SECTION ONE

THE LANGUAGE AND THE SPIRIT

Forget What You Thought You Knew

> What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe.
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> —Flannery O'Connor, Letter to Louise Abbot [1]

I don't want to convince you to become a Roman Catholic—I am in fact not one myself—but I *do* want you to join me in drinking deeply in the Catholic tradition. Why? Because Catholic spirituality is where so many of the riches lie.

With an Irish surname like Sweeney, you'd think I was already—rather than almost—Catholic. But no. My paternal grandparents both came from Catholic families, my grandfather's Irish and my grandmother's Italian. They all settled in Kansas and became farmers. It wasn't easy to be Catholic in Kansas in the 1800s, and so they turned Protestant.

Several years ago, I visited the small village in the Po River valley of Italy that my great-grandmother's family left

in the 1890s in order to immigrate to America. We went to the Catholic church there to examine the baptismal records, only to learn that a fire a century ago had destroyed them. I wish I could click on YouTube and see a clip of my great-grandmother's baptism and First Communion in that old Italian church. Much of the original nave was destroyed in World War II, but the outer wall of rough stone rock remains. Such a foundation now cradles a newer timbered roof and freshly painted, movable pews where schoolgirls play with their rosaries and elderly women and men wait patiently for their turn at confession. The Catholic history of my ancestors haunts me, I suppose.

The most important reason for being a Christian must be to dedicate yourself to bringing about the kingdom of God: it's not primarily about what we believe or think or feel but more about what we actually do with our brains and hearts and bodies. But our focus in churches is rarely on these more practical, embodied ends of faith. In our denominations—which seem to multiply faster than rabbits—we like to defend our authority and sometimes our autonomy and prefer our worship, sacraments, and ways of doing things to those of others. The more time we spend trying to protect these fiefdoms of institution, the less time we spend doing the things that matter most, like feeding the hungry, caring for the needy, praying for our enemies, visiting those in prison, and showing love in myriad ways. We need to move beyond trying to save individual churches or traditions. We need to *be* church, instead, wherever we are and whomever we're with. And for that reason, I'm not very interested in buttressing any denomination. But I love the stuff and practices of what happens in religion—those millions of ways that actual churches instruct and guide us in the ways of God.

I've never been a big fan of religious authority, especially not when it is made out to be the stuff of foundational or even propositional truth—as if following Christ is impossible without first believing or doing this or that or the other thing. My love for religion does not mean that I love the hierarchical authority of faith. The cause of religion is always better served when authority is more leveled than hierarchical. Nevertheless, I respect the pope, both the position and the man. In his new book about Jesus of Nazareth, Benedict XVI writes, "It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search. . . . Everyone is free, then, to contradict me. I would only ask my readers for that initial goodwill without which there can be no understanding."[2] Any non-Catholic who thinks that this pope is heavy-handed with authority simply is not paying attention.

Religion can still fool us into thinking that there are magic formulas for solving our problems. Standing in the way of spirituality are the many ways that we often remain beholden to the magic and taboos, pride and false gods that Jesus came to free us from. Catholics and Protestants alike down through the centuries—including people like Francis of Assisi, Erasmus and Martin Luther, Oscar Romero and Simone Weil, and Martin Luther King Jr.—have worked to keep these things out of faith. We are always set on by the money changers in the temple. Our Pharisees—the doctrine police—are always wanting to argue. Sacrifices offered to God, trying to appease God, sacrificing everything but the heart and will that God really wants. *We* are the problem, the reason why God's kingdom has not come, rather than others whom we might consider our more "secular" opponents. It is for these reasons that some Catholics will argue today that the trouble for religion, particularly in America,

isn't that society is secular but perhaps that it isn't secular enough—and I think they are probably right. Our outward piety—demonstrated in church attendance and the talk in our public square—is first among nations, but why then are we also the world's most violent?

