

## CHAPTER TWO

### *What Is Religion and Why Have a Church?*

If you have ever wondered about being a Catholic, you may already have asked these questions of yourself and the great world about you. Most of us have had the answers handed (or handed down) to us before we were even curious about these issues. We inherit our ideas about what religion is and why we belong to a Church along with the family Bible and the family photo album.

It is natural, however, for people one day to open the boxes they stored away unwrapped after the will was read and to judge for themselves what elements of their inheritance they want to keep—and what they want to throw out. As they decide what silver and china they will use in the future, they may also reevaluate their spiritual beliefs and practices. They may nod and pass to the next item on the list or they may pause to

examine their religious endowment. Measuring it against their own life experience, they either store it away again or remove the contents, dust them off and decide to make better use of them in the future.

Still others of us make a checkmark on our list of shipments from the past, appreciating our religious heritage as though it were the venerable grandfather clock with the wonderful insides: we'd wanted it since childhood, but now are not at all sure we want it or even know what to do with it. It is handsome and it chimes regularly, and—don't get us wrong—we like it well enough and will hand it down to our children, too. It was magnificent and mysterious when we were children, but it's part of the furniture now and, although it stands guard in the background of many family pictures, it has lost its enchantment and we would never think to set our watches by it.

## DIALING THE DIVINE 911

Most of us do inherit our religion and our Churches, too, but we never think to set our lives by them. We remember them when somebody is sick or the times are bad, or, on occasion, as we shall see, we use religion like a casino chip, making a bet or a bargain as we place it on the red or the black of our needs or anxieties, *If you get me a job, or make me well again, I'll go to Church every Sunday...*

God hears a lot of these wagers every day, of course, on everything from our most profound personal problems to our hope that God will help the home team win. We sometimes file our

promise in a well-thumbed mental folder of forgotten pledges and are thankful that God does not engage a collection agency to call in these promissory notes. There is something touching about the way we humans turn to God the way children do to a father who never tires of the questions beyond counting.

These bargains—*If you do this, I'll do that*—are footnotes to faith that are found in all our lives and they help us understand that, even if we inherit our religion and our Church, our hymnal and our pew, we must grow in our understanding of ourselves and our faith if we are ever to make them our own. Such negotiating with God, much like regarding a parent as magical, reflects a stage in our overall spiritual growth. This development is a living process rather than a lesson memorized to pass the Judgment Day finals. Every one of its elements—the believer, the beliefs and the Church—have meaning only in and through living personal relationships.

## THE IDEA OF RELIGION

Religion is sometimes relegated to a corner of life or dealt with as if it were some large amiable pet—a part of nature and a part of us, too, but sometimes retrieving a boot instead of a bird and hard to keep out of the house no matter what we say. Culturally, we try to domesticate religion, saving it a place at civic banquets or a chair at Fourth of July celebrations, but forbidding it to cross the double yellow line painted down the middle of the nation's daily business. Except, of course, in an

emergency, when we wave it over, come-as-you-are and hold our hands when terrorists strike or a space shuttle explodes in the morning sky.

We can think of religion as a consumer good, *Follow directions for adult dosage. Principal side effect: obsessiveness, occasional superstition.* That is a pragmatic use of religion as a cure, an answer or a comfort. But is religion summed up as a second cousin to the placebo effect, that improvement in our sense of well-being generated by sugar pills?

Religion is tougher, stronger and more humanly demanding than any of these representations. It is traced to such words of origin as *relegere*, “to turn to constantly” or “to observe conscientiously”; *re eligere*, “to choose again”; and *re ligare*, “to bind oneself back,”<sup>2</sup> or “to reconnect.” *Religio*, from the old French and the Latin, refers to the “bond between man and the gods.”<sup>3</sup> It carries as its seed the notion of a relationship, the establishment of a connection, that is, something in which we are not merely acted upon but in which are actively involved. We are agents in relationship. No surrogate acts on our behalf. The nature and outcome of the relationship depend on how, and how much, of our true selves we give to it.

For the great Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas, religion “denotes properly a relation to God.”<sup>4</sup> Just as we fail in human relationships if we give only a portion of ourselves to them, so the relationship we call *religion* fails if we invest only part of ourselves, or on a part-time basis, or only when we need a favor or a deliverance. Those are the signs of an

immature relationship—a child’s relationship. We must grow through these, “put away the things of a child,” as Saint Paul expresses it, to achieve an adult relationship with God.

Centuries after Aquinas, in his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, philosopher William James described religion as “a man’s total reaction upon life.”<sup>5</sup> This catches the flavor of the Catholic theologian’s understanding that religion “has to do with the whole of human existence.” Religion is never fully expressed, therefore, by a part of us or on a part-time basis.

Religion may be understood as “the whole complex of attitudes, convictions, emotions, gestures, rituals, beliefs, and institutions by which we come to terms with and express, our most fundamental relationships with Reality (God and the Created order, perceived as coming forth from God’s creative hand).”<sup>6</sup> Catholics are very clear about how this sense of creation is disclosed through God’s self-revelation to us. Through religion, however, we are not just passively filled to overflowing by this revelation.

