

# **Jesus & the Apostles' Last Night Out**



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Integrative Project  
2018-2019**

# Introduction

The values that we are given as children largely define who we become later in life. The stories we are told and the heroes of those stories are meant to teach us something about life. Religion uses stories and heroes this way. I was raised in an Irish-Catholic family, and it has certainly influenced my values, and the way that I interact with others. For a long time, I didn't think Catholicism had much to do with the person that I became. I didn't feel that I had a relationship with the religion. However, as I've gotten older, I've realized that the people who raised me embody the values that are taught in the church, and taught them to me. In addition, hearing the stories of glorified martyrs every time I went to church stuck with me. Even though I wasn't aware of the lessons I was learning from those stories at the time, the themes behind them (self-sacrifice, martyrdom, etc.) became ingrained.

I started thinking about some of the defining stories of the Catholic faith, and what they implied about its followers. Many stories in the New Testament, like the Annunciation, the Last Supper, and the Crucifixion, all have historically rich visual iconography. I also noticed that the stories involving or surrounding women often emphasized the importance of female subordination and chastity. These iconographic traditions permeate through several centuries of artwork, and have in many ways become codified and sacred themselves. For example, above the altar of every Catholic Church there is a crucifix, meant to remind churchgoers of Jesus's sacrifice to save them from sin. You rarely see a Madonna image where her hair isn't at least partially covered, denoting chastity.

These iconographic images are common, and often shape our perception of the events described in the biblical stories. The depictions are often glorified, idolized, and made to be sacred. What would happen if many of these defining images weren't treated so preciously?

My final piece is an exploration of traditional Catholic iconography staged in a contemporary setting as a series of photographs using female models to play the major biblical figures. Young women appropriate traditional sacred symbols and tropes in Catholic art in order to take command of their place in a church that so often alienates them, to place themselves in a narrative that they were never able to relate to. Women no longer play a supporting role in the story, but are front and center, in a situation where they have full control and agency.

The story of the Last Supper is an important one in the Catholic faith. Placing young women in this image as the main figures of the story places them in the central moment that defines Catholic belief. Turning the iconic imagery of The Last Supper into a college party is a choice that directly relates the story to a younger generation, making it feel less archaic and precious, while it also pokes fun at the religion and the way that it so carefully handles its iconography.

# Contextual Discussion

## Catholic Iconography

### *The Last Supper*

In the Bible, the Last Supper is the final meal before Jesus Christ's crucifixion, where he shared bread and wine with his 12 disciples.<sup>1</sup> This bread and wine was symbolic of his body and blood that would be sacrificed for them and everyone else to save them from sin.<sup>2</sup> This is also the event where Jesus predicted his betrayal by Judas, and denial by Peter, so it also contains connotations of betrayal and sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> This story later became the biblical basis for the sacrament of Eucharist, or Holy Communion, which Catholics partake in every week at mass, and is in some ways the central experience of the gathering.<sup>4</sup> This means that the Last Supper is a central story to the Catholic conscious, and it has been a popular subject in the visual arts throughout history, eventually leading to Leonardo Da Vinci's iconic depiction (see Fig. 1). The painting has become so recognizable that the imagery itself, rather than just the story it represents, has become sacred. This is why Da Vinci's Last Supper is the perfect imagery to manipulate for my purposes. It is instantly recognizable, central to Catholic belief, and will elicit a response from the viewer.

<sup>1</sup> Shisley, Steven. "Biblical Views: From Supper to Sacrament: How the Last Supper Evolved." *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March 2017. <https://www.baslibrary-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/biblical-archaeology-review/43/2/8>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Runnells, C. (2018, Sep 23). "Last supper" mural offers message of acceptance. *The News Press* Retrieved from <http://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/docview/2110780708?accountid=14667>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Other artists have also used the iconographic power of Da Vinci's Last Supper to make points about religion and inclusion. For example, in artist Ross Boone's (who makes art under the name Raw Spoon) version, (see Fig. 2) the central Christ figure is a homeless man offering McDonald's to a stray dog.<sup>5</sup> Some of the people representing the apostles are prostitutes, a Middle Eastern family, LGBT people, and abused children.<sup>6</sup> The Judas of the piece is "a mega-church pastor" holding his bible.<sup>7</sup> Boone says that he wants everyone, including people that the church historically looks down on, to feel included in religious communities, and call out the "hypocrites" who look down on those people.<sup>8</sup> This is one of many precedents of artists using religious iconography (and the Last Supper in particular) to comment on inclusion in religious communities.