I remember the first time I visited Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. I toured that incredible church and saw the huge tombs of popes and saints, reminiscent of the memorial grandeur that one sees in London's Westminster Abbey in honor of kings and queens. In Saint Peter's, I prayed at Michelangelo's *Pietà*. I sat at the back of a consecration Mass for new Italian priests. But then I went downstairs to the Vatican museums. Experts don't even know all that those corridors contain. The rare manuscripts on display are encrusted with jewels. Others are tucked in ancient closets far from the light of day. Saints' relics of bone and blood and things that were once touched are encased in gold. The treasure that is not on display there could fill the halls of the Louvre.

Like many people, I was simultaneously enthralled and disgusted by the wealth and power of the Vatican museums. But money and power are not what it means to be Catholic. If all of that wealth disappeared tomorrow, the storehouse of all things Catholic would still be one of the richest places on earth. The riches all originate in—and supply—our shared practice, history, and mystery.

In some of the explorations that follow, I will be reevaluating Catholicism. There have been many figures in history, including the first men and women who took to calling themselves Protestants, who became so caught up in battling the amassed wealth and power of the Catholic Church that they failed to remember and see what was more important beneath. There is so much beauty to be uncovered

there, and there are many elements of Catholicism that (even unbidden) have potency for non-Catholics and for people who are not "Catholics in good standing," as the Roman Catholic Church would define it. You need to be willing—whether you were born into the Church and would call yourself "lapsed" or whether you have always been suspicious—to open your mind and heart.

Being Christian is not the same thing as being churchy or even religious. There are different layers to it, and some speak for our intentions, while others merely declare who we are, whether we intend it or not. The outer layer is to affirm the beliefs of the ancient church and to honor, love, and remember Christ in practice, liturgy, and worship. Many of us do that intentionally and visibly on a regular basis. My first encounter with Catholic worship was a profound one. For others, the outer layer may not mean very much.

But there is much more below that surface. The next layer down is where we encounter Christ. This is not about creeds. Creeds are ultimately unsatisfying to both believers and detractors because we do not encounter the Holy One in a creed. The way we believe or don't believe in the propositions of religion is entirely different from *faith*. When Hebrews says that faith is "evidence of things not seen," it doesn't say that faith is *believing in* evidence of things not seen. Faith is itself the evidence. Belief and assent are something else, but faith is borne in us. There are distinctively Catholic ways of faith and belief, which we'll discuss in detail in what follows.

To be Christian is to share in the mystery of being known by the person of Jesus who is loving us. And we do this in various ways and places—whether we know it or not. The problem is that many of us have been conditioned to discount, discredit, and deny this mystery in us. Catholic

spirituality is all about responding to these mysteries—even though religious leaders have often said that being Catholic is primarily about that outer crust of religious observance, confusing the matter further.

Go another layer in, right to the center, and to be Christian is to be human. The message of the Incarnation is that the human being is a new species combining the earthly and the godly. There are biologists today who pinpoint the ways that spirituality has become part of the "natural state" of being human. The geneticist Dean Hamer has even identified God "genes" that he claims to have discovered using behavioral genetics and neurobiology to show that human brains inherit predispositions to embracing a higher power.[3] Spiritual or religious experience is said to be universally human and biologically natural. In other words, being Christian is being human.

Graham Greene suggested something similar in his novel *A Burnt-Out Case* decades ago. Here is part of a conversation between an atheist and a believer:

> "Evolution today can produce Hitlers as well as St. John of the Cross. I have a small hope, that's all, a very small hope, that someone they call Christ was the fertile element, looking for a crack in the wall to plant its seed. . . . Love is planted in many now, even uselessly in some cases, like an appendix. Sometimes of course people call it hate."
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> "I haven't found any trace of it in myself."
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> "Perhaps you are looking for something too big and too important. Or too active."[4]

Even Richard Dawkins, the famous religion hater, argues in *The God Delusion* that the stubborn persistence of belief in God down through the ages might have something

to do with natural selection.[5] Who knows for sure, but we are unavoidably human, and on the deepest level, to be human is to be Christ—at least in some mute, inglorious ways. As the novelist Marilynne Robinson recently wrote, "I believe in the holiness of the human person and of humanity as a phenomenon."[6] Sometimes there is little visible or real difference between those of us who live consciously and deliberately in this and those of us who don't.

