In a light-hearted style the author reflects upon his own experience of living through the myriad changes in the lives of Catholics occasioned by the event of Vatican II. Viewing the developments from the perspective of a deep personal faith, the author offers a hopeful vision for those troubled by the shifting currents of modern Catholic identity and life.

When a child wakes from a nightmare, reality is all askew. She is lost in a surreal emptiness with no landmarks. So she cries out, and her mother is there, turning on the light, rocking her in her arms. “Everything’s okay, honey.” Order has come back into her world; things are “as they should be.” All of us, no matter our age, need some sense of “Everything’s okay, honey.” We need a myth—a matrix of persons, symbols, and rituals that embodies and anchors our being “at home.”

What, then, of Catholics for whom the Church had been an impregnable bulwark in their formative years but, almost overnight, metamorphosed into what seems more a Tower of Babel?

A friend’s letter focused that. A “good Catholic” but, involved in international finance, his focus was on more pressing matters. Like many from the 50s, he was educated and Catholic, not an educated Catholic. He endured the new unengaging rites because religion was crucial—but peripheral, like paying taxes. Then the sudden death of his son jolted him from complacency. “Why am I still a 50s Catholic?” Tragedy had jerked him awake, and he no longer felt “at home.” My friend Mimi Kennedy asks, “How do we lose fear as a religious motive and still be Catholic? Without all those catechetical certainties?” Back then, we said the Creed because we were told to, not because we understood or cared what it said.

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(any more than the Apostles would have). Now we need reasons for remaining Catholic—like really understanding and accepting it.

The Bulwark

Though not as golden as they appear in our rearview mirrors, the 50s were a dandy time. After a Depression bracketed by two world wars, we wanted normalcy, a place to feel “at home.” And, more or less, everything did begin “comin’ up roses,” especially for Catholics.

The GI Bill allowed boys never outside Pomona or Paducah—but now fresh from Tokyo or Paris—to expand their horizons even further. Wartime savings and low-cost mortgages began a rush to $25,000 suburban homes. The baby boom demanded school building, then college expansion, and Catholic families grew twice as fast as any other segment. Those opportunities brought a crop of Catholic professionals from ethnic Catholic ghettos into the mainstream. And without anyone realizing how dangerous it was, Catholics were learning to think for themselves.

Like medieval Christendom, ethnic Catholicism provided cohesiveness in every sector of life. It was defined—in all senses, clear lines between us and every “them.” Anything not compulsory was forbidden, and as in Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor those with time to think about such matters had removed from the ordinary Catholic the burden of freedom and the concomitant need to reason things out for oneself.

Foxholes had made religion important to most men, not in the head, but in the gut, which is far more important. From 1950–1955, the U.S. Church grew by 25 percent. For ordinary folks, Fulton Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, and Billy Graham pointed the way to peace, happiness, and a successful life. All round was the corroboration of The Robe, Ben Hur, Going My Way. For middle-brows, Chesterton, Belloc, C. S. Lewis. For intellectuals, Maritain, Niebuhr, Merton.

Even for someone with a first-in-the-family degree, religion was reassuringly uncluttered. The Bible was literally true; the monsignor was right even when he was wrong. We had precise answers to all human problems, important or trivial, strict uniformity in worship and doctrine rooted solidly in Thomistic metaphysics. However, because we had accepted it whole since we were toddlers, few of us sensed it was also divisive, insular, and resolutely anti-intellectual.

Our 50s religion had no ambiguities, buttressed with certitudes untouched since Trent, true per omnia saecula saeculorum. Each sin was either trivial or enough to empty one’s soul of God’s love, instantly. Many felt almost rhapsodic guilt (as I did), scuttling across town to a priest who would not recognize our voices. The Church cavalierly invoked mortal sin: meat on Friday, one Sunday Mass missed, toothpaste water before Communion, a condemned movie. I can’t
recall anyone objecting to those being yoked as equals with murder, kidnapping, and slave-trading. We had ingrained repressive mechanisms, stereotypically Irish emotional and sexual restraints, Pavlovian deference to clerics. The basic moral stance seemed, “Give them (or yourself) an inch, they’ll take a mile.” (Forgetting another cliche: “Might as well hang for a sheep as for a lamb.”)