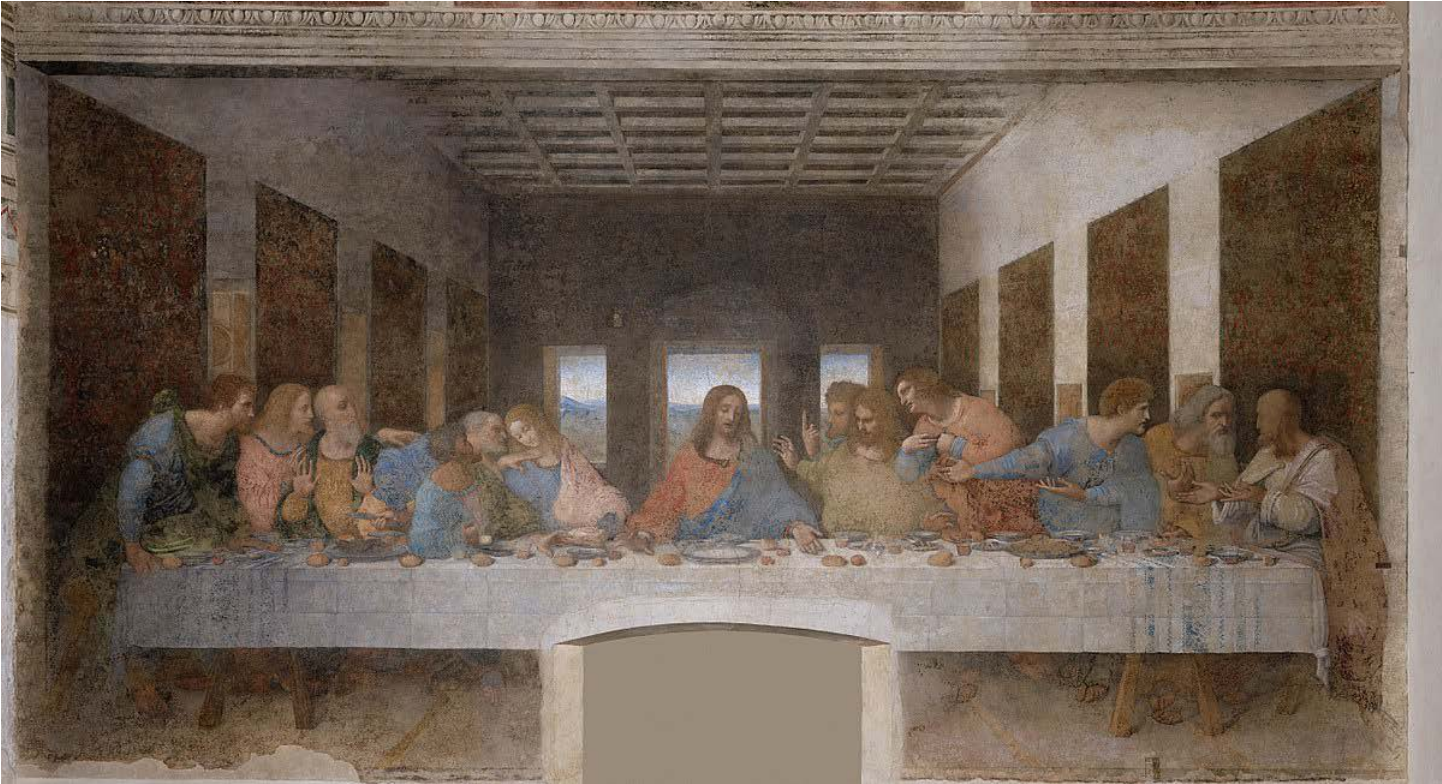


Figure 1: Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper."  
Da Vinci, Leonardo. The Last Supper. 1490. Convent of Santa Maria Delle Grazie, Milan.