Even though being human and Christian is this inclusive, the language of being Catholic can still sometimes seem exclusive. There may not be a special handshake or code to be deciphered, but nevertheless, it takes time for the non-Catholic to feel comfortable in Catholic language, symbolism, and imagination.

The Israelites used a code word more than three thousand years ago to identify Ephraimite spies who were attempting to infiltrate Gilead after a battle. According to the book of Judges, this story is where the English word *shibboleth* originated. To identify the spies, the soldiers of Gilead asked each Ephraimite, as he tried to cross the Jordan River, to pronounce a word that the two tribes pronounced differently: "Gilead then cut Ephraim off from the fords of the Jordan, and whenever Ephraimite fugitives said, 'Let me cross,' the men of Gilead would ask, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' If he said, 'No,' they then said, 'Very well, say Shibboleth.' If anyone said, 'Sibboleth,' because he could not pronounce it, then they would seize him and kill him by the fords of the Jordan" (Judges 12:5–6). *Shibboleth* is the Hebrew word for a rushing stream.

Apart from the deadly intent, this might be akin today to someone in a bar across from Yankee Stadium trying to identify a clandestine Red Sox fan by asking him to speak. In speech, both fans would most likely "pahk their kahs"

rather than "park their cars," but to the trained ear, there are subtle differences of pronunciation. The Dutch resistance used a shibboleth during World War II to find Nazi spies in their country; they found subtle ways to get men whom they suspected of spying to talk about Scheveningen, a seaside resort in the Netherlands frequented in those days by German tourists (the Germans and the Dutch pronounce the consonant cluster *sch* very differently).

In one of her short stories, Mary Gordon tells of a man who talks in a way that gives him away as a Catholic convert: "But the way Dr. Meyers said 'The Faith' made Joseph feel sorry for him. It was a clue, if anyone was looking for clues, that he had not been born a Catholic, and all those things that one breathed in at Catholic birth he'd had to learn, as if he had been learning a new language."[7] These chapters are my explorations of both the language and spirit of being Catholic.

"Catholic"

> "The Church is not a thing like the Athenaeum Club," he cried. "If the Athenaeum Club lost all its members, the Athenaeum Club would dissolve and cease to exist. But when we belong to the Church we belong to something which is outside all of us; which is outside everything you talk about, outside the Cardinals and the Pope. They belong to it, but it does not belong to them. If we all fell dead suddenly, the Church would still somehow exist in God."
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> —G. K. Chesterton, *The Ball and the Cross*[8]

The word *catholic,* meaning "general" or "universal," was first applied to the early church in about A.D. 110 to distinguish the Christian faith from the Judaism out of which it sprang. First-century Judaism was centered on a specific people (the Israelites or Hebrews) and specific places (the Temple, the city of Jerusalem, the Promised Land, and other biblical sites). To define this new faith as "catholic"

was to say that what Christ began was something different: it was available everywhere, easily transported, mostly invisible, universally understood, and not limited to one or a few nations, cultures, or languages. Somewhere along the way, over the course of the centuries, this broad understanding of being "catholic" transformed into a web of practices, creeds, and differentiated ways of believing embodied in the Roman Catholic (that is, Universal) Church.

Conversely, consider what it means to be Protestant. To be Protestant is to define yourself as protesting against certain forms of religion. The word *Protestant* began as a political moniker in the sixteenth century to describe the protestations of certain German princes at the Second Diet of Speyer, in the Rhineland of Germany. Soon afterward, the word took on a broader meaning for believers who wished to differ from the orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic Church. Some parts of the world still reveal the political origins of this disunion; we still unfortunately talk about Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Ulster Protestants.

