Invitation to Catholicism

Beliefs + Teachings + Practices

Alice Camille

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by Alice Camille

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Writing a book can be rather lonely work—like hiking the Grand Canyon without someone along to share the wonder and discovery of the journey. Happily, I was not alone in my journey through this book. My sister-in-law Susan Hancock Pedergnana agreed to be my "Protestant" reader, pointing out any obscure Catholic ideas I might have used without definition. My neighbor and long-suffering friend, Erin J. Boulton, was willing, as a recently professed Catholic who loves the church, to be my RCIA reader. My sister Evelyn Mautner also read every page and e-mailed me daily to assist and encourage me. (She also offered to leaflet all the cars in the supermarket parking lot with a free chapter, to boost sales.) Without Susan, Erin and Evie, this book would have been written in a vacuum. Thanks also to my fellow religious writer Paul Boudreau, who was my "computer guy" throughout, as well as fact-checker and heresy-spotter.

Dedication

To my parents,
Evelyn and Theodore Pedergnana,
from whose generous love and fidelity
I learned my faith.

Introduction

All stories begin somewhere. This one has its beginning at the deathbed of a friend. He was well loved and gentle in spirit, regarded by all as a wise and holy person. In his final illness, he told the story of his journey toward God. It surprised many of us who thought we knew him thoroughly.

My friend had been brought up in the country by parents who were indifferent to organized religion. While he was still a small boy, a neighbor offered to take him to church along with her brood, and so it was that he was introduced to the God of Christianity. It was not a highly influential encounter. What mattered to him more was the kindness and welcome of the neighbor and her family.

As a young man, my friend began to travel, first around the country and then around the world. He was astounded by the vastness of the world, the immense variety of human experience and culture. He was attracted in particular to the ways the people of many lands seek the face of their God. In order to understand this phenomenon, he decided to participate in it, immersing himself in each people's language, culture and worship. He became fluent in many tongues and sympathetic to the common yearning soul of humanity. He prayed in Arabic, kneeling on his prayer rug in mosques. He contemplated among Buddhists, attentive to the gong of his bowl. He wore his prayer shawl at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, reciting Hebrew texts and rocking back and forth with rabbis. He was very serious about each experience, respectful of every tradition he encountered.

But from each religious expression, he came away convinced that he could be only a visitor. His own spiritual home eluded him. He dabbled here and there among the congregations of the United States and finally shelved the religious quest altogether, moving to Utah to tend bar at a ski lodge.

As so often happens, once we stop our determined effort to find God, God finds us. My friend overheard coworkers at the

lodge talking about visiting a monastery down the road a ways. A Catholic monastery, complete with cowled monks! In the heart of Utah this seemed unlikely, so my friend decided to have a closer look. On the weekend, he drove to the monastery and asked for a room. Left alone with his thoughts, he found the experience restful and clarifying, so he made plans to visit again. This became his habit for months and years to come.

Eventually he developed a relationship with one of the monks, Father Patrick. Each time he came to the monastery, he would meet with the monk and volley questions at him—about God, Jesus, the Catholic church, and the absurdity of knowing anything for sure about the spiritual world. He'd seen it all, studied it all, and it was all the same. There was no way to know God, ultimately. "It's no use," he would tell the monk each time, feeling the despair in his words.

One day, my friend came to the monastery as usual, and asked to see Father Patrick. Word was sent to him that Father Patrick would not meet with him any more; there was no purpose to it. My friend had built up a fortress with his questions, and no answer the monk had to offer would penetrate it. There was nothing left to say.

My friend panicked, sending word back that he would go away and leave the monk alone if only he would meet with him one more time. Just once more. In the end, Father Patrick agreed and came to the small, bare sitting room where guests of the monastery were received.

The monk entered the room and said not a word. Kneeling down, he took off my friend's shoes and socks and kissed his feet with great tenderness. Then he stood up, bowed to my friend and left in silence.

My friend burst into tears. Suddenly his heart opened and he understood, beyond words, the answer to all his questions. He had encountered the love, compassion and humility of Christ, and knew his long search was over. That Easter he was baptized and received into the Catholic church.

Coming to the crossroads

For my friend, nothing could have been more strange and

unsought than the idea of joining the Catholic church. From the outside, Catholicism can seem foreign and complex, a step backward into the Middle Ages or onto another planet. Most of what non-Catholics know about the church comes from two sources: Hollywood (saints preserve us!) and ex-Catholics. Practicing Catholics are some of the quietest believers on earth, but ex-Catholics are usually ready to talk your ear off about why they don't practice their former faith.

To be sure, former Catholics often have very good reasons why they found the church wanting. Chief among these reasons is how they were treated (and perhaps mistreated) by the primary representatives of the church: parents, clergy and religious personnel, teachers at the parochial school, and other church members. Those wounds can take a long time to heal, and sometimes that healing has to take place in another community altogether. The church may be "the communion of saints," according to its creed, but even saints are sinners, prone to errors in judgment, foolishness and lapses in love. One of the great mysteries of Christianity is the call to forgiveness, and the church is not excluded from those who need to be forgiven and to seek forgiveness.

Many who pick up this book may find themselves at a crossroads of sorts. Perhaps you are like my friend, looking for God or a community of faith or answers to questions you can't even form in your mind. Or maybe you love someone who is a Catholic and you want to understand what that identity means to him or her. Some of you may be sifting through some unfinished business with the church, trying to understand what went wrong and what may still be right about the religion you left behind. Others may be lifelong Catholics who are looking for a way to get a sense of the "big picture" of Catholic belief. You've been on the inside for so long that it's hard to see the forest for the trees.

This book may serve as a topographical map of the terrain of Catholic belief. Unlike a catechism, it won't be full of doctrine and dogma and official pronouncements. For the last word on every subject of that nature, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has already been written. What I offer here, as

a lifelong believing Catholic, is a sense of what I find beautiful, joyful and good about Catholicism. It's the side of Catholic belief that doesn't appear much in news magazines and movie scripts. It is, I hope, a presentation of the church that demonstrates how a thinking person in the twenty-first century can embrace Catholicism without compromising reason. Furthermore, as a person deeply committed to a life of integrity and meaning, I want to present Catholic Christianity as a courageous choice that enlivens and supports the quest for fulfillment and true freedom.

If life has become unsatisfying, empty or desperate for many, it is because we seek answers that the world cannot give. As a professor at Princeton University observed not long ago, more and more children are being raised in homes that are "fatherless, godless, and jobless," the acknowledged formula for both depression and crime. If more of us are looking for a sense of love and belonging, something greater than the dollar to worship, some meaningful work for our hands, what we seek can be found in yielding to the image in which we are made: to the God who created us to be more than slaves to the clock and to our physical needs.

