

*God In the Clouds*

*A Memoir by Sister Nancy*



*“We are the same in God’s eyes, we are loved the same.”*

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From the time I was small, church, prayer, and religion were a big part of our family life. In my birth family, my mother's brother was a priest. My mother did music at an Italianate church with clothed statues, novenas, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and processions in the street. We lived literally across the street from the church and convent. When I was in kindergarten, I moved with my adoptive family to a small farming community where we lived through 4th grade; but we spent most weekends with Nanna in the city and went to church with her at the Italian church. We would take part in the Corpus Christi procession there, walking what seemed like forever down these cobblestone streets with hundreds of families leading the Blessed Sacrament, singing in Italian and Latin and praying the rosary. In our small town we were at the local church a lot. My uncle was pastor and mom directed the choir, did the sacristy wash, and said the Latin responses at daily Mass in place of the altar boys—there were no altar girls then. We used to mumble at least the first line with her: *Ad Deum qui laetificat, juventutum meum*” or something like that. I went to the rectory each day after school to practice piano. Each Sunday at breakfast after Mass we would have to tell our parents and my uncle what we remembered from the sermon. If we hadn't paid attention, we had to stand in the corner of the living room until we remembered something! Father Paul often would come over on Sundays,. He brought us rosaries, holy water, and Chanel perfume when he came back from Europe during the Holy Year 1950. Each of us had our own sizable crucifix that was a sick call set. Inside were two candles and a holy water bottle to be used for the sacrament of Extreme Unction (as the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick was called then) in an emergency. I don't know that I had a relationship with God when I was very young, but let's say there was a lot of religious influence there.

When I was in the upper grades, we moved back to the city and passed the church on the way to and from school. I always would stop in on the way home for a 'pop in visit'. God was way up there somewhere far away, and the church was quiet, and there was something special about being in it. I felt God was present there and I could talk with him. I think we were told we got special indulgences for stopping in and saying 'six Our Fathers, six Hail Mary's, and six Glory Be's'. Peter, Michael and I sang in the school choir for Sunday Masses. Our Carmelite aunt made us a white, tiered, wooden altar platform and altar with tabernacle and veil, and miniature versions of all the vessels and vessels, missal and the two Mass cards with the priest's prayers, little hosts and a figurine of the priest in his cassock. We used to play 'pretend Mass' on the window seat in our bedroom. I would be the priest because I could say that one line of Latin! We prayed the rosary every night on our knees---the whole family-- before you could do anything else right after supper. I don't know that that helped my concept of God at all because we were just conscious of how hard it was to kneel up straight the whole time. I remember being poked a lot in the middle of my back and told to straighten up! I also remember driving from church to church as a family each year on Holy Thursday night for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Mom prayed to the saints for things and encouraged us to do so: to St. Anthony to find lost objects, to Christopher to keep us safe when we traveled, to Jude 'for hopeless cases', and to Anne that she find good husbands for us four girls! Mom and Dad both did what we later would

call Spiritual Reading before they went to bed at night. We watched Bishop Fulton Sheen on TV each week and there were the gatherings at our house to watch and discuss a film about Cardinal Mindszenty and the Communists. My Grandma's brother was a Jesuit and sometimes would come to the city and visit our classrooms. We thought it was pretty special to have such a smart man as an uncle! Between the two priests in the family, my aunt at the Carmelite monastery, and dad's first cousins as a Dominican nun and Passionist brother respectively, we had contact with more 'church people' than most children did. Add to that dad's two good Jesuit friends from college who often would spend a week at a time staying at our house. One of them was an associate editor of America and was always very interesting to have around. We always had to stay at the table until the end of dinner, so we heard plenty of talk about church and religion and things political.

My mom belonged to the Catholic Women's Club that sometimes would meet at our house. She also was involved in the National Conference of Christians and Jews, so we interacted with Jewish families. At one point, after the bishop saw her photo in the paper as coordinating an event for the NCCJ, he wrote to her, threatening excommunication if she did not resign from the organization. This was an era, the 50's, of a defensive or isolationist, ghetto mentality among Catholics. We did not interact with Protestants, let alone Jews. Mom did not back down. One particular Jewish family, the Gelmans, became lifelong family friends. Mom helped care for their five teenage kids after their mom died.

