“A writer of unusual grace and clarity, he is eloquent in all his reflections ... he speaks with authority, in a voice of true clarity, and it is impossible to doubt him.”

—The New Yorker

“Like Sartre’s The Words, a work with which it favorably compares, Hunger of Memory reveals the fathomless capacity of language to reshape experience. The author is profoundly honest, hauntingly so. The price of American social success is often loneliness, but Richard Rodriguez has come to terms with himself.”

—Boston Globe

“Must reading for those who wish to deal honestly with the disparities in our educational system and who wish to preserve and improve our public schools.”

—Bayard Rustin

“His book is an affecting act of filial piety, a tribute to the special bravery of immigrant parents who point a child forward a cultural divide they cannot cross. But his book also is a profound compliment to the country. He praises what he has lost, but insists that the gain—Americanization: a place in our public—has been worth the pain.”

—George Will, Washington Post Syndicate

“His story is extraordinarily sensitive and compassionate, yet disarmingly objective, a genuine act of human and religious faith. Few have presented with such skill the indestructible intimacy of family love and its resilience under the stress of change. The book provides new understanding of the dynamism of language in establishing a person’s private and public identity.”

—Walter J. Ong, Professor of Humanities, St. Louis University
DEDICATION

She tells people, her neighbors, that I am a 'Ph.D. professor,' I am doing some writing, she explains. But I will be going back to teach in a year or two. Soon, in private, she admits worry. Did somebody hurt you at Berkeley? ... Why don't you try teaching at some Catholic college?'

No, I say. And she turns silent to my father, who stands watching me. The two of them. They know I have money enough to support myself. But I have nothing steady. No profession. And I am the one in the family with so much education. (All those years!) My brother and sisters are doing so well. 'All I want for you is something you can count on for life,' she says.

For her and for him — to honor them.
THREE

Credo
The steps of the church defined the eternal square where children played and adults talked after dinner. He remembers the way the church building was at the center of town life. She remembers the way one could hear the bell throughout the day, telling time. And the way the town completely closed down for certain feast days. He remembers that the church spire was the first thing he’d see walking back into town. Both my parents have tried to describe something of what it was like for them to have grown up Catholic in small Mexican towns. They remember towns where everyone was a Catholic.

With their move to America, my mother and father left behind the Mexican Church to find themselves (shy to praying in whispered Spanish) in an Irish-American parish. In a way, they found themselves at ease in such a church. My parents had much in common with the Irish-born priests and nuns. Like my parents, the priests remembered what it was like to have been Catholic in villages and cities where everyone else was a Catholic. In their American classrooms, the nuns worked very hard to approximate that other place, that earlier kind of religious experience. For a time they succeeded. For a time I too enjoyed a Catholicism something like that enjoyed a generation before me by my parents.

I grew up a Catholic at home and at school; in private and in public. My mother and father were deeply pious Catholics; all my relatives were Catholics. At home, there were holy pictures on a wall of nearly every room, and a crucifix hung over my bed. My first twelve years as a student were spent in Catholic schools where I could look up to the front of the room and see a crucifix hanging over the clock.

When I was a boy, anyone not a Catholic was defined by that fact and the term non-Catholic. The expression suggests
the parochialism of the Catholicism in which I was raised. In those years I could have told you the names of persons in public life who were Catholics. I knew that Ed Sullivan was a Catholic. And Mrs. Bob Hope. And Senator John F. Kennedy. As the neighborhood newspaper boy, I knew all the names on my route. As a Catholic, I noted which open doors, which front room windows disclosed a crucifix. At quarter to eight Sunday mornings, I saw the O'Briens and the Van Hoyts walking down the empty sidewalk past our house and I knew. Catholics were mysteriously lucky, 'chosen' by God to be nurtured a special way. Non-Catholics had souls too, of course, and somehow could get to heaven. But on Sundays they got all dressed up only to go to a church where there was no incense, no sacred body and blood, and no confessional box. Or else they slept late and didn't go to church at all. For non-Catholics, it seemed, there was all white and no yolk.

In twelve years of Catholic schooling, I learned, in fact, very little about the beliefs of non-Catholics, though the little I learned was conveyed by my teachers without hostility and with fair accuracy. All that I knew about Protestants was that they differed from Catholics. But what precisely distinguished a Baptist from a Methodist from an Episcopalian I could not have said. I surmised the clearest notion of Protestant theology from discussions of the Reformation. At that, Protestantism emerged only as deviance from Catholic practice and thought. Judaism was different. Before the Christian era Judaism was my religion, the nuns said. ('We are all Jews because of Christ.') But what happened to Judaism after Christ's death to the time the modern state of Israel was founded, I could not have said. Nor did I know a thing about Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam. I knew nothing about modern secular ideologies. In civics class, a great deal was said about oppressive Soviet policies; but at no time did I hear classical Marxism explained. In church, at the close of mass, the congregation prayed for the conversion of Russia.

