

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: HIS WAY, TRUTH AND LIFE

by Mary Cunningham Agee

Concerns about The Task and The Question Itself: Why am I Still a Catholic?

Two words embedded in this seemingly simple and certainly direct question caught my attention from the first moment it was posed to me for consideration: "I" and "still." Both made me uncomfortable from the outset for it was quite clear that they would demand something far more revealing from any thoughtful respondent than the relatively safe inquiry, "Why would anyone become a Catholic?"

The word "I" would deny permission for the more comfortable stance of a detached theologian or logical thinker offering one more well-reasoned apologetic about Catholicism. Instead, any meaningful reply would have to take on a distinctly personal tone. No answer could avoid providing a testimony of faith, and with it, an intimate look into the very nature of that which is most precious to me, that which defines my very being: my religious commitment.

As if the prospect of exposing such private and vulnerable thoughts in a decidedly public forum were not enough reason to back away from this invitation, the word "still" conjured up two additional concerns: First, the word left no room for discourse in anything but the *present* tense. Gone would be any hope of relying upon the childhood nostalgia that we lifelong or "cradle" Catholics are so fond of using to cover up the gaps in our less than rigorous spiritual formation. No permission would be granted to escape into an historical context where vague reasons could be excused due to the passage of time. No, this answer would have to measure up against the stark reality that a mature convert must face when asked to make a religious commitment here and now. I couldn't help but wonder if my answer would hold up--not so much to the scrutiny of an audience of readers out there--but to the inescapable and far more critical audience in here.

Also, the word "still" in the title made me uncomfortable, and, frankly, still does. It appears to arise from the same kind of misguided assumptions about individual freedom that have fueled the so-called "pro-choice" movement in this country for over two decades. For the

past twelve years I have expended every ounce of my professional energy to expose the faulty reasoning and outright lies that lurk beneath the deceptive rhetoric of this euphemistically named movement. And yet, the allure of "choice" has pressed on, compromising the emotional lives of 25 million mothers and the physical lives of a generation of children.

To suggest that I have a "choice" not to "still" remain Catholic--despite knowing that the practice of my religious faith will directly impact my chance at eternal life, is disturbingly analogous to suggesting that a mother might exercise her "choice" not to "still" remain pregnant--despite knowing that the practice of her nurturing love will directly impact her unborn child's chance at physical life. The exercise of both choices requires either a callous disregard or tragic ignorance about the inherent inferiority of one option over the other.

Granted, some Catholics do choose not to remain Catholic and some mothers do choose not to remain pregnant and so, in this sense, the question has a legitimate right to be asked. But I would be less than forthright, if I did not at least express my view that questions of choice that gloss over or ignore the distinct inequality of two alternatives should be identified as such right up front.

The Need to Bear Witness

If overcoming the hurdles imposed by the wording of the title question seemed challenging, it proved to be only a minor feat when compared to one additional obstacle that had to be conquered: Fear. At best, this emotion may have been rooted in an honest humility about the imperfections of my own faith journey not to mention the limitations of my skills as a communicator. At worst, it was rooted in a form of vanity that felt justified in shrinking away from any public exposure that could invite ridicule or criticism. I rationalized that I had already been through enough of both, thanks in no small measure to a media that prefers entertainment to facts and finds nothing wrong with turning someone's life into a cartoon-like tabloid-- especially if her values don't happen to mesh with those prevalent in secular editorial circles. Whenever this admission of fear tweaked my conscience, I could always fall back on the seemingly excessive demands on my time as a wife who takes her vocation seriously, as a mother of two young children whom I still try to home school during several months of the year and as a managing director of a growing nationwide charity that is as good at saving human lives as any I have found.

How true it is that Satan tries to engage us at our point of greatest weakness! But even his promptings could not drown out the bold directive I heard clearly articulated on the evening of my decision whether to write this chapter. In the utterly uncompromising voice of our nine year old son and from a supposedly random page of our family Bible came back the ultimate reminder from Our Lord Himself. "So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge before My Father in heaven; but whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny before My Father in heaven." (Matthew 10:32-33)

