

Practicing
CATHOLIC

James Carroll



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PRACTICING CATHOLIC

WHY AM I A CATHOLIC? There are a thousand ways to answer that question, and this book will take up many of them. By its end, there will be one answer. I will move through the three phases of my life as a Catholic—from my youthful formation, in an immigrant family that magnificently achieved its assimilation; to my time as a seminarian and priest, which coincided with the unexpected hope of the Second Vatican Council; to life after the priesthood, a time when the limits of assimilation into the American consensus showed themselves, and the reforms of the council were repudiated, but when I discovered a far deeper meaning of the faith.

This book has the form of a personal and historical essay about the Catholic Church in my lifetime—from the full flower of the faux-medieval Catholicism into which I was christened, through the heady arrival of an Irish-American subculture in the Kennedy era, the glorious witness of a humanist pope, the frightening dislocations of assassination and war, the crisis of authority over sexual morality, the political power-brokerage symbolized by a pope who helped end the Cold War, the ironic collapse of post-Vatican II Catholic identity after that "arrival," the stunning betrayal of the priestly sexual-abuse scandal, to the end of narrow denominationalism that sets Catholic Christians against Orthodox and evangelical Christians. After 9/11, fundamental assumptions of Islam came quickly into question, but so did the assumptions of every religion. Like millions of Catholics, my faith has been shaken by the events of our time. We have had to announce, "The Church is dead," while searching for a way to declare, "Long live the Church."

I trace the large drama of major shifts that affect the whole American people, but do so by telling a personal story that is firmly located in part of the nation's life. Though centered in one person's experience, *Practicing Catholic* is less a family memoir than a religious and cultural history, addressed to everyone concerned with questions of belief and disbelief. Apart from the museums that anchor the great cities of Europe and America, the Roman Catholic Church is what remains of "Christendom," the generating aesthetic and intellectual tradition of Western civilization. Offshoots of the Protestant Reformation claim, that same Christian heritage, but the Catholic Church, in its institutional DNA if not its ideology, has served as the vehicle for carrying key elements of the Roman Empire forward into history, much as Rome carried the achievements of ancient Greece forward. Even today, in its organization, judicial system, official language, attachment to material culture, and elevation of the classic virtues, the Church embodies that first *Romanitas*.¹

Leaving theology aside for the moment, this worldly rootedness has been a source of the Church's exceptional longevity as well as of its global reach. The diocesan structure of its organization, for example—with bishops and cardinals exercising over local churches an authority derived from the transcendent power center—is a repetition of Rome's proconsul method of governance. The way the Church's finances are organized, with independent dioceses feeding support to that center; the way the Church's diplomacy is structured, with papal legates dispatched to world capitals; the way the cult of the leader is maintained, with the bishop of Rome regarded as the deity's vicar—all of this echoes the methods of the imperium, a system that is otherwise long gone.

St. Peter's Basilica, after all, is an architectural duplication of the palace of the emperor; indeed the word "basilica" derives from the basil wreath with which, in primordial Rome, the ruler was crowned. Meanwhile, Catholic doctrine is grounded in philosophical propositions that came into their own in the ancient world, which is why any revision of that doctrine—is it even possible?—would

amount to an extraordinary intellectual and spiritual transformation. Down through the ages, the tension between the papacy and the councils of the Church, which across two thousand years were convened, on average, once each century, can be seen to have been analogous to the tension between Caesar and the Roman Senate, which ended tragically. Indeed, the Church has, if only accidentally, carried forward the internal conflict between republic and empire, a tension that, in the Church's case while yet to be resolved, has become dramatic in the contemporary push-pull between the laity and lower clergy on one side, and the hierarchy on the other. For all of these reasons, Catholicism continues to be an object of fascination. And, admittedly, of repugnance.

Grave moral failings of the Church became evident in the era since my birth, and those historic failings were compounded by further mistakes in recent years. I reflect on this dark legacy, showing what it meant to me as I was repeatedly forced to confront it. But I aim less at judgmental criticism than at a loving act of remembrance, recalling Catholics—and myself—to what they have been at the best. A tradition centered on social justice, accommodation of immigrants, the work of peace, sacramental respect for creation, liturgical beauty, a global vision, and the consolations of faith—all of this weighs as much in the scale of history as spiritual imperialism, scandal, and hypocrisy. One theme of *Practicing Catholic* is loss, but another—through the embrace of change—is renewal. Catholic history is nothing but a saga of glory and tragedy, corruption and reform, false starts and new beginnings. In our time, this age-old pattern has been compressed and sped up, with an edge that cuts deeper than ever before.

I bring a Catholic sensibility to bear on this experience, but equally I bring an American sensibility, which is something else entirely. American Catholicism, which has been profoundly influenced by the nation's predominantly Protestant ethos, is a subject of its own here, with tension running in both directions—against the broader national culture, which is overtly secular but implicitly pietistic,² and against European Catholicism, which in the past was established, hierarchical, and antimodern, but is at present in a state of near collapse. European Catholicism came to the United States and became something new, as it is today becoming something new in Africa and Asia. Third World religiosity may define the Catholic future, much as Europe defines its past. But American Catholicism stands decisively on its own ground, even if Rome has never fully accommodated that.

At its peak, just as I entered the seminary in the early 1960s, the Catholic Church in the United States was an astounding success story. Perhaps as much as a third of the nation's population—more than fifty million people—were Catholics, and nearly three-quarters of them reported attending Mass every week.³ Since then, "success story" is not the way the Church would be described, yet a vast number of people continue to understand themselves either in its terms or against them. Today there are about seventy million self-identified Catholics in the United States, about a quarter of the nation's population, registered in about twenty thousand parishes. They put a billion dollars a year in collection baskets.⁴ This may not seem like a decline, but these numbers are bolstered by a huge percentage of newly arrived immigrants, mainly from Latin America. In the past thirty years, the number of native-born U.S. Catholics has plummeted; about one-third of those born into the faith have left it behind, meaning that fully ten percent of Americans are former Catholics.⁵ But whether they have abandoned the Church or remain with it, the religious identities of all of these people have undergone transformation—the kind of tectonic shifts in meaning and practice that this book will report. Many American Catholics and former Catholics will recognize their stories in this work, but so might all Americans whose religious identities have undergone transformation or obliteration in these tumultuous years.

I was born in 1943. Numerous global eruptions have upended religious and political assumptions in the decades since then. Europe, after two acts of continental self-destruction, yielded to the United States as the power center of the West. The United States, in turn, defined itself, theologically as well as politically, against communism abroad and at home. Basic flaws were laid bare in Western civilization (the Holocaust) and in America (continuing racism), with the recognition that hatred of the Other (whether Jews, blacks, or, say, Muslims) is still virulent. Women came to a new self-understanding, from the workforce jolt of World War II to the claustrophobia of the suburbs in the 1950s to the liberation of the 1960s (the birth control pill) and 1970s (*Roe v. Wade*). Sexual sensibility itself was upended, with gay rights, the loosening of marriage, male insecurity, and the eroticizing of mass culture. Europe and Japan embraced pacifism while America was so much at the mercy of an arms race that, even when the Soviet Union disappeared, the economic, psychological, and political grip of war did not give up its hold on the United States. All of this weighed heavily on religion in general, and on American Catholicism in particular.