To my mind, there is little need for Protestants anymore. What are we still protesting? The Reformation of the sixteenth century was a European event. Just as Roman Catholicism was inevitably formed by Mediterranean sensibilities and ideas in the first few centuries after Jesus lived and died, the first waves of Reformation were formed by Germanic responses to late medieval corruption both in the Church and outside of it. Perhaps the cat is out of the bag and we'll never be able to catch it again.

The original, one, true Catholic Church is what compels many of us today, not protest. But what is that "one" and "true" Church? No one can say for sure, even though we try. As the fourth-century Nicene Creed affirms, "We believe in the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." Anglicans,

Roman Catholics, and Orthodox all link their religious authority to the first twelve apostles of Christ. To be an "apostolic" church is to trace your authority to a long succession of ordained bishops all the way back to Bartholomew, Peter, John, or any of the other nine original apostles. But it's not that simple. In Catholic and some Orthodox parishes, those four words in the Creed—*Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Church*—are capitalized, whereas in Anglican and Protestant churches, they are not. The new *Lutheran Service Book* even replaces the lowercased *catholic* with an uppercased *Christian*.

Ultimately, there is no longer such a thing as the "original" Church; we can't recover the ancient past, and if we did, we wouldn't necessarily want to replicate it anyway. When I say that the one, true Catholic Church is what compels many of us today, what I mean is that we desire more and more to be involved in something universal, vast, beyond us. We "evolved" Protestants desire to protest less by turning back to what is tried and true, part of the bigger story of what it means to be Christian. Thomas Howard explains this transition well when he says, "How much better it is to hand the immense task over to the venerable wisdom of the Church herself, so that the pattern of our interior life takes shape as a matter of obedience and not of our own devising."[9]

It is all things *Catholic* that bring us home to tradition, to the first centuries, to the faith in Christ that baffled and inspired Saint Paul; that seemed worth dying for in the Roman amphitheaters, built faith communities and churches all over the world, and formed the language of the Nicene Creed and the saints of the Middle Ages—the mysteries of faith that challenged the first millennium and challenge people today. Many Christians in the Global South—where both Catholicism and Protestantism have grown up indigenously

and so resemble each other more than they do in Europe—seem to understand this better than we do.

I write this book with a religious identity that is thoroughly Christian, and yet indefinably so. My origins were evangelical Protestant and my early adulthood was a process of searching from one tradition to the next. But over the last two decades, I have gradually found my identity in the mystery of what is Catholic. I am drawn to the ancient and medieval traditions out of a desire to connect with the deepest and widest paths on the way. Two millennia of saints and practices and teachings and mystery form a golden string that connects us to our beginnings. These paths are very much about our future, even as they illuminate our past. If you are like me and seek a new set of practices and ways of thinking about your relationship with God—explore with me our ancient past and our necessary future.

I make the assumption that tradition and scripture are equally important. For centuries, Protestants have excitedly distinguished themselves from Catholics on the issues of justification by faith alone and *sola scriptura.* Martin Luther said, "Scripture is its own interpreter. . . . Scripture is itself its own light. It is therefore good when Scripture interprets itself."[10] But I agree with the poet Scott Cairns when he says, "It is good to note that even Martin Luther—the father of our cranky phrase, *sola scriptura*—was himself utterly well-equipped *with* and assisted *by* a rich and enriching communion with the tradition expressed by the fathers and mothers of the Church. Having thoroughly ingested that tradition, he was, perhaps, in a unique position to say he would thereafter proceed 'by scripture alone.' We and our interpretations, on the other hand, might fare better with a little company."[11] In other words, even the reformer needed to be Catholic in order to see things as clearly as he did.

And then there are those issues that Catholics get excited about in the reverse, such as the proper meaning of the sacraments and apostolic succession. In one direction or another, these issues have ushered good men and women into one denomination or another. But my reflections are for the purposes of stepping back from the old debates and looking at the beauty of ancient, shared faith. Like any good Catholic, I am occasionally protesting, but I am still Catholic in the broadest sense of the word. To be Christian is to be Catholic; whether you capitalize the *C* is a matter of where your heart is.

