

FaithLife Stories: Mary Lau

Mary Dempsey Lau is a longtime OMC parishioner. She lives with her husband Dan in Chestnut Hill and is an historic preservation architect with Preservation Design Partnership in Manayunk.

“Religion was fairly important when I was growing up and I went to Catholic school through 8th grade. But when I went to college at Colby, I stopped going to Mass although I still believed in God. I learned about Pavlov’s dogs in my first freshman psychology course, and I thought, ‘Well, priests are just conditioned in a Pavlovian way.’”

“When I started architecture school at Yale, things got difficult. I felt I wasn’t well prepared to be with such talented and experienced people, and that my work wasn’t valued or respected. I got so upset one day that I felt driven to go to the Catholic student chapel, where I got on my knees and poured out my feelings to God. I received a feeling of consolation I had never experienced before...it was a very memorable experience. After that, I did go to Mass sometimes.

“After Yale, though, I stopped going to Mass. That experience in the chapel wasn’t enough. In my earlier life, I had not been catechized deeply enough to know what was going on in the Mass, I had no training in virtues. When Dan and I decided to get married, it didn’t bother me that he wasn’t Catholic or even Christian. He was raised in a form of Chinese ancestor worship. However, I did want to marry in the Catholic Church.

“When our first child, Eva, was born, I had to go to Mass regularly as part of the preparation for her baptism. The pastor at that time, Father Sirolli, gave wonderful sermons that introduced me to the idea of God’s love for me, and these sermons were transformative. I really didn’t understand our faith and he was saying things that I really needed to hear.

“In 2003, our three year-old son Gabriel died in the ER because of a sudden heart episode at home. As they tried to revive him, I kept saying Hail Marys, going back to what I knew at this time of total devastation. Afterwards, I kept asking, “Why does something like this happen to anybody?”

Father Mike McHugh gave me three books to read, including *The Saints Guide to Happiness* and a work by Henri Nouwen. These opened up the Catholic world for me and I understood so much more. I then knew that for the rest of my life, I could read about the Catholic Church and never run out of things to learn.

About five months later, I was reading the chapter on suffering in *The Saints Guide to Happiness*. It really touched me and I got on my knees to thank God for this opportunity to get to know him better. I felt a rush of love, similar to how the saints’ experiences are described – ‘...a rush of love in the middle of my chest.’ It was pleasurable but not like anything I had experienced before.

“This fundamentally changed me. It convinced me that God truly exists – I had no previous experience that made me so sure. It was something that came from outside of me. At last, I felt like I was on the right track. I continued reading and going to daily Mass. From that, I had other experiences, like the feeling of God within me and also in the tabernacle. Sometimes it was almost too much, like in the Old Testament when people had to hide their face from God.

The more information I absorbed, the more everything made sense and my deepest questions got answered. It gave me great joy to put together a picture of what life is really about. I suddenly understood it and was so grateful for the Church as the keeper of these truths. During this time, I read *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, which helped me understand why suffering happens to any of us. I’ve continued to be interested in suffering as a subject. If I ever write a book, that’s what it would be about.

“I have come to understand that life isn’t just going from day to day seeking enjoyment. That the deeper meaning is to see God in all things. But it took me a while to see it that way. Even when terrible things happen, like Gabriel’s death, there is a reason. It was necessary for me to go through that. Suffering is sometimes the only way God can get our attention. If we allow that to happen, it will be transformative.

“Once you get started on this path to understanding God, you’re more ready to listen to what God is saying to you. For a year after Gabriel died, I kept getting one word: ‘Promise.’ I felt like God had made me a big promise without me knowing the details. Maybe it’s about the afterlife. God took Gabriel from me but part of the promise is that this will not be forever.”