

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING, GOD?

Louis DeThomasis, FSC

IN EXTENSO SAM

**Unveiling a Spirituality
for the Twenty-First Century**

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for the Twenty-First Century*

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Louis DeThomas, FSC

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INTRODUCTION

God Will Answer Us

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We thought that after the [Vatican II] Council there would be a day of sunshine for the history of the Church, and instead we found storms.

POPE PAUL VI

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And storms there still are! We faithful who are out in today's freewheeling information age know that the religious world has not escaped the storms that have buffeted politics, society, and culture. The blustery squalls coming from global diversity, rapid changes in the political landscape, terrorism, and brutal conflicts on six continents have few parallels in history—ancient or modern. Those strong gusts swirling all around the globe rattle any hopes of serenity and tranquility in our lives. Is it possible for any of us not to feel those very storms jolting us to our spiritual cores? In fact, for the faithful Catholic, there is no need to even step outside our own church doors to be blasted by that tempest. The windstorms of controversy and contretemps are just as present within our parish church and also, maybe even especially, within the frescoed walls of the Vatican itself. Indeed, opening the Catholic Church's stained glass windows at Vatican II let in a lot more than bright sunshine and fresh air.

Let me be direct from the outset and step out into the storms of ecclesial wrangling, bickering, and full-fledged battles. Of course, many readers—or should I say potential readers—may disapprove, or at least be curious about, the title that I chose for a book about spirituality: *Do You Really Know What*

You Are Doing, God? Unveiling a Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century. At first some may think it just doesn't make any sense to question God. How much more perplexing, then, is it for me to assert that questioning is not just permissible, but that it is an essential element of any mature spirituality? Does that sound over the top? Is that an arrogant, sacrilegious, or at the very least impertinent question that should rightfully bring the wrath of God raining down upon me? Isn't it also a baffling question, since we believe the omnipotent Creator and Savior and Spirit of the World to be all knowing? And finally, realizing that question places me in the eye of the storm of today's church controversy, isn't it heretical for me to even entertain such a question?

I don't think so. In fact, I wrote this book because I believe it is my obligation

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Questioning is not just permissible, but it is an essential element of any mature spirituality.

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as a vowed religious, a lifelong educator, and a faithful Catholic to ask that very prying question and many more like it. I do not claim to present on these pages an academic theological presentation. Many magnificent works from astute professional theologians address these confusing times in the church from a more academic perspective. Their contributions are incredibly valuable—despite the fact that some of our church leaders dismiss many of their thoughts and insights as unorthodox

or even outright heresy. While I am no theologian, I am definitely an expert about my personal faith. That is, I am a faith-filled, doubt-filled, and question-filled believer in the Catholic Church as the People of God and—as best I am able—a follower of Jesus Christ. I present this book as an individual Christian, specifically a Catholic believer on a life-long journey exploring how I, a sinner, can better follow Jesus Christ in today's world and under a church hierarchy whose actions often confuse and confound me.

I am frustrated with the tensions and attacks by both the ideologically rigid Catholic conservatives and the similarly uncompromising Catholic liberals. I don't even like the placaters who claim the middle of the road. This state of affairs in the Catholic Church is as much the fault of church insiders as outsiders;

priests as well as laypeople; bishops as well as cardinals and popes. Certainly, not everyone in each of those categories is a perpetrator of divisiveness; but, I am firmly convinced that even those who remain silent are just as much at fault because they are not publicly out front, condemning the destructive antagonism that seems to overwhelm our institution. This is not the way Christians should be seeking solutions to the many legitimate differences among us. Where are the realists and innovators in the church who are ready and willing to use Christian common sense to create the future of “your kingdom come... on earth as it is in heaven,” rather than endlessly indulging in nostalgia for a perfect church of the past that all educated Catholics understand never really existed?

The general state of Catholic spirituality has failed to ameliorate this unfortunate state of affairs. It's just not working. Woefully lacking is a necessary, generous dose of Christian common sense. Enough already of traditional and nostalgic spirituality that was considered by some to be effective in the past. Enough of the forced rationalizations within dogmatic teachings that pretend the Catholic Church can never change its doctrines. In case we haven't observed, the world is not just changing—it has already changed. The church, as well, is not just changing—it has already changed. People have changed; politics have changed; culture has changed. What makes anyone think it is possible that the church has not changed?

I will argue throughout this book that the core truth of God's love for creation and the loving care of the divine Holy Trinity for that creation has not changed. It can never change. But that is about all that has not changed—and will never change. The rest is up for grabs, whether the church's leaders and bureaucrats like it or not.

For the Catholic Church to remain relevant today, it is important that we are free, and even encouraged, to talk about Christian truths in ways that people can understand them, and to develop a spirituality that embraces change instead of denying and resisting it. The Catholic Church must offer people—especially our young people—a spirituality that proclaims the Gospel message of love for all without condemnatory bias toward anyone. Anything less is not Christian, and therefore not Catholic.



You are not alone if you say this kind of unbiased spirituality is not humanly possible. I would have to agree. But neither is it a human impossibility to transform our spirituality into one that is inclusive, open, and loving to all. That is Christian common sense, if we embrace the spirit of Jesus' Gospel by following him in how he loved and served unconditionally. As Saint Paul put it: "We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute." (1 Corinthians 4:10) While loving and serving unconditionally may appear to be folly, it happens to be the unwavering demand of the Gospel. Of course such love and service seem to be humanly impossible, but isn't that what Christianity is all about?

God created a world that is good—in fact, Scripture tells us it's very good. Neither you, nor I, nor the Catholic Church created our very good world, whose imprint reflects the image and likeness of God. It's now the Christian's mission to nurture, through love and service, a continuation of that ongoing creation of our very good world. This article of faith can be appreciated to the degree that we see a reflection of the diversity of Three Divine Persons reflected in the abundance of diversity in people, ideas, and beliefs surrounding us. Difference, variety, mixture, discrepancy, and ambiguity is *in*, *through*, and *with* God's Creation. There isn't just one way to love and serve each person on Earth. That's just plain common sense. So how can a true Christian spirituality be a rigid construct that does not embrace diversity? It must encompass the same diversity that the Trinity's reality reflects: the One God in Three Divine Persons. The "one" God apparently needed that diversity to express "oneness"—what a mystery that is! Divine ambiguity may look like human folly, but we Christians call it revelation.