During my lifetime, America fully embraced the ethos of global empire, fulfilling what had begun in the merely continental notion of Manifest Destiny. A shift in the nation's religious self-understanding occurred, too, with its Christian character being more openly proclaimed by politicians while preachers blatantly advanced political agendas.⁶ Up until the time of my birth, American Protestants, particularly fundamentalists, had been, as we will see, unbridled in their contempt for Catholics, but that changed. As "faith-based" initiatives marked both domestic and foreign policy, a new coalition was formed between politically motivated evangelical Christians, who supplied the fervor, and so-called neoconservative Catholics, who supplied a newfound intellectual gravitas.⁷ Together they represented a major new strain of public influence in America, defined by nothing so much as political moralism. This book tells the astounding story of that shift, with reactionary Catholics and Protestants alike regarding the secular United States as an infidel nation, and their program one of massive cultural resistance.

The most striking instance of this new alliance centered on the U.S. Supreme Court, which had long been a hostile forum to Roman Catholics. Only one of the first fifty-four justices was a Catholic. Then, for many years, there was a single "Catholic seat" on the nation's highest bench, occupied most recently by Justice William Brennan, Jr., a moderate liberal whose appointment by the moderate Republican Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, when I was thirteen, gave me my first feeling of personal connection to the court. But then, under a succession of conservative Republican presidents, a string of Catholic conservatives was appointed, until, with the naming of Samuel Alito in 2006, the Supreme Court had a Catholic majority for the first time, a majority composed of right-wing Catholics who were poised to reverse precedents on antidiscrimination statutes, conservation, women's rights, free speech, and government intrusions in the private lives of citizens.⁸

But the brand of Catholicism represented by the court majority was out of step with the generally progressive social teachings of the Church (the Catholic justices were not, for example, opposed to the death penalty). Indeed, the court's five Catholics could be seen as holding out not only against the dominant current of contemporary-American life but also against a new Catholic mainstream that had been set running in the mid-twentieth century, a fountain of renewal that will form the wellspring of this book.⁹

But Supreme Court or not, right-wing Catholicism does not define the heart of this tradition even now. I know this from my own experience and the experience of countless fellow Catholics. In steadfastly asserting my Catholic identity, I am not describing mere membership in a group. There is more to being Catholic than that, as I and many others learned over the decades that are the subject of this

book, a time when our Church's own leaders first called us to profound re-forms in our ways of being religious, and then warned us off those reforms. By now we find ourselves caught, in effect, between an increasingly vocal group of "neo-atheists"¹⁰ and religious reactionaries, some of whom want to teach creationism in schools and some of whom vie for control of our own Catholic Church.

When the likes of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, ¹¹ citing insights of science or the rise of sectarian violence, denounce the very idea of God, Protestant and Catholic fundamentalists strike back by attacking the pillars on which such modern criticism stands. Yet religious people make a big mistake to dismiss those who warn, even mockingly, of the dangers of irrational belief or of religiously sponsored intolerance. Instead, such criticism should be taken as a challenge to purify faith of its dehumanizing elements, and this book aims to be an instance of that. Dawkins and company share one common conviction with religious reactionaries—that religion is a primitive impulse, unable to withstand the challenge of contemporary thought.¹²

Rather than feel intimidated by secular or scientific criticisms of religion, a believer can insist that faith in God is a fulfillment of all that fully modern people affirm when they assent to science—or object to violence. From Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud forward, religion's critics have insisted that faith is mere superstition, a province of the illiterate masses. When educated people cling to the faith it is supposed that they are merely protecting unexamined, if closely held, notes of identity. Smart folks, too, have their irrational needs—although not the smart folks who have jettisoned belief. Grossly fervent popular religion and cooler, more sophisticated belief systems are, to the critics, alike in their dependence on ignorance, their encouragement of resignation in the face of injustice, and the deep complicity in intolerance and even violence.

Against all this, it is embarrassing to the critics of religion that so many passionate advocates of justice in this world are motivated by expressly spiritual concerns; that peace defines the work of so many believers around the globe; that so many otherwise intellectually astute people cling to their doctrinaire mumbo-jumbo despite all the quite evident reasons not to. The critics steadily manage to avoid the clear fact of human experience—that "evident reasons" forever fall short of fully accounting for human experience. "Naive atheism is as difficult to sustain," the Catholic scholar Peter Steinfels has written, "as naive theism."¹³ Critical religion, while always aiming to submit to tests of reason, never defines itself exclusively in terms of evidence or reason. And in that, critical religion is pointing toward the essential depth of living that science by itself cannot address. The test of reason, that is, includes the acknowledgment of reason's limit—and that test is one to which religion submits.

At the same time, a believer can advance the Dawkins-Harris-Hitchens critique (and the Marx-Nietzsche-Freud critique) to say that most articulations of traditional religion of all stripes fall far short of doing God justice. The world has changed, and with it the way humans think of the world. Inevitably, that means the way humans think of God has changed. As will become clear in this book, the God who has repeatedly been pronounced dead is not one for whom all religious people mourn. The God whom atheists aggressively deny (the all-powerful, all-knowing, unmoved Mover; the God of damnation, supernatural intervention, salvation-through-appeasement, patriarchy, puritanism, war, etc.) is indeed the God enshrined in many propositions of the orthodox tradition. But this God is also one whom more and more believers, including Catholics, simply do not recognize as the God we worship. Such people regard the fact that God is unknowable as the most important thing to know about God. Traditional propositions of the creed, therefore, must be affirmed neither rigidly nor as if they are meaningless, but with thoughtful modesty about all religious language, allowing for doubt as well as respect for different creeds—and for no creed.¹⁴

This is not an entirely new way of being religious. One sees hints of it in the wisdom of many thinkers, from Augustine in ancient times to Nicholas of Cusa in the Renaissance to Kierkegaard in

the modern period. But, in fact, the contemporary religious imagination has been transformed by understanding born of science. Once a believer has learned to think historically and critically, it is impossible any longer to think mythically. That is the ground on which this book stands; its subject is the positive transformation of religious thought that has defined much of Christianity, including Catholicism, during my lifetime. I intend to offer a defense of that transformation.

In truth, however, that transformation has had profoundly negative aspects. For Catholics of my generation, there was a particular epiphany attached to the clergy sexual-abuse scandal that came to light in the first five years of the new millennium. In the chronology traced here, that tragic story must inform the climactic period, for it was then that the Catholic laity had no choice but to face the harsh reality of our Church's situation. Although a small minority of sexually exploitative priests had actually betrayed the young people in their care, almost the entire rank of bishops, from the pope down, had moved with alacrity to protect the abusive priests instead of the children.¹⁵ In the name of "avoiding scandal," the crimes of the exploiters were covered up. These priests were typically given new assignments, which meant they could repeat their assaults. Psychologically disturbed men were enabled by *their bishops* to become serial rapists of boys and girls. Their offenses were perverse and far more extensive than anyone imagined. But what the bishops did in response revealed a systemic corruption, an indictment of the whole clerical culture.