In the Catholic understanding of religion we “deliberately reach out toward” the God whom we perceive sacramentally, that is, in the persons, occurrences, events and things that we see. This sacramental sense of the world, of God’s perpetual self-disclosure through creation, is both the foundation and the keystone of the Catholic understanding of religion. It is a response to all of creation by all of us. That is why religion in general, and Catholicism in particular, does not reject but embraces the human, with whose imperfect glories it is completely comfortable.

Religion is, therefore, our response in a hundred human ways, through art and story and prayer and song, but just as much through the longings we feel deeply within us at the return of spring, or in the small signals of love transmitted through eyes and embraces that are as powerful as the large signals of God's inexhaustible revelation. Everything human counts in Catholicism, everything created bears the genetic code of its Creator. Churches are formed, as we shall see, into human institutions, that is, structures that reflect and match our human nature and needs. The function of these institutions is to remember and sing the truths of creation to the created world, in ritual and symbol, in sacrament and celebration. Before, however, we explore the meaning of *Church* as in *Catholic Church*, we may look more deeply at how religion, a phenomenon that also fits our natures, can reflect, in its forms, the varying stages of our own growth to adulthood.

### RELIGION AS HYPOCRISY/HYPOCRISY AS RELIGION

Everybody knows people who sing God's praises in Church on Sunday morning but, immediately afterward, hang up their beliefs with their best clothes (*That takes care of that for another week*). They neither permit nor encourage—indeed they never think of the possibility of—any overflow of the Sabbath religion's influencing the way they treat their families, friends or employees during the work week. Observing the disconnection between the way some believers claim to love God while not

much liking their neighbors, certain people write such religion off as camouflage for hypocrites and want nothing to do with it.

These people are not reacting to fully developed religion but rather to half-grown or stunted religion, faith that is not faith at all. There is a lot of this going around, as they say of a flu that gives everybody the same symptoms. What are the symptoms shared by such cavalier Churchgoers and wouldn't we be better off staying away from any Church that lets them in?

We should note that this superficial profession of faith may be observed in every continent and in every form of religion. That is how zealots can praise their maker at dawn and blow up a school bus before lunch. So demanding is real religion on equating what we believe with how we behave that it has often been misunderstood and misused by people who regard faith as a play, a make-believe in one act a week in which they recite, but need not mean, their lines. Indeed, the word *hypocrite* comes from the Greek word for *actor*, one who speaks words written by another.

True religion cannot coexist with hypocrisy, the original cover-up, the sin-as-pious-disguise that is repeatedly condemned by Jesus Christ in the Gospels. He speaks of those who may have God's name on their lips while their hearts are far away and of the superficially religious who enlarge the religious symbols on their clothing to seem godly to others. The truly religious person, however, is the widow slipping her mite quietly out of her sleeve and into the collection basket or the man standing in the shadows near the back of the temple, whose deepest spiritual

realization is also his simplest prayer—that he is a sinner in need of God’s mercy.

Hypocrisy has a history as long as that of religion and, feeding off it like a parasite, it nourishes only itself. No hypocrites need apply for membership in a religion like Catholicism that insists that belief and behavior be integrated, that they form a whole rather than parts forced together despite their lack of fit. People who fit together are said to possess integrity. In the Catholic spiritual tradition this integrity or wholeness is the basic definition of holiness. Both holiness and wholeness derive from the old English root *hal* that means “health.” These concepts, as we shall see, cannot be split apart in the Catholic understanding of faith without destroying that faith.

## RELIGION MATURE AND IMMATURE

If health, wholeness, and holiness are not an alien wafer of veneer but the deepest grain in the wood of Catholic belief, we may borrow a distinction from religious psychology to differentiate surface religion from profound faith. Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport first introduced the distinction between mature, or *intrinsic*, faith and immature, or *extrinsic*, faith more than half a century ago.<sup>7</sup> It has proven to be an enduring and fruitful way to discriminate between the ways that we may profess religious faith.

Allport was attracted to the issue after observing that, as in our earlier example, the faith of some regular Sunday Churchgoers had little, if any, impact on their behavior during

the rest of the week. He was puzzled by Churchgoers who could espouse religion and racial prejudice at the same time. Such persons appeared to experience no discomfort at holding viewpoints incompatible with the general religious judgment that loving God and hating our brothers and sisters were mutually exclusive positions. How could so many people fail to evince even a twinge of conscience at professing a faith that preached love for all while giving safe harbor within themselves to prejudice that prescribed hatred for certain groups?

Allport developed a scale to measure what he termed *intrinsic* versus *extrinsic* religion. As we have observed, we all inherit a religion of some kind from our parents. At first we don it much as we do the clothes that they choose for us as children. We fulfill the external demands of inherited religion—attendance at Church, reading the Bible, observing religious feasts and holidays—much as we fulfill the external demands of family tradition—going to Yale or Notre Dame, becoming a lawyer or a longshoreman, showing up at family weddings and wakes. These are social responses to which, to some extent, we are conditioned and which we accept on the generalized attribution of authority that we give to Church elders or family ancestors. At a certain time in life, Allport suggested, we examine these values that we have previously accepted without qualm or question. This may occur at a moment of change (entering college), or a moment of crisis (an illness or death), or at a moment of unexpected self-exploration (in falling in love or becoming disillusioned with a career).