

St. Mary in my basement

I'm an Episcopal priest. Why would I have a statue of the Blessed Virgin in my home?

By [Heidi Haverkamp](#)

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Our Lady of Walsingham. Photo by Heidi Haverkamp.

My husband and I recently moved to a new town, and one of the first things I did was to install a statue of Mary in the damp and dark bowels of our new house. The house was going to stand empty for six months, as we tore out its innards and put them back together, and I thought it needed a protector. Although I grew up in a church that was as rationally Protestant as perhaps it was possible to be, I have found it hard to resist a sense of kinship and warmth with the mother of Jesus. Also, I believe in "things seen and unseen," and in this Halloween season, I'll just say that the older I get, the further along I find myself on the spectrum of believing "there are things we don't understand" and the more I find things like demons, ghosts, and angels hard to dismiss out of hand.

This particular statue came into my possession when I was visiting a now-closed Episcopal church a couple years ago with one of our bishop's staff to pick up prayer books, hymnals, and other churchy items for my former parish. She was on a shelf in the sacristy.

I was struck by her face and a very strange sense that she was instructing me:
Please take me and my Son with you.

There were no other plans for her, so with leave and encouragement from the staff person, I packed her up and took her to the congregation I served then, thinking she might be a welcome addition to our sanctuary. However, my altar guild chair raised quite an eyebrow and as she pointed out, I noticed that this Mary and Jesus were in fact quite dirty, and seriously starting to crumble.

Some may recognize her as [Our Lady of Walsingham](#), a favorite image of Mary in Anglican and Episcopal churches. But her traditional lily scepter was already broken in three pieces the day I packed her up and its paint and plaster continued to crumble until, with what I believe was her permission, I tossed it. Her throne was broken by a mover who didn't realize she wasn't made of sturdier wood or stone. Turns out, he was Roman Catholic and turned absolutely pale when he realized what he had done. (We didn't sue for damages.)

Our Lady and her Son are smudged and gray; I've tried to clean them, but the dinginess doesn't seem removable. It is as if she is determined to remain gritty. And so, it seemed natural to ask her and the child Jesus to look after our house. She's on a shelf near a window, facing the stairs. I like knowing she is there, grounding the energy of the house and keeping an eye out for unclean spirits.

We have had contractors and small children walk into our basement and ask, "What's *that*?" But others see her and don't ask, maybe because they in fact know why she's there—or perhaps because they're too weirded out.

For me, the statue is an icon of God's love and protection in what will be our new home, just as Mary herself was, literally, the embodiment of love and protection for Jesus as he grew up. This Mary is broken and dirty, but she has stood for and amongst blessed things for decades. I cautiously believe that she continues to stand for those things in my basement. Her broad lap, her patient gaze, and her solid base are a bastion against uncertainty and shadows, and the child Jesus, on her lap, looks out with hope and love.

The world is a hard place, and the older I get the more I am weighed down with the realization that greed, violence, and sin are not going anywhere. Perhaps I am sequestering myself away, out in this country college town, in this little house with Mary and Jesus oozing goodness in the basement. I choose to believe that I'm coming to grips with my inability to control my world, whether it's the house, my loved ones, my career, or my country. I am not giving up, but I'm not sure I can continue without leaning on faith, prayer, Mary, Jesus, and [things unseen](#) to buoy me up.

Originally posted at [Haverkamp's blog](#)