

WHY I AM
STILL A CATHOLIC
VOLUME TEN

A CONVERSION STORY:
HANGING ON CATHOLIC...
FITTING LIKE A GLOVE

BY

JAMES A. HAROLD, PH.D



Why I Am Still a Catholic
A Conversion Story:
Hanging on Catholic. . . Fitting Like a Glove
by

James A. Harold, Ph.D

Copyright © 2017 by James A. Harold

Edited by Ronda Chervin

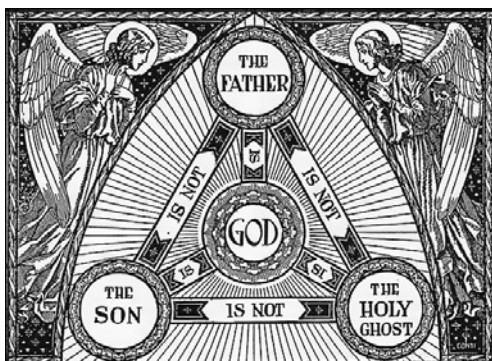
Designed by James Kent Ridley

Published by Goodbooks Media

Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN-13: 978-1974575107

ISBN-10: 1974575101



For My Wild and Wonderful Niece

goodbook
M

GOODBOOKS MEDIA

3453 ARANSAS

CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS, 73411

goodbooksmedia.com

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

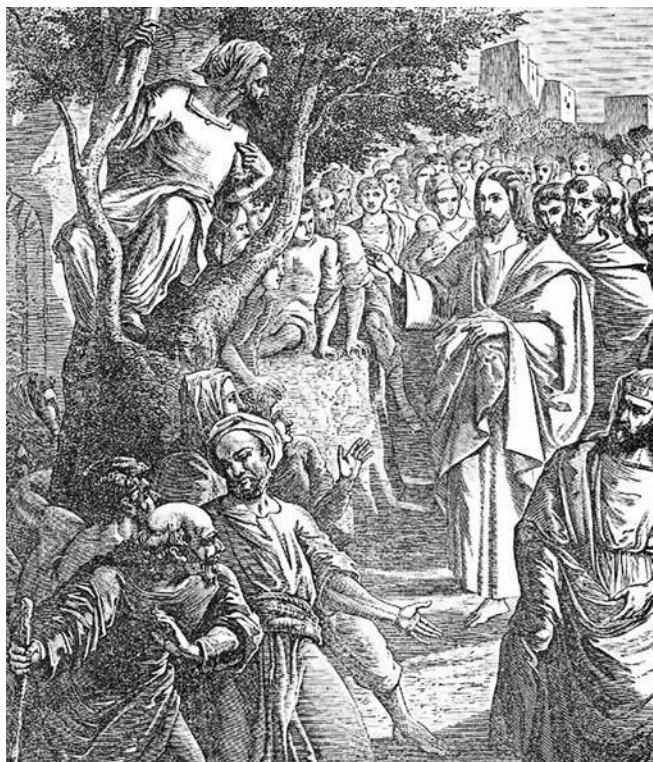
all those who have left the Catholic faith, and beg you to give us one more chance. Could it hurt to say a little prayer, such as this?

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!





In what follows I want to give an account of my life, from the deepest or at least from the most fundamental point of view concerning my own belief in God. As far as I can, I want to come to understand it. What is it that motivated me to remain Catholic all these years after my infant baptism? I could have easily left, together with so many of my friends and classmates. Why did I stay?



IT IS EASIER TO CHANGE ONE'S
RELIGION THAN IT IS
TO CHANGE ONE'S LIFE.



Those people who are believers will no doubt point to the utter necessity of grace for anyone to come into the Church or to stay once there. I certainly will agree with that assessment. But conversion is also about reasons. It is not reducible to them, as I believe there is also a role for grace that is “behind” conscious experience. But reasons are utterly necessary because of our personal nature. God is not dealing with robots or drones, and persons need to be adequately motivated by rational reasons in order to respond in a fully personal way. I want to explore some of those reasons here.

This loose chronological development will take me as far as the university. It was in college and graduate school, especially in philosophy (after getting a Master’s degree in psychology) that I really solidified in my religious faith. I was also fortunate enough to marry a wonderful, serious Catholic, who only further confirmed me

in my faith. And in my graduate school training in philosophy, I was around other students and faculty who were incredibly talented, good-willed, educated and serious about their religious faith. After this university training, the rest of my life was more a process of deepening what I already believed.

Where there was flux and the greatest threat to my faith was actually in my earlier years of high school and first few years of college. It is around this time—together with my own particular family circumstances—that I want to tell my story, as it was especially during this time that I experienced certain temptations for giving up my faith. The reasons for this challenge had more to do with the way I was living my life than any theoretical, intellectual problems I faced. I recognize, of course, that my own experience will on this point will differ from others, who perhaps really will have significant intellectual objections against Christ. In my case, however, the temptation was less theoretical and more existential, as **it is easier to change one's religion than it is to change one's life**. Because my own particular challenges to the faith were more existential than theoretical, I will focus more on my life experiences than on any particular intellectual trials that believing may have brought. Then within the context of these

life experiences, I will try to identify some of the reasons for my belief in Christ and in the Church.

