

Chronicles of a Catholic Housewife: Forty Years Toward the Promised Land

Carmen Hartono

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Chronicles of a Catholic Housewife is the charming, moving memoir of a woman who met God wherever life took her.

The words “Catholic housewife” summon a prim, devout image of a woman devoted to servitude. However, Carmen Hartono’s *Chronicles of a Catholic Housewife: Forty Years Toward the Promised Land* is anything but stuffy. This toothsome memoir is rich with memories, cultural moments, and family experiences that show the pleasures and challenges of daily faith.

Chronicles details four decades of marriage between an “animated Latina and a decorum-loving Javanese man.” Hartono is a strong foil for her husband, John, a ship’s engineer. Her vivaciousness contrasts with his reserved nature, and from the first chapter, it’s apparent that the relationship will be rocky. The difficulties Hartono faces do not only come from within her marriage. The forty-year period of the book spans a time of significant social and cultural upheaval, and includes the end of the Vietnam War, the Summer of Love, and the Cold War. *Chronicles* balances insights about marital intimacy with international conflicts.

The book’s seven chapters fly by as Hartono’s narrative voice weaves a compelling, intelligent story, beginning with her birth in El Salvador and her family’s immigration to San Francisco in 1960. Throughout, Hartono defies stereotypes about Latina women, Catholics, and stay-at-home mothers. The book is sprinkled with references to Sinatra, Socrates, the Mayan calendar, Jung, and other great thinkers. Hartono’s deft sense of humor eases difficult scenes, such as her decision to keep a pregnancy conceived with an IUD in place.

For a spiritual memoir, *Chronicles* is refreshingly un-preachy. There are no assertions about divine favor or blasts of holy light. Instead, Hartono’s perspective on God and the Catholic Church is earthy. Over the course of her life, Hartono has discovered and reencountered new conceptions of God. She explains that her commitment to her family is a form of faith, because it’s an experience of love as the fulfillment of God’s wish for humanity. Her marriage, she says, is a way of honoring God: the union of two people is the realization of divine love on earth, not to mention God’s sense of humor.

Through the birth of her children to her forays into academic life and all the changes that time brings, Hartono remains undaunted. Her humility about her spiritual message is the central thread of the memoir. On a mission, she tells a Lutheran minister, “I’m not very religious.” He responds, “But you are very spiritual.” Hartono says that his “smile reflects the compassion of Jesus.”

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