

SANCTITY TRAPS

Adrian J. Reimers, Ph. D.
3803 Eastmont Drive
South Bend, Indiana 46628

Chapter 1—Sanctity Traps

This book is about sanctity traps and how to avoid them. But before talking about negative things, we should first say what real sanctity is. After all, in the final analysis our job as Christians is positive—to be holy.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux has been called the great saint for our time. She knew how to be holy. But in one sense, she never did anything. There are some colorful anecdotes about how badly she wanted to be a Carmelite nun. On the other hand there are no miracle stories, no great works of evangelism. Her namesake in religious life, Teresa of Avila, traveled all over Spain founding religious houses. The “Little Flower” stayed in one place and never founded anything. She never came close to being Mother Superior. She wrote no great theological treatise and no manual of prayer—just her own autobiography. She had no great mystical visions and never received the stigmata. All she did was to spend each day loving God and her sisters in the convent. She chose deliberately to shower special care on those who were hardest to love—the really disagreeable nuns. Then, as her tuberculosis slowly killed her and her soul was assailed by doubts about God, she continued to pray and to love Jesus. She called this her “little way”. Because of it, the Church recognizes Thérèse as a great saint. Being holy was not something she *did*; holy is what she *was*.

In the proper sense of the word, only God is holy. Sanctity or holiness is one of God’s principal qualities. To be holy means to be both higher and fundamentally different. God is *higher* than any created thing, magnificent and powerful. Scripture speaks of him as “high and lifted up” (Is. 6:1). He dwells in glory, “in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16). Angels and saints alike bow before his throne. Demonic powers tremble before his majesty and power. God is also *other*. He is fundamentally *different and separate*. He is

different from us. His ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. (Is. 55:8) No statue or image even begins to resemble him. Because he is other—so different and separate—no one can approach him without God’s special help. The people of ancient Israel knew that for a sinful human being to look upon God would be death. God is too high and too magnificent for mortal men and women to cope with. Only God is truly holy.

Because God is holy, anything that belongs to him is made holy; it shares in his holiness. And if a person or thing somehow resembles God, it too shares a kind of holiness. So if a building is set aside for the worship of God, it is holy. It is consecrated, which means “made holy”. The church building is no longer *profane*, or for earthly use. This is why it is wrong to use it for secular purposes. The Church building is set aside for God and reflects his holiness. This is also the point of the second commandments, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.” When we back up a surprising, but trivial piece of gossip with the phrase, “I swear to God”, we are calling on the majestic and holy Lord of creation to stand behind a thoughtless tale. God’s own name is holy and should not be used frivolously.

In much the same way, people can be called holy. Some people are set aside and consecrated directly to God’s service. They are then holy in the same way that a church building or chalice is holy. This is why it is a sacrilege to strike a priest. Not only is it an assault against a man, but it is also an insult against God. Selected from among men to minister the sacramental mysteries, this man may no longer be treated like other men. This is also why priests may not hold political office or serve as armed soldiers in war. They are set aside for God. The pope is called “Holy Father” or “Holiness” for the same reason. Some popes have been very saintly; a few were great sinners. But all were set

aside to serve God as head of his Church on earth. No matter what the man may be like personally, he is still *Holy Father*.

The kind of holiness that we are all concerned about the most is personal holiness. That is what this book is about. This is the holiness that makes us saints. This is the holiness that the Second Vatican Council says we are all called to. It is the most important kind of holiness, because it is the only kind that God works inside us. If enough cardinals vote for someone, he becomes the *Holy Father*. It's all up to the cardinals. But whether you or I become holy is between each of us and God.

God told ancient Israel, "Be holy, as I am holy." (Lv. 19: 2) The way they were to be holy was to obey God's law, especially the Ten Commandments. God then revealed himself fully in Christ. Jesus is not only truly man, but truly God as well. He taught, "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful." (Lk. 6: 36) Here is a new side to holiness. Christ reveals holiness as abundant mercy. That is why he added the second part of the Great Commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus' whole life was an exercise in mercy which reached its climax on the cross. Jesus gave his life so that we would not have to suffer the just consequences of our sins. The true path of holiness, then, reduces to love. We become holy by imitating God's incarnate love and mercy in Jesus. Ultimately, every path to holiness (or "sanctity") comes down to this: accepting God's love and responding to him in love by imitating Christ.

If you are reading this book, it is probably because you want to be holy. Perhaps this desire has caused you problems in some way. Maybe you got 'burned' by a religious group. Or you could be confused about the latest demands that Christ or Our Lady is allegedly making on those who would be holy. The good news is that this desire to be holy is also God's plan for you. As the Second Vatican Council so often reiterated, all of

us are called to holiness. Few of us are intellectually brilliant, artistically gifted, or athletically talented. Not many have the chance to be heroes during war or disaster. But all of us can be true saints. In fact, it is our vocation. But on the road to sanctity we can fall into traps, and these are what this book is about.

A Sanctity Trap: The Story of Steve and Linda

The afternoon was warm and quiet that spring day. Both boys were napping and lunch dishes were cleaned up. Linda lay down on the sofa, closed her eyes, and welcomed a few moments of reverie. Disjointed memories and images floated lazily through her mind—thoughts of her day, the boys, her home, her husband Steve. Suddenly she sat upright: “What am I doing here? I never chose this. I don’t love Steve.” In a moment her entire perspective on her life, her marriage, and her faith changed.

A tawdry tale from Ricki Lake? Yet another woman who “found herself” and abandoned her family? No, Linda is a good Catholic woman who had consecrated her life to Christ. She did not leave her husband or abandon her children. However, she did open her eyes to a serious problem. Linda had fallen into a sanctity trap. Because of it she married a man, but not because she loved him and wanted to share her life with him, bear his children, and grow old by his side. Of course she loved him in the way any one Christian ought to love another. She had even come to like and respect him. But she did not really want him for her whole life.

Because of a false idea of sanctity Linda had lost her chance to build a marriage naturally, on the basis of her own desire and decision. Instead, she—and Steve—who had the same problem, it turned out—had to build a marriage out of duty. They had to love

out of obedience, hoping that their feelings would eventually follow. They were victims of the Personal Prophecy trap.

Sanctity traps take many different forms, but they have similar results. Good Christians, wanting to love God and be holy, find themselves bound up, guilt-ridden, and often trapped in marriages or jobs they never wanted. The effects of a sanctity trap may be legal, social, psychological, or physical. In every case, though, the victims have lost something of the freedom that God wants for them.

A religious renewal community set the trap that Linda and Steve fell into. However, sanctity traps can appear anywhere. *A freshman in college 2,000 miles from home, Luis almost ruined his health and had to drop out of college because of a self-inflicted trap. Inspired by books of the great contemplative saints* ^{*}, *Luis fasted severely, deprived himself of sleep, and spent long hours in prayer. When his father finally flew up from Guatemala to take him home, Luis was a physical and emotional wreck.*

Sometimes another person's expectations can become a sanctity trap. Not long ago young people would enter religious life or the priesthood out of family duty; "someone from our family should do this". More often today, young people embrace false—and often crippling—spiritualities or ways of life because religious leaders or teachers convince them that this is what God *really* wants, because this is the perfect way to be holy.

The most serious and dangerous traps lie in groups and organizations. The past thirty years have seen a dramatic rise in the awareness of cults and cult-like groups. What was David Koresh's commune in Waco, if not a large sanctity trap? The same principles that form the Branch Davidians can be at work in other groups, movements, and organiza-

^{*} but ignoring their fundamental rule—to find a mature spiritual director.

tions. Because of its leader, its isolation, and its end-of-the-world theology, the Branch Davidian cult developed into an extreme example of a sanctity trap. But other groups can develop the same patterns of leadership and control on a less intense level. Even if the result is not a fiery drama on the east Texas plain, good Christians can still be crippled spiritually and psychologically.

But what is a sanctity trap? By this term *sanctity trap* we mean *any idea or practice that promises holiness, but instead delivers physical, psychological, or spiritual bondage*.

Vulnerability to Traps: Personal Aspects

As I said, sanctity traps can be found anywhere. Certain personal spiritual flaws can make us particularly susceptible to them. For example, St. John of the Cross, the great Spanish Mystic, warned against “*spiritual gluttony*”. Many Christians whom God has blessed with an experience of his love begin to crave spiritual experiences. They become like gluttons who crave tasty foods and treats to enjoy. They pray to adore and honor God—yes—but they also long for and look for powerful religious experiences. Now, God does bless us with deep and moving experiences—the peace of Medjugorje, the radiance at Fatima, the overwhelming joy of yielding to the power of the Holy Spirit, the profound solemnity of a High Mass in Latin—but he uses these only to encourage us. God always gives his gifts so that we will seek him as the Giver. Spiritual gluttony forgets the Giver and seeks just the gifts.

Scruples are another spiritual flaw. Conscientious Christians can become overly responsible, constantly worried about doing everything right. *The boss kept her late at work, dinner boiled over, and the 7th-grader needed the report typed tonight (“PLE-E-EASE, Mom?”)*. *The scrupulous woman will then get out of bed at 11:17 PM,*

thinking that she has let the Blessed Mother down by forgetting to say the seven Our Father's, Hail Mary's, and Glory Be's for the day. Scrupulous Christians constantly fear that they are leaving something out or doing something wrong. Their great fear is that they are letting God down. Like spiritual gluttons they are psychologically vulnerable to sanctity traps.

Vulnerability to Traps: Social Aspects

If imperfections like gluttony and scruples make Christians susceptible to sanctity traps, groups and movements provide the opportunities for them. 350 years before Christ, the philosopher Aristotle remarked that we are social animals. Human beings belong to society, and our social groups influence us profoundly. This is as important in religion as it is in worldly affairs. The Psalmist could have gone to the Temple whenever he wanted to, but he was happiest to go with other believers: “I rejoiced because they said to me, ‘We will go up to the house of the Lord’.” (Ps. 122: 1) Just as we enter into the “team spirit” at a sports event, we get caught up into the devout sentiments of a congregation during a procession. We join our faith with the faith of the assembly. We make their hopes our own. In fact, this is Christ’s will for us. He founded a Church so that each of us could be saved as part of his people. Only the Church has the whole Christ; no single Christian does. The Church is the Body of Christ. The individual Christian is always in a certain way incomplete.

Religious groups and spiritual movements build on the social aspect of Christianity. There are many ways to serve Christ and many good spiritualities. It is natural for Christians to come together into groups according to their experiences, interests, and temperaments. They can reinforce each other in their commitments. Alone I may set out to serve the poor and do a few good works for a month or so, but if I join St. Vincent De

Paul Society, my commitment is more objective. Other members will help me remain more faithful to Christ's call upon my life. Often an organized group can be more effective than several individuals working alone.

Religious groups also offer a sense of fellowship. If I have had a charismatic experience and have begun to pray in tongues, my fellow Catholics in the parish may find this kind of prayer strange or even offensive. By attending a charismatic prayer group, I can experience the support of others who embrace this spirituality. Groups and movements represent important ways to live out a part of the faith. The Church alone contains the whole life in Christ, but within the Church many different groups can help us out.

To speak about groups is to speak about leaders. "Official" Church leaders—bishops, priests, abbots, mothers superior, etc.—get their positions in institutional ways. They go to school or get appointed. Movement and group leaders, on the other hand, arise "naturally", often on the basis of their strong personalities and dynamic leadership skills." "David Brown" went to the seminary and was ordained as "Fr. Brown"; ten years later, the bishop appointed him Vicar General, because he knows Canon Law so well. The Congregation for Bishops in the Vatican recommended "Msgr. Smith", and then the pope appointed him to be "Bishop Smith". But the leader of the movement or prayer group is often the one who can inspire confidence and motivate followers. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who renewed the Benedictine order and founded the Cistercians, was such an inspiring speaker that when he came to town, many mothers hid their sons, knowing that boys who heard Bernard preach usually joined the monastery. Often the entire 'tone' or 'flavor' of a religious group is set by its leader. The Franciscans still reflect St. Francis of Assisi's joyful simplicity. Mother Teresa shows by her life as well as by her words what it means to serve Christ in the poorest of the poor. This is why the second Vatican Council

encouraged religious orders to remain faithful to the spirit and charism of their founders. The leader profoundly affects the group as a whole and its individual members.

Because groups can influence us so powerfully, they can lead us into sanctity traps. The reasons for this will appear throughout this book, but three of them are worth mentioning here: 1) perfectionism and elitism; 2) peer pressure, and 3) ambitious leaders.

At this point I should give you a warning. In this book I will discuss many different groups and movements within the Church—the charismatic renewal, the Medjugorje/Marian movement, the pro-life movement, and others. For the most part these movements and groups are good. I do believe that in the wake of Vatican II the charismatic renewal was a grace for the Church. It led many Catholics back into reading their bibles and gave a strong impetus to evangelization. The events in Medjugorje have not only resulted in many conversions, but have also inspired a worldwide rebirth of Marian devotion. In fifty years, Catholics will probably be grateful for the efforts of today’s “traditionalists” to preserve the Latin Mass.

I could go on, but the point is simply that abuses and sanctity traps don’t make a whole movement bad. God himself started Judaism. Yet Christ condemned the “sanctity traps” that the Pharisees and lawyers set for the people in the name of the Law of Moses. “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you frauds! You shut the doors of the kingdom of God in men’s faces, neither entering yourselves nor admitting those who are trying to enter.” (Mt. 24:13) St. Paul warns against false teachers who “worm their way into homes and make captives of silly women burdened with sins and driven by desires of many kinds”. (2 Tim. 3:6) This was in churches that Paul himself had established.

To repeat: *The criticisms in this book should not be taken as blanket condemnations of any movement or group.*

Perfectionism and elitism are the result of the fact that a group has rediscovered something important in Christianity. They have found something that seems generally to be missing in Church life. For example, in the early days of the charismatic renewal, many leaders referred to the charismatic experiences—praying in tongues, spiritual gifts, receiving prophecy, expecting miracles—as a return to the experience of the early Church. They saw themselves reliving the book of Acts, as it were. It was not hard, then, to conclude that the faith of non-charismatics fell short of the full Christian ideal. In a very different way, dedicated pro-lifers can sometimes assume that others who do not participate in their activities fall short in their witness to Christ. So we see a young protest leader challenging a priest and Catholic university president to prove his fidelity to Christ signing on to a particular statement at a particular time. In the 1960s some questioned whether any fully committed Catholic could continue to live in the suburbs and not personally work against poverty and discrimination in the ghetto. It is very easy for a group—any group—to believe that their charism is the one essential thing that *every* Christian must embrace. In this way they set up a new standard for Christian perfection. They risk seeing themselves as the spiritual elite.

Peer pressure: Religious groups are subject to the same patterns of behavior as secular groups of human beings. If cliques and rivalries can form within the sophomore class, they can also form in the youth evangelism team. If certain members of the marketing team always try to shine too brightly when the CEO is there, there will also be prayer group members who show off when the bishop visits. When a group has especially strong, charismatic leaders, we frequently see members imitating them—expressing their views, using pet phrases, even smoking a pipe, growing a beard or wearing long skirts.

In particular, ordinary peer pressure is at work in every group—even religious ones. We all naturally want to ‘fit in’. We accept the group’s norms and adapt our

behavior to what others want and expect. In many ways this can be good, but it can become destructive. Peer pressure can prevent a Christian from witnessing to the truth. For example, the Latin Mass movement contains an undercurrent of mistrust of the American Catholic hierarchy. In such an atmosphere many people feel awkward and uncomfortable speaking favorably about their parish priest or sticking up for the bishop.

Ambitious leaders can overreach their charism and rightful authority. Every religious success and spiritual gift can bring earthly rewards—including fame and a reputation for holiness. Mother Teresa chose to serve the poorest of the poor, and they gave her the Nobel Peace Prize. She has been on the cover of *Time*. Because of these earthly rewards, the leader can always be tempted to magnify his or her own status. Other leaders—especially Church authorities—may be seen as a threat to the leader’s own influence and power. *This tendency is normal*. Even the apostles argued about which one of them would be most important. We all get defensive and protective of our positions, authority, and prestige. When this happens to a religious leader, though, he may slowly fall into pride and begin leading his followers not to Christ but to himself.

It is especially important to realize that some religious leaders are even frauds. Some men and women consciously use the faith of devout believers for their own benefit. In the late 1980s and into the ‘90s the media devoted considerable attention to prominent televangelists whose “ministries” were devoted to making themselves rich. We know now that many cult leaders are motivated by a desire for power and the luxury of a personal harem. This happens among Catholics, too.

A particularly dramatic example comes from Italy. *Upon the death of Padre Pio (whose life and ministry were exemplary) a young monk revealed that he had received the stigmata—almost as a kind of “passing of the torch”. Soon his fellow monks and visitors*

*to the monastery began to smell a sweet aroma in his presence. Stories of miracles and bilocations began to circulate. Eventually Father Gino—he had been ordained—succeeded in bringing the nuns of a neighboring convent into perfect obedience to himself. He began to enter into relationships of deep intimacy with some of his young followers, encouraging them to depend too much on him. He became an important spiritual influence on many in Italy, and his reputation spread throughout the world. And he was a fraud. Investigations have shown that the ‘stigmata’ were faked. The odor of sanctity came from bottles in his cell. He had a strong, imperious will that he imposed on anyone who fell under his influence. His cult became a sanctity trap for his followers. And it was the result of deliberate deceit.**

What to Expect from this Book

The next ten chapters are a kind of catalogue of sanctity traps. I have broken them down into ten main ones. Someone else might find more, but these seem to be the most common ones. The ten traps are

1. “Holy Card Pictures”—confusing looking holy with being holy;
2. “The Obedient Wife”—that personal, family, and societal peace come from wives’ being totally obedient and submissive to their husbands;
3. “Religious Recipes”—trusting formulas to make us holy;
4. “Blind Lover’s Leap”—that Christianity is a matter of finding love so real “you can just feel it” and not of thinking;
5. “Personal Prophecy”—that God has a specific thing he wants of you and that you must decipher his clues to it;

* For a detailed look at Fr. Gino’s activities, see Thomas Case, *Mind-Forged Manacles* (Fidelity Press, South Bend, Indiana 1993), Ch. 11, “The Seer of San Vittorino”.

6. “Prophet for Our Age”—that something so new is happening that to serve God we must follow the new prophet he is raising up;
7. “Devils Are Everywhere”—that all the events in the world and even the thoughts in my own mind are under the devil’s constant influence;
8. The “Deny Your Self”—that self-denial means denying that I have a mind and a self;
9. “Big Happy Family”—the illusion that perfect family love and acceptance are possible in a spiritual or religious group of ‘real’ brothers and sisters in Christ, and
10. “Perfection Is Possible”—expecting that a pure and perfect experience of holiness is possible in this life and that we can find a pure and perfect Church life.

Each of the next ten chapters will examine one of these traps. We will look closely at some true-life experiences of these traps^{*}, at the lives of some saints, and at what Scripture says. Most important, we will uncover positive steps for avoiding and getting free of such traps.

^{*} The names and some of the details have been changed for the sakes of those involved. Most of these stories will actually be composites of several persons’ experiences.

Chapter 2—Holy Card Pictures

Marianne was finishing her coffee and getting ready to leave the retreat. The first session was over and she needed to run home to check on the children. As she dropped her Styrofoam cup in the trash bag, JoEllen ambled up to chat. “You must feel like a real sinner,” she remarked, “living next door to a saint like Evelyn.” Marianne was stunned. “I guess so,” she stammered, and she hurried out the door.

Although JoEllen hardly knew Marianne, she had hit a nerve. Marianne was deeply conscious of her faults. She knew that her temper kindled too quickly and that she laughed to much at the wrong kind of jokes. She wanted to be holy, and she knew she wasn’t. She needed no reminder that she was a sinner. Evelyn, on the other hand, made an almost perfect holy card saint. An attractive, though not really beautiful woman, she had long brown hair and a smooth oval face. When she spoke about the Lord—and she did this very well—she would slowly lift her wondering big brown eyes and an ethereal smile would cross her face. Anyone could see what a deeply spiritual person Evelyn was—one that Marianne would never measure up to.

Anyone who looks holy must be holy. This is probably the simplest and most obvious sanctity trap. We are all concerned how we look, what impression we make. Secretly we do like to be noticed. Some time ago a Russian doctor asked me if I had Russian ancestry. To his wife, I looked like a Russian prince. Even though I am mostly Irish and not at all Slavic, I found this flattering that this couple wanted to claim me as one of their own—and nobility at that!

If it’s nice to be mistaken for a prince, it is especially gratifying to be called a saint. We want to be saints. That is our goal. If other people think I’m holy, then I must

be making spiritual progress. Because we usually want to think the best about ourselves, it is not hard to start thinking that they are right—that we are saints. Looking holy becomes a concern. We start posing for our holy cards.

The most obvious way of doing this is through personal appearance. In my Catholic grade school in the 1950s, students who looked especially devout during Mass were praised, as were girls who wore blue (in honor of Mary). During the 1970s women in some charismatic groups began wearing long skirts as a sign of their rejection of feminism. In such groups woman in slacks or shorts eventually became suspected of worldliness or imperfect devotion to the cause of Christ.

The easiest way to impress others, however, is by how we talk. In the early days of the charismatic movement, the charismatics were always easy to spot; they constantly were saying, “Praise the Lord!” or even just “PTL!” Of course, this is not bad. Certainly it is better to salt one’s speech with God’s praises than to pepper it with crude cursing. But talk—as they say—is cheap. The problem begins when Christian slogans and expressions become our emblems to show off how Christian we are. We laugh at people who try to sound “educated” by using (and misusing) long words; it is just as silly to try to look holy by using religious words.

Witnessing to God’s love incarnate in Christ is not just an activity for some Christians; it is a duty for us all. The Second Vatican Council taught: If Christ is to come into the world, he must come through us. One of the clearest signs that the charismatic and Marian movements are from God is the strong thrust toward evangelism. Members of both movements have done an excellent job witnessing to God’s love and mercy. The traditionalist, Latin Mass movement has born effective witness to Christ’s mysterious presence in the Church. But real witnessing always flows from one’s life and experience.

We give witness first by the goodness of our acts and then—as the occasion arises—in words. The true witness testifies to how Christ has made the difference in his own life.

This witness is good so long as its focus stays on the Christ who transformed me and off the wonderful me who got transformed. A particularly troublesome way to “look holy” is to over-spiritualize. By “over-spiritualizing” I simply mean turning every thing into a spiritual event and every conversation into a testimony about God. Everything is described in terms of God’s acts and Satan’s attacks. *“I asked the Lord for a parking space and he gave me one right in front of the doctor’s office.” “I know that Mary was watching over our whole trip. We didn’t miss a single connection.” “Satan did his best to ruin my job interview. First I spilled coffee on my tie, and then I had trouble finding the address.”* Of course, God’s providence does extend to everything. God can intervene whenever he wants. This is one reason why we should thank God in everything. However, he normally works through the natural order of things. Satan might not want me to get that job, but like anyone else I can get clumsy with my coffee. And if I had followed the advice of job counselors, I would have left fifteen minutes earlier for the interview. And that parking space at the doctor’s office might be empty because someone else had a traffic accident on the way to that doctor. *When I over-spiritualize, I put myself on a pedestal above other people.* ‘The rest of the world may live with natural causes and chances, choices and decisions, success and failure; but I walk in the wake of God’s mighty moving hand.’ By over-spiritualizing I present myself not as an ordinary person who believes in God and loves him, but as a kind of angel dancing through a spiritual dreamland on earth. Other people see earthly things, but I believe I see everything from God’s point of view.

One problem with “looking holy” is that eventually the image gets substituted for the reality. To put it more bluntly, the “Holy Card Picture” is false. In fact, real holy

cards are often very sentimental and not good likenesses. When the Church began to consider canonizing St. Thérèse of Lisieux, her religious order retouched the photographs of her to provide a more ‘saintly’ image. Her sister doctored her autobiography with extra edifying phrases. The real St. Thérèse was a bit too ‘ordinary’ to be a convincing saint. We have a natural tendency to elevate saints into superhuman beings, but when we do, we lose sight of what really made them holy. In the Hollywood blockbuster *Quo Vadis*, St. Peter is able to silence 50,000 cheering spectators in the Colosseum just by standing and holding up his hands—a hero, larger than life with compelling moral authority. The real St. Peter was a man, not a superman.

It is good to remember that when movie producers want to portray saints, they hire professional actors and not holy people. There were thousands of very good nuns in their convents in 1943, but the producers of *Song of Bernadette* chose Jennifer Jones to play Bernadette. Collapsing in the rain beneath the cross, Olivia Hussey’s Mary made us almost feel how sharp that sword was that pierced the Sorrowful Mother’s heart.* Both of these actresses portrayed holiness wonderfully. They *looked* holy. That was their job. And it would be hard to find a living saint who could play those roles as well. The point is that *looking holy* is an art, a skill that professional performers can do very well. Looking and acting holy are not the same as being holy.

An even more serious problem with looking holy is that Christ forbids us to try it. He warns us not to be like the hypocrites who pray on the street corners and wear long faces when they fast so that others will notice them. (Mt. 6: 5, 16) Those who practice holiness to impress others will get their reward from other men, not from God. Indeed, the Apostle John tells us that the reason the Pharisees—the holy men of their time—

* In Jesus of Nazareth.

rejected Christ was that they cared more for the praise of men than for the praise of God. (Jn. 12: 43) Trying to look holy is not only foolish, but dangerous as well.

Why the Holy Card Picture Is a Trap

Being holy is not the same as seeming holy, but why is the “Holy Card Picture” syndrome a trap? What is there about it that catches Christians and won’t let them go? Recall that Jesus said that if your concern is to look holy, you already have your reward (Mt. 6: 2, 5, and 16). An old proverb has it, “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” If the reward you seek is from men, then it is men you must please. Whoever gives you your reward calls the shots in your life. If you fall into the “Holy Card Picture” trap, then you are no longer free to serve God for his own sake; instead you have to do what makes you look holy.

If my goal is to be holy I will strive to love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself. But if I want to *look* holy, then I become self-centered and vain because my focus is on *me*. On an earthly level, this is one of the trials of adolescence. Teenagers are acutely conscious of how they look and of what others think of them. To a fourteen year old, “bad hair” or a “zit” on the chin triggers a serious crisis. *Everyone* will notice it. One of the signs that a teenager is growing in maturity is that he or she becomes less self-centered and begins to care more about the feelings and interests of others. The “Holy Card Picture” Christian is a kind of spiritual adolescent, who needs to escape his self-absorption and open his eyes and heart to God and others.

There is another and more ominous side to the “Holy Card Picture” trap. This is the trap of accepting others as saints simply because they make a good first impression. A Christian friend of mine once told me about seeing Elizabeth Taylor’s portrayal of the good-hearted Jewess in *Ivanhoe*. He commented how he could tell that back then there

was a real purity and innocence about her. Liz Taylor now seems to be an unhappy woman, and she has made some bad life choices. But a having played a particularly innocent and generous character does not tell us that the young Liz Taylor was *really* different. Kate Mulgrew has played St. Elizabeth Seton in a movie and Captain Janeway on TV's *Star Trek*. It would be as silly to expect her to teach us sanctity as it would be to ask her to pilot a space shuttle. But Christians of all stripes—from 'liberal' to 'conservative', both Protestants and Catholics—do exactly this, following persuasive personalities. Many Christians will believe, follow, send money to, and even commit their lives to religious leaders who present a compelling image. Believing that the image really does reflect the inner reality, they trust men and women who wind up misusing and even betraying that trust.

Certainly our Savior knew this was true. Jesus did not entrust himself to anyone, because "he was well aware what was in man's heart" (Jn. 2: 24-25). He sharply criticized the Pharisees for being "whited sepulchers", beautiful and clean on the outside, but full of dead men's bones within (Mt. 23: 27). He warned against those who appear innocent as sheep, but who inwardly are ravenous wolves (Mt. 7: 15). Again and again the Scriptures warn us that God does not judge by appearances. Christ takes special pains to warn us against being taken in by outward appearances.

Jack was a dynamic speaker and forceful personality whose natural gifts raised him into leadership of a growing campus prayer community. Though not handsome, he had a compelling presence. By his confidence in God's power and word, he drew people to himself. At daily Mass in the dormitory, the priest often allowed Jack to give the homilies. These were really extended teachings that formed the spiritual lives of prayer group members. At a time when too many priests were reducing the faith to a kind of

vague optimism and general good will, Jack taught the cross of Christ in all its horror, as well as the reality of our sharing in Christ's resurrection.

Few saw Jack's other side. In a careless moment, while trying to draw some more mature members into his inner circle, he commented that every man has until the age of forty to make his mark in the world. Jack's achievement would be to form a vital Christian community. It would be his "claim to fame". (One of those present later stated, "When I heard that, I decided to have no part in it. I'm not going to commit my life to his dream.") Among those working closest to him, Jack's inspiring faith gave way to imperious commands and belittling put-downs. He could share a dynamic faith and intense love with a caller on the phone, but then he'd bark an insult at his assistant when the call was over. He could inspire a crowd that they were special in God's eyes, but make the typist feel incompetent.

The prayer group grew until ugly stories of psychological abuse surfaced, and Jack was forced to leave town. In his "household"^{}—a kind of semi-monastic group of unmarried men—Jack was developing a "breakthrough ministry". In the middle of the night, a young man he thought needed spiritual growth would be dragged out of bed. Jack and his lieutenants would then bombard him with loud prayers, exorcisms, and accusations of sin, calling on him to repent and surrender to God's will. This 'ministry' would continue until the moment of breakthrough, when the victim would collapse in*

* The establishment of "households" is peculiar to charismatic communities. Ordinarily a household is established by moving several single people in with a family, although many groups have established households exclusively of single men or single women. In the household one man (the husband, if it is built around a family) serves as head. His authority, however, goes far beyond the management of chores and scheduling. He is regarded as a genuine pastor and personal 'head' of all household members. Thus the household is supposed to resemble a mini-monastic community.

tears and accept whatever Jack had to say about him. In his wake, Jack left not a community of faith, but a heritage of pain, psychological harm, bitterness, and mistrust of religion in general.

Charm is charm, and acting is acting—whether in show business, politics, or religion. If a con artist can convince people that he has their financial interests at heart, is it surprising that spiritual con artists can convince people that they are working for God’s glory? Some times the two can even go together. *A Trappist monk, Brother Leo, insinuated his way into the mind and life of a wealthy Texas widow, becoming her spiritual advisor. Eventually he convinced her, “If you love me you will do my will.” And she did, making him trustee of a huge portion of her estate upon her death. He had won her confidence spiritually and used this to gain control of her fortune.* Looking holy is easy. It is a trap to fall for those holy appearances.