What's in this book

The organization of this book has a lot to do with the twenty years I've spent as a religious educator in parish work, campus ministry, and especially with the formation of adults who wish to enter the Catholic church formally through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Each chapter ends with a set of questions for personal or group use, as well as suggestions on how to apply this topic to real living. Sometimes one good question is worth a whole essay, so even if you're reading this alone, scan the questions to see if one of them has your name on it.

The first chapter, on mystery, attempts to lay out basic ideas that religious people—Christians and then Catholics in particular—take for granted. It includes some of the "primary colors" with which we paint reality. For those with no formal religious experience or those who have had only a secular expo-

sure to religion, this may be especially helpful.

The next three chapters focus on the Trinity, as revealed through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, better known as the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible. The Bible is, hands down, the most important book you'll ever read, and I can't emphasize too strongly the need to develop a relationship with this book. But because it's large and old, and because many of us have learned to be afraid of its complexity, many lifelong Christians have yet to sit down with it personally. So I present a Cliff Notes-like version of it, with the hope that it will lessen your fear and increase the longing to go further in your spiritual search.

Chapter Five is about the church. From writing a children's textbook on this topic I've learned that a whole book is not enough to cover what has evolved through twenty centuries of living and countless volumes of theologizing. So this single chapter is only Sandbox Theology 101, as my seminary teacher used to say. It gets you in the door—but once there, you're on your own.

The next three chapters are about the sacraments, and although they may seem like old hat to veteran Catholics and voodoo to those raised apart from the church, the approach here is not simply "seven sacred signs" but how to *live sacramentally.*

The last four chapters include topics that people ask questions about the most: prayer, Mary, morality, and the afterlife. An appendix including basic prayers used by Catholics and others can be found at the end.

Why I'm writing this book

There are hundreds of books in print right now about Catholicism, ranging in style from scholarly tomes to trendy little outlines. Many are written expressly for RCIA groups or Catholics returning after some time away or practicing church members looking for an update. One more volume in that sea of information might not seem significant, unless it's the one that finds you.

Rather than defending the need for still another book on

this topic, let me explain why I wrote *Invitation to Catholicism*. Let's go back to the beginning of this introduction, to the deathbed of my friend. He lived the last twenty-five years of his life as a thoroughly happy, jubilant Roman Catholic. He was, frankly, the best advertisement for the church that we cradle Catholics who knew him had ever seen. He spent every year of his post-baptismal life in exuberant evangelization for the sake of Christ. This cause inspired his living, as well as the lives of everyone around him. And it illuminated his dying, so that all that remained in his last hour was his breathing and the light of Christ.

Beyond the loss of someone I loved, all I could think of in his final hours was how dearly I want a death like his. Such a death, I feel sure, is available to all of us and is intended for us as surely as we take in our first breath. But as Flannery O'Connor, Southern writer and notorious Catholic, insisted, "The creative work of a Christian's life is to prepare his own death in Christ." Far from being macabre, this statement is as matter-of-fact as the idea that we are what we eat. We weave the future out of the frayed elements of the past, and we create all our tomorrows out of what we do with the precious bits of today. The spiritual quest is not a hobby or a luxury; it is our destiny. Sometimes it may seem that we just don't have time to find God or get our spiritual act together. But the truth is that time is not given to us for any other reason.

I hope that the time you spend here will not be wasted. May God bless you on your journey.

One

Room for Mystery

The word mystery used to be huge, evocative of worlds and possibilities that lie hidden to us. But contemporary use of the word has shriveled it to where it's no mystery at all. It now means hardly more than "whodunit," as in there's a body-on-the-floor, a weapon-in-the-lake, and three suspects-to-choose-from. Mystery as a genre has shrunk the concept down to manageable size, where we can tame it if only we pay attention to the clues and don't get seduced by the attractive stranger with the iron-clad alibi.

Mysteries of this kind are meant to be solved. These mysteries are really no more than facts that have yet to come to light. Mystery, in the popular sense, is a temporary state of ignorance, easily resolved by the clever person in the trench coat.

We treat mystery this way, I suspect, because of the scientific revolution. What was once the terrain of mystery—cosmic forces, star-embedded skies, the power of the elements, the wonder of the human mind, the ruthless dominion of disease and death—are now problems we are solving or have yet to solve. Mystery is a condition easily remedied by the clever person in the lab coat. When mystery becomes interchangeable with mere ignorance, then knowledge is the tool that will bring it under our control.

One can read articles that seek to explain love as a chemical response or heroism as a biologically comprehensible decision. God and religion have long ago been tossed into the dust bin of useless notions. The appeal of mystery in its former meaning—something that is at bottom patently incomprehensible but about which we can learn more and more—seems to challenge the foundation of scientific inquiry itself.

How science meets religion

Science is not the natural enemy of the spiritual quest, though some fundamentalist approaches to religion have viewed science with great misgivings. Science is a noble enterprise, with its many fruits laid at the service of humanity. All of us are beneficiaries of its gifts, in this generation more than in any other. But science will fail us if we view truth through the lens of scientific inquiry alone. What science cannot offer is an answer to the *why* questions that most humans start asking at the age of two. A child asks her father why the ocean is blue, and her dad rattles off a twenty-minute exposition on the properties of light and water and the workings of the eye and brain. Having proven his thesis, he finishes with great satisfaction, but the child stares at the restless body of water before her and asks again, "But why blue?"

Or why is there an ocean, or a father and child, or anything, instead of nothing? Why time, space, history? Why being of any kind? Why the ability to ask why? Why an asker of any question, and a universe answering or mutely refusing an answer? Here we enter the realm of protoscience, or philosophy. Why does a woman suddenly miscarry a healthy child, seemingly without medical cause? Even if science attempts a response, the reply is meaningless in the arena of grief. "But why has this happened to my child, to me?" the woman asks. For this, chaos theory or statistical probability has nothing useful to offer.

When it comes to the problem of human suffering and the reality of evil, nothing that science or philosophy has come up with can make these two disappear for good. All over the globe, from the rising of the sun to its setting, people are asking questions that cannot be answered with a pill or a theory. And they may carry the questions in their hearts for all of their lives.

The spiritual quest

The enterprise of religion has been around a long time. It does not preclude or exclude scientific discovery or science-born truths, though many speak as if it did. The goal of religion is not to take things apart to see what makes them tick, but to see

beyond the pieces to the Maker of the whole. If the goal of science is human knowledge, the endpoint of religion is knowing and being known by the One who is and was and is to come.