I could now understand in a fresh new light our Holy Father's increasingly urgent pleas for a renewed spirit of evangelization among all Christians as we approach the millennium. I could comprehend more fully his insistence that it is the "fundamental duty" (Ad Gentes, No. 35) of the People of God to more courageously bear witness to their faith. I could more fully grasp the seriousness of his warning in Lumen Gentium (No.14) that Catholics who do not respond to their baptismal call to live and share their faith, will not only "not be saved, but shall be the more severely judged." I realized that any one of us who would hope, in the haunting words of the thief who was crucified beside Jesus, to "be remembered" when He enters His kingdom of Heaven (Luke: 23:42) would have to heed His direct command not to "hide your light under a basket" (Mark 4:21) or "bury your talents in the ground." (Mt 25: 31-36) I realized, to put it bluntly, that my very salvation would depend upon my willingness to "go forth and proclaim the Good News to all people." (Phil 2: 12, Mt 28:19)

Why I Am A Catholic

Enough said: I'm convinced and I'm writing. Why am I still Catholic? My first reaction is to answer, perhaps a little too glibly, that given the extreme ups and downs, the unexpected twists and turns of almost epic proportions that my life has taken, why would I ever consider being *anything but* a Catholic? Where else could I possibly have found such a compassionate, understanding and inspirational mother than in the Catholic Church? How else but through the raw materials and sacred tools of my Catholic faith--prayer, the sacraments, holy scripture, the rich heritage of the saints, the inspired papal documents--could I have survived in this world of ours? Where else could I have turned for spiritual sustenance, non-judgmental support and an interpretation of human suffering that would become more meaningful with each new challenge that fate tossed my way?

My Catholicism is both my home and my way of life. In a very real sense, it *is* my life. The Church baptized me as an infant into the only Life that truly matters and it continues to "deliver me from my evil" by nurturing this Life at each defining moment of my earthly existence with its unique treasury of sacramental gifts.

My Articles Of Faith

In sharing even these preliminary words of appreciation for all that the Church has come to mean in my life, it occurs to me that it may be helpful to identify at the outset any articles of faith upon which my religious commitment may rest. We can assume that by their very nature, I will need to return to these fundamental tenets again and again in order to support my reasoning and illustrate my life experience. In a very real sense, these basic truths are also an essential part of the spiritual bounty that the Church has bestowed upon me. Each is recited at Mass in The Creed and each has been supported beyond any reasonable doubt by the Church's vast treasury of inspired writers including the saints, bishops, cardinals, popes and doctors of the Church.

Surprisingly enough, I find that there are only four bedrock beliefs that form the cornerstones of my Catholic faith; all other issues no matter how provocative or profound, inevitably seem to return as footnotes to one of these underlying principles:

First, I believe in the reality of an all-loving and powerful God Who created me and every other human being in "His image and likeness" (Gn 1:26) and entrusted each of us with an eternal soul and the gift of free will so that we might choose to live as children of God and be united with Him forever.

Second, I believe in the divinity of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, Who was sent by the Father and born of the Virgin Mary at a precise time in history in order to redeem all of mankind from sin. As the Son of God, I believe that Jesus Christ was "like us in all ways except sin" (Luke 1:35) and, therefore, was absolutely honest and utterly accurate when He described Himself as "the Son of the living God" (Luke 22:69-70, John 8: 24), "the Light of the World" (John 8:12), "the Bread of Life" (John 6: 35), the "Messiah," the Savior of the world. (Mt 26: 63-64, Mark 14: 61-62, John 4: 25-26)

Third, I believe in the authenticity of the Sacred Scripture as the "Word of God" (John 14:23, Peter 1:23-25, Divine Revelation 11) as set forth by Christ's apostles under the inspiration of the third person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit. As such, it is the single richest and truest source of wisdom about the person and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, I believe in the absolute authority of the Catholic Church as founded by Christ Himself and as revealed in Sacred Scripture when Jesus said, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." (Mt 16:18-19) and "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." (John 20:21) I believe that this divinely-ordained power to teach and guide on all matters of faith and morality has been passed down through the ages by means of papal succession and lives on today in the person of the Holy Father and the body of knowledge called Sacred Tradition.

I cannot consider a reasonable part of this brief writing assignment to be an effort to explain or defend these four underlying principles of faith. Many of the greatest theological minds throughout history have tackled this project with dedication and vigor and have still concluded their exhaustive studies and writings with the most humble of admissions about the limitations of reason and language. Nonetheless, I cannot think of a more noble pursuit or more worthwhile expenditure of intellectual energy at some future time than probing the depths of these fundamental keystones of Catholic faith.