What to Do

Each of us needs to keep in mind what Jesus said about showing off our holiness. It may be gratifying to hear how devout I look, how my prayers inspire, how deep my insights are, what a saint I seem to be, but it is also dangerous. When Jesus told us always to take the last place, he was not talking only about looking good socially. At the heavenly banquet too, we must not assume the highest seat. God himself assigns the seats, and mine might be much lower than I had expected. In fact Christ does not even want us to *think* about who will be the greatest saint. Our job is to love and serve.

Jesus takes this business of “Holy Card Pictures” even one step further. In his Sermon on the Mount he says, “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me.” (Mt. 5: 11) *I* think, “What a blessing! They call me a saint.” Jesus says, “No, it is a blessing when they call you a sin-

ner and revile you.” He even warns his apostles that the day will come when those who kill them will think they are serving God (Jn. 16: 2) And so, for example, St. Teresa of Avila, a mystic and Doctor of the Church, was condemned by some Spanish bishops as disobedient, rebellious, and troublesome. Her friend St. John of the Cross (also a mystic and Doctor of the Church) was even imprisoned by Church authorities as a heretic. When he was a young bishop, Angelo Roncalli’s open-mindedness and charity earned him a reputation for sympathy with the Modernists, that is, with heretics. (Here I am reminded of friends who were judged to have “New Age tendencies” because they like fantasy fiction.) Much of his ecclesiastical career he suffered under official suspicion and was given undesirable jobs. Not until his surprising election as Pope John XXIII was he able to expunge the charges of Modernism from the Vatican files on him.

We must not care what others think about our holiness. It does not matter at all. If your boss thinks you are a good worker—great! If your teacher calls you a talented student—be happy! *But* if anyone calls you a saint, flee from that person. What others think has absolutely nothing to do with your standing before God. God alone knows how holy you really are. So be humble. Keep a balanced perspective on your own life. Look at yourself with a sense of humor and without self-importance. Be yourself—the “you” God made you to be.

As far as the holiness of others goes, the same principles apply. You and I have no special talent to recognize which of our fellow Christians are great saints. There is no earthly image that holiness “looks like”. And the distance between *looking or sounding holy* and *being holy* is infinite. Anyone can learn the art of seeming holy. Being holy is a matter of your personal relationship with God.

We must be cautious, then, about following “modern-day saints”. Someone may speak movingly of the love of God. She may be aglow with the Spirit. He may thunder against sin and bring us repentant to our knees. But before we follow anyone, we must remember our Savior’s own rule: “By their fruits you will know them.” (Mt. 7: 13; 12: 33) Good fruits are the sign of a good heart. *But* these fruits are not looks or achievements. Our Lord does not tell us to look for a warm smile or a firm handshake, a gentle demeanor or a serene face. He does not point us to achievements like stirring prophecies, inspiring homilies, conversions and followers. Even supernatural visions, prophecies, and miracles are not good fruits. St. Paul lists some good fruits for us: “love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity” (Gal. 5: 22-23). When we see these (and we don’t really see them when some one stands at a lectern or before a microphone), then the Holy Spirit is at work. On the other hand, where we find greed, anger, factions, sexual immorality, insults, suspicion, mistrust, guilt, and bitterness, there the flesh is at work. If someone’s life and followers show these fruits, we are foolish to entrust our lives to him.

Early in the charismatic movement, Dan stood out for charm and his sincere interest in others. (In fact he had studied carefully how to stand and focus on others to make the best impression.) He was very smart and had a reputation for great wisdom. One of his more enthusiastic followers spoke of the “love puddles” he left behind him. Another spoke of his almost mystical ability to speak precisely to each person’s spiritual state. On the other hand, even though he had great learning, his talks and teaching often left people confused. Eventually some of his followers noticed that they would get opposite stories from him on certain things; it seemed he was not entirely straightforward. Even though he came across as thoroughly spiritual, other leaders began to distance themselves from him and divisions arose. These are all signs of bad fruit. As

this began to happen, some of that man's followers began to leave him. His fruits did not measure up to his claims to sanctity.

It is by their fruits—and never by their appearances—that the saints of Christ will be known.

Chapter 3 —The Obedient Wife

Sally staggered slightly and grabbed the sink for a moment. The dizziness would pass in a moment. The singles in the household all had meetings that night, so she had to clean up dishes alone. Her feet were sore. They tended to swell anyway when she was about seven months pregnant, and this time was no different. And she hadn't had a nap that day. Because it was her night to fast (It was Lent and her husband had decided that everyone in the household should take turns fasting twice a week.), she had thought of sleeping through dinner, but that would be to give in to the flesh. The dizziness passed, and she scrubbed the rice that Ella had burned onto the bottom of the pot. Then Dave called her from the living room: "Sally, Tommy smells again. I think you need to change him." Biting her tongue—he was a man of God and had his own responsibilities—she dropped the Brillo, picked up the diaper bag and headed into the living room. As she knelt to change the diaper, the pain struck again. The next day, in mid-afternoon, the pain came again and didn't stop until Sally had delivered her stillborn child.

Why did Sally overwork herself? Why did she undertake a strict fast so late in her pregnancy? Why did an intelligent woman accept her unhelpful husband's orders so unquestioningly? Sally was a victim of the "Obedient wife" (O.W.) trap.

A Powerful—but Neglected—"Biblical Teaching"

Its advocates call it the key to all our problems ... the cure for the breakdown of the family ... the solution to adolescent crime and teen pregnancy ... the key to a peaceful society. All these blessings are promised by the "Scriptural teaching" that we call the "Obedient Wife" (O.W.) trap. And there is more. By embracing this teaching you prove

that your faith is real, that you trust God’s word, and that you stand against feminist modernism. The essence of the teaching is simply this:

Wives are commanded by God to be completely submitted to their husbands, obedient in everything but sin. Everything they do is subject to their husbands’ rule.

I have heard influential leaders in the charismatic renewal say, “Headship and submission [in marriage] is the key to everything.”[†] One of the country’s largest and most influential Medjugorje centers writes:

“[This teaching] is among the most important directions Caritas of Birmingham has ever printed because if it is followed, it will work, being that it is based on solid Scripture, backed with Our Lady’s messages and the lives of the saints.”

This group goes on to say that those who reject this teaching are not only wrong, but they play into Satan’s hands. The relationship between husband and wife is supposed to be the fault-line along which the devil wants to destroy society. If the right order of marriage can be ruined, then human society itself will fall. Modernism and feminism are so strong in the Church—it is said—that priests and bishops are afraid to recognize the truth or stand up for it. But God’s word still obliges married couples to obey this teaching.

The basis for the O.W. teaching is found in St. Paul’s letters, especially in his Letter to the Ephesians. Since this text is used so often, let me quote it in full:

[†] The word “headship” apparently comes from the charismatic discipleship movement that arose in certain Protestant free churches in the 1960s and ‘70s. “Headship” means not just “authority” but standing over another with spiritual authority. This authority extends beyond certain activities to the entire life of the one who is “headed”.

Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord, because the husband is the head of his wife just as Christ is the head of his body the church, as well as its savior. As the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church. He gave himself up for her to make her holy, purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the word, to present himself a glorious church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort. Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ...

This is a great foreshadowing; I mean that it refers to Christ and the church. In any case each one should love his wife as he loves himself, the wife for her part showing respect for her husband.

Ephesians 5: 21-28,32-33

Right here—apparently—is where St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, sticks it to the feminists. He commands: “Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord.” They are to be subject “in everything”. This means (so it is taught) that no part of her life is to be outside of her husband’s authority. Protestant preacher and pastor Bob Mumford explains it this way: If a wife has prayed and decides that God wants her to sing in the church choir, her decision does not yet stand until her husband approves. Even if she has already promised the pastor and choirmaster to join, she must back out if her husband disapproves. Caritas[†] teaches the same thing in their newsletter. A wife may make no decisions on her own. She may do only what her husband approves. Otherwise she is disobeying God.

The wife is to submit to her husband “as to the Lord”. This is taken to mean that her husband stands in Christ’s place for her. If she would not say “no” to the Jesus, then the Christian wife may not say ‘no’ to her husband. Christ—so goes the O.W. doctrine—

[†] The organization quoted above.

has established the husband over the wife with the Lord’s own authority. In his family life conventions. Bill Gothard spoke almost in terms of a chain-of-command: God-Christ-husband-wife-children. Disobedience anywhere along this line is a sin. Each is to obey the next one up (except the children, who obey both father and mother). The wife cannot “go over her husband’s head” directly to Christ. He is Christ for her. Even if he is a bad husband, maybe an alcoholic or not a churchgoer—Caritas gives the example of a man who beat his wife with a hammer—even then she must love and obey him as if he were Christ. If this seems hard, she should still trust the Lord to take care of her through her husband.

Further support for this doctrine is often drawn from 1 Corinthians 11, where St. Paul discusses women’s head coverings at church. There he says that “the head of every man is Christ; the head of a woman is her husband; and the head of Christ is the Father” (1 Cor. 11:3). Taken by itself, this text seems to support the chain-of-command image. Everybody has a head, and the heads give the orders. Stephen Clark[§], one of the smartest and most articulate purveyors of the O.W. doctrine (and one of the few Catholics), ties it in with the idea that husband and wife are “one flesh”. If they are one flesh and the man is the head, then the woman is really part of her husband’s body. They are one person. If someone’s nerves are damaged so that his brain cannot move his arm, then he is crippled. By the same token, if a wife does not obey her husband (her head), then they are crippled. She is to be completely one with him. She is to think what he thinks and want what he wants.

[§] Stephen B. Clark was one of the early leaders in the Charismatic Renewal Movement in the Catholic Church and is one of the cofounders of The Word of God covenant community in Ann Arbor. He authored *Man and Woman in Christ*, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor 1974.

The good wife (in the O.W. teaching) reminds me of my friend Jim's partner. Jim is a police officer, and for a time he had the advantage of working with an especially brave, intensely loyal partner. Jim was the superior. He called all the shots. His partner was unquestioningly obedient. At Jim's word he would pursue the most dangerous criminal, check out the darkest house, and ultimately offer his own life for Jim. He was almost an extension of Jim's own mind. Jim's partner was a loyal, faithful, brave, patient, obedient -- German Shepherd! Unfortunately, the kind of wife that Clark and Caritas idealize looks a lot like Jim's dog.

Who Would Want This?

Spiritual traps are always voluntary. We fall into them willingly, because we think they will make us holy. Why, then, do people with good sense embrace the "Obedient wife" doctrine? It isn't natural. It leads quickly to discord. When couples even start to talk about doing it, a genuine sorrow enters their relationship. Nevertheless, thousands of devout, intelligent, well-read modern Catholics have embraced some form of this doctrine. Why?

Certainly the disintegration of family life has been one factor. According to one study, the typical American couple spends, on the average, less than three minutes a day talking seriously with each other. With conflicting work, school, and recreational schedules, many families no longer share a family meal. More important, we no longer enjoy a common understanding of what marriage and family mean. The divorce rate is very high. Many young people now live together without marriage. And there is a growing movement for the social and legal recognition of homosexual marriages. We no longer enjoy clear models or social understanding of what family life is.

The popular culture adds to the problem. TV’s “buffoon fathers”, Homer Simpson, *Married with Children*’s Al Bundy, have become a cultural icons—selfish boys in men’s bodies. We admire the simpler, more traditional lives of the Waltons, but see ourselves in the Bundy’s and Bunker’s (from the sitcom *All in the Family*). Our teenagers are sold a model of family life where parents are irrelevant.

In short, the American family is in trouble. Intelligent, concerned Christians want to know how to solve it. If “Christ is the answer”, then he should have an answer for this very important problem. And—in an age when TV shows us Tim Allen ogling girls and playing with toys, and when “successful” men work 60 hours a week or more to get ahead—if a preacher or author says that the solution is for fathers and husbands to take responsibility and keep their promises, this rings true. It is no great mystery that two men so different as Bill McCartney (white, Christian leader of the “Promise Keepers”) and Louis Farrakhan (black, Muslim leader of the “Million Man March” in October 1995) have gotten such a strong response. When a man stands up and calls on other men to be responsible and to take charge of things in their homes—by being there, instilling discipline, checking homework, assigning chores, and backing up mother’s authority—most of us say “yes!”. If God’s word in Holy Scripture addresses this, then it only makes sense to take it seriously.

Love is the other factor that leads both men and women to embrace the O.W. teaching. The heart of the Christian is eager to obey and sacrifice for love of Christ and devotion to his Holy Mother. When charismatics began to hear Spirit-inspired prophecies, they knew they must obey God’s word. When the Medjugorje visionaries reported messages from Mary, those who called themselves her children wanted to live those messages. Whenever anyone begins to start taking the faith seriously, he or she begins to understand that praying and thinking are not enough. If we love God, we will do what he

says. So: If God's word (or Mary's message) is for wives to obey their husbands in everything, then this is what we must do. Out of love for Christ and his Mother, we can give up everything—even the relationship we have grown comfortable and happy with in our marriage. We can do the hard thing for the sake of Christ.

Obedying this teaching has also become a matter of faith. Do you really believe God's word? Do you trust him that if you obey, he will take care of you? Very often a husband and wife embrace the O.W. teaching as a genuine, practical step in faith. Here—they are told—is a concrete way to embrace the cross and show Christ that you are serious about following him and trusting him.

In other words, the victims of the O.W. trap are not just the mousy, timid wives of macho, bullying husbands. They are often conscientious, intelligent Christians who want to obey the Lord and to make the world a better place.

What Scripture REALLY Commands

The O.W. teaching misrepresents what God wants. It is based on a simplistic, one-sided misreading of a few texts in the Bible. But you don't have to take my word for this. The authority of the Church's teaching Magisterium rejects this teaching. The Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* devotes an entire chapter to marriage and the family, and it makes no mention of such a teaching. If this is THE vital teaching on marriage for God's people, why did the Council completely ignore it?

Pope John Paul II has taught often about marriage and the family. This pope has not been afraid to stress teachings that most Catholics (and the world at large) find hard to accept—the ban on artificial contraception, the prohibition of remarriage after divorce,

priestly celibacy, to name some. But he has *never* said that wives have to obey their husbands. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* (“Familiaris Consortio”), his 1994 *Letter to Families*, and his many addresses, he has called for love, family prayer, sacrifice, and virtue—but he has never said that the wife’s obedience is what will save the family.

Most important, in his Apostolic Letter, *The Dignity of Women*, he completely rejects the subservience of the wife. Read what the pope says:

“The husband is called the ‘head’ of the wife *as* Christ is head of the Church; he is so in order to give himself up for her. ... But the challenge presented by the ethos of the Redemption is clear and definitive. All the reasons in favor of the ‘subjection’ of woman to man in marriage must be understood in terms of the ‘mutual subjection’ of both ‘out of reverence for Christ.’”—*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 24

Picking up on St. Paul’s opening sentence, “Defer to one another out of reverence for Christ”, the pope summons both husband and wife to mutual submission. Furthermore, if the husband takes Christ’s place, it is not as lord and master. It is to lay down his own life for his wife. Pope John Paul II rejects the O.W. teaching.

When God decided to create woman, he said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helpmate.” (Gn. 2:18) Some take this to mean that God created the woman to be a servant. This is not what the Bible means. The Hebrew word ezer (help, helpmate) is applied more often to God than to any human person; “Happy he whose *help* (ezer) is the God of Jacob.” (Ps. 146:5) The woman is a partner for the man’s good. When Adam first sees her, he rejoices, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” (Gn. 2:23) Here is someone like him. The woman’s submission does not appear until after the Fall. It is an effect of the original sin (Gn. 3:17).

But what about St. Paul? Doesn't he command wives to obey their husbands? No, he does not. Socially and politically the women Paul was writing to were second-class members of society. They were not getting jobs, putting the kids in daycare, agitating for their rights, voting in elections, or challenging the patriarchal order. St. Paul was not writing to feminists. These women were already obeying their husbands—they had no choice! Paul was telling them *how* to obey. This is why he begins and ends this section with the call to mutuality.

Wives are to be subject to their husbands “as to the Lord”. But how is the Christian subject to the Lord? Jesus told us how he sees it: “I no longer call you slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is about. Instead, I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from the Father.” (Jn. 15:15) We don't obey Christ as trembling servants, anxiously waiting for his orders. He calls us friends and asks for our response in love. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (Jn. 14:21) The way we obey Christ is not out of ignorant fear, but out of friendship and love. Likewise, wives owe their husbands love, not servile obedience. In this way, at least within her home, the ancient Greek Christian wife met her husband as an equal and not as the highest ranking slave.

But doesn't Scripture always imply that the husband is in charge? Pope Pius XI does call him the “head of the home”, while the wife is its “heart”.^{*} This is true. That the man is head of the family is a cultural universal. In virtually every historical age and in every part of the world, the man is normally head of the family. This seems to be a result of natural dispositions of human beings. Men tend to be physically stronger and more

^{*} See his encyclical *Casti Connubii*. This encyclical also insists that the woman must be treated with equal dignity as her husband. It does not deny her right to exercise her intellect and freedom of will.

aggressive, more oriented to the world outside the home. A woman is disposed to motherhood, which entails a certain withdrawing from the outside world to protect and nurture her baby. Men are oriented toward achievement, women to relationships. Traditionally men have had to protect and provide for women. So, when the Bible (or a pope) talks about the man's role as head, it is referring to a fact about human nature and culture.

We no longer live in a traditional society. Roles and relationships change. In the United States and western Europe now, headwork is replacing muscle work. Not only in offices and laboratories, but in factories as well, intelligence is replacing brawn. Armed with her mace and .38 revolver, a 120-pound policewoman is as effective as her 230-pound male partner. In modern democracies women have taken their places in the polling booths, legislative assemblies, and highest executive offices. Margaret Thatcher of England, Golda Meir of Israel, and Indira Gandhi of India have been among the strongest of their countries' recent leaders. Education and intelligence are decisive now for leadership, cultural influence, and social advancement.

The Church does not command us to return to traditional roles. Furthermore, the Church has *never* said that when the man is head of the family, his wife is to be absolutely subject to him. The relationships in the family and its 'governmental' structure depend on the culture it is in. The point is to permeate the culture with Christ. In the First Century the Church said to married couples, "You wives—who have no rights and are little better than slaves—claim your dignity and love your husbands the way you love Jesus, your Lord. And you husbands—who have every legal right to treat your wives like property—love your wives and give your lives up for them." Today the Church continues to call husbands and wives to love. Only the culture has changed.

Effects of the Obedient Wife Trap

Of all the traps in this book, the O.W. trap is among the most destructive and certainly the most painful. Any couple who embrace it will find that it quickly cripples love—and in the long run kills it. *The Obedient Wife teaching destroys marriage by destroying friendship and love.* Strong words. Perhaps I'm exaggerating? Let us analyze it with an illustration.

Two years out of nursing school, Julie married Paul. She was a surgical nurse at a large urban hospital. The doctors there praised her skill and intelligence. Julie and Paul struggled through those early years, balancing her job, his graduate studies, in-law problems, and the arrival of the first baby. Paul learned to change diapers and feed the baby. Then Julie took over all the household burdens, as Paul wrote the final draft of his dissertation. They prayed, worked, fought, made love, worried, laughed, and talked. They liked and respected each other. Then they started going to prayer meetings. At the prayer meeting they heard a new teaching. They heard that Paul is Christ to Julie. She is to submit to him in everything—body and soul, mind and heart.

Now Paul has this problem, and Julie has never liked it. She does not want to accept it. Paul leaves his socks on the floor. Early in their marriage, Julie realized that nagging and scolding didn't help. Leaving her nylons on his computer desk did. This little retaliation quickly alerted Paul how annoying his own sloppiness could be, and he became more considerate.

But with the new teaching Paul became God's man, standing in God's place. He is now head and lord. He enters his den and there are the nylons. "Julie, remove your nylons. And please don't put them on my desk again." Julie tries to argue, but he cuts her short: "Your duty is to obey, not to criticize my habits." What should she do?

Give him a piece of her mind? Julie can't do this, because she too believes the O.W. teaching. It is not Paul she is arguing with but God himself in Paul. Even if he might be wrong, it's not her place to correct him. She must keep her mouth shut and lift her concerns up to God. Picking up her husband's socks is no longer an irritating chore or even an act of selfless generosity—it is now her obligation before the Lord.

Some months later the baby gets sick. Paul, who is stressed and preoccupied by a problem at work, doesn't need this. "It's just a flu," he says. "Give her an aspirin." Julie knows better. The symptoms might point to flu. But they could indicate a more serious illness. As a nurse, she knows that a doctor's diagnosis is necessary. But as a wife, she must defer to her husband. And Paul gets angry when she brings up the subject. The normal response would be to take the baby to the doctor anyway and let Paul cope with it. But Paul is the head in everything. She must trust God to use Paul to guide her. She may do nothing on her own.

I would love to be able to say that this sort of thing does not really happen. Unfortunately, it does. I personally know of cases where the counsel, "Obey and trust God to care for the children," has endangered children and left adolescents ignored. Both Paul and Julie want to love each other, but there is an interloper in the marriage—a false idea of God. Paul has become divinized; everything he does is supposed to be from God. So, any real conversation or partnership is impossible. If Julie thinks the baby is sick and God's man says she is not, who is right? If Julie is frustrated with Paul's habits but Paul is her lord, whose problem is it? The trap is that both husband and wife believe that Paul speaks with the voice of God. They can no longer talk things over as equals. Because her husband holds the place of Christ, *she is always wrong*.

This affects every part of the marriage. Sexual union, which was once the happy enjoyment of mutual self-giving, is undercut by the dutiful wife's resentment. What she owes to his command is no gift. Her self-esteem is lost. She is no longer an adult but the oldest child in the family. Her opinions don't count. She sees herself not as the sexy girl who once won his heart, not as the competent professional who carried the family through those early years and still enjoys the esteem of the medical community, not as the devoted mother of a healthy child—more and more she sees herself as the drudge. Even her spirituality, her relationship with Christ, is under her husband's authority.

This trap also damages the husband. His superiors tell him that he is head, standing in Christ's place. He serves his wife best by ruling her. What he sees, though, is that he is hurting her. This means either that she is an especially rebellious woman—resisting all the grace that God is pouring on her through him—or that he is an incompetent, unworthy man of God. In either case, the answer is the same: He must tighten the screws and exercise firmer authority. This drives the wedge further between him and his wife. He is lonely and frustrated—a failure in God's sight. The two of them, who had begun so well to build a strong marriage, are now held apart by a growing wall of bitterness—and a false idea of God's plan.

There is a further consequence—infidelity. One of the greatest enemies of sexual happiness in marriage anyway is the loss of “magic”, the way that married people can come to take each other for granted. The joy of human sex is never sheer physical pleasure. It is the delight that this person has given herself freely to him, when she might have chosen not to. She *wants him*. And she experiences the delicious thrill that he finds her desirable. Having “won” each other for life, married couples need to beware of losing sight of the gift they are to each other. In the O.W. marriage, the gift is lost. Marriage becomes a corporate contract with a command structure. There is no question here of

gift. This woman who gives herself is not the fascinating creature whose heart the husband won, but the drudge who has to do what he says. And the wife simply finds her heart full of resentment. *He* is God’s holy man; *she* is the submissive little woman with no mind. She has to obey his every word. He can ignore her, and it’s because he is ‘busy with God’s work’. This is a breeding ground for infidelity *and it does happen*. Adultery has become a serious problem in many renewal communities that adopt the O.W. teaching. And invariably the affairs are with non-members—interesting people who bring some life into their relationships.

Spousal Abuse

This discussion would not be complete without some mention of the problem of abuse. We hear it repeated too often: The abused wife has one responsibility—to be a martyr. Even—and this is an actual example^{*}—if he cracks and bloodies her head with a hammer, she must never speak against him or stop honoring him. Fortunately, not all purveyors of the O.W. teaching go this far. However, social scientists tell us that the second best predictor of wife abuse is a fundamentalist interpretation of the Biblical doctrine on marriage. In other words, the second most likely sign that a man is a potential abuser is that he holds to this teaching.[†]

In fact, we know that the most important thing an abused woman can do—both for herself and for her children—is to insist on her own dignity. Over and over the children of abusive fathers tell us that their deepest anger is not toward the father him-

^{*} from the above-mentioned Caritas of Birmingham Newsletter.

[†] Alcohol abuse is the number one predictor.

self—”He was a sick man”—but toward the mother who accepted it all and failed to stand up for herself and her children.

What to Do

The solution to the O.W. trap is very simple. Don’t believe it. Instead, love each other. Care and be there for each other. Communicate. Love your children. Make love your aim, and then use common sense. Get advice from people you know and trust when you need it. Learn from the Scriptures and from the Church’s authentic teachers. Pope John Paul II’s writings are especially helpful.

Don’t let inspiring or forceful teachers bully you. These teachers especially love “straw man” arguments. “Do you believe God’s word? Or do you believe the feminists?” They set up a “straw man”—in this case that the only alternative to what they think is radical feminism—and then make you choose between it and their own view. “*Are you afraid of the cross?*” “*Satan is good at planting doubts?*” “*Do you really have questions, or are you afraid of losing your wife’s favors in bed?*” Statements and questions like these are nothing more than bully-tactics. Loving each other in marriage for life is hard enough as it is.

Life gives us enough pain, and often the only way husband and wife can hold on is with each other’s help. Marriage is a matter of love that is faithful unto death. It is for this that Christ gives the sacramental graces of matrimony, not for a rigid, dehumanizing chain of command.

Chapter 4—Religious Recipes

“I’m sorry for my sins. I need you Jesus.” Jerry’s tears began to flow. “Lord, I really need you. Come into my heart. Take charge of my life. Forgive my sins and help me love you.” Kneeling by his bed, his face awash in tears, Jerry felt the weight lift from inside him. For the first time in years he felt peace inside. His bitter scowl melted from his face. He was free. He was saved. And he felt very good.

The Walker home had not been happy. Jerry and Beth hardly ever spoke any more, except to argue. They had married just out of high school—two popular kids in the match everyone said would happen. Thirteen years and three children later, they had separate lives under a common roof. Beth cared for the home and the two smaller children. Jerry had his work and the oldest boy—and his cards. Jerry loved cards—card games, card tricks, shuffling cards, fancy decks of cards. He had no time to talk with his wife, but he could manipulate a deck like the best dealers in Las Vegas. The Walker marriage was disintegrating from neglect.

Then Jerry heard a radio preacher talk about turning to Jesus. He hurried home, knelt down, and prayed. A couple of days later, Beth mentioned how much happier he had looked lately and wistfully added, “It must be nice.” This was Jerry’s cue. He jumped up from the table half spilling his coffee, and pulled his wife away from the sink. “Come on upstairs --- no, come on. It’s OK --- Just kneel down right her, next to the bed --- That’s right. Now repeat after me: ‘I need you Jesus.’” Beth mumbled, “I need you Jesus.” “Lord, I need you. Come into my heart.” Beth repeated all his words, exactly as he dictated them. Then, sitting back on her legs, she looked up quizzically at her husband, as if to ask, “And now what?” Jerry’s wonderful prayer didn’t work.

This story had a happy ending, and Jerry now laughs at his clumsiness. A few days later Beth did start praying, but quietly in her own way. The wounds and divisions in their family soon healed. Jerry became a devoted father to all his children. But for one moment he had fallen for a “Religious Recipe” (R.R.)

What a Religious Recipe Is

A formula or set procedure for getting close to God is a religious recipe. It is a set of rules for pleasing him and enjoying his blessings. “If you want to be holy, follow these steps.” Jerry had a genuine conversion experience. He poured out his heart in repentant prayer and God answered him. But then he used his own experience as a recipe. He thought his words and posture were the key to what happened, and not the humility in his heart. But Beth needed to approach God in her own way.

Many Christians are trapped by “Religious Recipes” and find it hard to get free. Some of these recipes are experiential: “To be holy, you must have this experience.” This is a classical position within American Holiness Protestantism. Without the *experience* of abject sinfulness and of being forgiven by Jesus, there is no salvation. (This is why the question, “Have you been saved?” is so important to them. If you were really saved, you must have had a particular experience.) The Pentecostal movement arose from the idea that there had to be some distinctive experience—the “initial evidence”—that every Christian must have when the Holy Ghost comes. When some of Charles Parham’s Bible study class started praying in tongues in 1901, they believed they had discovered that “initial evidence”. This was the beginning of Pentecostalism.

Some Catholics have picked up this attitude, even though the Catholic Church has always taught that salvation and sanctification are objective realities and not just subjective experiences. In the early days of the charismatic movement I met priests who were

puzzled and offended by charismatics asking, “Have you received the Holy Spirit yet, Father?” They were not asking about confirmation or ordination. They wanted to know if the priest had ever been prayed over and felt something inside—something they call the “baptism in the Holy Spirit”. More recently, there are those who know that if you felt nothing special at Medjugorje, then your heart must have been closed to Mary.* Similarly, many Catholics believe that no true Christian can be angry, troubled, or in serious doubt.

In other words, one kind of religious recipe says that God always touches everyone in the same way. If my confession in Medjugorje was a cleansing, life-changing experience, yours should have been, too. If saying the “Jesus Prayer” unleashed a flood of tears and kindled a fire in Ellie’s heart, then it will in mine, too. But God never promised certain religious experiences. We can compare this with parents and their children. Daddy’s sharp word and disapproving glare may silence one child into humble obedience, while it provokes a second one to open rebellion and brings out all the sly charm of a third. Different children experience their parents’ actions and love in different ways. Well, we are God’s children, and we experience him in our own ways. God relates to each of us according to his or her individual personality.

A second kind of recipes are action recipes. *A real Christian has to do some one particular thing.* In the late 60s and the 70s, many Christians believed serving the inner-city poor was the acid test of real Christianity. Taking their cue from Acts 2: 42-44, the Bruderhof communities firmly believe that no one can be Christian except in a community that holds all things in common. Today, many think that any true Christian must be

* There is a certain irony here. Some of the best conversion stories from Medjugorje are those of hardened sinners and scoffing atheists, dragged to the shrine against their will. God reaches them in spite of their hardness.

actively demonstrating against legalized abortion. Or God cannot bless you unless you identify with and serve the African-American community. For some, the battle against sex-education or the English liturgy marks the border between true and ‘modernist’ Catholics. What all these have in common is that they set down some *one thing*—one work or activity—that we have to do to be pleasing to God.

