

WHY I AM STILL A CATHOLIC:

**From the Land of OZ
to the Subversive Nazarene Truth**



Charles William Valentino

*Why I am Still a Catholic:
From the Land of OZ to the Subversive Nazarene Truth*

by

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Edited by Dr. Ronda Chervin

Designed by James Kent Ridley

Published by Goodbooks Media

Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN-13: 978-1544101255

ISBN-10: 1544101252



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GOODBOOKS MEDIA

3453 ARANSAS

CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS, 73411

goodbooksmedia.com



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INTRODUCTION ~ THE COMING STORM



L. Frank Baum begins his book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, with his heroine Dorothy and her family being threatened by a fast-approaching cyclone. I relate this climatic phenomenon to the storm of moral and ethical relativism that has wreaked havoc in the secular and religious worlds for many years.

The calamitous results of this attack upon the notion of absolute truth is succinctly described by Dietrich von Hildebrand in his book *The New Tower of Babel*:

[t]he role of truth in human life is so predominant and decisive, the interest in the question of whether a thing is true or not is so indispensable in all the domains of human life, ranging from the most humble everyday affairs to the highest spiritual spheres, that the dethronement of truth entails the decomposition of man's very life. Disrespect for truth, when not merely a theoretical thesis, but a lived attitude, patently destroys all morality, even all responsibility and all community life. All objective norms are dissolved by this

attitude of indifference toward truth; so also is the possibility of resolving any discussion or controversy objectively; peace among individuals or nations and all trust in other persons are impossible as well. The very basis of a really human life is subverted. There exists an intimate link between the dethronement of truth and terrorism. As soon as man no longer refers to truth as the ultimate judge in all spheres of life, brutal force necessarily replaces right, oppression and mechanical, suggestive influence supersedes conviction, fear supplants trust. Indeed, to dethrone truth means to sever the human person from the very basis of his spiritual existence; it is the most radical, practical atheism and thus it is deeply linked with the depersonalization of man, the anti-personalism that is the characteristic feature of Communism and of all the different types of totalitarianism. An abyss separates this decomposition of human life and of the human person from the attitude expressed in the words of St. Augustine: 'O Truth, Truth, how inwardly did the very marrow of my soul pant for you... (p. 61-62).

WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE



“Why I am still a Catholic” — an intriguing subject to be sure. I have pondered many things during the course of my life but have never given this matter serious consideration. Perhaps this is because I was born Catholic and Catholic I remain.

Unfortunately, this “cradle Catholic” mentality can also be used as an excuse to mask the fact that I was a wayward believer in the sense of treating the Holy Mass as if it was just another requirement to fulfill rather than viewing my participation as a privilege. In point of fact, not a privilege but an opportunity to be in the presence of Almighty God. Even more than being in the presence of the Lord, I did not fully appreciate the blessing of actually sharing in the sacred mystery of transubstantiation by consuming the Precious Body and the Precious Blood of Jesus Christ.

Not being fully aware of this reality was certainly the case for extended periods of time in my life, but something is different now. One difference relates to the fact that I am now in my late sixties and retired from my approximately thirty-six-year career as a child-care worker and Clinical Social

Worker. I began as direct care children services worker in a private residential treatment facility and several years later transferred to a state run residential program. Both of these programs were located in Connecticut.

Another major influence in my life is the fact that I am now a widower after being married for thirty-four years. The fact of my retirement and the subsequent death of my wife have led to a much greater awareness of the unique and profound truths that form the Catholic imagination. Yes, it is possible to age “gracefully”. In my case this coming of AGE has meant developing a greater appreciation for the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a more decisive belief in the notion that everything is Grace, and increasing reverence for the Eucharist.



THE LAND OF OZ



This cultivation of faith is even more significant since it occurred in the hinterland of OZ, a place where the twin towers of Obfuscation and Zealotry, confusion and pride, loom large in an ever-burgeoning culture of death. The grand irony of it all relates to the fact that this coming of age really reflects a rebirth of sorts, a developing mindfulness of and enchantment with the notion of spiritual childhood and following the “narrow way” as expressed by Jesus Christ.