Every December before Christmas, we hosted Baby Jesus' Birthday Party, a tradition that my siblings have continued with their children and the grandchildren in all the families. We would have about 30 or 40 people over, mostly small kids. We would have a procession around the big house as we sang carols, the youngest child present carrying baby Jesus. When the figure was in the crib, dad would bless the crib and the tree, and we would all have Baby Jesus' Birthday Cake—always chocolate! One year the dog got into the cake before everyone arrived! Each family would bring canned goods and other non-perishable items to the party as presents for Baby Jesus. Our family then would them in baskets to a poor, African-American family on the East Side the next day.

As you can see, there was a religious and interfaith atmosphere in our home. There always was that sense of connection with church, religion, or faith that basically permeated everyday life. As a teenager I had all these prayers that I said faithfully each night before turning out the light. There were a few prayers that I read, but each night I would pray for my birth parents who were 'on the other side' and my sister who was next in age to Bill and died at age 4 ½ before I was born. I was always conscious of persons who had gone before and were with God. So, there was that kind of connection to God. Somehow they all were together somewhere. Somewhere—it was a place at that point in time. When I was a small child at an orphanage, I do remember very distinctly sitting outside on the big swing with a family member, and there was a blue sky with these great cumulous clouds. Whoever was with me told me that my parents were up there in the clouds where God was. So for years, I loved clouds; I still love clouds because somewhere the people I love who have died are floating around up there. Part of it was I suppose a consciousness of the other world or after life.

In terms of personal relationship with God, or who God was for me in the high-school years, I

developed what at the time I thought was a fairly close relationship with God. As I look back, I think I was manipulating God a lot. I would pop into the chapel in between classes if I were on the chapel floor. I was praying for the next test or something I wanted to go well or something I needed (or thought I needed) or success I wanted. By junior and senior year, there was a more personal relationship I guess. I was very conscious of God throughout my day and loved the quiet time of prayer before I pulled up the covers. I always started the rosary when I got in bed. It was a sure way to fall asleep before I even got to the first decade!

One of the hardest things when I entered the community was to have prayer highly structured and regimented. I loved the sung office on weekends, even though it was in Latin. During the week, we prayed litanies that didn't mean much to me. There were lists of saints, titles for Jesus, and titles for Mary that seemed to put them at a distance from me. What I remember is that on the other side of that time was recreation for a half hour or so! The only times I felt I was really connecting with God were the quiet prayer time from 5:30-6:00 a.m. and at night after the formal night prayers. We would get ready for bed, and I would come back to the dark chapel. That was my connection time; at least, I remember going there to try to find the God whom I had known. At the other set prayer times, I didn't feel I was connecting with God. Maybe at Mass, but that was so early in the morning, and there were no homilies, and much of it was in Latin. It was the music that saved me. Even then, sometimes I wasn't praying, even with the music, I was singing and enjoying hearing 250 people singing three-part harmony in that resonant space, or playing the organ and being scared that I would make a mistake.

I think it was when I first was teaching that I was able to recapture what I would say was a personal relationship with God. We still had a half hour of quiet meditation before Mass, and my schedule was such that there wouldn't be students free to take lessons during the first period of the day. So I would go back over the bridge to the convent chapel and do spiritual reading for half an hour. That was special time when no one else would be around. It was just nice quiet time, and I'm grateful for that.

I think that, during the first years at the college where I next taught, I was kind of riding on the spiritual capital from those high school days. Five of us formed what later would be called an 'intentional community'. We moved together into an apartment. We lived simply, had no car, shared rooms, and often that first year had lengthy suppers together, often with an interesting guest or two. It was a most wonderful opening up kind of time. It was just an alive time! I would attend student liturgies, but I was not good about carving out a place and time for quiet prayer or reading. God was meeting me in other ways, but I was not giving my best energy to our relationship.

After two years, when I went to study at Indiana University, my time was my own to organize. It was blessed time for exciting music study, developing close relationships with three other students in my hall, and reclaiming a spiritual practice or two. I would plan so that I was up early enough in the morning to have the quiet prayer and reading time before anybody else was around. And the walk between the dorm and the music school was through lush, green ravines and trees...so good for the spirit and conducive to sensing God's presence and giving thanks to the Creator of it all. Being surrounded constantly by beautiful music that made the spirit soar, was sheer gift.

When I returned to the college where I taught before, the more I got involved in overload teaching and was on campus from early morning until late at night pretty much seven days a week, I finally reached a point where I said, “What am I doing with my life?” I was successful professionally, but I felt that my life as a sister, who was supposed to have a special relationship with God, was a sham. ‘Should I have left the community when so many others did?’ I asked myself. Gone were the daily meditation and spiritual reading—and even Mass some days. Where was God? Who was God? What God was, was Energy. If I had to name an image a God, God was fire, and God was energy, the Spirit that permeated everything, the One who provided me with energy that kept me going (when no one else knew what was going on inside). The personal God was gone. I had made God in my image.