There are typically not just one or two reasons for why people become or stay Christian and Catholic: there are often thousands strung together. And yet my own personal certitude—no doubt along with others—goes far beyond those reasons. It is like asking a loving husband why it is that he loves his wife. It will be hard for the husband to even identify, much less express, all the reasons. Thus whatever reasons he gives will always be insufficient to all the actual reasons he has. Christianity is like that. It is a belief system, of course, but it is also something more than that. It is—like marriage—also a love relationship



between persons. Still, in every love relationship there are some reasons to be found. What are they

concerning my belief in Christ? These reasons will be embedded within the context of my life. Here is my story.



My dad was a cradle Catholic, the son of a wild and wonderful Irish Catholic woman with flaming (dyed, I suspect) red hair. He himself married an upright, beautiful Scottish Protestant. Apparently the Catholic/Protestant divide did not prove to be any obstacle at all to the marriage, at least as far as I could see, partly because both parties seemed to be only culturally Christian. Nobody on either side of the family seemed put-off by it for religious reasons. I do not know for sure if this was the case because we never, at least as far as I can remember, ever talked about it. Religion, although respectable, was just not a topic of family conversation. It would have been instantly granted that religion was important, as it formed part of what constituted a respectability and decency. But religion was not the measure of respectability, as the relation was actually reversed. Religion itself needed to be within respectable bounds. Too much religion would have been as frowned upon as much as too little. Its importance within bounds was granted, but preferably only in an assumed and implicit way.

This is not to say that these people were not utterly great parents. One of my best memories of them came from our long-time Mexican gardener. He would come to our house once a week for mowing and trimming for what seemed like at least 30 years. Towards the end of that tenure, I remember him telling me that my parents was the very last of the houses he was working because he had been fired from all his other jobs, perhaps because he was just too old to do the work anymore. I thought: How typical of my parents to stay with good and faithful people. I thought the way they treated that man is exactly how we all should treat people. Perhaps he couldn't do the work as well as he once did, but the grass and bushes did survive.



*Robert Edgar Harold,
my father*

Their loyalty to people extended to the workplace. My dad became president of the only full-time job he ever had, at a medium-sized manufacturing business of plumbing supplies. He didn't talk much about his business to me, but I always knew when he had to fire people: he was in agony. A good manager sometimes just has to do it for the sake of the company, but of all the jobs he had that was clearly the one he detested the most.

At the end of his career, he turned the company over to the employees to try to make it, as far as he could, employee-owned. He made it so that every month his workers would earn stock in the company, serving also as a retirement fund. The only person in the company who did not benefit from this perk was himself. This was utterly in line with Catholic social teaching, where the ideal was for businesses to be owned not by government or by very few people, but broadly as possible and especially by its workers. My dad had no idea how Catholic his business ideas really were.

My parents were very fine people: to their employees and especially to their children. They were just one more gift given to me, utterly undeserved.

Why did I win the parent lottery? Why did I have such loving parents, whom I knew would almost literally kill themselves for my sake? I look around me and see kids growing up without fathers or mothers, psychologically wounded without loving or financial support—the support I knew I desperately needed—and I am in shock. Again, I do not have the explanation for this.

I've noticed this gift-giving aspect of God in other areas of my life too. I am professionally a professor of philosophy. This point is utterly

astounding to me. I do not seem to recall winning any scholarly awards in my rather checkered academic career. It just suited God's purposes—and perhaps His sense of humor—to give me this position that I knew I did not particularly deserve, like Moses with his speech impediment being sent to speak before Pharaoh. Couldn't the Good God have found someone better suited for this? Furthermore, I've been given gifts over and over again with my marriage and my children and grandchildren. And yes, I count my religious faith as just one more of those undeserved gifts.

I do know, however, even if it is only in faith, that God loves every single person and from every single background. And it is not just “everyone” considered in some generic sense. He loves every single person, even those severely wounded by



their upbringing or by their own decisions in life. Put another way, it is not just Cinderella who is special, but everyone one of us is repeating in our own lives the Cinderella story. We are all in our own way Cinderellas, and we all have cinder-

faces, full of wounds from our upbringing and from our sins. And we are also all utterly loveable, not just collectively but individually, every single one of us.



Perhaps this last idea can, to a point, be understood when we take into account the words of Christ, when he states, *“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked”* (Luke 12:48). While I would argue against the relativity of morality, there *is* relativity with respect to what is expected from us. I knew I had been given a lot, and I knew that I would not be morally evaluated on the same level as someone else who had been given far less. The important point is that the gifts given to me (leading to higher standards) were not because of any personal superiority. And I knew what a complete wreck I would have been without these gifts, especially of my loving parents. But as loving as they were, they were not particularly religiously oriented.