Figure 2: Artist Ross Boone's version of "The Last Supper."  
Runnells, C. (2018, Sep 23). 'Last supper' mural offers message of acceptance. The News Press Retrieved from <http://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/docview/2110780708?accountid=14667>

## Women and Catholicism

Women raised in the Catholic Church face a host of problems in challenging the patriarchal system that can often work against them. Doing so likely also challenges their own self-concept, as taught to them their whole lives. Historically, Catholic women have been taught that their job is to bear the suffering of others and lift them up (e.g. family, male peers, etc.). Put in a more extreme sense:

*“...The spiritual function of woman is to weep, bleed, and starve for the salvation of others, to offer herself up as a holocaust to appease a revengeful male deity. And who benefits from the suffering of these (and by extension, of all) women? Men, of course. The male-dominated hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church or the individual men... reaping the benefits, spiritual as well as otherwise, of some woman’s suffering.”<sup>9</sup>*

This means that if women believe that their place is martyring themselves for the benefit of others, and that they deserve no better, the patriarchal hierarchy they are subjugated by will not be challenged: “If women are especially identified as, in their nature, inclined to piety, then they should stay in their subservient places. It will serve them well, creating avenues for the outlet of religious emotions. To step out of their place ill befits those who bear the suffering of others (family, nation).”<sup>10</sup> Though these are somewhat archaic ideas, one can still see the ways in which they linger today. There is a “clash between conservative patriarchy and feminism that continues to be played out within both ecclesiastical and secular settings.”<sup>11</sup> For example, the Catholic Church’s idea that marriage is an indissoluble and permanent bond can effectively leave many Catholic women feeling hopeless in situations of domestic violence and crisis.<sup>12</sup> Some women may even believe it is their cross to bear, undoubtedly influenced by these ancient ideas about female martyrdom which still permeate religious teachings today.<sup>13</sup>

Many modern women raised in the church can find themselves at a crossroads. Some women of faith can find it difficult or uncomfortable to be in an environment that seems to make no room for them. “Catholic women, with a raised feminist consciousness, ‘find themselves in excruciating tension with the institutional church.’”<sup>14</sup> Other women may be put off from the religion entirely. It is not difficult to

<sup>9</sup> Lahutsky, Nadia M. “Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840–1970. By Richard D. E. Burton. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004. Xxvi 292 Pp. \$45.00 Cloth.” *Church History* 75, no. 1 (2006): 199–201. doi:10.1017/S0009640700088594.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gervais, Christine L. M. “Canadian Women Religious’ Negotiation of Feminism and Catholicism.” *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 4 (2012): 384-410. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/stable/41818896>.

<sup>12</sup> Carpenter, Colleen Mary. “ENFOLDING VIOLENCE, UNFOLDING HOPE: EMERGING CLOUDS OF POSSIBILITY FOR WOMEN IN ROMAN CATHOLICISM.” *Zygon Journal of Religion & Science* 51, no. 3 (September 2016). <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/doi/full/10.1111/zygo.12267>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Gervais, Christine L. M. “Canadian Women Religious’ Negotiation of Feminism and Catholicism.”

understand why. Mass is an event at which one is lectured by a male priest, because women are not allowed to be ordained, where you celebrate a man born of a woman who is only praised because she was literally unattainably perfect and without sin, in a religion where the men who wrote the book containing all its teachings said that humanity is cursed by original sin because a woman impure seduced man to his ruin. Some women, then, might feel they aren't wanted, that there is no place made for them. This is why my project inserts women into a place in Catholic iconography traditionally held by men, to make a space for them in a patriarchal system that wants nothing more for them to fade shamefully into the background.