My Response: The Church as His Way, Truth and Life

With a renewed appreciation for both the great gift that these four axioms of faith represent and their underlying significance for my religious commitment, I will now return to our discussion of why I am still a Catholic. It should be acknowledged that any topic as profound as this presents a special challenge. It is not at all unlike my trying to respond in finite words to the question posed by one of our children, "Why do you still love me?" On the one hand, I know that my reply, no matter how eloquent, is bound to fall short of capturing the depth of my full emotional commitment. Even the most lucid answer is in danger of sounding hollow, superficial or even insincere. On the other hand, not to respond at all presents a far greater risk of sounding unclear, uncertain or even unconvinced. It is against this delicate backdrop and upon this fragile canvas that I will now try to paint a picture of my spiritual life and love as a Catholic.

I have often thought that the most unambiguous and comprehensive words Jesus Christ ever said about Himself were, "I am the *Way*, the *Truth* and the *Life*. (John 14:6) I find that these three words provide the most meaningful structure for me to shape my response to the title question:

First, I choose to still be Catholic because I *love the Truth*. Jesus Christ *is* the Truth. We know this because He said so. As the Truth, He is incapable of deceit in anything He says or does. One of His greatest deeds was the creation of His Church. Having assumed our human nature, He understood that we would need His ongoing, living Presence in our lives. And so, He gave His first priests, the apostles, the Holy Eucharist and asked us to recognize Him in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine. (Mt 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24) Since He promised to be with us for all eternity (Mt 28:20), it is my privilege and duty to continue to seek and find Him in His Church no matter how difficult this may seem at times. Just as I love the Truth, I love His Presence in His Church and would never knowingly choose to be separated from Him.

Second, I choose to still be Catholic because I *need to follow the Way*. Jesus told us that He *is* the Way. His Way is the way to salvation. This is my ultimate goal in life and the true purpose for which I was created. My task is to grow in love for His Truth and work diligently to obey His commands which light and guide the Way to eternal Life. Jesus asked us to "Pick up our cross and follow Him" (Luke 9:23), and promised that those who did so would find salvation. (Luke 9:24) When he said, "If you love me, obey my commandments" (John 14:15), He linked love to obedience. And when He said, "If anyone keep my word, he will never see death." (John 8:51), He linked obedience to eternal Life. Since the grace needed to overcome my many weaknesses and to be obedient is given through the sacraments of His Church, I choose to participate as fully as possible in the Life of the Church.

Third, I choose to still be Catholic because, in the words of the Mosaic Law, I *choose Life*. Jesus said that He *is* Life. He was sent by our Creator, His Father, so that "we might have new Life and have it more abundantly." (Rom 6:4) He gave us Himself in the ultimate act of sacrifice on the Cross in order to "free us from sin and death." (Rom 6:23) He anticipated our need for forgiveness, communion and spiritual fortification and so He asked us to partake of His instruments of grace, the sacraments of His Church. He connected a Life of holiness with

salvation (Mt: 5:20) and salvation with participation in the sacraments: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:54) Therefore, I would not deliberately choose to separate myself from the Source of all Life by denying my soul the vital nourishment of the Church's grace-filled sacraments.

Frankly, as I review these thoughts about the reasons for my religious commitment as a Catholic, it all seems much more reasonable than I would have expected. I feel obliged to admit that there is a far greater part of me than these three logical explanations would suggest, I practice my faith in much the same way as I practice the art of loving--without the need for words of rational support. But having committed these words to paper, I would now like to ask a few questions of my own: What reasonable person would not choose the freedom of Truth over the prison of deception and lies? What thinking individual would knowingly separate himself or herself from the greatest Source of this Truth, The Church? What sane or sensible person in the hope of attaining salvation would deliberately turn his back on eternal Life by refusing to follow His Way and recognize His Truth?

The Gifts of the Church: A Need to Express Gratitude

Being a child by nature, I find it easy to understand why my choice to remain Catholic is so greatly influenced by the many generous gifts that the Church has given and continues to give to me. Since I believe that the most valuable gifts are those that nourish my soul and help me to achieve my ultimate goal of everlasting union with God, I am drawn to the Catholic Church. It abounds in such gifts and never ceases to make them available to me, her unworthy child.

Before discussing the gifts themselves, I need to take a moment to share my thoughts about the endangered art of *gratitude*. I'm not speaking about mere good manners or polite rules of etiquette. I am talking about that profoundly humbling emotion that fills a person's heart when they discover that they are the recipient of something hugely valuable. As I consider how seldom and how meager the expressions of this emotion appear to be today despite the endless array of precious gifts continually being conferred upon each of us by the Church, I am troubled.