In contrast, even as a small child, I took my faith seriously. When I was around six years of

age, I remember being very disturbed that my dad would play golf on Sunday mornings instead of going to mass with the family. On one occasion I even privately called him on it—a six-year-old kid calling out the president of a company—and later, to my surprise, he fairly quickly stopped that habit and started coming to church with the family. To this day I do not know if what I said had anything to do with his change of heart. But because of his love for his children, I would not be surprised if he did it for my sake.

One other memory of Sunday mass: besides being continually the last one to the car because I couldn't find a shoe or a tie (boys wore ties to Sunday mass in the 1950's)—was, on one occasion, my dad gave me money at the beginning of mass for the collection; and I spent the first part of mass before the collection thinking about how I could just pocket the money and then on how to spend it. So I withheld the money from the basket. Of course, my dad called me on it. I said I forgot—now adding lying to the attempted theft—and he directed me to hand it over to the priest after mass. It was all rather embarrassing, but in handing it over to the priest, I proudly announced that I forgot to give it—thus lying a second time—and he complimented me on my honesty in handing it over. I felt rather sheepish about the compliment,

but was glad for it just the same.

This is the only occasion I can think of in my life that involved my attempting to steal anything. My point is not self-congratulation, but rather to point out that given my particular family circumstances, theft—outside of this botched attempt just noted—was simply off the table. The question is why. Was it because I am a superior human being?

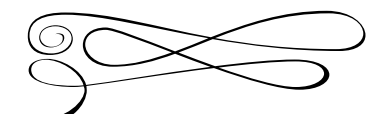
To answer the above question, consider what percentage of people incarcerated for theft would be in jail today if they would have had my parents and upbringing? And what are the odds of my staying out of jail if I had been in their situation?

Although I was given a religious temperament—as a sheer gift!—I had precious few religious insights as a child. I was just a normal, thoughtless kid. But I do not remember having one insight. It was at Christmas time, which was nothing less than a magical time for me. Every Christmas Eve my parents would host a large party for relatives on both sides, providing an occasion for everyone—grandparents and aunts and uncles—to exchange gifts. Before the relatives came, there would already be gifts under the tree, from parents and siblings. When the extended family arrived, the pile grew appreciably larger. Then during Christmas Eve night, after Santa had ostensibly visited, leaving

Perhaps I can now fill out this line of reasoning by saying that I somehow vaguely sensed, as a child, that the presents themselves—as great as they were—were by their own nature incapable of giving me real happiness. Happiness had to lie somewhere else, on another higher order of being, so to speak. Believe me, it is not like I didn't utterly love my loot, it is just that I longed for something else, something completely other. This longing was vaguely conscious and existential, although coming from a kid. There was nothing theoretical about it, nothing learned from books or school.



THE DEAD SEA AND THE PLAYBOY CULTURE



I was aware that I needed not only help, but also a specifically Christian transformation. It wasn't so much that I was psychologically disordered; with me it was more a spiritual disorder. But spiritual problems could quickly turn into psychological disorders, if I started repressing truth or looking for scapegoats and rationalizations for my misery. Furthermore, I was coming of age in the 1960s, a difficult time to be growing up.



Perhaps growing up at any time is difficult, but in the 60s, things came in that seemed so appealing, without yet realizing the ugly fruit they were to produce. It was the advent of *Playboy* magazine and James Bond:

good-looking and sexy. What could possibly go wrong? I was introduced to the tender mercies of pornography and masturbation.

I remember my high school teacher talking about such things: a lonely voice among a seeming sea of acceptance by the wider culture. But I really didn't need that voice—except as encouragement to avoid sexual sins—to know how disordered... and especially how enslaving, such practices was to me. I had first-hand knowledge.

In thinking back upon this time, I feel like one of the people of the Old Testament Exodus. There



were good reasons why God had Moses and his people wander about in the Sinai desert for 40 years, when they could have made the journey to the Promised Land in a few weeks. It was far easier for these people—with God's help—to get out of Egypt than it was getting Egypt out of the people. For the idol worshipping ways the Israelites adopted from the Egyptians can easily become deeply engrained. That timeline seemed about right for me too: It is hard for all of us to give up deeply-engrained addictions.

Will my giving them up—or will our giving our sins and addictions up—make us freer, happier,

more loving and more fulfilled? Oh yes. Even when I was deepest in my addiction, I knew that. Will getting free of them be easy and fun? Oh no. C. S. Lewis has this wonderful line, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” I honestly think I would have never given up these addictions, if they hadn’t made me so miserable. Misery is a powerful motivator. It also helped focus the mind of my utter need for Christ.



One part of this misery was the utter hopelessness of my situation. Try overcoming a deeply engrained addiction on your own. I had to take seriously the call of Christ that He came for sinners, because there was for me no other choice. It is all so humiliating and humbling. The other part of my misery was the realization that continually turning inward to these sins was death. It was a spiritual death of selfishness.