As I warned above, this book is not an academic theological treatise; yet, I hope to assimilate the work of many fine theologians in an understandable manner for serious and thoughtful Christians who are not satisfied with the conventional spirituality we are offered by the Catholic Church today. I invite the reader not to approach this book as a dogmatic presentation, even though I state my convictions quite forthrightly. One of my friends scolded me once after I told her that I was being forthright with her, saying, “Louis, you’re forthright all right—you are right only about 25% of the time.” So, I leave it to my reader to judge which “fourth” of this book is correct.

Please read this book with pen in hand. Question it; argue with it; explore with it; then ask God your own questions. Be questioning, and yet have faith. God will answer you. That’s spirituality for sure. You can be certain of that because the validity of the examined Christian life sustains our certitude that Jesus lives in our hearts forever.

Louis DeThomasis, FSC, Ph.D.

Rome, Italy

Pentecost Sunday, 2017

CHAPTER 1

Better Late Than Never

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If one takes seriously the Incarnation—that is, that God made himself part of history—it’s impossible to think of doctrine as fixed code that came down from heaven.

ANTONIO SPADARO, SJ

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We Christians have our own important questions to ask if we desire to deepen our spiritual lives through our personal faith commitment to Jesus. There are, of course, equally compelling questions to ask if we desire to deepen our fidelity to the Catholic Church. And if we want to truly understand the relationship between our own faith and the teachings of the institutional church, there are even more questions to explore.

While we should all be asking questions, many of us today are afraid we will experience blowback from the church if we ask our most personal and perplexing questions. It seems counter-intuitive to find that kind of tension in the church community, but the piercing questions of which I speak are not welcomed by many in the hierarchy. Answers that the Catholic Church does provide through its teachings often indicate that it doesn’t seem to understand people’s current needs and concerns. Just as conventional solutions are failing us in the political arena today, traditional answers are just not working for all the faithful in the church. Be aware, it is not the truth of the Christian Gospel and God’s revelations that are not working; rather, it’s the “how’s” and “what’s” of many official hierarchal pronouncements that are irrelevant or unresponsive

to many of the faithful's lived experiences, the questions and legitimate doubts we bear.



This point is amply demonstrated in the results of two national studies from the *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University* [CARA]. In an interview conducted by Matt Hadro of the *Catholic News Agency* (December 18, 2016), Mark Gray, a senior research associate at CARA said of their findings about young Catholics:

It's almost a crisis in faith.... In the whole concept of faith, this is a generation that is struggling with faith in ways that we haven't seen in previous generations.

These studies show quite clearly that this crisis has occurred in part because the hierarchy's teachings are not compatible with things demonstrated by basic science to be unequivocally true. Most alarming are findings revealed in Gray's interview about the age at which the faithful begin to fall away: "The interviews with youth and young adults who had left the Catholic faith revealed that the typical age for this decision to leave was made at 13.... Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed, 63 percent, said they stopped being Catholic between the ages of 10 and 17. Another 23 percent say they left the faith before the age of 10." Of those who had left the faith, "only 13 percent said they were ever likely to return to the Catholic Church...and absent any big changes in their life they are probably not coming back."

If the institutional church does not read the signs of the times now, and transform its spirituality now, there may be no viable future for a Catholic Church that is inclusive and is for all people across the globe. It will be, instead, just what some in the Vatican and elsewhere (but not our current pope, Francis) are calling for: a church that is smaller but ostensibly more "faithful." Of course, what these church hierarchs mean by "faithful" is that the rest of us

accept what they themselves proclaim to be the acceptable practice of Catholic faith.

It is not just the young, but even the older faithful who have questions about, and the desire to examine, traditional Catholic teachings. For example, we Catholics have always believed that Jesus is truly God, yet he is also truly human, and not just God pretending to be human. Even in the midst of global tensions and frightful acts of terrorism today, most of us continue to believe that core truth. But some of us wonder how or why an all-knowing God took on a human nature and came into this sinful world. No one in the history of the world has been able to offer a complete understanding of that singular act, of the divine becoming human. Not even the magisterium of the Catholic Church can offer a definitive explanation of how the Incarnation is possible. It only teaches that it is true. And we who have faith believe it, even if we don't understand it.

But we now know and cannot dismiss the fact that most people in Jesus' time neither understood nor believed his claim that he was God. These are the very people who heard, saw, and lived with him during his earthly life. Not only did they not believe; they condemned him to death. Yes, the very people who directly experienced him, his teachings, his love, and his many miracles wanted him dead. How, as a human being to whom God has given the gift of intellect, can I not ask, "Did you really know what you were doing to your son, God?"

If we believe that Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro (the editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*) showed keen insight in the epigraph to this chapter, then surely we can acknowledge that there is no "fixed code," nor any ironclad heavenly dissertation explaining the Mystery of Faith. Isn't that why we call it a mystery? We must admit we will never fully understand the mystery of the Divine Trinity; or the rationality of Jesus dying so that we may live; or a full explanation for God's omnipotence and infinite love; or reasons why people are as they are—astounding, loving, miraculous, awesome, and yet, at times, sinful, hurtful, judgmental, and inconsiderate! Never mind the implications of that for the Church's catechesis; try explaining that to yourself without asking God any questions.

As Christians we believe that Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, is the

Savior of the world and that he lived, died, and rose from the dead because he loves us, sinful though we may be. That bit of truth takes a large chunk of faith

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If one's faith does not have more "I don't know" than "Here's the answer" then it is not faith.

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and can never be fully captured—or co-opted—by institutionalized religion with all its dogmas, doctrines and dictums. Those mysteries are not picture puzzles that can be assembled into a total picture of the reality of God's creation. It is truly a mystery, and while puzzles can be solved, mysteries can never be unraveled. At best we may embrace and live with a spirituality encapsulated in personal faith that finds its life in the seeking of understanding. But, such a spirituality cannot be realized without exploring—and questioning—that which is not

completely knowable in human terms. If one's faith does not have more "I don't know" than "Here's the answer" then it is not faith. It is superstition or folklore.

With the teachings of Jesus' church and its Tradition over the years we are in a continual process of becoming Christians—never to be fully consummated in this life—who follow Jesus in love and service, even with our questions and doubts. As devout Christians we should be on a never ending journey of becoming, seeking, and discovering Jesus Christ. As our spirituality matures, we find a growing confidence to explore the very doubts and questions that we might have once feared were signs of weak faith.

