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## from badass to blessed

### Surrounding Myself with Extraordinary Women Who Inspire Me

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If you run your finger along the back of my left ear, you can feel the raised scar from the time I nearly lopped off my ear when I was a little girl.

It happened quickly. I tied my bath towel around my neck to make a Superman cape and secured it with a wooden clothespin (the kind with the spring) before bravely climbing up my desk and onto the top of my dresser.

From there I could survey my whole room. I figured if I leaped straight out I could fly for a couple of seconds before landing safely on my bed. With a deep breath, I sprang. It was a spectacular launch, an amazing flight . . . followed by a loud thump when I missed my bed and grazed the corner of the night table with my head.

I don't know which alerted my parents—the house shaking or my screams. Everything after that was a blur until I found myself lying on my back in an operating room staring at the cold surgical light. I could hear the sound of the thread being pulled through my ear as the doctor sewed up the damage.

You'd think I'd have learned something from this little adventure. Oh, I don't know, perhaps the important lesson that little girls can't fly? I didn't. Within months I was sporting a

four-inch scar down the length of my cheek, from eye to chin, from a second failed attempt at flight—this time I'd jumped out of a tree, trying to swing like Tarzan. I didn't understand the physics of it: a static branch looked as though it could swing like a jungle vine. Maybe.

I was lucky to have avoided breaking bones, not to mention losing my eye. These failures never deterred me, and if I'm being totally honest, I'll confess that part of me is still ready to parachute out of an airplane. I just need somebody to dare me.

### **La Tremenda**

My long-suffering mother knows this about me. She calls me *tremenda*, a Spanish word that has many layers of meaning. To look at it, you might think it translates handily as *tremendous*, but that's not quite right. It does mean tremendous, sometimes. It also means terrific, and terrible. It translates as bold. Daring. Fearless. Stalwart. Smart. Courageous. In a lot of cases, it can be used as a modifier to express both judge-y disdain and profound admiration.

But mostly it means *badass*.

The sensibilities for the word are a little looser in Spanish, but as a lover of words, I can't help but be drawn to the nuances inherent in using a word that carries a little shock value.

Sometimes we need a little shock in our lives to get our attention. Not too much, though. Vulgarity for its own sake precludes the rich opportunity for communication opened up by an unexpected zinger such as *badass*. It gets your attention, and believe me, the women in these pages deserve our attention. They certainly got mine.

As a young woman, I suffered under the misconception that to pursue a life of holiness meant to lead a boring life filled with long periods of contemplation and silence. I longed to find role models who matched my own approach to life—saints with boisterous laughs and quick tongues that sometimes got them in trouble, women unafraid to be themselves and say what was on their minds, even if they ruffled a few feathers.

In short, I longed to discover badass women who lived lives of real holiness. Women with whom, perhaps, I might have a little in common.

As a girl, I loved excitement. I loved adventure. (I still do.) Those adventures always seemed to be a good idea—too many times to the dismay of my poor mother, who probably owned stock in Mercurochrome. Evidently I had to survive Mercurochrome poisoning to make it to adulthood.

Besides the aerial adventures, there was nothing extraordinary about my childhood. It was an idyllic time. We lived in a complex of townhouse apartments. We knew all our neighbors. Our mothers stayed home and took care of us. Our fathers went to work, some in the mornings to factories, others, like my father, in the early evening to work in the restaurants and nightclubs of downtown Atlanta.

I didn't know we lived in an immigrant ghetto populated suddenly by an influx of Cuban refugees. I just knew I spoke like everybody else, except for my next-door neighbor Elizabeth, who spoke a different way. In no time, I could speak like her and a couple of the other kids from down the street, but I had no word for *bilingual*. And the concept of growing up bicultural wasn't a notion even in the minds of the adults.

I knew that I was loved, that I had friends, and that I had to be home before the streetlights came on. It was, to me, a fairy-tale childhood.