Although my dad was not particularly given to philosophical thinking, the one simile I remember him using to great effect with me was that we should avoid becoming like the Dead Sea, exclusively taking in water but never letting any of it out. That kind of inwardness leads to death, as the water gets stale, sick and then kills. That is a good image for a sickly, self-absorbed egotistical life: using and taking, never giving and loving.



This last point reminds me of the nature of the price I (we) have to pay for religious faith. The price will be everything, as we are called to give ourselves to another in love. And it will also be nothing, because it is only in self-gift that we can become happy. My sexual addictions were everything, for just like Tolkien's Gollum with the ring of power, they were all engrossing. And yet they were nothing too, or less than nothing, because they were all so



clearly disordered. I was turning in upon myself and trading the possibility of transcendence and self-gift for immanence and self-poisoning, and I knew it. I was stopping up, just like the Dead Sea, making myself miserable and sick. Turning instead towards Christ was giving to Him nothing for something.

Someone could respond and blame my religious upbringing. Perhaps if I just threw off my religion and achieve sexual freedom, I could get over my guilt and bad conscience. Perhaps there were people I knew who thought like that, and I also did flirt with the idea—which perhaps was the motivation for driving around with my aunt that Sunday long ago instead of going to mass—but deep down I knew that “solution” was really a lie. Christ was the cure, not the disease.





THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE
AND FRIENDSHIP
AND A FLAMING SHIRT
INSTANCE OF LOVE



At the time I clearly did not understand the proper (positive) nature of sexuality. I did not understand that sexuality is meant to be a gift for my beloved: reserved for her alone as a wonderful expression of our committed and exclusive love for each other. I do try to give a sense for that understanding of sexuality in my Ethics classes that I teach today. I certainly did not have that understanding myself growing up. I did know about faithfulness from the example of my parents, but I thought sex—outside of having children—was for entertainment. What I got for all that entertainment was (negative) enslavement and addiction. The Playboy culture is not all fun and games. It is best to be aware of both the above negative and positive sides of sexuality. And both sides are in no way contradictory when seen in light of the principle that **the higher the good (our sexuality) that is abused, the worse the evil that is produced.**

It was not until college that I got a sense for an adequate philosophy of sexuality. One important turning point for me was a class I took on *The Philosophy of Love and Friendship*. I was at that time a psychology major, and was engrossed in experimental psychology classes, with their rats and mazes. Psychology was not reducible to these things, of course; but the experimental method seemed to be a central focal point of my psychological education in college, because it is what measured psychological reality. In contrast, with this class on love and friendship, I found a far more interesting and theoretically appropriate subject matter for doing justice to my existential lived experience than anything I found in my psychology classes.

Psychology, of course, needs to go beyond what I was going through as a teen-ager. But it shouldn't ignore those issues either, as some of them dealt with perennial human concerns of love and friendship. It seemed to me that psychology did better at explaining psychological dysfunction and disorder than right order and what it is that genuinely fulfills people.

I mentioned above my tendency to turn in upon myself. I've already noted how this personality tendency of mine to go inward has its drawbacks and darker side, trying to get satisfaction simply

from one's self. But there is also a positive correlate to my personality as well. I do have a reflective nature. That nature comes in handy when trying to figure out what to do and how to grow up.



*Frances Harold,
my mother*

My more reflective nature proved to be an interesting contrast with the personality of my mother. She was an artistic, non-reflective and non-intellectual woman, who had a son who was non-artistic, reflective and intellectually oriented.

Later in life when my own family would come to visit my parents, my wife and I would talk about our children, assessing their problems and trials, trying to think of the most adequate approaches to dealing with them. My mom would listen for a while, but then ask why were we analyzing our children so much. Why not just experience them and love them? Why are you trying to figure them out? My mom was the kind of person who went for the immediacy of direct experience. After a while, all this reflection stuff bothered her.

In contrast, someone like me is willing to take a step back from that experience and look at it. My mom's immediacy of direct experience approach

certainly has its advantages—such as for being in the moment, as opposed to her dreamy son—but it also had its drawbacks too, insofar as potential or real problems will tend to not get addressed. Sometimes people can hit upon solutions, if they just think about things. Comparing the personalities of myself with my mom is a real study of contrasts, and yet I knew she utterly loved me.

I remember that when I was around eight or nine, I used to put the front edge of my tee shirt over a pot of boiling water on the gas stove during the winter months. It never got too cold in Southern California, but cold enough that the steam would then warm my skin when I let the shirt down. But one time I kept my shirt over the boiling pot too long and the shirt burst into flames. I had no idea what to do, except to run to my mother (sitting



close by) who put out the flames with her bare hands. I was surprisingly unhurt by that episode, but I doubt the same could have been said for my mom. I never asked about her injuries, but I also never forgot the price she paid for her son that day.

Reflecting about what it is that really fulfills people was something important to me, especially

insofar as my own tendency for turning in and feeding upon myself was just not working out for me. I knew that if this continued I would in short order consume myself, just like any other addict. To stop this pattern, I knew I had to somehow get beyond myself. I needed some kind of transcendence. I needed to learn how to love, just like what I was studying in that class. Getting out of myself involved love and friendship. But how was that possible for someone so addicted?

