My sabbatical proposal included one tangibly measurable publishing goal—an article on Adelaide Procter and the Virgin Mary—and one more diffuse intellectual goal—exploratory, possibly foundational, research to decide whether a book-length project on Victorian women writers and Catholicism would be feasible for a future sabbatical project. I am happy to be able to report on my progress toward both those goals.

After spending fall semester 2006 in England with students, teaching Victorian literature, discussing English and Irish Catholicism, pondering on women’s religious communities and fielding students’ earnest questions about George Eliot, Anna Jameson, the Brontës and gender roles, I entered my sabbatical primed to focus on the research at hand.

In December, I began my sabbatical projects by preparing for publication a chapter that had been in process some time: “‘Must her own words do all?’ Domesticity, Catholicism and Activism in Adelaide Anne Procter’s Poems,” coming out this November in The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers, with Palgrave Macmillan Press. Completion of a project that had seemed a long time in the making as the collection went through review by several publishers gave me renewed vigor to turn to the questions of faith, gender and literature that prompted my original proposal.

My first task for sabbatical was to draw on these experiences and to finish the necessary research on Procter and Victorian representations of the Virgin Mary. That essay, “Poetry, Activism and “Our Lady of the Rosary”: Adelaide Procter’s Catholic Poetics in A Chaplet of Verses.” will appear by the end of 2007 in Sublimer Aspects: Interfaces Between Literature, Aesthetics and Theology from Cambridge Scholars Press.

Preparing for that essay, I was able to make a research trip to the Graduate Theological Union Library in Berkeley, where I worked with Anna Jameson’s Victorian art history series on Sacred and Legendary Art. I combined that research time with a visit to Urban House, where Chris and I spoke on seeking vocation as a married couple. Throughout the weekend, I was repeatedly struck by the similarities in our students’ questions and comments and in approaches to women’s work, our intellectual lives and our communities of faith that I was finding in Jameson and in Procter.
In February, I was asked by a current Lilly Fellow to join a panel on Victorian women and devotional poetry, which she was preparing for the Modern Language Association meeting in December. The panel presented an opportunity to reframe some of my earlier thinking on Procter in terms of women’s work and social justice, so I agreed. The panel was accepted, and I’ll be delivering “Ora et Labora in Adelaide Procter’s ‘Homeless’” in Chicago in December.

I reviewed Michael McKeon’s *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*, a critical literary history covering three centuries, and weighing in at over 800 pages. Clearly, McKeon’s work is not something I would have made the time to read carefully had I been teaching. His combination of gender, domesticity, novels and English Christianity brought me up to date on critical background and framing concepts, particularity in the fluidity of religion from the public to the private realm in English women’s lives. The review will appear in *Christianity and Literature* in December.

In February I was also asked to serve as a judge for this year’s Conference on Christianity and Literature Book of the Year. Again, though this wasn’t officially part of my sabbatical plan, I had the time so I agreed. As I had hoped, a small handful of these books have directly addressed women and Christianity, and a few others have helped to broaden my understanding of the connections between faith and literary production in the long nineteenth-century. None of this year’s submissions directly discuss Victorian women writers and Catholicism. Had I not been on sabbatical, though, I would have passed on this opportunity to get acquainted with several books that will sharpen my discussion of Protestant/Catholic dialogue in nineteenth-century women’s writing.

For most of March and April I focused on another piece of foundational thinking for a future book project. I brought almost to completion revisions of a conference paper for an article—titled “Sex and Prayer in *Adam Bede*” —on George Eliot and the Victorian religious landscape, especially Methodism and Feuerbachian thought. I anticipate putting that article into circulation before the end of the year.

In late March I traveled to England for archival work at The British Library, The National Archives and also the archives of the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Birmingham. This trip provided detailed notes on early editions and church documents from both Jameson and Procter, as well as new material on nineteenth-century Catholic novelists Georgianna Fullerton and Charlotte Yonge. I returned home to give baccalaureate address, with the pleasure of speaking to class of 2007 about Adelaide Procter as a model of an educated Christian with a strong sense of vocation.
In the various activities of sabbatical, did I come any closer to that larger, less concrete goal of determining whether a book-length study of the draw of Catholicism for Victorian Protestant women feasible? Yes. The completed work on Adelaide Procter and expanded work on Anna Jameson give me a beginning of that study. I plan to propose a first new step into ecumenical relations by proposing a paper analyzing Protestant/Catholic dialogue in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* for this year’s Conference on Christianity and Literature. I now also envision chapters on Victorian traditions of female saints in George Eliot’s *Romola* and on influences of Victorian representations of early modern mystics on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

While my travel to the archives in England played a crucial role in solidifying my preparation to embark on this book project, that confidence was clarified even more by my weekly travel through Montecito’s upper-village to the Immaculate Heart Retreat Center where I sat in the library and broke for lunch with the small cluster of devout Catholic women, former nuns who keep the retreat center. I spent most of these Fridays reading and writing about George Eliot and Adelaide Procter, but on different weeks I also held a rosary for the first time, walked the stations of Mary while my new friend Joann narrated Mary’s life for me, and begun to cultivate the centuries-old Christian discipline of centering prayer. Over the course of the semester, my appreciation for my own Reformed tradition deepened immensely, and I found myself spiritually encouraged by dialogue with new Catholic friends.

I end my sabbatical grateful to the college and to God for these opportunities to explore women’s Christianity and Victorian literature, and enthusiastic about continuing the work I have discovered on ecumenical relations in Victorian women writers.