The distinction between science and religion is critical, because to attempt to use religion in place of science—or vice versa—causes intellectual or moral schizophrenia. Many people of the twenty-first century who reject the religious enterprise see it in conflict with the truths of science. They feel compelled to make a choice between the two, and the educated mind finds it hard to vote against intellectual freedom.

To those who feel such a conflict, relax. Nobody is asking you to turn off your brain. What is needed is to activate another faculty entirely: the living spirit within you.

Religious truth does not challenge scientific knowledge, any more than it attempts to trump historical truth, mathematical truth or the inquiry systems of any other discipline. As theologian William Herr has noted, if a thing is true, it has to be compatible with faith. Religious truth, particularly as it applies to the Old and New Testaments, addresses the matters of meaning and purpose and direction that exist beyond or beneath the questions that other disciplines ask. The story in Genesis about the Garden of Eden does not seek to address the dating of dinosaur bones or the beginning of the human race. The story of the Great Flood was not written as a historical record of a "perfect storm." The idea of the Israelites wandering forty years in a desert that could be crossed easily in a short period of time is not about having a poor sense of direction. And the theological concept of Trinity is not a math problem of how three equals one under certain circumstances. Religious truth is broader than temporal, tangible fact. To grasp the difference, we may look to the ancient discipline of myth making.

A word about myth

Popular usage has it all wrong about myth. We use the word to dismiss something as patently false: "That's a myth." On the contrary, a myth encapsulates truths about the human condition that lie deep beneath the surface. Its domain is the presentation of those elements of human reality that are not simply

historically true—true for some particular person, place or moment in time—but universally true: true about people, life, the way things are everywhere and in every age. Mythological truth is most naturally presented in storytelling and poetry. Here human experience is communicated not as a means of historical record keeping but to advance human self-understanding: This is what human beings have done or are capable of doing. This is how it is, and how we are.

Of course it must be said that not all we learn by means of myth is true. A lot of myth making depends on the person, people or culture behind it. Think about the personal myths you carry around from your family of origin, the proverbs you were taught to guide you through life. You may have heard simple prejudice pronounced as fact: "Those kinds of people are like that." Or paranoia presented as truth: "Watch your back. People are not to be trusted." You may have also imbibed the American myth, the inner story of a people that is still evolving its themes: "Hard work will be rewarded" or "Anyone can grow up to be president."

Myth making travels a long, winding road from Homer's epics and Aesop's fables to the parables of Jesus to the American dream. Although it is a dynamic and creative avenue of human truth, it does not nail us to the floorboards of predestination but presents us with decisions for us to make with our freedom. It leaves room for mystery.

God as mystery

Religious mystery is not for solving, as we have said, but rather simply for acknowledging. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). God alone is God, an infinite, eternal and therefore incomprehensible Other from the perspective of finite, mortal, limited humanity. When it comes to reality, we are sitting in the cheap seats, and what we can see from here is humble compared to the vastness of God's timeless, limitless perspective. Just grasping the reality of our mortality teaches us not simply about ourselves but about God. What we are, God is not. And what God is, we are not. God is maker, and we are made; we are creatures before the Creator.

Isn't it surprising how few people live as though this were true? We often live as if we believe we are God: titans with limitless energy who will never die, with no needs, in total control of the flow of events. Mortality is a fact we don't even consider until illness or disability strikes, a loved one dies, or we hit the wall of our own limitations. Somewhat clinically, theologians call these experiences of our mortality "teachable moments." When we suffer, suddenly our inner atheist gets religion, big time.

When we do respect the mystery of God, however, we also honor our own human nature. We know who God is and who we are. The freedom of this knowledge presents the possibility of unspeakable cooperation between what we can do and what God can do. The first step in acknowledging the Sacred, then, is embracing humility by facing who we are. The second is using our freedom to learn who we can become.

A new way of seeing

Opening the window on mystery offers a new way of seeing and interpreting the world around us. Most people who "get religion" of some kind don't lapse into visions, at least not right away. A sense of the God-embedded nature of things comes upon us in a more organic way. In fact, the natural world is the best place to begin to understand the presence of God-with-us, since creation was God's first utterance. God's desire is not to remain hidden from the created world but to be known by it and through it.

In light of this, we discover that we can approach the infinite God through the finite world. This leads to an important tenet of Catholic belief: Common things hold sacred realities. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," as Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. If you want to know about the majesty of God, stand among the Rocky Mountains and look around. If you want to know God's beauty, gaze over the edge of the Grand Canyon. If you want to know God's abundance, travel the lush farms of the heartland of America. If you want to know the awe-inspiring power of God, go to Death Valley when the high winds are blowing. The God who created

these marvels contains all these possibilities within the divine imagination.

We also learn about God through certain signs and symbols that have been given to us through the tradition of believers. These common things—bread and wine, water and oil—teach us about the life that God offers us in every ordinary moment of our days. God uses ordinary items for divine purposes. And each of us, out of the ordinariness of our lives, is invited to become aware of ourselves as children of God, living stones built into a new temple where God chooses to dwell (1 Peter 2:5).

The Catholic way of seeing extends beyond the recognition of God's self-revelation in the wonders of creation and in common, ordinary things. We also see one another as the revelation of God. The story of Jesus who was both human like us and divine Son of God affirms this way of seeing. We are urged to see Christ in every person, to uncover the divine face in the lowliest and most unexpected face of all (Matthew 25:40). Our use of sacramental signs, as in baptism, Eucharist, and the anointing of the sick, expands our appreciation of the sacredness of all times, places and persons. The vision of God's holy presence in all that is—what we can call the sacramental worldview of Catholicism—goes beyond our moments of ritual to all the hours of human existence and experience. (We will explore the meaning of the sacramental worldview in more detail in Chapters Six to Eight.)

A new language

It used to be said of a person who accepted a creed or joined a church that he or she had "had a conversion." That is still true, although the word *conversion* implies more than the formal acceptance of a creed or a church. Religious conversion means making a formal assent to a new way of "seeing" and involves, for Catholics, baptism and a profession of faith, which is an affirmation of the God we know as Trinity and of the community we know as church. But that is only the first step of conversion. The fuller meaning resides in turning over the whole of ourselves to God.

Our understanding of conversion is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Hebrew word for conversion is *t'shuvah* or "turning." It involves turning away from the self and toward God. It does not imply a negation of the self but an orientation to "right relationship" between God and ourselves. Giving to God what belongs to God reveals our rightful identity: not as servants of the world but as the beloved of Love itself.