As we pray and question God for understanding, we may often find ourselves surprised that instead of discovering all the answers, we reveal more and better questions to ask, and unearth more doubts to contend with. As the popular adage instructs us, there is a higher truth in questions that can't be answered than in answers that can't be questioned. Questions, not answers, can simultaneously deepen and strengthen our fidelity to our faith in the church as the People of God.

Institutional religions, through their doctrines, ideologies, and even the magisterium of the Catholic Church, honestly attempt to reveal religious truths. Yet those efforts necessarily obscure the totality of those divine mysteries. Mystical truths are beyond human comprehension. However those religious truths

are expressed in human language, that expression can, at best, only assist us in our own embrace of those hidden mysteries of faith.

Rigid doctrinal attempts to explain complex religious concepts in simple terms may actually hinder many in their quest for an informed faith—especially the young. When formalized religion attempts to proclaim its faith, it seems designed often more to provide a veil obscuring the entire truth than a lens helping us to discern ever deeper truths. It is through our own spirituality that we must begin to lift that veil in order to better see—in the very act of lifting—the truth lying beneath, within, and beyond. The Catholic Church and its teachings, for example, attempt to reveal a divine reality that cannot be contained—God’s unconditional and limitless love for us and all of creation. Paradoxical as it may seem, we Catholics need a spirituality that will nurture questioning and doubting within the communion of the universal church.



Perhaps this image of a veil may be better understood by tapping into our imaginations with the kind of insights that great works of art can awaken in us. Specifically, I am in awe of Giuseppe Sanmartino’s (1720-1793) sculpture that sits in the Sansevero Chapel (*Capella Sansevero de’ Sangri*) in Naples, Italy. Though this masterpiece, *The Veiled Christ*, is not as famous as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* or his *David*, it is as magnificent, astonishing, and perhaps—because of its relative obscurity—even more wondrous.

When beholding *The Veiled Christ*, it is impossible not to be mesmerized by the illusion of the sculpted veil that covers Jesus’ reposed body. This marble veil, implausibly and remarkably, appears to be translucent. The viewer can actually see the image of Jesus’ body, as if through this sculpted marble veil. So translucent in appearance is the veil that our vision informs us that the veil could not possibly have been sculpted from marble. For centuries, many conjectured that the veil was indeed a fake, processed to look like marble, counterfeit, since it was believed no sculptor could execute such an extraordinary illusion. Many hypothesized that an actual veil was placed over Sanmartino’s

sculpted Christ and some chemical machinations utilized to create the illusion that the shroud was marble. Modern scientific analysis, however, confirms that the veil in this masterpiece is truly and totally sculptured of marble. It's truly amazing.

We Christians have faith in Jesus Christ, who we believe is the only Son of God in a unique and special way that we, who are also children of God, do not share. We are in joyful communion within the church as the People of God *as we lift together* the veil of faith, of our doctrine of the Trinity, to comprehend more completely the nature of our loving God. We proclaim our faith in the God of Jesus, in spite of the fact that we have no certifiable proof that God is as Jesus described him. Our Jesus is now a veiled Christ, and our God has always been a veiled Holy Trinity. Throughout our lives as Christians, it is our own spirituality that empowers us to lift the veil covering divine mystery, little by little, throughout our faith journey in this mortal life. But we also believe that until we meet our Lord in his loving embrace, until we are born into eternal life, that veil can never be fully lifted.

Jesus is a puzzle that humans can never put together completely. He is the mystery that we embrace in a relationship with God through the grace of faith. This brings us together, in communion, with all his followers in a loving acceptance of the abundant diversity of God's creation.

Why, then, can we not have a spirituality in today's world that flourishes and grows with dialogue, questions, and doubts, even within the institutional church itself? Or perhaps, the better question is, "Can we any longer have a meaningful Christian spirituality without an abiding faith that still has questions or doubts?" Should questioning make us feel guilty, or cause us to doubt our faith? No. In today's world, our skepticism should be a sign of true faith.



It's about time in our modern, globalized world, that the Catholic Church and its teaching authorities, along with all religions and all people of good will, stop acting as if a scant few of us have a monopoly on truth, stop the pretense that

anyone can lay claim to a singular understanding of God that alone is real. It's about time, in this shrinking globe of ours, that we accept diverse ways of loving, discerning, and believing. Such acceptance would not weaken our faith as a Church; it would rather nourish and expand our insights into an all-loving God.

Do we forget that even the disciples—who lived, ate, and drank with him and witnessed his miracles first-hand—doubted Jesus many times? Peter—*“the rock I will build my church on”*—denied Jesus three times in his hour of passion. Thomas refused to believe in the resurrected Jesus until he had placed his hands in Jesus' wounds. Should we now, two thousand years later, be troubled because we have doubts and questions for the successors to those same doubting disciples? Eugene H. Peterson captures this very familiar scriptural moment in his modern translation, *The Message*:

Thomas said, “My Master! My God!” Jesus said, “So, you believe because you’ve seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.” Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.

John 20: 28-32

The Catholic Church, through its doctrines, tries to explain the beliefs at the core of our shared Christian faith. These explanations, however, turn out to be much like the illusion of the veil in Sanmartino's sculpture of *The Veiled Christ*. While they are not fabrications or intentional machinations of the truth, they do shroud the real mystery of our God and Savior, which is neither scientifically verifiable nor easily captured in words.

The very means intended to help us understand Christianity act instead as a veil—not of marble—but of words, creeds, and dogmas. These are the veils covering Jesus today. We come to know *about our God* when we actively seek out the teachings of our church and participate in communal rituals, sacra-

ments, and prayers. But, we can only come *to our God* when we personally experience the divine life in our own spiritual lives.

This book attempts to help readers lift the veil cloaking the essence of our Christian faith and rediscover its robust spirituality. It is my very personal and common sense reflection on the world that I have experienced and cherished my entire life, and on the Roman Catholic Church that I have loved and served my entire ministry.

Beware! It will not be a comfortable ride—no safe and secure spiritual journey replete with pat answers. Together let's peel back that veil so that we may more clearly encounter in new ways the Jesus of the Scriptures in this confounding and convoluted world of ours. Let's exercise the spiritual maturity to ask: "Do you really know what you are doing, God?"

IN EXTENSO SAMPLE

CHAPTER 2

From Magic to Faith... But Faith in What?

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"I want to do it properly," were the first words of which Harry was fully conscious of speaking. "Not by magic. Have you got a spade?" And shortly afterward he had set to work, alone, digging the grave in the place that Bill had shown him at the end of the garden, between bushes. He dug with a kind of fury, relishing the manual work, glorying in the non-magic of it, for every drop of his sweat and every blister felt like a gift to the elf who had saved their lives.