Almost Catholic begins in Section One with new definitions and language. Section Two is all about what I call "The Catholic Imagination," exploring a particular way of seeing the world. Section Three takes a look at the most important single aspect of what it means to be Catholic, which is to embrace the Incarnate Christ. The Incarnation is what links us essentially to Jesus, and I find many aspects of that earthiness to be more compelling than God's otherworldliness. Section Four enters into the small things I love that fill my Catholic life with physical connections to reality. Section Five offers a short and slightly unorthodox catechesis—a meaningful, living transmission of the faith—that reflects my own journey of understanding. Finally, Section Six offers several practices on the well-worn path that pull us together. Practices such as these are often called "ancient-future," symbolizing the ways in which they are being rediscovered by many people today. I find that exciting.

Forget About Conversion

> [He] had been visited in all his senses: touched as by an unction on his cruel eyes that had not seen the countenance of pardon; on his inattentive ears, which had not heard the groaning of the Holy Spirit; on his wild-beast nostrils, which had not perceived the fragrant odor of the divine rapture; on the sepulcher of his mouth, which had not eaten the living bread; on his violent hands, which had not helped to carry the Savior's cross; on his impatient feet, which had hastened in all directions, except towards the holy sepulcher. That word *conversion,* so often prostituted, if applied to him, did not altogether explain the catastrophic change.
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> —Léon Bloy, *The Woman Who Was Poor*[12]

I have just turned forty. It's important to point that out, because you are reading a book of musings on beliefs and practices that are ancient in origin but still held dear by many people, perhaps even by you. Being forty (too young to understand much, too old to really know), I probably

experience these things in ways that say something about my generation.

I believe that the practice, history, and mystery of Catholic faith are for everyone. You don't need a special password to come in. There is no secret code. And you don't have to be *Roman* to practice spirituality that is Catholic. To be Catholic is a conscious choice, but it is not the same thing as being born into Roman Catholicism or even converting to it.

Conversion was all the rage in my parents' generation. Dabbling with a tradition was frowned on, whereas taking the conversion plunge was respectable. Even movements from one denomination to another—which seem today like selecting a different mode of transportation on the way to worship—became conversions. Over the years, I've watched friends and family convert from Baptist to Presbyterian, from Dutch Reformed to Missouri Synod Lutheran to Evangelical Lutheran, and bigger jumps, such as from Methodist to Anglican to Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholicism, and so on. Each movement involves more than simply changing seats or buildings. They include catechisms, orientation and confirmation classes, and elaborate ceremonies.

The convert is always the most earnest and determined of practitioners. Some converts to Roman Catholicism will say that theirs was a decision made after becoming convinced of truth. They were convinced that Roman Catholicism is the oldest tradition in Christendom. They read the arguments for the apostolic succession that traces itself back to Saint Peter. Such thinking convinced thousands of people during the last century toward Roman Catholicism, drawn by the desire to connect with absolute and immutable Truth and Tradition. Their beliefs took on institutional importance in their lives.

I don't seek Truth with a capital *T.* For one thing, I believe that faith usually happens in much more haphazard fashion. There will always be stories of Christians who consider the arguments on both sides, like Justice weighing her scales, and then favor Christianity as most true. But for every one of these today, there are three who enter by a side door. A friend helps in a time of crisis and shows you how to pray. A local parish opens its doors at a time when you need to get warm. Perhaps even something inexplicable happens to you—call it spiritual experience—and it begins to make sense to explore more of that sort of thing with like-minded others. Becoming a person of faith takes a lifetime, and it begins far more often in participation than it does in some sort of judging. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal criticized the approach to faith that says it begins with belief. You start with belonging, he said. Belief comes later, and even then, belief comes and goes. Consistent belief is not essential to faith.