Naturally, there is a strong existential component for somehow learning how to love, as my mother taught me again and again, and most poignantly via the tee shirt fire incident. She taught me by the example of her life and her love for me. But that philosophy class on love and friendship also gave me an important theoretical key, especially important considering my own reflective nature. In that class the professor introduced me to a philosophical notion that was to become the most important idea I have ever encountered in philosophy: **the notion of intrinsic importance or value**. This is the idea that certain kinds of things, such as persons, as well as certain kinds of inner attitudes and responses that people make, such as responses of love and friendship, are not only important, they are **important-in-themselves**. Thus by value I mean an inner property of a being

or act which makes that being or act important-in-itself.

Normally, in college, people will learn all sorts of stuff. Sometimes they will master ideas. But more often than not, students will hardly go beyond some vague remembrance of the terminology, seemingly without the slightest attempt to really understand its meaning (as a teacher, I speak from experience). But whether we master ideas or not, what we learn in college will typically not stay with us and, in time, will inevitably filter away. This is, of course, sad, but it also is the obvious way of the world. And if the truth be told, some ideas we learn in college are better off being forgotten. Not every idea is good or true, and sometimes my mom's approach to life is far closer to what is authentically real and true than many silly ideas propounded by some woolly intellectual.

The notion of **intrinsic value** was not in that category. Granted that I learned this idea as an immature teen-ager, at an age when ideas and intellectuals can easily dupe people; but this idea has stood the test of time. It is something I never forgot, never (theoretically) turned away from. It became my intellectual North Star. Here we have a kind of marriage between lived-experience—my mom's approach—and my own more reflective approach, insofar as each side confirms the other.

It is an idea that doesn't challenge my deepest existential experiences of naïve lived-experience or any religious experience. It rather reinforces and confirms them. It is an idea, as I hope to show below, that led me to God.

There is another, obvious point: I realized in my own life that I needed to be motivated by values. Lust was a dead-end. But with value-motivated responses—especially when deep and pure—there is a greatness, a sweetness, something even majestic about them. While there are countless examples of this, the following one especially stands out



to me: I remember reading about a plane crash into the frozen Potomac River near the Washington D.C. airport. It was a while ago, perhaps in the 1980s. There were very few survivors from the

crash. Perhaps seven or eight were able to scramble up to the top of the fuselage of that part of the plane still floating above the freezing waters to wait for rescuers. Help soon came in the form of a crane, which lowered a harness for people to get into, to then be hoisted to safety. One of the survivors helped the others into the harness. Everyone was

hurt and some were severely injured by the crash. But when it came time for him to get into that harness, he, apparently, was too weak to



put himself in and there was no one left to help him; so he, instead, slipped away into the water. He saved six or seven lives that day. No one knew who he was.

Somehow all the evils of the world—which are of course considerable and at times overwhelming—pale in front of something like this: simple human goodness reaching to heroic levels. Evil cannot compete with this, no matter its severity or breadth. It remains too ontologically “thin,” like (to use a C. S. Lewis analogy) the space between cracks in a sidewalk that then opens up to the entire universe of goodness and reality. That man’s action that day was a window into that world. Evil can be overwhelming and horrible, but despite its horror, sometimes stretching as far as the eye can see, it will always have this “thin” character. The meek really will inherit the earth, and they will always inherit it. It seems that the promise of the eventual defeat of evil, of all evil, is already presaged in one authentically great, value-responding action.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VALUE FOR MY LIFE



While I knew that I needed to be motivated by values, there was also the motivation of lust, whereby a person does not particularly care about the other person, and merely approaches her from the point of view of pleasure. In fact, pleasure is a whole other kind of motivation. I knew all about pleasure-based motivation, pleasure versus value would be the battleground for my soul. Of course I knew of pleasure's legitimacy when there is no disrespect to any significant value at stake, but I also knew pleasure when it involved this disrespect, such as with lust.

This **distinction between pleasure and value** was important to my life because I could see that the first kind of importance kept me headed down the road I was already on, whereby the "theme" of my life was myself, and especially of (the immanence of) my own pleasures and needs. The more I was motivated by this kind of importance, the more I became the measure of everything motivating my will, and the less sense I had of anything or anyone

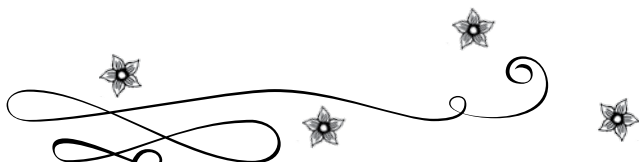
being higher than my own desires.

Not only that, I also noticed that my will became progressively weakened by becoming more and more subservient to my desires. Instead of my will being over my desires, the reverse actually happened. Thus my desires grew while the power of my will receded. I became the star (so to speak) of my own movie, and yet at the same time oddly increasingly impotent. I already knew this road pretty well, and I knew where it led: to addiction and misery.