It is not enough to say that I grew up a ghetto Catholic. As a Catholic schoolboy, I was educated a middle-class American. Even while grammar school nuns reminded me of my spiritual separateness from non-Catholics, they provided excellent public schooling. A school day began with prayer—the Morning Offering. Then there was the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. Religion class followed immediately. But afterward, for the rest of the day, I was taught well those skills of numbers and words crucial to my Americanization. Soon I became as Americanized as my classmates—most of whom were two or three generations removed from their immigrant ancestors, and all of whom were children of middle-class parents.

When we were eleven years old, the nuns would warn us about the dangers of mixed marriage (between a Catholic and a non-Catholic). And we heard a priest say that it was a mortal sin to read newspaper accounts of a Billy Graham sermon. But the ghetto Catholic Church, so defensive, so fearful of contact with non-Catholics, was already outdated when I entered the classroom. My classmates and I were destined to live in a world very different from that which the nuns remembered in Ireland or my parents remembered in Mexico. We were destined to live on unshallowed ground, beyond the gated city of God.

I was in high school when Kennedy's picture went up on the wall. And I remember feeling that he was 'one of us.' His election to the presidency, however, did not surprise me as it did my father. Nor was I encouraged by it. I did not take it as
evidence that Catholics could, after all, participate fully in American public life. (I assumed that to be true.) When I was a senior in high school, consequently, I did not hesitate to apply to secular colleges.

It was to be in college, at Stanford, that my religious faith would seem to me suddenly pared. I would remain a Catholic, but a Catholic defined by a non-Catholic world. This is how I think of myself now. I remember my early Catholic schooling and recall an experience of religion very different from anything I have known since. Never since have I felt so much at home in the Church, so easy at mass. My grammar school years especially were the years when the great Church doors opened to enclose me, filling my day as I was certain the Church filled all time. Living in a community of shared faith, I enjoyed much more than mere social reinforcement of religious belief. Experienced continuously in public and private, Catholicism shaped my whole day. It framed my experience of eating and sleeping and washing; it named the season and the hour.

The sky was full then and the coming of spring was a religious event. I would awaken to the sound of garage doors creaking open and know without thinking that it was Friday and that my father was on his way to six-thirty mass. I saw, without bothering to notice, statues at home and at school of the Virgin and of Christ. I would write at the top of my arithmetic or history homework the initials Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. (All my homework was thus dedicated.) I felt the air was different, somehow still and more silent on Sundays and high feastdays, I felt lightened, transparent as sky, after confessing my sins to a priest. Schooldays were routinely divided by prayers said with classmates; I would not have forgotten to say grace before eating. And I would not have turned off the light next to my bed or fallen asleep without praying to God.

The institution of the Church stood an extraordinary physical presence in my world. One block from the house was Sacred Heart Church. In the opposite direction, another block away, was Sacred Heart Grammar School, run by the Sisters of Mercy. And from our backyard, I could see Mercy Hospital, Sacramento’s only Catholic hospital. All day I would hear the sirens of death. Well before I was a student myself, I would watch the Catholic school kids walk by the front of the house, dressed in gray and red uniforms. From the front lawn I could see people on the steps of the church, coming out, dressed in black after funerals, or standing, the ladies in bright-colored dresses in front of the church after a wedding. When I first went to store on errands for my mother, I could be seen by the golden-red statue of Christ, where it hovered over the main door of the church.

I was no católico before I was a Catholic. That is, I acquired my earliest sense of the Church—and my membership in it—through my parents’ Mexican Catholicism. It was in Spanish that I first learned to pray. I recited family prayers—not from any book. And in those years when we felt alienated from los gringos, my family went across town every week to the wooden church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which was decorated with yellow Christmas tree lights all year long.

Very early, however, the gringo church in our neighborhood began to superimpose itself on our family life. The first English-speaking dinner guest at our house was a priest from Sacred Heart Church. I was about four years old at the time, so I retain only random details with which to remember the evening. But the visit was too important an event for me to forget. I remember how my mother dressed her four children
in outfits it had taken her weeks to sew. I wore a white shirt and blue woolen shorts. (It was the first time I had been dressed up for a stranger.) I remember hearing the priest’s English laughter. (It was the first time I had heard such sounds in the house.) I remember that my mother served a gringo meat loaf and that I was too nervous or shy to look up more than two or three times to study the priest’s jiggling layers of face. (Smoothly, he made believe that there was conversation.) After dinner we all went to the front room where the priest took a small book from his jacket to recite some prayers, consecrating our house and our family. He left a large picture of a sad-eyed Christ, exposing his punctured heart. (A caption below records the date of his visit and the imprimatur of Francis Cardinal Spellman.) That picture survives. Hanging prominently over the radio or, later, the television set in the front room, it has remained a position of prominence in all the houses my parents have lived in since. It has been one of the few permanent fixtures in the environment of my life. Visitors to our house doubtlessly noticed it when they entered the door—saw it immediately as the sign we were Catholics. But I saw the picture too often to pay it much heed.

I saw a picture of the Sacred Heart in the grammar school classroom I entered two years after the priest’s visit. The picture drew an important continuity between home and the classroom. When all else was different for me (as a scholarship boy) between the two worlds of my life, the Church provided an essential link. During my first months in school, I remember being struck by the fact that—although they worshipped in English—the nuns and my classmates shared my family’s religion. The gringos were, in some way, like me, católicos. Gradually, however, with my assimilation in the schoolroom, I began to think of myself and my family as Catholics. The distinction blurred. At home and in class I heard about sin and Christ and Satan and the consoling presence of Mary the Virgin. It became one Catholic faith for me.