But it did make us feel important. As with SEALS, its very rigor made it meaningful. We always knew where we stood—on a tightrope. In order to receive Communion with the family, we had to go to confession, no matter how humiliating. But we had the assurance that, if our sins were that important, we ourselves had terrifying value. And Mass was scarifyingly important. (Unlike my Catholic contemporaries, no boy I now teach ever “played Mass.” Trivial perhaps, but an indication how demystified the present Church is and the future Church will be.)

It was also a serenely smug “us” versus “them.” Long, sonorous Gregorian Good Friday prayers begged God to save “those in error . . . heretics and schismatics [many of our neighbors and relatives] . . . the perfidious (sic) Jews.” After sixty years, I can remember Caroline Isbister, a leprous Protestant, who averred babies came from their mummies’ tummies, which we intuited as blatant heresy. I still see her cringing by that skinny tree as we, in our prideful purity, pelted her with pebbles. About that same time, the Klan assaulted the Buffalo Carmelite convent, convinced it was a priests’ brothel. And imagine the caterwauling in our household when my sister announced she was marrying a “sort-of Methodist,” whom she could wed only in the rectory.

The separatism was clear in the fact of a “Catholic” War Veterans, “Catholic” poetry, and “Catholic” philosophy and morality, as if we had some Gnostic insight into humankind.

Its steadfast anti-intellectualism was rooted in Pius X’s implacable stance against Modernism. Bishops were not shepherds but guardians of faith, teaching conformity no matter whom it hurt. The parish school often rose before the church, lest children be tainted. Priests and (our most formative influence) nuns had no time to study but, after the catechism, what was left to learn?

Faith was not a matter of the inquiring mind but of the submissive will, and we believed it all “under pain of mortal sin.” Yet without genuine doubt, honestly overcome, there can be no genuine faith, merely dutiful conformity.

At Holy Cross College in freshman year we recited the catechism weekly—indoctrination, not learning, a kind of lay seminary. Lights out at eleven, and

[W]ithout anyone realizing how dangerous it was, Catholics were learning to think for themselves.
everyone handed in a ticket to prove he had been at Mass that morning. After
four years, out of 400, 40 were in real seminaries. When I entered in 1951, there
were 65 in my class for the New York Province alone. (Last year, one.)

In 1956, historian John Tracy Ellis sent up a Catholic Sputnik, American
Catholics and the Intellectual Life. No Catholic university ranked in the nation's
top 50. All our conclusions were not from exploratory research but deductive
from scholastic principles, certe et certissima. Gustave Weigel compared Catholic
college administrators to commissars trying to “prevent students from meeting
thought which has not been apologetically sanitized.”

Seminary philosophy was little different, not much Aquinas but manuals like
the college texts, only more complex—and in Latin. We submerged in philo-
sophical enigmas as inaccessible as most adults
today find Pokémon. Though Aristotle and
Aquinas left room for uncertainty, for us no
conclusion was “basically true” but as certain as
the toxicity of cyanide. We demolished Kant,
Hume, Hobbes (and many others) in a paragraph
each. What’s more, those studies took place in
hermetically sealed seminaries, remote as alien
planets, an atmosphere two psychiatrists later
told me was the most sensorily deprived they had
ever seen. We took “Metaphysical Psychology”
—unsullied by intrusions from Freud, Jung,
Adler, or even William James. Depending a
great deal on Cardinal Newman, I wrote a paper
on a Summa article which suggested that, some-
time, all this celestial calculus be grounded in
the concrete. I got a C, and the prof said, “New-
man was neither a philosopher nor a theolo-
gian.” And what of me?

Later, moral theology and canon law often
seemed a school of the pharisees, focusing much effort on learning when to with-
hold absolution, in stark contrast to the moral practice of Jesus. With some ex-
ceptions, the systematics courses were little different from scholastic philosophy.
But in Scripture our unquestioning peasant faith finally met its first genuine, ter-
rifying test. And we woke in the dark, strangers in a strange land.