Perhaps, a brief anecdote from my childhood might illustrate my point. When I was five years old, a kind and devoted priest, Father Bill Nolan, assumed the responsibility of being a

father figure to our family of four children. One of the parables he delighted in sharing was about the Carpenter of Nazareth who, 2000 years ago on the dusty road to Jerusalem, was moved to compassion by ten men with leprosy. He would point out that Jesus healed all ten lepers and yet, only one returned to thank him for this miraculous cure. The Healer's poignant response was, "Where are the other nine?" (Luke 17: 17-18)

I believe that his purpose in repeatedly sharing this particular parable with our family was to remind us of the singular importance of gratitude. He wanted us to understand that even the greatest spiritual leader of all time looked for ways to feel appreciated and affirmed. It is my hope that by responding with my life like the one leper who returned, I may in time deserve to be called a good student of my first spiritual confessor and beloved religious mentor, Father Bill. There may even be hope for me someday to become a good disciple of the One to Whom he devoted his entire saintly life.

The Sacramental Gifts of The Church

With this having been said, let us return to the sacramental gifts themselves for which I am most grateful. While the constraints of both time and space will not allow me to describe each of the seven sacraments in the detail it surely deserves, I hope to at least be able to convey the basic reasons that each is an infinitely valuable gift to me.

The first gift that every Catholic is given by the Church is the sacrament of Baptism. As I consider the all encompassing magnitude as well as the universal availability of this gift, I am in awe. Imagine the expensive price tag and exclusive distribution channel that a marketing executive would envision for any product that promised to do what this initial sacrament of Baptism does. We are told in the words of Christ Himself, "Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3: 5) Who among us, believer and agnostic alike, would not admit to preferring eternal salvation over everlasting damnation? No wonder, Jesus *commanded* His disciples to go forth and "proclaim the Gospel to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." (Mt: 28:19-20) Sacred Scripture clearly tells us that this foundational sacrament provides all of the grace we need to be "born again" into a "Life in the Spirit" so that "Christ might live in us." (Gal 2:20) As if this ultimate of gifts were not enough to inspire a lifetime of grateful service, we also learn that it is through this gateway sacrament that all of our past sins are forgiven and we become "temples of

the Holy Spirit" (II Cor 6:16, John 14:23), "adopted sons and daughters of God" (Rom 8: 14-17, II Cor 6:16-18) and members of the mystical "Body of Christ." (Eph 4:15-16, I Cor 6:15)

The Church's generosity and determination to be my spiritual aid and guide on the path to salvation continues well beyond this great sacrament and is evidenced by Her sacramental presence at each milestone in the course of my life. When I play the part of the prodigal's son, she rushes out to meet me with forgiving arms and presents me with the healing sacrament of Reconciliation. When I struggle to find the grace to persevere in my vocation let alone to see the face of Jesus in the midst of my enemies, I am shown the way to a more intimate awareness of His real and immediate presence in my life through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. When I reached the age where I needed to strengthen my commitment to follow in Christ's footsteps, the Church was there to offer the gifts of the Holy Spirit through the sacrament of Confirmation. When I searched for the grace to choose a vocation that would enable me to put to fuller use the gifts that I had been given, the Church was ready to honor and bless my love of another human being through the sacrament of Matrimony. And when my days are ready to come to a close, I take no small comfort in knowing that the Church will once again be there in Her infinite mercy to anoint me with the healing sacrament of Extreme Unction and offer one final gift of grace to send me on my way Home.

The Church Itself as a Sacramental Gift

I cannot conclude this discussion of the sacramental gifts of the Church without at least mentioning that the Church *itself* can be called a "sacrament." As a child I committed to memory the simplest definition of a sacrament as "an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace." (Baltimore Catechism) The purpose of any sign is to point the way toward a reality beyond itself. For the Church, that Reality is Jesus Christ. This fact is an important reassurance for anyone who has ever wondered about the purpose for the Church's statues, rosaries, stations of the cross, vestments and other religious articles, rites and customs. All exist for one reason and one reason only: to "point the way" to Jesus Christ.