Rather than deal with that dysfunction, and with inevitable questions about the place and power of the laity, mandatory celibacy, and the priesthood's male exclusivity, the bishops engaged in denial, putting their own power ahead of the welfare of the Church's most vulnerable members. By "scandal," it became clear, the bishops meant anything that might undermine their authoritarian control. With that, the Catholic people saw what had happened to the Church we loved. The magisterium of the Church, from its unmagisterial margin, was seen to exercise a sham authority, with little real influence over the inner or outer lives of the faithful, who had been forced in all of this to claim a new kind of Catholic identity. That new identity is my subject.¹⁶

I say new identity, but actually the Catholic people have long affirmed their faith in ways that maintain a certain independence from the authority structure of the Church. Often, indeed, the Church is discussed as if its clerical aspect were all there is. But that is not, and never was, the half of it. There are more than a billion Catholics around the world, and we are far from slavish—or even uniform—in the way we express our beliefs. Yet in the basic creed to which—rich and poor, north and south, high-tech savvy and illiterate—we devote ourselves, can we all be wrong? The very size of the Catholic Church is perhaps its anchor in history, the reason both to take it seriously and to understand it as involving far more than a relatively small clerical establishment. As councils and popes vied with one another for supremacy, and as theologians and philosophers debated fine points of the triune "persons" of the Godhead or the two "natures" of Jesus Christ, ordinary Christians kept the substance of Jesus Christ's meaning at the center of practice, the Gospel narratives paramount, the rite of initiation into his death and resurrection as the basic symbol, with regular gatherings to remember him at Mass as the main note of communal identity. And always Catholics understood what every ethic had to be measured against: the Lord's central command to love each other and the stranger, his radical option in favor of the powerless over princes.

Thus hospitals, schools, universities, peace movements, social welfare organizations, labor unions, healthy family cultures, and humanistic art forms all emerged with creative regularity from the Catholic experience. (Today the Roman Catholic Church is the largest and most productive nongovernmental organization in the world, accomplishing good works, without strings, around the

globe.¹⁷) The laity, producing most of this, knew full well, even in eras of widespread illiteracy, what membership in Christ implied, no matter the pronouncements coming from on high.

If there is a surprise in this story, it is in how, after a century of decline and disillusionment, religion reemerged as a major factor in the new millennium's future, and how questions of Catholic identity surfaced with profound relevance not only for me but for the world. Yet the dominant tone of what I recount, as it turns out, is wonder at the privilege of living through a period of such momentous significance. And in the telling, I discover that the most important personal note is gratitude for the way in which this profound and profoundly conflicted tradition presents itself anew, inviting a fresh embrace and affirming a place of welcome.

So here is the faith of a "practicing Catholic," which is the way we like to define ourselves. The label holds several meanings. "Practical" describes someone who is both concerned with matters of fact and good at solving problems—two characteristics necessary for survival in today's Catholic Church. And, of course, we laugh that we are "practically Catholic," too, depending on who is doing the defining. But fundamentally our religious life is a practice, like the practice of medicine. This religious practice involves practical disciplines, like acquaintance with a tradition, regular observance of rituals, and attendance, as we say, at Mass. Attending physician, attending Catholic. The sacramental life is not to be confused with subservience, although even dissenting Catholics are steadily in search of authority figures who show themselves worthy of respect. But for us, the primary meaning of "practicing" is that, through these disciplines, rituals, and searches, we have some prospect of getting better. This, therefore, is practice like the practice of an art or sport. That we are practicing means, above all, that we are not perfect—not in faith, hope, or charity. Not in poverty, chastity, or obedience. Not in the cardinal virtues, the works of mercy, or the acts of contrition. Not in peace or justice. Not in the life of prayer, which is nothing but attention to the presence of God. In all of this we are practicing, which is the only way we know to be Catholic. The main form that my practice takes, since I am a Catholic writer, is this book.

BORN CATHOLIC

1. PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

"WHO MADE YOU?" I was asked in catechism class by the nuns at St. Thomas More School. I knew the answer.

"And why did God make you?" The answer to that question remains the very marrow of my being: "To know, love, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him in the next." Knowledge plus love plus service equals happiness—such was my first arithmetic, and its simplicity formed my *lives*. There are two lives, I was taught, and they are divided by the moment of death. And, though by now the content of my faith in that next life is thoroughly undefined, it remains the punctuation mark of time as I experience it, making the idea of the future as permanent as the past and the present. And say "the" future, not "a" future, preferring the article that implies no particularity, exactly because I do not know *what* to expect. I know only *to* expect.

As a way to measure the weight of the past, and to carry it forward into the future, belief in Jesus Christ, mediated through the Latin Church, has defined my existence, and still does. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim writes that on the planet of Tralfamadore, "all moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist." But what about the problem of transience here on earth? Is there any way a human can locate himself in eternity? The way I have found to do that is by asking three questions about Jesus: Who was he? Who is he? Who will he be?

So I begin with history, the memory of an actual man about whose actuality I know little but that in an age of empire, he preferred service over sovereignty, a choice that led the empire to murder him. I know that, because of that preference, and despite his murder, he was recognized by his friends as having unique significance as God's son, an awareness that struck them during the simple act of eating the meals he had regularly prepared. At table, the serving Jesus insisted that we are all God's sons and daughters. After his death, that insistence took hold of his friends' imagination—a taking-hold that, leaving doctrinal questions aside for now, is called the Resurrection. They, too, embraced service over sovereignty.

Jesus was a peasant of no social standing, but his actions and words were compelling. His friends responding to him as a teacher of Jewish faith and as a resister of Roman occupation, were devoted to him and continued to revere him after death. Because the first followers of Jesus let him down when he needed them most, the community that grew out of their inability to let go of their affection for him was defined above all by its awareness of failure. Yes, what we call sin is a fact, but so is forgiveness. Those followers had forgiveness from Jesus himself, as so many of the stories about him declare. Therefore the Church is the community in which forgiveness is always necessary and always possible.

It matters that only gradually did his friends come to think of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, and, even more gradually, as the Son of God. It matters that their sacred texts evolved slowly out of oral traditions, and then that the sacred texts themselves were only gradually selected from among many others, equally honored but never officially deemed "inspired." This book will take up the story of these developments. The point here is that once we understand that doctrines evolved over time, we

stop regarding them as timeless. The evolution of doctrine can continue.

~~In Jesus, after the fact, believers saw the presence of God, and in that faith, what we call~~—Incarnation, they established the key idea of this religion—that human experience, far from being untrustworthy or contemptible, is itself God's way of being in the world. The Church gives concrete expression to this idea by organizing itself around sacraments, which turn the key moments of life—birth, maturity, marriage, illness, death—into openings to transcendence. God the Great Unknown is nevertheless as routinely present as bread, wine, and a common word of love.

The illuminating meal with Jesus continues as the Eucharist, the Mass, the ritual to which we Catholics make our way each week in order to renew that first awareness. Sovereignty remains the great temptation, as nothing shows more eloquently than the Church's own history, especially once it embraced the ethos of empire against which Jesus had set himself. But the Church is judged by its foundation, and is continually recalled to service by the memory of its founder. That is why we Catholics go to the table as much to be forgiven as to be fed.

Because all religious language is indirect, a matter of metaphor more than metaphysics, we know precious little about the present life of Jesus—his "presence"—except that at Mass it is "real." How that is explained—from the first enthusiastic reports of resurrection to the philosophical conceit of transubstantiation—is less important than the visceral conviction that, in the sacrament, Jesus lives. The conviction is sustained by the presence of all those others at the table, which is why we Catholics prefer not to eat alone.

The past of history and the present of ritual point to a future fulfillment, which remains as undefined as it is, in faith, certain. With creation, God has begun something that includes its own forward momentum. When creation became aware of itself in the human person, that awareness carried an invitation to trust the momentum, without knowing where it goes. As we do not understand life's origins, we cannot predict life's ultimate fate. Enough to know, with Jesus, that God is God of this creation, and in the very act of creating life out of nothing, God forbids the return of nothing. The one who creates *ex nihilo* is no nihilist. Life is worthy of trust. The future belongs to God, but so does God's creation. Therefore God's creation has the future, too.