Why I am still a Catholic; indeed, why am I Catholic at all? At first glance this issue would seem simple enough to address. Yes, this question would be relatively easy to answer if it was only a matter of intellectual assent, a conscious and rational decision. The disturbing truth is that my consideration of the question occasioned an unexpected bout of brooding self-examination. A quick scan of this troubling circumstance suggested the presence of unresolved conflict, anxiety, and fear.

Simply stated, I am a Catholic because I believe Catholicism contains the fullness of truth

– a subversive Nazarene truth – that eases the existential anguish and spiritual acedia associated with feeling like a stranger living in a strange land, a person with neither face nor voice. I have been wandering in the Land of Oz for several decades now. This shadowland, located just east of Eden, is inhabited by people who all suffer from the effects of a lethal, stress-induced disease.

The origin of this oppressive STRESS takes us back to the time when **Satan's Total Rebellion Established Soul-Sickness**. This universal malady leaves its victims with a malevolent cluster of symptoms characterized by a disorienting sense of having soft brains, hard hearts, and lacking in virtue – especially courage. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this soul-sickness generates a sense of longing and restlessness that causes the afflicted to search continuously for a place to call home – a place where they feel truly and unequivocally human.



Think of the characters portrayed in Baum's work, the scarecrow with no brain, the tin man with no heart, the cowardly lion with no courage, and Dorothy with no home, as one amalgamated entity. Most of us are represented

by this undifferentiated mass of imperfections as it wanders along the fictitious “yellow brick road” of life in search of something real, substantial, and meaningful. Some, the proud and/or powerful, deny the need for assistance while relying solely upon their personal endowments; others understand that guidance is necessary to achieve the authentic and ultimate goal of eternal life that is made possible only by the grace of God via the salvation of one’s soul.

This condition is vividly described by Joseph Ratzinger who observes that

[t]he decisive point remains this: men are unable, of themselves, to give any meaning to their individual and collective stories. If they were left to their own devices, human history would run out into nothing, into nihilism, into meaninglessness. No one has grasped this more profoundly than the poets of our time, who feel and live in that solitude of man left to himself, who describe the boredom and pointlessness that are the basic sense of such a man who becomes a hell for himself and others. (*What it Means to Be a Christian*, p.62)

The search for home invariably leads people down many narrow and winding detours and

dead-end roads and is characterized by the author of Ecclesiastes as the “Vanity of vanities” (1: 2). The journey becomes even more perilous given the wayfarer’s compromised intellectual capacity, emotional instability, and omnipresent inclinations towards non-virtuous and selfish acts.

Regardless of the numerous self-inflicted spiritual wounds people accumulate throughout the course of their wanderings, commonly known as looking for love in all the wrong places, and all the pain and suffering they inflict upon fellow travelers, a blessed few actually succeed in finding a place of true repose.



HEAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD



The place of peace, for me, is the Catholic Church. I know I will never fully comprehend the meaning of the subversive Nazarene truth that acts as the cornerstone of this magnificent edifice. It is because of this faith in absolute truth, however, that I can aspire to become a citizen in the Kingdom of God, a SAINT, or someone who is **Sinful And Imperfect Nevertheless Transcendent**.

It is Jesus the Christ – Yeshua the Messiah – who embodies this Nazarene truth. It is Jesus who refers to himself as the “Way, the Truth, and the Life” – the Way is characterized by belief in the fully human and fully divine nature of Jesus, and willingness to follow his walk to the cross; the Truth is subversive because it demands fidelity to the One True God while dismissing the dishonest words and false idols of the day; and, the Life indicates that we – each and every one of us – is created in the image of God and has been given a **Sacredly Ordained Unique Life**, an eternal SOUL.

[God] knows and loves every single one of us for ourselves.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of man, in whom there took place the decisive breakthrough of universal history toward the union of the creature with God, was an individual, born of a human mother... What is both offensive and sublime in the Christian message is that the fate of all history, our fate, depends on one individual: Jesus of Nazareth. (Ratzinger: *What it Means to Be a Christian*, p.59).