Another word that influences our understanding of conversion is the Greek word *metanoia*, which means "a change of heart." Since the books of our scriptures are written in Hebrew and Greek, the insight of key phrases in these languages helps us to grasp more fully the meaning behind our use of the words. "Change is never the same," as the old irony goes, and conversion means we can't go on being the same once we have professed that God is in charge and we are not. The earth moves under our feet when we profess faith in God. Everything changes, and that includes us.

Theologian Bernard Lonergan has identified five aspects of conversion in our lives: religious, moral, conversion of the head, conversion of the heart, and a social dimension of conversion as well. After religious conversion (we've made the assent; we have been "still" long enough to know that God is God), we find that our language has changed. We no longer ascribe events to luck or chance but to grace or providence. We no longer speak cynically but with hope. We no longer look for the bad news and the gossip but put our hope in the unrelenting good news of the gospel.

Next, we face the challenge of moral conversion. That means what it sounds like: Our lives have to change in keeping with our words. Moral conversion means practicing what we preach. If God is sovereign, if God rules, then God's ways take precedence over our inclinations to do otherwise. The scriptures contain the Ten Commandments from the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 5:6–21), nine Beatitudes from the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5:3–11), and all kinds of good advice to use as guidelines on how to live. More will be said about moral conversion in Chapter Eleven.

Conversion of the head and heart, or intellectual and affec-

tive (emotional) conversion, accompany this process. We usually think of events happening in a linear way, but conversion follows its own route, so don't expect to check these off your list in a straight line. Think of these five aspects of conversion as spokes on a wheel rather than a ladder to climb. We probably won't conquer them one by one, but rather we will return to each over and over as our life in faith deepens.

Intellectual conversion is the movement away from superstitious or rigid thinking about religion. Just as we didn't learn everything about life by the age of thirteen, so we have not learned everything there is to know about God in Sunday school, religion class, or up to the present moment. Graduating from parochial school or finishing the RCIA process won't teach a prospective believer all there is to know about God, any more than getting a Ph.D. in theology will. The search for God and knowledge about God is a lifelong process. We have to keep learning, even if it means asking uncomfortable questions and upsetting our smooth system of beliefs now and then. Life itself, with its unsettling turns, is a great promoter of intellectual conversion.

Conversion of the heart, or affective conversion, is the process of unlearning most of what our hearts have learned so far in life. It is the softening of hearts made hard by broken dreams, betrayals of trust, lack of forgiveness and experiences of sorrow. Affective conversion is making ourselves vulnerable again to love, forgiveness, compassion and trust. It's a darn fool thing to do, by worldly standards. But to one who is wandering the wheel of conversion, it is the only way of becoming more like the One in whose image we were made and long to be. We become like children again, trading in our world-weary hearts of stone for hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19).

Even as we till the soil of moral, intellectual and affective conversion, however, we have to contend with one more thing: social transformation, or what Lonergan calls "socio-political conversion." The other forms of conversion seem rather personal and private, but mature Christianity is not a private matter. The gist of socio-political conversion—and it's every bit the mouthful it implies—means no less than the transformation of

our relationship to all the structures around us. Many of the systems that support our lives—political, economic, professional—are tainted with the same corruption (known as sin in religious language) that has touched our personal lives. Just as we must surrender to the grace that frees us interiorly from the effects of sin, so we also have an obligation to commit ourselves to the transformation of society as well.

"Getting religion," we can see, is not enough. It is not the end of the story of conversion, only the beginning.

A language beyond words

Think of the words that shape reality as our culture defines it: democracy, progress, upward mobility, freedom, individuality. People undergoing the effects of religious conversion find themselves with a whole new vocabulary for the description of reality. Sin (missing the mark of love), grace (God's endless presence and supply of help) and salvation (not being lost to the control of sin but rescued for unending joy) are three of the handiest words to keep in your front pocket after religious conversion. They will help you to understand what is happening to you—but don't expect them to play well with family or friends who have not shared your experience. Sin, grace and salvation tell the whole story, but only for those who have "arrived."

But in addition to religious words we Catholics have the language of ritual, which we use to communicate the same understanding. Why ritual? The Reformation of the sixteenth century, which resulted in what we today call Protestantism, asked this question critically. At that time, the church was divided over many serious issues, one of which was the way in which God seeks to be made known among us. Martin Luther and others insisted that the authority of God's word is spoken among us *sola scriptura*, "only in scripture." Anything beyond that was of human origin and therefore carried less authority. Although some mainstream Protestant denominations today, such as Episcopalians and Lutherans, employ a great deal of ritual in their worship similar to that of Catholics, many other denominations rely almost exclusively on the proclamation of scripture and the sermon as the center of their gathering.

The authentic expression of Catholic Christian faith continues to hold that God is known in many ways, including the incarnational approach of ritual. To *incarnate* means to "enflesh" the abstract, to "embody" what is spirit. In ritual, we incarnate what we mean by our very actions, as when we put a hand on our hearts to pledge loyalty to our country. The celebration of the Mass is evenly divided between a ritual of scripture and one of sacrament, expressing the same truth in two ways: in story and in symbol. God is made known to us in the readings from the Old and New Testaments as well as in the bread and wine, which we hold in faith to be the body and blood of Christ. The seven sacraments of the church are all ritual encounters with God's presence and grace. In our formulaic greetings ("The Lord be with you." "And also with you.") and in our ritual gestures (making the sign of the cross over ourselves, the bending of one knee known as genuflection, sharing the sign of peace with a handshake or hug), we give witness to our common faith with our whole person and share that witness with one another.

Ritual language and gesture, of course, are no alien observance in our society. We observe proper rites in our stadiums, courtrooms and classrooms, as well as in the ordinary greetings we exchange on the street. Ritual is a natural and orderly way we honor people and events and convey meaning in our lives. Birthday parties, a toast, observance of holidays and anniversaries, and the habitual way in which we begin every day suggest that the role of ritual is both useful and beneficial.

Ritual, above all, helps us to remember. We are fragile beings, and a lifetime gives us a lot to hold in our memory. We want to make sure we don't forget the important people and the crucial events and places that have shaped who we are and where we are going. If ritual helps us to find our keys by putting them in the same place all the time, won't it help us to remember more ultimate things, like why we are here and what we are striving to become?

The need for community

People on a religious quest will often ask this question of

Catholics: Why do we need the church? Can't I find God on my own? The short answer is, of course, you can. God isn't hiding from us, to be found only in a church. You can find God on a mountain in Tibet, on the worst street in a city near you, or even in an obnoxious neighbor. If you're looking for the Judeo-Christian God in particular, you can buy a Bible and read it to get the basic story. You can buy books of church teaching called catechisms, or use the vast variety of prayer books, or become a hermit in the desert. In all these ways and more, you can have an authentic experience of the God of Moses and Jesus.

