

WHY I AM STILL A
CATHOLIC
Volume Eight
FACING OUR
IMMORTALITY



SR. ANNE MARIE WALSH, SOLT

*Why I Am Still a Catholic
Facing Our Immortality*

by

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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!



I am a perpetually professed Sister of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, an international missionary community comprised of all the vocations: Priests, Religious and Laity. I hold degrees in Early Childhood Education and have completed additional course work in Formation and Missiology at the Pontifical University Urbaniana, Rome, along with various other formation and development seminars, classes, etc., over the last 33 years.

I have served in many different works of Our Lady's Society, particularly in education and formation, as well as 13 years in General Administration, 10 as the General Sister Servant.

At present, I write, conduct Family Healing study groups, Ignatian Retreats, retreats on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Theology of the

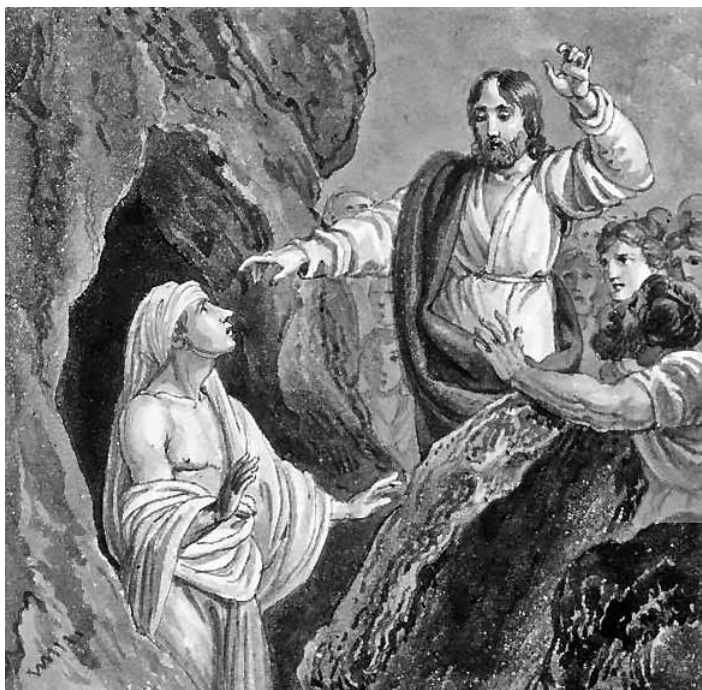
Body, retreats for women with cancer and other retreats as requested. I am currently assigned to *Domus Trinitatis* in Willey, Iowa, a SOLT retreat and renewal center. Some of my writings can be found at:

www.missionaryinthemodernworld.blogspot.com
<http://catholic365.com/author/sr-anne-marie>

I was diagnosed with my first cancer 13 years ago at the age of 48. After surgery and treatment I was free of cancer until three years ago when I was diagnosed with a different, more aggressive form of cancer. After treatment, I am currently again cancer-free. It is worth mentioning that the treatments I chose both times, were a mix of the conventional, alternative and spiritual (I always immediately seek out the reception of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, blessings from our Priests, and prayers of the whole community.) Many people, when receiving a dread diagnosis, one as frightening as cancer, struggle with understanding how a loving God could allow such a thing. As a result they lose faith or even leave the Church. The mystery of suffering is not easy. It challenges everyone of us at some point in our lives. Here is my experience and what I have learned from dealing with this mystery in my own life.

*"When I shrink from suffering,
Jesus reproves me and tells me
that He did not refuse to suffer.
Then I say, 'Jesus, Your will and not mine'.
At last I am convinced that
only God can make me happy,
and in Him I have placed all my hope..."*

St. Gemma Galgani





FACING OUR IMMORTALITY



Anyone who has ever received an unexpected diagnosis of cancer or some other serious disease knows the power of the experience to suddenly and radically change the inner world in which we normally live. Anyone who has lost a loved one especially without warning, experiences the same thing. Perception, understanding, the hierarchy of what we have up to then considered important suffers a seismic shock and shifts the plates of our current existence into a completely changed landscape which can seem foreign and strange and certainly frightening in many ways.