Without the Church—its memory of the past, its present ritual, its insistence on a future—I would be an orphan in time, and a prisoner of it. The past is a foreign country, yes, but Catholicism makes me one of its citizens, with my Irish forebears but with all the others, too. The Church is my time machine, taking me back through Rome's tragic glory, the source of our vitality and vanity; through Christianity's roots in Jewishness, the tradition that gave Jesus his measure of meaning (and which continues to this day as another mode of God's presence to creation); through history into myth and all the way back to Adam and Eve, in whom human life itself, including fallibility, could be reckoned as the image of God. So with the future—forward not to spaceships but, according to the faith, to an undefined but sure life with the One who is life's source and sustenance, a life in which nothing valuable of the past is lost.

"Absolute future" is another name for God, whom we more typically assign to the past.¹ But human experience is essentially a matter of an ever-expanding awareness, which is awareness of both the world and the self. That expansion is what drives the imagination forward, out of memory and into expectation. All of this unfolds in a relationship, for no person comes to awareness alone. The one in relation to whom this expansion of awareness ultimately unfolds, the one we continually expect, is the one we call God. In God the temporal categories of past, present, and future, which seem always to fall apart, fall together. Indeed, they do so in our experience, too, with the present being nothing but the instant intersection of the past and future, with the transitory character of all three being what makes

them permanent. The myth of paradise is usually regarded as a story of the old days, but the Golden Age is the one that has not yet come.

Paradise, as Genesis portrays it, is the present moment in which the past and future both are lost. The story of the mistake of Adam and Eve provides us with the doctrine of Original Sin, a peculiarly Catholic reference, given compelling expression by St. Augustine in the fourth century. In fact, Genesis nowhere uses the word "Fall," and it is important to acknowledge that the dogma of human fallenness, attached to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, comes not from the revealed Word of God but from its early interpreters.² For Catholics, the chief interpreter, in this regard, was Augustine. But sin was not all of it for him.

The first great theologian of the Western Church, Augustine elevated self-consciousness into an occasion of grace, and he did that through his self-consciousness as a writer. In his works³ Augustine defined, in effect, the markers of the momentum of creation, from simple being to being alive to being aware to being self-aware. From *Homo sapiens*, that is, comes *Homo sapiens sapiens*—the creature that knows it knows.⁴ Each individual human, however modest his or her circumstances, is *all of creation aware of itself*, across all of time and space. Human consciousness, even in its finitude, is unbounded in its reach. In that unboundedness Genesis saw an "image" of God, and Augustine saw God's way of being in the world.

Augustine's *Confessions* is a monument to one man's exploration of his own experience, and his bold assertion is that in such exploration, the man can find his way to God. If the book I am writing has a license, it comes from Augustine—however short of Augustine's achievement this work falls. Its premise is opposed to all those—from Augustine's time to our own—who insist that the only way to God is through the authorized dogmas of orthodoxy, which are overseen by an ordered hierarchy. Augustine, ever alert to the dangers of narcissism, was a defender of orthodoxy, but at a deeper level. "winding down through the spirals of memory," he was an exemplar of the search through human experience as the surest path to sacred illumination. The tensions we have already noted between past, present, and future gave shape in Augustine, for example, to a threefold mode of temporal consciousness in which he recognized nothing less than traces of the Trinity.

In Augustine's supremely self-aware writing, the outrageous proclamation of Genesis, that human life is the very image of God, is applied to one life; one man applying it to himself. Augustine is a treasure not only of the Catholic tradition but of Western civilization, for in taking individual experience so seriously, as divinity's own analogue, he planted seeds that sprouted into the literary genre of autobiography—and ultimately into the idea of democracy, which assumes the primacy of *self-evidence*. ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...")

Yet Augustine's reading of the Adam and Eve story is remembered as having put a cold stamp on the Christian mind, and that—more than his glorious celebration of self-exploration—must give this book its starting point.⁵ For him and others under the influence of philosophies that disdained physical existence in favor of the spiritual, the fateful sin, which Genesis defined only symbolically—eating fruit of the tree of knowledge—had a decidedly sexual component.⁶ That its first consequence was the shame Adam and Eve felt at their nakedness—"I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid"⁷—seemed to prove the point, and Catholicism was suspicious of sex ever after. "Concupiscence" is Augustine's word for that suspicion, and I am sure it was the first four-syllable word I was ever taught to say.

There is an irony in the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin. A primordial fallenness was a shadow descending on the millennia to darken every life, even at its conception. But the expectation of moral disappointment is so thoroughly drummed into us that the Church's own fallenness, evident most in its laughable claim to be unfallen, is not finally disqualifying. Speaking generally, Protestants believe

that a church (small c, the visible institution) should seek to replicate the Church (large C, God's invisible creation). When a church fails to do this, Protestants feel commissioned to leave the church (small c) to start a new and better church (again, small c). Catholics take for granted the universal condition of self-centeredness from which every person and institution needs to be redeemed. Yet the Church is always rendered as capital C. Its imperfections do not disqualify it from being God's. The Church, that is, is only its people. What's the point of leaving? "To whom shall we go, Lord?" Peter asks Jesus.⁸ This can lead to a quietist tendency to acquiesce in the face of scandalous behavior, and Roman Catholics often do. Tyrannical popes? Abusive priests? The hypocrisies of the annulment game? Mafia money in the collection basket? Catholics hold to the principle of *ex opere operato*, which literally means "by the work worked." Just by the proper performance of the ritual, an officiant in the state of mortal sin nevertheless validly enacts the sacraments. The priest at Mass can be drunk, but the bread is holy. Braced for the worst, we are not as surprised as we should be when it comes. That, too, is central to the story this book tells.

2. DE PROFUNDIS

I was born in a hospital named Little Company of Mary, on the South Side of Chicago, but really I was born in Original Sin. I associate the idea, in my first sense-memory, with the stench of the nearby stockyards, which gave me my dominating metaphor for hell. The yards were laid out, fifty years before I was born, in a perfect square, a mile on each side, straddling the terminal points of three great railroads. Their multitudinous activities, all designed to turn flesh into coin, were organized in a huge maze of animal pens. Tens of thousands of cattle, sheep, and hogs were daily run through long rutted chutes into one of two mammoth slaughterhouses from each of which tall graceful chimneys rose like the upraised fingers of a man going down for the third time. Into the air from those chimneys streamed tons of ash and smoke, the only unused vestige of animals that had been turned into hams and dressed beef as well as glue, brushes, and fertilizer. A cloud of sulfur dioxide poured into the prevailing winds that carried it across Chicago, but the most ferocious stench suffocated my neighborhood, Back of the Yards. It was the concentration of all the foulness. The odor was in the very wood of the floors I learned to crawl on. My nostrils first opened to the stink of death.⁹

The doctrine of Original Sin was the idea in the presence of which my religious awareness first opened. The cries of animals being sacrificed are part of this story, as are the cries of children being born. "Out of the depths I cry unto Thee, O Lord," Psalm 130 begins, and I am sure that was the first psalm that ever registered with me. I knew what crying was, and I could guess what "depths" were. *De profundis*: even the Latin phrase by which the psalm is known is like a rod in my memory. The past has us by the throat even as we come into the world awash in blood. The stockyards give me my religion.

Animal sacrifice, after all, was the moral improvement, whatever the stench, that replaced human sacrifice, the breakthrough in consciousness, embodied in the story of Abraham, Isaac, and the miraculous ram that took the boy's place upon the altar. The story was taken as God's signal that the blood of a human person would never be required again. *De profundis* must have been the music I was hearing when I began to think this way. The line from that psalm takes me back so far in memory, and the Abraham-Isaac story pushes back even further.