I have come to realize that the Catholic Church is composed of a vast multitude of people who are sinful and imperfect and, nevertheless, seek a transcendent peace beyond all understanding. Some of these people have shared their personal soul-healing stories for the benefit of posterity. These people, recognized as Saints in the Catholic family, have remained a source of spiritual nourishment since the inception of the Church.



All ye saints of God, intercede for us.

COME HOLY SPIRIT



I have many times over the years had a sense that, despite my spiritual acedia (sloth), someone or something was watching over me. Yes, there were many near and many more actual occasions of sin, but the subsequent sense of crushing guilt and devastating shame never devolved into a serious consideration of suicide.

Some past behaviors, however, if left unchecked, could have resulted in an untimely demise. As I have heard it said, where there is life there is hope – however miniscule that feeling of hope might be. I will now relate a series of encounters with this otherworldly presence that show how life can seemingly grab you by the shoulders and, by the grace of God, shake you out of spiritual desolation and into a state of blessed consolation.

I was professed into the Third Order of Mary on June 4, 2013. It was a very moving ceremony that actually reminded me of my wedding day. This was especially poignant given the fact that my wife of thirty-four years had died nine months prior. It may only be coincidental that this nine-month gestation period initiated my spiritual renaissance

– maybe not. In any event, I felt as though I was entering into another covenantal relationship, totality different than my earthly marriage to be sure, nonetheless a two-become-one hallowed encounter that promised to transcend the chaos of life and the stillness of death. In retrospect, I think of the marriage ceremony to my wife as taking place in church, while the initiation ceremony resulted in my marriage to the Church.

As the days went by, some longer than others, I made the necessary adjustments to a new life without my dearest friend, a sweet and gentle soul who loved much and was much loved. As one might suppose, the initial passion experienced on the day of my initiation into the Marist family waned. My heartfelt commitment to the Blessed Mother was weakened by realities associated with the loss of a cherished companion. It was not until several months later that I was able to comprehend the simple yet profound words attributed to Dr. Seuss – “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.” And, as we are told in Scripture,

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1: 2-4)

One unanticipated blessing derived from this “long day’s journey into night” was an increased assurance in the teachings of the Nicene Creed that ends with the words “... I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come. Amen.” I can now say with greater conviction to those who carry heavy crosses of past regret, present sorrow and future dread, that one does not have to fear what’s meant to be because that’s where we’ll meet eternity.

Subsequent to the time of my profession into the Third Order of Mary community, I entered into many other roles in the Church, some of which I would not have thought possible before.

Among these new endeavors, I reestablished my standing as a Eucharistic minister, and became an altar server and lector. I am a regular participant in a Cenacle of the Marian Movement of Priests, and am a member of a Eucharistic Apostles of the Divine Mercy Cenacle. I also participate in regular Eucharistic adoration. These activities occur within three different parishes, with two of the parishes being “yoked,” which means sharing the same priest.

Although these activities may seem rather benign to most people, they represent something much more to me. They are not just a way to fill

the time of a retired widower who has nothing else to do. My participation in these ministries actually represents a considerable amount of personal and spiritual growth.

As previously mentioned, for many years – actually well into adulthood – I felt like a person with no face and no voice. Simply stated, this was due to a combination of factors that included a sense of inferiority, self-consciousness and performance and social anxiety, all of which were exacerbated by a debilitating speech impediment that essentially rendered me selectively mute. All of these elements resulted in a sense of spoiled identity (no face) and a feeling of helplessness (no voice).

But now, although it is not in keeping with my naturally reclusive nature, I am trying to establish a friendship with the eternal God with support and guidance provided by the people and the culture of the Catholic Church.

Furthermore, I no longer believe anyone has to necessarily go looking for God because I trust he has already found us. I can encounter God at every Mass, in every sacrament, in every prayer and every reading of sacred scripture, and see him in the face of every person stricken with “soul-sickness.” This is the result of God-given grace and has nothing to

do with any sort of personal spiritual achievement. This is, in fact, the new commandment given to us by Jesus himself,

... that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13: 34-35)





BEWARE THE WINGED MONKEYS



The winged monkeys inhabit the Land of Oz and are under the command of the Wicked Witch. These creatures represent, for me, the assortment of negative thoughts and feelings that intrude upon and altogether disrupt the endeavor to practice the art of authentic love for God and neighbor.