Only now do I trouble to notice what intricate differences separated home Catholicism from classroom Catholicism. In school, religious instruction stressed that man was a sinner. Influenced, I suspect, by a bleak melancholic strain in Irish Catholicism, the nuns portrayed God as a judge. I was carefully taught the demands He placed upon me. In the third grade I could distinguish between venial and mortal sin. I knew—and was terrified to know—that there was one unforgivable sin (against the Holy Ghost); the sin of despair. I knew the crucial distinction between perfect and imperfect contrition. I could distinguish sins of commission from sins of omission. And I learned how important it was to be in a state of grace at the moment of death.

Death. (How much nearer it seemed to the boy than it seems to me now.) Again and again the nuns would pull out the old stories of death-bed conversions; of Roman martyrs; of murdered African missionaries; of pious children dying of cancer to become tiny saints; of souls going immediately to heaven. We were taught how to baptize in case of emergency. I knew why some souls went to Limbo after the death of the body, and others went for a time to Purgatory, and why others went to heaven or hell—‘forever and ever.’

Among the assortment of possible sins to commit, sexual sins—the cherries—were certainly mentioned. With the first years of puberty, the last years of grammar school, we began hearing about ‘sins of the flesh.’ There were those special mornings when the priest would come over from church to take the
boys to the cafeteria, while the nun remained with the girls—"the young ladies"—in the classroom. For fifty minutes the priest would talk about the dangers of masturbation or petting, and some friend of mine would turn carefully in his chair to snirk in my direction or somebody else would jab me in the back with a pencil.

Unlike others who have described their Catholic schooling, I do not remember the nuns or the priests to have been obsessed with sexual sins. Perhaps that says more about me or my Mexican Catholicism than it says about what actually went on in the classroom. I remember, in any case, that I would sometimes hear with irony warnings about sins of the flesh. When we were in eighth grade the priest told us how dangerous it was to look at our naked bodies, even while taking a bath—and I noticed that he made the remark directly under a near-naked figure of Christ on the cross.

The Church, in fact, excited more sexual wonderment than it repressed. I regarded with awe the "wedding ring" on a nun's finger, her black "wedding veil"—symbols of marriage to God. I would study pictures of martyrs—white-robed virgins fallen in death and the young, almost-smiling, St. Sebastian, transfigured in pain. At Easter high mass I was dazzled by the mucous perfume of white flowers at the celebration of rebirth. At such moments, the Church touched alive some very private sexual excitement; it pronounced my sexuality important.

Sin remained, nevertheless. Confession was a regular part of my grammar school years. (One sought forgiveness through the ritual plea: "Bless me, father, for I have sinned. . . .") Sin—the distance separating man from God—sin that burdened a sorrowful Christ—sin remained. (I have disobeyed my parents fourteen times . . . I have lied eight times . . . I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee. . . .) God the Father judged. But Christ the Son had interceded. I was forgiven each time I sought forgiveness. The priest murmured Latin words of forgiveness in the confessional box (And I would leave the dark).

In contrast to the Catholicism of school, the Mexican Catholicism of home was less concerned with man the sinner than with man the supplicant. God the Father was not so much a stern judge as One with the power to change our lives. My family turned to God not in guilt so much as in need. We prayed for favors and at desperate times. I prayed for help in finding a quarter I had lost on my way home. I prayed with my family at times of illness and when my father was temporarily out of a job. And when there was death in the family, we prayed.

I remember my family's religion, and I hear the whispering voices of women. For although men in my family went to church, women prayed most audibly. Whether by man or woman, however, God the Father was rarely addressed directly. There were intermediaries to carry one's petition to Him. My mother had her group of Mexican and South American saints and near-saints (persons moving toward canonization). She favored a black Brazilian priest who, she claimed, was especially efficacious. Above all mediators there was Mary, Santa Maria, the Mother. Whereas at school the primary mediator was Christ, at home that role was assumed by the Mexican Virgin, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, the focus of devotion and pride for Mexican Catholics. The Mexican Mary "honored our people," my mother would say. "She could have appeared to anyone in the whole world, but she appeared to a Mexican." Someone like us. And she appeared, I could see from her picture, as a young Indian maiden—dark just like me.
On her feastday in early December my family would go to the Mexican church for a downtown high mass. The celebration would begin in the cold dark with a blare of trumpets imitating the cries of a cock. The Virgin's wavering statue on the shoulders of men would lead a procession into the warm yellow church. Often an usher would roughly separate me from my parents and pull me into a line of young children. (My mother nodded calmly when I looked back.) Sometimes alone, sometimes with my brother and sisters, I would find myself near the altar amid two or three hundred children, many of them dressed like Mexican cowboys and cowgirls. Sitting on the floor it was easier to see the congregation than the altar. So, as the mass progressed, my eye would wander through the crowd. Invariably, my attention settled on old women—mysterious supplicants in black—bent deep, their hands clasped tight to hold steady the attention of the Mexican Virgin, who was pictured high over the altar, astride a black moon.