I would have to say that this was the time when I was so grateful for a small group of BVMs who prayed together every morning in one of the college dorms. For about six months, it was their faith at that time that really sustained me. Their prayer was my prayer because I didn’t know how to pray at that point anymore. My prayer was simply one of desire...just being present, and wanting to be able to pray as they prayed so freely and from the heart. I had cut out the blocks of quiet, prayer time and no longer experienced the core relationship when I was at Eucharist. It was when I made my first directed retreat one June in the mid 1970’s that my life was changed. During that retreat, God just came so alive for me. My spirit was freed so. There was a small, enclosed garden in back of the building, and I would be there from after breakfast until lunchtime. I would just sit yoga fashion and soak in the hot sun. I didn’t move; I didn’t need to move. My director met with me each day and suggested four particular scriptures to pray—the first days, especially the Isaiah and the Jeremiah and the Hosea passages that talk about God’s personal care and unconditional love. I knew and experienced myself accepted and forgiven and loved through and through, no matter my history. I didn’t want to stop to go inside for lunch. After lunch, I couldn’t wait to get back out there again. I would sit out there until 4:45 Mass and walk there in the evening until the door was locked. This was major, transformative time, conversion time.

On the fourth or fifth day of that kind of intense prayer and attentiveness, I remember that I had a really rough morning. There was an inner turmoil. I went to lunch, and things weren’t right. At about five minutes before one—I distinctly was aware of the time because I looked at the clock--everything cleared, and I went back outside to pray in the afternoon. I met with the director at about four o’clock, and she said, “How was your day?” I didn’t want to tell her how my day was because I thought I had really messed up; so I said, “How was your day?” She said, “It was the strangest thing. I’m directing three people, and somebody had a really terrible morning. I actually went to bed because I could feel the struggle. I’ve never done this. I even missed the staff meeting, which I’ve never done before. But, whoever it was is okay now. Everything cleared up for them at about 1:00.” I thought, “oh my God, oh my God, okay.” And I opened up and told her my whole life story. It was such a healing time because it was the first time I had told anyone my story; and I could really own it and be grateful for my it with its myriad pieces. Even through the scholasticate years, I remember still being conscious that I was adopted and therefore different from the others and felt I didn’t fit in. Now I realized that all of the overachieving was to try to prove that I was somebody, and I didn’t need to do that now. I didn’t need to prove anything to anybody. I told this person my story, and she just listened. I felt comfortable enough with her at the time, and we have stayed good friends all these years. God

has ways of working...in this case, through Scripture and in the presence of another person who embodied God's presence and understanding.

What I had experienced was what in Ignatian spirituality you would call consolation. It's nothing you earn or have control over. You can't make it happen. It's gift, pure gift...an experience of God that is pure gift. That gift was there for me for a number of years. I kept waiting for it to be taken away, as all the spiritual writers said would happen! Scripture came alive, and I began three decades of keeping a daily prayer journal in which I would dialogue with God---well, it was more of a monologue, sharing with God as one would with a good friend. I could not wait for breaks during the day to go to my room and read or pray. By now I had moved into the main college building to a tiny room on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor overlooking the lake. From my bed there I could see the sun rise out of the water and give thanks for another day of living and loving. It was a 30 second walk up three flights of stairs from my voice studio. I wanted to be with this God who loved me. I even remember not being afraid to die because I would be united with him (As yet there was not a consciousness of feminine metaphors for God or use of vertical, inclusive language.) That fall after the retreat, with a drastically reduced teaching schedule and the opportunity to work in liturgy and campus ministry at the college, I had the opportunity to sing with the Chicago Symphony Chorus. The experience of being a part of making such exquisite music caused my spirit to soar. I remember one time being so moved that I had to hold onto my seat onstage during a concert because I felt I was literally being transported! We premiered new works with the composers present at rehearsals and performances. We traveled to Carnegie Hall and made four recordings while I was in the group, each of them Grammy-winning. God was everywhere and life was incredibly rich! God has ways of knowing what we need to draw us to Godself and be happy and free at various points in our life journey. From the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, any time I would get too caught up and focused in work and start to lose track, there would always be a wake-up call. It would almost always be a health issue, a series of minor surgeries, enough to just say, "Wake up. Pay attention to what is going on in your life and to your body." It was a way of God saying, "I'm in charge still. You need to hand it over, just keep handing it over."