Our first Scripture course fissioned all our naive convictions about the Bible.
“Father, I know we’re not trying to prove the gospel writers knew Jesus, but are
we trying to prove they at least knew what they were talking about?” No. Gasp.
You mean original sin, the core of our spiritual lives, is not rooted in a pair of
nudists in a park who fell for a fast-talking snake? Jesus did not walk on water?
And, uh, what about the, uh, resurrection? I remember big-bodied Wally Jungers
pacing my tiny room like a caged Minotaur, growling, “If I can’t find somebody who can prove to me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Jesus rose from the dead, I’m outta this damn place!”

For awhile, the only thing that kept me plodding was that the Scripture profs still said Mass. After twenty-five years of exclusively rationalist, Gradgrind education, we had finally, painfully to begin coping with symbols and figurative language, with the differences between literal truth and literary truth, between accurate and meaningful. The evangelists wrote not as historians but to evangelize, reporting not what eyewitnesses actually saw but what was actually happening—just as renaissance painters picture Mary swathed in brocade receiving the great-winged Gabriel in a paneled drawing room or saints with golden haloes tacked to their heads. It didn’t matter if the Magi ever showed up; the story is still true—Jesus came not only for poor, illiterate Jews but for rich, learned foreigners too. No need to ask how Peter walked on water; the story is still true—focus on Jesus and forget your own shortcomings, and you can do what you thought impossible, like being crucified rather than deny knowing Jesus risen.

We were forcibly ejected from Plato’s comfortable cave of shadows, out into the light. Since before puberty, the only pope we knew was Pius XII, who epitomized Catholicism: precise, austere, rigorous, distant. Then on October 28, 1958, we found in his place a grumpy dumpling! The day after his election, the papers showed John XXIII as nuncio to Paris, cigarette in one hand, martini in the other. And I remember gasping, “We’re saved!”

Well, yes. And no.

**The Walls Come a ‘Tumblin’ Down**

Many 50s Catholics attribute “all those changes” basically to three admittedly dramatic events: the disillusioning assassination of Jack Kennedy, Vatican II, and the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, forbidding all artificial birth control. Those played a major role, but as Mark Massa’s masterful *Catholics and American Culture* shows, cracks in the dike had begun appearing far earlier than that, but we were too busy succeeding to notice.

For over a century, most Catholics had been “foreigners,” then the children of foreigners, but by the third generation, that taint seemed ludicrous, especially after the homogenization of military life. Also, the GI Bill raised us into professional acceptance and out into the suburbs. Before, you mixed with “your own kind”; now, we were just like everybody else. We moved into the mainstream. But you can not blend in without being thinned out.

Despite his egregious excesses, the ascent to prominence of Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Catholic war hero, for awhile gave Catholics not only a sense of solidarity in a righteous cause but greater acceptability in the eyes of outsiders who
also feared what Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called “a demonic
religio-political creed”: godless Communism. McCarthy had strong support from
Cardinal Spellman, who blessed the weapons of our troops fighting godlessness
Chambers, Klaus Fuchs, the Rosenbergs, and Alger Hiss “proved” Reds were
poisoning our village wells under our noses. The annexation of Catholic Eastern
Europe placed Catholicism clearly “on the right side.” *Commonweal* and *America*
opposed McCarthy, but he had strong support from *Ave Maria*, *Our Sunday
Visitor*, and *The Brooklyn Tablet*, all more accessible to the majority. His cause
was, after all, the prime policy of Pius XII. To be Catholic became irrefutable evi-
dence of loyalty. But McCarthy made a rift in the bulwark; 58 percent of Catho-
lics supported him, 23 percent opposed, the first true crack between the “left” and “right” sides of
the wall among ordinary Catholics.