J.K. ROWLING

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

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For much of history, people looked upon the forces of nature as perplexing and capricious. Shamans typically claimed ownership of secret remedies, or ritualistic prayers to the deities to influence nature's mysterious ways, or the sacrifice of animals—and sometimes even humans—to appease the mercurial gods. Diseases were attributed to transgressions against the spirits, climatic disruptions were considered signs of the gods' displeasure, and evil spirits needed to be inveigled with all manner of hocus-pocus by an elite and privileged class.

Tom Carney, in a *National Catholic Reporter* article (September 20, 2016) titled "Our intelligence is a gift from a generous creator," captures the reality of the religious predisposition to magic that can so easily subsume spiritual faith when he writes:

I often hear prayers in church or elsewhere that appeal to this magician God. We ask God to do things God may expect us to do ourselves—like reducing poverty, putting an end to war, and taking care of the environment. Most bad things happen, ultimately, because we allow them.

For most of human history, we have understood that faith is in reality the prevailing force that propels peoples' lives in this world. Yes, faith. But faith in what? The religious impulse was what I would term more an "archetype" of faith than faith itself, usually manifested somehow through the reputed power of convoluted mystical forms. It was faith suspended like a fly in amber in practices and rituals controlled by entitled religious authorities. Followers sought a means to negotiate, through those intermediaries, with the inscrutable ways of nature and the divine. Some form of magic was deemed necessary for the simple reason that the natural order was so poorly understood until very recently in human history. This thought is perhaps nowhere more succinctly expressed than by George Coyne, SJ, retired director of the Vatican Observatory, who said: "My faith is rational, though not provable by scientific means. It means leaving behind "God the Magician."



Shades of the magical mystique still have an insidious but obscure—might we say veiled?—presence deep within the credos of modern religious institutions. Even in this third millennium, so dominated by science and technology, vestiges of mystical powers over the unexplained remain; such forces at least still abound in faith communities. On the opposite end of the spectrum, today's staunchest atheists—perhaps unconsciously but certainly paradoxically—apotheosize science itself, acting as if they are today's high priests, with a magical prowess in solving what they consider to be the problems worth solving. Might the Christian churches fuel such tendencies with our orthodox rituals and moral dictums that leave so little room for questioning?

It is our responsibility as thinking Christians to lift the veil covering Jesus

when his message and image are blurred with spellbinding words or dictums from any individual or institution—profane, secular, or clericalist. It was Saint Augustine who advised us Christians that, “Believers are also thinkers; in believing they think, and in thinking they also believe.... If faith does not think, it is nothing.”

Integrity requires the faithful to carefully consider how we Christians are incorporating our beliefs with modern secular advances in science, medicine, anthropology, and psychology. We must be especially attentive in articulating moral principles regarding such wide-ranging topics as the role of women; the role of sexuality in a variety of intimate relationships; the sensitivity to cultural diversity on today’s shrinking globe; and even the investments we make and the actions we take to foster a love and respect for the environment and the integrity of creation—or fail to take.



We must think and judge for ourselves and inform our consciences with the teachings of the institutional church. We must judge in fairness whether the institutional church is articulating sound principles consistent with our modern understanding of the world. We must consider whether some church leader or institution inappropriately demands allegiance to nostalgic propositions that have been long disproved, or are laced with claims of infallibility that cannot be properly claimed. And we must ultimately accept our responsibility to form our own conscience, and to judge the way we do that with the same rigor we apply to our religious leaders and institutions.

A fully “informed” conscience requires thinking Christians to listen thoughtfully to the teachings of the institutional church, most of which are not proclaimed “*ex cathedra*” (an exceedingly rare event), but we can never be required to suspend our intellect or common sense in the process. We cannot be expected to check our brains at the church door, like so many unbecoming hats. We do well to heed the warning of Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), the highly regarded Spanish philosopher, when he said:

Better beware of notions like genius and inspiration; they are a sort of magic wand and should be used sparingly by anybody who wants to see things clearly.

It may be helpful to reflect on the Harry Potter epigraph that opens this chapter. Even in his awesome magical world with his mastery of the occult, Harry was found, “relishing the manual work, glorying in the non-magic of it, for every drop of his sweat and every blister felt like a gift....” Indeed, scientific and technological advances should give us all cause to place less emphasis on enchantment and more on enlightenment. A modern Christian should never be complacent, content with pietistic explanations of sanctified authority, whether it is veiled or whether it is wizard-like. Much as Harry Potter did, we accept our journey in Christian faith as a job of hard work with all the “sweat and blisters” it implies: asking the difficult questions; struggling with our doubts; stumbling over the many obstacles that appear daily without warning. This is how twenty-first century Christians seek a relationship with our loving Creator.



The Catholic Church has overtly acknowledged that traditional ways require transformation in today's world. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated the establishment of *The Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization*. No matter what spin combatting institutional church players try to place on this development, the blatant fact is that Pope Benedict XVI—a respected traditional pontiff and theologian—saw the need for new ways of evangelizing for one obvious reason: The old one isn't working too well. Even after this admission by a conservative pope, and despite the pastoral ways of his successor, there are still deeply embedded institutional forces in the Vatican—and elsewhere—who fight change.

Unless we the faithful ask difficult and uncomfortable questions, and the church nurtures a new, open, and engaging spirituality, people both inside and outside the church will be confused. The institutional conflicts among the hier-

archy are no longer secret. They are out in the open. For instance, on September 19, 2016, Cardinals Burke, Caffarra, Brandmuller, and Meisner made public five *dubia* (Latin for doubts) sent to Pope Francis demanding clarification on the document, *Amoris Laetitia*. Then, Cardinals Burke and Brandmuller indicated that if the pope does not respond to their *dubia* they will initiate some type of “formal correction” to him. (I guess the cultural war inside the institutional church has begun! And it has been started by the very traditional-

ist Cardinals who always objected if any of the rest of us faithful ever questioned what the pope said. Very interesting, isn’t it?)

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If the hierarchy does not nurture a new evangelization with a spirituality for today’s world, then we will continue to see true disenchantment.