Having been through this myself several times, and watching those around me, I've come to realize that the shock comes not so much from facing our own mortality as it does from not having faced our immortality. That's the real problem. *To say we now are brought to a place where we have to face our own mortality is actually to stand before an untruth and feel forced to embrace it.* Our whole being revolts against it and all the classic stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and resignation follow.

And with good reason. *We are not mortal, and the light of Christ announces that definitively.*

Jesus doesn't come into our darkness to commiserate with us. He comes into our world to rescue us from the fetters of our darkness, including the weight of our own corruptible bodies, so that time, (however much we have), in its proper place, can launch us safely and happily into eternity.

It is true that death is a kind of limit, the line past which nothing more can be done in



this world in our present state. But it is not the

end. ***We are immortal, and it really is not necessary to defend this belief because all who are truly in touch with themselves know deep in their being that something infinite, something eternal abides in their very substance.*** And this something is personal. It is not an energy or a memory or a force. It is of the substance of who we are, how we know ourselves, and how we are known. It is our very person, and it is never lost by trial or suffering or disease or death. ***The person does not die. The body gives way for a time. But we do not die.***

Because our body is corruptible in this fallen world, we shed it in dying, in order to be completely healed and made ready for immortal bodies which we will receive, at the end of time. And like all who go through the decline of their own bodies in aging, sickness, losing parts here and there, I've come to understand that it is in keeping with God's plans ***to hold fast to the promise of eternal life and the glorified body*** rather than trying to hold on to our present existence, attempting by our own might to make our bodies immortal as though we can somehow transfigure them under our own power. Sickness quickly disabuses us of the illusion that we have the capacity to do this. But it doesn't take away from us the desire to be completely restored, whole and transcendent.

All the other darknesses we hold onto in our lives are also often rooted in this failure to embrace our immortality. Jesus comes to us, “to a people who walk in darkness” to show us a great light. “To those of us living in a land of gloom, His light shines.” (Is 9:1) This is a light that comes from eternity and causes joy and great rejoicing. It doesn’t matter if I live in the gloom of a corruptible body which I am losing piece by piece or in the decay of old age.

It doesn’t matter if my darkness is the bondage of alcoholism or weariness, doubt, indifference, fear, wounds, worldly aspirations, pride, unforgiveness, bitterness, depression, a hard heart. ***This is a light that actively seeks out every darkness in order to dispel it and banish it forever. It is the light of the promise of immortality which we are created for*** and which Jesus comes to restore to us if we can just let go of our mortal clingings.

I cannot tell you exactly why I am no longer afraid to die. It is not imminent at the moment that I know of. I have, as I said, faced my own death before. The first conscious time was full of all the shock and fear that is normal for anyone who receives an indefinite diagnosis and is told they may die. ***“If the disease is anywhere else in your body then all bets are off.”*** That is the way it was put to me. All the human emotions and

questions coursed through me at that time, leaving me sleepless and isolated within myself, knowing no one else could really stand with me in the place I had suddenly found myself.

The most frightening realization had to do with time. Time, always seemed without limit. There seemed to be plenty of it. Without measure. Now it was quantifiable. There was only so much left. ***How is it I was not used to thinking of time here as something limited and then gone forever?*** To manage time now seemed overwhelming. A great number of things which had always seemed possible, now had to be definitively rejected. They would not, could not be done any longer. My mother, as she was dying, recognized this watching a slide show of Hawaii. She said matter of factly and somewhat sadly: I guess I will never get to see Hawaii. And we in our denial said: “Well, let’s see. Maybe.” The fact was she never got to see Hawaii. And she knew it.

My fear in relationship to time had very much to do with its ending for me. ***I was frightened by my lack of preparedness for what would come next,*** for what would come as soon as the measurement of things in this world was no longer the reality I lived in.

The most unsettling thing was the thought of

suddenly standing before God, Face to face, and not knowing what I could possibly say to Him,



fearing He would be so utterly disappointed with me for having done nothing, really nothing of any importance for Him! My fantasies of accomplishing great things were suddenly wasted hours of vainglorious daydreaming, all dissipation, nothing of substance to present, because I had only been thinking of myself. And nothing of the accomplishments or achievements I held within me amounted to much in this different light of eternity. They didn't have much meaning there, as far as I could tell, not because they were without value, but because I would have done them for myself and now I, as I knew it, was coming to an end. *The prospect of death has a funny way of de-*

centering you from yourself, causing you to step outside yourself, making you realize at a deeper level than you have ever been aware of before that you are not the nexus for meaning in life. Our egoism runs much deeper than we think.