This is what some of the Jews were driving at when they asked Jesus, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (Jn. 6:28) For the ancient Jews, the traditional works of piety were prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Jesus’ answer was completely unexpected: “This is the work of God: have faith in the One whom he sent.” (Jn. 6:29) Of course, this means much more than simply *saying* “I believe.” Belief in anything has consequences. I might say that I believe that a low fat diet is best for my health. However, if you see me loading up on butter, cream, sausage, and French fries, it makes sense to ask, “Do you *really* believe that too much fat will hurt your health?” It is like that with faith. Our acts have to show what we believe. The point is that we cannot reduce faith in Christ to some one specific action.

By far the most common and crippling kinds of Religious Recipes are for spirituality. By “*spirituality*” we mean a tradition or habit of prayers and devotions. One lady I know prays the sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary every day for the poor souls. Another woman says a short prayer before almost every new activity. Some people build their prayer and devotional lives around daily Scripture readings and others around the Blessed Mother. Typically, Mexicans venerate the Virgin of Guadalupe; they say that Mexico is 90% Catholic, but 100% *Guadalupano*. Poles honor the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. One priest built his entire spirituality around the Little Flower. In his weekday Mass homilies and in the confessional, he always managed to work in a lesson from the life

or writings of St. Thérèse. Any of these spiritualities can be good and spiritually fruitful—until we turn them into recipes. There are two ways we do this.

1) A Christian’s personal spirituality can grow stale, and like stale bread it becomes stiff and tasteless. Praying the Rosary is good, but mindlessly reciting it as part of your morning routine (“Hai’MAARY, fulla GRAACE ...”) can be little better than no prayer at all, if it’s simply a mechanical exercise. Reading Scripture every day is a wonderful practice, but the Apostle James warns us not to read it thoughtlessly, forgetting the word of life as soon as we close the Bible (cf. Jas. 1:23-24) When this happens, devotions become a burden, a daily chore without meaning. They become external—no longer from the heart. No longer do I say my prayers out of love for God but out of blind habit. I continue with them more out of fear of what will happen if I stop, than because they bring me closer to God.

In this way I can actually let an ingrained devotional habit cut me off from a fruitful devotional growth. My limited time for prayer can get so “cluttered” with required devotions that I have no time left simply to meet the Lord heart to heart. That is, I am doing the motions but not speaking to a person any more. This is a trap.

2) Some Christians impose their spiritualities on others. In the heady, early days of the charismatic renewal, some leaders taught that the charismatic experience is “normal Christianity”. Does this mean that everything in the Church outside that movement was “abnormal”? In the mid-1980s certain books connected with the Medjugorje apparitions taught that Mary’s express wishes are that we all fast twice a week and spend two-and-a-half hours in prayer each day. To live as Mary’s children we must pray the daily Rosary (slowly and attentively), pray the seven Our Father’s, Hail Mary’s, and Glory Be’s, read

the Bible, and attend Mass daily. All these things are good, but they were presented as a recipe: Drop your old devotions; here is what Mary wants you to do.

Invariably there is a threat behind such recipes. If you do not do this, your own faith will wither, and you will fall into sin. Your family will disintegrate and fall into the devil's snare. If enough Catholics do not respond to this call, the forces of evil will triumph, the Holy father will suffer, and Satan will wreak havoc in the Church.*

How Recipes Form a Trap

Religious Recipes are not just dead practices; they form a trap. They can be positively harmful. The reason has to do with idolatry.

When an ancient Roman planted his vines or a Phoenician set out to sea, when a Syrian woman got pregnant or when a Hellene set out to war—whenever the ancient pagans undertook anything important, they sacrificed to the gods. They had gods for fertility, childbirth, sowing and reaping, war, the winds, and so on. If these gods were pleased, then good things happened. If the gods were annoyed, then bad things. So it was important to find the right sacrifices to please these gods. The ancient farmer would no more think of putting in corn without a sacrifice than would a modern one without fertilizer and herbicide.

The ancient pagans did not *love* their gods. There was no question of a personal relationship or covenant. They did what they thought would make the gods happy, so that the gods would look out for them. Sacrificing was serious business. The ancients were

* It is worthwhile to recall that the authentic messages of the great Marian apparitions—including the core of the Medjugorje message—have always been a call to repentance, faith, and prayer, that is, to what the Church has always called us to.

enslaved to their idols, because these held the keys to everything they needed. Like shop owners in a mob-controlled neighborhood, they had to “pay off” the gods to survive. Certainly modern superstition is very much like idolatry, and the accompanying fear makes its hold on the mind hard to break.

The idolatrous mind-set can infect our relationship with God. We pray and pray for a friend’s conversion or a relative’s healing from cancer, but God doesn’t seem to answer. Then a spiritual person holding a Bible says, “Claim it in faith. Without a trace of doubt in your heart, repeat the Bible promise and claim it from Jesus!” This is the most blatant kind of recipe. It is a superstitious use of the Bible and prayer. It says: if my prayers didn’t get answered, the problem was that I used the wrong formula. If my mother dies of her cancer, it was my fault. I didn’t remind God of his promise, or a shadow of doubt flashed through my mind. The “name-it-and-claim-it” recipe comes out of unorthodox fundamentalist Protestantism, although many Catholics accept it. But Catholics too come up with “sure fire” novenas, prayers, and devotional acts. We treat God not as a loving Father who listens to us and cares for us, but rather as a trickster and a tease. He withholds good things from his children until they have jumped through all his hoops in just the right way.

A particularly dramatic example of this came out of the message of Fatima. In a private apparition to Sr. Lucia, the Blessed Virgin said that if the Pope, in union with all the bishops, were to consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart, Russia would be converted and a time of peace granted to the Church. In the ensuing years Popes Pius XII and Paul VI consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart but without mentioning Russia by name. One American priest founded an organization to push for the ‘proper’ consecration—one that explicitly mentions Russia. This priest went on to accuse certain churchmen of murder. In his organization’s magazine he argued that some cardinals and

Roman Curia officials were preventing the required consecration. Now, anyone who does not stop another person from murdering shares in that person's guilt. But as long as Communists remained in power, they would imprison, torture, and kill Christians. The Pope's act of consecration—so goes the argument—would remove these Communists from power and so prevent them from persecuting and killing Christians. Therefore these unnamed cardinals and churchmen were guilty of murder. This is superstitious, “recipe” thinking. It assumes that the Holy Father is incapable of listening to our Lady and discerning her wishes and her role in his ministry. It also assumes that Mary had really given us a recipe. Say these words or that prayer, and Communism will fall.

One Catholic explained to me once that Pope John Paul II should be removed from office, because he has neglected to preach the Gospel. Like St. Paul 2000 years ago, Pope John Paul II was invited to speak in a Jewish synagogue (the one in Rome). Unlike St. Paul, however, he did not preach the Gospel to the Jews. That is, he did not tell them powerfully and forcefully that Jesus died and rose and that he reigns now as Messiah and Lord. Therefore he has forfeited his legitimacy as an apostle. This, too, is R.R. thinking. My friend assumes that Christ orders his apostles to repeat certain words and phrases in certain situations, regardless of their effect. The Holy Father, on the other hand, tried to bring God's love to his hearers (who knew perfectly well where he stands concerning Jesus) as best he could. Christ called us to spread the Gospel, not simply repeat the words, “Jesus is Lord and Messiah.”

It is like that with other promises. For example, Our Lady promised that no one who wears her scapular will be lost to hell. But this does not mean I can put on my scapular and then forget prayer, acts of charity, and the sacraments. The scapular is a kind of outward sign of an inner commitment. Mary's promise means that if I try to live out my devotion to her, she will be with me at the moment of my death. The scapular is a

kind of outward sign of my inner consecration. It would be very strange if Jesus had offered his life in agony on the cross, only to specify that the key to salvation would be two pieces of flannel on a string! Jesus died for love of us, to bring us into a family relationship with God. We are God’s adopted sons and daughters. He wants our love.

While strolling around a particular town one Sunday, I saw a small boy and his parents out for a walk. The father was playing a little game with the boy—a rather mean game, it seemed to me. He would run on ahead and call for the boy to come. The boy ran to him, but at the last second his father would move farther away. No matter what the child did, he could not catch up with his father, who kept laughing as though this were great fun. Soon the child started crying. The poor kid could not figure out how to please his daddy—what he must do to get close to him.

This is the kind of image we project onto God when we follow religious recipes. We treat him like a mean tease of a father. This entraps us. Religious recipes change our relationship with God in a fundamental way. He wants us to approach him as trusting children. Instead we act like cynical adolescents, trying to put on the right show for the “old man”, or like fearful slaves, anxiously trying to appease a demanding master. In either case we are not free. Freedom is a gift for love. If all God wants for me is to follow the rules and say the right prayers, then the gift of freedom is just a dirty trick. God gave us freedom so that we can love him—even if we do make mistakes.

The Heart of the Matter

God created us to know him and to love him. If we consider how great God is, then it is clear that no recipe is adequate. God is transcendent. He is beyond the reach of any set of procedures. If I want to see the pope, there are definite steps I can take—get a passport, buy an airline ticket to Rome, go to the Vatican on a Wednesday morning, and

so on. Any good guidebook to Europe will spell out the exact steps to take. This is because the pope is a human being who lives in a certain place and follows a certain schedule. God is different. He transcends, or goes beyond, any earthly powers.

To reach God we need supernatural help. In fact, we need first to be changed inside. Because we cannot see him or touch him, we need faith. His promise of salvation is beyond anything we could imagine or wish for; we need the grace of hope. He asks for our perfect gift of self; we need charity. These are called “theological” virtues, because they come from God. On my own, I can practice saving money and so become thrifty. But I need the Holy Spirit to plant faith, hope, and love in my soul. By these graces, God himself makes us able to approach him. To reach God, we need God to reach us first.

God reveals himself fully only in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the way to God—the only way (Jn. 14:6). We have heard this often enough “I am the way and the truth and the life” but we can forget what it means. Philip asked Jesus, “Show us the Father.” Jesus answered, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (Jn. 14:9) Jesus really is God’s full self-disclosure. Any other way to God is incomplete. Only Jesus brings us all the way to God. If we believe that Jesus is truly God and truly man, then clearly there can never be another way than him.

This means that to come to God, we need to make contact with Jesus. God wants us to know him and love him fully. Therefore he wants us to meet the whole Christ. This is why he gave us the Church. And this is why the Church is necessary for our salvation, because only through the Church can we fully encounter Christ. In the Scriptures—especially when read in the Liturgy—we hear the Lord’s voice. When we go to Confession, Christ himself forgives our sins. In the Eucharist we join our small prayers and sacrifices with Christ’s perfect prayer and sacrifice of himself. At Mass we stand

mystically at the foot of the cross on Calvary. In Communion we meet Christ bodily and embrace him. In this way, the Church—with its Scriptures, liturgies, and sacraments—is necessary. This is why the Church has set down certain rules—the “bare minimum”, as it were—for weekly Mass, Confession and Communion once a year, and so on.*

Everything else in the Christian life—every form of spirituality, every kind of prayer and holy work—flows from Christ’s presence in his Body, the Church. Every private or family prayer gets its life from last Sunday’s encounter with Christ and anticipates next Sunday’s. The sinner’s prayer of remorse in his room prepares for his meeting with the forgiving Lord in Confession. Devotional reading of the Bible is like re-reading the love-letter Christ sends on Sundays.

Except for his Word and the sacraments God has given us in his Church—these things that Christ himself touches us in—no devotion, practice, or experience can reach all the way to God. For centuries the Church has warmly recommended the Rosary. Nevertheless, even this powerful devotion is inadequate to touch God. The Rosary is a help, not an infallible way to Christ. It is a way of opening ourselves to God’s touch. In fact, the old practice of praying the Rosary during Mass was actually absurd.† The point of the Rosary is to call on our Lady’s intercession while we meditate on the mysteries of Christ’s life. In the Mass, Christ is actually present in those self-same mysteries—his Incarnation,

* Of course, none of this means that only Catholics can be saved. The Second Vatican Council reaffirms what the Church has always taught: that God will not reject those who, through no fault of their own, do not belong to the Catholic Church. Furthermore, the Council teaches that many vital elements of the Church of Christ are genuinely present in non-Catholic churches and communities—elements like Scripture, some sacraments, lively faith, devotion to Mary, etc. So it is that many Christians outside the Catholic Church have attained real sanctity, many even to the point of shedding their blood for Christ.

† For a good explanation of this, read Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical *Marialis Cultus*.

death, and Resurrection. So praying the Rosary at Mass gets it all backwards—like sitting at a Chicago Bulls basketball game and reading Michael Jordan’s book.

Two other points are important here. First, even though there are no recipes for getting to God, certain acts do cut us off from him. Some acts—murder, adultery, procured abortion, lying under oath—are simply incompatible with the love of God. These are called mortal sins. “Thou shall not steal” is a law, not a recipe. Second, promises to God do create obligations to him. The promise may be informal; one woman promised that she would keep Mary’s image in every room of her house if a favor was granted. There is nothing especially sanctifying about placing pictures and statues all around the house. God never asked for this. However, since this woman promised it (and God answered her prayer), she created an obligation to keep that promise. A vow may also be formal, like the solemn vows to religious life. However, even private promises come under the authority of the Church. If the obligation is too burdensome or even harmful, the Christian can always bring the issue to his confessor or pastor.

“Love God and do what you will”

God made us for love, and love presupposes freedom. He wants us to give him our hearts. Saint Augustine once wrote, “Love God and do what you will.” This doesn’t mean, “Have warm feelings about God and forget your obligations.” It means that the right choice is the one done for the love of God, provided (of course) that it doesn’t violate his law.

This motto is an excellent help for the scruples that come from recipe-thinking. God wants me to read Scripture, so I’ll read a chapter a day. They say Mary insists on a daily Rosary and the seven Our Father’s, Hail Mary’s, and Glory Be’s. The prayer group is calling on everyone to pray the Padre Pio novena for the homeless clinic, and Grandma

had drilled into my head how much Jesus wants me to pray for the poor souls. And the Second Vatican Council wants lay people to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. Is it any wonder that I dread the drudgery of prayer time and feel guilty when I finish? What's worse, I no longer feel that I am in touch with the Lord. What St. Augustine's maxim tells me is that I should spend that time of prayer loving God as I think best. I am free to love God in my own way.

One Christmas my wife gave me a wool overcoat and a complementing scarf. It is a wonderful coat. It fits me and keeps me warm. It also conveys a sense of gentlemanly elegance that I would like to think fits my personality. My teenage son would never think of wearing such a coat. He wears a jacket of blue and gold with "Notre Dame" emblazoned on the back. His older brother wears a bright ski-jacket (his week on the Austrian slopes got into his blood), and my wife wears an overcoat that is both business-like and feminine. Who has the best coat? Which one of us wears the *right* coat? None of us—or rather, all of us. Each coat is warm and comfortable. And each one was chosen to fit the wearer's personality.

Spiritualities and devotions are like that. God has created each of us to be different, and we express our love for him differently. You are no more obliged to raise your hands and praise God in tongues than my son is to wear a middle-aged man's overcoat.

The Church is not an army, but a community, a people. She is the Body of the one Christ, but she calls each of us to approach him personally. The Catholic Church is big enough for Dorothy Day (who founded the Catholic Worker Movement) and William F. Buckley (a conservative commentator and advocate of free-market capitalism). St. Thomas Aquinas was so intelligent he could dictate three books at a time to his secretaries; St. Maria Goretti was barely literate when she died a martyr just after her twelfth birthday.

The Frenchman Louis de Montfort was effusive in his Marian devotion; John Henry Newman was an Englishman's Englishman, witty and restrained. St. Peter was impetuous; St. Paul was crafty (see Acts 16:36-39; 23:6-10). There is no recipe for sanctity, except this: to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

But love is something *you* do. The saints and spiritual writers give us ideas, patterns, and suggestions, but the love comes from within your own heart. Devotions and religious activities have to flow from love. If the Christian simply follows a recipe, then it's no longer love.

Chapter 5—Blind Lover’s Leap

“I could just feel the love in that room! It wasn’t like at church on Sundays. Everyone was smiling and friendly. As soon as I came in, this young man came to ask me if I was new. Then he introduced me to some people and helped me find a good seat.

“When we started praying, it was as though people really meant what they were saying. Their singing was full of joy, and they prayed as though God was right there. They trusted in God—simply and completely.

“The speaker was really powerful. He spoke right to my heart; he didn’t drone on. He read the Bible as though it was alive, as though it means something. It wasn’t at all a ‘head trip’. Afterwards I felt as though I was really fed! This group’s meetings are so much better than church.”

What is described here could be a charismatic prayer meeting or a Medjugorje conference. Or it could be a service in a fundamentalist, evangelical church. Or it could be a meeting of a cult, like the Moonies or The Way. In some ways, it is even like a Tupperware or Amway sales meeting. Instead of the coldness of a parish where people don’t speak to each other, members are warm and welcoming. Instead of dead ritual, the meeting is alive and spontaneous. Instead of boredom, the newcomer feels refreshed and renewed—’fed’. Here, it seems, is a Christian group built on love, love so real you can feel it. All you need to do is jump into it.

This could lead to the Blind Lover’s Leap (B.L.L.). The sad fact is that many Catholics do leave the Church because they have found a false promise in a church or cult or community that offers a new and welcome experience of love. What newcomers don’t see is the rough underside of these groups and churches. This doesn’t mean that every

happy, warm, and welcoming group is dangerous. Most are not, and we badly need warmth and friendship in church groups. But the “love so thick you can feel it” can be false. This chapter will point out how to recognize this false love.

In his book, *Churches that Abuse*, Protestant sociologist Ronald Enroth shows how even with lively, faith-filled worship, powerful biblical preaching, and love so thick you can feel it, a church can crush the hope and dry up the faith of its members. The ‘only’ requirement that members love and trust each other, can actually be used to create a new form of legalism. The reason is that this love is loaded with hidden conditions and loyalty tests.

The worst examples of the B.L.L. trap are in cults and mind-manipulating religious groups. Young people voluntarily leave home and family, the Church, college, their friends, and their future plans to join groups promising a new experience of God and a chance to change the world in love. When we look at the beliefs of these groups, we often find it hard to believe that anyone would fall for them. (For instance, Rev. Sun Myung Moon claims to be the Messiah, back to finish the job that Jesus was unable to finish.) But people don’t fall for the beliefs; they are won by love—by the abundant, apparently unconditional acceptance and friendship that the group offers. Here is a love so real and so powerful—they come to think—it must be from God.

The other side of the B.L.L. is the invitation to and pressure for total commitment. The human heart is made for love. In their natural generosity, young people are eager to love and often hungry for heroism. If invited, they will often give everything for God. And so when they ask, “What do I have to do?”, the answer is often very simple: “Just join us and give it all to God.”

These facts present a lesson and a challenge. The Catholic Church enjoys a rich heritage of symbolism in music, art, and liturgy. It is ironic and disturbing that members of this Church leave it to find life and nourishment in simple, “Bible” churches or home-based communities. In the Catholic Church above all, young people should be able to experience the mystery, the beauty, the holiness, and the reality of God. For more than three-hundred years the Catholic Church has stood firm against rationalism; Catholics know that God can work miracles. Yet many Catholics today leave the Church, looking for God’s miraculous power. From its earliest days, the Church has offered young people the challenge to “be perfect” by abandoning everything for God and vowing poverty, chastity, and obedience for Christ’s sake. What youthful hearts are yearning for is there. But they cannot see it. Except for the likes of Mother Teresa, few are showing them where to find it.

Setting the Trap: Love-Bombs

Jeanette had never met anyone like Rob. He was tall and nice-looking, but that was not important. Rob was special, because he made Jeanette feel special. Unlike her last boyfriend, who took her for granted, Rob constantly surprised her with his attention and generosity. Tuesday a rose in her mailbox ... Friday a poem on her answering machine ... a balloon bouquet on the 2½-week “anniversary” of their first date. She began to think he might be “the one”.

However, just as she considered a life with him, some things about Rob started to bother her. They had not yet talked about marriage, but he was getting possessive. A couple of times when she could not go out, Rob acted hurt and made Jeanette feel guilty. More and more, he seemed to count on her wholehearted devotion. He acted irritated that she spent an hour a day on the viola: “You can’t make that thing your whole life!”

He talked about how devastated he would be ever to lose her. She was flattered at this, but also disturbed. On the other hand, he really was totally devoted to her, calling and sending little gifts, making her special. More and more Jeanette felt herself indebted to Rob.

Eventually Jeanette had a long talk with herself. She did not want to marry Rob. So, regardless of how he might feel or react, she had to break off their special relationship. Rob reaction astonished her. After a display of hurt (which she had expected), he grew suddenly cold—almost cruel. She could sense him seething beneath the surface as he told her how ungrateful she was, how he had thought she was “different than other girls”, how he had thought he meant something to her, “but obviously you were stringing me on”. Although she was knotted up inside and ready to cry, Jeanette held firm.

Jeanette was smart. Those who work with battered women would recognize in Rob the classic warning signs of a controller and abuser. He is charming and deft at “love-bombing”, pouring on attention and gifts and asking for nothing but gratitude in return. On the other hand, his need for affirmation becomes a controlling demand for loyalty and exclusivity. He would allow nothing to rival his place in her life—not another man, not her family, not her studies, not even her viola. In fact, many women experience abusive relationships as a series of loyalty tests—and they never score higher than a C-minus!

Exactly the same pattern is repeated in cults and abusive religious groups. *The new recruit attends a meeting out of curiosity and there he is showered with attention and warmth. The newcomer finds the group’s love-bombing as gratifying as Jeanette found the candy and flowers. “Here are people who are happy to see me,” he thinks. But gradually that same possessiveness creeps in. He can’t come to the Sunday night meet-*

ing, because it's bridge night in the dorm. A friend in the group gives a half-jesting pout and—with a touch of a whine—asks, "Don't you like us any more?" A more senior member may also remind him that God is more important than a card game. Very quickly the unconditional love brings in the loyalty tests: "We have been so open with you. Can't you give us something, just this once?"

Manipulative religious groups commonly and deliberately practice “love bombing” to attract new members. This is not unconditional love. Even emotional lunches are not free. Sooner or later the group will call in the debt of gratitude they created with all that love and attention. Most of us are naive about the wiles of people in religion. If the man wants to sell aluminum siding or a used car, we take his charm and friendliness with a grain of salt. We know he's selling something. In the same way we need a healthy distrust of religious sales people. The fact is, groups do practice “love bombing”, and they look very sincere when they do. Many will even use the natural attraction between the sexes to attract new members. It is no accident that the pretty blond greets you, cocks her head to one side, and lays her hand softly on your arm for a moment. Some groups have even discovered the technique of “flirty fishing”, winning male souls for Christ by a wriggle of the hips and the promise of more. “Love bombing” is real.

Setting the Trap: Tribes

The B.L.L. trap also relies on the tribal sentiment buried within our psyches. The need to belong is real, and each of us has it. To be really lonely—without friends, family, a place to fit in—is a crushing burden. For example, this is the hardest part of a widow's life alone. Not only has she lost her husband, but with his death many of her social connections are ended too. She may eventually become almost completely isolated in a

life of bitter loneliness. Each of us needs to belong. It is not normal to live disconnected from others.

In tribal cultures the life of the tribe or village is tightly knit. Every person has a place. The village has its leaders, heroes, art, and celebrations. The individual relies on the village and the village relies on individuals. Tribal life is truly a matter of “all for one and one for all”. We Americans don’t live like this. Very few of us live in the same place our whole lives. The typical American lives much more autonomously and independently than any tribal villager ever could imagine.

In a very real way, however, we are still made for tribal life. We no longer have tribes—but we create tribal ways. Why is it so important that South Side beat Central High in basketball? Students dress up; some paint their faces. They chant ritual cheers and sing ritual songs. They deliberately work themselves up to build enthusiasm. It is tribal. Why do so many people care so deeply about Notre Dame football or Chicago Bulls basketball? Why do short, middle-aged men identify with an athletic team whose fortunes they can’t possibly affect? Each of us has an inner impulse or tendency to belong to some “us”. And if I am one of “us”, then I am also against “them”.

These same tribal sentiments are at work in religion. Shared religious experience—songs, ceremonies, group projects—create a sense of belonging and solidarity. Music, whether solemn Gregorian chant in the monastery or the frenetic dancing in the Spirit of an old-time Pentecostal church, binds people together. How we sing is how we worship God. By strengthening these tribal experiences a group can strengthen its hold on its members.

In her book *Ungodly Rage*^{*}, Donna Steichen tells how hundreds of Catholic nuns have been won away from their fundamental Christian beliefs by means of tribal chants, dances, and ceremonies. They attend a retreat or conference on women's concerns in the Church, and the speakers begin to speak about re-imagining God and the Church to reflect women's perspectives. An undercurrent of distrust for the Church's structures and hierarchy is created by the speakers' criticism of the Church's 'patriarchalism' and insensitivity toward women. Fundamental Christian beliefs, including the Fatherhood of God, the uniqueness and divinity of Christ, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and of course the male character of the priesthood, are all rejected. By the end of the meeting, most of the nuns are converted to a new pagan kind of faith. Why?

The secret is the use of tribal ceremonies. Were the retreat talks the only factor, perhaps many of these nuns would question and reject the ideas they hear. However, those who give these retreats espouse a distinctively "feminine" religion—the religion of Wicca, the goddess within. In other words, they preach a form of pagan religion and witchcraft. And to lead these nuns into this religion, they use Wiccan ceremonies—spiral dancing, chants, trance-inducing movements, and expressions of rage. These ceremonies foster a new oneness among the retreatants with the Wiccan leaders. They may be the most powerful religious experiences many of these nuns have had in a long time. As a result, nuns who would never have considered denying their relationship with God in Christ leave the retreat as believers in the earth goddess in every woman. They belong to a new tribe.

^{*} *Ungodly Rage: The Hidden Face of Catholic Feminism*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1991

One of the most destructive ways a group can foster tribal ties (and this is one of the tell-tale signs a group is manipulative) is to foster an “us vs. them” mentality. Because religion is deeply concerned with absolute—good vs. evil, light vs. darkness, Christ vs. Satan, the Kingdom of God vs. the world—religious manipulators can easily promote this mentality. Even though Christ himself compared the Church with a dragnet that catches all fish, both good and bad (Mt. 13:47-50), many Christian groups see themselves as the righteous few, the holy remnant surrounded by the children of darkness—the holy “us” in the midst of the wicked “them”. This can take different forms:

- the apostolic, Bible-based church living out authentic New Testament Christianity, surrounded by worldly institutional churches whose apostasy traces back to 330 AD;
- the Spirit-filled renewal community whose role is to save a Christian church that no longer praises God or trusts his power;
- the children of Mary, who pray the Rosary and love the Pope, whose authority in the Church is undermined daily by Masonic traitors.

The Trap: Love without Truth

The trap in the B.L.L. is a love that is separated from truth. The love-bombing and tribal sentiments create strong personal loyalties—loyalties that are the touchstone of unity for the group. And just here is the rub: *Personal loyalties take the place of truth.* The cult or manipulative group discourages thinking about the faith and how it is lived out. Raising questions about the truth—especially concerning teachings by the leaders and group policies—is “divisive” and “mistrustful”. “The Lord wants your commitment,” they will say. “You need to stop straddling the fence and jump in with both feet.” Precisely

here is the Blind Lover’s Leap. Having experienced such great love, the new member has almost a duty not to think and debate within his heart. He is expected simply to “give it all” and trust his brothers and sisters to care for him. One leader in a renewal community put this especially well. Speaking to a retreat for the women in her group, she said, “I don’t need to worry about following Jesus. All I have to do is keep my eyes on my pastoral leader and do what he says. I *know* that he is following Jesus. If I do what he says, then I am in the right place.”

Manipulative leaders often treat questions as a kind of smoke-screen. *Nastasha was meeting regularly with a “handmaid” in her covenant community to resolve some difficulties she had. She had serious questions about fitting in and living the community’s life fully. At one point the handmaid gave her this advice: Whenever anyone—especially her husband—would accuse her of doing something wrong, Nastasha should humbly take the blame, even if she was innocent. Nastasha couldn’t accept this and talked with her husband about it. Believing that such advice was very unsound, he took the issue to a leader of the group. Clearly such teaching was false and unwise. The leader’s advise startled him. “You need pastoral wisdom,” he told the husband. “Nastasha is resisting God’s will for her life, and that is why she keeps asking these theoretical questions. She doesn’t want to face the fact that she must change and submit to the community order. You need to see through her smoke-screen to the real issue. That’s the only way you can help her do what God wants.”* This leader believed that instead of saying what was really on her mind, Nastasha was raising irrelevant questions. The leaders had enough truth for her and everyone else. The only possible reason someone could have for thinking is to get out of obeying God’s will.

Truth in the Christian Life

It is not popular any more to talk about *dogma*. For many of us, the word ‘dogma’ suggests rigidity and intolerance. Aren’t dogmas what divide Christians into different denominations? If we really love Christ, won’t we worry less about dogma and more about love? The truth is that there is no conflict between dogma and love. In fact, *dogma* is simply the Greek word for “belief”. What we call dogmas are simply truths that the Church believes. They are truths God has revealed. The reason we have dogmas is that the Church insists that some things are true about God and others are false. God wants us to know the truth about him, so that we can know and love him better.

(Of course, there are—and probably always will be—‘dogma police’, ready to pounce on every apparent doctrinal deviation. The Marian Medjugorje movement has seen a remarkable amount of this activity in recent years. Certain writers and leaders of apostolates feel obliged to scour the writings and teachings of others to find “demonic” teachings, rebellions against the hierarchy, and New Age influences. It quickly becomes clear that the real purpose is not to uncover the truth, but to find something to condemn.)

The question of truth cuts directly to our dignity as human beings. Being created in God’s image means that we have the power to know the truth and love what is good. Because of these powers we can freely choose what is truly good. These powers are the basis of our freedom.

Imagine a cattle drive crossing the west Texas desert. Plodding across the dusty terrain in the merciless, blazing sun, men and animals feel themselves drying out from the inside. The sun burns their skin, and their thirst screams for relief. Water becomes the world’s greatest gift. Cresting the hill, the cowboys see a pond ahead. The cows pick up the smell and begin to trot. Water! The cowboys spur their horses on—but not to get the

first drink. Instead, they force themselves into frenetic activity to turn the herd aside. Why? Because the cowboys have knowledge. They know what the animals cannot see or smell—that the water is alkaline and will kill any animal that drinks it. This knowledge sets the cowboys free to ignore their thirst and turn away from the water. The cattle don't have this freedom.