## Lady Gaga's "Judas"

I started looking for examples of the ways Christianity and Catholicism are depicted in pop culture, especially with a female focus. I eventually found Lady Gaga's music video for her song "Judas." In the video, she plays the role of Mary Magdalene, who is supposed to be devoted to Jesus, but is in love with Judas, the man who eventually betrays Jesus, leading to his capture and death.<sup>15</sup> The video places classic Christian imagery into a modern setting, where Jesus and his apostles are represented as a biker gang.<sup>16</sup> It pulls images from religious iconography in many of its costume and prop choices. Gaga, in one of her costumes, wears a blue and red hood and red bandana, and a sacred heart chest plate (see fig. 3).<sup>17</sup> It is very visually similar to familiar depictions of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

What's fascinating in the video is how her identity as a woman is explored within the context of a religious setting: "Lady Gaga's internal conflict to confront her power struggle. She constantly swings back and forth from a spirit of serving to a spirit of defying... Lady Gaga in some sense has an ambivalent, contradictory and even paradoxical relationship with Jesus (and more broadly, the Christian religion), from being a holy "subservient fool" to a "rebellious lover" of Judas."<sup>19</sup> This is consistent with the subservient and subordinate depictions of women in the bible.<sup>20</sup> Yet Gaga takes back her power and defies that labelling

<sup>15</sup> A.G.S., Catherine. "RLG233H1, Artifact Analysis: Lady Gaga's Music Video, "Judas"." Medium (blog), November 16, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



through her sexuality, thereby breaking the expectation of modesty and chastity. This was all very relevant to what I wanted to do in my own work. Like Gaga, I have lowered and made common the sacred themes and stories by casting them with cheap props. The characters themselves question the role and depictions of women in the Catholic Church and how those depictions overlap with sexuality.



Figure 3: Frame from Lady Gaga's "Judas" music video. Blue and red costume with sacred heart chestplate referencing Christian iconography.  
Gaga, Lady. Judas. By Nadir Khayat. Lady Gaga. Recorded 2010. Lady Gaga, 2011. May 3, 2011.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wagn8Wrmzuc>.



# Methodology

My process coming to my final work involved a lot of creating, research, and reworking. I first began by creating experimental collages that dealt with the subjects I was interested in and then narrowing down those ideas. I then started photographing everything in my daily life that I felt was relevant, which led me to an enlightening visit at a nun doll museum. I started doing research related to Catholicism in terms of iconography as well as culture. I then began experimenting with staged and portrait photography.

## Initial Interests and Collages

My initial interests in this project were wide and varied, ranging from coming of age, to evolution, to sexuality, to religion, and much more. I tried to narrow down what I was truly interested in by creating experimental collages and by writing out my ideas (see fig. 4). In addition, this is where I began experimenting with gold transfer foil to create halos, (see fig. 5) which I continued doing later on and into my final project. Figure 6 is the collage that helped me to solidify and narrow down my ideas. The black and white photo was from a church I visited in Galway, Ireland. The post-it notes were from an exercise in one of my classes. For a project about identity, we were asked to take several post-it notes and write elements of our identities on each one. We then grouped all the ones with commonalities on the board together. One section was filled with notes about religion, and I noticed that the ones that mentioned Catholicism used the specific phrase “raised Catholic” or put the word Catholic in quotation marks. Every other religion was stated plainly (for example, no one wrote “raised Christian”). I took a picture of this section of post-it notes and made this collage. This led me to research whether or not the source of this apprehension might be Catholic guilt. This collage and the research it led to helped me decide that I wanted to focus on disillusionment with the Catholic Church.

Evolution taught me that everything we do is essentially pointless because we are just wired to do whatever to breed. I sometimes hate that but I also find it comforting at times that nothing I do truly matters. <sup>so all that matters is what I care</sup> Catholicism taught me that life's purpose is to give to others everything that we have - to be selfless (altruistic) - to be guilty - to forgive - to love. It sometimes feels like Catholic guilt is the weight of the world's suffering on your shoulders since you can't give enough, when on its face it's all about love. In this way these two things are opposite.

The point of life according to two schools of thought - whether this brings comfort or stress. How they are similar/different to each other and how they outwardly appear. How these things relate to love and intimacy and comfort.