I did not come to a *reorientation* in my awareness until, in the peace of an evening sky in which the Father's presence was written large,



and I, as small as a child, touched by His awesome power, was lifted out of myself, above myself, into another embrace of reality that made my whole life different. *In that embrace, there was peace in living or dying.* It didn't matter which it would be. I would

be held in this love and nothing, not even death, was frightening in that love. Whatever happened would come from that love; and in that love I was always/already held.

Time was no longer the same issue because I now knew with my very being that,

... when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Galatians 4:4-7

This is what His love for me, and for you, is really about. This Gift is always being offered. Christmas is always present. ***Our deepest regret at the end of time will not be what we did or didn't do. It will be how deeply we underestimated and misunderstood the infinite goodness and love and mercy and tenderness of our God.*** Christmas lights up this incredible love of God. Calvary seals it and Resurrection celebrates its triumph over sin and death and all evil and darkness.

Jesus came, says the Liturgy of the Hours in Evening prayer I of Christmas, ***to "bring joy to all peoples with the promise of unending life."*** In the fullness of time He came to break the boundaries of time by giving the hope of heavenly birth to each of us. He did not cling to His time here. He

was born to die for us that we could live with Him for all eternity.

And Mary, most of all, knew this bittersweet mystery from the time she said: *Fiat!* ***She knew when she said yes to Bethlehem she was also saying yes to Calvary.*** She knew the Scriptures



like no other. She knew the Messiah would live out the mystery of the Suffering Servant, that He was destined to suffer and die and rise again to save His people. That she would be intimately involved now Herself in that mystery of life, suffering and death, was a conclusion she could not escape, and did not wish to escape once God asked her full cooperation in His Plan.

She is a Mother who thus leads us and protects us along a way she herself has trod more intensely than we ever will. The comfort in knowing this is immeasurable. ***Because God also asks our cooperation in this mystery of His own life in us.***

When I began treatments for my first round with cancer at a large, public university hospital in a major city, they scheduled me and then informed me without any input on my part. Imagine my surprise when I noted the dates they had unwittingly chosen:

August 22, the Feast of the Queenship of Mary, to October 7, the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary. Who was really in charge behind the scenes? ***Was it not obvious I was part of a deeper mystery?*** There was no doubt in my mind, only great comfort in knowing my Mother was with me and holding my hand through the whole ordeal.



This need for a mother at times of crisis in life was driven home to me in a very special way as I watched and occasionally spoke with others who were going through treatment at the same time. I began leaving rosaries and copies of *The Secret of*

the Rosary by St. Louis Marie de Montfort in the waiting rooms.

Since I was coming for treatment every day, I began to worry that because I had not obtained permission to leave these materials, they were being thrown out. This was because, every day, when I came again, the tables were empty and there was no sign of either rosaries or books.

My fear was put to rest when a radiologist came out one day and said: “Sister, do you have anymore of those rosaries?” So I said, “Oh, you knew it was me leaving them?” He laughed and said, “Yes, we figured it was you.” So I told him I thought maybe they were being thrown away, but he assured me that almost as soon as I put them out the rosaries, people came over to look at them, and then pick them up and carry them off.

My immediate thought was that these *people, like myself, facing maybe the greatest challenge in their life, needed their mother, and in this case, their Heavenly Mother.* They needed explanations, comfort, reassurance. And She certainly was anxious to Mother them. She was right there to care for all of them as the best of Mothers.

It may seem incomprehensible that our most intimate encounters with God often come through suffering. But I have come to discover

a remarkable mystery here, one which makes me eternally grateful for having been gifted with the Catholic faith. It is that ***suffering is a gateway into the heart of God.*** In all the world there is no integrating vision that explains, especially the reality of suffering, with the clarity, meaning, consolation and purpose of Catholicism.