A very potent factor in Catholic acceptability
was Archbishop Fulton Sheen. The movies
demonstrated that priests—Pat O’Brien, Spencer
Tracy, Bing Crosby, Karl Malden—were all-
round, manly, good guys, but Uncle Fulty proved
they could also be both brainy and accessible to
ordinary folks. He made no attempt to disguise
his Catholicism, appearing in a cape, wide sash
and pectoral cross, a Madonna statue, an “angel”
to erase his board. But his message was never
specifically “Catholic” but rather natural law,
complex Thomistic concepts wrapped in nickel words and images. Unlike the
emotionalism of Billy Graham or the feel-good generic religion of Norman Vincent
Peale, his talks anchored in a philosophical system he made clear to literati and
unlettered alike. He was a showman who knew his audience. His topics: Are we
more neurotic today; what does love really mean; how do we deal with teenagers?
—subjects interesting to anybody of good will, offered in a popular, unthreaten-
ing style, without a whiff of sectarianism. For five years his *Life Is Worth Living*
garnered 5.7 million viewers weekly and 25,000 letters a day—when TV was in
far fewer homes. He made Catholicism less remote and threatening, but—surely
against his intentions—also played into the hands of those more concerned to be
accepted as “American” than identified as “Catholic.”

Catholicism’s crowning glory was the 1960 election of “one of us” to the high-
est office in the land, barred earlier to Catholic Al Smith, partly because many
feared a direct line from the Vatican to the White House. The ardor of Catholics
and suspicions of non-Catholics were both misplaced, however. Kennedy was as
Catholic as Nixon was Quaker. His wife told Arthur Krock, “I think it’s so unfair
of people to be against Jack because he’s Catholic. He’s such a poor Catholic.
Now if it were Bobby, I could understand.” His “affiliation,” as he called it, was just “there,” like his Irishness. His Catholicism was his mother’s. His Houston speech to evangelical ministers in the campaign made that clear: “I want a chief executive whose fulfillment of his Presidential office is not limited or conditioned by any religious oath, ritual, or obligation.” Half his votes came from Protestants, and though his election did not kill anti-Catholic bigotry, he did make it unfashionable. Catholics were now no different from anybody else.

Seven Demons Worse than the First


In 1947, Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson cracked open major league baseball to Afro-Americans. Within three years of its inauguration in 1953, *Playboy* had a million circulation, popular not only for its pictures (unthinkable ten years earlier) but for articles by respected authors and a brand new concept: “lifestyle.” Sex was no longer sullying but liberating. In 1953 a progesterone birth control pill appeared, co-developed by John Rock, a Catholic. In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to surrender her seat on a bus, and a farmboy named Presley offered an ideal to young America much different from the farmboy named Lincoln. In 1956, Russian tanks crushed the Hungarian Revolution, which—with Dr. Tom Dooley’s books about Communist atrocities to Catholics in Vietnam—made some feel America ought to intervene. Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. Che Guevara posters began to appear on dormitory walls.

Vatican II’s Decree on Religious Freedom, John XXIII’s *Pacem in terris*, and Kennedy’s Houston speech undermined any doubts Catholics were open to pluralism or freedom. Educated Catholics generally welcomed change, but those educated and Catholic were not so sure, principally in areas directly impacting their own lives. They cared nothing about collegiality or ecumenism but about disconcerting changes in the liturgy, a dramatic shift of style in priests and nuns, and—amid all this adaptability—continued papal intransigence about artificial birth control.

The liturgy is where the ordinary Catholic intersects with the life of the Church. Religion is not a matter of ideas but of symbols that embody a divine connection. Before, whatever its shortcomings, Mass was “home.” Now it was like entering someone else’s house, centered not on witnessing but on participation in a “liturgy” (as cold a word as *metallurgy*), skewing attention from the host—and Host—to the community. But we had been trained to be silent.
When the altars turned round on the first Sunday of Advent, 1964, centuries of tradition reversed with them. New churches were open and airy, yet the 50s Catholic still feels a tug of nostalgia entering an old, dusty church, as if all the accumulated prayers of generations still animated the stones and gimcrack statues. Magisterial organs yielded to clumsy guitars. Youth culture fads like balloons, bells, and banners replaced ancient rites that had linked us to our history. Before, only the priest could touch the host with consecrated fingers, kept clasped from consecration to purification. (In rites class, we puzzled over what to do if a host dropped into a woman’s cleavage.) An altar boy kept a plate under each recipient’s chin, just in case.