Some of my earliest memories are of being happy in a little *barrio* in the Deep South in the middle of the civil rights movement. But that's not where the story began.

Our family's chapter began with my father's grit and desire to forge a new life for his young family, away from the dangers of a communist regime. And yet the rest of the story, as Paul Harvey used to say, is my mother's.

## **My Badass Family**

My mother is the most badass woman I know. Apparently, she gets it from *her* mother. I was a teenager before I could begin to appreciate what these women had gone through. I was a wife,

and then a young mother, before I began to understand the inner resources they must have possessed to survive.

These remarkable women, my mother and grandmother, both left behind their families, their homes, everything they had ever known, in the pursuit of freedom so that one day I could grow up free to practice my religion and pursue my dreams. They wanted me to have the freedom that had been denied to them.

My mother really never spoke of this sacrifice. She was busy working around the house doing the same things other moms did. She cooked. She cleaned. She sewed. She nurtured me and my brother and sister.

I took her for granted in the comfortable way so many children do. I didn't want for anything, so I didn't know there must have been hard times and struggles. We eventually moved out of the townhouse and into a house in the suburbs—and our friends from those early days followed us. We were living the American Dream, and I was going to school and becoming an obnoxious teenager.

Lucky for me, we all survived those turbulent years, and I came out of it for the better. Soon, I was pursuing my own dreams. I married right out of college and was swept away to live in Germany for a few years when my husband was in the army. My mother might have made a passing comment about my going full circle and returning to Europe, but I blew it off, still not ready to understand her story. *My* story, too.

You see, my mother and her mother before her fled oppressive political regimes. My grandmother and grandfather left Spain during World War II, Basque nationals running from an oppressive government and the bombings of Basque villages. I remember staring at Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the 1970s and thinking, *That is my story*. My mother's parents emigrated to Cuba.

Then, in 1962, just months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, my father journeyed to America to find a job and an apartment, leaving my mother, pregnant with me, behind in Cuba. He never imagined that the October Crisis would precipitate a forced

separation that lasted years. My mother would not be reunited with my father until 1966—when we were able to make it to the United States and I finally *met* my father.

Decades later, after I had started my own family, I discovered a box of photographs and mementos that my parents were putting into picture albums. I held and read the telegram announcing my birth that my grandfather sent from Cuba to my father in the United States. I then read my father's response, addressed to me, telling me how much he loved me and yearned to meet me soon.

I was undone by those little slips of paper, weeping big, fat, hot tears for my mother, for my father, for me. As a young parent, I couldn't fathom what it would be like to be separated from my child. I couldn't imagine losing my husband to a political machine, never knowing whether we would be reunited. It was too much for me in the moment; even now, twenty-five or more years removed from that discovery, the memory of intense heat from those tears still shocks me.

I recognized, finally, that the past doesn't go away: it lays a foundation for the future. Although I've never made a conscious effort to work with immigrant populations and the marginalization many of them experience in society, I've realized quite recently that I do find ways to put a balm on the pain of those immigrants I encounter.

### **Finding My Purpose**

One of the things I appreciate about midlife is the ability to reflect. I often look back on my life in astonishment, able in retrospect to see where God's hand has written entire sections to prepare me for things to come. It's a gift for which I'm thankful because it brings me a great deal of consolation.

I need consolation because I'm still that resistant child with the independent spirit. I fly off dressers and jump out of trees and don't look before I leap. Just as I said no to my parents when they wanted me to stay out of trees, I've repeatedly said no to the Holy Spirit and his plan for me. Sometimes quite loudly. It

has resulted in some bumps and bruises along the way, but it has also taken me on some unusual adventures.

When I refused, flat out, to become a teacher in spite of some serious recruitment on the part of an excellent educator who saw the spark of potential in me, I became instead a “corporate trainer teaching employability skills” to Cuban and Haitian immigrants in Little Havana, Miami.

That’s a fancy name for teacher, isn’t it?