It is by virtue of Christ's unique role as Founder, Chief Architect and on-going Guide, that the Church fulfills the complete meaning of the term sacrament. The Catholic Church is for me both a sacred, visible sign of Christ's living presence in the world and also an effective instrument of His saving grace for all of mankind. Whenever that "sign" seems a little hard to

read, I draw sustenance from the clear, uninterrupted line of authority its Founder set in motion when He said to His first priests, the apostles, "He who hears you, hears Me." (Luke 10:16) Whenever that "instrument" seems a little warped, I take comfort from the Architect's promise to remain always with His Church "even until the end of time." (Mt: 28:18-20)

Challenges to the Church Today

I believe that it is in large part because of this unshakeable awareness of the inseparable union of Christ with "His beloved Bride" (Eph 5:25-27) the Church, that I have been able to safely navigate the often choppy waters churned up by the "human element" within this sacred institution. I have sadly watched in recent years as the seeds of distrust and unrest have been easily sown among members of the laity who are weak in religious formation and members of the clergy who have become obsessed with popularity. I could not help but notice as this crop has been poisoned by initially minor acts of disobedience to Church authority and allegedly harmless contradictions of Catholic doctrine that have eventually blossomed into full-blown heresy. I have wept over this unfortunate harvest as it has been watered by the polluted drugs of convenience, comfort and complacency. And now I look on in horror as the branches of this diseased plant begin to bear their spoiled fruit of religious rebellion and spiritual apathy.

The Call to Personal Responsibility

What, you might ask, does any of this have to do with choosing to *remain* Catholic? In fact, you could argue, these disturbing conditions might easily contribute to the *weakening* of my resolve to remain faithful? Whatever my reply may now lack in diplomacy, I hope will be made up for by its candor. The very essence of Christian morality can be summed up in one word: "*responsibility*"; that is, *response-ability*, and I'm not about to shirk it. I believe that my very salvation depends upon my *ability to respond* "with all my heart and all my soul " (Deut 10:12) to both God and my neighbor. Since the Catholic Church is home to both, I see no lasting benefit in a "cut and run" strategy. Simon Peter captured this truth two thousand years ago about as well as anyone ever could when he replied to Jesus' question, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life . . . You are the Christ, the Son of God." (John 6:69-70)

My First Responsibility : Love of God

It could be accurately said that the entirety of Christian ethics can be captured in the "Great Commandment" given by Jesus Christ Himself: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:37-38) He made it clear that these were not mere suggestions but commands with dire consequences if not followed, "If you wish to enter into Life, keep the commandments." (Mt 19:17)

I want to focus on the first part of this Great Commandment and consider the message it may hold for any Catholic today who may be thinking that a quick exit strategy would make good sense given the current rash of turmoil in the Church. As any student of history knows, this is hardly the first time that the Catholic Church has experienced persecution or pressure for change from both within and without. We can find comfort in the fact that Jesus, Who is still present at the very heart of His Church, anticipated these struggles and reassured us with the stabilizing insight that His Truth is unchanging, that He "remains the same yesterday, today and tomorrow." (Heb 13:8) Therefore, we should not become anxious by exaggerating either the Church's temporary problems or our own call to assist Her.

I believe that Christ's command to "love God with my whole being" demands a concrete and practical expression. I can think of no more authentic or effective manifestation of this genuine love than through humble and courageous service to His beloved Church. For what loving child abandons a parent in a moment of grave illness? What loving parent neglects a child in a moment of serious peril? A decision to serve, to give of oneself, especially during periods of great danger, is always rooted in profound love. This is the same deep, abiding love that Jesus is calling for in the first part of His Great Commandment and, I believe, the kind that will safely guide His Church through this challenging period of history.

Criteria For Personal Responsibility

Social scientists have determined that three conditions need to be met in order for a person to feel a strong sense of personal responsibility. First, the person must feel a sense of *importance* and even *urgency* about the need to perform this task; Second, the individual must believe that the task is *do-able*; and Third, a person must feel *uniquely qualified* to perform the task at hand. As I reflect upon the Catholic Church's pressing need for renewal, I must confess to reluctantly

answering "yes" to all three. Since the "harvest is abundant but the laborers are few" (Luke 10:2), I will try to offer a few thoughts about how I reached this positive conclusion in the hope that this disclosure might prompt at least a few to become a little more generous in their own response to the current needs of the Church.

Given both its divine origin and the living presence of Christ within the Church, it should be obvious why I consider the task helping and healing the Church to be "important." Given the gravity and intensity of the threats being mounted against Her today, it should also be clear why I consider this task to be "urgent." And given any number of scriptural passages that remind us "in God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26), it should come as no surprise that I believe the task is "doable."