I have been blessed since 1975 in having compassionate and wise spiritual companions/directors and good friends. God clearly has worked through them to keep me focused and aware of God's action in my life. They have listened, affirmed, challenged, and called me to see God's grace at work in all the events of my life and in my relationships with others. In addition to these three, I have been blessed with other God-given relationships in siblings and their spouses, in cousins in my birth family who continue to stay in touch and include me in their family events, in super, long-term friends who have continually called me out of myself over the years, and others with whom I have shared so much of life. I have seen the face of God and known God's warmth in and through each of them when I have needed encouragement or to laugh or to know God's sustaining presence.

Over the years, through the liturgy and a lot of work as a cantor, praying with the Psalms, giving workshops with the Psalms, helping other people, studying theology and prayer, teaching students courses in worship or sacraments, my own spirit has continually been enriched. God has stayed alive in my life. It's a circular thing. There's a certain consciousness, an awareness. God comes alive in people in ways that are amazing. God is there when I meet someone who

smiles and is warm; that's God. God is there in the homeless person who is in need. God is tangibly present in and with us each time our SPRED group meets. When somebody is suffering, God is there suffering with the person. I do not believe that God has it all together up there and is impenetrable, untouchable, unchangeable. God weeps when we cry, and God rejoices when we rejoice.

I have felt God's presence most strongly these past 3 ½ years when close family members — Mom and three of my siblings — were dying. So, too, in the days surrounding their deaths when I would be with the family and working to prepare the funeral liturgies. What a privileged experience of God's presence and of the hope that is held out for all of us---of final, blest union with God and all whom we love and have gone before us in death.

One's image of God changes over the years and is something that we can't control basically. I suppose the thread that holds them all together for me is the loving God who provides, the God who cares. In my early years, God takes care of me whatever my needs are. God is a Father, all-powerful, yes, but He loves me. Then, the relationship with God becomes more intimate. God is lover and I am beloved. (That is the meaning of my name in Greek....) God starts to become more of a partner, more immanent and less transcendent. Then, God becomes the womb in which the universe and I are held.

The womb image has been the most powerful image of God for me since the mid-1990's when it emerged in a drawing in art class during a privileged sabbatical of 3 ½ months in Massachusetts. (Though I think it already was latent from the time of a retreat sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980's, when I had the experience, the feeling, of embracing in my own hollowed out center two people whom I did not realize I had not completely forgiven a decade earlier. Now there they were, held in my own womb, and there was such a feeling of peace and joy that all was healed.) In the drawing, not only people, but also other living creatures, are embraced in God's womb. I am held there, and so is everybody else. God's womb encircles and embraces the entire universe. And God loves everybody else just as much as God loves me, no less! Going back a decade, I think that that was one of the most powerful awarenesses that I had Guatemala. I remember saying to myself one day, "I, with all that I have been given in life, am no more significant or important in God's eyes than this little child who swam in the river just yesterday and died today of burst intestines (because he did not have the same medicines I had for his parasites and amoebas) or than Catarina who keeps coming to our porch and has no teeth and is begging and wreaks of urine because she is homeless and can't take care of herself." It was a reverse way of saying that each person is every bit as valuable and significant in God's eyes as I am. We are the same; in God's eyes, we are loved the same. We are brothers and sisters. Yes. That then becomes for the next period of my life the image of God the lover, but now not just MY lover, but the lover of all that the Creative Spirit has fashioned and holds in existence. So, the image of God changes with time, according to one's life experience at any given point. I think as you get older and begin to experience deaths in your family, God becomes close and very much the one who holds together those who mourn. The same is true when we hear daily of tragic, violent, and untimely deaths in war, natural disasters, accidents—or deaths of people too young and who leave behind young children. God is the one who strengthens those who grieve and who try to make sense, to make meaning, out of what has happened, whose faith is tested and whose hope gives all of us hope. As I get older and my death is closer in years to me than

my birth, I find myself desiring to be once again so vulnerable and honest before God, to be so much more integral in my person. In all my busyness, I feel an urgency, a strong desire to be present to, and ready to meet, the God who continues to want to be in a love relationship with me—the God who lures me to come back, to simplify my life and return with all my heart so that I am ready for our face-to-face meeting down the road and can be completely comfortable relaxing into God's loving embrace.