The gringo Catholic church, a block from our house, was a very different place. In the gringo church Mary's statue was relegated to a side altar, imaged there as a serene white lady who matter-of-factly squashed the Genesis serpent with her bare feet. (Very early I knew that I was supposed to believe that the shy Mexican Mary was the same as this European Mary triumphant.) In the gringo church the floors were made not of squeaky wood but of marble. And there was not the devotional clutter of so many pictures and statues and candle racks. 'It doesn't feel like a church,' my mother complained. But as it became our regular church, I grew to love its elegant simplicity: the formal march of its eight black pillars toward the altar; the Easter-egg-shaped sanctuary that arched high over the tabernacle; and the dim pink light suffused throughout on summer afternoons when I came in not to pray but to marvel at the cool calm.

The holy darkness of church never frightened me. It was never nighttime darkness. Religion at school and at church was never nighttime religion like religion at home. Catholicism at home was shaped by the sounds of the 'family rosary': tired voices repeating the syllables of the Hail Mary; our fingers inching forward on beads toward the point of beginning; my knees aching; the coming of sleep.

Religion at home was a religion of bedtime. Prayers before sleeping spoke of death coming during the night. It was then a religion of shadows. The last thing I'd see before closing my eyes would be the cheap statue of Mary aglow next to my bed.

But the dark at the foot of my bed billowed with malevolent shapes. Those nights when I'd shudder awake from a nightmare, I'd remember my grandmother's instruction to make a sign of the cross in the direction of my window. (That way Satan would find his way barred.) Sitting up in bed, I'd aim the sign of the cross against the dim rectangle of light. Quickly, then, I'd say the Prayer to My Guardian Angel, which would enable me to fall back to sleep.

In time dawn came.

A child whose parents could not introduce him to books like Grimm's Fairy Tales, I was introduced to the spheres of enchantment by the nighttime Catholicism of demons and angels. The superstitious Catholicism of home provided a kind of proletarian fairy-tale world.

Satan was mentioned in the classroom. And depicted on the nuns' cartoon placards as bringing all his evil to bear on the temptation of nicely dressed boys and girls. In the morning's bright light and in the safe company of classmates, Satan never
aroused very much terror. Around the time I was in fourth grade, moreover, religion classes became increasingly academic. I was introduced to that text familiar to generations of Catholic students, The Baltimore Catechism. It is a text organized by questions about the Catholic faith. (Who is God? What is Penance? What is Hope?)

Today's Catholic elementary schools attempt a less mechanical approach to religious instruction. Students are taught - what I never had to be taught - that religion is not simply a matter of dogmas or theological truths; that religion involves a person's whole way of life. To make the point, emphasis has shifted from the theological to the ethical. Students are encouraged to consider social problems and responses to 'practical' dilemmas in a modern world through which angels and devils no longer dance.

My schooling belonged to another time. The Baltimore Catechism taught me to trust the authority of the Church. That was the central lesson conveyed through the experience of memorizing hundreds of questions and answers. I learned an answer like, God made us to know, love, and serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him in the next. The answer was memorized along with the question (it belonged with the question), Why did God make us? I learned, in other words, question and answer together. Beyond what the answer literally stated, two things were thus communicated. First, the existence of a question implies the existence of an answer. (There are no stray questions.) And second, that my questions about religion had answers. (The Church knows.)

Not only in religion class was memory exercised. During those years when I was memorizing the questions and answers of The Baltimore Catechism, I was also impressing on my memory the spelling of hundreds of words, grammar rules, division and multiplication tables. The nuns deeply trusted the role of memorization in learning. Not coincidentally, they were excellent teachers of basics. They would stand in front of the room for hours, drilling us over and over (5 times 5 = 25; 4 times 7 = 28; 6 times 9; 1 before e except after c; God made us to know, love, and serve Him in this world...). Stressing memorization, my teachers implied that education is largely a matter of acquiring knowledge already discovered. And they were right. For contrary to more progressive notions of learning, much that is learned in a classroom must be the already known; and much that is already known must be learned before a student can achieve truly independent thought.

Stressing memorization, the nuns assumed an important Catholic bias. Stated positively, they believed that learning is a social activity; learning is a rite of passage into the group. (Remembrance is itself an activity that establishes a student's dependence upon and union with others.) Less defensively, the nuns distrusted intellectual challenges to authority. In religion class especially, they would grow impatient with the relentlessly questioning student. When one nun told my parents that their young daughter had a 'mind of her own,' she meant the remark to be a negative criticism. And even though I was urged to read all that I could, several teachers were dismayed to learn that I had read the novels of Victor Hugo and Flaubert. (Those writers are on the Index, Richard.) With classmates I would hear the nuns' warning about non-Catholic colleges, stories of Faustian Catholics falling victim to the foolish sin of intellectual pride.

Trust the Church. It was the institution established by the instruction of Christ to his disciple: 'Thou art Peter and upon
this rock I will build . . .' (How could Protestants not hear?) The nun drew her pointer to the chart in front of the classroom where the line of popes connected the name of St. Peter to that of Pope Pius XII. Trust the Church, the nun said. It was through the Church that God was best known. I came to believe: 'I am a Catholic.' (My faith in the Christian God was enclosed by my faith in the Church.)

