

NOT YOUR GRANDPARENTS' CHURCH

on recapturing your spiritual heritage



ACTA SAMPLE

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INTRODUCTION

What's Religion Good For, Anyway?

For many young adults today, religion in general, and the Catholic Church in particular, does not have a very positive image. Sunday Mass is perceived as a flat ritual; the priest's homilies are often boring or, worse, intolerant and dogmatic. The Church's teachings on women, gay marriage, and a host of other issues seem outdated and discriminatory. The news media regularly report the sexual and financial misdeeds of the clergy in various denominations, and Catholic priests and bishops are not absent from this list. Some young adults may also mistakenly believe the Catholic Church forbids believing in evolution, climate change, and science in general. You may know young adult Catholics who have been "turned off" by the Church.

You may also have friends who see no reason to be "religious" at all. "I can pray just as well while walking in the woods or looking at a sunset," they say. "I'm an atheist and don't need to waste time talking to an invisible old guy with a long gray beard," others assert. Your friends who are planning to marry soon may wonder why they should go through all the ecclesiastical red tape for a church wedding when getting married on the seashore

or in a mountain lodge—or at the Disney Wedding Palace—is so much more “romantic.”

You may be giving up on Catholicism yourself. The problem with doing so, however, is the danger of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” as the old saying goes. The Catholic Church has a rich, two-thousand-year heritage of prayer and spiritual practices that speak to the needs of a wide variety of people (the word “catholic” itself comes from a Greek word that means “universal”). Chances are one or more of these practices will be useful to everyone at some point in their lives.

This book is not an attempt to persuade you to swallow teachings you may currently disagree with, or to engage in rituals you may find boring or unintelligible. I say this even though I am a Catholic sister (a Sister of Charity) and have been one for many years. But I have also taught sociology to many college students, and I know today’s young adults grew up in a very different world than that of my own childhood, teens, and twenties. So while I value the treasures of the Church that have spoken to my own deepest longings as an adolescent, as a young adult, and now as I age, I cannot expect you to feel the same way about these treasures. Young adults in the twenty-first century have their own needs, desires, and questions for which they may be searching for answers in their own lives. Catholic spirituality is wide and varied; there is something in it for everyone.

So this book is simply a short introduction to some specific treasures in the vast wealth of Catholic spirituality that you may be unaware of and that may feed your own hungers now or in the future. While it primarily focuses on issues that sociologists and psychologists have found to bedevil young adults, persons of any age are invited to dip in and sample these pages when and as they need them. And feel free to stick this book on the back of your shelf and return to it later—something in it that does not speak to you now may be helpful in future years.

Each of the following chapters follows more or less the same pattern. I first present a brief description of a problem or difficulty that some of today's young adults have told me they are facing in their lives. Next, the chapter introduces Catholic prayers or spiritual practices that have been helpful to others facing this situation. Finally, there is a list of books, articles, video clips, and online resources where you can find information on these prayers and practices to learn more.

Chapter 1 addresses the problem of having too many choices in life. How to settle on *one* college major, *one* career, or even one *spouse*, when a better choice may arise later? Chapter 2 considers the masks we wear in our interactions with each other—so easy to don in the age of online social media. Chapter 3 looks at “noise”—the multitude of tweets, texts, Facebook, Instagram and

Snapchat posts—that vie for our attention and fracture our ability to be present to where we are, and who we are with, in any given moment. Chapter 4 examines the related problem of time—how we use it, waste it, and complain that we never have enough of it. Chapter 5 speaks to those who are dissatisfied with where their lives seem to be going, who had thought that, by their thirties, they would be happier, more successful, more settled, more involved in making a difference in the world. Where and how to satisfy this longing for more?

If the first five chapters address hungers some young adults may feel internally, the last three have a more external focus. Chapter 6 looks at the problems we have with “stuff”—how we have been shaped by ubiquitous advertising to think that having more things will make us happy, when often they simply cause more problems. Chapter 7 considers the growing gap between the wealthy one percent and the rest of us—and especially the barriers that keep so many in poverty. Chapter 8 looks at the growing polarization in this country and around the world—between red states and blue states, Christians and Muslims, blacks and whites, Trump supporters and Trump opposers. What Catholic teachings, organizations, and movements exist to address these larger issues?

To answer the question I posed at the beginning of this introduction, what is religion good for? Anthropolo-

gists say that, as long as human beings have existed, they have wondered about their place in the great scheme of things; they have questioned the meaning of suffering and death; they have stood in awe before the might of a thunderstorm or the cry of a newborn baby. Religions give us ways to join together in expressing this awe, and more or less satisfactory answers to these questions and wonderings with which we can reassure each other. It

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is true that individualistic Americans have often preferred to devise their own personal answers to spiritual questions instead of relying on an established religion. (Even early founding fathers like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson liked to say things like “My mind is my church” or “I am a sect in myself.”) But there is also a certain comfort in knowing we are not alone in our questioning. And it is certainly easier to learn from the experiences of others instead of reinventing the wheel on our own. This book invites you at least to sample some of the spiritual treasures that Catholicism,

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in its over two thousand year history, has found to be guides in our common search. Yes, it is no longer your grandparents' (or even your parents') Catholic Church, but it can be yours to make of it what you will.