The other road (of value), however, was different. This was the road of self-mastery, of giving myself to others in friendship and love, of responding to them as beings possessing a high value. It was the road of respecting others, where the only adequate response to another person is one of love. It was the **road of transcendence**.

VALUE OPENING TO GOD



What is interesting about value, in the sense of intrinsic importance, is how it points to God. Some ideas, in contrast, only make sense within the context of this world, and outside that context, lose their meaning. The whole world of economics is like that. The laws of supply and demand, so important in this world, are simply superseded in an infinite world where the supply is endless. This is not the case with the intrinsic values of love and friendship. The laws concerning the nature of these realities can never be superseded, only infinitely fulfilled. Love and friendship point to God, such that God is Goodness and Beauty and Love itself.

Of course, we do not see the infinite realizations of Goodness and Beauty and Love in this world, but we do find finite expressions of them in this world. This idea helps explain the following passage from the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses says this to his wavering people wandering about in the Sinai Desert:

For this command that I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up

in the sky, that you should say, 'Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?' nor is it across the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?' No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out (30:10-14).



EXISTENTIAL GRATITUDE AS
LEADING TO
PROOF FOR THE EXISTENCE
OF GOD



It is not just love and friendship that has the character of being intrinsic values, but also gratitude. One particular kind of gratitude, **existential gratitude**, can also take us to God. With gratitude in general, we can rightly say that the claims of a benefactor outweigh those of a stranger. Well, God is our greatest benefactor. Let us try now to understand this point, and how our existence implies—not just evidence—but even a strict proof for the existence of God.

It seems perfectly clear that I do not exist eternally. I am rather a creature rooted in time, having a beginning point at conception and birth. This, of course, means that there was a time in which I did not exist (before my birth and conception), and then came into existence. This further suggests that there is not then a simple identity between my being and my existence, where it belongs to my nature or essence to exist, as I could have remained

a mere possibility, and not then have become an actual person. Philosophers express this idea by saying that I—as well as everyone and everything else outside of God—have existence only. And since from nothing nothing comes, a non-existing me cannot be the cause of me. There is thereby a need for a reason—outside my own being—for my own existence.

Thus we have the occasion for gratitude for our very being and existence, as there would be no occasion for gratitude, if my nature explained my own existence. Furthermore, gratitude normally refers to gifts given to me. This kind of gratitude is different and far more fundamental: It is what we can call an existential gratitude for our very existence.

One could accept this point on existential gratitude for my very existence, but then claim we do not need God to explain this kind of gratitude, because of the obvious connection we have to our own parents. And sure enough, we really do have an obligation of gratitude to our parents, not only for whatever they have done with bringing us up, but also for their bringing us into existence.

There is, however, one problem with the object of my existential gratitude being my parents, as one can ask, how did they come into existence? Here it

seems obvious that my parents are not the ultimate source of my own existence, and that by stopping with them, one only postpones the problem without yet getting at this ultimate source. Because one can always reasonably ask: Where do they owe their own being and existence? Their being too had a beginning in time and was rooted in time every bit as much as my own existence. They too are only caused causes. How did they come into existence? By what power did they come into existence? Why is there something instead of nothing?

From nothing nothing comes. Even if we go back to the “Big Bang,” something had to have exploded. It was, after all, not nothing that exploded. What is the cause of that being? If it was itself caused, you are again only postponing the question. The whole sequence of caused beings needs an uncaused cause (because all other caused beings only postpone the question) in order to explain the real existence of every being in that sequence. Thus it seems to me that it is not only perfectly rational to conclude that only an uncaused cause created us, it is required if we are to think rightly.

Although the above is a bit of metaphysical reasoning, it is not really too far from common sense. We can call it a deepened common sense. It can also be found in ancient Judeo-Christian thought. I was amazed to read, early on in the

Old Testament, when Moses came upon the Voice coming from the famous burning bush that did not consume itself, that He then asked the Voice, who are you? And the Voice responded, “*I Am Who Am*” (Exodus 3:14). In other words, I am Existence Itself. Here philosophy and Sacred Scripture meet, supporting each other.

God is not only Goodness and Justice and Love Itself, going back to the first point, but also Existence Itself as well. Thus St. John could have just as easily said, “God is Existence” as “*God is Love*” (1 John 4:8). God is the uncaused cause, the ultimate source of all being and existence.



THE MAGNIFICENT BEAUTY OF CHRIST



A third connection between value and God concerns how God reveals Himself in the life of Christ. Archbishop Sheen famously said that Christ was the only person born to die: his death on the cross. The rest of us were born to live: our salvation in heaven.

Lots of people talk about why it is that Christ “had to die.” This kind of talk always seemed strange to me, because God is omnipotent. If He can do everything, at least everything intrinsically possible (to make murder and rape good is, in contrast, intrinsically impossible, like a square/circle), then why can’t He simply forgive our sins without the messiness of the cross? Why was it necessary for Him to have to go through his passion and death?