But if you understand anything from all that activity, you will seek a church community promptly. Christian faith is a communal enterprise. We are all in this together. The community of church isn't an obligation but a gift. It is part of the process, and in some ways it is the crux of the matter. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," Jesus told his followers (Matthew 18:20). By gathering followers, traveling with them, and sending them out only in pairs, Jesus formed a community before the word *church* was ever spoken. Christianity is not do-it-yourself enlightenment. It entails authentically becoming the people of God.

We can read everything the Bible has to say about love, peace, justice, forgiveness and joy, but if we aren't living that out in a community of faith, then we are just cruising the surface of our religion. If we profess our faith privately to God but don't declare it publicly within the community, what does our profession mean? If we give our testimony under a bushel basket, how does that light become useful and profitable? Faith, we Catholics come to understand, is not really a private matter at all. It has to be publicly spoken, shared with others, and supported by others in a common mission. The mission of Jesus' disciples is to go forth and bring the gospel to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The "ends of the earth" generally refers to an area larger than a backyard, one's own family, a geographical neighborhood, or even a parish community.

That's why *church*, as Catholics define it, is larger than a local congregation. Even a parish is not a large enough arena in which to live out our faith. The church is a community of *faith*,

not just a community of *truths*. It is a lighthouse for the sake of the whole world. That is not a modest vision; it takes the high-visibility witness of a worldwide community to shine that light to the ends of the earth.

Did someone say witness?

There is a figure in popular culture that comes to mind when we hear words such as "witness" and "testify." He's the lonely guy who stands in the park on top of an overturned crate and shouts Bible verses to the amusement or annoyance of passers-by. He's a gutsy fellow, if somewhat negative and unappealing in his overall message: Repent or be destroyed!

There are variations on this stereotype of religious witness. There are the people who ring your doorbell and want to have the "salvation chat" with you. There are the nice young people who wear ties and want to share their ideology on the street. There are the people who would be grateful to sell you a rose at the airport. None of these approaches are what the Catholic church promotes as part of its witness.

Testimony, in the Catholic sense, is once again an incarnational event. It happens in the daily witness of your life, in the way you live out your commitments to family and friends. It means fidelity to your spouse, tenderness and attentiveness to your children. It has to do with the honest day's labor you present to your employer, the just way you deal with your employee. Testimony is reflected in keeping God (and not money) at the center of your attention. It is rendered in a lifestyle that is simple and suitable. It shines out in the way you speak, act, vote and relate to others. And it is never so powerful as in your relationship to the poor.

Catholics believe in a God who is known in the *real presence*. This is the term we use to describe the reality of Christ's true presence in the Eucharist. Bread and wine are not only a memorial meal for us, a remembrance of things past. We believe that Christ continues to be with us in a very real way in the Eucharist, and we incorporate Christ into our flesh and into our lives when we share in this meal. In fact, the eucharistic hosts that remain from the Mass are reserved in the tabernacle of

every Catholic church to remind us that God is also truly present in the world in Christ's Body, which is the church.

In a similar way, we become the witnesses of this real presence wherever we go. We are the bread of life for a hungry, restless world that has needs—material and spiritual—that are not met. In our love, in our compassion and especially in our joy, we testify to the reality that Jesus lives, our God is real, and the Spirit of God dwells within our world and is available to anyone who reaches out in faith and hope.

A return to mystery

This overview of the Catholic perspective will have been familiar to some and a bewildering drive-through for others—full of unfamiliar language, ideas and landscape. The rest of this book will offer more opportunities to encounter these same ideas again at greater depth. Although getting the facts straight is helpful for a solid foundation of faith, it would contradict the nature of divine mystery to suggest that "getting the skinny on God" is desirable or even possible. Trying to define love or uncover the dimensions of joy might prove equally fruitless. God, like love and joy, can be known only in the experience.

The information provided here may help foster that experience. But acquiring information about faith is not the same as having it and living it, and the entire enterprise can be deceptive if faith is seen as an end in itself. Through a prayerful, reflective consideration of the Questions to Explore at the end of each chapter, you may productively spend more time with each chapter's material. If you are part of a faith-sharing group, articulating your own questions or stories related to the themes of each chapter may be clarifying. The questions provided are only suggestions; other questions you may come up with may have more personal relevance to you. In the same way, the Faith Responses suggest possible ways of incorporating the chapter's idea into your lives, but you or your group might find more meaningful ways to integrate the material.

Questions to Explore

1. Describe the kinds of truths with which you are comfortable or uncomfortable. Why do you find it hard to deal with "truths" that are not scientifically verifiable?
2. What were the myths, proverbs or sayings that were central to your upbringing? What have been the effects of these truths on your life?
3. Does humility seem like a virtue or a character flaw to you? Describe how your feelings about humility affect your relationship to God.
4. How have you experienced God in the created world? What are your personal ways of encountering the Divine? What are your symbols or names for God?
5. Who are the people who have revealed the face of God in your life? Describe how they did it.
6. Considering the five aspects of conversion discussed in this chapter (religious, moral, intellectual, affective, socio-political), which ones sound easy to you? Which are more challenging? How have you already dealt with some of them?
7. Describe some secular rituals that are meaningful to you. Are you generally comfortable or uncomfortable with ritual? Why?
8. Describe your personal history with the Catholic church or with churches in general. What was positive about it? Negative? What would you hope for from a community of faith?
9. What are some of your deepest convictions? How do you witness to your convictions in your daily life?
10. Where and how do you experience the real presence of God in the world?

Faith Response

1. Start a journal to accompany you as you read and interact with this book. You may want to answer some of the end-of-chapter questions or note phrases and ideas that concern you as you read along. You may also want to record your faith experiences with some of the Faith Response exercises.

2. In response to this section on mystery, make two columns. Write at the head of one, "I Know God Is God Because…" and jot down any evidence, personal or theological, that you can think of. At the head of the other, write, "I Know I Am Not God Because…" and present the evidence for that statement. Compare the two lists. What do they teach you about humility and the nature of God?

3. Draw a conversion wheel according to the five aspects of conversion considered in this chapter: religious, moral, intellectual, affective, and socio-political. Describe a few ways you are being called to respond to each of these avenues of conversion in your life right now.