Humans have extra life stages related to love and comfort - childhood - post-reproductive

I find disge... comfort in both - what I feel that if I just stopped  
 are those elements? everything nothing would  
 why am I always worried about a family reaction? <sup>really another that much</sup> but I would miss love  
 I am disgusted by the chimp but when I see it being held I feel an instinct for maternal comfort.  
 evolution of the heart  
 Mother ape intimacy  
 when they hold child I feel it in my chest  
 my own instinct to hold  
 I don't like looking at primates because they are too much - evolution of like us but I am heavily investment fascinated by how alike they are to us  
 I'm uncomfortable w/ people that are too open bc I was taught that self-involvement was  
 Love the neighborhood  
 Live in community groups  
 Common ancestor creation for us  
 The fault of evolution is that we even care about sick children and invest in them when they won't help our fitness but it is not a fault we would change  
 Died for sins  
 I

Figure 4: Page from journal in which I wrote my initial ideas as a stream of consciousness. A huge variety of topics are written out as I thought of their tangential connections.



Figure 5: A collage comparing a photo of myself and my mother to a chimpanzee mother and child. First experiment with gold foil transfer paper. An attempt to pull together the wide array of topics I was interested in



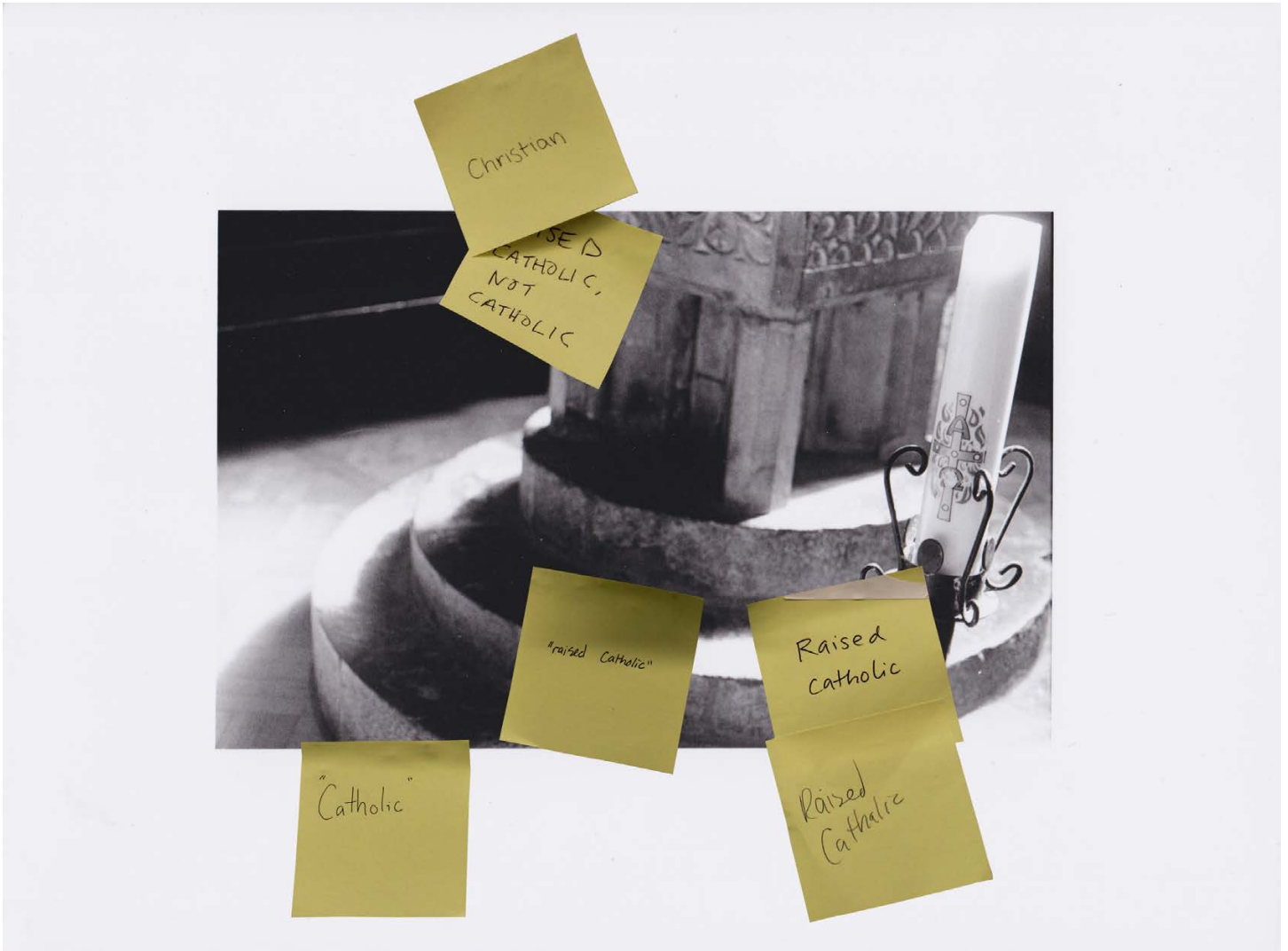


Figure 6: Collage combining photo of an altar in an Irish Catholic Church with post-it notes that say "raised Catholic." This collage is what made me realize I was interested in young people's disengagement with the Catholic Church, and why I related to it.

