

To whom it may concern,

Katarina Goitz had a smile that could brighten a room, but there was so much more to her than that.

My name is Maia Adolphs, I am a 16 year old from Holy Family Parish in Galveston, Texas. Katarina Goitz was my beautiful youth minister. I was blessed to have known her, so in this letter, I hope to show you just how special she was.

Katarina came to our humble youth program in 2018. Most of the students in the Life Teen program were there for one reason: their parents were forcing them to be confirmed.

For years, Life Teen was the same. We met on Sunday nights, probably 5 of the 60 students had actually gone to church that morning, some adults talked about something faith-related, there would be a little kumbaya, some pizza, and then we would go home. No one really wanted to be there.

I personally, started Life Teen after an 11-year stint in Catholic School. Religion was almost always my favorite class, and it genuinely interested me. Coming from a school where most students had a pretty good grasp of the faith, Life Teen was tough for me. The questions they asked me were simple. "What were the 12 apostles names?" "Who were the four evangelists?" "What are the gifts of the Holy Spirit?" My hand flew up at every question, and I seemed to be the only one. Life Teen quickly became Catholic trivia night, and I was batting a 400. The leaders became increasingly more annoyed with me. I was no longer able to answer more than 5 questions in a row, then three, then one. I sat quietly after my one question limit was reached. I found myself checking out. I was bored. The teachers did not like me, and I felt something empty in my faith, but I couldn't quite figure out what.

I was an excellent Catholic, I was assistant liturgist in middle school, I was an altar server, cantor, lector, I had read the bible a handful of times, and even owned a copy of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Somehow though, Catholicism had turned into a subject in school that I always made an A in, rather than my faith. After some thinking, I realized what my emptiness was. I had no spirituality. I knew what seemed like a million prayers, yet I truly did not know how to pray. I tried talking to one of the leaders at Life Teen, but they just handed me a prayer book and shooed me away. This wasn't a program that encouraged a teen's faith, it was a program to get a kid confirmed, and then forget about them. Then Katarina came.

My mom and I entered the fellowship hall after mass to sign me up for my second year of Life Teen. A tall woman with bouncy curls was speaking in fluent Spanish to a mother and her son. She nodded thoughtfully and helped them complete the necessary paperwork. Her warmth hit me. Our parish has a large Hispanic population, but besides the two Spanish masses, bilingual services were rare. Mostly, you saw teenagers translating for their parents when it came to Life Teen. The woman was eager to help. After she finished with the other family, she turned to us

smiling brightly. It took me a few minutes to realize that she smiled at everyone all the time. She was a genuinely happy soul. She introduced herself as Katarina Goitz, our new Youth Minister, and jovially explained her passion for our faith and her love for children.

Life Teen started and I quickly fell into my pattern of answering every single question. I paid attention to Katarina's face as my hand shot up. She never rolled her eyes, shook her head, said anything under her breath, or just flat ignored me. In fact, every time I raised my hand, she beamed at me. After a few questions answered in a row, I apologized for answering so many questions. She simply responded that no one should be annoyed with an answer to a question unless they didn't want an answer at all. Later she even challenged me with trickier questions. Rather than a factual question taken from a lecture we had just heard, she would ask me theological questions. I loved it! I was finally being challenged since leaving Catholic school. Katarina continued to build on the required teachings for confirmation. She discussed theological principles that really made us think. She asked probing questions about our world view and personal theology, instead of simply feeding us with the same information that was told to us every year. Life Teen was becoming fun and exciting.

We discovered very quickly that Life Teen was changing. I started noticing kids who never spoke up, raising their hands to contribute to the conversation. I saw kids at mass that I had never seen before. Many of us frequently went to confession, mass, and adoration, all because of Katarina. Katarina genuinely cared about each and every one of us. She always asked us how our school work was going, how our jobs and extracurriculars were going, and even how our friendships and relationships were working out. She was so present in our lives. Katarina made sure and attended our home football games, parades, and even theater performances, and she encouraged our other core team members to do the same. It always made me feel special to know that while I was onstage, Katarina had come to see me. Our Youth Ministry Instagram page shows just how involved she was. We had an Advent/Christmas party, fun scavenger hunts, beach days, and even games in the parking lot. We had so much fun every night. Katarina encouraged social time, game time, and prayer time all equally. She really changed how we saw Life Teen.