4. Be still and know that God is God. Spend some time in the silence of a church, park or some favorite place where you feel calm and at peace. Pray for the gift of humility and its freedom to live as a child of God. Still your body, your mind, your heart. Imagine yourself pressed to the heart of God and listen to the God's warm heartbeat of tenderness. What is God saying to you?

Two

God: The Story

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen….
—Nicene Creed

Make a list of everything you believe about God. This list may be brief or extensive—depending on the role religion has played in your life or how much you may have read or thought about God. If you were raised in a Judeo-Christian environment, your list may contain statements like "I believe God created the world" and "I believe God is all-powerful and all-knowing." You may further state that you believe God is good, merciful, loving and the just judge of the universe. You may believe God has certain expectations for human beings to live up to and future rewards or punishments to mete out after we die.

If your life has been affected by the Christian story, you may include these kinds of statements in your list: "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God" or "I believe that God is revealed as the Trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

By making this simple list, you have been engaged in the enterprise of theology. When we talk about God and start to uncover our basic system of belief, we are doing the work of theology. Theology may sound like a dry, highbrow discipline reserved for specialists of the "sacred science," but it is actually a much plainer and more common activity than that. We are doing theology when we decide which sources are legitimate teachers of God's nature or will: Do we accept the Bible, the Koran or the Bhagavad-Gita as revelation of God? Does the revelation of God's truth reside within the story of the Jewish people only, or does the gospel of Christianity tell us even more?

Does the tradition of the Catholic church add something useful or necessary to our understanding of God? Is it possible that our own experience can be a source of divine revelation?

Far from being an elitist discipline, theology is something even children are comfortable considering. Ask any child to draw a picture of God and you may be surprised with the results. Psychologists have done crosscultural studies of children from various religious traditions and found that most children have a very clear sense of who God is. Part of the theological world of children is shaped, certainly, by their training and the beliefs they have absorbed from their parents. But others are more individualistic, bordering on the mystical. A six-year-old girl explains that Jesus comes to her and stays with her as she sleeps: "It makes me feel special." A young boy says with authority, "God sits in the sky and eats cabbage." This may be a minority view, but it's a definite if halting step down the road of theology.

A formula for belief

When we make lists of things we believe about God, we are forming the basis of a personal creed. *Credo* is the Latin word for "I believe." The early church community formed many creeds to express what it understood to be true. In one of the letters of the New Testament, for example, we find this early "sure saying" about Jesus: "If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him… (2 Timothy 2:11–12).

Within the first centuries, the Apostles Creed (based on the teachings of the apostles, the earliest leaders of the church) became a well-known summation of what Christians believe. It has a trinitarian structure, which means it is organized around statements about the three divine persons: God as creator of the world, Jesus as savior of humanity, and the Holy Spirit as inspirer of the church. (See the Appendix for the complete text of the Apostles Creed.) From this creed, later church councils drew up the Nicene Creed, which is the official profession of faith that many Christians use today. It is the creed Catholics profess during the Mass. The Nicene Creed is based on the trinitarian for-

mat of the Apostles Creed, but it has been expanded to include certain precise and clarifying phrases intended to counter the prevailing heresies of the fourth century. We will be looking at the Nicene Creed paragraph by paragraph in the following chapters, and it is printed in full in the Appendix.

For the moment, we are focusing on the first four lines of the Creed, the part concerning God the Creator, which appear at the head of this chapter. Whole books have been written about just the first line of the Creed, "We believe in one God," so what is said here can be only a brief summary of the theology contained within the creed. Let's consider the word "one" to begin with. Among the unique contributions of the Hebrew story was the revelation of God as one, which is called monotheism. The first Hebrews were nomadic people like many of the tribes that inhabited the region we now call the Middle East. The neighboring cultures worshipped a variety of local spirits, and early Hebrews most likely saw their God as one among many, though certainly the only God worthy of their allegiance. Eventually, through generations of experience and prophecy and reflection, they came to believe that there is only one true God, not a pantheon of rivaling deities. The worship of lesser local gods was seen as foolish and even blasphemous: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4–5).

Because we hold in our hands today the Bible that begins with the book of Genesis, we get the sense of monotheism as a given. "In the beginning" only one God is on the scene, creating everything in six days. The books of the Bible were not written in their present order, however, nor were they composed by one hand. Actually, a careful reading of Genesis reveals several strands of theology developed somewhat independently of one another. For instance, two creation stories are presented, one in chapter 1 and the second in chapter 2. In the first creation story, God creates the earth from plants to animals to humanity—the man and woman becoming the pinnacle of creation. In this version, the first couple is created simultaneously. Yet in the second creation story, a man is created for the garden before the

birds and animals, which are then created in the process of finding the man a suitable helper. When none is found among the animals, a woman is fashioned as the final movement of creation.

This example of the two creation stories is but one that scholars point to as they unravel the various origins of scripture. The consensus of Catholic scholars today is that four main schools of theology are represented in the first five books of the Bible. The first school believed in a powerful, remote God who could spin a universe out of nothing and then retire to a regal distance, like the Creator of chapter one of Genesis. The second school envisioned God as a more personal, accessible deity who cared enough about the loneliness of the first human to personally bring creature after creature to him until a suitable partner is found. A third school of theology saw God as concerned with minute matters of worship and ritual, as in the long descriptions of the ark of the covenant and correct sacrifices found in Exodus chapters 25–30. The fourth school was very interested in spelling out and maintaining God's law, as much of the book of Deuteronomy exemplifies.

Eventually these four strains of theological tradition, and perhaps many more, were compiled to form a cohesive theology for the Israelites. The many competing religious factions at the time of Jesus—not to mention among present-day Christians—reveal the tensions that by necessity reside within a complex but shared view of the one God.

Our relationship with God

One of the features of the Apostles Creed is its personal assent to faith. "I believe in God," it begins. The Nicene Creed starts with the bold phrase, "*We* believe," making this an affirmation of the whole church. By professing this creed, we join our personal allegiance to the historical and present community of the people of God. The communal nature of the creed underlines the communal nature of Christian faith. Our personal assent to the God we profess unites us to the whole church, to Christians everywhere, to those who have lived faithfully in past ages and to those believers yet to come. Together, all of us believe in this

same God.

And who is this God we believe in, this "one God" the ancient Hebrews came to know as the *true* God who exposes the falseness of idols and demands complete allegiance? The Old Testament traces the story of a people intrinsically intertwined with their emerging sense of relationship with this God. Just as our personal experiences lead us to an awareness of God that can be individual and distinctive (does God eat cabbage?), the Hebrew story is about learning, often through trial and error, what God's will is for the world.