There is no real narrative thread outside God. And I have found nothing with the power to give meaning, to unify and integrate the complexities of the human heart or explain the struggles and yearnings that inhabit the depths of a soul and that steer the course of our history, our own stories, as fully as the Catholic faith does. ***Man tends toward God by His very nature. And this will always lead him outside himself in a quest to be a part of something greater, something transformative and transcendent.*** The awakening of a living Faith in our lives, often through suffering, draws us into a real encounter with God, with our loving

and provident Father, with Jesus our Savior and Brother, with the Holy Spirit, our Consoler and Guide. In Them, our lives, our stories, are filled with the best of all relationships, a Mother like no other, and brothers and sisters who surround us with unending help and encouragement.

To realize experientially that one is never alone, but loved and deeply cared for, especially in suffering, is a healing balm of tremendous worth all by itself. For whatever reason, a genuine, well-developed theology of suffering, an understanding of the redemptive value of suffering, is rather rare



outside Catholicism. Most people don't like to see Jesus on the Cross longer than it takes them to acknowledge that He died for our sins, which He certainly did do. And understanding our spiritual bond with one another is often limited to one of fraternal

solidarity which also is true, but does not reach to the depths of our oneness with each other in Christ as members of His Mystical Body. In the Catholic understanding, I offer my sufferings in union with Christ, no matter what they are, that He may use them as channels of grace and salvation for other souls in need of them.

In fact, what really happens is that, in suffering, it is not my suffering that Christ enters into but rather His that I enter into, so that He may live out His life in me, as He has done down through the ages of time in all His holy ones, bringing salvific grace to every generation. He seeks my participation in His own suffering, which lacks nothing but our presence in it out of love for Him and for other souls. Thus St. Paul can say:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ on behalf of His Body which is the Church... Col. 1:24

One of the laments of Bishop Fulton Sheen was ***the amount of wasted suffering that goes on, especially in hospitals.*** Suffering that is not linked



*Venerable Magdalena Aulina Saurina
(1897-1956)*

to Christ, which He is not allowed to enter into and make meaningful not only for ourselves but for the lives of our loved ones and even other souls who are in need who we may not know, is lost forever. It is not a wonder that people who do not have a vision enlightened by faith, are full of anger and bitterness. ***Jesus had a***

vision on the Cross. He knew what His suffering would effect. To be on the Cross without Jesus and without His vision, is a recipe for despair.

I'll never forget meeting a young man, perhaps 14-15 years old, in a waiting room where he was about to begin a third round of chemo. He was under no illusions about the effectiveness of the treatment. He matter-of-factly told me that the treatment would not cure his cancer, but only hopefully keep the tumors from growing.

He was a typical teenager. He wore a cool black jacket and black jeans with lots of zippered pockets all over both. And he was lost in his music, listening to his ipod, like any other teenager any other place in the world might be doing. ***Except he wasn't any other teenager and he wasn't any other place in the world.*** He was a cancer patient in a room with others waiting for an infusion of harsh chemicals into his body, chemicals that would attack not only his cancer cells but healthy ones too, and cause him suffering additional to the cancer.

I was immediately intrigued by him, and finding only one chair left, sat next to him. He noticed me too immediately and took his ear plugs out long enough to start a little small talk before tentatively saying: "You know, I know God, and I'm not afraid to die. No one should be afraid to die, that is if you

believe in God.” I was in my religious habit so I affirmed that quickly.

“Of course I believe.” I said. And then He said something which I’m sure his illness had opened him up to understand. He said, ***“It is a shame that people wait until something happens, like they get really sick, before they get to know God.*** They should try to know Him no matter what. I am not afraid of Him. I know Him. I am not afraid of dying.”

And with that he went back to listening to his music. It reminded me of the story of St. Aloysius



St. Aloysius Gonzaga

who was asked what he would do if he found out he was going to die that day. He said, “I would keep doing what I am doing.” Meaning, he was always conscious of God and of his own limited time here. So if he were outside playing ball or studying or whatever, he would keep doing that, until it was time to go. He also died young, at the age of 24. He was known for the great purity of his love. His interior vision was always on God. And it gave him great peace in the midst of whatever was going on.

This peace is a gift that can come with suffering and I saw it in that young teenage boy. I have seen it since in others facing the end of their lives here on this earth. And I have seen joy. Even great joy. It has been my experience as well.