After I had gotten to know Katarina pretty well, I decided to seek her guidance in my spiritual block. Katarina's relationship with God was stronger than any of her earthly relationships, and that made her earthly relationships so much better. She saw each and every person as God's child, and she treated them as so. Katarina's advice was simple: talk to God. She explained to me that everyone prays differently and that the set in stone prayers were not the end all be all to spirituality. She encouraged me to start with a simple conversation with God. I learned from her that praying can be as simple as thanking God for giving me the good things in life and offer up my sufferings in the things that were harder. After years of struggling, and wondering why praying didn't feel meaningful, I find myself praying every single night. Now, I pray for Katarina's guidance as well.

Every candidate for confirmation must attend a confirmation retreat. The ones made available to me in my first year of Life Teen did not work with my competition schedule for theater. When I talked to my Youth Minister, she had a very "oh well," attitude and wasn't interested in helping. As my second year came along, my spring was once again booked up with Theater. I was worried I would be unable to be confirmed. I asked Katarina what could be done. Rather than being uncaring, Katarina went out of her way to send me to a retreat with a neighboring parish. She even came to see one of my Theater performances that spring! Katarina did this for so many of us. She made sure that we got everything that we needed for confirmation and more. When I wanted my confirmation sponsor to be from out of state, she made sure that it was possible. She did so much that she didn't have to do because she genuinely cared about each and every one of us.

Then, after nearly a year of knowing and loving the teens of my parish, she was gone.

She died in a car accident in Chicago on June 24, 2019 after attending an event at her alma mater. I was surprisingly unaffected, or so I thought. That weekend was the retreat that Katarina had arranged for me to attend. I packed my things and my parents took me to St. Luke the Evangelist in Houston. I walked into the narthex of the church and I was immediately stricken with grief. I felt Katarina's presence with me. That weekend was one of prayer, healing, and ultimately, how I said goodbye to this kind soul.

We returned to Galveston the following Sunday afternoon, where we were having a memorial mass in her honor. This was extremely difficult for me. I saw so many of the kids and leaders I had gotten close to, I saw Katarina's parents after meeting them briefly while painting our activity room, and I sang in her honor. I have sung Haugen's Shepherd Me, O God at a handful of funeral masses. It was fairly straight forward for me. I have never cried on the altar singing that psalm, until Katarina's mass. That mass was so emotionally charged. I heard so many stories. Katarina had not just changed my life. She changed the lives of every person she met, and so many of them attended that night to share in her love.

Katarina's grace was like a burning flame. She passed it along to everyone she met, and her kindness and gentleness inspired those she touched to spread it further. Katarina brought joy and light into a parish community that is so often weighed down by petty arguments and personal gain. Katarina floated above all the negativity with such a pure spirit.

I am personally doing all I can to ensure that the flame Katarina touched me with is left burning bright. I am preparing for my confirmation this October, in which I will take the name St. Catherine of Sienna, the name which Katarina took as she herself was sealed with the Holy Spirit. I hope that Katarina's joy and warmth will live within me as long as I live.

I am seriously saddened by the number of people who were not graced by Katarina in her short time on this earth. To have known her is such an incredible honor that I possess. I am lucky to

have known her grace, tenderness, gentleness, kindness, joy, and warmth, and I will cherish her for the rest of my days.

Katarina may not have cured cancer or invented the automobile or been the president, but I can assure you, she made a positive impact on each and every individual she met. She was the joy and love that we all strive for. In your consideration of her for this award, I would like to tell you one last thing.

I am not the amazing fruit of her labors. It is no surprise that I religiously (pun intended) attend Life Teen. It is no big accomplishment that I am going to be confirmed. There is a group of kids who are known for their partying lifestyles. You will never see them in church on a Sunday morning, as they will be in recovery. They never cared for church or Life Teen or anything "lame," like that. Over the past year, I have seen these kids helping our teachers at school, attending Life Teen an hour early for the social hour to talk to our leaders and our seminarian, and they even attended our Catholic summer camp. I saw them turn into more selfless and kind people who love God. Katarina did that. She made us all a little kinder and helped us all love God a little bit more. Everyone who knew her saw God in her, and in turn, found themselves closer to him.

I will miss Katarina's smile, country line-dancing with her, laughing with her, receiving her guidance, and being her friend. As much as it hurts to have lost her, I am comforted to know that she is smiling down on me.

Thank you,
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