

What Christ Church Cathedral Means To Me,  
by Sister John Mary Adshead.

I am a novice at the Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis in Connecticut. Later this year I will be professing my monastic vows, a key step in my monastic life. At my place in choir, there is a photo of Christ Church Cathedral: not as it was, but as it is now, with its gaping wound a symbol of a still suffering City. It was in this cathedral that God first spoke to my heart, and as we chant our prayers each day at the Abbey, I pray for the Cathedral's restoration, and take this prayer with me as I move into vows.

I was born in Christchurch in 1967. My parents, Samuel and Katherine Adshead, were Lecturers at the University of Canterbury for almost 30 years and devout Anglicans. The Cathedral was our parish, and we attended church there every Sunday, but its place in my life went far beyond this role. As a girl at Saint Margaret's I sang in our Christmas carol concerts there (and sometimes read lessons from the "eagle" pulpit); we also sang there with Christ's College. I took organ lessons with David Childs, and to play a Bach fugue within the resonance of a neo-Gothic cathedral was an awe-inspiring experience for a young girl. In addition, I would regularly meet my father after school outside the Cathedral, to take the bus home, and my girlfriend Shelley and I, as teenagers, would often arrange to meet at the top of the spire before going off shopping, just because it seemed the right place to start. Thus it was in the Cathedral that I learned to appreciate the beauty of sacred music and liturgy, and to know the Cathedral as the center of the city. My faith was instilled there, and a desire for God planted in my soul.

After school, I went on to England, and Oxford University, attending the college of (where else?) Christ Church, where my father had been a member. There was the original Christ Church Cathedral (to which ours is remarkably similar), dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and saved by monks from its destruction by Henry VIII. This was the place where so many of Christchurch's founders came from, and, I'm sure, our city's name, and there was a comforting continuity about being there, even while so far from home. At Oxford I converted to Catholicism, but like my namesake, John Henry Newman, I did not renounce my Anglicanism, but took it with me; like the Cathedral, it was still the edifice of my faith in God, and the hymns I sang there, I still often sing here.

As I travelled through life, different countries and careers, crises and recovery, I would always go home every year to see my parents, and I always visited the cathedral. It embodied the city for me, and symbolized what I felt about Christchurch, as a stable stronghold; if no longer literally when I moved away, at least always in my being. Everyone should have a Christchurch in their lives, I thought: a place of stability to anchor them through the vicissitudes of life.

Until, of course, that stability was ripped apart by the earthquakes, and the Cathedral was no longer an icon of stability, but a wounded corpus in a besieged city. I

called my parents; their almost instinctive response had been to send a donation towards the Cathedral's restoration. I was surprised how deeply the Cathedral's collapse affected me, and I began to dream constantly about it, searching among the ruins for shards of stained glass windows. I realized that, subconsciously, the Cathedral was an integral part of who I was, my identity as someone from Christchurch. Increasingly, as I moved towards vows, I began to realize that it wasn't going to be enough just to remember the Cathedral fondly as it had once been: I had to go back and be a witness to the Cathedral as it was now. I needed to take the Cathedral back with me to the monastery, in all its fallenness, and hold it in a contemplative way as it had held me all these years. Our Abbess gave me permission by exception to leave our cloistered monastery, and so I returned home last year in 2015. There stood the broken cathedral, now so vulnerable, and I wept as I watched the pigeons flying in and out, desecrating holy ground and the hymn books I had once sung from. Its state of disrepair seemed to me to reflect a sense of unsettlement in Christchurch, something not yet at peace, even as the city courageously rebuilt itself. I saw tourists buying postcards, not of current sights, but of the Cathedral standing tall before its collapse, and it seemed to me that they intuitively knew that the Cathedral was, and still needed to be, the defining landmark of the city.

Now home, I pray for the restoration of the cathedral, not out of a sense of nostalgia, but because I believe it is central to Christchurch's restoration. In our Benedictine tradition there is another vow that monastics make, the Vow of Stability, and I believe that restoring the Cathedral (even the *process* of restoring) would give Christchurch a spiritual stability in a physical environment still so fragile. The Cathedral is not just the iconic landmark of the city, but a landmark of its faith, the faith of its Founders, that continues to be unshakeable. Even as exciting new architectures rise up, Christchurch needs a continuity with its past, a stable core, a place that at once grounds the city, and at the same time whose spire invites us to look up, as I did all those years ago.

As a young man, Saint Francis heard the voice of God instructing him, "Go, rebuild my church, for it is falling into ruins." This is my prayer for the Cathedral. Though I am far away, we are all part of Christ's Church, and you will be with me as I make my vows on that day.