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We laypeople, clerics, and vowed religious, who make up the great bulk of the people of God, can no longer rely on simple answers in a world that is increasingly complex. The traditionalists among the hierarchy are fighting their culture wars because they fear the faithful will be confused if they don’t give them all the answers—packaged, approved, and requiring no further inspection. To the contrary, it is the traditionalists who are confusing us. If the hierarchy does not nurture a new evangelization

with a spirituality for today’s world, then we will continue to see true disenchantment—especially among our young people—as we reclaim our brains at the door and we shuffle out of church, searching for other institutions and other, secular, leaders to help us understand our modern human predicament.

Faithful Christians today certainly believe that God is all-knowing and infinite. But we also know that we humans are finite beings and can never have all the answers. So how on earth can we not have questions, doubts, and an incomplete understanding of a God who is totally “other” and therefore incomprehensible to finite minds? To think that anyone has complete knowledge about God, or that institutional church teachings have fully captured the mystery of God, is an illusion that taints our beautiful and life-affirming religion

with distracting magical qualities. Rationality must be taken into account in the new evangelization if it is to make sense in today's world.



J.K. Rowling opined in one interview, “We do not need magic to transform our world. We carry all of the power we need inside ourselves already.” That power is the grace of Christian faith, churning inside those who are willing to sweat and blister with the hard work of believing, serving, and acting upon Jesus’ message to love all, despite the pervasive and inexplicable evil we find in the world we live in. The person who does not then ask, “Do you really know what you are doing, God?” is confusing spirituality with a magical certitude. That person fails to explore the richest questions hidden deep in the solitude of our soul’s journey of faith.

A spirituality responsive to today’s increasingly democratic and free-thinking world deepens our faith and blesses us with the confidence to share with God all our concerns, doubts, and questions. Oh yes, we have all heard orthodox proclamations that tell us God gave us free will and therefore does not cause evil in the world, but merely permits evil to exist. And that is supposed to make us feel better? Well, that explanation doesn’t do the job for me!

More and more people—the young, the middle-aged, and the old—in our modern world are questioning the validity of the orthodox rationale that evil is not God’s fault. It is not because we are less spiritual today but rather because we are eager and committed to live with an authentic spirituality that—despite our incomplete understanding—trusts in a divine Creator who loves and cares for all of creation. The growing lack of confidence in organized religions’ easy answers emanates from a faith in a loving and merciful God that is not imbued with past rigid doctrines or magical forces. Our faith comes alive in today’s world because the faithful respond to God’s love with our actions, with our *sweat* and with our *blisters*.

So how can it be that an all-loving merciful and holy God does not cause, but supposedly only permits evil, in creation: unspeakable poverty, sickness,

child abuse, death, starvation, terrorism justified in God's name, church scandals, and a never-ending list of horrors and injustices? It is up to the faithful Christian to have the courage and the loving relationship with God to ask the question, "Do you really know what you are doing, God?"

Today's ideological Christians are afraid to ask that question. They need a big dose of real, living faith. It is like two people who love each other: They trust enough to ask about things they don't understand about each other. That doesn't mean they don't love; rather it is proof of an abundance of love in their relationship. How much more, then, should we trust our God enough to ask

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The faith-filled Christian is willing to love and act on Christian love in this world even though there are no complete answers in life.

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questions about things we do not understand? Superstitious and unquestioning belief in God actually signifies distrust in God. It suggests that we may be trying to fool ourselves into believing that we possess magical powers that let us fully understand the omnipotent creator.

The faith-filled Christian is willing to love and act on Christian love in this world even though there are no complete answers in life. We Christians who encounter Jesus in the Scriptures know Jesus did not come into this world as some magical security blanket to take away our responsibility to act with love for all—not just the few or even the many. That simply is not the Christian message. In my recent book, *All Things to All People: A Catholic Church for the Twenty-First Century*, I explore at length how faith-filled Christians must stop just "being Christians" by accepting institutional beliefs and "do Christianity" by following Jesus' Gospel of love for all. In that book I quote from Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation of the Bible, *The Message*:

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on

their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!

1 Corinthians 9:19-25



Jesus brought us salvation through love, yet there remains suffering; with mercy, yet there are still hardships; with caring, yet there is always brokenness; with faith, yet there is doubt and confusion. He called the people of his time to be holy people of action by serving others. He chastised the hypocrites, whether they were secular or religious leaders. It takes courage to live a life as a follower of Jesus when we know we lack pat answers to the biggest questions.

But that's Christian faith. That's Christian spirituality for today's world.

CHAPTER 3

Not “Born-Again Christians”... But “Christianity Born Again”

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Anyone who wishes to engage in the radical transformation of what exists will find tradition to be an indispensable source of content, inspiration, and caution. The proper attitude toward tradition is neither preservation nor rejection but to rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge.

GABRIEL MORAN

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Tensions, even disputes, persist among various Christian denominations in spite of significant progress in interreligious dialogue. Especially within the Catholic Church, differences abound. No one is immune: the pope, cardinals, bishops, deacons, vowed religious, and laity. Hot-button topics bring out destructive dynamics that bear no semblance to Christian charity: communion for divorced Catholics; same-sex marriage; LGBT church employees being fired; women’s ordination; abortion and even birth control. The list goes on.

It would be disingenuous to deny that a veil obscures our vision of Christianity and Jesus’ desire that we may all be one—with love for all. But the rancor so common among religious people today is inexplicable in the light of our shared biblical values. Many people ask themselves, “God, why do you permit such viciousness among different religions and even among faithful Christians themselves, much less among Roman Catholics? Do you realize the negative consequences for your church and the faithful?” Most of us fear to express

such thoughts freely lest others judge us as unfaithful or sinful for asking such impertinent questions. Then the warring labels start flying: hypocrite, heretic, unfaithful, disordered, intrinsically evil, apostate.

We faithful followers of Jesus must act with love, care, and respect for others, even those with whom we disagree. It is when religion becomes *ideology* instead of *spirituality* that culture wars are fought. The ideologues' ammunition is labels: conservative vs. liberal, orthodox vs. heterodox, holy vs. worldly. But behind each of those labels are people who are Christians— whether we like it or not; whether we are like them or not; whether we agree with them or not; whether we are a cardinal or a lay person; whether we are a learned theologian or a simple carpenter.



It is important for us to remind ourselves of important clarifying distinctions between religion, faith, and spirituality. Those words are often used interchangeably in ordinary speech. Without elaborating on the many academic, theological, and philosophical nuances in these terms, however, I can surely state some simple but important distinguishing attributes of each.