Some of the greatest challenges that can come to a person in the midst of suffering can actually come from the outside, from those closest to you. You begin to recognize that the same thing that happened to Jesus happens to you. People looked at Him as He carried the Cross, and in their minds, He was stigmatized immediately as a criminal who had lived a bad life. His closest friends deserted Him out of their own fear of being associated with Him. Some were in denial. They couldn't understand how this was happening. Others told Him there had to be something He could do to save Himself. Still others disdained Him and reviled Him, as someone unclean, an untouchable.

All these things can be experienced especially by someone going through something as fearful to others as cancer. 'You must have done something wrong.' 'You must not have taken care of yourself.' Even, 'God must be punishing you for something.' 'There must be something you can do to save yourself. You have to cooperate and do what they tell you, no questions asked.'



Job and friends

There is a kind of desperate energy that keeps certain people around you in constant agitation over what is happening to you. And then there are those who are so self-conscious about your condition they say all the wrong things, cease relating to you as a person they know and love and have been comfortable with in the past. They just don't know what to do, and so you must spend lots of energy helping them. Which is not such a bad thing really. It's an education for everyone. But one of the hardest things to take is when they cease looking at you as the friend or person they knew and now only see that "you have cancer", as though cancer is who you have become.

When I was first diagnosed, and after I had gotten control of my thoughts, I made a conscious

decision with regard to cancer and I told everyone about it. I told them that ***cancer was not going to become the center of my life. God and my purpose, His mission for my life, would be where my energy would continue to be directed.*** And I would do what I needed to do treatment-wise, but only after prayer, study, discernment and outside consultation. I made decisions that did not always make my oncologists happy but which I knew were the right ones to make. And I continued with my life, dealing with the cancer when it was necessary, but ***never removing it from the Lord's power over it.*** God is in control. He knew from the before the foundations of the world that this would be a part of my life at a given time. And He knew, He knew all the sufferings that would come into my life, and what the causes of those sufferings would be, some my fault, some not, some just a part of the mystery of iniquity at work in the world, and others a share in His own Redemptive work. He knew what graces He desired to draw from the battle, what benefits, what goods He would fashion from the struggle both for myself and others. ***When everything is surrendered to God, there is no possible bad outcome.***

A woman I greatly admire is a fervent, Spirit-filled evangelist named Christine Caine. Her zeal for the Lord and for His people fills the room

when she speaks. Her gifts have been forged in the crucible of profound suffering, beginning from the time she was 3-years old and unspeakable weekly abuse began at the hands of 4 men, continuing for the next 12 years.



Her own process of healing and inner liberation from the fear and shame and

anger, bitterness, unforgiveness and resentment which filled her, and the healing of many other sufferings that seemed to target her life, ***required real time and the deepest penetration of Christ's transforming grace and power.*** But she too seems



to have found, in the midst of unimaginable sufferings, that gateway into the Heart of God, the wound in the side of Christ which He held open for her to enter into, finding in that gaping hole, a place that had her imprint, and that no one else could fit into. And from that Heart she now speaks with a divine

urgency and power that flows right through her and works miracles of grace in the hearts of those

who hear her speak. I know this. I have watched her and been moved by the power of her words, of her testimony.

Whether she knows it or not, she preaches with her life, as St. Paul did, Christ and Him crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1Cor. 1:24.)

I was amazed then to hear her tell of her own diagnosis of cancer only a few years ago. She was told she had cancer of the throat, a shock certainly to anyone who uses her voice in the kind of powerful way she does. But the way she and her husband dealt with it was to keep a small circle of those who pray and stay positive around them, trusting in the Lord Who can do all things. She then told of how she recognized only 3 possible outcomes.

1. The doctors could heal her through conventional treatments that would effectively eliminate the cancer.

2. God could intervene and heal her miraculously.

3. God would take her home to Himself.

She told everyone that ***in all three instances she would win.***

Hearing that, I wanted to shout for joy! I wanted

to tell everyone I knew that ***that is the precise spirit the Lord wants us to have when we face anything in this world that seems a threat to our current existence. There is no scenario in which we lose unless we are separated from Him.*** If we abide in Him and He in us, it doesn't matter if the whole world falls apart around us; nothing can harm us, not if we see it in the light of eternity.