Also, I think that Christians today are beginning to accept that *not* knowing is actually essential to faith. Our premodern ancestors understood this instinctually. That was when mystery permeated everything. They didn't presume much knowledge at all. But during the Middle Ages, that same power of mystery was used by the powerful against the weak. The poor were made poorer when their religious leaders created indulgences (pardons for sins) that could be purchased, Masses for the dead that were also bought, payments for the right to Baptism, First Communion, and Confirmation. Understanding those abuses are where most Protestants stop in coming to know Catholicism.

The abuses of the past led to the promises of reformation and enlightenment and ultimately to where we find ourselves today: feeling that we are the ultimate judges of

what is true and what is not. It all reminds me of one of the stories from the enigmatic monks known as the Desert Fathers (because they fled the cities of ancient Egypt to lead a different sort of life in the desert). Saint Antony once posed a question to the gathering of followers that had grown up around him. He quoted them a difficult passage from the Bible, and then he asked each in turn, "What does this mean?" From the youngest to the eldest, the men offered erudite and subtle readings of the ancient text. Each of them believed that their answers would show their learning and earnestness for the spiritual life. But the last to respond was a monk named Joseph. When Antony asked him for the meaning of the verse, Joseph said very simply, "I do not know." At that, Antony told the gathered disciples, "Only Joseph knows the way."

To look at faith through the lens of belief is to be stuck in some sort of rationalism that makes little sense today. William Blake said that our reason—those "mind-forg'd manacles"—will undo us as Christians and as human beings.[13]

Whatever category of Christian you are, chances are good that you've been taught to be confident in the power of believing and in your ability to identify and discover truth as a buttress for belief. This is the way of modernity that we inherited from the Enlightenment. Modernity convinced our ancestors that religious faith should be replaced by reason so that a more reliable truth could take its place. But take a quick look at our recent past, and it is easy to lose confidence in those promises. What have three hundred years of modernity—from about 1650 to about 1950—accomplished for us? Plenty of good, but we have also seen that modernity is no savior. Science promised to save humanity and has created ever-greater ways to destroy us. Economic systems

such as capitalism and Marxism offered security for all, but instead the gap widens between the ridiculously rich and the horribly poor year by year. Politics claimed that it would find ways to provide for people; instead, it most often breeds greed and feeds on power.

Modernity is based on the ideas that faith will always succumb to reason, but of course, it doesn't. As Henry Adams said long ago, it is faith that holds up the buttresses of the Gothic churches: without faith they'd make no sense, but within faith, the universe that includes them is marvelous, mysterious, and tapped into something that secularism can't fathom.[14]

Many of us today acknowledge that we live in a new era—some call it *postmodernity*—in which propositional truth, certainty, and even papal infallibility play the same sort of smaller role in a spiritual life that they played in the premodern worldview. We decide what is true in different ways. The Christian writer and activist Brian McLaren recently wrote, "How do you know if something is true? First, you engage in spiritual *practices* like prayer, Bible reading, forgiveness, and service. Then you see what happens; you remain open to *experience.* Finally, you report your experience to others in the field of spirituality for their *discernment,* to see if they confirm your findings or not."[15]

We have immersed ourselves in the protests and reason of reformations and enlightenment. It is time to move on. The meaning of life—as well as faith—has little to do with truth and answering the "big" questions and has a lot to do with actually doing away with the questions. Life and faith are about living in ways that make believing easier and make doing for others normal.

For me, qualities such as hoping, desiring, and reconciling have taken on bigger roles in my life as the energy

I used to pour into believing has moved more and more into the background. Hope is not optimism. Love is not affection. To feel or show optimism and affection is pretty simple, but to hope and love takes time, practice, and self-examination. Capacities such as hope are to be learned and strengthened—and I find them recommended in the scriptures more often than belief. Even when Jesus praises belief, as in the case of the woman who anointed his feet with tears and alabaster (and "who had a bad name in town"), he praises her desire and love, not the sort of propositional belief that we have come to understand today. "I tell you that her sins, many as they are, have been forgiven her, because she has shown such great love" (Luke 7:36–47).