I never read the Bible alone. In fifth grade, when I told a teacher that I intended to read the New Testament over the summer, I did not get the praise I expected. Instead, the nun looked worried and said I should delay my plan for a while. ('Wait until we read it in class.' ) In the seventh and eighth grades, my class finally did read portions of the Bible. We read together. And our readings were guided by the teachings of Tradition—the continuous interpretation of the Word passing through generations of Catholics. Thus, as a reader I never forget the ancient Catholic faith—that the Church serves to help solitary man comprehend God's Word.

Of all the institutions in their lives, only the Catholic Church has seemed aware of the fact that my mother and father are thinkers—persons aware of the experience of their lives. Other institutions—the nation's political parties, the industries of mass entertainment and communications, the companies that employed them—have all treated my parents with condescension. The Church too has treated them badly when it attempted formal instruction. The homily at Sunday mass, intended to give parishioners basic religious instruction, has often been poorly prepared and aimed at a childish listener. It has been the liturgical Church that has excited my parents. In ceremonies of public worship, they have been moved, assured that their lives—all aspects of their lives, from waking to eating, from birth until death, all moments—possess great significance. Only the liturgy has encouraged them to dwell on the meaning of their lives. To think.

What the Church gave to my mother and father, it gave to me. During those years when the nun warned me about the dangers of intellectual pride and referred to Christ as Baby Jesus, they were enabling me to participate fully in the liturgical life of the Church. The nuns were not interested in constructing a temple of religious abstractions. God was more than an idea; He was person—white bearded, with big arms. (Pictures could not show what He really was like, the nuns said, but one could be sure that He was Our Father.) He loved us and we were to respond like children, in love. Our response would be prayer.

In my first-grade classroom I learned to make the sign of the cross with English words. In addition to prayers said at home (prayers before dinner and before sleeping), there were prayers in the classroom. A school day was divided by prayer. First, the Morning Offering. At 10:15 before recess, the Prayer to My Guardian Angel. At noontime, the Angelus, in celebration of the Word: The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary . . . ! After lunch came the Creed. And before going home the Act of Contrition. In first grade I was taught to make the sign of the cross when I entered the church. And how to genuflect (the right knee bending and touching all the way to the floor). And the nuns told us of the most perfect prayer (Christ's offering of His body and blood to the Father), the 'sacrifice' of the mass.

Alongside red, yellow, blue, green, Dick and Jane, was
disclosed to us the knowledge of our immortal souls. And that
our souls (we were Catholics) needed the special nourishment
of the Church—the mass and the sacraments.

In second grade, at the age of seven, we were considered by
the Church to have reached the age of reason; we were sup-
posed capable of distinguishing good from evil. We were able
to sin and able to ask forgiveness for sin. In second grade, I
was prepared for my first Confession, which took place on a Sat-
rday morning in May. With all my classmates, I went to the
unlit church where the nun led us through the forms of an
Examination of conscience. Then, one by one—as we would be
summoned to judgment after death—we entered the airless
confessional. The next day—spotless souls—we walked as a
class up the aisle of church, the girls in white dresses and veils
like small brides, the boys in white pants and white shirts. We
walked to the altar rail where the idea of God assumed a shape
and a scent and a taste.

As an eight-year-old Catholic, I learned the names and
functions of all seven sacraments. I knew why the priest put
glistening oil on my grandmother’s forehead the night she died.
At the baptismal font I watched a baby cry out as the priest
trickled a few drops of cold water on his tiny red forehead. At
ten I knew the meaning of the many ritual gestures the priest
makes during the mass. I knew (by heart) the drama of feast-
days and seasons—and could read the significance of changing
altar cloth colors as the year slowly rounded.

The Church rocked through time—a cradle, an ark—to rhythms
of sorrow and joy, marking the passage of man.

The Catholic calendar in my bedroom was printed by W. F.
Gormley and Sons, morticians. Every month there was a dif-
ferent Bible picture in beautiful colors. Every day was some-
thing. The calendar noted ferial and ember days, fish days and
the feastdays of saints. (My birthday honored St. Ignatius Loy-
ola.) There was another, a ‘regular,’ calendar in the kitchen
(Capitol Savings and Loan). It noted full moons and crescents
and the official change of the seasons. My mother used the
regular calendar to write down our doctors’ appointments
(shots; teeth).