When I was a newlywed living in Europe while my husband served in the army, the only job available was substitute teacher. The principal liked me so much he made me a permanent kindergarten sub. I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown so I applied for a job as a technical writer.

I wanted to be a writer. I got the job. What did I do all day? I created PowerPoint presentations for a directorate in the Department of Defense. In short, I wrote curriculum.

My husband finished his enlistment, and we returned to Miami, where he pursued a career in computer science and I got back my old job as a trainer. Right up until I became pregnant and needed some health insurance. What saved me? The signing bonus and benefits package . . . from my job as an English teacher in the very high school that graduated me.

I taught remedial English to a rough crowd of gangsters, a group of kids who believed everyone in the system had given up on them. I lived my own episodes of *Welcome Back, Kotter* (a sitcom from the seventies in which a former student returns to an inner-city school as the teacher).

Within a few years my husband pursued new opportunities in Georgia, and the family relocated. I quit teaching and returned to technical writing—it was the happiest day of my adult working life. I became a bilingual freelancer, and within months I was translating documents for the local schools. A short time later, the county mental health division hired me to teach the writing and journaling portion of a women’s therapy group. That was the first time I could clearly discern what God was doing: all my experiences up to that point had prepared me to provide not just instruction in composition, but the compassion

and empathy needed to help the women write the stories hidden in their hearts.

*Everybody* has a story. Some are broken by it and don't know how to write new and better chapters. Others celebrate it. I've been drawn to life stories ever since I taught that class.

### **Holy Cards, Holy Women, *Holy Smoke!***

These pages are filled with the life stories of some extraordinary women—women who fought against the elements, fought against enemies both foreign and domestic, fought against society. Injustice. Inequality. *The odds.*

Some of these women are saints. Some of them are saints in the making. And still others ought to be named saints. The common denominator among them is the amazing way they rose out of their ordinary circumstances to commit acts of audacity: bold, daring, plucky, fearless acts.

I knew many of these women from holy cards or other Church pamphlets, but for the most part they remained one-dimensional. Their indomitable spirits were reduced to three or four talking points in a sidebar and, if they are saints, maybe a quick reference list of their patronage. Who were they, really? And why would I want to emulate them?

The short answer is that I want to surround myself with extraordinary women. There was a time when I would have been content with fictional heroines in stories or superheroes in comic books. The little girl who jumped off dressers would have loved to be friends with Wonder Woman and have adventures with the Justice League. I focused on extraordinary feats of daring to escape the drudgery of the ordinary, missing the importance of these little daily tasks.

The years of separation from extended family robbed me of strong role models within the family, but I was blessed without realizing it by my mother's friends, women who formed a strong spiritual bond in community. Like those imaginary superheroes and my mother's real circle of friends, the amazing women in these pages accomplished the extraordinary because it was the right thing to do.

Now in midlife, I find myself picking up my old holy cards and looking past the dull pictures and facts to see the real women who are my spiritual role models. Their holy lives inspire me to live my life in fulfillment of my baptismal promises . . . and yet I also love that these women tend to be *tremenda*, a little badass, too.

I knew many of these saints from primers in elementary school: St. Teresa of Avila, St. Joan of Arc, and St. Catherine of Siena. Some of the other saints were new to me, if not by name then certainly because of their unique stories. A few of them, such as St. Gianna Beretta Molla and St. Rita of Cascia, have quickly become my go-to saints.

I look to these saints so I can imitate them and grow in their virtues, but also so I can call upon them for prayer. They are powerful intercessors. I hope you also find inspiration in the women I feature in these pages. They have become a part of my extended family, my sisters in Christ. And like the good sisters they are, they all point to our ultimate spiritual model: the Blessed Virgin Mary.

### How to Use This Book

*My Badass Book of Saints* contains both questions to ponder at the end of each chapter and group discussion questions designed for a six-week study at the end of the book. Explore the works listed in the resources section at the back of the book to learn more about these inspiring women.