Therefore, making the transition from wayward to wayfaring Catholic, also required saying “no” to potential and actual impediments to the journey. In my case, the most important “no” was the refusal to acquiesce to the subterranean fears and anxieties that remained buried in the recesses of my mind – thoughts and associated feelings that, despite past personal and professional success, continued to alternately whisper and scream the words “unworthy, helpless, guilty, lost and alone.” It is true that, without the grace and mercy of God, I really do fit this description. With God, however, and through the blessings made available to all in the sacrament of reconciliation, I can ask God to “... blot out my transgressions...” and to “wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51: 1-2).

I read the following material many years ago and remember thinking how well it described me at that time:

[Some people] “are more comfortable and function better when they have someone else – a boss, a leader, a jailer – to rely upon for direction. They would rather be dependent in a hostile environment and combat it every day than manage their own lives. In this way they avoid having to confront their own anxieties and discomfort about activating and asserting their real selves. (James F. Masterson, M.D. – *The Search for the Real Self*, p.12)

One major factor this description did not include was the presence of a smoldering anger awaiting, actually welcoming, any excuse to ignite. I can now joke about this and say that I never really got angry; I bypassed feelings of anger and went directly from experiencing real or imagined social slights to a state of rage. Intermittent attempts to ameliorate this condition resulted in varying degrees of experimentation with mind-altering substances. Fortunately, I was able to sublimate much of this anger through extensive athletic endeavors.

There was a movie made several years ago

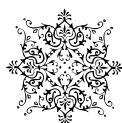
entitled *The King's Speech* that depicted the true story of a member of English royalty who suffered from a serious speech impediment. Through a series of unexpected events, this person was required to engage in very high level public speaking. The opening visual of the movie is a shot of a seemingly gigantic microphone that dominates the entire screen. Viewing that particular image triggered a host of very unpleasant, more precisely traumatic, memories related to my own years of social agonies.

I relate this story now because I experience similar “flashbacks”, although to a much lesser degree, almost every time I approach the ambo to proclaim Scripture. I have learned to manage this anxiety and fear by reminding myself that God created me for a purpose – to spread the Good News – and he gave me the gift of speech in order to do just that. Yes, it is my “soul” that occupies a particular space at a particular time behind the ambo during the liturgy of the word, but it is God-created breath that passes over God-created vocal cords and God-created words that flow out of me in God-created sounds and vibrations that give life to the subversive and iconoclastic Nazarene truth. It was the Adversary who stole my gift of speech in an attempt to render me useless and, perhaps, encourage another Judas. It was a few individuals

in the Catholic Church who, unknown to them, set this captive free when they asked if I would be willing to become a lector and give voice to God's great Word.



LOOK HOMEWARD ANGEL



Again, I believe someone or something was watching out for my well-being and consider myself extremely blessed that my past transgressions never resulted in incarceration or death. But my greatest blessing was, without doubt, the fact that I met and married a woman who was my best friend, confidant and soul-mate for over forty years. It is easy for me to say that she made me feel “complete.”

Nevertheless, there is no such entity as a perfect marriage and my wife and I experienced our share of difficulties. This makes it all the more remarkable that:

Undaunted by life’s challenges,
the lady did proceed
embracing lost and weary souls,
helping others to succeed.

One such soul she found was me.
Inside out and upside down,
with the eyes of love, she saw
a smile beneath the frown.

These lines were written as part of a poem I presented to my wife on the occasion of her sixtieth birthday. I used this poem, with a few additional stanzas, as a substantial portion of her eulogy that I presented at her funeral mass. This was the real beginning of a personal and spiritual transformation that continues to unfold. The Holy Spirit is profoundly ready, willing, and able to gather in the lost and weary souls found in abundance in the Land of OZ.

I conclude this portion of the reflection on *Why I am Still a Catholic* with verses I composed for my wife's poem and added subsequent to her death.