It was the religious calendar that governed my school year.
In early September there was a nine o’clock mass on the Friday
of the first week of school to pray for academic success. (Stu-
dents were grouped according to class; behind my class would
be my new teacher’s face, a face I still wasn’t used to.) In June,
there was a mass of graduation for the eighth-graders. Between
those events, school often stopped or flowered as routine bowed
to the sacred. In the middle of a geography or an arithmetic
lesson, the nuns would lead us out of our classrooms and we
would walk—four hundred students in double lines—down a
block to church, stopping traffic (We were Catholics!) to attend
a First Friday mass or a rosary to Mary. In Lent there were
Friday Stations of the Cross. (Fourteen meditations on the
passion of Christ—He stumbled, He fell—fourteen times the
priest intoning, ‘We adore Thee, O Christ . . .’.) Benediction,
the adoration of the Host, followed. The lovely hymn, the
Tantum Ergo sounded as smoke of incense rose like vine. Upon
the high altar stood a golden monstrance in the shape of a sun-
burst, at the center of which—exposed through a tiny window
—was the round wafer of bread. We returned to the classroom,
came back to the same paragraph in a still-opened book. Rou-
tine resumed. Sacred dramas of Church thus fit into a day,
ever became the routine; rather they redeemed the routine.
On Halloween night, all over Sacramento, children dressed up as ghosts or Frankenstein's or dime-store skeletons with phosphorescent bones. But only Catholic school kids went to mass the next morning to honor the white-robed saints on the Feast of All Hallows. It was one of the 'holy days of obligation' – a day on which I was obliged to go to morning mass, but for the rest of the day I was free – no school. I could ride my bicycle around Sacramento; watch public school kids walking to school. And people downtown were passing just another day. (They seemed not to know.)

In the secular calendar there was no day like Ash Wednesday. All day I would see on the headless foreheads of classmates the Hindu-like smudge of dark ash, the reminder of death. (. . . Unto dust thou shalt return.) One year a girl at school was killed in a car crash shortly after Ash Wednesday. I took the lesson.

On those few occasions when secular Sacramento took up the sacred calendar they got it all wrong. Christmas downtown began in early November. Merchants would string tiny white lights up over K Street, where they shone through the night as pretty as heaven. But their Christmas ended in late afternoon on Christmas Eve – I saw department store clerks working against time to replace a holiday window display with deathly white piles of towels and sheets. In church, in early November there was Advent, the time for penance. On a table in front of the altar was a wreath with four candles stuck in, one of which was lit each week to mark the coming – the slow, slow coming – of Christ. In church, Christmas began at midnight mass, Christmas Eve. And the holy season continued until the Feast of Epiphany, the sixth of January, when carols were sung for the very last time and fir trees on the altar no longer cast their dark scent of damp earth.

The secular calendar whirled like a carnival wheel and offered carnival prizes – a fat Santa instead of the infant God; colored eggs and chocolate bunnies instead of the death and resurrection of Christ. During Holy Week all pictures and statues in church were shrouded by purple silk drapes. On Holy Thursday to commemorate the Last Supper of Christ there was a 'white' mass at sunset (when stained-glass windows burned briefly before the light failed). After that mass, the sacrament was removed to a side altar and the red sanctuary lamp was extinguished, so that the next day, Good Friday, when women in scarves and men in work clothes came to church for 'the three hours' they found an altar stripped bare and the tabernacle gaping.

In our house on Good Friday we behaved as if a member of our family had died. There was no radio or television. But I noticed that the Standard gas station right across from church stayed open for business as usual and I saw people at the Laundromat watching their clothes tumble behind a round window – as if nothing in the world had happened. In Sacramento, the blue Easter morning seemed always to rhyme with the gospel account of the three Marys wending their way through a garden to discover an empty tomb. At church, at the altar, there were vestments of gold and the climbing voices of a Mozart mass, tossing rings sempiternal.

The wheels turned. Two wheels of time. The secular calendar made plain note of the hot first day of summer. Fall. Then winter. Ordinary time: Labor Day. The first day of school. Arithmetic class. An hour for spelling (a test every Friday). Recess. Church time: Benediction with classmates. Candles on St. Blaise's day, Ash. Palms in April. The red-eyed white dove descending, descending on Pentecost Sunday. Mary crowned with dying sweet flowers on the first day of May. The wheels
third grade. Christmas, Epiphany. The secular calendar announced the vernal equinox. The low valley fog of late winter would slowly yield to the coming of Easter.

I went to the nine o'clock mass every Sunday with my family. At that time in my life, when I was so struck by diminished family closeness and the necessity of public life, church was a place unlike any other. It mediated between my public and private lives. I would kneel beside my brother and sisters. On one side of us would be my mother. (I could hear her whispered Spanish Hail Mary.) On the other side, my father. In the pew directly in front of us were the Van Hoyts. And in front of them were the druggist and his family. Over to the side was a lady who wore fancy dresses, a widow who prayed a crystal rosary. She was alone, as was the old man in front who cupped his face in his hands while he prayed. It was this same gesture of privacy the nuns would teach me to use, especially after Communion when I thanked God for coming into my soul.

The mass mystified me for being a public and a private event. We prayed here, each of us, much as we prayed on our pillows—most privately—all alone before God. And yet the great public prayer of the mass would go on. No one ever forgot where they were. People stood up together or they knelt at the right time in response to the progression of the liturgy. Every Sunday in summer someone fainted from heat, had to be carried out, but the mass went on.

I remember being puzzled very early by how different things were for the Protestants. Evangelical Christians would ring the doorbell to ask bluntly whether or not I was ‘saved.’ They proceeded to tell me about their own conversions to Christ. From classmates I would hear about Holy Rollers who jumped up and down and even fell to the floor at their services. It was funny. Hard to believe. My religion—the true religion—was so different. On Sunday afternoons, for a guilty few minutes, I’d watch an Oral Roberts prayer meeting on television. Members of the congregation made public confessions of sin, while people off camera shouted, ‘Hallelujah, sister! Hallelujah, brother, preach it’!

