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O, Jerusalem, If I Forget You!

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“My dwelling place will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Ez 37:27)

It was one of countless days like it. The older kids were at school, my husband Soren was at work at the chancery in Arlington, and I was on my way in, preschooler in tow, to Trinity House Café + Market, our non-profit's outpost of the new evangelization in Leesburg, Virginia.

Our Pope John Paul II-inspired ministry had hosted events in parishes for many years before preaching to the choir had gotten stale enough to launch into preaching to the streets. And in the early years of fallout from our over-reaching idealism, before the café systems were solidly in place and Soren and I were able to work together every day, I would truly need to steel myself as we approached the blue door, our hand-hewn portal into another world.

I would go back and forth with the staff, “Good morning!” and “How's business today?” Were they making themselves busy or goofing off and needing redirection? I don't remember. But I'm sure I had fifty things to do, all while engaging staff, guests, and my little one, before rushing home to meet the school bus. There's no rocket science involved in getting a café plus gift shop off the ground, but trying to balance the slew of details—in a professional and gracious way—was enough to make this grown woman regularly beg for mercy.

I eyed my to-do list while keeping my son, who was busy with a coloring book, in my peripheral vision. How long would it take to do inventory and still make the ordering deadline? Before I had a chance to figure it out, a guest was approaching. Being in the historic district of a tourist destination in Northern Virginia meant we hosted folks from everywhere, and that day was no exception. My interlocutor was an Israeli, and he was intent on detaching me from my daily checklist.

Every day, people are moved—despite my continuing pettiness and paltry means. And I keep thinking about that brown plastic rosary, about what God is able to do with a dot on the map. And then my imagination does still occasionally surge with dreams of the “new springtime of the human spirit,” the beloved vision of my hero, Pope St. John Paul II.

“Come with me!” my Israeli guest insisted. And so I did, trying to be charmed. Passing beneath Our Lord reigning from the beautiful, old crucifix above the door to the Trinity Room, we arrived at the bookcase next to the front door of the elegant 19th-century home that houses the café. He physically turned me toward a framed tile atop the bookcase, and quite aggressively, though not unpleasantly, challenged me, “What is this?” And I hesitated.

Like many things in our little approximation of the Heavenly City, there is so much behind this colorful tile—with its illustration of a city and Hebrew inscription—so many more memories, ideas, and dreams than any one moment with a guest can bear. Inventory deadlines still looming, I stammered out, “It says, ‘O Jerusalem, if I forget you, may my right hand wither.’” Exasperated and animated he replied, “I know what it says! *Why* is it here?”

Why indeed? How could I say what a life, a marriage, a family, a ministry mean when there was so much friction between my family's ideals and the reality of life on the ground that I could barely remember why it was there, myself? When Soren and I met in Kraków in the Jubilee Year of 2000, we dreamed of creating a little taste of heaven on earth, a home to share with God and our children yet to be born, but also with neighbors and strangers, a place to welcome anyone who yearned to dwell within the Most Holy Trinity, together with our Blessed Mother and all the saints.

Back then, we knew little about the abyss between our fuzzily glowing dreams of the City of God and the harsh contours of real life. And thank goodness, because courage doesn't come in that denomination. Twenty years later, there is a bit more convergence between dream and reality, an emerging out of days, weeks, years of often quite dreary pilgrimage through the wasteland of our stripped-down culture—toward the blue door and through, into the ever-richening landscape of the new springtime of the third millennium.

But do I still really believe in the new springtime to come? Many days of long service—of creating a waystation, a peaceful respite for my town, introducing a little taste of heaven—have ended with news of more darkness encroaching. It seems no matter how many espresso shots pulled or cups of tea brewed, no matter how many weary bodies restored with a crunchy panini or a fresh salad, no matter how many prayer candles sold or guests inspired by the hand-painted icons that grace our walls, the balance still tips discouragingly toward the abyss. Despite hundreds of live music events, story times, Bible studies, and art exhibits, our Heavenly Jerusalem remains just a dot on the map of a burned-out world.

Or is it? On a recent day, now approaching eight years since we first signed the lease, I went through the blue door intent on connecting briefly with the staff and placing a few orders before heading home to more desk work. But as so often happens, the barista was at the espresso machine, foaming milk and talking with a chatty guest while another guest politely waited to order. And because, against all odds, I am still drawn to these encounters, rather than call another staff person from the kitchen, I moved toward the register.

As I passed the guest anticipating his latte, I heard him exclaim with apparent joy, “I never imagined that I would have a mystical experience today!” His choice of words was a bit unusual, but his delight at discovering the world inside our Trinity House was something I’ve witnessed over and over. A few minutes later, I was still caught up in serving guests, and a woman approached holding a rosary. She asked, “Is this really free?”