But it is the third criterion for assuming personal responsibility that almost caused me to stumble. Most of us with even just a modicum of humility would be hard-pressed to describe ourselves as "uniquely qualified" to assist in the ongoing formation of the Life of the Church. And yet, the scriptural passages that refer to *each of us* as being "called by name" and putting to good use the many "varieties of gifts" of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4) cannot be ignored. Even just a quick reading of the warning that was given in the parable about the rich man who hoarded his gifts (James 5:1-7) is chilling enough to make me think twice before "passing the buck" to someone "more qualified." And there is always that familiar passage indelibly etched upon my conscience from a childhood marked by frequent lapses in everything from piano practice to homework studies to household chores: "To whom much has been given, much will be expected." (Luke 19:26) I interpret each of these scriptural passages as being important reminders not to undervalue or underutilize the unique array of gifts that each of us has been given.

On an even more personal note and still well within the bounds of considering this third criteria for personal responsibility, I believe that there are three unique gifts that have, in particular, shaped my identity and my willingness to "stand up and be counted" whenever the Church or any of Her members is in need of support. I can discern their catalyzing influence at the very heart of all that I do. Right now I'm wondering if they actually make me "qualified" as much as they surely make me "unique," but for the sake of this discussion, I am inclined to think it may be both.

Paradoxically enough, as I force myself to analyze these very special "gifts," I discover

that each initially came wrapped in the riveting anguish of human tragedy. Each would demand that I learn an invaluable lesson: to convert a life-altering loss into a Life-saving gain. Each would require me to put into full practice the spiritual survival skills of faith, hope and love if I were to overcome the temptations that await anyone who has known profound grief: despair, self-pity and anger. Upon reflection, only a most loving God intimately in tune with the precise needs of my individual soul could have pinpointed the perfect time and circumstances for each of these "gifts" to be presented: At age five, I lost my father; at age thirty I lost my privacy; at age thirty-three, I lost my first child.

I believe that it was in these moments of extreme brokenness that I managed to discover the singularity of purpose and clarity of mission that might otherwise have eluded me for longer than I care to speculate. How painfully true it seems to be that we easily-distracted human beings can only hear the call to holiness when the cluttered paths of our busy, self-indulgent lives are laid bare, when we finally fall humbly upon our knees. I know, because I have spent a lot more time in that position than I would ever have freely chosen. And yet, like the vine that has been sharply pruned or the metal that has been forged and tested by fire, I can now give thanks.

I believe that each of these potentially devastating events has, by the grace of God, been converted into the "leaven" in the bread of my life. Through the invitation to let go of my human father, I received the gift of compassionate love for any child who feels abandoned. I was also given a far more intimate relationship with my Heavenly Father Who kept His promise not "to leave me orphaned" (Jer 49:11) and never seemed to tire of reminding me of my "belovedness" as a "child of God." Through the invitation to relinquish the safety of my privacy, I received the gift of compassionate love for those brave souls throughout history who have been "persecuted for the sake of righteousness." (Mt 5:10) I was also given a stronger resolve to loosen my grip on the vain pursuits of power, fame and fortune. Through the invitation to release the life of my first child, Angela Grace, I received the gift of compassionate love for every mother who has ever lost a child in any manner or form. I was also given a more genuine desire to learn the single-minded devotion of Abraham who was willing even to sacrifice the life of his only son, Isaac.

My Second Responsibility: Love of Neighbor

The Catholic faith was not designed by its Founder to be a tidy set of doctrines that could be neatly practiced alone in the safety of one's private relationship with Almighty God. It is a

generous religion that demands authentic expression in practical and loving service to others. Its Founder was not mincing words when He warned, "Anyone who says that he loves God and hates his neighbor is a liar" (1 John 2:4) and "Whoever says he is in the light, and yet hates his brother is still in the darkness." (1 John 2:9) He could hardly have been more clear when He said, "As long as you did it for the least of these, you did it for Me." (Mt 25:40) This is why we find included in the same Great Commandment that demands an absolute love of God, an equally stringent requirement of an unconditional love of one's neighbor. Christ left no room for confusion. His was not a Church that would look with favor on anyone who would hope to achieve salvation by just "looking out for number one."

For me, this call to loving action has taken a very specific and concrete form. It is my small but determined attempt to "light a candle rather than to curse the darkness" of the "culture of death" in which we find ourselves living. My "Little Drummer Girl" response to the second part of Jesus' Great Commandment is called The Nurturing Network.

My Personal Response to This Call to Action: The Nurturing Network

The idea of The Nurturing Network did not come to me in a dream, but in the nightmare of a mid-trimester miscarriage, when the emptiness makes you want to cry out, "Why me, God, why me?" In my anguish, I was initiated into a sorority of loss, listening in the darkness for the cry of a child whom I would never be able to hold or comfort. As I put away the empty crib and folded the handmade baby blanket, I began to comprehend the vivid truth in what Bishop Fulton Sheen had said so often, "There could never have been an Easter Sunday without there first being a Good Friday."