Sister and Brother were terms I used in speaking to my teachers for twelve years. Father was the name for the priest at church. I never confused my teachers or the priests with actual family members; in fact they were most awesome for being without families. Yet I came to use these terms with ease. They implied that a deep bond existed between my teachers and me as fellow Catholics. At the same time, however, Sister and Father were highly formal terms of address—they were titles, marks of formality like a salute or a curtsey. (One would never have spoken to a nun without first calling her Sister.) It was possible consequently to use these terms and to feel at once a close bond, and the distance of formality. In a way, that is how I felt with all fellow Catholics in my world. We were close—somehow related—while also distanced by careful reserve.

Not once in all the years of my Catholic schooling did I hear a classmate or teacher make a public confession. (Public confessions were whispered through darkness to the shadow of a priest sworn to secrecy.) Never once did I hear a classmate or teacher make an exclamation of religious joy. Religious feelings and faith were channeled through ritual. Thus it was that my classmates and I prayed easily throughout the school day. We recited sublime prayers and childish ones (‘Angel of
God, my guardian dear . . .'). And nobody snickered. Because the prayers were always the same and because they were said by the group, we had a way of praying together without being self-conscious.

Children of ceremony: My classmates and I would rehearse our roles before major liturgical celebrations. Several days before a feastday we would learn the movements for a procession. In the half-darkened church one nun stood aside with a wooden clapper which she knocked to tell us when to rise, when to kneel, when to leave the pew, when to genuflect ('All together!'). We'd rehearse marching (the tallest last) up the aisle in straight, careful lines. Worship was managed as ceremony.

My sense of belonging in this ceremonial Church was dearest when I turned twelve and became an altar boy. Dressed in a cassock like a priest's I assisted at the performance of mass on the altar. It was my responsibility to carry the heavy red missal back and forth from one side of the altar to the other; to pour water and sweet-scented wine into the priest's chalice; to alert the congregation with a handbell at the Sanctus and at the elevation of the Host. But by far the greatest responsibility was to respond to the priest in memorized Latin prayers. I served as the voice of the congregation, sounding, all told, perhaps a hundred responsorial lines.

Latin, the nuns taught us, was a universal language. One could go into a Catholic church anywhere in the world and hear the very same mass. But Latin was also a dead language, a tongue foreign to most Catholics. As an altar boy, I memorized Latin in blank envelopes of sound: *Ad day um qui lay tee fee cat u ven tu tem ma y um*. Many of the ordinary prayers of the mass were generally recognizable to me. (Any Catholic who used a bilingual missal could, after a while, recognize the meaning of whole prayers like the Credo.) I had the advantage of being able to hear in the shrouded gallery of Latin sounds echoes of Spanish words familiar to me. Listening to a priest I could often grasp the general sense of what he was saying — but I didn't always try to. In part, Latin permitted escape from the prosaic world. Latin's great theatrical charm, its sacred power, was that it could translate human aspiration to a holy tongue. The Latin mass, moreover, encouraged private reflection. The sounds of Latin would sometimes dull my attention to induce an aimless drift inward. But then I would be called back by the priest's voice ('Oremus . . .') to public prayer, the reminder that an individual has the aid of the Church in his life. I was relieved of the burden of being alone before God through my membership in the Church.

Parish priests recognized and encouraged my fascination with the liturgy. During the last three years of grammar school, I was regularly asked to serve as an altar boy. In my busiest year, eighth grade, I served at over two hundred masses. I must have served at about thirty baptisms and about the same number of weddings and funerals. During the school year I was excused from class for an hour or two to serve at a funeral mass. In summertime I would abandon adolescence to put the black cassock of mourning over a light summer shirt. A spectator at so many funerals, I grew acquainted with the rhythms of grief. I knew at which moments, at which prayers in church and at gravesides, survivors were most likely to weep. I studied faces. I learned to trust the grief of persons who showed no emotion. With the finesse of a mortician, I would lead mourners to the grave. I helped carry coffins (their mysterious weight — neither heavy nor light) to burial sites when there were not mourners enough. And then I would return. To class or to summer. Resume my life as a boy of thirteen.
There are people who tell me today that they are not religious because they consider religion to be an evasion of life. I hear them, their assurance, and do not bother to challenge the arrogance of a secular world which hasn't courage enough to accept the fact of old age. And death. I know people who speak of death with timorous euphemisms of ‘passing away.’ I have friends who wouldn't think of allowing their children to attend a funeral for fear of inflicting traumatic scars. For my part, I will always be grateful to the Church that took me so seriously and exposed me so early, through the liturgy, to the experience of life. I will always be grateful to the parish priest who forced a mortician to remove an elaborate arrangement of flowers from a coffin: ‘Don't hide it!’