When Edith Stein first read the autobiography of Saint Teresa of Avila, she stayed up all night, engrossed. It was through Teresa that Stein first met a God who was real. Afterward, she felt the divine presence so clearly that she said she felt absolutely compelled to become a Christian, even a Roman Catholic, and eventually a Carmelite nun. *That* is the sort of conversion I can understand. I've never had that complete an experience. In the meantime, for many of the rest of us, paradoxes often remain the best answers.

I sometimes wonder if the animal or insect or invertebrate worlds are as perplexed these days as we humans find ourselves. I suppose not, but we have the burden of reflection forced on us. Conversion is sometimes used as a way of ending an argument. It's a conclusion—staking one's flag in the ground, and it feels good. But my spiritual life is not ready for any conclusions, at least not yet.

Doubters and Believers, Atheists and Agnostics

"I rather believe in doubting. The only people I've met in this world who never doubt are materialists and atheists."

—Malcolm Muggeridge, "How Does One Find Faith?"[16]

"We want a few mad people now. See where the sane ones have landed us!"

—George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*[17]

Catholic spirituality and practice not only allow doubt, misbelief, and the refusal to believe but in many ways encourage them! In fact, the so-called lapsed Catholic is often the most concerned of all people when it comes to matters of faith. Why else would they call themselves "lapsed" if they were not conscious of the ideal? One of the surest signs of an inner spiritual life is the frustration, anger, and enthusiasm of the lapsed, the doubter, the one who has intentionally put himself or herself on the outside looking in.

Doubt is the most powerful fuel to faith. Even when doubt batters belief (our ability to agree that something is true) like a ship at sea during a nor'easter—even then, doubt fuels faith, our wanting to believe. I feel far more comfortable with people who have doubted than I do with those for whom belief always seems to be a lock. Any person who troubles with matters of religion enough to fight against them is someone in whom the spirit is hard at work. I would rather have the pews full of angry atheists and questioning agnostics than of certain or sleepy believers on any given Sunday or Saturday night.

Doubting Thomas—the one disciple who insisted on sticking his finger into the wounds of Christ—should inspire us to similarly test and challenge what we are told. We are people with skin and beating hearts, not disembodied spirits, and we want to know what's what as sure as we possibly can.

Why is it that we don't hear Methodists and Quakers and Congregationalists describe themselves as "lapsed"? The average Protestant will use the term *inactive* rather than *lapsed,* or perhaps even *former.* But to be Catholic is to be a part of something self-defining, something enormous, far bigger than precepts of belonging to a local church could ever communicate. It's only the feeling of obligation that has left the lapsed. They are still looking. The novelist Graham Greene took to calling himself a "Catholic agnostic" and even a "Catholic atheist" toward the end of his life.[18] Greene was communicating the deep divide that he felt between faith and belief. He had plenty of the first and less and less of the second.

The British broadcaster John Humphrys hosted a popular BBC TV show a few years ago called *In Search of God*. Humphrys, who describes himself as a former Roman Catholic, approaches matters of faith with profound skepticism, energy, and creativity. He interviewed the archbishop of

Canterbury, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, and the atheist former Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan, posing challenging questions to each of these men, and the result was interesting television. A year later, Humphrys followed up the television series with a book titled *In God We Doubt: Confessions of an Angry Agnostic.*[19] In doubting reflections such as his, you may find more meaningful spirituality and faith than in many of the pious books that glow on the shelves of religious bookshops.

"Mortal eyes cannot distinguish the saint from the heretic," says one accuser of Joan of Arc in George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*.[20] Indeed, when it comes to faith, it can be nearly impossible to tell the difference between the two. It's not as if you can spot a follower of Christ the same way you spot a deer in the woods. We don't wear badges or even head scarves, although we are supposed to be doing certain things that make it easier to find us.