#### questions to ponder

1. Think about the title of the book. Do you find it shocking, or does a part of you smirk a little and wonder about the content? How do you think this book will compare to other books on the saints you've already read?
2. What does the author say about her choice to use the word *badass*?
3. The author uses the Spanish word *tremenda*. Define it. Are you *tremenda*?



*audacious sisters  
who acted fearlessly*

Sr. Blandina Segale and St. Teresa of Avila

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Entertain acts of audacity.

~Dr. Curtis Johnson, educator

I have a soft spot in my heart for nuns toting guns.

Some years ago, I walked into a friend's office while she was putting up a new calendar. The calendar featured pictures of nuns doing all the ordinary things regular people do. Because, you know, nuns are regular people. They just have a habit of dressing differently.

My friend and I giggled happily as we went through all the months in the calendar, marveling at the fun pictures: nuns playing Skee-Ball on a boardwalk, nuns on bicycles. Bowling nuns. And then we saw the badass sisters: nuns holding guns.

There they were, lined up in their habits, wielding rifles like pros. Clearly nobody was going to get past *them* without encountering the business end of those guns. We laughed and laughed at this wild image. But it probably wasn't that unusual. Missionary religious sisters and nuns have traveled to all kinds of isolated destinations. Maybe they were really good hunters.

*Right.*

I forgot about that calendar until recently, when I noticed a headline in *The Huffington Post* calling Sr. Blandina Segale of the Sisters of Charity the "Fastest Nun in the West." The headline not only captured my heart, but it tickled my love of wordplay and a good pun. Fastest nun, eh? I had to read more. The article spoke about her newly opened cause for canonization, but the link bait worked—I was drawn to images of a showdown on Main Street in the middle of a deserted town. I wasn't too far from the truth.

### **A Fearless Trailblazer**

Like so many of the other religious sisters settling in the United States throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sr. Blandina started off with a vocation to serve God, never imagining it would lead her to the Wild West.

The beginning of Maria Rosa Segale's story is not extraordinary. She was born in Italy in 1850 and immigrated to the United States, settling with her family in Ohio. As a young girl, she told her family that she wanted to join the Sisters of Charity, and when she turned sixteen she entered the novitiate, taking the name Blandina. She went to teach in the Cincinnati and Dayton areas.

This is when the story twists. One day, Sr. Blandina heard she would be transferred to Trinidad. She thought she was going to Trinidad in the *West Indies* and got excited about this new adventure. (I can't blame her.) Unfortunately, she learned soon enough that she wasn't going to the West Indies, but rather to the American West . . . to Trinidad, *Colorado*.

Trinidad, Colorado, was no Caribbean paradise. When she arrived Sr. Blandina encountered a violent town filled with

hardship and lawlessness. The residents often took justice into their own hands, forming lynch mobs to handle dangerous outlaws.

Now, one would not think that a twenty-two-year-old religious sister would have much influence in such an environment. But Sr. Blandina managed to do the unthinkable, as commemorated in the CBS series *Death Valley Days*: she squelched one of those lynch mobs by bringing the accused to the bedside of the dying man he had assaulted. The dying man, through Sr. Blandina's intercession, forgave his aggressor. As a result, the accused man was tried in a court of law rather than by a vigilante mob in the streets.

I love that! What could inspire a young woman to face a mob intent on hanging a man? She stood on the strength of her convictions. She knew that a violent response to violence generally leads to more violence. Regardless of whether the accused man was found guilty in his trial, Sr. Blandina's intervention accomplished a great deal: She stopped an angry mob from behaving vindictively, saving those men from the inhumane desire to repay one heinous act with another one. She helped a grievously wounded man face his own death and judgment by forgiving the man who caused it. And by encouraging the accused man to face his victim and seek forgiveness, she may have stirred something in his heart as well.