Because we can know, we are not slaves to our passions and the other things that influence us. I might need a car. The sporty yellow one might be beautiful and the salesman convincing. Still, I can ask, “Is it good for me?” Jesus himself connected truth and freedom: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (Jn. 8:32) If we know Jesus, then we know God. The prophet Jeremiah promised a new covenant:

I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the LORD. All, from the least to the greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31: 33-34)

We are free because each of us baptized into Christ knows the Lord himself. By giving us the gift of himself through the power of the Holy Spirit, God has written his law upon our hearts, just as Jeremiah promised. Because each of us knows Jesus, each of us has the truth. Of course, we still need to know truths about Christ and his Church; this is why we have catechesis, religious education, and theology. Nevertheless, God has given each us direct access to him in Jesus. He wants each of us to know him and has revealed the truth publicly so that we can know him. As a Christian, you know the truth.

In practical terms, this means that we can safely apply St. Augustine's maxim, “Love God and do what you will.” There is no need to be afraid that my gift to him will be wrong. I am not approaching an intimidating boss, whose quirks I need someone to tell me about. When I decide to do some particular thing for the love of Christ, I am not just

guessing. I know him personally. My judgment is the best there is concerning what I should do. Mother Teresa did “something beautiful for God” by serving the poorest of the poor in the Calcutta slums. I can do something just as beautiful for God by caring for my family and bringing Christ’s love to my own neighborhood. The point is: Our knowledge of Christ sets each of us free.

It is not only the great eternal truths of Revelation that set us free. All truths are important—even unimportant truths. One of the clearest “give-aways” of a religious manipulator is that he cuts his followers off from the truth—any truth. *On his day off, Jon—a Catholic cult member—attended a baseball game in Cleveland. The next day, at the community’s “Lord’s Day” dinner, one of the “elders” commented “what a shame it is that the Indians lost such a close one yesterday, by only 4-2.” Jon joined in: “Yeah, I was there—a real heartbreaker. In fact, it was actually closer—3-2 at the end.” Immediately silence fell over the table as the elder put down his fork and glared at Jon. By showing off his knowledge, Jon had ‘dishonored’ the head whom the Lord had established. The elder corrected and humbled him in front of everyone.* Now in themselves, baseball scores are not that important. But Jon’s dignity is important. And where does that dignity come from? The elder would say that Jon has dignity only as a member of the group. By violating the group’s order, he had forfeited that dignity. But Jon was a witness to the truth—about a ball game, to be sure, but it was the truth. The elder was saying, in effect, that Jon had no right to that truth, that his status as a witness to any truth—even the smallest—is worthless. If this is the case with a ball game, then what right did Jon have to claim to know Jesus?

The Church insists that we know the truth. This is why she encourages us to read the Bible. This is why for almost 1,000 years she has supported education. This is

why the documents of the Second Vatican Council and recent papal encyclicals are addressed to everyone in the Church.

The B.L.L. is a trap, because personal loyalties and group loyalty are used to cut off truth. We see a consistent pattern in manipulative groups. *Bob, the newcomer, asks a question about some belief or practice. The speaker promises that a leader will cover that in his talk next weekend “Just be patient”. Comes the next weekend and Bob’s question wasn’t really answered. The leader did say something about a similar subject, but it wasn’t Bob’s question. So Bob takes the question back to his small group leader. Then he learns that he is in the wrong: “I’m surprised you’re asking this again. Didn’t you listen during Brother Paul’s teaching? He seemed to deal with it pretty directly, in my view.” “Well, not exactly,” Bob responds. “What I wanted to know was ...” “Look, Bob, we’re really impressed that you want to know our teachings and how we live—really we are. But we’re not going to get anywhere if you get into this nit-picking whenever you don’t understand something. It seemed pretty clear to everyone else there. I almost think you don’t trust me—or is it maybe Paul you don’t like? You have to trust us more. Or maybe our life isn’t right for you.”*

Bob has learned three things here. 1) No one else has these questions; the problem must be with him. 2) He is hurting the people who have been so open with him; he is not being very nice. And 3) he is closing himself off to something really good; he just might not be ready for this warm and wonderful group. Bob is intimidated. The leader’s pressure forces him to abandon his concern for truth. Otherwise he loses his friends.

Finally, a contempt for thinking—and this means contempt for theology, philosophy, psychology, and the other human sciences—puts the system of love beyond criticism. As a result, what had started off as warmth and love ends up as a trap of stifling confusion

and paralyzing guilt. If critical thinking is something “negative”, then the enemy of all your loyalties and friendships is in your own mind. The loyal member must distrust his own thoughts. And so it is that he is cut off from truth. Eventually finding himself made confused and suspicious by things he sees and suspects, the member has no way to set himself free. The instant love “so real you can feel it” has turned out to be a trap.

Chapter 6—Personal Prophecy

At the beginning of this book we told the story of Linda, who was married to a man she did not love. Marrying Steve was not her idea in the first place. While in college she had joined a vigorously evangelistic covenant community. The group promised not only a vibrant, intense experience of “New Testament Christianity”, but also help to “find God’s will for your life”. A devout person, Linda saw the community as an answer to prayer. As she grew in the Christian life and finished her studies, the community and its leaders were always there to counsel and advise. Shortly after graduation, one of the handmaids came to Linda and told her that it was time now to “pray through her state in life”. For a year Linda was not to date, but instead to pray and meet frequently with the handmaid to discern God’s plan for her life. In the meanwhile the community was growing rapidly on campus. But the leaders wanted to build up its presence in town, too. For their community to endure, they needed a large, stable core of young families with homes off campus. Together with her handmaid, Linda discovered that God was calling her to be married. Linda was pleased by this. In her heart of hearts she knew all along that she wanted to be a wife and mother. With the handmaid’s guidance, Linda began the process of “casual dating”.

Steve was one of the young men who started dating her. Unlike Linda, Steve had often thought of not marrying. From his childhood he had imagined himself a priest. Indeed, he had even sent off for information from the Jesuits up near Detroit. However, Steve’s pastoral leader (or “head”) showed him how certain events in his life, prophecies, and the mission of the community as a whole all pointed to marriage as God’s will for his life. “We are all called to die to ourselves,” his head told him. “God seems to be calling you to give up your personal dream of being a priest to serve what he is doing

now.” Steve wanted nothing more than to please God by obeying him. Under his head’s direction he started dating eligible women in the community. His head was very pleased when he asked Linda out.

Everybody said Steve and Linda made a good couple. Both were young, but serious, devout, and committed to Christian life in the community. They enjoyed their times together and seemed compatible. But the relationship was not exclusive, and Linda also accepted a couple of dates with Roger, a natural comedian and former third-string football player in the Big Ten. Roger had hung around the community for a while but then drifted away. After graduation, though, he had stayed on as an assistant coach for the freshman team while he studied in the M.B.A. program. Linda was not sure how much she was attracted romantically to Roger; she did know however that they were friends, and she liked his company.

The handmaid soon learned about Linda’s relationship with Roger. (Actually it was no secret.) It was time for a talk. God was leading Linda to marriage. This meant that Linda had to take this dating process seriously. More important, the handmaid discerned that Linda’s growing desire for Roger’s company came from a spirit of lust. It was a plain fact that Linda had to cut this relationship off. “Steve,” said the handmaid, “is the better candidate.”

For his part, Steve confided to his head that he had a strong respect for Linda. The head brightened up. “In a world so dominated by lust, you have God’s wisdom!” he said. “This may be the best sign that Linda is the one God has chosen for you.” At his head’s urging, Steve suggested to Linda that they pray about the future of their relationship. Urged by the handmaid, Linda agreed. As they prayed they found they shared

similar views of family life. Their values were much the same. Still neither was convinced that they were meant for each other. Their relationship stalled.

It was at this point Steve's head received a message in prayer. The Holy Spirit seemed to say, "I have chosen Linda to complete Steve's heart." That same day, the handmaid opened up her Bible at random, and her eyes lit upon the passage, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall become as one." (Mt. 19:5) In the meantime, Linda ran unexpectedly into Roger. For an hour they chatted and joked. Linda laughed so hard, her sides hurt. The rest of the afternoon her heart was light, and she thought, "I hope the man I marry can make me laugh." That evening she, Steve, the head, and the handmaid met to pray. It was discerned that God was calling Steve and Linda to become "one flesh" for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Steve and Linda obeyed God's word for their lives. They announced their engagement the following Sunday at the community gathering.

Linda and Steve got married because others convinced them that this was what God wanted. They had fallen into the Personal Prophecy (P.P.) trap. Like any mechanical trap, this one has two jaws. The lower jaw is the belief that God has *some one thing* he wants a person to do. The upper jaw is the word of the prophet who claims to know what that thing is.

Of course, the Bible is full of stories of God's call to different people. Both the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul were called from their mothers' wombs to serve God's word (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15). Zechariah prophesied of his son, John the Baptist, "And you, my child, shall be called the Prophet of the Most High; you shall go before the Lord to prepare his way." (Lk. 1:76) God called the prophet Jonah and commanded him to preach repentance to Nineveh. When Jonah took a ship to run away, God raised such a

terrible storm that the prophet’s shipmates had to throw him overboard to save their lives. Then God sent the fish to catch Jonah and vomit him up on the shore near Nineveh. God wanted him to do something and pursued him until he did it. And in the Gospels we see Jesus repeatedly inviting people to believe in him and follow him. He chose twelve of these people to serve as his Apostles. God does call on people to do things for him.

There is a deep truth in this idea of a personal calling or vocation from God. In the Lord’s eyes we are not so many interchangeable human pieces. The military commander wants a certain number of healthy, trained young men to fill his ranks. If Private Jones is wounded, then Private Smith can take his place. As long as both can handle a rifle and a grenade, it doesn’t matter which one fills that slot. In God’s Kingdom, however, each of us is personally willed, chosen, and loved by the Creator himself. We are not a mass of nameless faces but his sons and daughters. He knows each of us by name—you and me. What we do is important to God. And he really does have a plan for each of us.

The Trap in Personal Prophecy

The P.P. trap begins with the belief that God wants *some one thing* from each one of us—that God has a very particular job for me to do and I have to find out what it is. One covenant community leader put it this way, “God wants you to do some one thing. Satan wants you to do anything else.” The individual Christian’s job is to find out what the “one thing” is. Obviously, if there is some one thing God wants a Christian to do, he will have to let him or her know what it is. For his part Satan will try to distract or confuse the Christian, so that he does not know what God really wants. So one of the Christian’s chief tasks is to listen carefully to find out what God has in mind.

This “one thing” could be anything. For Linda, it was to marry Steve. Some Catholics believe that they must travel to Garabandal, Spain, when Mary gives a certain

signal. In the early days of charismatic renewal, some charismatics believed that every morning the Holy Spirit would direct all their activities for the day, if they would but pay close attention to him. Leaders of one international Marian group make no plans of their own, but pray every morning, fully expecting Mary to give them their orders for that day. *Pastoral Renewal* magazine presented the example of a young man's turning his back on the medical career he had always wanted, because prophetic leaders told him God wanted him to be a renewal community elder. The "one thing", then, could be an activity for the day or a life choice.

To know God's specific will, the Christian needs a specific revelation. Some popular teachers and theologians have explained this in terms of two Greek words, *logos* and *rhema*. The *logos* is God's eternal word (so the theory goes), always and everywhere true for all Christians. The *logos* says, "love your neighbor", "feed the hungry", "go the extra mile", "show hospitality to the saints", and so on. The *rhema*, on the other hand, is God's *now* word—what he wants of this person (or these people) *now*. This "now word" might say, "move together with this other family", "move from the big city to a Midwestern town", "fly to Medjugorje and pray on the mountain", "warn the Church against Freemasonry", and so on. To know this "now word", it is not enough to read Scripture. A special revelation is needed, a word for now—in short, a prophecy.

Of course, this "now word" cannot conflict with the eternal *logos*, nor can it add anything to Revelation. But it does have a certain priority over God's eternal word, because the *rhema* tells us what God actually wants us to step out and do now. For example, on the basis of prophetic revelation one group discerned that Marxism, Islamic fundamentalism and militant feminism were Satan's principal tools to destroy Christianity in our age. Their leaders taught special courses and mobilized their people to meet these threats. At one of their meetings, one woman asked if the group could also do something

about the number of abortions in the town. The leader’s response went straight to the “now word”: “*God wants us to battle the enemies of Christianity. We don’t have the time or resources to worry about ordinary murder.*”

Believers in the *rhema* use slogans like, “The good is the enemy of the best,” and “We don’t want to get so caught up in doing good things that we neglect God’s thing”. Often a belief that the times are in crisis underlies this “now word” theology. We are special people called to service in a critical time. Normally it is a good thing to plant crops or assemble clocks. But when hurricane and flood strike or the enemy hordes ride over the hill, these good things become irrelevant. Everyone must mobilize to meet the present emergency. Likewise, the *rhema* theology suggests that normal good things—like studying, visiting the nursing home, balancing the books for the Christ Child Society, serving coffee after the 10:30 Mass—are distractions from the work of combating feminism, preparing for the Three Days of Darkness, or building up the Spirit-filled bulwark against evil.

God’s “now word” must be a *prophecy*, spoken by God to someone at a particular time. It is generally assumed that it has to run contrary to natural inclinations: why would God ask me to do what I would want to do anyway? (Remember how Linda and Steve’s own desires and yearnings had little to do with finding God’s will for them.) A peculiar kind of theology of suffering is at work here. Whatever God *really* wants must involve a sacrifice. The harder it is to accept something, the more likely it is that it is God’s will. I know a man who went through real pangs of conscience, because he was not willing to obey a momentary impulse to throw away his Swiss Army knife to show he loved God. Indeed, a surprising number of Christians are ready to believe that what they want in their own hearts is “merely human” or “carnal” and therefore not God’s will.

A second quality of the *rhema* is that it is better than any reasoning or planning. One of the most popular tests of prophetic words in the charismatic renewal was: “It must have been the Spirit. I never would have thought of that myself.” The advice of Church leaders and the reflections of theologians count only as “worldly wisdom”, which falls short of God’s “now word”. (Here is a danger signal: When a group rejects all criticism or advice because no outsider can really understand what God is doing with them, the group is probably a trap.) We see this especially when priests or bishops warn about the dangers of enthusiasm or when new groups are encouraged to adopt certain safeguards. Reason is only human; prophecy is divine.

The *rhema* theology says I need to know God’s “now word” now, so that I can get on with serving him. How do I get this word? What techniques do I use? Certainly, I can pray and see if God says anything. The thoughts that come into my head might be from God. But they might also be my own imaginings. How can I know for sure? I could “pray for a passage”, that is, invoke the Holy Spirit and then open the Bible at random to see what it says. Whatever it says is God’s word for me. God can actually use something like this. St. Augustine wanted to be a Christian but could not accept chastity. As he was sitting in a garden, he heard a child’s voice saying “*tolle, lege tolle, lege*” (“Take and read”). He picked up the Bible, and it fell open to Romans 13: 13-14: “not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.”* Immediately his heart softened and he decided to accept Baptism.

Some Christians “lay fleeces before the Lord”, following Gideon’s example in the Old Testament. The Lord had called on Gideon to save Israel from the Midianites. Since

* See St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Bk VIII, ch. 21.

Gideon could not believe that God would choose someone so unimportant as himself, he set up a test. “If indeed you are going to save Israel through me, as you promised, I am putting this woolen fleece on the threshing floor. If dew comes on the fleece alone, while all the ground is dry, I shall know that you will save Israel through me, as you promised.” (Judges 6:37) The next morning the fleece was so wet with dew that Gideon could wring a large bowl full of water from it. In other words, he asked God for a miraculous sign to show that it was really God speaking. Today, many Christians will present “fleeces” to the Lord. “Jesus, if you want me to tell this man about the Gospel, have that red car turn left,” or “Mary, if you want me to go to Medjugorje, have someone send me \$10 unexpectedly.”

Inspirations in prayer, Scripture passages, fleeces, and coincidences can all point to God’s will—sometimes. If God wants to say something, he has plenty of options. But he also has the right to remain silent. Very few Christians really experience God speaking clearly to them every day or in every important choice.

If this is so, how can I know God’s word for me today? How can I get it right? One answer, which arose in the covenant community movement and which is now appearing in some parts of the Marian movement, is that God will speak through wiser, more mature, spiritually gifted persons. That is, God has sent his prophets and they will guide me. (This is how Steve and Linda “knew” God’s will for their marriage.) Through the other methods—prayer, passages, “fleeces”, and so on—God does not seem to speak all that clearly. This is particularly true with major decisions, such as marriage or entry into religious life. *How can I know what to do? If God has raised up a prophet, then the prophet can tell me. If he has given special gifts to the leaders of our movement or group, they can tell me. After all, I can see only a small piece of God’s overall plan.*

The leaders see the whole as God wants it. They can tell me what to do. And besides if I want to obey God, I must obey those he has raised up.

We need to note this well. A fundamental change has occurred. No longer do such Christians expect God to speak to their hearts. They believe that God must speak from *outside* them. What has happened is a shift away from personal trust in God. The Christian who reaches this point in the *rhema* theology no longer trusts God to move powerfully in the depths of his own heart. He will only listen to the god who issues direct, specific commands through some third party. Here is where faulty theology becomes a serious trap. Here is where the unordained—and usually theologically unqualified—leader gains control over lives and consciences.

In fact, the *rhema* theology is a trap. If God is so specific—so picky—then you’ve got to get it just right. The P.P. trap says: “Love is not enough; you have to obey God exactly, to get it right. It’s your job to pick up his signs and clues, to understand them properly, to find the right prophets to guide you, and to do exactly as God tells you. Otherwise, God will have to write you off as a useless servant.” The P.P. trap leads to scruples—to pharisaic nit-picking, straining out gnats while swallowing camels. Essentially, this is what Jesus criticized about the Pharisees. The problem with them was not that they were always showing off their holiness or that they claimed to be holy when they really were not. The Pharisees’ problem was that they needed rules for serving God. For them, it was a matter of figuring out how to apply the Law of Moses to the tiniest matters of daily life, so that in everything they were sure of obeying God. So Jesus rebuked them: “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you frauds! You pay tithes on mint and herbs and seeds while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and good faith.” (Mt. 24:23) The Christian in the P.P. trap will fall into the same kinds of pattern needing

a revelation, a prophecy, or some divinely authorized instruction for every aspect of his life.

The P.P. trap leads ultimately to an unhealthy dependence on others. “I know what I want to do, but how do I know what God wants me to do.” I remember speaking with a young man who was terribly concerned to find God’s will. He wanted to be married and was very attracted to one especially pretty young woman. Both were mature, good people. Neither was promiscuous. Yet my acquaintance was troubled that his attraction was motivated by lust. He believed that God wanted him to marry someone without his desire for her physical beauty to enter into it. As a result, he submitted his decision to the leaders of his community, who did—in fact—steer him towards someone of their own choosing. The effect of the P.P. trap on this young man was that he turned control of his own life to someone else.

Finding God’s Plan for Your Life

The P.P. trap is not the idea that God has a plan for your life. It is that God has specific instructions for you to obey. Why this is and how it works are clear when we look at what Jesus himself taught.

Our Lord began his public ministry with the call to repentance. He made it clear that he wanted to forgive sins. When the Rich Young Man asked what he must do to be saved, Jesus told him first to obey the commandments. (Mk. 10:17-25) In other words, Christ wants me to turn away from sin—especially mortal sin—and towards his mercy. Am I stealing from my employer or defrauding the insurance company? Am I sleeping with someone I’m not married to? Do I treat my aged parents shamefully? Do I curse others or revile them behind their back? Then Jesus wants me to stop, repent, and ask his

mercy. Standing up boldly against Islamic fundamentalism or invoking Mary under the title Queen of Peace means nothing if I continue to live in mortal sin.

In turning away from sin I must turn toward God in love. When the Pharisees (who were very keen on the fine points of the Law) wanted to know what was most important, Jesus told them all the Law and the Prophets—EVERYTHING God has in mind—boils down to this: Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. (See Mt. 22:34-40) Anyone who repents from sin and strives to avoid it, who loves God wholeheartedly and his neighbor as himself—such a one does not need to worry about obeying God’s “now word”.

There still remains the question of vocation. After all, God does call Christians to different works. Christ did have an answer for the Rich Young Man, when he asked “what more” could he do to be perfect. And the Church encourages young people to pray about their vocations—whether to the priesthood, religious life, or marriage and family. God’s call is real, and he does have plans for us.

God does speak to us, but this “speaking” very seldom comes in the form of an audible voice. Most often it is a thought or a kind of mental vision that comes with an inner conviction. *Sister Teresa, an Ursuline nun teaching in a Catholic school in India, was praying as she rode the train to her summer retreat. Suddenly she had a deep awareness of God’s wanting her to serve him in the poorest of the poor. She took this idea to her superiors and eventually to the authorities in Rome. With their approval she left her order and founded the new Missionaries of Charity. Today we know her as Mother Teresa of Calcutta.* And when did the Lord speak to her? Certainly on the train his call came into focus. Subsequent events, such as Sr. Teresa’s idea to found a new order and to collect the dying from the gutters, as well as the guidance and permission of

Ursuline and Vatican authorities, also gave shape to what God was saying. Most likely, the plight of the poor had been on her heart for a long time. In other words, God was at work in her heart and her life situation. He did not just speak ‘out of the blue’ on the train. Similarly, Francis Bernardone was praying at a ruined chapel when he hear Christ speak from the cross: “You see my church, how it is in ruins. Rebuild my church.” Immediately, Francis set to work restoring the chapel. The young men who gathered around him made up the core of a movement and religious order that would eventually renewed the Church universal. Neither Mother Teresa nor St. Francis was expecting God to speak. And certainly Francis did not grasp the full implications of Christ’s command, “Rebuild my Church.” But Christ, who is always in control, could use his wholehearted love.

To discern God’s call (or vocation) is not a complicated matter. It is largely a matter of common sense and clear Scriptural principles.

1. God doesn’t play guessing games, and he’s not trying to trick us. Losing your passport so you can’t go to Medjugorje does not mean missing out on God’s plan for your life. Nor does God drop subtle hints and expect you to pick up on them. He does not mention his eternal plan once and then drop it if you don’t jump to it.

When I was between the ages of about nine and thirteen, I thought often about entering the priesthood. This idea faded in high school, especially after I discovered how much I liked mathematics. I decided then that maybe I would like to be a scientist instead of a priest. Maybe. Eventually I applied to the University of Notre Dame and was accepted. During the summer after graduation, I attended a special mathematics program there. Living in the dorm on campus, I suddenly became convinced—with absolute certitude, it seemed—that God wanted me to enter a seminary. By going to

*college to study math that fall, I would be turning my back on God and his will for me. Surely, I thought, God must be angry and disappointed in me. Fortunately, the floor prefect, Fr. Tom McNally, C.S.C. *, was a wise man. “God is not like that,” he said. “He’s not sitting up there waiting for you to make a mistake, so that he can punish you for the rest of your life. Go ahead and enroll here in the fall. If God really wants you to be a priest, he’ll keep calling you.” This was some of the best spiritual advice I ever had. Fr. McNally not only set me at peace, but he also taught me something important about God. (Four years later I did enter a seminary. There I quickly learned for certain that God was not calling me to the priesthood.)*

Reflecting on the 50th anniversary of his own ordination, Pope John Paul II puts this very clearly:

When Christ called His apostles, He said to each one of them: “Follow me!” (Mt. 4:19; 9:9; Mk. 1:17; 2:14; Lk. 5:27; Jn. 1:43; 21:19). For 2,000 years he has continued to address the same invitation to many men, especially young men. Sometimes he calls them in a surprising way, even though his call is never completely unexpected. Christ’s call to follow him usually comes after long preparation. Already present in the mind of the young person, even if later overshadowed by indecision or by the attraction of other possible paths, when the call makes itself felt once more, it does not come as a surprise.*

And if God really wants you to do something, he has ways to make himself very clear. Remember Jonah. God followed him out to sea and sent a fish to bring him back.

2. God’s call always works together with our natural talents, interests, and inclinations. God is not going to call you to something absolutely foreign to you. If your best

* In this case, his real name. He deserves the credit.

* “The Vocation of the Priest”, *The Pope Speaks*, Vol 41, No. 4, 1996, p. 244.

efforts in high school Spanish earned you a “C-”, God is probably not calling you to work with Mexican migrant workers. If your head is filled with music and your every shower is a concert, your interest in joining the choir might be from God. And Linda, who tended to be a bit too serious, probably should have waited until she found a man more like Roger and less like Steve—someone who attracted her and complemented her own personality.

This does not mean, of course, that God can’t let things change our plans. No one’s interests and inclinations turn toward caring for a severely disabled or autistic child or a spouse with Alzheimer’s. Yet when these things happen, God’s will is that we love and serve. Life doesn’t come with guarantees. Young people the world over are prevented by poverty, political oppression, or family situation from realizing their dreams and using their gifts. Love is a matter of playing the cards life gives you. The “better or worse” in the marriage vow is a tacit admission that “worse” can happen, and the response to it is faithful love. These things, however, are beyond human choice. James doesn’t marry Sally with the conviction that in forty-five years God will want him to care for an elderly woman with Alzheimer’s. He marries her to build a life with her.

But what about Jeremiah? He did not want to be a prophet. He felt he was too young (Jer. 1:6), and he resented the trouble that his ministry caused him (see Jer. 12:1-5; 15:10-18). But look what goes on in his heart:

Whenever I speak I must cry out,
 violence and outrage is the message;
 The word of the LORD has brought me
 derision and reproach all the day.

I say to myself, I will not mention him.
 I will speak in his name no more.
 But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart,
 imprisoned in my bones;
 I grow weary holding it in,
 I cannot endure it. (Jer. 20:8-9)

God’s will for Jeremiah was not imposed from outside; it was *alive* inside him. His own heart was burning with God’s word. Likewise, if you know the yearnings of your own heart, if certain Scripture passages sing to your soul, if a particular saint captivates your imagination and you want to model yourself after him or her—these are things pointing to God’s will.

3. God points out a direction; he does not assign tasks. When Sr. Teresa was on that train, God did not tell her, “Go into Calcutta. The first dying person you see in the gutter, take him home and clean him up.” God simply pointed her to the poorest of the poor and let her decide what to do. The Lord wanted a New Testament written with teaching for his Church. Besides the Gospels, it needed extensive reflections on morality, the relationship between sin and the Law, the nature of the Church as his Body, and so on. But he did not give St. Paul instructions, “Go write a bunch of letters to put into the New Testament.” Instead he sent Paul to preach the Gospel. While doing this, Paul came up with the idea of sending letters to some of the churches to clarify some things and help them out. To be sure, the Holy Spirit was at work in this decision; he inspired St. Paul as he wrote. However, God’s actual command to Paul seems to have been nothing more specific than “Spread the Gospel”.

4. Meet your responsibilities. If you are married, you *must* care for your spouse and children. Even if Steve did once have a vocation to the priesthood, God wants him now to love and care for his wife and children—and God will help him do this. If you are a priest, then minister to your flock. Students should study and graduate. Workers should do quality work. And in your travels through life, when you come across a man stripped, robbed, and beaten by thieves, don’t pass by. God is showing you his will.

St. Augustine wrote at the beginning of his autobiography (*The Confessions*), “You have made us for yourself, oh God; and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Our hearts are designed for God. We don’t need special prophecies to know how to please him. If we strive to love according to the truth about the good, our hearts will lead to God’s perfect will.

Chapter 7—The Prophet for Our Time

We all remember the scene—the flimsy, wood-frame compound with flames pouring from the windows, the tank pulling its nozzle out of the thin siding, the sudden “whoomph” of the fireball, and the shimmering superheated air rising over the Texas plain. The Apocalypse came to Waco, and the Branch Davidian community perished in the conflagration of their final conflict with the forces of evil. They regarded their leader, David Koresh, as the true prophet for our time. While the F.B.I. called him a con-man and a criminal, his followers saw in him the one man sent by God to interpret the Book of Revelation, the one prophet who could understand the Seven Seals. Indeed, for those within his compound, every prophecy turned out to be true. The prophetic people of the Branch Davidians were being persecuted, surrounded and hounded by unbelievers who threatened them with powerful weapons. They *knew* that the final battle would be a trial by fire—a trial they could face in confidence that they would rise again and triumph. And when the tanks came, they set those fires to thwart their enemies and so they died, together with God’s anointed prophet for our time.

The cult in Waco was one of the most dramatic, but is certainly not the only apocalyptic cult. Members of another cult in Japan poisoned the air in the Tokyo subways. Shortly thereafter, members of yet another committed suicide and murder in Switzerland. All believed they were in a particularly dramatic time in spiritual history, and all believed that they were playing a special, distinctive role in this apocalyptic age. They believed they were chosen to follow the single leader anointed and certified by God.

Among Catholics we hear apocalyptic messages from many sides. Some come through saints or acknowledged visionaries. Some are speculative. Some rest on the dubious reports of unknown seers. Some hint that we may be on the verge of the Second

Coming of Christ. However, they all point to this age as a time of especially intense spiritual activity. The many dramatic events in the world (such as two world wars and the Holocaust) and in the Church (for instance, the Second Vatican Council and the apparitions at Fatima), as well as the dynamic, prophetic character of recent Church movements, have created an atmosphere of apocalyptic expectation. And that atmosphere creates opportunities for human pride and ambition—especially for the self-appointed Prophet for Our Time (P.O.T.)

God's Action in History

The Scriptures and Church history clearly show that God does work in history. The book of Genesis tells us that God called one man, Abram, and promised to make his descendants a great nation—this to an old man who had no children. After those same descendants had lived as slaves for 400 years, God spoke to another man, Moses, and led them to freedom. Pursued by one of the great armies of that age, the people of Israel found themselves pinned against the Sea of Reeds, with no escape. Then God intervened dramatically to let them cross the sea, while he destroyed Pharaoh's pursuing army. Shortly afterwards, God gave them his Law—the Ten Commandments—on Mount Sinai. Forty years later, God led them into the Promised Land, powerfully defeating their enemies. Later he gave them a king “after the Lord's own heart” and promised this king, David, a dynasty that would last forever. When Israel sinned, God sent prophets as his spokesmen to call them back. When they persisted in sin, he punished them with seventy years of exile.

The New Testament is the story of God's greatest intervention in history—the incarnation of God the Son as the man, Jesus. God himself was born in a stable in Bethlehem. He walked the earth, healing and teaching and driving out the devil. Jesus was then

arrested, tried, and crucified, but on the third day he rose from the dead. Led by the Holy Spirit and relying on his power, Jesus' disciples spread his Gospel throughout the civilized world.