## Photographing Daily Life

Once I knew I wanted to focus on Catholicism and explore it through photography and collage, I started carrying my camera everywhere so I could shoot anything in my daily life that was relevant to my topic. The shots were more descriptive of my daily life than of religion (See fig. 7). It was very self-involved work, which became less exciting to me. However, this strategy paid off when I visited a religious roadside attraction in Indian River, Michigan, called “Cross in the Woods.” There they had what they claimed was the “largest collection of dolls dressed in the traditional habits of religious communities in the United States.” The nun doll museum was a very fascinating display of baby dolls and Barbies dressed as nuns that felt surreal and almost satirical, though clearly it was done with sincerity (See fig. 8). Something about the idea of using dolls to depict the perfect Catholic life, in miniature, resonated with me as both humorous and telling of how people within the church might conduct themselves. But it also struck me that there was a lot of care put into creating these scenes, a kind of patience and devotion. I almost felt bad about finding an unintentional humor to them. I was drawn to their kitsch-like qualities, and wanted to find a way to capture that kind of depicting-the-right-thing-but-it-feels-wrong aesthetic in my photos.



Figure 7: Photo of my bed lit by the sunlight coming through the window.



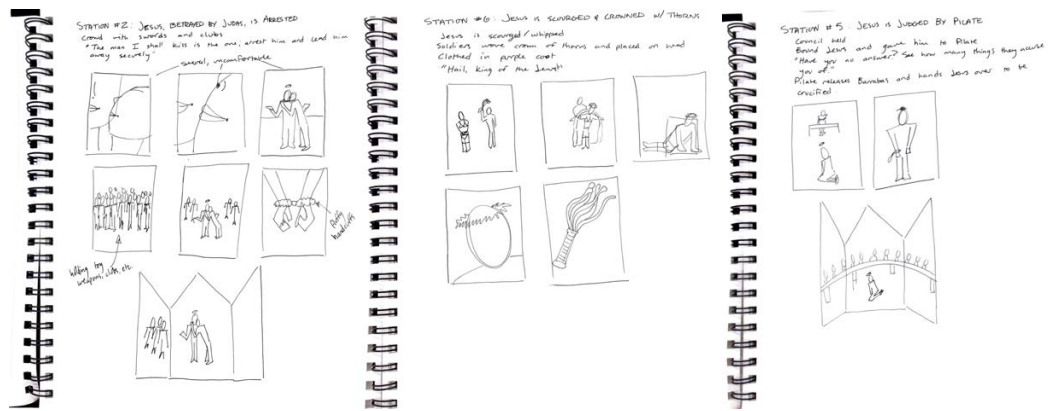
Figure 8: A diorama of a nun from the nun doll museum at Cross in the Woods. This was one of many dioramas depicting the many roles that nuns can play in their religious communities (teachers, nurses, missionaries, etc.)



