Voices of Sisters

Spirituality

The author, Apostle of the Sacred Heart Sr. Kathryn Press (left), sits with Benedictine Sr. Celina Galinyte, director of Alpha in Lithuania, and Xavières Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary at the Synod of Bishops) at Royal Albert Hall in London. The three spoke at a panel at Alpha International's Leadership Conference May 1-2. (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)

by Sr. Kathryn Press

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Earlier this month, I had the life-changing opportunity of attending Leadership Conference 2023 at the Royal Albert Hall in London. This annual conference is hosted by Alpha International, a nonprofit Christian charity that aims to help people discover and develop a relationship with Jesus.

The Leadership Conference has been running for 13 years. This was its first conference since COVID emerged in early 2020. More than 4,000 Christians from different traditions and denominations, including Anglicans, Pentecostals and Catholics, gathered for this two-day event. Approximately 20-25% of the delegates were Catholic. The days were quite full and included excellent speakers, fantastic musicians and powerful moments of prayer.

Alpha invited me to speak on a panel. Anglican pastor Nicky Gumbel interviewed me along with Xavières Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary at the Synod of Bishops) and Benedictine Sr. Celina Galinyte, director of Alpha in Lithuania. Each of us shared something about our life "before the convent" and how God was inviting us to serve him now.

As I unpack — spiritually, mentally, ministerially — these days, my heart is full of gratitude. For the invitation and opportunity. For the prayer and fellowship. But I am experiencing another feeling too, an aftershock if you will, that has strengthened my heart: a deep sense of hope. As 1 Peter 3:15 reminds us, we must always be ready to give an account of our hope. Well, here goes.

I met the Holy Spirit on Monday, May 1, 2023, in an elaborate concert hall built more than 100 years ago. In the words of Mary Magdalene in "The Chosen" (Season 1, episode 2), "I was one way, and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in between … was Him." Words fall short of explaining the way that God spoke to me in the very depths of my being.

I've known Jesus my whole life. I didn't have a dramatic conversation like St. Paul did. I've simply always known God to be a part of my life. Sure, the journey had a few detours along the way, but the Lord has blessed me with some really profound moments, too. There was my Transfiguration experience of seeing Pope John Paul II when I was 16 years old and I wanted to stay in that moment. There was my burning bush experience when the Lord called me to religious life and I was certain he had

confused me with someone else. Then there was my "Feeding of the 5,000" experience when I walked 10 miles in Poland to sleep in a field and celebrate Mass with young Catholics at World Youth Day.

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But this experience in the Royal Albert Hall wasn't like Mount Tabor, or Mount Horeb, or the Mount of Beatitudes. It wasn't a mountaintop experience at all. Yes, it was sacred, surprising, something to be savored. But it was different from anything I've ever experienced. It lit my heart on fire and convicted me. Now, I am like St. Paul: "If I preach the Gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it!" (1 Corinthians. 9:16). Despite how inarticulate I am in sharing what happened to me, I feel compelled to at least try.

It strikes me that we are truly living in an in-between time. Liturgically, in these days between the Ascension and Pentecost, we're oriented toward expectant waiting. This is the origin of our practice of novenas. (Many bishops' conferences have transferred the Ascension from Thursday to Sunday, which may be pastorally appropriate but does make for a bit of difficulty with the math.) But each day we await the Spirit rushing over us. We wait like the early church did between the time Jesus returned to the Father and when the Spirit came in the upper room in Jerusalem.

When did you first meet the Holy Spirit? If you haven't, will you pray "Come Holy Spirit"? How are you preparing for Pentecost? What gift do you want to ask the Paraclete to pour out into our world? Into your heart?

My Pentecost novena will be spent listening to "Rest on Us" by Maverick City and reading *Come, Creator Spirit* by Franciscan Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap. I'll continue to unpack what the Lord spoke in my heart at the Royal Albert Hall, surrounded by so many of my Christian brothers and sisters. And I'll be asking the Holy Spirit to continue to fill me and speak the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31).

Let us pray together: "Come, Holy Spirit!"