I belabor these points because many people—especially the most educated—no longer believe that God actually does intervene in human affairs. Even many Catholic theologians and clergy will call it “fundamentalism” to believe that God actually does things in our world. But if God did not and does not intervene in the world, both on his own initiative and in response to our prayers, then Scripture is fundamentally false.

God did not stop acting in history when the Apostle John died on Patmos. Pope John XXIII prayed for God's intervention when he asked for a new Pentecost at the Second Vatican Council. And that same Council called on us all to recognize the “signs of the times”, so that we can respond to what God is doing. And if we look to the history of the Church we can see God's action again and again—from St. Benedict's establishment of monasticism to St. Maximilian Kolbe's martyrdom at Auschwitz, from St. Francis' witness of simplicity to the sophisticated learning of the early Jesuits, from the eight-million Indian conversions following Mary's apparitions at Guadalupe to the collapse of Communism following her influence in Fatima. God does act in history, and he uses human agents.

Our own age certainly seems to be a time of dramatic spiritual change. For the past 300 to 400 years, mankind has tried more and more to “go it alone” without God. Man has eclipsed God to become master of his own destiny. As the 20th Century broke, he saw his world as full of promise. Science was—supposedly—on the verge of a complete understanding of the world. American and European political and military leaders thought they had found the keys to permanent peace and prosperity. God's place, if he

had one at all, was on the fringes. More and more, educated people thought of religion as something merely personal, if not downright superstitious. Human reason was all we needed to bring about the good life.

This century did not turn out as planned, of course. A new kind of war broke out in 1914, a war in which machines mowed down millions of young men and devastated vast areas of Europe. Before war would re-ignite in 1939, Russia and Germany had set up totalitarian regimes. Hitler turned killing into an efficient, mechanized industry. Lenin turned the idea of democracy on its head, making the “will of the people” a kind of idol and himself its high priest. Stalin perfected this “religion” and arrogated to himself more power than any king with “divine right”. Then the Second World War engulfed the whole world, causing sixty millions of casualties and destroying whole cities. No longer was war something that took place mainly on battlefields or between warships. Unseen submarines sank unarmed civilian vessels. Sophisticated flying machines rained bombs on civilians, and—at the war’s end—we saw the power of nuclear weapons to destroy entire cities in an instant.

The 20th Century belied every promise that was placed in human progress. All the hopes of 1910 had turned bloody. The judgment, it seems, had come.

As the Second Millennium runs out, we stand at the end of an era. As God has been eclipsed, human life and society have disintegrated. Human reason was supposed to free us from the shackles of superstition and lead us to heaven on earth. Instead it brought the hell of total war, the Gulags, death camps, and genocide. If God really loves and redeems us, then we have to expect him to act.

Indeed, God has acted. A month before the Bolsheviks took over in Russia, Mary appeared at Fatima and promised that Russia would be converted, if only after even

greater horrors than World War I. After the Second Vatican Council, a movement of charismatic faith broke out in the United States and spread around the world. Millions of Catholics were praying with expectant hope that God would answer. They began reading their Bibles with new eyes. Many who had fallen away from the Church returned and became witnesses themselves to Christ's mercy. Then in 1981, six young people in Communist Yugoslavia reported seeing an apparition of the Blessed Mother. Whether the events in Medjugorje actually constituted supernatural visions or not,^{*} millions have found their faith in God and their devotion to Our Lady renewed through them. Within a decade of the first reported apparition, Communism had fallen throughout Europe—largely without bloodshed.

We can indeed see concrete signs of God's work in our present world. We can expect him to continue acting. The questions for us are: What does he intend to do? What does he expect of us? Many Christians expect God to intervene further before the century is out. Billy Graham reflected this expectation several years ago, when he commented that if God doesn't deal with this generation, "he's going to owe Sodom and Gomorrah an apology." And Pope John Paul II has said that his whole papacy should be understood in terms of the coming Third Millennium, when he expects a "new springtime" for the Church. However, both Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II have responded in the same way to this age—by stressing the importance of evangelization and conversion.

^{*} A bishops' commission was established to investigate these apparitions, but the new independence of several former Yugoslav republics and the subsequent wars have interrupted the work of this commission. The most authoritative pronouncement to date is that the commission cannot affirm that the apparitions are supernatural.

Prophets for Our Times

The message of Fatima, the fundamental charismatic experience, the core message from Medjugorje, and of course the teaching of Vatican II all come down to a reaffirmation of the Gospel: *God is real. He sent Jesus to save us. Have faith in him. Repent of sin. Pray with confidence.* Mary has called for consecration to her Immaculate Heart as a particularly fruitful way to devote ourselves to God. But there are many who see the situation quite differently. They see God as up to something completely new. They have a different response, one that gives rise to the “Prophet for Our Times” (P.O.T.) trap. This response develops in three stages.

1. “*All bets are off.*” What is happening now—so it is said—is so new and different that all previous spiritual ideas and standards no longer apply. In the past, Christians were wise to mistrust “automatic writing” (where the seer’s hand is moved automatically by a spiritual power—allegedly Jesus or the Blessed Mother). But now Christ is bringing about unity among Christians in a new and powerful way, and the Church needs messages that a certain woman transmits. Or: Ever since the German and Dutch bishops broke the established rules and hijacked the Second Vatican Council, no bishop, pope, or council can be relied on to express the true faith in its purity. The Holy Spirit’s guarantee of infallibility and indefectibility is no longer over the Vatican. Or: The bishops and priests have become so worldly and the institutional Church so bureaucratic that the Holy Spirit cannot live within its parish and diocesan structures. New Spirit-filled local bodies must be established to build the Church, because the old ones are dead. In short, the traditions and practices of the Church are not simply in need of renewal; they are no longer any good. The old ways no longer work. Traditional wisdom and lessons of the past no longer apply to the Church in our new situation. Or so it is said.

2. “*The Church can’t cope, so normal church life is inadequate for today’s spiritual needs.*” If all bets are off, we must discard traditional devotions and spiritualities.

Novenas and Forty Hours, sodalities and societies, Third Orders and parish councils, even Mass and Confession don’t confront the real conflict between God and Satan. They are nice for old people and those who need something ‘safe’, but—really—they are more like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Not only is traditional church life thought inadequate, but so is traditional wisdom. Priests and bishops may be well-trained in theology—it is said—but most of them are unaware of the prophetic character of the situation today. They just don’t understand what’s *really* going on.

3. “*God is raising up a new prophet.*” Because the normal, traditional, institutional Church is no longer able to cope, God is raising up a new prophetic voice to show us the way. This may be a person or a group; The Word of God covenant community got its name from their belief that God had made them to be his word, spoken to the state of Michigan and to the entire country. This prophetic voice might also be the Blessed Mother, but as revealed and interpreted by a particular mystical messenger. In any case, what God wants us to do comes only through this prophetic voice. The guidance of theologians, priests, bishops, classical spiritual writers, and ordinary good Catholics is at best only marginally useful. It could even be harmful. Since these people don’t know what *really* is going on, they can’t tell us what we *really* need to do.

These three stages and the ideas they give rise to undercut the Christian’s confidence in the Church Christ has established and make the P.O.T. trap plausible.

The Prophetic/Apocalyptic Scenarios

One new vision runs something like this: “*This is the age of the final confrontation. At the beginning of the century God set Satan free to attack the Church. Now God,*

with his armies in heaven and on earth, is getting ready to march against Satan's forces and deal them a crushing blow. Soon we will see the great chastisement and Christ's final judgment against sin. The Antichrist will be unveiled. The battle will culminate in the revelation and glory of God's faithful spiritual warriors." We read that John Paul II will be the last pope.* Books and pamphlets tell how to prepare for Three Days of Darkness that will descend upon the world, during which Satan and his hosts will fill the air and only those Catholics will be saved who remain indoors with blessed candles burning.

According to this scenario all bets are off. What God is doing is something completely new and unexpected. The entire human race will find itself either at war or afflicted by natural disasters.† The war will be led by the Antichrist himself, a man of hypnotic, even magical, charm. No earthly power will be able to resist him or his forces. The devil himself will empower him. In this battle, not only earthly powers, but the Church herself will be powerless. Total defeat will be certain—except for the secret army God is raising up with special power and wisdom to overcome the Antichrist.

Another less dramatic but more plausible scenario envisions the total subversion of the Church. Even now (according to this scenario) enemies of Christ are infiltrating the Church. These enemies are secretly Communist, secular humanist, or Masonic. Alarming numbers of them are already in the Roman Curia, preventing the Holy Father from doing

* It is worthwhile to note that the pope just recently released the Apostolic Constitution *Universi Dominici Gregis*, in which he laid down detailed procedures for the election of his successor. John Paul II seems to expect someone to follow him as pope.

† Here is one of the little-noted differences between Catholics and Protestants. The Catholic apocalyptic scenario expects the war to originate in Russia and overrun Rome. The Protestant version has it beginning in the Middle East and attacking Jerusalem.

what he knows he really must. He is virtually a prisoner in the Vatican, cut off from accurate information about the rest of the Church and prevented by traitors from saying what he really thinks. And now—it is feared—Freemasons (or Communists or humanists) control enough cardinals that they can decide who will be the next pope. This will mean the death of the Church.

Now let me be clear. Communists, secular humanists, and Freemasons *do* share a common enmity of the Catholic Church. Powerful enemies of the Church *can* do great damage. The English bishops, with the exception of St. John Fisher, defected from the Church *en masse* when Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church there. Communists tried to destroy the Church in Russia and Ukraine. In the 1920s and '30s Freemasons attempted to quash Catholicism in Mexico. And as Donna Steichen's book *Ungodly Rage* documents, radical feminists have successfully infiltrated many diocesan offices and Church teaching institutions. However, both the manner of their working and the extent of their power, as well as the remedy to their schemes, are significantly different from those proposed by the apocalyptic scenarios.

These scenarios portray the Church as weak, confused, and divided—clueless about the true spiritual state of things. They imply she is not the “Bark (i.e. Ship) of Salvation”. She is no longer founded on the Rock of Peter. Rather, the Church is completely unprepared to meet the onslaught coming against her. Her only hope is a great miracle—and rescue by the remnant who will fight for her. To make this possible, God is raising up an extraordinary leader to put the spiritual weapons together and save the Church.

This leader must be a prophet, because only a prophet can know what to do. Because Satan controls the Church and the secular media, we no longer have reliable infor-

mation about what is going on. God has to reveal this to us. Besides, all bets are off; the crisis is beyond the power of human reason to understand. Our responsibility, then, is to obey this prophet. If anyone stands against the prophet, then he stands against God. Doctrinal matters and charity toward others are secondary. An exchange involving the Protestant “Vineyard” movement illustrates this perfectly. This movement, led by a team of powerful “prophets”, has been gathering large groups of men in convention centers around the country to pray and prepare for the coming battle and God’s victory. Some evangelical theologians took these prophets to task, saying that their teachings did not square with Scripture. The prophets and their followers responded—in effect—that they are above criticism. It doesn’t matter that they make doctrinal mistakes; the important thing is that God has given them the *now word* to gather God’s men. Anyone who criticizes them is standing against God.

Obedience is paramount. “If we are going to defeat Satan’s plan, we must stand together like an army. Each one of us must be fully committed to this body the Lord has raised up. Each of us must be fully submitted to the authority the Lord has put over us. And to wives, the Lord says, ‘Let my men be free! Give them up to my work!’” At least one mainly Catholic covenant community went so far as to declare war on Satan. (We have to ask, didn’t they ever take or renew baptismal vows?) When the Communist government in Poland outlawed the Solidarity movement in 1980, a prominent charismatic leader publicly cast all the demons out of Poland. One group of otherwise normal Midwestern Christians (again mostly Catholic)—people who held normal jobs and lived in normal neighborhoods—pledged themselves to “obey their commanders” in everything, to hide their movements from the “enemies of Christ”, and to be ready to give up their own lives in this battle, knowing that their commanders would see that their children were cared for. At least one prominent Marian group is moving in a similar direction, embrac-

ing authoritarian leadership and committing all their resources to prepare for Mary’s next move.

Furthermore -according to the apocalyptic mind-set—the effect of even one person’s disobedience or even of weak commitment is supposed to mean victory for Satan. Everything depends on obeying the prophetic instructions. Ordinary Revelation in Scripture and the teaching of the Church are not enough. “We need God’s now word for his people.” It is not enough to be morally good. We need God’s specific command. A war is going on and the enemy is demonically clever. Therefore the prophet must communicate to us only on a need-to-know basis. Our job is to obey, knowing that we will eventually share in the glory of this great victory over the forces of hell.

The Problems with the Prophet

The P.O.T. trap causes two general kinds of problems—one earthly and the other spiritual.

1) Secular or earthly problems: Simply and bluntly, the Prophet for Our Time winds up with too much power. This was clear in David Koresh’s case and also with Jim Jones. It is also true of less dramatic ‘prophets’. As the only one with God’s “now word” and the vital secret wisdom, he is above criticism and reproach. Who can argue with someone who gets his daily instructions directly from God? ^{**} If you disagree with him, you show that you are either too proud or not strong enough to fight in the Lord’s battle. You might even be opposed to God’s plan. In any case, it is NEVER the prophetic leader who is wrong.

^{**} It is worth noting that in genuine apparitions, the visionaries do not presume to command others, convey secret “battle plans” or otherwise make themselves indispensable.

As the Prophet for Our Time, this leader has the lives and resources of others at his disposal. He believes he is the voice of God for them. They owe him unquestioning allegiance for the highest and noblest of reasons. This is not merely a source of pride; to believe this is itself spiritual pride of the highest degree. And the prophet is only human. Sooner or later, he will take advantage of his power. Again and again we see this truth: Wherever religious leaders have total, direct personal authority over others, they exploit them sexually and financially.*

A group's high spiritual ideals and love of the Lord is no protection. The prophet's high level of inspiration is no guarantee. If the leaders have total authority over their followers' lives, and if they are not subject to regular, effective oversight, it is almost certain that some members of the group are being sexually manipulated and financially exploited.

"That may be true of some groups," the loyal member might respond, "but our leaders are different. First of all, we can *see* how spiritual they are. And besides, they are all accountable to each other." As we said in Chapter 2, looking holy is not the same as being holy. A man may be capable of inspiring a crowd of 10,000 Christians and still live in adultery. In a curious way, he is not even hypocritical—at least not to his own mind. It is remarkable how easily someone can convince himself that the desire he feels for a woman is spiritual, not carnal. *Adultery is what lustful guys do, the kind who hang out in bars. "Our relationship is more spiritual than physical. The Spirit brought us together."*

* So in religious orders everyone, including the superior, is bound by the vow of poverty, and the superior's authority is governed by laws and rules. Furthermore, every individual has the freedom to choose his or her own confessor and to appeal grievances to higher authority. Abuses are always possible, of course, wherever sinful human beings are; the Church recognizes this and puts restrictions even on spiritual authority.

From believing that God has specially chosen me it is not far to thinking that his moral rules don't apply to me in the same way.

The idea that a team of leaders offers protection from abuse often offers only false security. The most powerful member—the “true prophetic voice and judge of the prophets”—can easily become the distributor of sexual benefits to, and in fact the seducer of, the others. These benefits may be fairly innocent, at first, as when a particularly lovely young woman is moved into a man's household or put under his authority. Eventually, the leader will come to “have something on” the others and his control of them will be complete. It does happen. Sex is and always will be a powerful temptation. Authoritarian leaders can be counted on to abuse it.

If sexual misbehavior is always hidden, financial exploitation is in the open—but under a different name. God's work needs money, and young people with college savings or—even better—elderly members with substantial retirement accounts “need to get their priorities in order”. *“There are 260,000,000 people in this country, and only about 2,000,000 of them regularly receive Mary's messages. That's less than one percent! Can't we do more to get out Our Lady's word?”* In comparison with someone's eternity in hell and the possible triumph of Satan over the Church, money for college or retirement is a pretty minor problem. “Besides,” the exhortation goes, “don't you trust God to meet your needs?” So even important earthly needs have less claim on our resources than the work of Christ. For Christians who really do want to give it all for the Lord or for His Mother, these arguments seem conclusive. They dig deep and turn over the money.

Of course, this kind of appeal is false. If I have an income or savings adequate to my needs and my family's, then God *has* provided. My income is the normal way for him to provide for me. If I give away what he provides, then I am not entitled to additional

provisions “in faith”. Caring for one’s family—including one’s own legitimate needs—is one of the first acts of charity. Children may be starving in Africa, but my own children are just as real. They will starve if I don’t feed them. Souls may be lost because they don’t hear God’s word, but God wants me to bring that word into my own work and social circles—and I can do this best if I fit in with the appropriate education. God does not command ignorance or poverty in old age, just so that we can help others do his work.

Just as important is the sorry fact that this money is often misused. A young man from the Third World once confided to me that his biggest complaint about most of the charismatic renewal leaders he had met was that they tended to travel first class, to stay in the better hotels, and to eat well in good restaurants. Leaders—especially God’s P.O.T.—feel themselves entitled to special remuneration. Apostolates become full-time jobs. Wants become needs. Religious leaders—especially those who are not subject to financial oversight—can come to live comfortably on other people’s sacrifices. It is naive to think that any person is *so holy* that he won’t fall into this trap. It happens—often.

God does raise up prophets, and often they have something important to say. However, the reason Christ taught us all to pray, “lead us not into temptation” is that *all* of us can be tempted. Sex and money are perhaps the most potent weapons in the devil’s armory. Even “God’s holy man for our time” is not immune to ordinary temptation. It is almost a law of nature, then, that unrestrained absolute power results in sexual and financial abuse.

The second general kind of problem with the P.O.T. trap is that it changes the spiritual rules. God’s way has always been modest. The Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign from heaven—some decisive, magnificent, undeniably supernatural event that would prove beyond all doubt that he was the Christ. Jesus replied that it is an “evil, adulterous” gen-

eration that seeks a sign (Mt. 16:1-4). On the day Christ was born and God himself appeared in this world as man, a Chinese servant may have stood trembling in fear before his master, awaiting his rebuke for a mistake he had made. As Jesus died on the cross to redeem us all from our sins, a young Gothic hunter might have rejoiced, for the darkening sun made it easier to creep up on his prey. And when the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, Mayan fisherman set out into the Gulf of Mexico to fish. In other words, when God was doing his greatest saving works, most of the world was going about its business. When Mary appeared for the last time in Fatima, 70,000 Portuguese—believers and skeptics alike—saw the sun spin and dance. And in America a similar crowd watched the White Sox beat the Giants in the World Series. Life goes on, even while God is changing the world.

A great spiritual battle *is* going on, but it is *not* a battle that makes headlines. God has always chosen to work mysteriously, through those who are insignificant. (Think of the press Our Lady would have gotten had she skipped Fatima and instead appeared at Comiskey Park! But she chose not to.) God’s plan is not to overpower our hearts with great events, but to touch our hearts and minds individually by the witness of the truth. He wants not simply to overcome the cosmic Evil One; he wants me to repent of the hidden sins in my own heart. His work of salvation has not been accomplished with massed armies, but with saints who love him passionately.

In our zeal for God’s work, we tend to Americanize Redemption. That is, we try to apply American know-how to accomplish what the cross could not. It is tempting to see the cause of Christ as an organizational problem. To be sure, modern media and organizational management techniques can serve Christ and his Church. But the key is always love unto death—even death on the cross. With good organization and budgeting, effective advertising, aggressive use of the latest technologies we can fill a stadium with

charismatics praising God, fly more pilgrims cheaply to Medjugorje, get Latin Masses established in more dioceses, send low-cost Bibles to Russia, and put papal encyclicals on the Internet. Good as all these might be, they are all secondary. The real battle is in confessionals and on death-beds, in the daily choices for love and against lust or greed or pride, in the Christian mother's quiet testimony how Christ helped her overcome her temper toward her children, in the manager's decision to keep the faltering worker on payroll for those last 18 months until his retirement.

The battle is not against a purely external enemy. Satan is powerless without our sinful cooperation. The cutting edge of God's work, the center of the conflict between Christ and Satan is always in the human soul. It is folly to try to structure a community that will have no sin, no weaknesses. An army marches in lock-step, but the People of God is a communion of individual souls. Each soul is the scene of the decisive battle against sin. It is the cross—not mass movements, small-group dynamics, or demonstrations of power—that overcomes sin.

The Issue of Authority

This brings us to the heart of the issue concerning authority. Christian authority is Christ's authority, based on the Word of God and the sacraments. A true prophet or teacher's authority is the authority of God's word. He or she is responsible to proclaim that word, to speak it as the Lord leads. However, *it is God's place to enforce obedience*. If those who hear this word do not accept it, *it is up to the Holy Spirit to convict them*. Mother Teresa has received a true prophetic word about the dignity of the poor and about loving Christ in every one of our neighbors. But she does not presume to insist that all Catholics must live among them as she does. She allows the Holy Spirit to draw young women to her order. And if one should come to her and say, "Mother, I feel called to a

life of study and contemplation and teaching,” Mother Teresa would not condemn her. As superior of the Missionaries of Charity, she would point her toward another order or religious group whose apostolate is study and teaching.

Unordained leaders serve the Church in valuable ways. But their authority can never extend to the entire Church. Neither can it extend to the soul and conscience of their followers or members of the groups they head. By her prophetic charism Mother Teresa reminds us all that what we do for the least of our brethren, we do for Christ. But it is only members of her order that she can command to work in this house or serve in that way.

Christ has given his authority in a fuller way to the bishops and through them to the priests who help them. This authority flows directly from their sacramental ordination. They are ordained and authorized to preach the Gospel authoritatively, especially in the Liturgy, and to sanctify the People of God through the sacraments. Christ’s death and resurrection—and nothing else—are the acts that redeem and sanctify us. The way Christ “applies” these to us is through the sacraments: In Baptism we are joined to him in his death and burial. In Confirmation the Spirit of the Risen Christ is poured out to strengthen us. In the Eucharist we receive and are joined to the suffering and dying Lord. In the sacraments alone do we fully encounter Christ to be sanctified by him. Our Savior has given authority over these sacraments to the bishops and priests of his Church.

This is what gives the bishop the authority to tell any Catholic what must be believed. He watches over Christian doctrine. By his sacramental authority he can tell a Catholic whose sin is grave or public, “You may not approach Communion.” And by that same authority the priest requires a penance of the sinner in confession and pronounces to the bride and groom that they are now husband and wife. If he turns out to be an inspiring

preacher, a compassionate and sensitive confessor, an effective teacher of the young, his ministry will be more effective. But these personal gifts are not the basis for his authority. That basis is the work of Christ himself, a work that the priest accomplishes in his sacramental ministry.

The P.O.T.'s authority, on the other hand, is his own. What we see too often in those who fall into this role is that they become spiritual bullies. They push and persuade, wheedle and manipulate, command and intimidate. Instead of leaving it to the Holy Spirit to convict their hearer's hearts, they try to overpower their hearers by sheer force of personality. The P.O.T.'s confidence, then, is not in the cross of Christ, but in the world's techniques. Through the sacraments Christ meets each person in his or her own freedom; the P.O.T. is above freedom and ultimately against it. The only freedom he acknowledges is the "freedom to obey".

In one respect the P.O.T. trap is the most destructive. The P.O.T. has an uncanny knack for using the other spiritual traps against his followers to ensnare and manipulate them. By his actions he institutionalizes his own sin of pride. The P.O.T. trap is the one that undergirds cults or "mind-control" groups. The Prophet for Our Time is always a powerful, compelling personality—someone dynamic, able to touch hearts and move them. Usually he is far better at this than most ordained clergy. But he cannot deliver the spiritual goods. What he delivers is a suffocating, exploitative spiritual trap. At times the trap may even turn deadly.

Chapter 8—Devils Are Everywhere *

I never knew I was a sex-pervert—not until two leaders of our covenant community prayed with me for deliverance. The community had just formed, and our leaders had learned about this wonderful way to pray just eight months or so before. As one leader explained to us, Christian community was not even possible until the Lord gave our leaders this prayer against the devil. The problem had been that Satan and his minions oppressed and obsessed individual Christians, fostering weaknesses and fomenting conflicts. These undercut every effort to form a solid Christian community. And not only was the deliverance prayer important for community-building, but it offered new joy and freedom for individuals, too. So, when the night for our deliverance came, I was hopeful and eager. I knew I was a sinner, and I wanted that freedom from sin.

My role in this deliverance prayer was easy. The two leaders prayed over me, while I was simply to yield to their guidance and renounce the devil. The senior leader began by commanding the devils to state—through me—how many of them there were. In response, I was to say whatever number came to mind. I think I said “seven”. Then the leader began to call on the spirits to identify themselves. Again, my role was to ‘yield’ and say whatever came to mind—‘greed’, ‘lust’, ‘pride’, or the like—trusting that the command “in Jesus name” would force the spirits to reveal themselves truthfully. Whenever a demon was identified, the leaders commanded him, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, depart and return to hell. Leave this child of God alone and never return to him again.” One by one the devils were cast out, until finally only one was left. In spite of our best efforts, “he” refused to give his name; nothing

* Much of the material in this chapter has appeared earlier in my article, “More Than the Devil’s Due”, *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1994, pp. 77-87.

meaningful came to mind. At one point I tentatively offered something, and the leader barked, “That’s a lie!” and ordered the spirit to stop wasting our time and tell the truth. The words “sexual perversion” came to my mind. The leaders cast that demon out, and the prayer soon ended. Even though I had never desired perverted sex, this demon, which was—allegedly—ruining my spiritual life, was cast away forever.

Demons Rediscovered

Educated, modern people—we are told—no longer believe in devils. This is not quite true, but the prejudice against such belief is certainly there. Even within the Church we hear very little about the work of the devil. Many theologians regularly explain away Scriptural texts that refer to the devil. They say that demons are just part of the primitive, pre-scientific world-view of unsophisticated cultures, that what Scripture was really talking about were things like mental illness and epilepsy. In fact—they argue—Jesus didn’t really ever say that devils exist; he simply accepted the prevailing viewpoint of his culture. Very seldom, if at all, do most Catholic priests speak about Satan, either in the confessional or from the pulpit. It is almost as though the belief in evil spirits has been written out of the Church.

Nevertheless, the Church does continue to believe in the devil and his angelic followers. Periodically Christians will rediscover C. S. Lewis’s classic *The Screwtape Letters*, a very readable and thought-provoking look at the devil’s business of temptation. The charismatic renewal opened up the eyes of many Catholics to the Holy Spirit and the reality of miracles. In doing so it also made them aware of the reality of evil spirits. The Marian movement has drawn attention to Mary’s role in our struggle with Satan. She is traditionally identified with the woman who crushes the serpent’s head (Gn. 3: 14) and with the woman clothed with the sun, whose battle with the dragon is described in Revela-

tion 12. Several messages from Medjugorje refer to Satan. The Vatican Council itself referred to the devil, and Pope Paul VI pointedly and emphatically reaffirmed the Church's belief that evil spirits do exist.

Confused Demonology

If devils are real, what should we do about them? The answer depends on what demons do and how they do it. The Catholic Church has an old and well-developed teaching on this, but precious few priests present it to their people. As a result, a popular demonology has arisen out of a quick reading of the Bible, with the help of fundamentalist Protestant and Pentecostal ideas. This demonology can be summarized in the simple phrase: "Devils are everywhere." According to this view, no matter where a Christian goes or what he does, devils^{*} will certainly be there, interfering with what God wants. They not only tempt to sin, but they cause accidents, inconveniences, frustrations, setbacks, bad feelings, and disagreements.

The most important part of the "Devils are everywhere" (D.A.E.) teaching is that evil spirits can interfere with the inner workings of our minds. If any unexpected positive thought "must be from the Holy Spirit", then any negative thought must come from Satan. Demons are believed to affect our inclinations as well, so that, in principle, any inclination or desire *might* have a demonic origin. The devils who are everywhere can access our minds and urge us to do what they want.

This working with our minds is the basis for the practice of deliverance described at the beginning of this chapter. Deliverance is not exorcism. The Church carefully

* This name is somewhat controversial in many circles, since some popular teachers find subtle but important differences between demons, devils, evil spirits, and unclean spirits. According to them, different kinds of spirits must be dealt with in different ways.

regulates exorcism, which is the prayer to deliver a person from actual possession by evil spirits.* Some popular charismatic teachers, however, propose the idea of demonic oppression. The idea is that certain demons—such as a spirit of lust or rebellion—will attach themselves to a person, constantly influencing his or her behavior. So, for instance, a person oppressed by a spirit of anger might find himself regularly wanting to lose his temper. However, the spirit can also work “backwards”, too, by frightening a person so much that an area of his life is crippled. So, a spirit of anger might so frighten a Christian that he is excessively meek—over-compensating, as it were, to avoid confronting the rage within. A person oppressed by a spirit of lust might be promiscuous, but on the other hand he or she might completely avoid members of the opposite sex, instead. Thus, this oppression is not the same as sin. The oppressed person may never have yielded to direct temptation. Nevertheless, he or she is still crippled.

What all this means is the Christian has *no clear symptoms* of demonic oppression. His generosity might be a virtue, but it might just as well be a symptom of a spirit of greed working “backwards”. According to the D.A.E. teaching, *the only way demons can be detected is through someone else’s spiritual gift of discernment*. This belief led one charismatic leader to make this comparison: “Trying to live the Christian life without the discernment of spirits is like being in the ring with Mohammed Ali and not knowing he’s there.”

If this is how it is with the devil, then our spiritual life does indeed require special tools. The first of these is the need for constant vigilance. The devil is always looking for an “in”. So the Christian must constantly monitor his own thoughts. Strange, unusual,

* There is also a rite of exorcism in the Rite of Baptism, when the new Christian is brought for the first time into the Kingdom of Christ and out of Satan’s dominion.

“disloyal”, or fantastic ideas might be “from the devil”. Of course, this is especially important in religious matters. For example, *the leader of your group is teaching that to criticize him is the same as “raising your hand against the Lord’s anointed” something David would not do against King Saul, even when Saul was trying to kill him (see 1 Sam. 24). It occurs to you that this teaching could be somewhat self-serving. Almost immediately you realize that this is a mistrustful thought—maybe even disloyal. It might be from Satan, trying to keep you from trusting your leaders. And so you repent and renounce it, for the worst thing you could do is to fall into Satan’s trap.* Thus, the fear of Satan leads many Christians to shut down their minds, to ‘repent’ even of well-founded doubts and misgivings. The price of deliverance becomes a constant vigilance against one’s innermost thoughts.