After each chapter in this book, I will list several other resources that might help you in your quest.

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RESOURCES

Books

Michael Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in their 20s and 30s*. 2007. Paulist Press.

Articles

Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. "Religious, Spiritual and Secular: The emergence of three distinct worldviews among American college students." September 2013. http://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/issse/Documents/ARIS_2013_College%20Students_Sept_25_final_draft.pdf

Online Sites

Busted Halo <http://bustedhalo.com/>

God in All Things: <http://godinallthings.com/>

Word on Fire: <http://www.wordonfire.org/>

CHAPTER 1

FOMO: “From catsup to spouses to life’s meaning”

A few years ago, a group of psychologists tried an experiment. They took an assortment of people and randomly divided them into two groups. The first group of people went, one at a time, into a room where there were two different brands of catsup on a table, together with a plate of French fries. Each person was asked to choose one of the bottles of catsup, pour some of its contents on the French fries, and eat them. Each then completed a short survey on how well he or she had liked the catsup. The second group of people did the same thing, except the room each one entered contained fifty different kinds of catsup, not just two. What the researchers found was that *the more choices people had, the less satisfied they were with the choice they made.*

The same thing happens in many areas of your life as a young adult. There are so many more choices available today—types of restaurants, styles of blue jeans, models of cars, careers—that having to pick just one can lead to your being paralyzed by the dreaded

FOMO, the Fear Of Missing Out on something better. As Aziz Ansari, a comedian and star on NBC's hit TV show *Parks and Recreation*, once noted, his Indian parents had known each other for only thirty minutes prior to their arranged marriage, while he took longer than that just to pick a restaurant for dinner! In fact, he said it took him so long to text his friends for suggestions and explore websites such as Eater and Yelp that he ran out of time before his show was scheduled to start and "I ended up making a peanut-butter-and-banana sandwich to eat on the bus." Meanwhile, his parents are still happily married 35 years later.

FOMO can be merely annoying when it involves restaurant choices. It is more significant when it happens with some of the larger choices in life. I have counseled college students who have cycled through so many majors that they have racked up 150 or 200 credit hours—and corresponding amounts of debt—without completing the degree requirements for any of them. Researchers have found that many young couples live together for years but never actually sit down and *talk* about whether or not they want to get married. These researchers report that couples who slide through their relationship transitions without consciously choosing them, or who hold out on making a final decision about them, have poorer marital quality than those who make intentional decisions about these major milestones. Ac-

According to theologian Harvey Cox, “Not to decide is to decide.” Choosing from a multitude of options may be scary at times for you. By *not* choosing the path you are on, however, you may eventually end up where you never intended to be.

Alternatively, you may avoid making your own decisions by simply following what your friends or acquaintances are doing or thinking. Having grown up with Google, you may want instant answers that are clear-cut and require little thought on your part. Or you may lapse into “black and white” thinking, which shortcuts the need to weigh a multitude of options. But these prepackaged choices may not really fit you at all.

CATHOLIC TREASURES



The Catholic Church has centuries of experience with spiritual techniques to address the problem of how to make life-giving choices. One of these is Discernment Prayer. This is a prayer process by which a person reflects on two good (or at least neutral) alternatives, imagines what it would be like to follow each one, and asks for

God's help in knowing which alternative is best *for him or her*. It involves honestly asking yourself questions like "What do I really want in my life?" "What have I been

doing so far?" "How do I feel when I imagine myself following Choice A? When I imagine myself following Choice B?"

TRUE DISCERNMENT REQUIRES TIME AND ENERGY AND OPENNESS.



There are some basic principles underlying Discernment Prayer. The first is that God really loves us (better even than we love ourselves) and wants only

the best possible future for us. God isn't trying to trick or test us by deliberately keeping the knowledge of our best future from us: We *can* know God's will for us. Another principle is that our feelings are an important way to discover this best future *provided that we are really honest about what we are feeling*. Of course, we can also lie to ourselves about this—you probably know a friend who is convinced he or she are "in love" and destined to be deliriously happy with someone whom you think is actually a total scumbag. Yet your friend simply will not listen to you or to anyone else who tries to dissuade him or her. True discernment, on the other hand, requires time and energy and an equal openness to each of the

alternatives you are praying over. A final principle is that discernment is a life-long process. New choices will continue to arise throughout your life, and it is good to get into the habit of listening daily to discern God's will. A key time for discernment is when you got it "wrong" the last time: What does God want you to learn from that mistake that will actually make you stronger, holier, and better people in the future?