It is significant to note that these sentiments were considered, written and later delivered at a time of great personal sorrow — a sorrow that could have easily descended into a debilitating soul-sickness characterized by emotional, psychological and spiritual fissures with an accompanying eruption and sulfurous flow of “wicked ways.” Much to the contrary, however, these words were the harbinger of a spiritual odyssey that continues to foster, with sporadic setbacks, a faith-influenced exploration of **The Way** that leads one to “strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one can see the Lord” (Hebrews 12: 14):

And now it's time to say good-by,
sweet memories replete,
until the time beyond all time
where true believers meet

among the distant stars above
in a place of endless light,
singing songs of praise and glory
with supernatural might.

This is the day I give you back
to the Lord of all creation
and celebrate your spiritual birth
with great anticipation,

because I know we'll meet again
at the supper of the Lamb.
So wait for us, we're coming soon
to meet the great I AM.



“DIS-EASE” ~ A CONFLUENCE OF CONSCIENCE, CONDUCT, AND CULTURE



Those who deny the supernatural realm offer us shallow banter and inane solutions for self-inflicted personal and communal wounds. What is to be done?

Does one acquiesce and go with the cultural flow, accepting the premise that “all is vanity,” or that creation is meaningless and just a “blooming, buzzing, confusion?” Are we to live a life of “quiet desperation” and assume a “survival of the fittest” mentality? Ideas attributed to and promoted by impious and profane thinkers, in all areas of society, have resulted in a vacuous world of moral relativism and situation ethics that views the notions of **Absolute Truth** and **Divine Authority** as being an “opium of the people.” The steady drumbeat of ridicule and denouncement of spiritually driven virtue has resulted in the inevitable pronouncement that “God is dead.” The prevailing question is no longer “to be or not to be”, but to believe or not to believe – and at what cost?

Thomas Merton, in an introduction he wrote for St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, states that:

Original sin, an act of spiritual apostasy from the contemplative vision and love of God, severed the union with God that depended on the subjection of Adam's will to the will of God. Since God is Truth, Adam's apostasy from Him was a fall into falsehood, unreality. Since God is unity, Adam's fall was a collapse into division and disharmony. All mankind fell from God in Adam. And just as Adam's soul was divided against itself by sin [soul-sickness], so all men were divided against one another by selfishness. The envy of Cain, which would have been impossible in Eden, bred murder in a world [OZ] where each self-centered individual had become his own little god, his own judge and standard of good and evil, falsity and truth. (p. xii)

Countless people have fallen prey to these, and even more sinister deceptions. The wizard who hides behind the screen in this surreal Land of Oz, a land made desolate by the ravages of confusion and pride, seeks to reinforce and perpetuate our collective identification as "poor banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears." As you may have already ascertained, the wizard who lurks behind this screen is none other than the ancient enemy — the Accuser — who

sought to sabotage our Lord as He confronted the fallen nature of this world with a two-edged sword of Truth - the subversive Nazarene truth.

It is the infernal Tempter who profits from our spiritual confusion and sinful pride. It is he, made manifest in the scoffers at the time of Jesus' earthly mission, who bound our Lord to the whipping-post in an attempt to stem the rising tide of belief in a new way of life that emphasized saying "yes" to the eternal truths of faith, hope, and love. The scourging was, and remains, Satan's way of instilling terror into the hearts and minds of those who are followers of Christ, the only Son of God the Father, fully human and fully divine.

As our spiritual mother, it is the Virgin Mary who teaches us to remain hidden and unknown and to ponder all things in our heart. It is Our Lady of Sorrows who helps us imagine standing in the crowd with her as she observes the horror wrought by spiritual indifference and compromise with the evil ways of the world. May we gain a sense of the sacredness of suffering experienced by Our Lord as he gave himself over to those who sneeringly asked "what is truth?" – and were unable to comprehend the obvious answer. I offer my own reflection:

Shrewdly sly and subtle serpent
your sinuous form swishes and swirls,
swift and severe, like a whip smartly swung
with supple and sinister skill.

Your siren sound sizzles and stings,
while searching the spotless skin,
as you seek to shred the sacred soul
with a shearing suffering.

But only your screams slice the silence
in salacious and slanderous scandal,
as you slither away in stealth defeat
like smoke from a spent candle.