This vigilance can also extend to innocent aspects of modern culture. Some see the devil’s hand in the rhythm and volume of rock music, regardless of the lyrics. (This has led some more reflective Christians to reflect consider whether ordinary Christians can safely listen to such classical composers as Wagner and Stravinsky, too.) Many see a spiritual danger in Halloween customs, as though Satan will use costumes and trick-or-treating to ensnare their children. Some shun rainbows and unicorns in art, for the devil might use these to spread New Age ideas. Now, we certainly ought never to take the devil lightly. However, he is not God and cannot so infect cultural objects with his presence to create his own ‘sacramentals’ of evil. Recall that St. Paul’s had only one objection to eating meat offered to idols, namely that it might scandalize one’s neighbor (1 Cor. 10: 23-30).

One of the key ideas in the D.A.E.. teaching is that the devil is so incredibly clever that he can use well-intentioned Church leaders to do his work. Satan can and will tempt anyone, of course; even the pope is not immune to temptation. And anyone can

yield to temptation and sin. But that is not the point I'm making here. Let's consider a concrete example. *One Midwestern bishop, who had long supported a renewal community that was both Marian and charismatic, was disturbed to learn about financial irregularities. As he inquired further, he learned about allegations of pastoral abuses within the group. He launched a formal investigation. Now the leader of this community had a reputation as a great spiritual warrior. As the bishop's investigation proceeded, the word went quietly around to the members and to other, similar groups that Satan was using the bishop to undercut what God was doing through their community. By doing precisely the pastoral job the Church had given him, the bishop had allegedly become a tool of Satan.*

If this is true, then *there is no one we can trust with our spiritual welfare.* This is serious. We Catholics believe that Christ himself has established bishops as our pastors. They are the ones Christ has established to bring us to him. They have real power to rule their dioceses. Now we hear that when a good bishop conscientiously follows up on legitimate pastoral concerns, he is a tool of Satan. Even the Church itself is suspected of being Satan's tool. No one is reliable—except for someone “anointed”, to whom God has allegedly given special wisdom and powers of discernment.

The Abuse of Spiritual Warfare

My deliverance was to have been turning point in my life. No longer would demons hold so much of my behavior and personality in bondage. I was to be free of sin and temptation in a way I had never before known.

It didn't work out that way. Certainly I was more confident of my own holiness. It wasn't until much later that I realized how ill-founded this confidence was. But from the community's point of view, it turned out that this momentous prayer was only the first

step in my ongoing deliverance. Every two or three years another deliverance was necessary, often driving out as many devils as the first prayer had. There always seemed to be more devils to drive out. This was so not only for me, but for everyone in our community. You can never get free of the devil's hidden workings in your soul.

In fact, the D.A.E. teaching is blatantly manipulative. Although it uses the language of strength and battle, the D.A.E. teaching fosters an attitude of victimization. It makes the Christian personally helpless in the face of demonic attack. *he always needs someone wiser and spiritually gifted—invariably a leader—to come to his rescue. The Church's usual remedies for temptation—prayer and fasting, regular confession, avoiding occasions of sin—are no longer enough. The Christian is a soul constantly under siege. The reason for this is that his mind is not his own. The Christian's thoughts and imagination are the devil's playthings and his mind Satan's playground. The only real hope is to submit his own life and consciousness to others and what occurs to them in deliverance prayer.*

Of course, the victim of Satan's attacks is not personally to blame (usually). If Satan is attacking, then Satan is at fault. If you take something from someone, you sin. But you are not responsible for the spirit of theft that is oppressing you. However—and this is key in this teaching—you are responsible for cooperating with the Lord's work of deliverance. If Christ has set you free from a destructive spirit, then you are guilty if you continue to act as that spirit wants you to. You are refusing Christ's gift and, in effect, invite that spirit back in. This is the key to the manipulation of consciences in the name of spiritual warfare. Let's look at an example.

For three years Cindy had belonged to an intense spiritual community. About two months ago she became engaged to Rick, but lately she has had misgivings. Rick has

turned out not to be the gentle person she thought. He was becoming increasingly bossy. In private she has called him a “control freak”. Sister Linda, who has been pastoring Cindy for the past year, encouraged her to look past these faults. But Cindy couldn’t get these misgivings behind her. So Sister Linda proposed that she and some other leaders pray with Cindy for deliverance. Of course there could be no question of refusing this great spiritual help. During the prayer, one of the leaders closed his eyes and spoke softly but firmly: “I really sense the presence of a spirit of rebellion. I think we should cast it out.” Sister Linda concurred, and she whispered to Cindy, “Just renounce that spirit of rebellion, and we will command him to go back to hell, where he belongs.” About half an hour later the prayer was over. The leaders gave Cindy a warm hug. She was spiritually free. Those demons had no more claim on her.

The next day Cindy went out with Rick. He didn’t like her hair-cut: “From now on, let it grow long”, and he found her open-toed shoes “immodest”. Her thoughts on the Palestinian question were “irrelevant”. Back home, she got a call from her older sister, and they chatted for an hour about everything, including Rick. “Boy, Sis, he sounds like Dave did before we got counseling. You don’t want to start out marriage like that, believe me.” When class was canceled the next day, she spent two hours in the chapel praying. There she found the peace the leaders had promised her. Marrying Rick would be a mistake. She decided to tell Sister Linda and then meet with Rick.

It was at this point that Cindy’s deliverance was used against her. When she heard about the date and the phone call and the prayer time, Sister Linda did not smile. She spoke gravely. After being delivered from a spirit of rebellion, Cindy has gone right back and given in to fleshly hurt feelings. She let the devil right back in. And why, when Sister Linda has made herself so available—“You know you can call me any time!”—did Cindy take such an important matter to her sister, outside the spiritual covering of the

Body of Christ? “I know your sister means a lot to you, but she doesn’t have the spiritual discernment you need. I would think that the fact she found it hard to live peaceably with her own husband would have told you something.” She went on: Cindy’s emotions were misleading her. Of course Cindy felt “inner peace”. Once she surrendered to Satan’s plan, he stopped bothering her. Surrender IS a kind of peace. But if she carried through with her plans to break up with Rick, she would lose all the spiritual progress she had made (“and we had such really high hopes for you”). The consequences could even be eternal. Crestfallen, ashamed, and confused, Cindy acquiesced. Five months later she embarked on an unhappy marriage with Rick.

Such manipulation is possible because it breaks down the boundaries between the self and the non-self. Sister Linda was interfering with a deeply personal decision, one that touched the core of Cindy’s heart. She did this under the guise of dealing with alien entities (demons) who were enemies to both her and Cindy. She really believed she was doing Cindy a great favor. But neither she nor Cindy knew any longer where to draw the line between the devils that are everywhere and Cindy’s own spirit. As a result, Cindy forfeited a fundamental decision to the community’s leaders. In a sense, she forfeited her self.

The story of Cindy (and by the way, I know at least two “Cindy’s”) illustrates another source of spiritual abuse—spiritual blackmail. Those who have this special wisdom and discernment claim to provide a spiritual shelter or “covering” for their followers. Anyone under this covering is supposed to be safe from Satan’s wiles. However, for those foolish enough to leave there is hell to pay—literally. They are taught Satan will take full advantage of their exposure. *“Most people who leave this protection fall away from the faith. They become worldly and turn back to old sins. Their children often become promiscuous or drug addicts. Jesus will not protect you if you turn your back on*

the shelter he has provided.” If devils are everywhere, they have immense power to destroy the lives of the unwary.

Escaping the D.A.E. Trap

As with every other trap in this book, the D.A.E. teaching mixes the truth with some important errors. Knowing the truth is the key to freedom.

Devils are—in a sense—everywhere, but they can’t do everything. God is in control. And he puts us in control. “Resist the devil,” writes St. James, “and he will take flight.” (Jas. 4: 7) St. Peter tells us, “Resist him (Satan), solid in your faith, realizing that the brotherhood of believers is undergoing the same things throughout the world.” (1 Pet. 5: 9) This is a command to YOU. If the devil is attacking YOU, then YOU can resist him. The devil’s attack may be subtle and unexpected at times, but it always has the same goal—to get you to sin. The way to resist him is by resisting sin.

“But how do I know if Satan is inspiring me? Don’t I need a wiser Christian to tell me?” God has blessed you with a mind, and your mind can know the truth. Of course it is good to seek counsel of wise Christians. It is necessary to read the Scriptures and learn the Church’s teachings, especially moral teachings. Satan can deceive; he is the father of lies. But this does not mean that we can’t use our heads to find out the truth. Cindy knew everything she needed: She wanted to get married, but Rick belittled her and tried to control her. Her sister, who had almost lost her own marriage to someone similar, advised caution. Cindy loved God and wanted to do his will. There was nothing hidden she needed to know beyond this. But the D.A.E. teaching said there was, that her own power to know the truth was not enough.

The truth is that Christ gives us what we need to resist the devil. God also exercises his control over Satan through his Church. Probably because their doctrines come from fundamentalist Protestant sources, the D.A.E. teachers always ignore the power of the sacraments. The truth about the sacraments is that they cause what they signify. Baptism is not just a ceremony to express a faith commitment and welcome someone into the Church. It really does join a person to Christ. A baptized person cannot be stolen away from Our Lord by an innocent, non-sinful decision (like not marrying Rick). Likewise, the Sacrament of Reconciliation really forgives sins. They are wiped away, and the hold Satan had because of them is broken. Frequent confession—even of venial sins—has a cumulative effect. It steadily breaks down whatever hold on our habits the devil might have built up. One confession does not drive Satan away forever, but regular confession wears him down and weakens his power to influence us. And in the Eucharist we are joined to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. We actually join him in his act of defeating Satan. Because she has the sacraments and God’s Word, the Church is competent to handle the devil. Catholics should not live in fear of him.

From time to time, for reasons we don’t understand, God allows Satan to take possession of a person’s body. Such demonic possession is rare. It is never to be dealt with by a lay person. Canon Law explicitly places all matters of real exorcism into the hands of the local bishop. Exorcism is a difficult and dangerous matter; taking into one’s own hands is dangerous foolishness.

Underlying much of the D.A.E. teaching is a spirituality that expects victory to be the norm in this life. *We who are Christians—especially good people like you and me—should be completely free from all that negative stuff. So if we are spiritually alert, under the Lord’s “spiritual covering”, clothed in the whole armor of God, and confident in the Lord’s resurrection power, then we will “kick butt”, spiritually speaking, and*

overcome everything the devils send our way. In fact, we are all sinners and inclined to sin. The Christian life is not a life of unremitting victory. Christ overcame Satan—yes—but at the price of his own agony and death on the cross. We share his battle by battling the sin in our hearts, not by finding new demons to cast out. If we want really to share his victory, then we must also accept Christ's lot in this life. This may well mean frustration, defeat, suffering, and death. This was Christ's way and the way of his saints.

Chapter 9—Deny Your Self

“Jesus gave everything to us. We owe him everything.” Joanne, a member of the leadership team, spoke in a quiet, slow, firm voice to the 800 women on the retreat. “But what do we have of our own to give back to him? ...our families? ...our homes? ...our talents? All these things come from God. In fact ... there is nothing—no good thing—we have that doesn’t come from God.

“What does this mean, then? It means you have nothing of your own to give him. The only things you really own are your sins!”

It fell to another speaker, towards the end of the retreat, to nail this point down in practical terms. Believing we have something good enough to offer God is pride. Holding our own ideas is pride. “Not to submit your thoughts, beliefs, and your opinions to the pastoral leaders for correction is the capital sin of pride.”

Denying Your Self—A False Humility

Jesus called us all to self-denial. At the point in his public ministry when he began talking about his own passion and death, he also started calling his disciples to the cross. “Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it.” (Lk. 9: 23-24) The disciple of Jesus must be prepared to be treated as Jesus was, to suffer as he did—to lay down his own life, if need be. He warned his apostles not to seek high places and titles. Following our Lord, St. Peter exhorts us to humble ourselves under God’s mighty hand (1 Pet. 5: 6). The very intelligent and commanding St. Paul called himself the least of the apostles and the greatest of sinners (1 Cor. 15:9). In his Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord said, “Blessed are the meek,

the lowly.” In the ancient world, only the Jews and the Christians thought humility was a virtue. And one of the constant signs of authentic spiritual renewal in the Church is this sense of humility, of self-denial.

By contrast, the consumerist culture of the United States and Western Europe has fostered a cult of self. The most important goal in life is to be self-fulfilled. The highest moral value is to be true to self. When Frank Sinatra sang, “I did it my way,” the point was not that he was skilled or successful, that he achieved something of value or beauty—but that he expressed his own self. We read in popular publications of people who suddenly abandon all their responsibilities to adopt a new life-style and “find themselves”. The goal of serious art any more is not to create something of grace and beauty, but to break convention and express the artist’s inner self. This attitude carries over into education, where many professional educators believe that anything a student writes, paints, or draws is good, because it flows from his real self. The result of such “selfism” is selfishness. Quite rightly, many Christians have rejected it.

If humility is a real virtue and ‘selfism’ is so wrong, why do we call “Denying Your Self” (D.Y.S.) a sanctity trap? *As with most of these traps, the problem is with a one-sided application of the truth.*

Evelyn had belonged to her religious group for almost ten years, but she never felt she fit in. An avid newspaper reader, she jumped with relish into political discussions. Her father was a “rugged individualist”: “If you don’t watch out for you, no one will.” She obediently tried the long skirts, veils at meetings, downcast eyes, and ‘womanly thoughts’—and she felt she was in a cage going crazy. Evelyn wanted to be a good community woman. So she sought help and guidance of the group’s pastoral team. A ‘handmaid was assigned her.

“You have to be peeled,” the handmaid said. “Layer by layer—like an onion—you need to be peeled. With prayer and deliverance and counseling, we’ll strip away everything you have learned from your parents, schools, religion teachers, and friends. We’ll strip away your attachments and attitudes, your interests and worldly beliefs. Then when your core is laid bare, we’ll build you back up into the Evelyn that Christ wants and sees.”

What was Evelyn’s problem? Some people might say she was in the wrong kind of group for someone with her interests and personality. But the pastoral team’s position was that her interests and personality were themselves the problem. The group was for every committed Christian; if she didn’t fit in, the problem was with her. Living out the Christian life, then, was not a matter of knowing herself or finding her place. Evelyn herself didn’t matter. All she needed to know was the community’s way of life. Everything personal and individual, whatever comes from inside her, must be rooted in sin. So her duty was to repent of it all and learn to do what is rooted in Christ (as that community understood it).

I have had some personal experience of this sort of thing. For a while I belonged to a tightly-knit charismatic community that eventually tried to foster a certain vision of ‘manliness’ among its men. Men were to take command, to do battle, and to relate to each other in authentically masculine brotherhood. From childhood I have been a shy, bookish person. It is nothing pathological; my shyness does not cripple me. On the other hand, I am not a take-charge team leader or a natural salesman. I don’t dance or join into activities at large parties very well; I’d rather talk with a few friends. I’m the sort of guy Garrison Keillor makes his “Powder Milk Biscuits” for. However, this shyness did not fit in with our community’s vision of what a man should be, and pastoral leaders began urging me to become more outspoken, talkative, and even boisterous. In my life I have

had to repent of my share of sins—to be sorry for them and try to avoid them in the future. But the hardest thing I even tried to repent of was being quiet and shy. I can repent of immorality and sin, but not of who I am.

We can take a lesson from “the greatest basketball player on the planet”. In 1993 Michael Jordan ‘repented’ of basketball and became a minor-league baseball player. When we saw him on TV, he was no longer feinting and faking, spinning and leaping impossibly high, changing hands and slamming the ball through the hoop; he was in left field dropping routine fly balls. Jordan has always been moral—a good sportsman and role model—whether in basketball or baseball. But when he tried to become a baseball player, he was only mediocre.

On a social or communal level, the Amish push this to extreme. Anything new, fancy, or original is a sign of ‘Hochmut’—pride. But other, more conventional Christians adopt the same attitude by seeing their jobs or careers as not being their ‘real’ work. “I teach school/repair cars/balance account books to earn money. My real work is what I do for God at home or in the prayer community.” According to this view, a Christian should be a good employee, because the Bible commands servants (slaves) to obey their masters and serve them well. The work they feel they want to do is not important. Building the better mousetrap does not build up the Kingdom of God. And artistic or athletic excellence is often considered just a way of showing off; better to add your beautiful soprano voice to the chorus than to display it in a solo. In other words, natural desires and gifts have nothing to do with holiness and everything to do with pride. They are nothing before God.

Some Lessons from the Military

In 1968 I was invited (under pain of \$10,000 fine and five years in prison) to join an organization that suppressed all individuality. They gave us each a number. They took away our own clothes and made us all dress alike. They shaved our heads, marched us in straight lines and let us speak only when spoken to. All our activities were regulated—going to bed and getting up, meal times, cigarette breaks. The organization was the U.S. Army, and the place was a Basic Training battalion at Ft. Campbell. For those eight weeks, everything about us belonged to the Army. “You miss your wife? If the Army wanted you to have a wife, we would have issued you a wife!” “You want to call your mother? Around here, *I’m* your Mama—and your Papa!” And it really did not matter if you were a master woodcarver, a violinist, a breeder of champion livestock, or the funniest kid in your class. You had to fit the Army mold.

The Army had good reasons for this. A war was going on, and they needed soldiers to fight it. The goal of basic training was to train healthy young men to fill well-defined slots in combat units. The Army’s concern is not for the individual as such but for the unit and its military mission. Under the peculiar circumstances that the military faces, this makes sense. Armies are regimented because they come in regiments. Although we all grumbled (soldiers always grumble), we understood the point.

In fact, however, the military learned the hard way that being a good soldier is more than just being a good soldier. During the Korean War several American POWs stunned the country by publicly accusing our country of terrible crimes. By torture, intense psychological pressure, and manipulation of their environments, their Chinese captors had induced these men to condemn their own country. This phenomenon of *brain-washing* raised a host of serious questions. Granted that POWs were under extreme stress

and that the Chinese techniques were uncommonly sophisticated; it was still troubling that so many men fell so completely to their machinations. Somehow these men had lost their grip on their identity as Americans. Having been captured and stripped of external supports, they had no inner resources with which they could resist their Communist tormentors. Being proficient soldiers was obviously not enough. We were reminded that the good soldier must also bring spiritual resources—especially love of his country and loyalty to it—to the war. We expected American soldiers to be more than mere mercenaries or conscripts. Even a soldier needs a strong sense of self—something these men seemed to lack.

Now the Body of Christ is not an army. In the eyes of God none of us is simply another soldier, assigned a serial number and put into a unit. If it is important in the army to have a strong sense of self, how much more important it is in the Church, under the Lord who fashioned and called each of us before we were even born.

What Is a Self?

Hardship and suffering reveal who we really are. A couple of incidents from the life of Karol Wojtyla (now Pope John Paul II) show us clearly what kind of man he is. They help us find the keys to the self.

Wojtyla was a 19 year old student when the Nazis overran Poland. They held that country in an iron grip, exploiting its resources and people. Hitler's goal was not only "Lebensraum"—"living space"—for the German Reich, but also the elimination of "inferior" peoples and their cultures. To his mind, the Slavic peoples were especially inferior. Some young Poles took up arms, secretly joining the Polish resistance. Others organized underground cells to keep Polish culture alive. Young Wojtyla helped to form one of these cells, a secret theater company. No longer allowed to attend the university, he

worked days in a stone quarry. Then at night he and his friends would rehearse their plays and present them to small audiences in secret. Had they been caught they would have been arrested and sent to the concentration camps. But they risked this to keep the spirit of Poland alive.

During the war Wojtyla decided to become a priest. Since the Nazis had closed the seminary, the archbishop instructed his seminarians privately. At the end of the war, the archbishop returned to his palace and re-established his seminary there. Unfortunately, the Nazis had badly used the building. In one room they had dumped garbage and human waste. The stench was overpowering, and no one would enter the room for fear of being sick. No one except Karol Wojtyla. The brilliant student, playwright, and future pope grabbed a shovel and went in alone to clean the room.

To know these stories is to know much about who Pope John Paul II is. We clearly see two important aspects of his self. The first aspect is his heritage—what he had received from nature, his parents, and his culture. He was bright, with a natural affinity for language, poetry, and the theater. When some took up arms in secret and others fled to England to form Free-Polish brigades, Wojtyla turned his gifts toward the preservation of the Polish soul. Knowing his background, skills, gifts, physical traits, and native intelligence is one key to who this man is. These things are part of his *heritage*.

The second aspect is character, based on values. Faced with that stinking room, the young seminarian could easily have said, “Well, I’m a student, not a sanitation worker. My job should be to arrange the books in the library. Someone else can shovel ...” But he did not do this. He did what had to be done. He put his own interests aside—for *no one* has a natural inclination to spend an entire day wading in his enemies’ excrement and shoveling it. We know that Karol Wojtyla loved God and his colleagues enough to

undertake something truly disgusting for their sakes. This tells us who he is and what we can expect of him. This act reveals the character of his self.

Character is based on values, on a strong sense for good and evil. Several years ago the movie *When She Says 'No'* ran on television. This true story concerned a young woman attending a professional convention. After she spilled a drink on her dress during a reception, she went to her room to change—followed by three male colleagues. They urged her to change clothes in their presence. Despite her insistence that she wanted not to, they then pressured her into sex. Upon returning home, she filed rape charges against them, alleging that they had intimidated her, even after she had said 'no'. Several writers criticized the movie and the woman, because they found it incredible that she could have been so naive and compliant. Yet, it was a true story.

What is especially interesting about this movie was the profession of those involved. The meeting was a regional convention of the American Philosophical Association. These people were philosophers—lovers of wisdom and experts in the thoughts of the wisest and the smartest minds in history. Compare this woman's behavior with that of Maria Goretti, an 11 year old Italian peasant, whose First Communion was delayed almost until her twelfth birthday, because she could not read. Her life was one of field and household work, with almost no chance for schooling. When a neighbor, Alessandro Serenelli, attempted to force her at knife point into having sex, she steadfastly refused, telling him, "It is a sin." She died rather than to consent to the attempted rape. St. Maria Goretti knew who she was, because she knew clearly what was good and what was evil. The violated philosopher knew a lot, but she did not know where to draw the line for herself.

Who I am—my self—is ultimately determined by my character, by the virtuous use of my heritage in love.

Self-Denial and Denying Your Self

During a forum on abortion at Notre Dame right after *Roe vs. Wade*, an outraged audience member charged one of the speakers, a doctor, with being selfish: “How can you deprive a desperate woman of needed medical treatment [meaning an abortion] just for the sake of your own conscience—so that you can sleep nights!” In a way, this outburst points to the difference between self-denial and denying your self. Suppose the doctor were loading his golf clubs into the car on a Wednesday afternoon. His elderly next-door neighbor is trimming the hedges, when he suddenly collapses, clutching his chest and hoarsely whispering, “Help me! My heart!” If that doctor were to jump into his car and drive to the country club, we would reproach him. Obviously, he should deny himself by giving up his tee-off time to save a man’s life. But the questioner at the abortion forum was saying something different. She was challenging him to turn his back on his conscience, on his belief in the value of unborn life. In effect, she put his dislike of abortion on the same level as his annoyance at being late for tee-off. What she was asking him, however, was to deny his very self.

In his play *A Man for All Seasons*, Robert Bolt presents this same point in the contrast between St. Thomas More and Richard Rich. Rich knew whom he admired and what was the right thing. But for the sake of wealth, position, and reputation, he chose to perjure himself. He refused to deny himself these advantages and so became whatever Cromwell and the King wanted him to be. By contrast, More eventually lost everything on earth—books, friends, family, freedom, and finally his life—because he would not deny

the truth and do what he knew to be wrong. He did not particularly want to deny himself, but he had to in order to avoid denying his self.

Your heritage is a good thing. It is a gift from God. In reality *you* are a gift from God. The fact that you are funny or musical or intelligent or good with your hands is God's gift to the world. He has made the world a happier place by putting you with your sunny disposition and sense of humor in it. If you are sober and cautious, it is because God wants you to help bring prudence and common sense into the world. It is not only the Mozarts, Shakespeares, and Michael Jordans who brighten up this world with creativity. Each of us brings creative human gifts to others. You really are God's gift to the human race—even if you are not the only one!

Love is a matter of self-giving. If I have no self to give, then I cannot really love. I have to love as the person I am. The old medieval tale tells of the poor juggler who had no gift for our Lady on her feast. So in the dead of night, long after the High Mass, he stood before her statue and juggled for her alone. Each of us must give of what he or she has.

Sometimes, of course, special talents and favorite things have to be put aside. A college-graduate, her mind energized by four years of studies, marries and soon has a baby. For the next ten years she can almost feel her brain stagnate; she worries that she will never use a three-syllable word again. She has to put some of her heart's desires aside. A scientist I know has seriously cramped her career opportunities in research by choosing to care for an elderly grandfather. It's an open secret in the corporate world that men who opt for the "daddy track"—40 to 50 hours per week, most weekends free, vacations in the summers, time off for childbirth—cripple their career prospects in most companies. To

give up what you love and are good at, just for the sake of giving it up, is pointless. But sometimes love demands putting a higher good in its place.

The speakers quoted at the beginning of this chapter called their hearers to deny that they had any intrinsic, personal value, that they had any love of their own to give to God. The miracle of God's creative love is that what he has given us is really ours. Every good gift does come from our heavenly Father, but what he has given me is really mine. If I deny the self that he has created me to be, then I effectively deny his generous gift. Furthermore, because that self is founded upon the values I embrace, if I forfeit my love of those goods and—out of “humility”—let someone else make my decisions, then I have no ‘self’ at all. I have become someone else's creation. By denying my self in this way, I become something God never had in mind.

Chapter 10—Big Happy Family

As she hung up the phone, Martina could feel the beast roaring inside her. For almost an hour she had begged her sister Rose for help, for a way out. But Rose didn't understand. Even though she had offered—even that night—to drive down from Cleveland, Rose didn't understand. She probably couldn't help either. How do you make someone understand about that beast inside—the beast that keeps roaring, “You haven't done enough! You're letting everyone down!” ... the beast that you would run through the wall to escape ... that dark, malignant beast that will not stop squeezing your heart and shouting into your mind. Rose just didn't understand. She couldn't help. Martina picked up the phone again and called Deborah.

At noon the next day, Deborah Schaedler and her father came to Martina's college dorm to move her out and into their own home and the warmth of their church family. With one decisive stroke, Martina ended her college career and her relationship with her own family.

Martina was the perfect daughter, an All-American star in an immigrant family from eastern Europe. A popular girl in high school, she had graduated with honors, seventh in her class. Those who knew said that had she not sprained her ankle in the last regular-season match, she would have led the volleyball team to the regional and possibly to the state championship. For her achievements Duquesne University offered her a generous scholarship. At home she was the jewel of the family, unfailingly helpful, sweet of temperament, and sparkling in personality. Everyone expected great things of Martina.

The summer following Martina's graduation proved almost disastrous for the family, however. One brother got into serious trouble with the law, and the court ordered him into a residential alcohol-treatment program. Recriminations circled within the home. Mama was heartbroken that "once again" one of her children had let her down. Rose, the oldest, came to help out, but she had her work in Cleveland. Another daughter argued constantly with Mama, trying to get her to "lighten up". Papa retreated into his work and wood-shop. Then, without warning, he was struck with an acute viral infection. For a week he lay in the hospital near death. It was only a week before Martina's departure for Pittsburgh that he was finally out of danger.

During that summer no one noticed Martina's own emotional slide. She needed someone to talk to—but to ask for it would have been 'selfish'. Mama was suffering so much with Roger's drinking problem and Papa's illness. Rose helped some, but she was in Cleveland. Martina was torn by guilt. She began to resent her mother's emotional needs. But like the good girl she always was, she helped her mother and tried to make her life easier. In her mind, her resentment simply showed how selfish she really was. Her only real comfort and understanding was at Deborah's house, where she began to visit more and more often.

Life at the Schaedler's was more than the life of one family. Their life was life in the church. Mr. Schaedler was the chief elder in a small Pentecostal church just next door to their home. And the church was like an extended family. And Martina found peace there. Instead of constant demands, there was acceptance. Instead of Mama's perpetual cloud of guilt, Mrs. Schaedler filled the kitchen with hymns as she worked. And if Papa was never there for her at home, Mr. Schaedler's confidence and strength filled the house with a presence of peace and security. He was a man not afraid of his

wife's moods, a man who could handle any crisis. And he had a special sensitivity towards Martina. She felt safe with her friend's father and admired him.

Martina finally cracked at Duquesne. She could have done well in her studies, but she believed her family expected the 3.8 average she carried in high school. She knew she would fail and let Mama down again. She tried praying, but God didn't give her a miracle. Instead of studying, she often took the bus trip back across the state line to visit the Schaedlers. Finally, when she could no longer manage the beast inside, Martina took the drastic step toward peace. She broke from her family and her Catholic faith. She joined the happy family.

The Idealized Family

Family is one of our basic values. We all want good family life. Family means security, safety, and acceptance. Family means love. To an extent that most of us come to appreciate only in mid-life, our families make us who we are.

Every family begins with love. Two people choose each other as partners for life and promise themselves to each other. They seal and confirm that gift by the most intimate act of sharing possible between human beings. Of course, many couples do not carry through with that promise. Most live it out imperfectly. Young people usually bring immature motivations to marriage. Nevertheless, the marriage vow in the church and its consummation in bed are fundamentally expressions of one lifelong act of love.

The result of the couple's love-making is that the family grows. Children are the natural fruit of their parents' love. Biologically they receive their physical traits from their parents. Through the experience of daily life in the home their minds—what they believe and value—are formed. Human children are not like the sea turtles that hatch alone and

then find their way unaided to the water. Their parents form them both physically and spiritually. The family love is creative.

The family is a small community of life and love. Each family has to put together a pattern for their common life. Someone has to cook each meal. The home must be cleaned and maintained. Recreational activities are often shared. Peace and order must be preserved. Love is the fundamental law of family life. Usually no one is “rewarded” for contributing to family life. Family life ‘works’ to the extent that members give themselves generously for the good of the whole.

However, American family life is far from the ideal. Our society is marked more and more by separateness and isolation. It is fair to say that too many Americans feel they don’t *belong*. They are alone. In part, our prosperity and mobility are responsible for this. For example, my wife and I were both raised in the Great Lakes region, but today we have parents, brothers, and sisters scattered from Virginia to California, from the shores of Lake Erie to the Gulf of Mexico. The modern American way of life breaks down local traditions and folkways, especially in our larger cities. The “Southerner” you meet in Atlanta may have grown up in Boston and married in Detroit. This mobility erodes our attachment to neighbors, for we may no longer share common customs with them. Folk music and art no longer arise out of a shared life; they fall more and more into the spheres of hobbyists and devotees. Instead of folk cultures, we have developed a national mass culture. No longer do we gather for traditional dances, songs, and stories by local artists. We turn instead to mass entertainment coming out of the major cities through electronic media. The people we know are no longer the people who have always lived around us. Family and neighbors simply do not shape our lives the way they once did. We are a disconnected society.