Then suddenly the unthinkable became the rule: lay people put the host in the hands of people standing, who even drank from the forfended chalice. Latin had been (or at least felt like) something mystical and “holy,” and one could always follow with an English missal. Now the prayers were intelligible, but off-putting simply because they were so vapid, composed by theologians, not poets. Hymns became lullabies. Unlike Fulton Sheen, those in charge of the changes did not know their audience, or seem to care much as long as the liturgy was historically correct. Like changing the formula for Coca-Cola, it looked better to the suppliers than to the consumers who no more factored into the equation than they had in the triumphal Church.

This was not just an updating; it was radical change. As with Protestantism, this new way of praying required a different kind of faith, not only in the congregation but in the ministers. The mystique of Latin no longer supports an uncritical faith that the Eucharist “works” ex opere operato, simply because it is carried out, no matter how sinful, disengaged, or boring the priest. Now much more expectation focuses on his sermon, with varying results. In becoming more down-to-earth, we lost the transcendent. We stripped the brocade from Mary and the gold plates from the saints, as Anglicans had their rood lofts and stained glass, and were left needing the same faith one needed to believe one had found God in a carpenter born in a stable. This was not bad, just very different. And intimidating to Catholics in their middle years who had left Catholic learning in college. If not earlier.

Priests and nuns had been the other important embodiment of Catholicism for generations, especially nuns, who outnumbered priests three to one. Al-
ways chastely in uniform, even playing baseball, watchful, set apart and therefore “holy.” Now, as with liturgy, all that reversed. Both the council and pope urged religious to “adapt to the modern world.” Priests and nuns began to look, dress, and socialize “just like everybody else.” They were no longer “special.”

Again what looked reasonable and liberating on paper had within it unexpected and unpleasant corollaries. In 1950, 381 nuns had asked release from their vows; in 1970, 4,337. In 1967, there were 180,000 religious women; in 1999, 84,000, only 11 percent under 45. One-fifth of all American priests, about 7,000, resigned their ministries; there were 60,000 priests in 1967, now about 47,000 with a median age of 55 and rising. About 1,000 were ordained each year in the 60s; in 1998, 478.

The reasons are many: celibacy, the example of others resigning, few young priests as role models, the loss of Pat-O’Brien-priest status, the demystification of the liturgy, doctrinal conflicts. But one is tempted to guess that imbuing them all is cultural assimilation.

_Humanae vitae_ (1968) had a quite dramatic effect on the solidity of the American church. Some believed their informed consciences simply could not accept the priority of natural function of the sperm-ovum over the natural function of two committed human beings and could not remain in a church which held it. Others said, “If they okay birth control after our seven kids, they’ve seen the last of us!” But still others, surprisingly, reasoned their own way to a conviction the birth control question was surely not on a level with belief in the divinity of Christ or his resurrection nor, despite the official church, was it to any reasonable mind as “intrinsically evil” as torture, genocides, or child abuse. Polls consistently report about 85 percent of Catholics practice birth control and still receive regularly. They accept that the Church cannot err, but that there are two senses of “church”: the Vatican and the _sensus fidelium_—the conviction of a majority of the truly faithful (along with many bishops). The official church was wrong about slavery, the crusades, the Inquisition. Peter, the first pope, admitted himself he had been wrong about what he had thought essentials: circumcision and the dietary laws. Those who remained despite _Humanae vitae_ were willing to accept a Church that is right “most of the time.”

You can not train people to think for themselves and expect they will always end up thinking as you do. There is still a clear distinction between Church Teaching and Church Taught, but now many of the Church Taught have better degrees than many of the Church Teaching.
A Bi-polar Church

Doubtless Catholic intellectuals slapped around the labels “liberal” and “conservative” in the 50s, but the ordinary practitioner was not aware of them. Now they are commonplace. The solid, impregnable, unified Church seems at odds with itself.

But those who concentrate relentlessly on our differences in liturgical style, in doctrinal and disciplinary disputes, in attitudes toward the official church miss something very important. In fact, a miracle! We are all still here! Even though we go on batting one another like fractious children, none of us wants to leave the Trinity Family. There is something more important than our peculiar “stances” on questions—being Catholic!