## Staged Photographs

I decided to create staged photographic scenes using models as my “characters.” I started thinking about what practices are unique to the Catholic Church that conveyed visually. My first idea was to depict the Stations of the Cross. This is a ritual of prayer that breaks down the story of Jesus’s death or “passion” into 14 distinct steps. The Stations are usually depicted physically in some way (as 14 paintings, sculptures, signs, etc.) so that people can pray towards them. I started drawing thumbnails of each Station so I could decide on the types of poses and props I would need going into the photoshoots (see fig. 9)

Figure 9: sketchbook pages of thumbnails for the different Stations of the Cross



I then shopped for clothes and accessories that were modern but still referenced Catholic iconography (see fig. 10). I bought backgrounds and props from the dollar store and party store in order to contrast the sacredness of the subject matter with the cheapness of the material. I bought metallic gold door curtains at the party store to simulate the effect of a gold leaf background - a traditional background for giving importance to biblical images, represented with cheap plastic that looks gold. When I put the posing, props, background, and wardrobe together, I ended up with staged photographs that did have something interesting and humorous about them (see fig 11 & 12).



Figure 11: Some of my first experiments creating staged photographs. Right depicts a representation of Madonna and Child. Use of plastic babydoll meant to create humor.

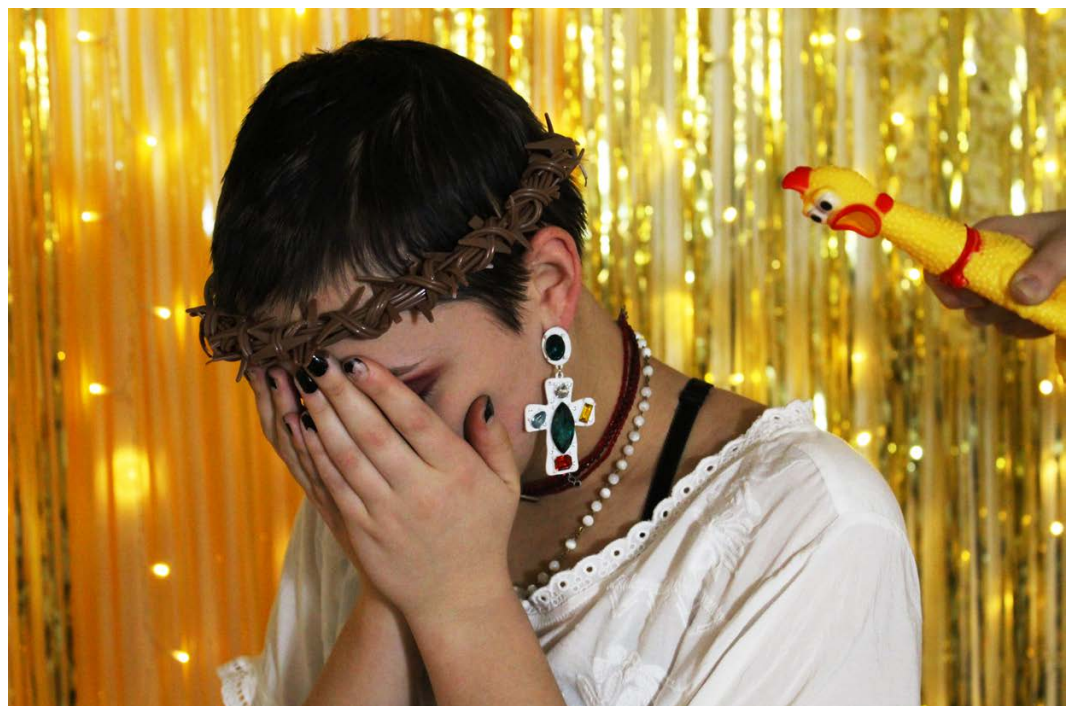


Figure 12: First staged photograph attempting to depict the Stations of the Cross. Depicts the moment when Peter Denies Jesus for the third time and the cock crows. A rubber chicken was used to create humor.



## Creative Work

My project is a photographic recreation of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci but recontextualized as a game of beer pong using all female models to represent the apostles (see fig. 13). The sets and props utilized emphasize the idea of a party atmosphere (the gold curtain background, the red solo cups, balloons, boxed wine, cases of beer, etc.). All of the models are also dressed in party clothes, the colors resembling the colors of the apostles clothing from the original painting. The poses in my recreation correspond to the poses in the original painting (see fig. 1) to make it easily recognizable. This large, central photograph was placed in a frame with a detailed floral design in order to reference the photo's renaissance-era source material.