It seems to me—and here I’m open to being corrected—that this so called necessity is not really on God’s part at all, insofar as He can forgive sins as He wills, but rather on our part. We need to see the extent of God’s love for us, especially

considering all the evil we obviously find in the world (and in ourselves). We need to see divine love, infinite love being poured out all over us without limit or measure...to the very last drop of blood. There needs to be an expression of love commensurate to an infinite being who is Love itself. If God simply forgave our sins—No Harm No Foul!—that message would not have been sent, and the evil of the world would also have not been dealt with the seriousness it deserves.

Without the cross, the jeering accusations coming from people like Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre really would have some force when they then exclaim: Where were you during the Holocaust? Or the Armenian, Cambodian, Chinese, or Ukrainian slaughters? Where were You?



Where was He?

He was hanging from a tree.



Yes, these horrors—and many, many others—really are horrible, for look at what they brought: Innocence and Goodness itself hanging from a tree.

And yet, at the same time, this infinite infusion of Love has to be respectful to our human nature as persons. Like with every other kind of love relationship, God cannot force Himself upon us. That would go against what Love is, or, in other words, go against God's own nature. It would constitute an inner contradiction to the nature and essence of love. Thus, it is because of our personal

nature that God only appeals to our freedom via love. But this invitation to respond in love is not only freely given; it also has to be freely received.

If all this is true, then our acceptance of it and even our gratitude, while free, is also obligatory. It is as obligatory for us to respond with gratitude toward God—not only for our existence—but also for what He’s done for us on Calvary. It is at least as important for us to do that as for those people on the downed plane in the Potomac to be grateful to the man who save them, even though they never found out who he was.

Consider in contrast the ugliness of the opposite state of affairs, of someone being saved after the air crash on the Potomac who then sneers at the man who gave his life to save his own. Imagine that person saying, “What an idiot. He saved others but he couldn’t save himself” (an attitude that eerily harkens us back to Calvary). Such an attitude, which we rightly see as ugly and evil as applied to the air crash heroism, would be exactly like what we do to God, if He is not only our creator, but also really did ransom His life for ours. People like my niece do not know if God exists, and so they are far more “off the hook” than people like me who do know, or at least so believe.

THE HUMILITY OF GOD



One charming aspect of God is how He allows us to help each other get to heaven. He doesn't seem to stand on ceremony. Of course, in one respect everything is grace, and everything ultimately goes back to God and His grace. But God does not seem to mind not taking credit.



I remember hearing about my own godfather, my Uncle Charlie. Apparently he was not exactly the most reputable man on the planet, as he might have even been a thief. At one point of his life, he was managing a gas station, when there was an altercation with a customer not willing to pay for his gas. What the man did was douse my uncle with gasoline and light a match, severely burning him. He was so burnt that, at the hospital, he was scheduled for a leg amputation the next day. During the night, however, my uncle had a vision of a black man, dressed in black and white Dominican robes, floating up to his bed, silently smile, giving

him a sign of the cross, and then just floating out. No words were spoken. The next day another doctor looked at his leg and became upset with the other doctor the night before who scheduled the amputation, as he declared that my uncle had no



need for any such operation. Later my uncle found out from religious holy cards that the person who floated in was Martin de Porres, a mulatto—that is, half (black) Mexican and half (white) Spanish—and a lay brother of the Dominican Order from Peru (1579–1639).

From that point forward, my uncle began a love relationship with Martin. He would later give testimony for Martin's canonization (in 1962), and also gave talks and went on radio programs to spread the word about this wonderful man who cured his leg. What interested me was that it was not Christ who—at least directly—so touched my uncle. I remember my father describing him as the

kind of guy who would help with the collection and stand in the back of the church making jokes with friends during mass. He, perhaps, was not the most pious man in the church; and yet the Good God was willing to let Martin “do the work” saving my uncle. This story too touches on the humility of God.

Before my godfather died, my own family—with wife and two boys—visited Saint Louis where he lived and went to see him. He was in public housing downtown. He was happy to see us and tell his story yet again about Martin. We told him that, if we had another boy, we would call him Martin. We did not yet know that my wife really was then pregnant, and with our Martin. My uncle died shortly after Martin’s birth. His last note to us was just one line, “Where’s my Martin?” We all knew that it had to be a boy, even without fancy sonograms.

I remember myself relying on the humility of God with my own mother. She was dying of cancer. She was very afraid of death, no doubt afraid of meeting God (who isn’t?), but also afraid of the non-existence of God as well. She seemed to me to be afraid of believing in an illusion, of taking the risk of love and then being disappointed if it doesn’t turn out. Every love is, after all, a risk, including loving God. I remember a great grandchild of

my mom wanting a pen pal relationship with her, and she refused because she didn't want the disappointment of the child not writing back. With the humility of God in mind, I thought He wouldn't mind when I seriously and severely told her, "If I find out (presumably on the other side) that you despaired (thus not finding heaven) I'm going to be totally hacked!" It was not much of an argument, but I figured that the woman who was willing to go through fire for my sake would also do this for me too: her last favor for her son.