What all this comes down to is this: For Americans, a life is not what you *inherit* but what you *make*. Choice is more decisive than heritage. This freedom brings great advantages. But it also puts a real burden on the individual. Now your fate is in your own hands; your life is what you make of it—and often in direct competition with others. The governing idea of adult American life—from college (or even high school) on through the work-place—is self-reliance and competitiveness. It is up to you to carve out your niche, to select your studies, to show your mettle. Nobody will take care of you. Gone are the career tracks defined by employers. You must sell yourself and define your own career.

Similarly the old customs of courtship and mating have broken down. Finding a mate after graduation is a daunting task. Again, it all falls on the individual. We have maximized our freedom—but at a price. Few of us now have the emotional support of an inherited life, of a solid social and cultural network to identify with, somewhere where we *belong*. But this sense of belonging is still a fundamental human need. The theme song to the TV show *Cheers* expresses this well: “You want to go where everybody knows your name.”

The Waltons Myth

One of the best-loved TV shows of the 70s was *The Waltons*. The Waltons were, in a way, the ideal family. They were a large family—Ma and Pa, five children, and two grandparents. Their home was a haven of safety, large and light and warm, at the top of a beautiful but also dangerous mountain. Conflicts arose in the family—sometimes even serious ones—but none so severe that they destroyed the family. Instead the strong family bonds and Ma and Pa’s wise guidance drew the children together into genuine love and care for each other. Love was unconditional. Because you were a Walton, you belonged—no questions asked. There were no entrance requirements, no performance

reviews. Everyone had to work, but no one's status as a Walton ever depended on efficiency or productivity. And every night, as the warm lights in the house went off, the family reaffirmed their bonds with each other: "G'night, Ma ... Good night, Elizabeth ... Good night, John Boy ..." As American society raced forward, we looked back at the Waltons as the kind of family we wished we could still have. We can call this the "Waltons Myth".

The Artificial Family

"*It's SO NEAT! We're just like a FAMILY.*" This is probably the highest praise a young person can give to a youth group. A good parish or religious youth group does provide many experiences that seem to be "what family is all about". The most important of these is acceptance. Unlike high school with its classes and cliques, youth group members don't have to measure up. Just belonging and participating are enough. Members share time together doing something meaningful—praying, singing, learning, or working on service projects. And at the end of every project or meeting, there are "hugs all around". The group, *as a group*, is important. Young people in a good group come to realize that together they can grow and make a difference. What matters most in the group is not competition and personal achievement, but the love of God and neighbor. And so, if the group is well-led and working right, members will compare it to a family.

This dynamic can be a potent tool for good. By fostering a sense of mutual friendship, concern for each other, and common purpose, wise leaders can help young people express, deepen, live out, and spread their faith. In this they can counter much of the corrosive cynicism, competition, and isolation that form too much of the atmosphere in high school. A closely-knit youth group, whose members feel they belong to each other, can tap the natural generosity of young people.

However, a youth group is also a temporary thing. As quickly as leaders emerge within the group, just as quickly they disappear. College, marriage plans, military service, and new jobs pull older members out—and with them their maturity and leadership. Thus, as valuable as emergent youth leadership may be, the adult leaders have to provide the overall stability, continuity, and leadership. For young people themselves eventually outgrow the group and move on.

This phenomenon is important for our present topic—the Big Happy Family (B.H.F.) trap—because it provides the trap’s setting. A healthy young people’s group must be temporary. But the idea suggests itself: “If we’re just like a family, why don’t we make our relationship permanent? Why not form a *spiritual* family? Instead of blood relationships we will commit ourselves spiritually and make a covenant with each other to belong to each other.” Such a “family” will involve its members’ entire lives and not just monthly projects or weekly meetings. Because the covenant is permanent, they will never outgrow their relationships. The covenant becomes the central relationship. If the group is to last, even marriage and educational commitments will be made in terms of the spiritual family commitment. As one woman concisely put it: “God help me, if I ever think of leaving our covenant for the sake of getting a man.” An artificial family is born.

In a real sense, this artificial covenant family is a spiritual application of the “Waltons Myth”. The family is a haven of warmth, security, and belonging in a dangerous world. “Out there” you are constantly being tested and evaluated, judged and rejected. The most important things—your faith in Christ or your love for Our Lady—are belittled if you mention them. Even in your parish or at home, it seems, you can’t share the deepest, most important things. The spiritual family is a light on a dark and threatening hill. In it love is unconditional. Its only law is the law of love. The one requirement is family loyalty, or covenant love. “You belong here, because you are one of us—we all

belong to each other.” And when conflicts do arise, brothers and sisters in Christ resolve them peacefully under the wise guidance of the leaders. Together the brothers and sisters work together with true family commitment to bring about the Kingdom of God.

The spiritual family would be wonderful—if it were real.

A Reality Check: What Family Really Is

The truth is that the B.H.F. is not a family. Treating it like one leads to a serious spiritual trap, a quicksand of pseudo-sanctity that ensnares the conscience itself. The Waltons Myth is only one part of the truth about family life. We need to look at five other qualities of real families—qualities that we often think are irrelevant or even contrary to family life and love.

1. *Family is not chosen.* Very few people are close friends with all their brothers and sisters. We choose friends from outside our families. Friendship is a matter of the heart—mutual attraction and shared interests. “You are my friend, because I like you and we like the same things.” Brotherhood and sisterhood are a matter of blood, of having the same parents. Sometimes two siblings will be especially close. And there are close emotional ties, even between siblings who don’t much like each other. But common interests and friendship don’t make families. That is why extended family gatherings—reunions and weddings—can be boring for outsiders. These are not friends who share common outside interests; they are relatives who share common family. And so what they talk about is family—family gossip, old stories, tired arguments, latest news.

Because the family is not chosen, it is an excellent school for life and love in the real world. A large part of living as a mature adult is getting on well with people one has

no choice about getting involved with. Friendship with people we like is only one aspect of real life.

2. *Family is boring, an everyday thing.* As much as we celebrate the joys and richness of family life, it is—for the most part—routine. The daily life of a good family is usually uneventful. The prayer meeting, the youth group, the commitment ceremony, are all breaks from the routine, but family life *is* routine. And this is how it should be. Family is where everything is as it used to be and usually is. But it's not exciting.

3. *Like the State, the family is coercive.* According to the “Waltons Myth” family crises are resolved when Ma or Pa sits down and—with wisdom and compassion—helps the children to see what they need to do to be loving people. In real life, crisis resolution is often much less pretty. Ordinary families practice such “conflict resolution techniques” as yelling, name-calling, door-slamming, pouting, the ‘silent treatment’, and crying. Many conflicts are resolved by Mother’s command. “All of you, go to your rooms!” or Father’s order. “All right! Both boys, outside and clean up the garage!” In real families, peace is sometimes a parentally-imposed silence. Not every dispute ends with understanding and mutual appreciation. Not all wounds get healed. Most families have their uneasy truces and unspoken compromises. Beneath the surface are resentments, hurts, and disagreements that have never been resolved. Real families are dysfunctional—more or less—and their members practice denial. The effects of original sin linger on. The family might be a haven from many dangers of the outside world, but it is not a haven from original sin. King David was a man “after the Lord’s own heart”. He wrote many psalms and ruled God’s people. And his son, Amnon raped his daughter Tamar (See 2 Sam 13).

This does not mean that real families are full of hatred or that love is a meaningless facade. It doesn’t mean that families should not try to achieve peace and real har-

mony. And even when relationships are more or less ‘dysfunctional’, family love can still be fiercely loyal. Ten of Jacob’s sons saw fit to sell their younger brother Joseph into slavery, and they didn’t get over the guilt until they discovered him alive(Gen 37-45).

4. *Family ties are permanent.* They persist, no matter what anyone says, wants, or intends. This is not just a matter of DNA or of state-imposed legal consequences. Family members are tied to each others’ hearts. They know they owe each other something—even if they try to deny it. That ‘something’ is a certain kind of love and loyalty. You can’t escape your brother and sister, your parents, your children. Their lives are irrevocably a part of your own, even if you drift apart. In a real sense, they are under your skin.

5. *Family exists to give up its members.* Families are made up of parents and children, and children grow up. Then they leave home. In fact, if they don’t leave, parents push them. Family exists to prepare young people for mature, independent life. No family wants to remain always together. In a real way, the family exists precisely to disintegrate. In the long run, Ma Joad^{††} can’t keep her children together.

The point of these five characteristics is this: The B.H.F. is an illusion. It is not what real family life is like. As we shall see, it often has not much to do with real love, either.

The ‘Trap’ in the B.H.F.

Martina had left college and moved in with the Schaedlers. Still, her sisters tried to meet with her. However, the few conversations they managed to arranged were badly strained—and not only by Martina’s rebellion. By this time, nothing in Martina’s

^{††} in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

life could happen outside Mr. Schaedler's control. Had Martina run off with a boyfriend or a motorcycle gang, some reconciliation might have been possible. But Mr. Schaedler and the elders of the church had shut the door.

The church was a one big family. The members all knew each other and built their entire social lives around the congregation. They also enjoyed the spiritual distinction of being just about the only people in town not damned to hell. They alone obeyed the “full Gospel”. All other Christians—Catholics, of course, but also Baptists and even many other Pentecostals—were lost. Outside their fellowship, the world was in the grip of the devil, and he was trying to destroy each of them, too. Where Martina was concerned, the devil's line of attack was clear. The pastor put it bluntly: “The devil's got a hold of this girl's family.” It was the church's job to protect her from this demonic onslaught. Mr. Schaedler took the role of protector, helping Martina to think rightly and training her to avoid even responding to her family. He insulated her from the outside world. Martina entrusted herself completely to him.

Within her first year in the Schaedler home, a court granted an injunction to ‘protect’ Martina from her family. The next year, she changed her name to Schaedler. Today Martina lives with the Schaedlers in another state and shows signs of physical abuse. She is totally submitted to the Reverend Schaedler.

Martina had serious family problems. Her relationship with her mother needed to change—something that is difficult for any mother and daughter. Right when she especially needed them, the family went into crisis. Unable to cope and drawn by the apparent warmth and security of the B.H.F. of the Schaedler's church, Martina chose flight and ran straight into a trap.

This is NOT an unusual story. The literature on cults, abusive churches, and religious manipulation repeats this pattern again and again. A young person in transition, at odds with his parents (or even just trying to live according to his own ideals) enters a group where there is ‘real’ family love, where hypocrisy and denial don’t corrupt relationships, where people actually do understand and care for each other. And six months later, the natural parents or siblings begin to realize that they are cut out of his life, that this new spiritual family has replaced them completely. In fact, they are now the “enemy”, “agents of Satan”, whose effect on him can only be destructive. A son or daughter, brother or sister is lost for good.

Some Warnings about the B.H.F.

1. *Acceptance and love are never instantaneous.* Friendship and loyalty don’t blossom in a day. ‘Love bombing’ may make a person feel loved and accepted, but in fact, it is an emotional investment that will be collected later. A true friendship—even between people who “hit it off” from the start—must be built up slowly, as friends come to know each other and enrich each other’s lives. ‘Instant’ friendship, by comparison, does not grow. Like adolescent infatuation, it needs to be constantly reaffirmed and protected. The new brother or sister in Christ soon feels the need (fostered by the group) to prove his or her loyalty, to maintain the bond of unity by fitting in and doing what is expected. Real friends accept you for who you are—for your love of Janis Joplin and your fascination with chess, for your devotion to your kid sister and even your dislike of too much hugging.
2. *Boundaries are important.* “Hugs all around” seem nice, but they are unreal. Frankly, they are immature. A hug says, “I accept you completely. I welcome you into my heart.” It is the gesture of those who really know and care for each other. Hugs are

for family, close friends, sweethearts. Handshakes are normally the appropriate greeting between acquaintances. The handshake—which is done with the right, or weapon-bearing, hand—says, “I mean you no harm and offer to be just, fair, and open with you.” Greeting a new acquaintance with a hug instead of a handshake is false.

Hugging is a matter of physical intimacy, and B.H.F. groups use it to break down natural barriers. This physical intimacy is usually the prelude to breaking down psychological boundaries. Normally, we don’t share some things with other people. Matters like income and financial assets, personal weaknesses, why you were seeing a counselor, past sins, and when you plan to start having children are none of anyone else’s business. To ask about things like this is rude; it’s called “prying”. Yet in a B.H.F. *not* sharing these things—like not hugging—is ‘rude’; it’s selfish. It means, “you don’t trust us”. Far too often, though, intimate personal facts, shared in confidence with a new brother or sister, will go quickly straight up the tubes to the ears of the leaders. Three years later, when you want to go home for Mother’s Day, the leader will stun and shame you: “You want to visit a woman who beat her five year old child for wetting the bed? And doesn’t she still treat you like a child?” In most such spiritual families, secrets and confidences are routinely betrayed to the leaders in the name of honesty and pastoral concern.

3. *People are people.* No organization can eliminate the effects of original sin. No group can automatically make all its members loving, generous, and understanding. Consider this: No one goes into contemplative religious orders except for love of God. Of all places on earth, a cloistered convent or monastery should be full of love, humility, compassion, and generosity. You don’t look for wealth, fame, power, or sex in a monastery. Contemplative monks and nuns really have given up everything for the glory of God. Yet we know from the lives of St. Bernadette, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and Thomas Merton that contemplative religious houses are full of pettiness, rivalries, ambitions, hurt feelings,

back-biting, and selfishness—even dysfunction. Even a place of complete isolation from the world and its temptations and ambitions is only an opportunity for holiness. Sin can and does flourish in any soul anywhere.

Christ never promised us the company of sinless Christians. He instituted the Church to save us. What this means, though, is that the Church—*and every group within the Church*—is full of people who need his grace to be saved. He did not give us a Church to affirm us or to insulate us from other people’s sins. One of the great myths that B.H.F. leaders repeat is that the early Church—the New Testament Church—was a kind social and spiritual Utopia. *When the Apostles ruled the Church and Christian was on fire with the Spirit—then Church life was different, full of love and peace.* But it never really was that way. St. Paul had to scold the Corinthians for their bickering (1 Cor. 1:10-17). He himself quarreled so seriously with St. Barnabas that they could no longer work together as missionaries (Acts 15:36-39) The reason that his letters are so full of teaching on how to live is that the early Christians were most certainly not all living in peace. In the Church, Christ promises salvation from our sins, but not escape from sinners.

Besides—the point of our life in Christ is to love, not to find the people who make us feel good. A spiritual family that promises more—a perfect community of sinless love—is simply a lie. This is not what Christ gave and his plan does not promise this. There is no “Big Happy Family” on earth.

Chapter 11—Perfection Is Possible

Nothing is more frustrating to the new saint than sin – sin in himself and sin in the world. We want perfection, and after a powerful religious experience we expect it. Thus, the last of our “sanctity traps” is that “Perfection Is Possible” (P.I.P.). The P.I.P. attitude is that even in this life a perfect Christian life is possible. Nor more will sin and guilt weigh down my conscience. No more will temptations cloud my judgment. No more will I struggle with distractions in prayer, because everyday I will say ‘good morning’ to Jesus and walk with him as my constant friend. A young man who had experienced God’s love through the charismatic renewal put it this way:

“I know I’m saved. I know that I will one day see the Lord.”

“But what if you fall away?” I asked him. “Isn’t it still possible for you to lose your salvation?”

He was perfectly confident: “No, I can’t, because God’s work in me was so powerful that I know now he will never let me sin and lose salvation.”

This man was not boasting. He was a kind and humble person who could acknowledge his own weaknesses. However, he was so impressed by God’s power and love that he *knew* that after this experience he could never sin. He was perfectly confident that he was and would always remain in the state of grace.

If this were true, it would be wonderful. In this life, however, we have no guarantees. This is why St. Augustine saw fit to write a book on the “grace of perseverance”, which we must always beg God for. St. Augustine knew that, even after all God had done for him, he could still return to sin. We still have to cope with original sin and its effects.

Each of us is born wounded and separated from God. This is original sin. It is not as though we had sinned ourselves, but because of Adam's sin—followed up by the sins of our parents—we were separated from God. We didn't belong to him or enjoy his sanctifying help. We did not have the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts. Baptism undoes that original sin. In this sacrament we are joined to Christ—transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the Lord's reign of light. Satan has no more claim on us; we belong to Jesus.

Original sin is indeed washed away in Baptism, but its effects remain. One of its chief effects is the weakness of our flesh. Originally, Adam and Eve had no inclination to sin. When they looked upon each other in their original nakedness, for example, they were not consumed with lust, as we would be (Gn. 2: 25). This is why Satan had to tempt them first with pride: "You shall be like gods." (Gn. 3:5) But for us, even after that sin is gone and we are reconciled with God, this weakness remains. Theologians call it *concupiscence*. Something inside us still wants to sin.

How can this be, that sin is forgiven and its effects linger on? It is not so hard to understand, if we think about our ordinary experiences of sin. Suppose a young man has a habit of reading pornography. This is a sin and it leads him to other sins, especially masturbation. Realizing that this is wrong he repents and goes to confession. By the sacrament of Penance his sin is really forgiven. However, the priest in the confessional will instruct him that he must never again touch those publications—even if they have worthwhile articles that he might find useful. Why?—because they are for him an *occasion of sin*. We are creatures of habit, and if we put ourselves into certain situations, they trigger those habits.

Suppose I have always had a cigarette with a cup of coffee during my break at work, and now I want to quit smoking. I can help my “will power” by spending that break in a different way. If I know that a particular photography magazine contains nude photos that stimulate me to sin, then I need to avoid them and find a different source of photographic news and tips. Recovering alcoholics recognize that they cannot simply try to be moderate; they must abstain from drinking alcohol. We have all had experience that repenting and being forgiven of habitual sins does not make us immune to future temptations. It is like that with original sin; the sinful tendencies we were born with still remain. We have to battle them constantly.

This can be a hard pill, however. We don’t like to think of ourselves as weak. Most of us tend to think the best of ourselves. After a powerful religious experience, it is easy to believe that all sin is now behind us. *“I used to be a real ‘potty mouth’. But since I was baptized in the Holy Spirit, I have not even been tempted to use foul language.”* Yes, but since that prayer experience, most of my free time has been spent at prayer meetings and with friends I have made there. Then I play softball at my high school reunion and am shocked to hear what comes out of my mouth—the same things I always used to say in high school!

The Bible makes this truth particularly clear. David was the king “after the Lord’s own heart”. By God’s power he killed Goliath, assumed the throne of Judah, united the two kingdoms, established Jerusalem as the city of the Lord, wrote many psalms, and ruled God’s people well. Then he saw Bathsheba bathing. He committed adultery and then had her husband Uriah killed. David knew God well—and sinned badly. St. Peter spent every day for almost three years with Jesus—days of watching miracles and hearing the eternal wisdom of Christ. By God’s own power he recognized and

testified that Jesus was the Messiah. He vowed he would die for Jesus. Then, in the High Priest's courtyard, while Jesus was being interrogated, he denied his Savior.

The danger here is that I can fall back into serious sin. So long as I know I am weak, a sinner, and needing God's mercy, I won't be foolish about temptation.

Most of Ned's life was spent in drug and alcohol-induced crime. Through the apostolate of some "old women" (as he called them) who used to visit the prison, he was led to a genuine conversion. He confessed his sins, returned to the sacraments, and began to pray regularly. Unlike most prisoners who "find God", he did not try to use religion to get out of prison early. When he did get paroled, Ned managed to keep clean, to grow in prayer and responsibility. Then his cousin offered him a "snort" of cocaine. Ned was confident. He was holy now; he could handle this. He couldn't. Very quickly Ned was back to drinking and using cocaine. His rage and paranoia returned, and he got a handgun. Soon he was again on the run from the police.

Tragically, these are Christians like Ned, who think that Christ has made them invulnerable to old temptations. Christ promised to save us from sin, but he does not make us spiritual supermen.

The "One Thing" that Makes Me Holy

If sanctity can be certified, it is because of some one thing—some experience or act—that puts the Christian beyond the reach of sin. The idea of the P.I.P. is that in the individual Christian's life, some one experience or act can certify his sanctity. This might be a special act of consecration to Our Lady. One book promises: "In the Act of Consecration, our heart is *exchanged*, by divine grace, for Our Lady's heart and then our souls

are purified and cleansed through a focused reconciliation with God.”* This implies that someone consecrated to Mary can have a sinless heart like hers. For many evangelical Protestants this one thing would be their conversion experience. (Thus, the debate arose among evangelical theologians about whether the devil can have any influence over someone who was already ‘saved’.) For some charismatics, this “one thing” was the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Now these things—consecration to Our Lady, a conversion experience, a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit in power—are all good in themselves. The danger lies in seeing them in an exclusive way, as though after this one thing, one is free of all sin and temptation.

A particularly important kind of act is joining a special group committed to holiness. This group will be *so* holy and so attuned to God that if I join their life, then I can’t go wrong. Recall the retreat leader in Chapter 5, who said, “I don’t need to follow Jesus, as long as I keep my eyes on my pastoral leader.” By joining the group I decisively give it all to Jesus. The group certifies my own sanctity. Because it is holy, I am holy—as long as I continue to live its pattern of life.

The Pristine Church

Probably the most important and dangerous kind of certified sanctity is this belief that a “pristine Church” life is possible. The Church is full of sinners and it shows. When his Protestants split from Rome, Martin Luther complained that the priests he ‘inherited’ didn’t even know the commandments. Non-believers love to point to the ‘holy wars’ that Christians have waged against each other. Today we read about pedophile priests. We all know people who look good in Church and even get credit for being “such good Chris-

* In the End My Immaculate Heart Will Triumph, Queen ship Publishing Co., p. 10.

tians”, but who are unscrupulous in business or carry on adulterous affairs. Sometimes the Church seems to be no better than any other well-meaning social organization.

We want a holy Church—one that looks holy and makes us feel holy. What we see, though, is something different. What has gone wrong? Some would trace the problem back to the Edict of Constantine in the 4th Century. By freeing Christians from religious persecution and later making it the official religion in the Roman Empire (so goes the theory), Constantine corrupted the Church and made it worldly. The early Anabaptists of the 16th Century took this to its logical extreme, saying that the institutional churches—Protestant as well as Catholic—were false. They believed that after Constantine the true Church of Christ has survived only in the form of small, intense communities. Some Catholics today trace the Church’s problems to the Second Vatican Council, where—they say—the Council agenda was hijacked and perverted by liberal German bishops. “The Rhine flows into the Tiber,” and pollutes it. If Pope Paul VI could complain that the smoke of hell was seeping into the Church—they say—he had no one to blame but John XXIII, who announced he was “throwing open the windows” to let in some air. The church seems to be too much a part of the world. It isn’t a place to protect my holiness.

Some try to solve the problem of a sinful Church by constructing a pristine church life within the Church. The idea is to form a “local manifestation of the Body of Christ” outside the Church’s institutions. Instead of hesitant, confused, overworked priests, the leaders will be men of tested wisdom and pastoral skill. These leaders will not shilly-shally around where sin is concerned; their community will have clear, effective ways to ‘pastor’ the immature and discipline the disobedient. And the members will not be lukewarm ‘Sunday Catholics’. They will be people of genuine daily commitment, dedicated to permeating every part of their lives with the Christian faith. Their member-

ship will make a whole-life commitment. *Everything* in one's life belongs to the group and its members. They will be a group that looks like the entire Church *should* look visibly holy, filled with the Spirit, and loving one another in a way that stands out as a public witness. They, at least, will be living the Christian life as it should be lived.

A Reality Check

Although it *is* good to strive for perfection and to improve parish life as much as we can, God did not promise us perfection. A look at the Bible should make that clear. The entire Old Testament is the story of Israel's infidelity. God split the Red Sea and saved the rag-tag people of Israel from a powerful army with chariots and armored infantry. But within a couple of weeks, Israel was ready to go back. God led them into the Promised Land, where they overcame powerful peoples. No sooner had they settled down than they started worshipping local idols. God established David and Solomon as kings, but then the Northern Kingdom broke off and found some other gods. The Southern Kingdom didn't do much better, despite the many prophets that the Lord sent them. The Old Testament is the story of human infidelity and divine mercy.

"But that's the Old Testament. They didn't have the Holy Spirit." True enough. Still, Jesus had to chide his disciples about their ambitions. St. Peter denied Christ, and Judas, the traitor, was one of the Lord's inner circle. St. Paul had to scold St. Peter himself, as well as the Christian communities in Corinth and Galatia. Not that he was perfect, either. St. Paul was so annoyed with St. Mark that he did not want him on his second missionary journey. Sts. Paul and Barnabas had a major argument about this and ended up going their separate ways. The Church has always been afflicted with sin. There has always been something going wrong in it.

The common theme in our complaints is that the Church must somehow come out of this world. Emperor Constantine—or the German bishops, or American politics—has made the Church worldly. We are offended when the Church gets involved with money matters or when we hear of power struggles among churchmen. This reflects a deep longing we all share for the Reign of God, where we will all be holy, where “Christian” means that someone is genuinely good. We want to be safe from sin and the devil, somewhere where evil will no longer be able to touch us. God does promise us these things—but not in this life. Jesus promises to be with us, but not to take us out of the world (see Jn 17:11, 15-18). As long as we are here, the world, the flesh, and the devil remain with us, and we must cope with them.

The Scriptural evidence should give us a clue: The Church is not supposed to look pristine. Of course, Christ died to overcome sin, and the Church is the place where he conquers sin. Every Christian, every parish, and every diocese ought to struggle to overcome sin. But the point is not to have perfection. The point is not to dazzle the world with a perfect organization of perfect people. The point is that God has decided to save us from our sins—all of us—and to use sinners to do it. If he wanted things done perfectly, he could have sent angels. It would be no problem for God to set up a Church organization that runs perfectly. But he didn't. The Church is made up of redeemed—and still imperfect—sinners. And he chooses to work through them. The key is not how good we are, but how merciful God is.

The Dangers of the P.I.P. Trap

The fundamental problem with the P.I.P. trap is that it is a lie. As we have just seen, perfect Christians in a pristine Church are not what God had in mind. Believing that perfection is possible leads to both personal and corporate problems.

Spiritual writers warn us against the capital sin of *sloth*. This sinful tendency is not simply laziness. Sloth is a kind of sorrow or sadness about spiritual exertion. Sloth doesn't want to make the effort any more to avoid sin and grow in holiness and love of God. So, it resembles the garden-variety laziness that puts off cleaning the garage or finishing up the fiscal-year-end report. And the desire for "certified sanctity" is actually a form of sloth. It says, 'Can't I be finished now with fighting temptation and occasions of sin? Do I still have to study Scripture to learn from it? Can't I get on with the glorious stuff—prophecies, miracles, mighty works of God and profound inspirations? Do I still have to work on fundamentals?' The answer is "Yes". If concert pianists must practice their trills, scales, and repeated notes, if Michael Jordan must spend the summer working on his jump shot, then Christians must attend to the fundamentals of the spiritual life. Our sanctity is never "certified" in this life. We don't achieve assured perfection before we die.

Most important, the P.I.P. trap leads to the sins against the Holy Spirit: *presumption* and *despair*. If sanctity can be certified and perfection is possible, then where do I stand if I have never had the necessary experience to certify that I am saved? Langston Hughes illustrates this graphically in his autobiographical short story "Salvation". As a child he belonged to a church that taught that every Christian had to have a salvation experience. As a typical young adolescent, he had been into his fair share of mischief. He was a sinner, for sure. Then one Sunday he was prayed over in the hopes that the Holy Ghost would fall upon him and he would be saved. He waited and prayed, but nothing happened. His friends had told him to 'fake it', to babble in tongues, shout and dance. But Hughes really expected God to do something to him. When God did not, he was crushed. God had—so he felt—rejected him. In his case, the P.I.P. teaching had led him to despair. If everyone is supposed to feel this and I don't, then obviously God has rejected me. If everyone else is able to embrace the community's commitment and submit

joyfully to the leader and I feel reservations in my heart, then I must be a hopeless sinner. Everyone else feel joy, and I have suspicions. I wind up despairing of God's grace toward me.

This trap can also lead to the sin of presumption. *Now that I am perfect I'm safe. I pray in tongues, I have undertaken the commitment God called me to. Nothing can go wrong.* I presume upon God's grace, because I no longer need his help for my weaknesses and his mercy for my sins. This is where the Pharisee stood in Jesus' parable (Lk. 18:9-14). He was telling the truth when he thanked God he was not like other men, "grasping, crooked, adulterous", and said that he fasted twice a week and paid tithes. In fact, he was sincerely thankful. But he did not go home justified, because—unlike the tax collector—he did not appeal to God's mercy. He saw himself as beyond all that. He no longer needed to be saved.

This sin of presumption has two bad effects—one annoying and the other dangerous. "Perfect" Christians are annoying, not so much because they boast (although they sometimes do that), but because they can be so defensive. They are too holy to watch *Saturday Night Live*, but the other night "while flipping through the channels", they saw something funny. Deep down inside I am afraid that I might still be sinful, but I hate to be reminded of it. If I have had the "certifying" experience, then no one should call my holiness into question, right? I become defensive.

The genuinely dangerous effect of presumption is that it leads back to serious sin. Remember the story of Ned, who presumed he could dabble again with drugs. The grace of Christ really does transform us. St. Paul could honestly write, "I have been crucified with Christ, and the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me." (Gal 2:19-20) But he also wrote: "I am racing to grasp the prize if possible, since I have been grasped by

Christ Jesus. Brothers, I do not think of myself as having reached the finish line.” (Phil 3:12-13) The attitude of presumption makes the Christian lackadaisical. Very quickly he can fall back into old sins.

Besides the personal dangers of presumption and despair, the P.I.P. attitude is socially destructive; it ruins the Body of Christ. A priest-friend of mine commented on this once. He said that he admired the fervor of a particular group, but he thought their perfectionism was off-base. “As I’ve gotten older,” he said, “I’ve come more and more to see the wisdom of what they taught us in the seminary—‘Save a seat in the last pew.’ It’s good that these people want to be perfect, but you have to leave room in the back of the Church for those who have only enough courage to come in the door.” A church or community of the perfect has no room for sinners, no room for the weak. Paradoxically, the perfect group of perfect Christians has no room in it to do Christ’s main work—having mercy on sinners.