Consider for a moment how crucial our understanding of God's will is to our understanding of ourselves. To theologians, the question "Who is God?" is immediately related to the question "Who am I?" If God is the creator of all that is, then I am God's creature, which puts me in immediate, subordinate and natural relationship with the Divine. If God is just judge of the universe, as many theologies hold, then I am one to be judged, which places me in a relationship of respect, obedience and perhaps a deep sense of awe of God. If God is love, as the evangelist John proclaims, then I am beloved (1 John 4:16) and feel love, joy and gratitude in response. If God to me is an uncaring, distant force or a vengeful angry giant, these same characteristics likewise create a sense of who I am and what I do in response.

The ancient Hebrews understood God's nature in many ways. They perceived a world full of good things, but they also saw a world tarnished by evil and suffering. What could they learn about God from these separate and sometimes clashing realities? Much of the early part of Genesis is a theological grappling with these issues: God is the source of creation and its goodness but human decisions against goodness lead to suffering. How could a creature choose what is contrary to the will of the Creator? The power to choose must have been granted by God. This gift of freedom makes humanity like God in the one pivotal sense that we too can "create" the world, for good or ill, in which we live. Being made "in the image and likeness of God," as we are, we can still fail to choose the good consistently and show ourselves to be quite unlike our Maker.

The sin of more

The first sin to enter the world has been variously described as pride, disobedience or even lust by those who use the stories of Genesis as a guide. Catholic theologians prefer the term *concupiscence*, or the "desire for more." In a perfect world, paradise by all accounts, Adam and Eve sought still *more* than they had (see Genesis 3). The sin of wanting more afflicts the world still. It is the parent of every serious evil, causing wars and violence, greed and injustice, infidelity, envy, addiction. It adds bitterness and sorrow to every cup.

Instead of freely entering into a grand cooperation with our Maker, humanity chose the bondage of concupiscence and its restless longing after more. That bondage, called original sin, led humanity further and further from God's dream for us. After causing a rift in our friendship with the Creator, we brought about the same fracture among ourselves, as we see in the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). The rupture widens in the account of Noah and the ark, where we are finally separated even from the creation that God put into human hands for caretaking (Genesis 6–7). With the benevolence of creation grown hostile, our alienation from God's desire for us is nearly complete. By the time of the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11), we can no longer even speak to one another and our original human unity is altogether lost.

Theology might have ended there, on a dreadful note, if not for the emergence of one who dared to enter into a personal relationship with his Maker again. The story of Abraham officially begins the Hebrew story and—in a real sense—the hope of Christians as well.

God makes a promise

Abram (whom God later names Abraham, meaning "ancestor of a multitude of nations") is an ordinary sort of man who is led to do an extraordinary thing. He is born in the land of Ur (present-day Iraq) and taught to reverence the gods of that place. He is, like most of us, content to accept the religion he inherits and not to ask too many questions. But Abraham hears a call from an unknown God to go on to the land of Canaan. This new

God makes promises that go against conventional wisdom. If Abraham leaves his kin and his country, this new God will give him both land and heirs to fill it! This is especially intriguing since Abraham is childless. In a culture that valued women only for the children they bore, Abraham has been married many decades to the same woman who has borne no children. What is most striking about the situation is that Abraham chooses to remain loyal to Sarah despite this fact. The culture would have supported his taking a second or third wife, at the very least. Abraham reveals something unusual about himself in his loyalty to Sarah and reluctance to marry again. This trait of faithfulness makes him a good choice to become the keeper of God's promise.

The stories of Abraham and Sarah take up a good part of Genesis (12–22). Abraham walks with God, sometimes trusting a lot but sometimes showing some hesitation, as when he lies about Sarah being his wife in order to protect himself (Genesis 12:11–13). Yet Abraham is perceptive enough to know a divine visitation when he receives one and comfortable enough in his relationship with God to dicker over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18). Though he loves his son Isaac, his overriding loyalty to the God who gave him this son makes him even willing to sacrifice Isaac if commanded to do so. The God of the promise, however, does not require such a sacrifice (Genesis 22).

Abraham's relationship to the God of the promise is familiar to all of us who have sought to know God's will for our lives. God makes us promises that are contrary to the conventional wisdom of our world, for God asks us to abandon trust in our own strength and in the tangible securities of money and control. We who buy insurance on everything from house and car to health and life find the idea of "trusting in the Lord" a little unnerving. Just how far am I expected to go with this trust-in-God business? Is "blessed assurance" going to take care of me when I'm ill or old? Won't I be simply foolish if I make decisions based on my faith rather than on the hard, cold numbers in my bank account? We have to remember, however—as Abraham discovers over and over again—that the journey of faith

isn't taken in a day and isn't over in one act. Although rare people like Francis of Assisi do walk away in a heartbeat from everything they own, most of us relinquish our trust in worldly supports much more gradually and only as our confidence in God's promise is proved again and again.

Abraham learns to surrender completely to the One who called him on his journey. The lineage of Abraham moves forward through history, as God promised. Isaac's son Jacob receives the name Israel, meaning "struggles with God," from a night of wrestling with an angel and imparts it to God's chosen people ever after (Genesis 32:24–30). The great-grandchildren of Abraham leave their promised land during a generation devastated by famine and go as refugees to Egypt. At first they are welcomed warmly, but soon they grow too numerous to be trusted by the local citizens. Egypt then enslaves the Israelites, and the story of Exodus begins.

A God who saves

The Bible may seem like a huge book, but the story of God and humanity can be told in four words: We sin; God saves. The Bible merely supplies the details to this basic truth. When the people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt, only solid trust in God can deliver them to freedom. Once again God chooses a personal emissary, this time Moses, to accomplish the divine plan.

Until now, the people of Israel have related to God as "the God of the promise." Now they will find a new way to speak about God that will define their relationship for all time: The God of Israel is the "God who saves." Captive in a foreign land, they long for liberation. Moses, a Hebrew adopted by Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2), is an unlikely choice for liberator. He has few ties to his heritage and little knowledge of his people's God. But salvation history—the story of God's saving plan for humanity—is full of unlikely people becoming the perfect instruments for God's purposes.

Moses doesn't meet the God of Abraham in Egypt. As the story unfolds, Moses is forced to flee Egypt after he murders an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew. He assumes a new life as a shepherd in the wilderness (Exodus 2–3). Near the mountain of

God, called Horeb in some theological strands and Sinai in others, Moses sees a bush on fire but not consumed. Approaching it, he receives the call to cooperate with God's plan to save the people of Israel. As fearful as one might expect, Moses expresses several objections to God's idea, objections that God overrides fairly quickly. So Moses surrenders to God, returning to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and to free God's people (Exodus 3–4).