The ancient enemy was defeated that day, and continues to be subjugated every time a believer says “yes” to the Spirit of Sanctification. It is Mary, “full of grace,” whose own “yes” reverberates throughout history and encourages us to accept our own annunciation and subsequent way of the cross. May we all allow the Holy Spirit to overshadow us so that we too can become imitators of Mary’s total yielding to the will of God with a concurrent renunciation of self-love. Furthermore, may we strive to live as Mary and ask the “holy queen, mother of mercy” to become “our light, our sweetness and our hope.”

The choice is ours to make. It is actually a “Tale of Two Cities.” We can traverse the yellow brick road in search of a mind, a heart, the virtue of courage, or a way back home. What awaits us, however, is the grand wizard, the overseer of the Emerald City – the master of illusion and lies, the executor of death. The road less traveled, the narrow way, leads to the Eternal City, “...the holy city, new Jerusalem...” (Revelation 21: 2).

It is here that Almighty God will dwell with His people and “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21: 4).

The great and haughty wizard is a supreme executioner who, like a roaring lion, seeks to devour all wayward sheep infected with the opportunistic physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual “disease” of soul-sickness. After much consideration, I have begun to refer to this relentless adversary as the ubiquitous “Mr. Bones.” I have chosen this name because it describes one method he and his minions use to achieve their nefarious objective:

(1) Mr. Bones first attempts to *beguile* the unsuspecting person with something that, at first glance, seems not only harmless but beneficial.

This “fool’s gold” is in fact a temptation that begins to arouse any number of our moral and ethical weaknesses and/or selfish desires.

(2) This exposure to temptation *obfuscates* or confuses our moral, ethical, and rational sensibilities leading us to question their degree of efficacy and legitimacy.

(3) The resulting state of confusion makes us vulnerable to rationalizations, compromises, and subtle *nudges* towards the “forbidden fruit.” Mr. Bones has, from the beginning, been a very wily foe.

(4) It is now time for the potential prey to be *emboldened* into asserting their self-will in opposition to God’s will. This is the last opportunity the teetering soul has to say “yes” to God and flee from the infernal menace.

(5) If the process is allowed to continue unabated, Mr. Bones achieves his objective and *snatches* another unwary soul.

How very blessed we are to know that God, in addition to being a just judge, is also a God who is rich in mercy. Remember the words spoken from the cross – “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 2: 34).

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL



I think, at least to some extent, I remain uncertain of God's genuine love for me. The deeply imbedded neuropathways in my brain continue to proclaim my unworthiness like a flashing neon sign. For many years I was of the opinion that my sins were so offensive to God that He would not, more specifically, could not forgive me. I was taken aback on one occasion of spiritual self-flagellation when a person, perhaps due to impatience, suggested this was an example of extremely prideful thinking. In essence, I was stating that my sins were more powerful than God.

This way of thinking may have also been an attempt on my part to avoid taking responsibility for previous transgressions and not having the courage to engage in transformative change. Sometimes the screen that hides the infernal wizard is, in reality, a mirror – a “funhouse” mirror that presents a grotesque and distorted reflection of our true nature as one made in the image of God. The image in the mirror only allows us to see our soul-sickened self doubly bound in the cruel cords of temporal space and time. The reflection

we see is viewed through a darkened glass with little to no presence of the marvelous and Eternal Light (cf. 1 Peter 2: 9-10).

Difficult to describe, try to imagine a jig-saw puzzle comprised of six-hundred-and-sixty-six pieces turned over on a table top. Your task is to assemble the pieces in their proper configuration without benefit of seeing the whole picture printed on the top of the box. Furthermore, all of the pieces are tinted by shades of the color grey with the only real distinguishing features being their undefined and undulating shapes. Finally, you have a life time, however long that may be, minus ten seconds to accomplish the task. Failure to complete the puzzle will result in hearing God say, “I never knew you; depart from me you evildoers” (Matthew 7:23).

Our first mistake was to think we could accomplish this task of figuring out the “puzzle of life” on our own, without abandoning our will to the will of the omnipotent and glorious God. Our second mistake was to arrogantly continue along this path, bewitched, bothered and beguiled.