A *religion* is usually understood to be a community of believers with a fixed set of beliefs, doctrines, and practices concerning the relationship between divinity and humanity. They are usually organized within well-defined institutional structures and join one another in a regular practice of ritualistic celebrations.

Faith is a universal phenomenon that may be experienced by people whether they are practicing a particular religion or not. To live in the world of faith, we must embrace a natural, universal form of belief in something: the discipline of science, the healing power of medicine, or the primal importance of our personal interactions with others. Even atheists may embrace some basic faith. It is simply believing in phenomena that cannot be totally proven by our senses but are nonetheless important to our world view.

In this book, I will explore, very specifically, Catholic *spirituality*. Spiritual-

ity, though somewhat distinct from and more than a set of doctrines or rituals, is inextricably related to both our faith and our practice of religion. When we accept the theses of any religion, when we accept as true its stated beliefs, those beliefs should activate a spirituality in our lives, an intimate response to our religion that places us on a personal journey to meet in relationship to God.

Spirituality is not necessarily following a particular type of liturgy or religious devotion; it is how we find meaning in our lives; how we live our lives

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“Christianity born again” gives life to a spirituality that sees the beauty in the differences in people, not in their uniformity or conformity.

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in accord with our God; how we relate to people and ideas. For the Catholic faithful, it also includes our acceptance and grace-filled embrace of the sacraments. For us Catholics, the sacraments are the outward signs of the divine nourishment that sustains our spirituality.

In my personal living out of my life and faith, I have understood spirituality as the total response of “I” to God, to life, to others, and to the Catholic Church. It is that response which has become the total reality of the spirituality of “me.” I do not believe that this is a negative form of individualism. I do believe it is a spirituality, not of a “born again Christian,” but rather for a

“Christianity born again” that is needed for the third millennium. It recognizes that the “we” in the church are different “I’s” who believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the way, the truth, and the light. It is that recognition of the richness and uniqueness of our faith that make the People of God one. “Christianity born again” gives life to a spirituality that sees the beauty in the differences in people, not in their uniformity or conformity.

The very essence of a Catholic spirituality is intimately integrated with Christian faith in a Jesus who lived, taught, and asked us to follow him. With the words “Come follow me,” he prodded us not merely to proclaim words, creeds, and pious exhortations; he was insisting that we must do as he did: All our actions must show love for all people. We must respond daily to the unconditional love that God has for each of us. If we follow Jesus, relate to him, and

take action in the world with him, we come to know the “Abba” that he revealed is all around us.

This sense of a Christian spirituality formed within a true faith in the one and only true God was wonderfully captured by Bishop Thomas Gumbleton (*National Catholic Reporter*, October 27, 2016):

Again, it's not just saying, "Yes, I believe in God the Father Almighty," and we say "yes" to all those things. That's an aspect of faith, but it's not what we're talking about really in the Scriptures. Faith is how we relate to God; it's our relationship with God. Faith means that we trust God, we have confidence in God, we know God, and we know God knows us. It's a profound and deep relationship that we keep trying to build on, deepen, and make more real in our lives.



If we claim to be followers of Jesus, then how can we not explore, reflect, and imitate his life and actions? Isn't that both the spiritual and worldly tradition of Christianity? “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). This notion hits us even more powerfully when we hear this truth in today's vernacular as translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*: “A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”

And let's face it. We don't all have the exact same dreams. “*Vive la différence*,” is what I say. Intolerance of diversity among religious people in today's shrinking globe breeds acrimony—not a holiness that promises a “better life than they ever dreamed of.” Christian spiritual tradition at its core is our actions conveying throughout history the life, behavior, and love that Jesus taught and lived.

How simplistic and “unchristian” it would be to entertain the notion of tradition as a fossilized past that does not require an enlivening transformation to

be relevant in the evolving now. As Gabriel Moran states in the epigraph to this chapter: “The proper attitude toward tradition is neither preservation nor rejection but to rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge.” And how on earth can a person or an institution—especially our worldwide Catholic Church—rethink Jesus’ two-thousand-year-old revelation without asking questions in the bright light of a modern understanding of the world around us?

Is a conviction to “rethink the whole of tradition” a liberal view; a progressive view; a conservative view; an orthodox view? The answer to that question is: It is none of the above. Moran’s view is clearly a “Christianity born again” view that must become the Catholic Church’s view if we are to speak to all people meaningfully in the third millennium.

If we do not learn to view Christian tradition in the light of transformation, it will become a dead religion, perpetuating the attitudes, practices, and culture of people who lived centuries, even millennia, ago. We Christians would be compelled to worship in the temple. It would be appropriate for Christians like us to own slaves—if we treated them fairly: “Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (Luke 12.43). Jesus never ordained anyone, especially not just men, or consecrated bishops, or elected a pope. Should the Catholic Church only celebrate Mass in the evening, and never in the morning, since Jesus initiated the Last Supper—not the Last Breakfast?

Tradition, rejuvenated in and for the “now” is essential in order for today’s Christians to grasp Jesus’ revelations from the past. Those revelations are the essence of our Christian faith. But tradition must be understood not as a static remembrance of the past but as today’s actions by Christians in the world who have been inspired anew by that past. As Moran so persuasively points out in *Missed Opportunities*:

A divine revelation is not a collection of truths that the Roman Catholic Church possesses; it is an activity requiring interpretations by religious bodies, including the Roman Catholic Church. In a religious use of revelation, the word can only function as a verb, not a noun.

It is in our rich Catholic intellectual tradition, in which “faith seeks understanding,” that we should realize that Christians must “do Christianity” (the verb) and not just “be Christians” (the noun). As a matter of fact, it is not enough for us to be “born again Christians” but rather we must experience “Christianity born again.” We are called by our faith to transform the world, to act in ways whereby our Christian faith continuously embraces and renews an ever-changing world.



Anyone who is even half awake in this technological world today is acutely aware of the endless stream of new information, exploding at a pace never before seen in human history. A bewildering plethora of scientific discoveries and new technologies appear almost daily in every realm of human activity. But curiously—even astonishingly to some of us—many of our fellow Christians fail to see these advances as wonders of God, who created and nurtures all natural phenomena.

How can faithful Christians who are not dedicated to a “Christianity born again” expect to remain relevant in the new millennium? How can a Christianity content with “born again Christians,” that rests on the laurels of past practices and time-honored, but perhaps time-worn, explanations of the faith, have any significance for the new generations populating the globe? Christians must, as Moran admonishes us, “rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge” by causing Christianity itself to be born again.