But memory itself is the revelation. The past has the very future by the throat. How did I first learn this? Once again, memory tells me—a specific memory. It is a memory, intriguingly, of something that occurred at Mass, which is the symbolic sacrifice in which die animal—the Lamb of

God—has itself been replaced by a man.¹⁰ God wills human sacrifice after all, but the beloved son the time is God's own. Judging by the fact that, when I was on my knees at Church that morning, my chin did not come up as high as the edge of the pew in front of me, I could have been no more than five or six years old when the thing happened. I was next to my father. My mother was on the other side of him, and beside her was my brother Joe. The car-sized radiators on the nearby wall were hissing, a sound I attached to the other peculiar aroma, besides the yards, that stamped my youth—the perfume of candles and incense. It was the early morning Mass.

What I knew to wait for from other Masses I had attended was the happy jangling that broke the gloom when an altar boy shook his fist full of brass bells, filling the air. At last the ringing came, but this time, instead of craning toward the altar to see where the sound was coming from, I glanced up at the people around me. Just as I did, they all brought their closed fists sharply against their breasts while muttering something I did not understand. The bells faded, and I realized that the people having hit themselves was somehow tied to that glad sound. Then, before I could begin to take in what was happening, the bells rang out again, and once more the congregants slammed their fists against their breasts, saying something. This time I saw the blows for what they were, acts of real violence, cued to the bells. The bells rang and the people hit themselves. It happened once more. Three times the bent worshipers struck themselves hard enough to make me feel the pain. *Domine, non sum dignus*, they were saying, in unison with the priest. *Domine, non sum dignus. Domine, non sum dignus.* Much later I would understand: "Lord, I am not worthy ... Lord, I am not worthy ... Lord, I am not worthy..."

An adaptation of what a Roman soldier said to Jesus, the full pre-Communion affirmation continues, "...but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed."¹¹ But the people around me never made it as far as that act of hope, much as the prayer of *de profundis* never, in my hearing, went on to the promise of redemption. Unworthiness was all there was for these people, the depths their only home. Such explicit meaning eluded my consciousness, of course, but its emotional truth landed on me with full force. Associating the abject gesture of fist on breast with voices crying *de profundis*, I knew that something of enormous importance, as much for me as for the people I was part of, was happening right then. An oceanic question opened in my breast: *What are you doing? And why?*

The people from whom I spring were defined by the Chicago stockyards. They were its shitkickers, pipefitters, knife wielders, men whose job was to keep the blood flowing through the bowels of the slaughterhouses. Those were "the depths" out of which they came. When the drain holes clotted, the crimson soup would back up in the pipes, bubbling out onto the killing lines, covering the ankles of the butchers, forcing a stop, which in turn caused commotion in the pens, risking the animal panic of stampede. When that happened, the beasts would climb over each other before finding no escape, and then their common wail would replace the stench as the manifestation of stockyards horror. The stampede cry of twenty thousand caged animals, as from the throat of one creature, would carry out across the South Side, and drivers would stop their cars to listen, and worry. Out of the depths, the cry. But the uproar was the sound of meat being manufactured, the dead opposite of the muted anguish of the Auld Sod, where peasants and their children had sunk silently into the stupor of starvation. The Irish in Chicago, well fed because of the blood, never complained of the stink.

During the Great Famine, the population of Ireland had shrunk by something like six million—a holocaust of starvation and exile.¹² It followed the blight of the potato, a crop on which the Irish had become overly dependent because, unlike other crops, the British could not burn it. The famine drove the emigration that brought my people to America. They were in flight from a vast fetid killing field, though it could only be spoken of as the green land of leprechauns. The Emerald Isle. Yet no one emerging from the fog of such a past presumed to have left it behind. The most the children and

grandchildren of the famine could do was hollow out all memory with the spade of denial, digging an emotional abyss out of which nothing would come but an unslaked thirst and the barbed wit that passed for Irish humor. That abyss would always be there as the black hole into which they and their children and their children's children—myself—would be forever terrified of falling back. Out of those depths no cry had come, which is why the grief-struck psalm could itself seem an act of hope.

The stockyards defined the famine's antidote, but at a terrible cost. At the end of each workday, the South Siders stood under a scalding shower, trying to scrub the stench of slaughter from their skin. If they left the neighborhood, they always sensed their fellow passengers on the El squinting their noses at them. Indeed, the sensation of foul odors never fully left the nostrils of my people, and the permanent fear was that they themselves were the source of it.¹³ My Irish-American forebears spent their lives trying to escape the claws reaching up for them out of the starvation grounds of their ancestors, and out of the blood pits and shit holes of their own youths, to pull them back down where they belonged. Into the depths, not out of them. *Who do you think you are!*¹⁴

Those fists against those breasts were the most eloquent religious expression I ever saw, and alas it shaped my faith. I was born into an unworthy people. A mere symbol, yet I knew an act of self-hating violence when I saw one, and that it was carried out to the glad music of bells taught me all I needed to know about the contradiction that adheres to my religion. When, later, I asked my mother what the people were doing when they hit themselves in church, she waved me off: "It's just a prayer, Jimmy."

What my mother knew was the other side of the story, how that bent people was just then coming into its own. The great democratic mixing of World War II had just occurred, and immigrant Catholicism was already being triumphantly transformed. The GI Bill of Rights was sending a generation of Mick Wops, Polacks, and Krauts to college. The postwar economic boom was giving them a foretaste of real prosperity. The institutions of American Catholicism were thriving, with nearly fifty thousand priests, three times that number of nuns, four hundred seminaries across the country, and almost ten thousand parochial schools—including hundreds of high schools staffed by teaching brothers. In 1950 there were almost a million infant baptisms, which was a signal of the famously fertile birthrate. But that year, more significantly, there were well over a hundred thousand adult baptisms, showing that conversion to the Catholic Church was now a mark of American life.¹⁵ By every measure, the Catholic people were strong and succeeding, the furthest thing from the legion of breast beaters among whom I found myself.

And yet success, I was learning, was not to be trusted. My first lesson in religion was that we humans are born with a feeling of existential inadequacy. I am not certain if I believe in other expressly Catholic orthodoxies—God's intervention in nature through miracles, say, or the survival of the individual personality after death—and I actively disbelieve in some—the infallibility of the pop, sexuality as the condition of concupiscence. But I firmly believe in the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin, which is the way I understand my own limits, my inbred sadness, and my unshakable suspicion that, even before setting out on life's journey, I had lost my way. I say "my own," but this accumulated insecurity is inherited, and in these grim feelings I recognize my patrimony. Inbred, indeed. A feeling of unworthiness is the core of my selfhood, and I know exactly where I get it

The clue is the slaughterhouse and animal sacrifice. So the mind leaps, again, to Abraham and Isaac. *de profundis* was the psalm that first registered with me, the tale of that father and son was my first Bible story. The boy follows his father up the hill. He loves his father, and his father loves him. Their love for each other is the ground on which each one walks. From his father, the son has learned trust.

Or rather, from his own absolute confidence in his father, the son knows what trust is. Trust is the feeling he has whenever he and his father are together.