In that light, suffering actually has a power that Pope St. John Paul II refers to in his apostolic letter on the *Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*. He says that ***suffering releases love into the world.***

In the light of Christ's death and resurrection illness no longer appears as an exclusively negative event; rather it is seen...as an opportunity to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbor, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a civilization of love.

Certainly this is what Jesus is doing on the Cross. He's releasing love into the world, redemptive love. ***But He includes us in His own mystery. He uses our wounds to do the same through us.*** And so this releasing of love into the world happens in several ways in the world of suffering. Certainly it happens on the part of those who care for the ailing. But it also occurs in a very beautiful and

irreplaceable way through the suffering person, because God grants some of His greatest graces only through suffering. That is what we know. But He helps us to know it more than intellectually. ***He helps us to live it and to follow Him in it right through to Resurrection and to the glorified life that awaits us.***

At Christmas, Jesus comes into the world as a tiny infant. He grows up in us. And then, after we complete the work assigned to us here, He gets us ready to go home, to our true home, which our Father has prepared for us from the foundations of the world. ***The work we have to do is often not what we would think.*** It is a work in the invisible realm of grace which we won't fully understand until we get to eternity. But Jesus bids us pick up our own Cross and follow Him there.

There is no response to this but spontaneous gratitude to God for the unfathomable riches of the life of faith given in Christ in our very Baptism. In this faith we can know things that are beyond the power of our reason, things we could know no other way.

And it is in the light of this faith that ***one begins to see that suffering, no matter the cause, is a gift,*** maybe one of the greatest gifts of this world. It is said that the saints, if they were given a choice,

would come back to earth for only one reason, to suffer. Because from eternity, they see now, the immeasurable value of suffering.

One cannot see this way if they have not made the breakthrough into the Heart of God. Someone



who describes this better than anyone is a Frenchman, Jacques Fesch, sentenced to the guillotine in 1957 for the murder of a policeman during a robbery. He underwent a mystical conversion in prison and wrote the following shortly before he was executed.

I am living through marvelous hours, and I feel as if I had never lived any other life than the one I've been experiencing now. Jesus draws me to Himself, and knowing the weakness of soul He gives me much, while asking for so little. For each effort that I make I receive another grace, and, in view of the shortness of the time, this ascent toward God is being achieved far more quickly than it would be for someone who still had years ahead of him.

The Blessed Virgin protects me, shows me the way I must go and what her Son wants of me. Thus my sufferings are changed into joy, and in order to mitigate the anguish of the last moments, our Mother makes me prefer the other world to this one.

From **Light over the Scaffold**, the Prison Letters of Jacques Fesch Presented by A. Lemonnier.

May it be so for each of us! May we be filled with the sweetness of God's love made present in the light of the smile of the tiny Christ Child. And may that smile strengthen our inner vision, in sickness and in health, in our sufferings and our joys, all the days of our life, till we arrive safely in our everlasting homeland.





The Burning Babe

As I in hoary winter's night
Stood shivering in the snow,
Surprised I was with sudden heat
Which made my heart to glow;
And lifting up a fearful eye
To view what fire was near,
A pretty babe all burning bright
Did in the air appear;
Who, scorched with excessive heat,
Such floods of tears did shed,
As though His floods should quench His flames,
Which with His tears were bred:
'Alas!' quoth He, 'but newly born
In fiery heats I fry,
Yet none approach to warm their hearts
Or feel my fire but I!
'My faultless breast the furnace is;
The fuel, wounding thorns;
Love is the fire, and sighs the smoke;
The ashes, shames and scorns;
The fuel Justice layeth on,
And Mercy blows the coals,
The metal in this furnace wrought
Are men's defiled souls:
For which, as now on fire I am
To work them to their good,
So will I melt into a bath,
To wash them in my blood.'
With this He vanish'd out of sight
And swiftly shrunk away,
And straight I callèd unto mind
That it was Christmas Day.

St. Robert Southwell

*The difficulty of explaining
“why I am a Catholic”
is that there are
ten thousand reasons,
all amounting to one reason:
that Catholicism is truth.*

G. K. Chesterton



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