton institution). Mom ran in while Dad kept the car running and we girls excitedly anticipated the delicious sugar rush. As soon as we got home, we changed into comfy clothes and devoured the doughnuts while we read the funnies. Those doughnuts were part of my religious imprinting!

Another thing happened on some Sundays. If any of us misbehaved in church (and to this day, I can't imagine what we could've done besides breathing too loudly), then we had to come home and put our



"heads down and hineys up." All three of us. A communal spanking. It didn't happen every Sunday, but it happened often enough that I thought this, too, was part of church. Eet Gud and, every so often, spankings. Don't get me wrong; there was love in those spankings. To this day, my sisters and I are grateful for our loving but strict upbringing.

For the first 12 years of my life, there were three of us girls, all fewer than 12 months apart. We shared clothes, one bathroom (all three of us and our parents for more than 10 years!), banana-seat bikes with baskets, chores, chicken pox, cookouts, treehouses, and the most magical Christmas mornings ever. One of my favorite memories is gleefully flying down the stairs with my sisters and seeing an extravaganza of presents overtaking our tinsel-strewn tree and living room. I believed in Santa for longer than most children because I knew there was *no way* my parents could have afforded all those gifts.

My sisters were my playmates. Teresa was often outside making mud pies and planting gardens. Janet and I shared a purple bedroom, and when I couldn't sleep, she made up songs and sang me to sleep. Our youngest sister, Nicole, came along when I was 12 and completed our family. It was a wonderful childhood.

I liked being Catholic. It fit my dutiful and serious personality. It was all laid out. It wasn't messy. We had religion class every single school day. We learned the do's and don'ts, the "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots," the venial (bad) sins and the mortal (extremely bad) sins. (And most of us guessed at what I call the "inbetweenial" sins!)

### Sacraments

Catholics do an amazing job celebrating the sacraments. I mean *really* celebrating. They are Big Events. The *Baltimore Catechism*, the Catholic rule-and-answer book back then, defined a sacrament as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace."<sup>6</sup> The Catholic Church administers seven sacraments: baptism, penance (now called reconciliation), Holy Eucharist, confirmation, extreme unction (now called anointing of the sick, previously called last rites), holy orders, and matrimony. Most Protestant churches administer only two sacraments: baptism and Communion.







All of us received baptism, our first sacrament, as babies. In first grade, we studied and prepared for the next two: our first penance and our first Holy Eucharist (Communion).

When I was growing up, penance was referred to as confession. Back then it was a rather fearful experience. I entered a black closet with a screen that hid my face from the priest's, and vice versa. I knelt in this dark box, waiting for the priest to indicate he was ready to hear my sins by sliding open the screen near my face. I couldn't help trembling a little. I made the sign of the cross and began the prayer: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," told the priest my sins, asked for forgiveness, and promised to "sin no more." He absolved me of those sins and gave me the usual rote penance: three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers memorized prayers that never changed. Often the only variables were my list of sins and the priest's possible-but-unlikely variation of the prescribed penance.

In a perfect world, we were encouraged to go to confession every Saturday before receiving Holy Communion on Sunday to ensure we were always in a "state of grace." The only time my sisters and I complained the *least bit* about being Catholic was during our gradeschool summers, when Mom made us stop perfectly good kickball games at 3:30 p.m. and change into simple dresses so we could go to confession by 4:00. This drove us crazy for several obvious reasons, one of which was we didn't think we had much to confess at the tender ages of 6, 7, and 8. We had a tough time thinking of new sins each week.

After receiving our first penance, we prepared for our first Holy Communion. We practiced walking in orderly, single-file processions down the long church aisle, our hands in upright prayer positions. We even practiced receiving the wafer and what to do if it stuck to the roof of our mouths. We all got new clothes for this (no uniforms!): The boys wore suits, and the girls had fancy white dresses and mini bride-like veils. We carried small white purses with rosaries and prayer books tucked inside.

Like all things Catholic, these ceremonies were laden with great beauty, mystery, and reverence. These were holy, important occasions, and many classes were devoted to teaching us the necessity for and sacred implications of each sacrament. Receiving penance and Holy Communion was the highlight of first grade.



They were also happy family affairs, often with parties afterward. My family's tradition was to go to Buckley's restaurant, where Dad ordered us each a Shirley Temple with extra maraschino cherries followed by roasted turkey with all the trimmings. It was a big day. Back then, eating out was reserved for special occasions.

After receiving our first Holy Communion, we were encouraged to receive that sacrament as often as possible. To this day, devout Catholics try to attend Mass and receive Communion daily. (In my 20s, when I lived in Miami within walking distance of a Catholic church, I was able to do so for a short season. It was a beautiful way to begin my day.)

### Extra Credit

In addition to the sacraments, you can do lots of things throughout the liturgical year for "extra credit." As with Girl Scout badges, the goal is to obtain as many as possible. Catholics can participate in novenas (nine consecutive days of prayers for a particular intention), the Stations of the Cross (saying selected prayers at 14 visual depictions of Jesus' last hours on earth), Forty Hours' Devotion (40 hours of continuous prayer in front of the blessed sacrament, the Eucharist), saying the rosary (prayer beads for praying the mysteries of the faith). Of course, this is all *in addition* to trying to keep your soul pure *and* feeding the poor, visiting the sick, keeping the holy days of obligation, honoring your mother and father, and obeying the other commandments.

Catholicism kept us hopping.

In the past, these "extras" were referred to as indulgences, good acts done supposedly to shorten penance time for sins. Back in the 1500s, Catholic priest and monk Martin Luther had a difficult time with this concept and wrote his famous *Ninety-Five Theses* to argue that faith alone, not good works, is required for salvation. Thus began the Protestant Reformation—and Luther's eventual excommunication.

The Catholic Church still encourages indulgences.

## Join one woman as she walks away from religion and into the heart of faith

Andrea Syverson was raised Catholic. As in *really* Catholic, from plaid jumpers to early-morning Mass to meatless Fridays.

And then she did the unthinkable. She fell in love with a non-Catholic man whose questions about her faith she simply couldn't answer.

#### What's a good Catholic girl to do?

Frequently whimsical, often profound, always honest, Andrea shares her spiritual journey—one that feels familiar to anyone seeking Jesus. Through storytelling, reflective devotions, and spaces for readers to journal, *Alter Girl* is a jumbled jaunt from religion to relationship, from going to church to *being* the church.

Whether you love church or are done with it, or you're simply seeking a more authentic relationship with Jesus— Andrea's story will speak to your heart.



"Alter Girl is a tour de force of learning how to abandon preconceptions of the life of faith and embrace what is so generously given. Beautifully and honestly written."

-Pastor Eugene H. Peterson, author of The Message



Andrea Syverson lives in the Colorado Rockies with her husband, Dean. Partners in marriage, business, and faith for over 20 years, they're eagerly awaiting what will alter their journey—and hearts—next.



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