Without equivocation Jesus tells us, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). Most of the practicing Jews who lived around Jesus could not understand how this working-class Jew had the audacity to question the orthodox practices and doctrines of those times. How dare he be so insolent as to question what the Temple leaders taught as dictums of God? They simply did not understand that Jesus was not destroying Judaism’s traditions; rather he was rethinking Judaism for his time...and giving it a new birth for all times.

Perhaps we can better appreciate what Jesus was trying to tell the people in that famous passage cited above by studying Peterson's modern translation of Matthew 5:17 in *The Message*:

"Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures—either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working."

Why are we Christians today blind to what Jesus did to and for Judaism? Why is it so difficult for us to see how Jesus transformed Judaism and pulled it "all together in a vast panorama"? Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew. There is no denying that. However, it likewise cannot be argued that he was punctilious about traditions and best religious practices. He was not condemned to death because he was taken for a fervently orthodox, scrupulous, obedient, "born again Jew." No, he was scourged, humiliated, and nailed to a cross because he declared "Judaism born again." He dared to foment a Jewish renaissance, which eventually became what we know as Christianity, by announcing a new spirituality, in a new age, at a new time, and with new ways to imagine Judaism's traditions.

Listen to Paul in Galatians, from the translation in *The Message*. Paul startles those around him when he shouts out:

You crazy Galatians! Did someone put a hex on you? Have you taken leave of your senses? Something crazy has happened, for it's obvious that you no longer have the crucified Jesus in clear focus in your lives.

Galatians 3:1

Later in his pointed discourse with them he says:

Answer this question: Does the God who lavishly provides you with his own presence, his Holy Spirit, working things in your lives you could never do for yourselves, does he do these things because of your strenuous moral striving or because you trust him to do them in you? Don't these things happen among you just as they happened with Abraham? He believed God, and that act of belief was turned into a life that was right with God. Is it not obvious to you that persons who put their trust in Christ (not persons who put their trust in the law!) are like Abraham: children of faith? It was all laid out beforehand in Scripture that God would set things right with non-Jews by faith. Scripture anticipated this in the promise to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed in you."

Galatians 3:5-8

When we read and reflect on the life of Jesus as chronicled in the New Testament, we cannot help but see how this faithful and holy Jew caused turmoil among the temple leaders and the "faithful" of his time and religion. With his words, and by his actions, Jesus continually challenged and questioned Jewish traditions and practices. He argued with and questioned the temple leaders as to why he shouldn't heal on the Sabbath; he challenged and questioned a group of Jews who were about to stone an adulterous woman to death; he confronted and questioned the money changers in the temple, turning over their tables; he refused to follow the religious customs of his time by associating with sinners, outcasts, tax collectors, even gentiles. Such anti-authoritarian behavior was scandalous in those times. But that is how "Judaism born again" became Christianity. Now that Christianity, two thousand years later, needs to become "Christianity born again."

Jesus repeatedly questioned the existing religious traditions of "God's Chosen People," and he was the Son of God! Indeed, Jesus' own life clearly proves that challenging religious authority is not heresy. Questioning what traditional interpretation of God's revelation to us can be not merely acceptable but absolutely a necessity in living a faith-filled spirituality. We, as followers of Jesus, are called to understand our spiritual traditions, make them meaningful, and bring

them to life in our particular time in history. It really is that simple. It really is Christian common sense.

And it is not heresy. It is not watering down or dumbing down Christian values, as some protest. It's not forfeiting Christian truth and morality. It is not some ideological culture warfare "to rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge." It is the living, breathing, loving Christianity that listens to what the church calls the *sensus fidelium*, the lived experience of the faithful.

So, in my life, in your life, in our lives, it is not un-Christian for us to ask, "Do you really know what you are doing, God? We want answers." And know, "Lord, we may not always understand your answers, but we do trust you."

That's Christian faith. That's Christian spirituality for today's world.

IN EXTENSO SAMPLE

CHAPTER 4

The Importance of Squabbling with God

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Jesus gave us permission to be as close to God as he was, and we have his permission to share our indignation about suffering, we have permission to argue with God.... We have permission to declare our discontent.

REV. DR. ROBERT M. FRANKLIN, JR.

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Certainly, Robert Franklin's statement above on having an argumentative relationship with God is, shall we say, a bit unusual and unexpected in most normal religious settings. Some may describe having such an offbeat familiarity with God as abnormal, bizarre, even outrageous. Yet, the Reverend is no flighty, whimsical, religious zealot. He is the President Emeritus of Morehouse College; Visiting Scholar in Residence at Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute; Director of the Religion Program at the Chautauqua Institution; and has a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School.

To appreciate the insight and depth of Franklin's remarks it is essential that we are first transformed in today's world by what we previously described as "Christianity born again." That re-birth requires a current Christian faith that understands the cultural and religious traditions that Jesus experienced, so that we may better be able to "rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge." We should reflect on how that tradition experienced in today's fundamentally different world needs transformation if it is to be relevant in the now.

Given today's theological and historical research into the life of Jesus, it is clear, of course, that he was a Jew. However, he was not a Jew only in ethnicity. Jesus was also a Jew culturally, socially, and religiously. He was steeped in Judaism's traditions and humanly formed and nurtured within and by his spiritual and historical culture and the religious stories and practices of his times. Jesus was clearly motivated to action by the Hebrew Scriptures he often cited in his teachings. (See for example: Matthew 4:2-10; Matthew 22:42-45; Mark 7:6-13). It was Jesus the Jew who observed the Passover Seder in one of his last free acts (Luke 22:14-15). And on the day of his crucifixion, when Pilate asked him if he was the King of the Jews? He answered him, basically, "You said it!" (See Mark 15:2.)



It is important for us to look back at how the Jews understood their spiritual tradition and how they subsequently related to God as they lived that tradition. We can't even begin to understand Christian tradition (much less that of Judaism or Islam) if we do not first go back to the unique relationship that the great exemplar, Abraham, had with God. Abraham is the patriarch and the *father* of monotheism itself. He is the father of the three largest monotheistic religions in the world today, with well over three billion total followers. He was the person, at about the age of seventy-five, whom the God he didn't even know called to leave everything and travel to a future Promised Land, a place he had never been. Abraham trusted God so much that when God tested his faith by ordering him to sacrifice his beloved son (Isaac in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and Ishmael in the Koran), he submitted.