St. Faustina offers us a beautiful prayer to use when the arms of distorted time and space begin to slither around us like two sinewy snakes, not in an embrace of love, but in an attempt to render us faithless, hopeless and afraid.

O My God

When I look into the future, I am frightened,
But why plunge into the future?

Only the present moment is precious to me,
As the future may never enter my soul at all.

It is no longer in my power
To change, correct or add to the past;
For neither sages nor prophets could do that.

And so, what the past has embraced I must
entrust to God.

O present moment, you belong to me, whole
and entire.

I desire to use you as best I can.
And although I am weak and small,
You grant me the grace of Your
omnipotence.

And so, trusting in Your mercy,
I walk through life like a little child,
Offering You each day this heart
Burning with love for Your greater glory.

(Diary,2)



FINDING THE WAY BACK HOME



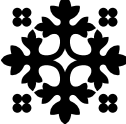
Being a lector and altar server has literally given me a different perspective on the Mass. First of all, I used to feel submerged in the sea of people sitting in the pews. There was a sense of comfort thinking of myself as anonymous and lost in the faceless crowd. I could become distracted, allow my eyes and ears to wander, even fall asleep, and no one would ever know. This was especially the case if I sat at the back of the church. What I have learned, however, is that I can see the faces of just about everyone from my vantage point as a lector or altar server; I can see a myriad of expressions ranging from indifference to reverence and wonder what people might be seeing in me, now that I have a face of my own. This little insight has allowed me to understand that we are never out of God's "sight" and He is aware of everything we think, say and do.

Secondly, and most astoundingly, I imagine the people rising up out of the pews and walking towards the Priest to receive Holy Communion as being like the dry bones that arose at the behest of God via Ezekiel (cf. Ezekiel 37: 1-14). These

parishioners — these “dry bones” — surely take on new life and are born again after consuming the Way, the Truth and the Life. In similar fashion, we are all like Lazarus, brother of Martha and Mary, who after hearing Jesus say, “Lazarus, come out” (John 11: 43), exited his burial tomb, unwrapped the coverings of death and encountered the Lord. Is that not what occurs with us each and every time we participate in the sacrament of reconciliation?

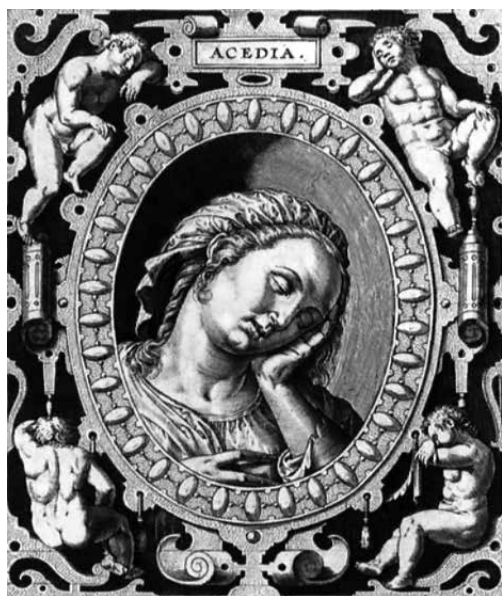


FINDING CATHOLIC REMEDIES FOR NEW TEMPTATIONS

 I am sufficiently removed in space and time from the acknowledged beginning of my spiritual coming of age and self-identification as a wayfaring Catholic to now seriously consider where my next footstep will lead. While remaining involved in all the activities noted above, I sense a vague but definite nudge to retreat into myself once again. Might this be the work of ubiquitous Mr. Bones?

Although I remain tentative, perhaps feeling the influence of Mistress Acedia, I know that full surrender to Divine Will offers an amazing reward — the Lord says,

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you.... (Ezekiel 36: 25-27)



TAKE A DEEP BREATH



How is it possible to describe an experience of why I am still a Catholic that is, practically speaking, indescribable? How does one, for example, define a spirit, a vapor, a breath? Yes, we can speak of breathing in “everyday” terms – our lungs expand with oxygen as we inhale and contract as we exhale carbon dioxide. But a breath is so much more. Indeed, breath is life itself.