God's love for us is infinite, eternal and therefore utterly constant and non-ending. Nothing we can do can ever change it. So what happens when we sin and "mess up" is not so much that God becoming angry or vengeful, but rather that he pushes, so to speak, a re-set button. There is a new reality—our sin—that has to be taken into account with respect to our salvation. But God's love itself never changes. But now we are wounded, and that wound has to be factored in for getting us to heaven.

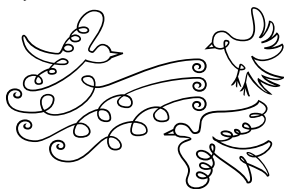
Thus the story is also not over with anyone of us—Christian or non-Christian—at any time during our life. Christ is happy for deathbed conversions, conversions at any time, as is already shown by the good thief Dismas, who stole heaven from his cross at Calvary.

On the other hand, there is also something sad about having to steal heaven, not from failing to achieve it (assuming that it is stolen), but rather from the failure to discover the real meaning of life earlier, of not giving to the Great and Good God the glory due to Him during life, and of possibly being at service to others—and especially of loved ones—helping them on their journey towards God.





FRIENDS, SAINTS AND GOD



After discussing how the various disciplines can lead us to God, I might conclude with a word on how a spouse or various friends, teachers (who have become friends) can similarly lead us to God. Friends are just another incredibly important gift given to me in my life. I remember C. S. Lewis once saying that at the university he fell into a pocket of people who were better than he. That was my experience too. They not only gave me the example of their Christian lives, they also opened me up intellectually. They were almost as important to me as my professors.



Teresa and James Harold

I know I am at the end, but one experience in particular is worth sharing. I remember—perhaps in early college—going out to a movie with my friends, and then going to some restaurant afterwards. We started, quite naturally enough, to discuss the movie, breaking it down and trying to

understand and appreciate it. I'm pretty sure my friends thought nothing of it, as it seemed to come naturally to them. But at the time, it was incredibly illuminating to me. I didn't know that people actually seriously discussed movies or books or plays, etc. I thought they discussed stuff like that only when forced to in artificial classroom settings, and not for fun. I thought that people just watched movies and that was the end of it. Discussing movies, however, really increased my enjoyment of them, and opened me up to a critical—or perhaps better—an appreciative point of view.

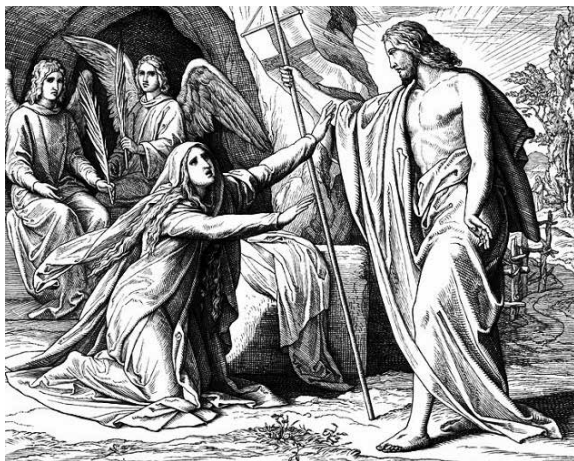
Besides the friends of my present life, there is another group of people I count as friends, who are just one step removed from me, although they hail from every stage in the history of salvation: **the saints**. They too teach me, especially by their example and their lives. And they are family too, part of our divine family of the Church.

You would think that these people, as followers of Christ, would become rather one-dimensional, as they would simply reflect the particular personality of just one person. But actually the opposite happens, as they become more their own unique selves by being followers of Christ. It is as if the Infinite Person of the being of Christ is so vast that He can organically incorporate Himself into billions of people who have lived on this planet,

bringing out their true selves when they turn to him, all the time respecting their freedom, just as Belle brings out the true self of the Beast and the Prince brings out the true self of Cinderella, minus the cinder face, and vice versa.







There are good reasons for believing in Christ and His Church. In some ways, belief in Christ did not come to me naturally, given my sinful nature. But Christ does fit into my nature...like a gLOVE.

PREVIOUS BOOKLETS IN THIS SERIES

Vol. 1: To Whom Shall We Go

Vol. 2: From Atheist Libertine
to Daily Mass Catholic

Vol. 3: From the Land of Oz
to the Subversive Nazarene Truth

Vol. 4: From Fear to Love

Vol. 5: From Ex-Catholic
to Joyful Catholic

Vol. 6: The Music of My Faith

Vol. 7: Through the Path
that Cuts the Jungle

Vol. 8: Facing Our Immortality

Vol. 9: The Eucharist: My Anchor
in the Whirlwind

All titles can be viewed in PDF format at the
Goodsbook Media website:

<http://goodbooksmedia.com/still-catholic.html>

Bulk purchases of booklets in this series
can be arranged by contacting
fauxpas@swbell.net.