We have a couple of baskets where we give away the endless stream of books and sacramentals that people donate, and this brown plastic item was definitely a freebie. “Yes! We can’t give them away fast enough,” I replied. Her questioning expression transformed into a beatific smile as she raised the plastic crucifix to her lips, ecstatically exclaiming, “Then this one was meant for me!” I shook my head internally, semi-incredulous that the Holy Spirit could touch a soul through such a banal object, but also a little jealous that she was levitating while gravity fixed me firmly, as usual.

I can’t tell you how many days are like that, when the roar of grace is practically deafening as guest after guest experiences the Spirit of God, who reigns powerfully over this house.

“My friend and I used to meet here for tea and now we have both returned to the Church. We had never seen the faith presented this way—so beautiful.”

“I can’t tell you how happy I am as soon as my feet touch your red brick sidewalk!”

“I go to the Trinity House for all my most important conversations.”

“Did you hear that? I just used the word ‘redemption.’ This place is really working on me!”

Those are just a few of countless expressions of joy and wonder that arise from this intersection of dream and reality. Every day, people are moved—despite my continuing pettiness and paltry means. And I keep thinking about that brown plastic rosary, about what God is able to do with a dot on the map. And then my imagination does still occasionally surge with dreams of the “new springtime of the human spirit,” the beloved vision of my hero, Pope St. John Paul II.

The hero-saint John Paul was known for bringing the riches of the faith into the public square. So, we were deeply moved when we found this home for Trinity House on his canonization day, on the corner of Church and Market Streets, across from the courthouse that hosted the first public proclamation of the Declaration of Independence in the Commonwealth of Virginia. But Saint John Paul II was not only intent on reawakening formerly Christian societies to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but he was just as passionate about demonstrating that Christ is the source of society's foundation on the dignity of the person and the common good.

He was no less intent on restoring marriage and family as the place in which people should first learn about truth, goodness, and beauty. People shouldn’t have to come to Trinity House to hear about the meaning of life. And so, Pope John Paul toiled endlessly that someday, we would once again learn it from Mom and Dad. While we had always thought of Trinity House as a domestic church writ large—where a family lives out God’s life of interpersonal communion and offers it to their neighbors—Soren and I started looking for a way to more fully pursue John Paul II’s other goal, the attainment of which could someday push Trinity House Café into obsolescence.

Two and a half years ago, Soren was finally able to join me full-time in ministry (and thanks to a growing group of supporters, I got my first paycheck from the non-profit after fourteen years)! As our vision matured, inspiring families to make home a little taste of heaven, a type

of the Heavenly City, became the heart of our mission. Now, we engage the public with this vision of the restored Christian family and home at Trinity House; we equip parents with *Heaven in Your Home Workshops* and weekly *Letters*; and we encourage families at monthly *Heaven in Your Home Gatherings* at parishes.

Though we are made to remain painfully aware of our limitations, it is very motivating to take the hard-won lessons and graces of our marriage and family life at our own home on Mount Gilead south of Leesburg, and use them in the public square to inspire other families to represent the Holy Trinity in their own homes and neighborhoods. All the while, one image anchors the heart of our efforts, the heart of the new Jerusalem inside every Trinity House.

At the center of our home and of Trinity House Café, hangs a copy of Andrei Rublev's 15th-century Trinity icon above the main fireplace mantel. Three angel figures around a table with a central chalice represent God. It is the Genesis scene, under the Oak of Mamre, when Abraham and Sarah hosted three strangers with the best they had to offer, and a family as numerous as the stars was their reward.

When we were first given the vision for Trinity House, this icon was suggested in prayer as a logo of sorts. It tells the story of abiding, interpersonal communion, the source of all life, among the persons of God, and how God offers his communion to us, to our families, to share with one another, to bring about more life in his image. Like so many things at Trinity House, this icon is rich with details. But suffice it to say that the Father figure *welcomes* us, the Spirit figure *listens* to us, and the Son figure *serves* us, nourishing us with the Eucharist to be like God for others in our turn.

At the summit of the icon's story, we observe the Father's House, the Trinity House, above the angel figure who first welcomed us to the table of life. Welcome, Listen, Serve. What God has done for us, we can do for others and reap the reward of eternal life—to dwell forever in the Heavenly Jerusalem, together with the Most High, our Blessed Mother, and all the saints—welcoming more and more people to join us in the eternal communion for which we all long.

I remember one time—I was working at a table in the Trinity Room—when I listened to a guest telling her friend about the meaning behind the icon. In explaining it, she shared the whole Gospel in a couple of minutes along with the precise answer to all the ills of a world that is heedlessly pursuing self-interest into ever-greater alienation and despair. And yet, many families we know are building their own Trinity Houses—portals through the darkening abyss into the new springtime of the human spirit. May the rising of these outposts of the Heavenly Jerusalem someday outpace the darkness and illumine our world anew with the light of Christ. Pope St. John Paul the Great, pray for us!

Ever Johnson and her husband, Soren, are the Managers of Trinity House Café+ Market and Directors of the non-profit Trinity House Community, which inspires families to make home a taste of heaven for the renewal of faith and culture.