Ten plagues and many miracles later, God parts the Red Sea and leads the people into the freedom of the desert (Exodus 5–15). Now what? Because human beings are not simple creatures, the story of God's relationship to Israel doesn't end here, with gratitude and praise for the rescue. Not long after, the people are dissatisfied again. The sin of *more* has crept in and they begin again their gripes and laments, which will last for roughly forty years. Liberation is fine, but thirst and starvation are even more immediate realities that consume their attention. Now that Moses has become their shepherd, he is going to tend this new flock for the rest of his life, interceding for them with God all the way to the promised land.

Moses receives a renewal of the promise (which is called a covenant) between God and the children of Abraham. The original covenant, or pledge, between God and Abraham was sealed in fire (see Genesis 15). The sign of acceptance of this renewed covenant is the circumcision of the flesh of every adult male (Genesis 17). This covenant mediated through Moses is then forged in law. Moses receives the Ten Commandments on the holy mountain, commandments designed to bring God's people into conformity with God's original will and desire and to protect them from the tyranny of sin (Exodus 20).

The long journey described in the book of Exodus (*exodus* means "the road out") is the road each of us must take in order to achieve liberation from the tyranny of sin and to embrace the freedom of God's people. Every person's story is about learning and relearning, severing and then mending the ties that unite us to God's desire for us.

Think of the ways you may have been in need of liberation along the path of your life: from relationships, jobs, habits or

influences that denied your full humanity. There may be factors in your life right now that keep you from being the person you long to be: debt that chains you to a soul-deadening career; old friendships with people who affirm you in values you no longer hold; personal habits that waste your time, energy and resources. Your personal exodus may seem like a very long road out, but the God who saves does not intend to leave even one human spirit languishing behind bars. When you and I are ready for freedom, God is ready to send a liberator to part the sea and show us the way.

Even though Israel's exodus to the promised land takes forty years and is not without battle scars, they make it. When the people of Israel arrive at last at the Jordan River, Moses is one hundred and twenty years old and ready to die. The people cross the river into the promised land under Joshua's leadership. Will the attainment of this land bring a final peace between God and the children of Abraham? You may have already guessed the answer.

Judges, priests, prophets and kings

Even during the time of Moses, it was challenging to govern a nation like Israel. Moses appointed a series of judges (in Hebrew, an elder or governor, including a military leader) to help him govern the people. This system of governance continued in the Israelites' new homeland.

The priesthood, founded under Aaron, Moses' brother, was a cultic or ritual office that had as its function the mediation of peace between God and the nation. The priests maintained holy equipment (for example, the Ark of the Covenant, a mobile altar of sacrifice containing the tablets of the Law and other sacred items) and holy places (such as the shrines that sprang up wherever the people encountered the divine presence). In generations to come, the main arena of the priests would finally be within the Temple at Jerusalem.

Prophets were active as well during this period. Prophets came out of left field, officially speaking. While judges were appointed by the people after Moses died and priests had to be born of the lineage of Aaron, prophets were God-appointed

individuals who often challenged the leaders and in general caused a great deal of unrest by saying what people didn't want to hear. Prophets often argued for sweeping changes in the way the Israelites did business, and people are notoriously reluctant to change. As *nabi* (Hebrew, meaning "mouthpiece of God"), prophets had great personal authority but often risked their lives in speaking out against established authority.

Judges, priests and prophets did not hold mutually exclusive offices, nor do these titles suggest precise descriptions of what leaders actually did. Joshua was a judge, but he acted mostly as a military leader (see the book of Joshua). Deborah was a judge and prophet who was known both for her arbitration and military prowess (Judges 4). Samuel was a judge and prophet, but it is as prophet that he is chiefly important to salvation history (1 Samuel). Elijah and Elisha functioned as "pure" prophets, with no other office to support their authority (1 Kings, 2 Kings).

Spiritual leadership and its authority has always been an issue for sincere seekers in religion. Who speaks for God in our world? Which church or leader has the authentic message? Discernment, the art of seeing how God is acting in the world and in our lives, is an issue we will cover in Chapter Eleven. Discernment is important because the voices that claim to speak for God are many. We can turn on the television or radio at any hour and hear strong, sometimes compelling evangelists who interpret world events according to a "word from God" they have received. Since these messengers "from God" do not always agree, only some of them—perhaps few of them—are authentic. Like ancient Israel, we need guidance and insight when those who claim to speak for God are in conflict.

The one kind of leader the people of Israel didn't have—for a long time—was a king. This was a deliberate decision, since Israel was established as a theocracy, a nation ruled by God. "One nation, under God" was no mere sentiment for a people who had served under Pharaoh for bitter generations. They knew that any human who represented the Divinity as a monarch did was suspect and that any human leader could lead them into sin.

A king of Israel

A nation with no king may be a spiritually advanced idea, but it can lead to diminished esteem in the eyes of other nations. For Israel to take its place among the nations that surrounded it required a recognized leader. The people press the prophet Samuel to supply a king for the nation, to select someone pleasing to God. Samuel brings their request to God, and God warns once again that the people are rejecting divine ways for human (1 Samuel 8:4–9). Samuel tells the people that having a king will lead to wars, oppression and injustice, but they refuse to listen and receive Saul as the first anointed king of Israel.

Saul fulfills the forecast exactly. He is a great military leader at first, and the people admire his appearance and strength; they take great pride in him before the nations. But eventually Saul overreaches his position, disobeying God's injunctions. His relationship to God and rightful authority are broken (1 Samuel 15) and he devolves into madness, all Israel suffering with him.

But God does not abandon the people to the consequences of having a king. Samuel is prompted to seek and anoint the next king of Israel. It is David, the youngest son of Jesse (1 Samuel 16). Though David will not rule for some time to come, God's plan for liberation is already in the works.

The story of David assures us that there is nothing we can break that God can't mend—even when we make decisions apart from the will of God, as Israel did in its desire for an earthly ruler. God proves time and again that we will not be abandoned to the consequences of our actions, like punished children who are going to "get what's coming to them." Salvation history is contrary to the idea of predestination, the belief in a fixed path that destiny inexorably follows. Nor do we believe in the railroad-track theory of human fate: Swing the switch one way, and we ride in safety to heaven; swing the switch in the opposite direction, and the train flies off the tracks to certain destruction. If we abandon God's desire for our happiness and take another track, the "God who saves" will most certainly move quickly ahead of us to give us another chance to have a change of heart and be saved.

David's kingship-in-the-wings is God's second chance for