In meditating over this truth, I'd like to believe that it was the Holy Spirit who whispered to my broken heart the possibility that *the life of many could be born out of the death of one*. If I could feel that much pain and loss over a child I wanted, how must other women feel when they are coerced by circumstances or family members to surrender the life of their child to abortion? How deep must be their grief, anger and guilt. How cruel that "choice" must seem to those who feel they have *no other* choice. I knew I was being given a rare glimpse into the injured hearts of so many women whose babies are aborted: "I felt alone, violated." "My child was taken from me. My little child, not a 'fetus,' not 'tissue,' not 'membrane,' but a baby. My baby!" The personal "call by name" to be my sisters' keeper came over a decade ago and with it was born an

organization that to date has saved over 8,000 children's lives and provided a hope-filled solution to each of their mothers. I structured this grassroots organization with the all-consuming hope that one day we would live in a society that no longer required our services. My prayer was that we would someday literally "be put out of business" by compassion and love: Love of a parent so strong that it might withstand the onslaught of a thing called shame; love of a mate or boyfriend so binding in fidelity that it would not instantly check out; love of a community so Christ-like that it would not cast the first stone of judgment but transform that stone into the bread of Life.

After some of our ten and twelve-hour days at the Network, I find myself asking, "Is love too much to ask? Is there room for love to slip in between the pronouns of me, myself and I in a self-indulgent society that shuns moral absolutes and where nothing is considered wrong as long as you don't get caught?" I find it difficult to answer these questions just as a relief doctor in Bosnia, Sarajevo or Rwanda finds little time to ponder the arguments for a just war. For there are literally hundreds of thousands of women in our midst who are in immediate, desperate need of our practical life-saving compassion.

I know, because I hear their mothers' broken voices on our telephone lifeline. I listen to their stories of abandonment and betrayal and discover not only the most obvious culprit, the father of the baby, at the heart of their struggle, but you and me. I believe that we are accomplices in these desperate, hopeless decisions every time we turn a deaf ear to Our Lord's command to "Love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34)

I believe that if we are "for life," we have a moral obligation to provide the means to support and sustain it. As I reflect upon the underlying weakness or flaw in the pro-life movement in America at this time, I have to admit that it may have much more to do with the Christian community's lukewarm and inconsistent response to this vital issue than with the deliberate efforts of pragmatic politicians or a Godless media. Despite almost two million abortions each year, Christ's call to action is still too often met with a series of lame excuses, conditional promises and allegedly higher priorities.

If there were just one moment in my many years of professional experience at The Nurturing Network that I would try to bring into sharper focus for those who think they can just "sit on the sidelines" of this culture-defining issue, it would be that charged instant when I hear a mother's heart lament, "*If only I had known.*"

In case you are about to dismiss this contemporary Mary Magdalene, let me clarify a few facts about who she really is. Our practical research has debunked the false assumption that the majority of those experiencing abortion are uneducated young teens from disadvantaged backgrounds. Rather, we have found that the most likely candidate for this procedure is an unmarried, middle class woman between the ages of 20 and 26, who has earned at least a high school diploma. You know this woman. She is your next door neighbor, your waitress, your colleague at work, the cashier at your favorite restaurant. She could even be your own daughter. These are women you encounter everyday and yet, their scars are hidden--some with band-aids called denial, others with armored rhetoric called "reproductive freedom."

The facts are that there are four basic influences that weigh heavily in all abortion decisions: The father of the baby, frightened and confused, issues a personally devastating ultimatum, "Either me or the baby." The family, embarrassed and disappointed, issues an emotionally crippling ultimatum, "Either your family or the baby." The peer group, well-intentioned but misinformed, issues a socially-charged ultimatum, "Either your social standing or the baby." And finally, the employer, blinded by "bottom line" pragmatism, issues an economically threatening ultimatum, "Either your career or the baby."

Of course, none of these ultimatums has anything to do with "freedom of choice." All have to do with unfair, seemingly impossible tradeoffs. This is why The Nurturing Network was formed -- to give a woman a positive alternative, one which recognizes her unique values, needs and circumstances. Our Network of 22,000 volunteer members is made up of doctors, counselors, educators, employers and nurturing families from every state in this nation and from fourteen foreign countries. These contemporary "Simons of Cyrene" empower a mother to nurture her baby's life -- while making the most of hers as well. Our volunteers devote their time, talent and treasure not to removing an option but to creating one, not to debating the merits of one alternative over another but to making sure that no woman feels she has been left without the choice to give birth.