We can also think about breath in an imagined, “eternal” context. To inhale can be thought of as receiving the soul-sustaining grace, love, hope and mercy of Almighty God, while exhaling dispenses these hallowed gifts into a world in great need of compassion and forgiveness. In essence, we receive God in a manner dependent upon our personal inclinations and unique life situations, and give Him away through our thoughts, words and deeds for the sake of building a unified community of “saints.” This depiction of breathing, characterized by the imagined dynamic of receiving and giving away of gifts attributed to the Holy Spirit, can be viewed as a form of silent and continuous prayer.

This moment of intimacy with God is something

foundational, an eternal cornerstone upon which every spiritual edifice is constructed. To experience Almighty God in such a personal manner imprints a memory in our consciousness that can be drawn upon at any given moment, in defiance of the dictates imposed by circumstance, time and place. The act of encountering God goes beyond relative measure and description — encountering God puts us in touch with the eternal and absolute truth.



YOU CAN RUN BUT PLEASE DON'T HIDE



I am very grateful for all the blessings I have received throughout my life, blessings I was only recently able to acknowledge. As previously alluded to, the misfortunes of life can actually be blessings in disguise. I know nothing about you, dear reader, except for the fact that you have also suffered. You have done battle with your own “winged monkeys” while traveling your own “yellow brick road.” I continue to encounter Mr. Bones and Mistress Acedia along the thoroughfare and must remain vigilant in my attempts to avoid spiritual atrophy. Yes, I continue to run but pray to God I will no longer attempt to hide. I now invite you to place your trust in Almighty God and in his one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Putting ourselves in position to more readily receive God’s graces is the least we can do to acknowledge the great sacrifice made by the Lord who entered into our everyday lives in “this valley of tears.” Scripture states:

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere,

"What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels, you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:5-9)

As members of the Mystical Body of Christ, we are eternally grateful that Jesus chose to taste death so that all who believe in the salvation of souls could taste eternal life.

Let us become like seeds planted in the "humus" of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that fertile ground so rich in mercy who, in turn, plants his seeds of grace in the compost of our lives through the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist.

May we become the personified body of Christ, both personally and collectively, so that others may, in some small way, encounter God when they encounter us.

And now, dear reader, I sincerely hope you have benefited in some small way from my musings related to the question as to “Why I am Still a Catholic.” In closing, I would like to leave you with these final images:

As my toes dangle over the edge of the precipice and I gaze out into the abyss, a multitude of thoughts and images cascade from darkness to light and back again. I know that God is with me and yet I hesitate to take the faith-filled leap and fly. I worry that my “wings” will not support this orb of a heavy heart. Perhaps this black hole, with a density so great and gravitational pull so powerful that not even light can escape its self-serving clutches, will someday be transfigured into a burning supernova of divine light.

If that occurs, the only decision left to make is to be either a living tabernacle with closed doors keeping the divine illumination hidden but not unknown, or be a living monstrosity continually radiating holy brightness. In either circumstance, or any combination of the two, I will know that God has answered my prayer to “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51: 2)!

Shalom,

Charles

ABOUT THE WHY I AM STILL A CATHOLIC!

A SERIES OF BOOKLETS

by Ronda Chervin, Ph.D., Editor

In the year 2016 I read somewhere that 60% of Catholics have left the Church or only attend occasionally!

I was shocked! Myself a convert from an atheist but Jewish background, Jesus, manifested and coming to me in the Catholic Church is the greatest joy in my life...from time into eternity!

How could it be that so many Catholics have lost faith in a church that offers so much?

I believe it was the Holy Spirit that suggested to me a remedy.

Suppose the parish racks had little booklets written by strong believers, such as myself, describing why we are still Catholics in spite of many of the same experiences which have alienated other Catholics! Such a series of booklets could attract wavering Catholics or be given by strong Catholics to family and friends who have left us. In this way our series was born.

So, now I address all wavering Catholics, and all those who have left the Catholic faith, and beg you to give us one more chance. Could it hurt to say a little prayer, such as this?

Jesus, if you are really the Son of God, and you want me to receive fullness of grace through the Word and Sacraments in the Catholic Church, open me to the witness of the writers of these booklets. As they tell me why they are still Catholics, please tell me why I should still be a Catholic!