Like now. The boy is carrying a load of wood for the father. He has done this before, whenever he has followed his father up the mountain of sacrifice. He carries the wood because his father must carry the offering. The wood is for the fire in which the offering will be consumed, as the Holy One requires. The son does not know why the Holy One requires sacrifice. It is enough to know that his father does as the Holy One requires. It is not the Holy One in whom the boy has placed his trust. It is his father in whom he trusts.

But wait. Something is different. The boy looks up from beneath the burden of the bundled wood he carries on his back. His father, as usual, goes ahead. But today his father is not carrying an offering. No first fruits. No lamb for the slaughter. His father's arms are empty. *Where is the offering, Father?* the boy would like to ask. *Where is the young animal or the bushel of crops to be consumed by the fire you will build with this wood that I carry? When we reach the top of the mountain, the place of sacrifice, what will you burn?* These are the questions the boy has, but he cannot ask them. That is all strange. He has never hesitated to ask questions of his father before. This question feels different. *What, Father, will you set afire?*

The Abraham-Isaac story in Genesis is an elaboration of the meaning of Original Sin.¹⁶ Original Sin in Genesis, however, refers not to the primal offense but to a blessing that precedes it. There was Original Sin, but before that there was a Creator beholding creation and saying, *This is good. This is very good.*¹⁷ That, too, is of the story. *In the beginning God* is how the Bible starts, the most implication-laden phrase not in the text but in the language. The word "God" and the word "good" go together, which is why God says it. But in pronouncing the creation good, perhaps the Creator was, in fact, making an argument more than an affirmation, declaring it good when there were already reasons to think otherwise.

What does it take for a parent to slay his child? For a long time I could plumb this mystery only from the point of view of the son. But then I became a father. When my daughter and son were small the absolute truth of my life—and this is every parent's absolute truth—was that I would protect them from everything, forever. As they grew up, I grew, too. We all grew into the knowledge that I could not do it. There is a tragedy at the heart of human existence from which there is no protection. *Is that tragedy good?* Not only would I be unable to shield my precious ones from what awaited them; from a certain point on, it would hurt them if I tried. That certain point is their adulthood, and when a parent comes to it, the parent comes into a second maturity.

Surely this was what Abraham knew. Leave aside the particular mystery of the *Akedah* (for "binding," as in "the binding of Isaac") story: How could the Holy One even seem to require the slaughter of the son by the father? How could Abraham even contemplate obeying such a commandment? At an even more primal level, what Abraham and Isaac were both confronting was the ultimate human dilemma that each of them was fated to be slain by the structure of life itself. *How can that be good, very good?* Isaac was spared his fate by a ram, but in truth his fate was only postponed. Now, of course, it matters if a parent is the actual agent of the slaughter of the child; it matters if one generation sends its juniors off to war. But these crimes and tragedies unfold within the larger crime and tragedy that is human life itself.

Or is it? I spoke earlier of trust. The One who creates *ex nihilo* is no nihilist. To me, that is what this story concerns. A child's trust in a parent, so complete, so unquestioning, must be outgrown. Questions are the essence of wisdom: *What is this wood for, Father? What will we be burning?* This story is not about Isaac's trust in Abraham, but about Abraham's trust in the Holy One. The Holy One, creator of life that ends in death, the Holy One who was already doing to Abraham what the Holy One was asking Abraham to do to Isaac. Knowing what we know about this existence, can we trust it

anyway? Can we trust the author of the story that is unfolding here, in our experience day by day? —The biblical tradition, as I read it now, and the living religious traditions that are nourished by that tradition—my own Christianity and, as I understand them, rabbinic Judaism and Islam—suggest an answer to this question. And the answer is yes. *Out of the depths I cry unto Thee, O Lord. For with Thee there is mercy and plenteous redemption.*¹⁸ Life is trustworthy, though it ends in death, the ultimate in depths. Death is at the service of life. There is no glib or easy way to say that. And, with Isaac, who has every right to feel betrayed, as with every child who has ever been sent by a parent into the maw of war, we know that there are good reasons never to trust anyone or anything again. Were it otherwise, trust would not be trust, for the trust of maturity, as opposed to childhood, is the act of affirmation that is made despite, not because.

So, yes: *In the beginning God ... And God said this is good, very good.*

3. JIMMY MARCHING

My mother and father—their names were Mary and Joseph. Given the character of this son they had—no Messiah—their names should perhaps have been Adam and Eve, and I wish they were. If I am Abel, I am also Cain—the favored son who hates himself for being favored. But at least I would not be what, for the first years of my pious association, I was by definition, the son of Mary and Joseph who was not worthy of the family names.

But that was not my mother's thought. To her I was the anointed one, that's all. "*Did you see my little Jimmy marching...*" She would sing the Irving Berlin ditty as she bounced me on her knee. The memory is sensuous. The light of a morning sun is washing the parquet floor and sound fills the air, her voice in synchrony with my own pleased laughing. Pleasure was to be the sole object of her attention... *With the soldiers up the avenue?*" The bouncing and the singing were a regular feature of my earliest years, and I knew the lyrics of that oft-repeated song long before I understood them. The words described an entire regiment of heroes heading off to war:

There was Jimmy just as stiff as starch,
Like his Daddy on the seventeenth of March...
Away he went,
To live in a tent;
Over in France with his regiment.

This music remains in my mind as the very structure of rhythm, the ground of order." *Were you there, and tell me, did you notice? They were all out of step but Jim.*" I took in what those words meant, but it was years before I got the joke.

That song was the most condensed affirmation I ever received. My mother was simply telling me that if the whole world stood against me, I was right and the world was wrong. She had found a song to say so, and it addressed me by name. Her voice, her fingers around mine, the trustworthy thrill of her dancing knee, the defense against all my accusers, the morning sun on the polished floor—this one memory remains the standard against which I measure every experience of happiness.

Now, in reading the lyrics, I notice that Jimmy is heading off to war: "*It made me glad, to gaze at the lad; Lord help the Kaiser if he's like his Dad.*" But I heard the song as concerning only me, and

what was it but the answer to *Domine, non sum dignus*? If I believed that my being out of step was all right, instead of yet another signal of unworthiness, it was only because of her saying it was so. "They were all out of step but Jim." The purity of insinuation in her voice made the affirmation absolute. Those who were out of step were the ones slamming their fists into their breasts. I did not need to do that. If I believe that affirmation still—and in some part, given the choices I have made (some of which involved a refusal of war), I must—it is still, in that same part, because of her.

To a child being brought into the mystery of the storied Holy Family, there were no coincidences. If I have laid claim to a deep capacity for trust, which, despite all contradiction, most profoundly defines the Catholic faith (trust in God defined, first, as trust in the self), I know where it comes from. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is called in the tradition a second Eve, because, by the fruit of her womb, she turned the Original Sin back against itself. Opposing these two women, Eve and Mary, as occupying polarities of sin and salvation, one defined as sex, the other as virginity, is the foundational mistake of the Catholic narrative, and I would internalize it. But even so, Mary as the answer to Eve was the great story of a second chance, and as much as I was born in Original Sin, I was born, son of my own Mary, into the warm aura of that redemption. That is what it meant when I learned that my mother had another name than Mom, and of course I thought of her, then, when she told me the name of our hospital, the place where she gave birth to me, the Little Company of Mary.

The name referred to the order of nursing nuns who ran the place, but I thought the company was of "Marys." Hadn't Mom been admitted to that particular hospital because she was one of them? Even Catholic has a confusion of Marys—there is the Blessed Virgin and there is Mary Magdalen, remembered as the repentant whore, yet another Eve—but in my case the name Mary, even double-barreled like that, was an *Open Sesame!* I now realize that the transcendent associations of her name defined my mother as the counterbalance to the inbred sense of unworthiness I sensed at church, just as the slaughter yards were balanced by a hospital, as I myself was balanced on her dandling knee.