During the twelve years that I have had the privilege of working face to face and heart to heart with these living "profiles in courage," I have learned a well-kept secret that I believe could fatally undermine the "pro-choice" movement if ever fully exposed. The simple truth is that most abortions do *not* occur as a result of "free choice" but because women in crisis feel they have *no other* choice. My informal research with hundreds of women who have experienced prior

abortion reveals that over 90% of these mothers would have chosen a positive, life-saving alternative *if only it had been made available to them.*

And, as if the moral absolute to protect and nurture all life were not enough, our clients have shown us time and time again that an unwanted pregnancy does not have to mean an unwanted baby. There is an obvious correlation between how much practical compassionate support we are willing to give women with crisis pregnancies and how many healthy infants will be available for the hundreds of thousands of potential parents wishing to adopt. But unless we are willing to offer the emotional, social and financial support needed by women facing this kind of pregnancy, we cannot legitimately express either condemnation or surprise when we discover that they have chosen a less hopeful solution.

You could say that The Nurturing Network was my "Field of Dreams" with that recurring and haunting voice that said, "Build it, and they will come." Indeed they have. And they continue to come. For our Network is no longer a dream but a powerful reality to the women and children of this country, a reality that is only a toll-free phone call away: 1-800-TNN-4MOM. This compassionate outreach is my living testimony to the daily miracles that can occur when each of us takes to heart the Divine Carpenter of Nazareth's plea to "Feed My lambs." (John 21:15)

Conclusion

In closing, I hope that I have been able to convey why the notion of choosing to walk away from the banquet table of the Catholic Church's grace-filled gifts, for me bordered on the absurd. Not only do I value these gifts beyond all others, but I take seriously the words set forth so clearly in Article 14 of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church: "Anyone knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God (for salvation) through Jesus Christ, (who) would refuse to enter Her or remain in Her *could not be saved.*" I hope and pray that at least some of the exit-takers may be able to wriggle through the gates of Heaven on the technical grounds that they "did not know." I am sure that I would not want to bet my eternity on this point.

A Final Point

After all is said and done, each of us must ultimately answer that most basic of questions

that Christ posed to His disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" (Mt 16:18) If you line up on the side of those who echo the words of Simon Peter, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Mt 16:16), then making a lifetime commitment as a faithful member of His Church becomes quite easy. If, on the other hand, you find yourself gravitating toward the side of Judas or Pilot or Herod, then such a commitment is preposterous.

The group for whom I feel the greatest concern are those "happy medium", "best of both worlds" folks who try to straddle both lines. While they may receive points in the popular press for their liberal moderation and "political correctness," they are walking a dangerous tightrope with their immortal souls. Can we honestly make sense out of statements like, "I believe in Christ Himself but I cannot accept His Church or any of the requirements that come from it." Or how about, "I believe that Jesus was Who He said He was, but I don't believe that His message holds much meaning for today's special challenges." And then there is always, "I believe that Jesus is a kind and loving God and so I don't really believe that He expects me to live up to all of His teachings." Let's see, we are now proposing a God who either didn't know what He was doing or didn't really mean what He was saying. I don't think I'll sign up for this group any time soon.

If you discover that you are in the lineup poised toward salvation alongside those who understand that Jesus Christ was precisely Who he said He was and not a dangerous dangerous liar or crazed egomaniac, then I rejoice for the moment with you. But before the celebrating concludes, I feel compelled to emphasize one final point. I ask that you take a good, hard look around you just as I have had to do since undertaking this writing assignment. Go ahead and ask your friends, your colleagues, the members of your family how they would answer the title question. Then listen carefully. If you hear the deadening silence of confusion and uncertainty or the nervous shuffling of sidesteppers, take notice. Better yet, take responsibility, for we *are* called to be our "brothers keeper" (Gen 4:9) and there is plenty of room on the path to Heaven for them too.

It is crystal clear to me that the Catholic Church with Her abundant gifts of grace is the only hope I have of approaching my day of judgement with any confidence at all. And maybe, just maybe, as I lay my earthly burdens down, a few familiar faces will be there waiting in the wings. As I turn to hear the Almighty's verdict, I might catch a grateful wink here or a knowing nod there for having played some small part that helped to nudge them on their way. I pray that with the help of my Holy Mother Church, I will hear the words from the Father Himself, "Well done! My good and faithful servant."