

Paradise Lost
By: Ali Hagerty

Growing up in the Catholic Church, I always thought I had a strong faith. As a child, I was required to attend mass every Sunday and go to bible school every Wednesday. My family always prayed before dining together, and I had all the hymns in the church songbook memorized. Somewhere along the way, I began to understand and believe the words I spoke in church every week. I developed my own relationship with God and strived to include Him in my everyday life. Because of my religious background, I was eager to experience the Grotto of the Redemption a second time. Being too young ten years earlier to grasp the true importance erected within the walls, I was glad to have the chance to walk through it again for one of my college courses.

Arriving in West Bend, I peered over the seat in the van to see the Grotto's peak reaching up into the virgin skies above, reminding me much of the wooden, jungle gym castle I had played on as a child. As we drew nearer to the monument, I started to make out the individual stones and shells beautifully placed within the concrete. Stones of all colors: light purple, blue, yellow, and red, sparkled in the sunlight, glimmering like pennies in a wishing pond. Geodes from all over the country: Iowa, Montana, Wyoming, and California could be found in this collage of precious stones. It was a castle of faith. Fifty years of hard work, a testament of one priest's beliefs was lain out before me. I noticed the gigantic, iridescent seashells placed above the archways, as I walked onto the holy ground.

It seemed to me that this stone sanctuary was something one should experience on their own, in one's own terms, in accordance to their relationship with God. One should experience it in silence with only one's own thoughts and own beliefs circulating through his or her mind; no outside opinions or biases keeping him or her from forming honest conclusions about the way it made them feel. This is how I wanted to experience it. I wanted to experience the Grotto alone, with no one around to judge me, mock me, or question my faith. Removing myself from the group, hoping to take my own time to appreciate this work of art, I confidently set off with an open mind and an open heart.

Beginning randomly at one entrance, I zigzagged through the exquisitely designed structure, in awe of the religious devotion its maker must have possessed. I traced my finger along the edge of a shell and felt the rough, black crystal inside a geode that lined the pathway in which I strolled. The familiarity of a gospel hymn echoed in my ears. Catching on to the tune, I hummed along:

Will you love the 'you' you hide
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found,
To reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound
In you and you in me

Pausing to look down at the black and white, tri-folded pamphlet that described the making of the Grotto, I reread the first line on the front cover page. "The Grotto of the Redemption is the inspiration and life work of Fr. Paul Dobberstein (1872-1954), a

Catholic priest.” Connecting the words of the hymn, I was sure, that this man, Father Dobberstein had used his faith purposefully in his lifetime. He had created the “eighth wonder of the world.” Standing there amidst the nine, jeweled grottos he had created, I began to question my own faith. How could I use it purposefully in my own lifetime? A burst of cool air hit my bare skin, interrupting my train of thought and making my arm hair stand on end.

I walked a couple more steps to a stone depiction of the Garden of Eden. Displayed marvelously before me were two ivory statues: Adam and Eve. I noticed the woman had her face drawn down in a look of disappointment and failure. Looking closer, I saw two half-structured trees with a jaded snake wound within the branches. The picture triggered the memory of a bible story I had heard many times as a child, and I beamed with pride because I could remember it so well. The structure was depicting the fall of man. I followed Adam’s gaze to see an angel descending from heaven above the two beings. She was presented there eternally, shunning Adam and Eve from the garden. Taking in all these images, my eyes slowly read the rock inscription below: “Paradise Lost.” The chills that had lined my arms suddenly shot down my spine, feeling as if someone had just shoved an ice cube down my shirt. It was at this point in the history of the bible, when man became mortal, capable of sin. A sense of guilt spread over me, like this first sin was somehow linked to me, as if I had been the one to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge. “Paradise lost.” Those words stuck with me as I turned to retreat from the area and continue on my way through the tunnels of gems and geodes. A shadow fell over the stone pathway before me, and my eyes rose to see the 40-foot high cross that had been erected higher than any other peak of the Grotto. A mourning Mary sat at its base, holding in her arms the son who had sacrificed himself to save all mankind.

I ventured back to the Grotto of the Resurrection, a half-circle cave constructed of many of the same rocks and crystals I had already seen. Again, a coolness struck my face, and my eyes fought to blink it away. Finally focusing, I made out before me another hand-carved, marble angel who was pointing to an open stone tomb, the sepulcher of Jesus. Written below, I mouthed the words of the angel: “He is risen; He is not here.” And with no thought at all, I peaked my eyes over the edge of the stone tomb to see what lay inside. Nothing. There was nothing in the tomb but a couple of red roses tossed in by visitors. And while I am sure many of these tourists did the exact same thing and curiously looked into the open tomb, my own action glued me to the spot in which I stood. Questions sprang up in my mind, like they had been miraculously placed there. Why had I looked into the tomb? What had I expected to see? Had I not just read that He, the Son of God, was no longer there?

My thoughts shot back to other parts of the bible I could remember where non-believers demanded proof of Jesus’ reign. Matthew 27:42: “‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but he can’t save himself! He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.’” John 20:25: “So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.’” With these verses testing my conscience, a sense of sadness came over me. Like the non-believers portrayed in the bible who had needed proof, instinctively, I had looked for it too. And all along I had considered myself to be stronger than everyone else, immune to

the inevitable, resistant to the flaws of the flesh. I was wrong. I was a victim of my own accusations.

My weakened heart beat loudly within my chest, and I dropped my eyes to the floor all too closely mimicking the statue I had just seen of Eve. Although most people would not see this encounter as a test of faith or even think to analyze the situation at all, I could not escape my feelings; I could not let myself off the hook. I had strayed from what I always thought was implanted deep within me. Paradise was lost. I felt guilty. And although Eve was probably unaware of the eternal cost that would come as she bit into the crimson fruit, I was afraid of what this meant. My trips to church, the prayers before dinner, and the gospel hymns would not be enough. I wiped the tear that had formed on my cheek and there, amongst the pillars of gems and stones, I intertwined my fingers and prayed.