If you asked a hundred people what it means to be Christian, they'd give you a hundred different answers. But most would likely say, "I go to church" or "I go to such-and-such church." "My parents were Christian." And "I was raised a Christian. I was baptized when I was young." Does any of that ultimately matter? The follower of Christ is not necessarily a person that you would expect to meet in church.

Consider the example of Mohandas Gandhi. Many Christian observers in India eighty years ago thought that they saw Saint Francis of Assisi in Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi never renounced his Hinduism, but he often declared himself a follower of Jesus Christ. He studied the Gospels and lived by them, carefully. There were times during the 1920s and 1930s when Gandhi would arrive to give a lecture and would simply quote from the New Testament, usually from the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. On one

occasion he did this and said, "That is my address to you. Act upon that." A Hindu intellectual of the 1920s said about Gandhi: "What the [Christian] missionaries have not been able to do in fifty years Gandhi by his life and trial and incarceration has done, namely, he has turned the eyes of India toward the cross."[21] It is ironic but true that Gandhi may have been a more faithful follower of Christ than many Christians have been.

Millions of the lapsed and doubting are now creating new-old ways to be Christian and Catholic or just to be believers. As many as five million are involved in house churches in the United States alone, and these are mostly evangelical Christians. Other lay movements such as the Community of Sant'Egidio (Catholic, founded by high school students in 1968 and now numbering more than fifty thousand adherents in seventy countries) and the Focolare Movement (of Catholic origin but broadly ecumenical today; founded in 1943, now with more than five million members) draw people who often feel uncomfortable in traditional churches, even as they want the practice, history, and mystery of faith.

Even great saints of history were sometimes "lapsed," going through their own rebellions, rejections, reformations—whatever you want to call them—before arriving at other ways of doing religion. Francis and Clare of Assisi, for instance, each rejected their mothers and fathers as they went in search of a more meaningful relationship with their heavenly father. Francis literally disowned his father in one of the piazzas of Assisi, and Clare fled home in the middle of the night. What would we think of these rebellions today? Sometimes we see ourselves and others as lapsed or doubting simply because we don't have the benefit of hindsight.

Eleven Steps to Becoming a Truly Catholic Christian

> "I'll become a Catholic. What does one have to do?"
>
> . . . "Very well," she said, "I will see about having you instructed."
>
> "Look, . . . I haven't the time. Instruction will be wasted on me. Just you give me the form and I'll sign on the dotted line."
>
> "It usually takes some months—often a lifetime."
>
> —Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*[22]

With more than a nod to the phrasings of the original twelve steps used in Alcoholics Anonymous, I call these "Eleven Steps to Becoming a Truly Catholic Christian." If you can join in most of these shared statements, you are well on your way!

1. We acknowledge that our faith is larger than ourselves.
2. We believe that unity with two millennia of believers and spiritual practices is more important than faith by ourselves.
3. Our catholicity leads us to embrace those who differ from us, which is difficult, because the same catholicity leads us to seek unity more often than reform.
4. We seek to work for the kingdom of God here and now, uncovering what is sacred in the world around us, working to lift and redeem all things.
5. We seek to see the world as it is, to see the truth as clearly as we are able, with the help of the Holy Spirit. We regularly admit to God, to ourselves, and to other human beings the nature of our sins and weaknesses.
6. We regularly pray for forgiveness for our trespasses against God and others, and we also pray regularly for those who trespass against us.
7. We practice faith that unites heaven and earth, time and eternity: seeking the company of saints, remembering Christ's death and Resurrection in the liturgy, reading the scriptures, with prayers old and new, and supporting others.
8. We support each other in both faith and doubt, understanding that both are essential to spiritual maturity.
9. We regularly try to believe the unbelievable and to talk openly, but never combatively, about these things with others.
10. We look for ways to open ourselves and experience at first hand the infinite ways that Christ lives in and through people who are different from ourselves. Saint Paul said, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22).
11. We order our days with spiritual practices that unite us with Catholics around the world.