This is the common territory of human development, how infants learn trust from the mother's smile, and how children move through the gates of a growing independence, supported by, and in conflict with, their parents—and ultimately finding a place among the larger group outside the family. In my case, this normalcy came cloaked in the language of religion, with the names of saints and martyrs invoked as the audience for our progression and the sponsors of it. I moved, as everyone does, from believing my parents were God to believing them, by virtue of the accident of their names, to be the parents of God, to understanding them, finally, as poor banished children of Eve like all of us. The point is, my parents, through our version of the ancient cycle, brought me into the way of choosing that is trusting by bringing me into a way of knowing that is believing. Where they brought me is where I remain.

4. GROWING UP WITH JESUS

In the beginning God... And in the middle God, and at the end as well. We are still in the shade of Billy Pilgrim's question about time, but time opens into space. *Where is God?* the nuns asked me, and I knew the answer: *Everywhere*. It was the core truth of my first awareness: *God is everywhere. Even here*. Catholicism is the language I was given to know that, and to know everything else that mattered. Election was the core of it, but not the whole of it. If I invoke memories of my first people here, it is because they taught me the religious lesson par excellence—how every people of God regards itself as the Chosen People. Jews do this, Catholics do it, born-again Christians do it, Muslims do it. And the catechism word for this affirming prodigality is "everywhere." God belongs to every place and every

person, yet without getting lost in an abstract universality. *God is everywhere. Even here.*

~~It takes a balancing mind to say such a thing. Soon enough, I began to think that balance was the~~ business of Catholicism, and just in time. I had to discover a way to live with what I had inherited, finding balance between being unworthy and being chosen. Between the stench of the slaughter yards and the sweet aroma of candles and incense. Between the self-doubt that my pew-mates showed me and the willed affirmation that I still associate with my mother. But because she was "Mary," I received an invitation to identify myself with Mary's son, who was the Son of God. This can be the warm bath of mere narcissism, a Christian version of the Jewish-mother joke, but there was more to it than my being ushered into a false sense of myself as Messiah.

About the time my infantile gaze was shifting away from the company of Marys, the figure of Jesus presented itself as an object of contemplation. This man came into my awareness when I was very young, and he did so as a point of automatic identification. Despite being the son of Mary and Joseph, and despite sharing a pair of initials with him, I never confused myself with Jesus, but neither did I imagine a life apart from him. I grew up with Jesus. He was a pole around which my consciousness turned, a mysterious figure in relation to whom, bit by bit, I constructed a sense of self.

Jesus was a friend and a stranger. He was a god and a human. He was a stern judge and a forgiver. Above all, even in being raised from the dead, he was mortal. Wherever I looked, I saw him. And when I saw him, I saw something of the man I wanted to be. And never would be. A man: of virtue, and a keeper of bad company. An itinerant, and a man at home in alien rooms. A lover of women, and of loneliness. The balancing of such contradictions—wasn't balance the skill that defined the lad who had to carry the bundle of wood up the mountain of sacrifice? In that Isaac story, too, I saw Jesus, how he trailed his Father through desolation, noticing too late that his Father's arms were empty. *Where is the object of sacrifice, Father?* What struck me early and strong—and surely this was the main point of my first full identification with him—was the complexity of the relationship between Jesus and his Father. My young mind exploded to learn that, from the top of that mountain of sacrifice, also known as Golgotha, the son hurled an accusation against his beloved Father: *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*¹⁹

I did not know until years after they had branded my soul that these words of Jesus were from a psalm (Psalm 22) and were therefore, perhaps, less a cry of despair than an anguished prayer—his own *de profundis*. That the Gospel of Mark, composed in Greek, put this one line in the Aramaic—*Eloi Eloi, lama sabachthani*—suggests that the desperate prayer may well have been wrenched from the disillusioned Jesus himself and not necessarily supplied after the fact by Gospel writers drawing on Jewish Scripture, as is true of so many other details of the Passion story. We will see more in this book of how the Gospels were composed, and why it matters, but here we should note that this accusing plea very likely points to an experience of forsakenness belonging to the historical Jesus. He expected some kind of protection from God and did not get it. I took the line that way in my first naive readings, and still do.

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? The literal meaning of these words still defines the moment of my identification with Jesus. God is everywhere, we are told, but God was not with Jesus when he needed God. Christianity was born in the broken hopes not first of the followers of Jesus ("We were hoping he was the one to save Israel," the devastated disciple tells the stranger on the road to Emmaus²⁰), but of Jesus himself. *Why, Father, have you chosen to make a sacrifice of me?* That heart-crushing note, evoking an experience of absolute existential betrayal, is what made the story of the Galilean so closely mine.

I was born a white American male near the middle of the twentieth century, which puts me in history's charmed circle. I have no illusions about my privilege. Yet that election makes my sensitivity to the furious injustices of the human condition all the more acute. From an early age, I

sensed broken hopes all around me, even among the well fed with whom I lived. It was my legacy, reaching back past slaughter yards and famine. An unsettled wind was blowing in the world into which I was born, ²¹ and I felt it on my neck. *Lord, I am not worthy.* Then the poor banished child of Eve nudges his neighbor to whisper, *And if I'm not worthy, neither are you, bub.* But if the generations do this awful thing to one another, then how can the One who generated the generations remain unaccused? *Where is God? Nowhere.* Here is the beginning of our story.

That the first half of the double-barreled but contradictory climax of the greatest story ever told renders the shock of God's complete absence from Golgotha forces me, again with the Jesus around whom my consciousness gyres, to the climax's second half. Having cried out his abandonment, Jesus then declared a final act of faith: *Yet into Your hands I commend my spirit.*²² Unbeknownst to me for years, those words were also from a psalm (Psalm 31). All I knew was that they were, in my mind, joined always to the words that preceded them from the mouth of Jesus as he was dying. First abandonment, then trust. The power of Jesus' ultimate handing himself over depends on that penultimate forsakenness.

My knowledge of the literary sources of Jesus' last words, and my questions about their historicity, have not changed their meaning or their character as the ground of my faith. The cry of despair and the act of self-surrender, in fact, come from separate accounts of Jesus' death, yet they are recounted as instants in the one story. In their conjunction, these two anguished cries amount to the purest form of prayer, which is inevitably an affirmation of oppositions. Rage at the Father and trust in the Father in the same moment. In my experience, those words—accusation and commendation—are the only prayer, and they must be twinned. That such a contradiction is at the heart of this mystery can itself seem to be a source of shame, a violation of order, and the cause of an ultimate negation. Nihilism after all. But the contradiction exists, and in the dispensation of this faith, the contradiction evokes the primal vision, God looking upon such oppositions and saying simply, *This is good. This is very good.*

5. IN GOD WHO IS NOT THERE

If this is a book about being Catholic, it must be a book less about bishops and doctrines and nostalgia and theology and history—the *reconquista*, the so-called culture of death, an argument with modernism, a German pope who downplays the German crime, the hatred of sex, clerical defensiveness, sexual abuse—than about the simple moment when a human being's heart opens in the act of handing himself, and all that he cares for, over into the care of God—but the care of God who is not there. Catholicism is nothing if not a way of doing that.²³ Nothing, that is, if not a kind of worship at the altar of contradiction. It is impossible to account fully for human existence except by reference to something outside the human realm, but it is equally impossible to articulate what or who is being referred to. Prayer, therefore, is this book's deepest subject—the prayer of those who find prayer impossible.