More serious is that the pristine church can quickly lead to a kind of enslavement. If it is by obeying the group that I am holy, then I am its slave. The Bruderhof Anabaptist communities have freely admitted that the worst times in their history were those when—out of desire for ‘unity of mind and heart’—their members stopped listening to their consciences and refused to speak out against errors. If the group is so holy, then anything original I might bring to it can only be sinful. I become a spiritual slave, because only the community can assure my holiness. If a Christian depends on the community to guarantee his holiness, then his guide is no longer Christ, but that group. He must do what his “brothers and sisters” approve and what the leaders want. For example, a Catholic joins a traditionalist group that celebrates a monthly Mass in Latin and also serves as a kind of doctrinal “watchdog” over local religious education programs. Members of this group are intensely aware of their Catholicity, and their habits of frequent Mass and confession keep

them close to Christ. Let us suppose, however, that this one member is invited to work with an inter-faith group at the homeless shelter, providing material services and cleaning the chapel. There is a good chance that many members of his traditionalist group will disapprove of this project. In fact, some of them—leaders included—may suggest that he is “less than fully Catholic”. Such a person might well decide not to join this good work for the homeless (a kind of work, by the way, which the Pope and Vatican II Council expressly approve), because it will cut him off from those who certify his personal holiness.

And if the group believes that they are really the pristine Christian community, they can become arrogant collectively. “The Lord has given us a way of life. We don’t need Mother Teresa to tell us how to be holy.” The member who does not conform is not just odd, but is a sinner. He disrupts the “life God has given us”. A premium is placed, not on virtue, but on conformity. The members lose their own individuality.

The fact is that Christ provides our only assurance. St. Paul writes, “If we hold out to the end we shall also reign with him. But if we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful he will still remain faithful, for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Tim. 2:12-13) Christ is certain, we are not. This means that I cannot trust my own strength. I cannot trust the strength of other people. I can trust only him and his mercy. This is why Christ told us to pray “Thy Kingdom come”, that the Father will establish his reign over us, and “forgive us our trespasses”, because until the day we die, we are in danger of sin. It is only his grace that will carry us to the end, not our own strength, not any act or experience we have.

The Error of “Visible Grace”

In the first chapter I warned that although this book would talk about many different movements and organizations, it would be a mistake to condemn them. Each of the

movements we have looked at in this book has had a strong experiential element—a conversion experience, a sense of empowerment with the Holy Spirit, a new feeling of deep peace, a sudden and new freedom for certain sins, a powerful sense of God’s love. God sends us these things to build us up. But none of these things is itself the faith that makes us holy. Experiences point the way, but they are never the reality.

Here we touch on a central truth of Catholic mystical theology. God cannot be experienced. He is absolutely beyond our senses, feelings and emotions. When you returned to a Latin Mass and found yourself overwhelmed by the majesty, solemnity, and holiness of the Liturgy, your experience was genuine, but it was not God. A sweet warm feeling flowed through your entire body when the prayer group laid hands on you and you broke into tongues. This was a gift of God, but it was not the Holy Spirit. *We can never experience God directly.*

The faith, the hope, and the love that make us holy are invisible and imperceptible. They cannot be felt. This is not because they are less than our experiences. It is because they are greater than our experiences. The faith that makes us holy is a mystical contact with God. Faith is a genuine contact and inner transformation by God. By it he forms himself—as it were—in our souls. It is something deeper than feelings. It is because God is so great and beyond all our sense and imaginings that real faith cannot be felt.

Strange as it may seem, this offers us great hope. Every emotion dies. Latin Masses become routine. The daily Rosary ceases to be sweet and becomes boring. Charismatics have wondered publicly what must be done to recapture that original fire. We can compare this with marriage. After the honeymoon, the loving husband and wife settle into daily life, no longer dominated by delicious romantic feelings. But their love

has taken root on a deeper level. Their entire life has been transformed by their vowed love and shared life. Likewise the Christian's life is transformed, even when it seems that the fire has gone out. In fact—and here is a profound truth that the spiritual writers have often addressed—God often lets us feel his absence precisely so that we will draw closer to him. God is not in the incense or the powerful Pentecostal wind; he is imperceptibly present in the heart. The faith that sanctifies has to trust in that presence and in his mysterious activity.

The truth about faith is that, in a mysterious way, it creates God's image in us. By the natural powers of our minds we cannot accurately know or imagine God. Every picture or idea falls infinitely short of what God really is. The greatness of the gift of faith is that by faith God impresses his own image or nature onto our souls so that in faith we do know him. This knowledge won't come to full fruition until we see him in heaven, but it is real in this life. But because this is a mystical kind of knowledge, we cannot be directly conscience of it. This means that I can never really know how real or strong my own faith is. Only God can know this. All I can do is to pray for faith and then trust in his mercy. But this invisible faith is far more real and enduring than any religious experience God may ever grant. Faith is the real gift.

So the desire for a pristine Church and personal perfection is really a desire for a kind of visible grace. This is natural; we humans live by our senses. But God wants to lift us to his level. And to do this he has to help us get free of this dependence and to walk with him. When we turn back to the "visible graces"—especially when God is calling us to deeper faith—then we fall into sanctity traps.

Chapter 12 Conclusion — Freedom and Sanctity in Love

Ten chapters of traps! Is it worth it? If there is so much to beware of, how can we possibly get through life safely? If so much can go so wrong, what can we trust? How can we be safe? In this last chapter, we can take our eyes off the negative and focus on the positive principles of true spiritual freedom.

As a teenager I tried to learn to play golf. The idea of golf is simple—swing the club and knock the ball into the hole. But as every novice golfer can testify, actually playing gets very complicated. You don't just stand there and swing. You have to keep your head down and eye on the ball, hold your left arm straight; you don't buckle your knees but do rotate your hips slightly, swing the club face straight through the ball (not from outside in or inside out), follow through (but don't lift your head!), and don't dip your shoulder. Oh, and change your grip; the fingers have to interlock. "WAIT!" you want to scream, "How can I keep all this straight?"

The secret, of course, is practice. The beginning golfer has to get out on the practice tee and hit golf balls over and over. Gradually, he gets the hang of keeping his head down and holding that left arm straight. Then he works on the hips, the follow-through and everything else. With help from a teacher and lots of practice, the new golfer soon works the basic elements of a swing into harmony. By the end of his first summer, swinging the club correctly even begins to feel natural. He has learned the basic habits that every golfer needs for playing the game.

The question for us in this book is similar. What we are really looking for is the character of a saint. What are those habits and elements of character that we need to develop to be saints? The goal is simple—to love God and dwell with him eternally. But

the task is complicated. The reason for this is that human beings are complicated. Right at the start, we can draw a few lessons from the golf example.

First, we cannot completely avoid sanctity traps, any more than a golfer can avoid sand traps. We make mistakes and get into bad habits.

Second, much of our growth is a matter of correcting bad habits. Like the golfer who picks up a bad ‘slice’ (hitting the ball so that it actually curves off to the right), from time to time the Christian has to work on bad habits and correct them.

Third, we have to be humble and relax. Accept the fact that you and I are not perfect. We will always make mistakes and have to improve.

In this chapter I will briefly outline the three basic factors that enable us to live free of sanctity traps. These are the three principles of Christian freedom.

1) Reverence Truth

In 1919 Fr. Rupert Mayer attended a discussion group on Communism. The leader of the group, a young man named Hitler, was favorably impressed with the priest and four years later sent him a congratulations telegram on his Silver Anniversary of ordination. Fr. Mayer was popular and well-regarded; his support would have been valuable to any politician. Hitler courted him. At that point the Communist menace was very real in Germany. Many writers, scholars, and churchmen were not as afraid of Hitler’s ‘quirks’ (of course, he still was ten years away from the atrocities of his Nazi regime) as they were of the Marxist threat. But Fr. Mayer would have nothing to do with him. This simple priest saw something that smarter and more educated people missed. He recognized that Hitler had no regard for the truth. He had no scruples about lying.

Cardinal Ratzinger writes that Mayer could recognize in Hitler’s lying and exaggeration the “mask of the Antichrist”. Then Cardinal Ratzinger goes on to say:

“If truth is not held in honor, then freedom, justice, and love cannot flourish. Truth, by which I mean the simple, humble, patient truth of daily life, is the foundation of all other virtues.”*

The opposite of the truth is the lie. We tell lies to manipulate other people. Certainly this is clear in political advertising. Campaign commercials do not—for the most part—inform us about the facts. Instead they mean to inflame us against the candidate’s opponent. As mayor, “Jones” levied a fee on certain forms of garbage dumping. Most voters would probably approve. However, his opponent presents this as “yet another new tax on hard-working citizens”—which the voters won’t like. But what the politicians do on TV, the rest of us do at work, in school, at home, in our business dealings. Cardinal Ratzinger’s point is that every one of those little truths is important, and if someone—like Hitler—regularly distorts the truth for his own gain, then he is using the mask of the Antichrist. Strong language! But truth is a serious matter. Without truth we cannot be free.

The most important truths, of course, are the truths about God. Each human being has an obligation to seek out the truth about God. St. Paul makes it very clear that even those who do not have Revelation can know something about God (Rom. 1:19-23).

In the Scriptures, God reveals the truth about himself. St. Augustine said that ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. The Church reads a portion of Scripture every Sunday at Mass. Over the course of three years, a Catholic will hear most of the Gospels and much of the rest of the Scriptures. At the minimum, then, Catholics should listen attentively to the Sunday readings and meditate on them. In the Liturgy of the

* Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Co-Workers of the Truth*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1992—p. 148.

Word, God speaks to us through the readings. The purpose of these readings is to let us know God better. We can build on this, then, by reading and studying the Bible regularly at home or in study groups.

To learn the truth about God, we have to listen to his word properly. Especially during the Mass, we should listen to God’s word to see what *he* has to say. This should be our fundamental relationship with God’s word. However, we often bring our own agenda to our reading. For instance, suppose I have recently been introduced to a new experience of the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Eagerly I search the Scriptures—especially the Book of Acts—to find everything I can about the Holy Spirit and charismatic gifts. This is good, but it is still what *I* have on *my* mind. I must also simply listen for what *God* has on *his* mind. That is, during the Sunday reading about “if your right eye offends you”, I should pay attention to what God wants to teach me about scandal and occasions of sin. Or for another example, I may be anxious about my teenage children, and I search the Scriptures for wisdom. This is good. But even as I try to guide my own children, God wants to guide me. What he says on Sunday through Matthew 6 about the love of money is for me. I must listen to that.

In other words, *don’t go to the Bible just for answers to your own questions*. Parents know how frustrating it can be when children refuse to listen. Dad wants to explain what an education meant to Grandpa, but his son wants only to talk about getting a car. Dad wants his son to hear something more important. God is *our* Father. We need to listen to what *he* wants to say.

Of course, the Bible is not the only place we learn about God. We also come to know him through the writings of the Church—papal speeches and encyclicals, Council documents, and so on—and the writings of the saints. We also learn about God from

modern teachers and writers, from magazines and cassette tapes. A wealth of religious materials is available from Catholic publishers and through the Catholic press.

“But wait!” I can hear the objections from every side “You can’t simply recommend *everything*. There are heretics and fundamentalists out there. Not everything published by a ‘Catholic’ publisher or written by a Catholic is orthodox. We need to know which writings are *safe*.”

My reply to this objection is concise: “Let Scripture and the Church guide you. Then use your head.” Only the Scriptures are the revealed word of God. Every other book or article on the faith has to measure up to Scripture. The Church provides us with additional guidance. She recommends certain writers as Fathers and Doctors of the faith—St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Thomas Aquinas, and so on. And she canonizes certain people as reliable examples of holiness and wisdom. We can learn from these, too.

Still, you have to use your head. Martin Luther based his new teachings largely on the Letter to the Romans (Scripture) and the writings of St. Augustine (a Father of the Church). Reading the right things does not guarantee that you won’t fall into error. Reading the ‘wrong’ things won’t make you a heretic. When you read, you have to think: “Is this true? Does it make sense to me? Does it fit in with what I already know about the Lord?” God wants you to seek him in love and in truth. If you read humbly (that is, to learn the truth), and you let the Church guide you, then—even if you stray off the orthodox track for a while—God can lead you to him. Heresy is not a matter of mistakes; we all make mistakes. Heresy is ultimately a matter of pride. (This is why we must be very careful about accusing other people of heresy.)

The truth about God is not the only truth. We need to know the truth about our neighbors, especially about those God has put close to us to love. This might seem obvious, but we often pass right over it. A married couple can share their lives, work, bed, and worries—and not talk to each other. Several years ago, social scientists noted a disturbing rise in the divorce rate of couples married about twenty years. After the kids are grown and move out, husband and wife discover they don't know each other. They had focused their marriage on providing for their children and raising them—to the neglect of their own relationship. After two decades, they are strangers! You can't love deeply someone you don't know.

When you know and love someone, you can rely on that knowledge and love. Starting with Eve in the Garden of Eden, human beings have always tended to trust strangers more than those they know well. Eve knew God personally. Then the snake came along with the “lowdown” on God, and she believed him. Shakespeare's *Othello* tells the story of a great general who kills his devoted and faithful wife, Desdemona. Jealous at having been passed over for promotion, Othello's aide Iago insinuates that Desdemona has been unfaithful. He drops hints and cleverly arranges circumstantial evidence to incriminate Desdemona. In the meantime, he professes his love and loyalty for Othello. In the end, Othello murders his wife on the word of a man who hates him. *Othello* is a great play precisely because this kind of thing can happen. In all sorts of ways, it *does* happen. Love for the truth should make every Christian profoundly suspicious of gossip. Most often, the unknown informant with the ‘inside scoop’ is bearing a false tale.

John and Denise belonged to a highly structured spiritual community in which each man had a pastoral ‘head’ and each woman a ‘handmaid’. After about a year of marriage, they found themselves fighting almost constantly. In a community that prided

itself on wisdom for peace in personal relationships, the head and handmaid worked hard to help. John's head met with him, and Denise's handmaid met with her. Then these pastoral leaders would meet to work on the relationship. The head instructed John what he needed to do, and the handmaid instructed Denise. It was a wonderful system—but it didn't do any good.

After several months of watching his marriage deteriorate, John had an inspiration: He proposed to his wife that they cut out the “middlemen” and work out their problems together. Their fights did not immediately stop, but they were back to communicating and into the love that had led them to each other. Soon afterwards they left the group—but they are still married to each other. John and Denise were living through third parties. Their knowledge of each other was replaced by a ‘higher wisdom’ that was really ignorance. Sometimes the advice of a third party can be helpful. But love is based on knowing each other, and this knowledge is irreplaceable.

Common sense is essential in the search for truth—whether this is the truth about God or neighbor. No religious insight should undercut the virtue of prudence (or common sense). We have certain “cultural icons” of untrustworthy people—used car salesmen, gold-digging blond floozies, opportunistic politicians. They are types that “only a fool would believe’. In real life, though, the bad guys don't wear black hats. The blond may be a gum-chewing friend to lonely bag-ladies, and the car salesman a “Big Brother” to a boy born with fetal alcohol syndrome. And the prophetic holy man might be an out-and-out swindler. The smart car buyer double-checks the salesman's claim that “this engine can run another 100,000 miles” before putting down \$5,000 for the car. Likewise, every Christian should move cautiously before committing a tithe on his gross income or his entire life to a religious leader. Even if the Antichrist is outside the gates and pounding to get in, it is not time to give up common sense.

Finally, the honest search for the truth is *never wrong*. If you “trust me” and don’t read the contract I put before you, I can take your money. Yet far too many Christians feel uncomfortable checking on the claims of a sincere-looking prophet or leader who knows God’s “now word”. It is not “unChristian” or “unloving” to check someone out or to examine his teachings. Too often, that phrase, “trust me”, is used to cut off the search for truth.

2) Grow in Virtue

The second principle of Christian freedom is to grow in virtue. A virtue is simply a habit of doing good, of doing the right thing. Every Christian is called to grow in virtue. But paradoxically, many Catholics who want most to be holy neglect the work of developing virtues. The encounter with God they experienced is so strong, they think all the work is finished. This is especially true if this experience included a new freedom from temptation. It really does happen that someone with a habit like masturbating or drug abuse goes to Medjugorje or a charismatic prayer meeting and feels the rush of God’s love. In the days and weeks that follow, he no longer feels that urge to sin. God can and will miraculously free people from certain destructive habits of sin. But this does not mean that all sin is gone.

“Getting saved” is not enough. Neither is being consecrated to the Immaculate Heart or “baptized in the Holy Spirit”. Going to a daily Mass in Latin won’t do it. To be a good person and to persevere in grace, the Christian has to grow in virtue – in *all* the moral virtues. In his parable of the sower (Mt. 13:1-9,18-23), Jesus warns that some seeds (which represent God’s word) are received with joy and spring up, but then wither away because they have no root. Remember the example of Ned in Chapter 11. Ned had

found salvation, but he did not (or could not) develop the virtues of temperance and prudence when he got out of prison. As a result, temptation overpowered him.

Any “duffer” can occasionally hit a beautiful, 200-yard drive on the golf course. What makes someone a good golfer, however, is the ability to hit good shots consistently. Likewise, a good person is someone who consistently does the right thing out of habit. The good-hearted prostitute, so beloved in Hollywood films, may do an especially kind deed, but in the long run her habit of selling herself will undercut committed love and true intimacy. The alcoholic might come through with a generous donation, but he still can’t be relied on to care for his family properly. A good person is one who can be counted on consistently to do the right thing.

Suppose salvation were a matter of playing good tennis: the best players are the saints. If this were so, I would be in bad trouble. When I hit my backhand I never know what the ball is going to do. But suppose Christ in his mercy visited the courts and transformed my backhand into a sharp, powerful, accurate stroke. Would I be saved? Of course not. My serve is still anemic, my forehand also needs work, and too often I get caught flatfooted. In fact, even if God were to give me Sampras’s serve and Agassi’s reflexes, I would have to practice—just as they do. Good tennis players need *both* natural gifts *and* good habits built up by practice.

By grace we are saved—but this is only the beginning. After the moment of grace comes the life-long effort to acquire and develop virtues—that is, to develop a tested character. This is why St. Paul warns against being too hasty in “laying on hands” (1 Tim. 5:22); new leaders should be men of proven virtue. Spiritual experience is not enough.

The Church has traditionally encouraged us to acquire the four “cardinal virtues”: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.

Prudence is the habit of applying good sense and intelligence to choices. The word “prudence” comes from the Latin word meaning “foresight”. And indeed, a prudent person is a foresighted one. While working on a major religious convention, I talked with a young man—one of the helpers—who said he was speeding while running an errand. He had a lot to do for the convention—the Lord’s work—and he was “just trusting in the Lord” to keep him safe. His trust was misplaced. God does not suspend natural laws just to protect us from our foolishness. (Fortunately this young man did not have an accident.) The virtue of prudence demands that we think ahead and exercise good sense. If the work is important to God, I must trust him to care for his work when I’m unavoidably delayed—and not foolishly presume on his protection while I violate the speed laws. So part of being a virtuous person is to become more prudent.

Justice means giving to each person his due. Philosophers distinguish between *commutative* and *distributive* justice. *Commutative justice* has to do with transactions, with giving fair return in exchange for some good. It is the kind of justice we want in the market place. The just person gives a fair deal for a fair price. *Distributive justice* gives each person those things he or she rightly has coming. If I find a \$20 on the seat of my car after you have gotten out, justice demands that I ask if it’s yours. It is out of distributive justice that parents give food and clothing to their children and their children give honor back to them. Distributive justice requires that we pay our share of taxes and that we care for the poor. A failure to grow in this virtue can undercut the finest spiritual efforts. A noted Catholic leader in the United States, a man who founded an effective organization to promote morality, who arranged to have Mother Teresa visit and speak to local Catholics, who generously promoted devotion to Our Lady, recently added this to his resume—

a conviction for his prominent role in the notorious savings and loan scandal of the late 1980's. He neglected the virtue of justice.

Temperance is the virtue of self control, especially concerning the sins of the flesh. Athletes know that one of the quickest ways to get an opponent “out of his game” is to get him intemperate. Professionals try this with “trash-talking”, but we amateurs do it, too. Playing tennis with my son (who has a better serve than I), I will sometimes play imprudently close to the service court, hoping that he will try to overpower me by slamming the ball especially hard. When he tries to “blow me out, he tends to miss. That is, I try to get him to abandon good habits and to be intemperately aggressive. Until he caught on to my “mind game”, it was a good strategy. In the spiritual life, temperance is a serious matter. Perhaps the quickest way to seduce a Christian away from the life of holiness is to seduce him into giving way to the flesh or to anger. Satan does it all the time. Emotion can overpower good sense, and the pleasures of intemperance become a trap.

Fortitude or courage is the virtue of standing firm for the good and against evil. It is the virtue of the soldier—including the soldier for Christ. Fortitude resists the cruel gossip in the break room and the lying conspiracy against the boss. A rather unpopular supervisor in my wife's agency was quietly accused by a coworker of “coming onto” another woman. Sexual harassment is a serious moral and legal matter—and the homosexual implications of the charge added to its gravity. It was easy to believe the accusation; the woman was abrasive and seemed “different”. However there was no evidence. My wife saw it as her duty to say, “No, this is wrong.” She let the competent superiors know about the charge (which turned out to be false) and did what she could to stop the rumor. This takes fortitude. It is always easy to go along with the gossip. It is hard to stand up for someone nobody likes too much. Fortitude acknowledges that Jesus is Lord, even in a corrosive academic environment. Fortitude is the necessary virtue for martyrs.

If we want to be saints, we must grow in virtue. We must practice being good in everyday events. The enthusiasm of conversion and commitment will carry us only so far. Beyond that “honeymoon period” with the Lord, we have to develop and rely on strong habits of doing the right thing. And we must pray daily for the Holy Spirit to form in us those three “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love.

Love: It's up to You.

Our Savior's one great commandment is to love. The night before he died he repeated this over and over (Jn. 13:34-35; 14:15,21-24; 15:9-13; 17:26). Love has two sides or aspects, one “objective” and one “subjective”.

From the *objective* point of view, love always does good for the beloved. Love seeks the objective, real good and not just good feelings. This means it is based on *truth*. Parents love their children by providing for them and by giving guidance and discipline. A wife does not love her alcoholic husband by pouring him the drink he wants.

Love seeks the good. It is unselfish in meeting the beloved's needs. It doesn't go half-way. A teenager who is hurting—maybe because of grades or an unrequited crush or even just that unexplained depression that comes over them from time to time—sometimes needs more than just a quick word of encouragement and a two-minute prayer. He might need a walk with Dad or a long talk with Mom. The new widow needs company over the next year, not just a meal right after the funeral. In short, love tries to meet the beloved's real needs as much as possible.

This objective character of love means that you must know the beloved. Here is one serious way that the Obedient Wife trap destroys love. “Wife”, according to this teaching, is a kind of position or role. Love means exercising leadership and supervision

of her; it does not mean caring for the woman you love for herself. *When Bonita lost her baby in the third month of her pregnancy, her husband promptly sought the wisdom of their “spiritual family’s” leaders. They told him to grant her a week to grieve before returning to her normal services within the home and the group.* This is not love, but following procedures. To love Bonita truly, he had to look at her and recognize her needs—not apply a formula and expect her to follow instructions. Even though both Al and Bonita agreed to this wisdom, by following it they actually helped dismantle the intimacy and self-giving of their relationship.

The “subjective” side of love complements the “objective”. In a nutshell, love is something *you do*. Your love comes from within you. It is not a duty. To paint a picture for your sweetheart is an act of love, but to paint it for your art teacher is not. Even when duties are involved—for marriage and parenthood do involve duties—the giving that is love goes beyond obedience to a rule. Another way to say this is that love is thoughtful. A loving mother does not simply provide 2000 calories of nutrition a day to each of her children. She gives them foods that taste good and often includes desserts that they like.

Our cat, Nena, had kittens in our house, and it was interesting to watch her provide for them. She fed them, of course, and made sure that they didn’t stray too far away from their nesting box. As cats go, she was a good mother. But she made no effort to beautify their box. When a baby is born, its human parents will paint the room in pastels, buy Winnie-the-Pooh wall hangings, change the crib sheets frequently, and generally try to make things nice. One might say that these things don’t really matter—the baby won’t appreciate Winnie until she is two or three years old. But from the very first moments of life, good parents go beyond the child’s physical needs to make things nice. This thoughtfulness is typical of human love.

Love is ultimately a gift of self. The poor juggler in the medieval tale gave the Blessed Virgin a show with the one thing he could do well. Married couples freely give each other the pleasure of their bodies in bed. The mother nurtures her baby inside her body for almost a year and then feeds it from her own milk. The father patiently practices baseball with his clumsy five year old. And the day may come that the 16 year old son will need a high school batting coach to correct and perfect what dad once taught. Still, he will have been formed as a human being by the father who took the time to show him the basics.

Love is something that each of us can do well—even if we are not sure of exactly the right thing to do. Love is the best gift, because when you give yourself to another, you agree with God, who says, “You are very good.” You show your beloved by your actions how good he is—good enough for you to invest yourself in.

St. Paul says, “Seek eagerly after love,” (1 Cor.14:1) for love surpasses every spiritual gift. But love can flow only from freedom. Saints—more than any other persons on earth—can live in freedom, because they know God’s love and respond to him in love. The secret, then, to freedom from spiritual traps and the bondage they bring is to love God according to the truth. This is God’s word for now and for eternity.

END

Appendix—If You Fell for a Sanctity Trap

You got sucked in and fell for a “sanctity trap”. For the past five or seven or ten years you have alienated your family, put your career on hold, “tithed” away your money and become another person, because you followed someone else’s plan for your life. Then you saw the light. Perhaps you discovered the leaders were lying. Maybe you saw how your trust and commitment were being betrayed. A family tragedy may have opened your eyes. Or you might simply have slowly wakened up. Now you feel angry, embarrassed, guilty, and lonely: Angry—because people you trusted have used you. Embarrassed—because your kid sister told you so and you didn’t listen. Guilty—because you have just backed out on all the promises you made to God, even though you know now they were traps. Lonely—because you cut yourself off from “the world” once, and you are sure no one can understand what really happened. What can you do?

You’re not Crazy and You’re Not Alone

Sanctity traps are based on falsehoods, not on reality. As long as you live in them, you are living in an unreal world. But living in an unreal world is craziness. If you feel as though you’re going crazy (and it is normal to feel this), the problem is not with you. The problem is the system you were living under. You are sane. You have just put aside a crazy system. The basic rules of reality have not changed, and you can understand them.

You are not alone either. It is always amazing how flexible and adaptable families are. Your parents, brothers and sisters are doubtless delighted that you are out of your trap. Most of them will welcome you. You can make new friends. When she left a controlling community, one woman I know decided to pick out a normal-looking person

at church and make friends with her. The resulting friendship has lasted for over a decade. Many groups do practice “shunning” (whether they call it that or not), and when you leave, you do lose many friends. But you have to walk away and find new friends. Leaders may warn that you will never fit into society after leaving the group. This is false. *The problem is not with you. The problem is with the group.* You can be normal and live a normal life with good friendships and family relationships.

If there are others who have left the group, then don't be afraid to meet with them. Form a support group. This is often very hard for victims of spiritual traps. Normally when people leave, the membership is quietly advised that there was something wrong with them; they had a “root of bitterness”, they were “disgruntled” or “not really with us”, they were “too weak” to answer the Lord's higher calling. It is surprising how former members will continue to avoid other former members out of a misguided feeling of loyalty to the group. Once you have left, you owe the group no explanations, no debt of loyalty. The leaders are not “the Lord's anointed”. You have every right to talk about your problems with others.

Remember: The problem is not with you. It's with the group. Their problem was also with the group. There is probably nothing wrong with other ex-members either.

What to Do #1: Repent

Every sanctity trap is based on a failure to live according to the truth in love. By living the life of a sanctity trap, you lived according to a lie. This does not mean you are personally guilty of everything that happened to you. No doubt you were lied to and misled. On the other hand, most of us got trapped not only by other people's lies, but also by our own ambitions, by desires to be ‘special’, by spiritual gluttony, and so on. Most of

who have fallen for spiritual traps knew that some things we were doing were not right. These things call for repentance.

If you are coming out of a spiritual trap, especially a destructive spiritual group, take the whole issue to confession. You don't have to judge exactly how guilty you are personally. It's always best to leave judgments of guilt to God. But take your involvement in the group to a good priest in confession and ask his absolution. By doing this, you break the spiritual hold your old group had on you.

Next, you probably need to approach those you have hurt by your involvement—especially family and old friends. Tell them you're sorry for not coming to the wedding or anniversary party, for missing the funeral or the reunion. You don't need to go into details; they know or suspect more than you think. In most cases they are willing to forgive, forget and get on with being your friend. Just say, "I'm sorry."

If you have been a leader, then you really ought to go to other ex-members of your group and tell them you're sorry. I cannot promise you that they will all be gracious and forgiving. I can assure you, in fact, that very few of them will trust you the way they used to. But you can help them and will surely help yourself spiritually if you do this.

What to Do #2: Get on with Life

It's over and you can return to normal. Make this your goal. Now this does not happen overnight. You are recuperating from serious emotional injury. You will have to work through anger, shame, confusion, guilt, bitterness and other feelings. You might want to form a support group. You might want to seek counseling.

However, for the long run, you have to aim at a normal life. This can mean developing a career plan, getting involved in parish work, returning to school, taking up golf

or cards. But whatever it is, you should aim to do what other normal people do with their lives. You are free from a sanctity trap; don't let fighting it keep you ensnared. As you do this, you will find that the demands of school, work, charitable activities, friendships, and hobbies will crowd out the memories and effects of the old life.

What to Do #3: Stay Close to God

Unfortunately, many people leave the Church and the spiritual life, when they leave a destructive spiritual group. For some, there is almost a physical aversion to church or to preaching. They look at every divine promise as a trap, at every prayer as 'magical thinking', at every religious leader as a charlatan.

It was not God's idea for you to be deceived. You can trust him. But this trust is on his terms, not on those of some prophet for our time. Try to pray, and as soon as you can, return to church. Tell yourself the truth that God loves you and cares for you. Jesus didn't die for you to be enslaved. You want to go to him. As you do, find a spirituality that is comfortable for you. If you have spent the past ten years praying in tongues and "waiting on the Lord" for him to speak to you, maybe a daily Rosary can help you get into prayer again. If the Rosary was an onerous duty, try the Liturgy of the Hours or quiet meditation. And especially, go to Mass on Sunday, and go to confession. In the long run you will find that Christ is still very close. And he doesn't look like the leaders who misled you.

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