God chose Abraham to reveal the one Divine Creator to all future generations. The essence of the spiritual traditions that have come down to us today—revealed, revised, and reborn as they have been many times over the centuries, are all based on Abraham's singular faith in one God of all.

It can be quite enlightening to revisit Abraham's relationship with the God who chose him: It was God communicating with Abraham and Abraham interacting with God.



I believe we can discern the spirit of this original encounter by reading Genesis 18. The passages in this chapter of the Hebrew Torah detail what can be taken to be one of the most amazing direct encounters of a human being with God. In the first verse we are told that, “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” Yes, just another day for Abraham. But then God comes to his tent, accompanied by two angels appearing as ordinary travelers. As this encounter unfolds, God informs Abraham that he and his wife will soon have a son. This was startling news to Abraham, since his wife, Sarah, was far past childbearing age. Sarah overheard, and laughed at the absurdity of it. But Abraham, who did have faith in the word and power of the Lord, later questioned how she could laugh about this inexplicable birth. This part of the story reveals the spirituality of Abraham, who accepts and trusts that God can work wondrous acts. He has faith in God’s wisdom, even though he could not possibly have understood how such a birth might be possible.

This is far from the whole story, but it is a most revealing glimpse into the budding spirituality present at the genesis of God’s self-revelation to humanity. As Genesis 18 continues, we find out that the two angels were on their way to Sodom to annihilate the city and all its people because of their gross wickedness. However, the faith-filled Abraham, who had just accepted God’s incredible promise that Sarah would bear him a son, considers Sodom’s planned destruction unjust. That’s right; Abraham questions and doubts God’s justice. He earnestly believed that Sodom should be spared. He thought that because there were good people also in Sodom God would be wrong in razing it. So faithful was Abraham, so comfortable and trusting in this relationship of faith, that he presumes to bargain with God. In fact, (using *The Message* translation for its fuller impact): “The men set out for Sodom, but Abraham stood in God’s path, blocking his way.” (verse 22)

So Abraham blocks God from leaving him until he gets some answers or concessions. And—get a load of this—he dares to say directly to God:

“Are you serious? Are you planning on getting rid of the good people right along with the bad? What if there are fifty decent people left in the city; will you lump the good with the bad and get rid of the lot? Wouldn’t you spare the city for the sake of those fifty innocents? I can’t believe you’d do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them. Doesn’t the Judge of all the Earth judge with justice?” (verses 23-25)

What is truly unbelievable is that Abraham wins the first round of the argument. God says, “If I find fifty decent people in the city of Sodom, I’ll spare the place just for them.” (verse 26)

But Abraham winning that argument is still not the whole story. He doesn’t stop with blocking and telling God that he “can’t believe you’d do that, kill off the good and the bad alike as if there were no difference between them” (verse 25). He proceeds to sweeten the negotiation with God, asking whether discovering only forty-five good people would be sufficient to save the city. God agrees. Now watch this. Abraham sees that he is on a winning streak:

Abraham spoke up again, “What if you only find forty?”

“Neither will I destroy it if for forty.”

He said, “Master, don’t be irritated with me, but what if only thirty are found?”

“No, I won’t do it if I find thirty.” (verses 29-31)

We are entitled to imagine that by this time there might have been a little edge of annoyance in God’s tone:

Abraham pushed on, “I know I’m trying your patience, Master, but how about for twenty?”

“I won’t destroy it for twenty.”

He wouldn’t quit, “Don’t get angry, Master—this is the last time. What if you only come up with ten?”

“For the sake of only ten, I won’t destroy the city.”

When God finished talking with Abraham, he left. And Abraham went home. (verses 31-33)

What does this story reveal to us about questioning and doubts in our spiritual tradition? It would seem outrageous for today's pious Christians to entertain such an arrogant dialogue with God—*unless* we lift the veil covering today's spirituality and “rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge.”



Early Christians did rethink the Jewish tradition, and today we do believe that Jesus Christ was the Messiah foretold in Scripture. Belief in a Messiah is a core tenet of the Jewish faithful, passed down to this day, although most of them

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As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ and God the Creator left us with the Holy Spirit to help us each day to lift the veil, to uncover ever more completely the inestimable truth of Creation.

.....

deny Jesus was that Messiah. Those who came before us, who witnessed the life, the teachings, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, are the ones who at the time had the courage and, to my point, the faith to “rethink the whole tradition with the help of present knowledge.” Those who lifted that veil of tradition then, and we who lift it today, call ourselves Christians. As Christians we believe that Jesus Christ and God the Creator left us with the Holy Spirit to help us each day to lift the veil, to uncover ever more completely the inestimable truth of Creation. We will never be able to fully grasp God's unconditional love for us and all of Creation. That is why Christians are on that unending earthly journey of becoming Christian.

Christian spirituality should stand as a megolith of immutable and fixed prescriptions, requiring no effort on the part of the faithful to confront changing realities. Christian spirituality is always being

Building a World in Which God Would Be Happy to Live

Brother Louis De Thomasis is at it again: challenging the very nature of belief in the modern world and how human beings can practice an authentic spirituality in the twenty-first century. *Do You Know What You Are Doing, God?* is aimed specifically at Roman Catholics, but it will be read by seekers of all Christian denominations, all faiths, and all those who are seeking a faith that makes sense to them in the contemporary world. So read this book and weep—and laugh, and think, and be inspired.

In our own perplexing attempts to peer beneath the veil of theological convention, we may discover there is a higher truth in questions that can't be answered than in answers that can't be questioned. Jesus, the great communicator, used the things with which his disciples had everyday familiarity to convey his message of salvation and the power of universal love: the lilies of the field, wheat and chaff, a mustard seed, lost sheep, fig trees, the power of Caesar, toiling in the fields, the nets of the fishermen. But is that how he would choose to speak to us today, in the third millennium since his death? Would he not speak instead of quarks and Wall Street capitalism, organ transplants, nuclear arsenals, gender identity, our failing stewardship of the planet, racial animus, income disparity, and unwelcome refugees? Who, we may ask, are the outcasts of our society today with whom he would seek communion? What contemporary hypocrites would suffer his scorn? Whom would he drive from the temple today? These are questions that have the power to engage and awaken us.

From *Do You Know What You Are Doing, God?*

The front cover image, *The Veiled Christ*, is the face of a full-length sculpture by Giuseppe Sanmartino. Produced in 1753 and now preserved at the Capella Sanservo in Naples, Italy, it is widely considered one of the world's greatest sculptures.

Catholicism/Spirituality

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