The ultimate contradiction comes at the moment for which every prayer is an act of getting ready. As noted in the introduction, we Catholics easily describe ourselves as "practicing," which implies the hope of getting better. As a defining phrase, "practicing Catholic" thwarts the impulse to claim much in the way of holiness or gravitas, yet it implies a question. What, actually, are we practicing for? And the answer comes not easily but automatically, and it comes out of the depths. What we are practicing for is death.

To repeat what I was taught: there are two lives, and they are divided by the moment of death.

Ordinarily, we think of the moment of dying as off in some undefined future, but the "practicing" to which we Catholics are called involves the recognition that every moment is the moment of death. That is literally true, as each instant yields to the next, with the past accumulating behind us like so much detritus. Memory is the faculty with which we not only retrieve what has been lost, but also, and more to the point, experience it as treasure instead of waste. We are back to Augustine, living life in anticipation, but understanding it in reminiscence, and the understanding is what promises the defeat of death. "Life is not ended," Catholics are told in every funeral liturgy, "but only changed."²⁴ Yet the change begins when we learn to think this way. The longed-for afterlife is already here.

Clearly, the mode of this reflection on the meaning of my Catholic faith is essentially an act of brooding memory, but that is because remembering is itself a refusal of death. Remembering is concerned less with the past, rendered present in memory, than with the future that memory's wisdom makes possible. The divided, and therefore always alienating, experience of threefold time (what drove Billy Pilgrim to Tralfamadore) collapses into the felt unity of an eternal present. Not collapses but rather rises. For this enactment itself, in the light of faith, is a foretaste of resurrection.

The figure of "Christ Crucified," in St. Paul's phrase, has its roots deep in the Christian imagination. How could it be otherwise, given what Christians claim to believe? Creeds aside, however, the corpus of Jesus hung on a cross, as an object of art as much as of devotion, was conceived in the refusal to avert the eye from the worst fact of the human condition. The point of the story of the crucified God, after all, is that no one is exempt from the fate that defeats every hope, not even the One who made it so.

The Western imagination has been similarly branded by the implications of this object. As ancient Greek art defined itself around the voluptuous and athletic nude, one could argue, the art of Christendom, even into the Greece-worshipping Renaissance that marked its end, defined itself around the naked agony of the man on the cross. I myself am the measure of what such physicality does to the imagination, for, though I was taught from an early age to distrust the body as "an occasion of sin," I simultaneously understood that physical existence is what really matters.

When, at the age of five or six, I was set free to run in the woods, experiencing myself as fleet-footed, capable of great leaps, susceptible to shortness of breath, exhilarated by the simple movement of my legs—I was as in love with my body as any hedonist. When, eventually, physical self-awareness became a matter of sexual restlessness, I knew, too, that flesh had transcendent significance, the realm of salvation as much as damnation. My five senses—smell, sight, touch, hearing, taste—were canonized by my religion. Hence sacred associations, already noted, with the stink of the stockyards, the jangle of bells, the hissing of radiators. Smut and guilt were part of the story—girlie pictures. Or, say, the ambushing sight of a classmate's ankle below the hem of her plaid skirt. But so were sensations of delight and satiation—the blissful exhaustion of playing touch football into the twilight. That girl's eyes, when she caught me looking at her. Bodies mattered in this religion, and we saw that above every altar. The body of Jesus, that is, was posted in our world as an icon of sensuality, an inevitable invitation to attend to our own bodies, for better and for worse.

Though the image of the crucifixion, thus implanted in culture, lives on as the vertical-horizontal measure of a world religion, it is rarely seen in the fullness of its historic horror. The body of Jesus shows what can befall the body. Ironically, if the horror is lost, so is its transcendent meaning. The crucifix should console less than appall. I remember putting my hand in front of my face and imagining what a nail through its palm would feel like. Yet pain could be exquisite. That, too, is part of the story of this kind of sensuality.

Why has the agonized death of Jesus so preoccupied the Christian imagination? Or has it? Protestant

Christianity defined its objection to Roman Catholicism by nothing more dramatic than the banishment of the corpus from the cross. In most Protestant churches there is no body, only the wood; the "remains" are gone.²⁵ This rejection of the vivid reproduction of Jesus' suffering was partly a matter of an iconoclastic repudiation of visual excess, but it was also a way of pointing toward the Resurrection. The empty cross evokes the empty tomb.

But the purging of the corpse also reflected an ancient uneasiness with the knotty center of the Christian story. The naked wood of the Protestant cross, by what it does not display, acknowledges, in effect, the catastrophe—and the catastrophic problem—on which Christian faith is based. Similarly, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, little or no emphasis has ever been given to the cross, much less the crucifix. Instead of the corpus, in the East one sees the iconic face of the risen Christ; instead of the crucifixion, it is the Resurrection that unfetters the imagination; instead of misery, glory is rendered.

In the first three centuries after Christ, the cross was not a defining Christian symbol, the corpus even less so. On the walls of catacombs, one sees images of the fish, the cup, the loaf of bread—not the cross.²⁶ It was only with the early-fourth-century conversion of the emperor Constantine, after a vision of the cross in the sky, that this symbol (with the mythic resonance of its vertical-horizontal axis) seized the Christian imagination. Crucifixion had been eliminated as a means of capital punishment, and the many thousands of crucified victims of the empire began to fade from memory; the cross was associated exclusively with Jesus. And when the "true cross" was discovered by Constantine's mother, Helena, the responsibility for the crucifixion was decisively shifted from the Romans to the Jews. Even then, the cross was taken more as a token of resurrection than of brutal death.

It was only in the medieval period that the Latin Church began to put the violent death of Jesus at the center of faith, but that theology was tied to a broader societal obsession with death, related to plagues, millennialism, and the carnage of the Crusades. Grotesquely literal renditions of the crucifixion came into art when self-flagellation and other mortifications came into devotion. Indeed, the moment of the death of Jesus was then understood as marking the division in time between the old era (Old Testament) and the new (New Testament). The death of Jesus, that is (not the Resurrection or the content of his teaching or the example of his life), was understood as the saving event. Death became the center of the religion here.

The theology underwriting all of this was expressed in the eleventh-century treatise *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why Did God Become a Man?), written by St. Anselm, the first great theologian of the Middle Ages. The answer to the question was direct: God became a man because only the infinite sacrifice of a God-man could atone for the infinite offense God took from human sin, and the atonement could be accomplished only by the death of the God-man. Protestants and Catholics both interpreted this "atonement theology" to mean the infinite offense God took at the sin of human beings could be atoned for only by an infinite act of punishment. This theology was commonly read as positing a loving God who handed Jesus over to executioners out of infinite compassion for each sinner, yet it equally assumed a cruel Father who, for his own appeasement, required the extreme suffering and death of his only son, a divine scapegoat. This theology reflected the age, coinciding as it did (1098) with the First Crusade, a campaign of savage violence launched under the slogan "God wills it!" It was in this culture of sanctified suffering that artists began to sculpt figures of Jesus *agonistes*.²⁷

But the corpus-on-the-cross struck a deep chord in the Christian psyche. After all, the Jesus movement evolved into "the Church" precisely by coming to terms with the great shock of the leader's death. Jesus himself was mistaken about his prospects, and his followers' hopes were crushed by his demise. Hopes for Israel, in particular. How could he and they have been so wrong? How could the

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