There are also many tools and methods in Catholic spirituality to develop your Discernment Prayer. Several resources are listed at the end of this chapter. The most common format is Ignatian Discernment Prayer, but there are Franciscan, Benedictine, and Vincentian models as well. All involve gathering the relevant information you need for a decision, placing yourself in the presence of God, asking for God's guidance and the grace to be open to both sides of an issue, and paying attention to your feelings as you envision yourself in each possible future. Some also recommend asking the advice of a wise person who knows you well.

Still another Catholic practice is Spiritual Direction. This refers to one person—usually someone trained and credentialed and experienced enough to do so—helping another person pay attention and respond to God's working in his or her life, thus growing in intimacy with God. Spiritual direction can best be done face-to-face and one-on-one, but it can also happen in

a group under a credentialed leader, or via letter, phone, Skype, etc. It is usually ongoing and happens once every month or so.

According to one website (<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/spiritual-direction>), true spiritual direction has several characteristics:

- ✦ *It focuses on religious experience.* It is concerned with a person's actual experience of a relationship with God. It is not the same as a psychological counseling session.
- ✦ *It is about a relationship.* This religious experience is not isolated, nor does it consist of extraordinary events. It is what happens in an ongoing relationship between the person and God. Most often this is a relationship that is experienced in prayer.
- ✦ *This relationship is developing.* God is leading the person to deeper faith and more generous service. The spiritual director asks not just "what is happening?" but "what is moving forward?"

- ✦ *The real spiritual director is God.* God touches the human heart directly. The human spiritual director does not “direct” in the sense of giving advice and solving problems. Rather, the director helps a person respond to God’s invitation to a deeper relationship.

The best place to find a spiritual director is to inquire at a local retreat house, if there is one in your area, or at the campus ministry center of a local college or university. If you are active in a parish, you can ask a priest or someone on the staff whom you trust to recommend someone. Just as you would with a doctor or dentist, it would be important to check the credentials of a spiritual director before arranging to meet with him or her, and most spiritual directors welcome a first interview with “no strings attached” before agreeing to take someone on. Also, be upfront with the spiritual director about fees, if any. Many spiritual directors make at least part of their living doing this work and so should be treated accordingly. On the other hand, most spiritual directors have some sort of sliding scale that can be adapted to your circumstances, especially if you are young and just starting out in life.

Young adulthood is a time of making choices that will affect the rest of your life. Older generations, like mine, often felt suffocated when we were young because

we felt we had too few choices. Some of us may now even envy your generation's freedom. But twenty-somethings like you know instinctively that too many alternatives can be just as oppressive. The resources listed on the next two pages may give you some ideas about how to deal with the choices in your life through the Catholic practices of discernment and spiritual direction.

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RESOURCES

Free Booklet

Bishop Robert Barron, *How to Discern God's Will for Your Life*. 2016. <https://www.wordonfire.org/wof-site/media/wof-ebook-how-to-discern-gods-will-for-your-life.pdf>

Books

David Lonsdale, SJ, *Listening to the Music of the Spirit: The Art of Discernment*. 1993. Ave Maria Press.

John Neafsey, *A Sacred Voice Is Calling: Personal Vocation and Social Conscience*. 2006. Orbis Books.

Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*. 2015, HarperOne.

Pierre Wolff, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*. 1993. Triumph Books.

Articles

Loretto Gettemeier, DC, "Vincentian Discernment and Decision-Making." *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 2. 1998. <http://via.library.depaul.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1194&context=vhj>



Online Sites

<http://www.loyolapress.com/discernment-making-inspired-choices.htm>

<http://www.loyolapress.com/ignatian-spirituality-discernment.htm>

<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions>

<http://godinallthings.com/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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WHAT'S RELIGION GOOD FOR, ANYWAY?

Patricia Wittberg, a Sister of Charity, makes no attempt to persuade you to swallow seemingly irrelevant teachings or to engage in rituals you may find boring or unintelligible. Instead, she helps you appreciate your needs, desires, and questions, and shows you how to search for your own answers in the light of the spiritual wisdom of Catholicism. “Catholic spirituality is wide and varied,” she writes. “It is no longer your grandparents’ (or even your parents’) Catholic Church, but it can be yours, to make of it what you will.”

Chapters include:

- FOMO: “From catsup to spouses to life’s meaning”
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- Noise: “Living in a state of continuous partial attention”
- Time: “I don’t have a lot of time to do just whatever.”
- Expectations: “Is that all there is?”
- Stuff: “I want it all—now!”
- Justice: “Who is my neighbor?”
- Community: “Can’t we all just get along?”
- Catholicism: “What’s it good for? Actually, a lot!”

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