Despite the fact attendance dropped from 70 percent to 40 percent, that 40 percent remnant is going to Mass without the sanction of mortal sin: 15–20 million Catholics, middle-class, educated, actively participating not only in worship but in volunteer activities, committed, informed, energetic. Active Catholics are still the largest single religious body in the U.S. Our antagonisms would fade to mere irritations, I think, if we just stood back and looked at what the Church should be.

I once wrote a book about the Church I wanted to call The Big, Bad, Beautiful Balancing Rock (which the publisher wisely changed to Why Be Catholic?). I copped the idea from Chesterton, who said the true Church is not some immovable bulwark but a huge ugly rock with all manner of knobs and excrescences, pivoting precariously on its pedestal. The excesses of the conservative delicately balance the overindulgences of the liberal. Let the quietist seek a liturgy without hymns and the enthusiast find one that rocks. Let us content ourselves with a Church that is “home” both to William F. Buckley and Anna Quindlan.

It is, I believe, pharisaic to scoff at “cafeteria Catholics,” who choose which doctrines they find themselves able to accommodate with the rest of what they know. God gave us intelligence before God found need to give us the magisterium. We can still achieve balance as a Church if we all accept what seem the non-negotiables on which our Rock pivots: that Jesus is the Son of God, who died and rose in order to assure us of our immortality and to share divine aliveness (grace) with us, that the values of The Kingdom far outweigh the values of The World, that we celebrate our incorporation into Christ in a serving community and in a weekly meal at which Christ is more truly present than anywhere else on earth. Leave the exquisite fine-tuning to the experts who enjoy and care about those things. When I grew up, I disagreed strongly with my Dad about Jews, but that did not make us love one another less.

The Educated Catholic

The malaise of 50s Catholics arose at least partly from substituting faith in the institutional Church for faith itself, for the message of the gospel, and even
for a genuine person-to-Person connection with God. The problem, I think, was never Latin or lack of participation, but faith itself, inability to articulate our belief to ourselves, not in others’ formulas but in our own words.

Even now, the official church seems to treat human and divine truths as if the Summa and tradition were still the only sources on those subjects, handling the vital connection between humans and God (which is what religion means) in a system of formulas and disciplines. It seems to have no tolerance for ambiguity—even though mystery is the very essence of dealing with God.

Close to the core of our God-sized hunger is what Eugene Kennedy calls “mystery deprivation.” In a true sense, “all those changes” have left religion disenchanted—stripped not only of superstitious illusions but also of exhilarating potency. We are dealing with realities beyond intellectual discernment but directly accessible to intuition. We do not need to “define” it, to “master the data,” any more than we can encompass love or humor. We can only experience it. Therefore, my first suggestion for the friend who caused this essay is a weekend retreat.

Another path is to help adult Catholics think about religious questions for themselves—ordinary people who try to find their way in a confusing world, using their best judgment, with the teachings of the Church as a guide, not a dictate nor a substitute for a personally validated conscience. Pastors could do great service starting adult discussion groups, suggesting from the pulpit books and articles they found helpful in understanding God. Failing that, I would suggest my friend learn to read scripture for himself, without a teacher. There are books too difficult for children, too simple for experts, but “just right” for educated persons who left learning about the faith long ago.

Perhaps the greatest need is to change our metaphors for the Church, not a bulwark but as Pope John XXIII reminded us, the Barque of Peter, which is not moving from one safe anchorage to another but launching into uncharted seas on a voyage of discovery. And judging by his own actions and admonitions, the Good Shepherd was not training sheep but fellow shepherds.

We serve a God who, demonstrably, is restless with stasis. Surely the upward process of evolution shows that. In each of us natural crises call us from security to larger lives: birth, weaning, play years, school, adolescence, dating, marriage, old age, death. The Bible proves it as well, God shows up just as God’s people settle into security, whistling them out onto the road again. Jesus stops by the disciples’ skiffs, upending their expectations of themselves. The pattern of God’s preferences seems inescapable.
Of all ecclesiastical boats, it strikes me the Barque of Peter leaks least, and for all its faults and confusions, no matter how others rearranged the furniture, banished comforting customs, roller-coastered from majestic to folksy, to pallid, to engaging, it’s still “home,” still my peevish, cantankerous, thin-skinned family, still that big old, bad old, beautiful old balancing rock.

References

