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### **Sick Pilgrim Bloggers Keeping Catholicism Weird in New Book *Strange Journey***

In *Strange Journey: How Two Homesick Pilgrims Stumbled Back into the Catholic Church* (Loyola Press, \$16.95 paper back, ISBN: 978-0-8294-4499-5, November 1, 2017), two spiritual misfits recount their wanderings and the longing for home that led them back to the church of their childhoods. Authors Jessica Mesman Griffith and Jonathan Ryan are cofounders of [Sick Pilgrim](#), a decidedly offbeat, dark yet stubbornly hopeful blog for “the spiritually sick” and fellow travelers. Drawn to the Catholic Church by many of the practices and beliefs that make it seem “weird” to outsiders—transubstantiation, stories (sometimes gruesome) of saints and martyrs, Eucharistic adoration, Stations of the Cross, Marian apparitions—Griffith and Ryan argue for the sacramental nature of that weirdness.

“Christianity makes wild claims and Catholicism makes the wildest and weirdest of all: bread that becomes flesh, rituals that break into eternity, saints who roost in trees and fly from their caskets,” writes Griffith, a Louisiana native and aspiring mystic since childhood. “For me it’s the only place I feel I can truly and rightly worship.”

“In the Catholic Church we’ve backed away from the Charism of the Weird, centered around the Mysteries of Faith, bones of saints, and other acts of popular piety,” says Ryan, the author of a series of paranormal thrillers. “When Catholicism is functioning as it should it keeps a foot in both worlds. The irony is that right at the time the Catholic Church should be embracing the weird, we keep trying to be normal.”

Both Griffith and Ryan were born into the church, but when they were kids, their families each left the church for Pentecostal and prosperity gospel varieties of evangelical churches. Both spent years exploring other churches, philosophies, and fascinations that either ended at despair or led them back to where they started. “When we did stumble into something that felt true and good, we’d begin to find it suspiciously familiar,” Griffith writes. “Oh, we’d realize. This is so...Catholic.”

*Strange Journey* begins in Advent, progressing through the liturgical year, including feast days, celebrations of the saints, and other observances, with stories from the writers’ own lives of “how we have been drawn ever deeper into the church, in pursuit of the mystery of faith.”

Grief, loss, darkness, and doubt are all part of this strange journey, but so are faith, hope, love, and mystery. Stories of the martyrs “are the kind of thing that gets us Catholics accused of morbidity,” but Griffith, whose mother died when Jessica was in eighth grade, needs a religion that looks death in the face. “I love that the church acknowledges that life is sometimes (often?) terrible and that the innocent suffer.”

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Both Griffith and Ryan are drawn to the symbols, metaphors, and poetry of the church, the rhythm of memorized prayers and hymns. Both hope that God will keep making them “agents of his weird presence, evangelists of the strangeness of the Trinity, and proclaimers of the downright bizarre communion of the saints.”

One way they are agents of the weirdness of the Catholic faith is through their award-winning Sick Pilgrim blog. The blog’s popularity indicates that “lots of people are suffering, wondering, and doubting in the pews, and that we as a church haven’t been accompanying them as they try to keep the faith,” says Griffith. “We haven’t been telling the whole story, showing the infinite possible shapes the Christian spiritual life can take.”

Griffith and Ryan are clear that Sick Pilgrim is not a rebellion—if it wants to be anything at all, it’s a renewal. “We’re not rebelling against the Catholic church. The church is our only home. There’s no real template for what a sick pilgrim looks like—other than one of the heart. We are bound together on this journey by deep, desperate desire to be healed and the conviction or suspicion that this healing will come only through Jesus, present in the Eucharist and in one another.”

***About the Authors:***

**JESSICA MESMAN GRIFFITH** is the author of four books, including the Christopher Award winning *Love and Salt: A Spiritual Friendship in Letters*. She is a cultural columnist for *US Catholic Magazine* and a contributor to *America*, *Christianity Today*, and *Living Faith*, among others. She co-founded, with Jonathan Ryan, the popular spiritual blog *Sick Pilgrim*, winner of the 2017 Wilber Award for Best Faith-based blog, and the Wonder Podcast. She travels the country to speak about art and faith. She lives all over the country but still calls Louisiana home.

**JONATHAN RYAN** is an author, columnist, and speaker. He wrote a critically acclaimed paranormal series (*3 Gates of the Dead* and *Dark Bride*) the *Library Journal* lauded as a worthy successor to the darker works of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. In his travels across the country, he has spoken to a motley group of people at wide variety of events (such as Salt Lake City Comic Con and Teen Author Boot Camp) to talk about art, the paranormal, faith, writing and the beauty found in struggling with our doubts about God. In 2016, he co-founded the Wilbur Award winning Sick Pilgrim blog and podcast with Jessica Mesman Griffith and they went on to start the Trying to Say God Literary Festival. He also wrote a Young Adult dystopian novel set in Depression era St. Louis that will come out in Spring 2018. Ryan's work can also be found in the pages of *Christianity Today*, *Notre Dame Magazine* and *U.S. Catholic*. In addition to writing, Jonathan works at a parish in Indiana and lives in the woods with a dog named Bear.

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