Figure 13: Finalized photo of my version of “The Last Supper”

In addition, I also took a series of icon portraits of each apostle (see fig. 14). Each icon portrait has either an accessory or prop that relates to that apostle's historic iconography. The original exhibition plan with all of my finalized photographs was to place a small portrait of Jesus centrally above the Last Supper photo (see fig. 15), and small portraits of all of the apostles below that in a line. However, due to unavoidable unforeseen circumstances, I was not able to finish shooting two of the apostles' portraits. Therefore in the final exhibition, rather than twelve apostle portraits, there was a photo of Christ's “crucifixion” instead (see fig. 16 & 17).



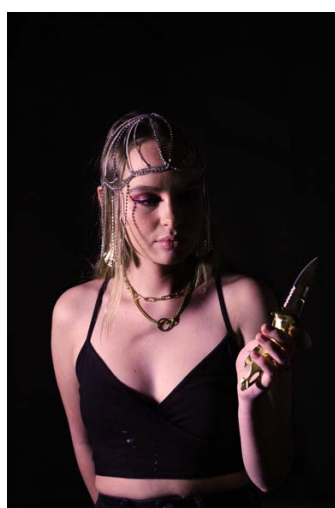


Figure 14: Portrait photographs of 9/12 apostles. Each portrait utilizes iconography associated with each apostle. Not displayed in final exhibition. From left to right, top to bottom: Andrew, Thomas, James Minor, Philip, James Major, John, Thaddeus, Simon, and Peter.



Figure 15: Portrait of Jesus Christ. Identified by crown of thorns, sacred heart, and cross earrings. Hung above "The Last Supper" photograph in final exhibition.



Figure 16: Jesus Christ's "crucifixion" portrayed as an intense and dramatic hangover.



Figure 17: Documentation of final exhibition. Gold foil streamers used behind photo frames was similar to what was used in the background of "The Last Supper" photo.



# Conclusion

I asked some of my friends what they thought about religion and using imagery that pokes fun at it. One said “I think about what religion has become. It’s so outdated and archaic that the more modern, realistic generation is making it look like a bastardization. But it’s not, it’s religion.” Her comments clarify my approach to this project. I appropriated themes, images, and stories that played a role in the development of my own self-concept, but in which I had no original voice or narrative input. I had pondered and analyzed the phrase “Raised Catholic.” It’s something many people in my generation say about their Catholic background when asked about their faith. The phrase implies a level of alienation from the Catholic identity, but also emphasizes something important or long-lasting about being raised in that culture. I think that many young people, especially women and girls, have become alienated from Catholicism because they can’t see themselves as a part of the narrative of the Bible. Yet, recontextualizing these stories to feature young women creates a kind of bastardized or taboo version of the thing it represents.

Shelley Perlove, an art history professor at the University of Michigan with a focus in Judaic and religious studies, said in one of her lectures that there is no sense of authenticity in recreations of Biblical stories because the religious events are brought into the artist’s own time.<sup>21</sup> This makes the stories relatable because the people in the Bible seem to have struggled just as we struggle now.<sup>22</sup> It may be uncomfortable to see serious biblical depictions set in contemporary scenes because the old artwork, by its very age, has become sacred. We may not notice how old biblical paintings made in the 1600s are set in the 1600s, for example, rather than set in biblical times, because it all seems old to us. However, if something is set in our own time period, we notice the contrast between the time period and the story almost immediately. For some, this might cause disgust at the modern imagery, because it either cheapens the original iconic imagery, or it raises the contemporary to a level of undeserved sacrality. What it also does, however, is allow one to see themselves portrayed in the formative stories and practices of their life. By changing the classic religious iconography, it was my intent to make a space for women that the church did not allow them.

<sup>21</sup> Perlove, Shelly. “Abraham and the Three Angels.” Lecture, JUDAIC 318, South Thayer Building, Ann Arbor, February 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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