To that crowd, Sr. Blandina's audacious witness to Christ's mercy was as remarkable as it seems to us today. For Sr. Blandina, it was just another day. After all, she faced Billy the Kid not once, but three times in her life! Perhaps she had grown so accustomed to the unsavory aspects of life in this Western town that she became immune to the rough element. Or, what is more likely, she saw beyond the baseness of the human condition and recognized the opportunity to save souls.

Because of her dedication to upholding the human dignity of every person, even Billy the Kid gave her a well-deserved measure of respect that saved her life, and likely those of others as well. Their first meeting occurred when one of the men in Billy's gang was severely wounded and rejected by the local

doctors because of his criminal behavior. Sr. Blandina took in the ailing man and tended his gunshot wound. When Billy the Kid arrived, intent on killing the doctors who had denied one of his men medical treatment, the spunky Sr. Blandina convinced him to let the doctors live. Just imagine Sr. Blandina standing up to her full petite height and sternly telling, *telling*, a hardened criminal to back down. *Or else.*

This would not be her last encounter with the outlaw. She met Billy the Kid again when his gang overran a wagon train she was traveling in. But when Billy the Kid looked inside Sr. Blandina's wagon and recognized her, he tipped his hat in salutation and left the group unharmed.

Her third and final encounter with Billy the Kid demonstrates something of her compassion for all people, especially those she cared for—regardless of their station in life or reputation. While visiting a man in jail, she once again found herself face-to-face with Billy the Kid; this time he was in one of the cells. She recalled that Billy the Kid spoke in defense of the man she went to visit, revealing some of his own regrets in the process. Sister observed that Billy the Kid might have lived a better life had he chosen the right path instead of the wrong path. She didn't judge him harshly, but merely observed that his choices led him to that place in his life.

Isn't that true for all of us?

### **Brave Nuns in the Wilderness**

It's easy to imagine that the pragmatic Sr. Blandina approached her daily duties with the same kind of understated heroism, focused not on recounting tales of high adventure in the midst of outlaws in the Wild West, but on building schools and hospitals in Trinidad, Colorado (and later Santa Fe, New Mexico). Her work with Native Americans and Mexicans, in particular, makes her a saint for today.

Her entire life was an act of audacity that began at her birth, when her mother, Giovanna, took the infant Maria Rosa to the church at Montecallegro in Italy and presented her to the Blessed Virgin Mary, praying for her daughter "to help mankind, *Madre*

*Mia*, to comfort the sorrowful . . . to harbor the harborless . . . to visit the sick . . . to teach your ways to mankind" (Segale 2).

Sr. Blandina grew up to do all those things, and more. She founded public schools, Catholic schools, orphanages, and hospitals in Colorado and then in New Mexico—including St. Joseph's Hospital in Albuquerque—before returning to Cincinnati, where she founded The Santa Maria Institute to serve Italian immigrants to the area. That organization continues today as Santa Maria Community Services.

Although she continues to make headlines because of her audacious behavior around hardened criminals, Sr. Blandina's most heroic accomplishment is her lifetime of diligence and daily sacrifice in the face of poverty and hardship.

The image of gun-toting nuns, while funny to my modern sensibilities, no doubt reveals something significant about what it took to be a woman settling in the American West. These women needed spirit and a large measure of courage just to survive. After all, they were facing much more than just a hostile environment.

Missionary nuns were settling throughout the western part of the country even before the days of rough cowboys and cattlemen. Sometimes they accompanied missionary priests, but often they worked alone. These sisters helped to build the American West. To say these women were brave doesn't seem enough. They had the stamina and drive to follow through with their mission, whether that mission was administrative support of an existing community or founding new communities, schools, and hospitals.

There was nothing romantic in this work. It wasn't just perilous; it must have been boring and tedious at times, too. Still, my imagination runs wild considering the more unsavory experiences these women must have encountered. After all, violent conflict filled those days with the kind of lawlessness that physically endangered women.

My wilderness is filled not with gunmen and washed out trails, but with twenty-first-century psychological equivalents: Too much structured time. Too many electronic distractions.