I celebrate now a childhood lived through the forms of the liturgical Church. As the Church filled my life, I grew to the assurance that my life, my every action and thought, was important for good or for bad. Bread and wine, water, oil, salt, and ash – through ceremonies of guilt and redemption, sorrow and rebirth, through the passing liturgical year, my boyhood assumed all significance. I marvel most at having so easily prayed with others – not simply alone. I recall standing at the altar at Easter, amid candles and gold vestments, hearing the Mozart high mass. These were impossible riches. I remember wanting to cry out with joy, to shout. I wanted to shout. But I didn't, of course. I worshipped in a ceremonial church, one in a group. I remained silent and remembered to genuflect exactly on cue. After the mass, I pulled off the surplice and cassock and rushed to meet my parents, waiting for me in front of the church. ‘It was very nice today,’ my mother said. Something like that. ‘It makes you feel good, the beautiful music and everything.’ That was all that she said. It was enough.

Now, I go to mass every Sunday. Old habits persist. But it is an English mass I attend, a ritual of words. A ritual that seeks to feed my mind and would starve my somewhat metaphorical soul. The mass is less ornamental; it has been ‘modernized,’ tampered with, demythologized, deflated. The priest performs fewer gestures. His central role as priest – intermediary between congregation and God – is diminished. Symbols have changed. A reciprocal relationship between people and clergy is dramatized as the congregation takes an active role in the recitation of the mass. The priest faces the people, his back to the tabernacle. And the effect of this rearrangement is to make the mass seem less a prayer directed to God, more a communal celebration of the Eucharist. There is something occasional about it all, and no occasion for pomp or solemnity. No longer is the congregation moved to a contemplation of the timeless. Rather it is the idiomatic one hears. One’s focus is upon this place. This time. The moment. Now.

In the old Latin mass my mother could recite her rosary while still being at one with prayer at the altar. The new English mass is unlinear, lacking density; there is little opportunity for private prayer. The English words enforce attention. Emphasis is on the communal prayer, communal identity. There is a moment just before the Communion when members of the congregation shake hands to dramatize a union. We nod and bow, shake hands like figures on a music box.

I go along with the Kiss of Peace, but paradoxically I feel isolated sitting in half-empty churches among people I am suddenly aware of not knowing. The kiss signifies to me a betrayal of the older ceremonial liturgy. I miss that high ceremony. I am saddened by inappropriate music about which it is
dampening enough to say that it is not good enough, and not even the best of its authentic kind—folk, pop, quasi-religious Broadway show tunes. I miss the old trappings—trappings that disclosed a different reality. I have left church early, walked out, after hearing the congregation spontaneously applaud its own singing. And I have wondered how the Church I loved could have changed so quickly and completely.

I continue to claim my Catholicism. Invariably I arrive late at somebody's brunch or tennis party—the festivities of a secular Sunday. Friends find it peculiar that I still go to mass; most have heard me complain about liturgical changes. Amid the orange juice and croissants I burlesque the folk-mass liturgy ('Kumbaya'), the peppy tambourine. Those listening find my sarcasm amusing. And someone says that my Catholicism is a mere affectation, an attempt to play the Evelyn Waugh eccentric to a bland and vulgar secular age.

I am not surprised. I do not know myself, not with any certainty, how much I really am saying when I profess Catholicism. In a cultural sense, I remain a Catholic. My upbringing has shaped me in certain attitudes which have not worn thin over the years. I am, for example, a materialist largely because I was brought up to believe in the central mystery of the Church—the redemptive Incarnation. (I carried the heavy gold crucifix in church ceremonies far too often to share the distrust of the material still prevalent in modern Puritan America.) I am a man who trusts a society that is carefully ordered by figures of authority. (I respond to policemen in the same tone of voice I used years ago, addressing parish priests and nuns.) I realize that I am a Catholic, moreover, when I listen skeptically to a political thinker describe with enthusiasm a scheme for lasting political change. (My historical pessimism was determined by grammar school lessons about sin, especially Original Sin.)

More important than any of this, I continue to believe the central tenets of the Church. I stand at the Creed of the mass. Though it is exactly then, at that very moment in the liturgy, when I must realize how different the Church has become in recent years. I stand as a stranger among strangers. For the truth is: It is not only the Church that has changed; I've changed as well.

My Catholicism changed when I was in high school. The liturgy was just then beginning to be altered. It was not simply that I found a different Church when I went to church; I went to church less often. (My high school was not connected to a neighborhood church the way my grammar school had been. There were, consequently, few schooldays interrupted by worship.) Liturgy was something for Sunday.

My high school, staffed by the Christian Brothers, offered a more 'Protestant' education. My freshman literature teacher only smiled when I mentioned the grammar school incident concerning Flaubert. He and other high school teachers encouraged my intellectual independence. Religious instruction became rigorously intellectual. With excitement I'd study complex Pauline and Thomistic theology and I'd remember with something like scorn the simple instructions of The Baltimore Catechism. In high school I started saying that I believed in Catholicism. My faith was buttressed by a book by Jacques Maritain rather than by the experience of worship at a Lenten service with classmates or serving at some old lady's funeral. Those years were marked by the realization that my parents assumed a Catholicism very different from mine. My parents seemed to me piously simple—like the nuns I remembered—
unwilling to entertain intellectual challenges. They would rely on their rosary every night, while in another room I read patristic theology.

In college I had few Catholic friends and fewer Catholic teachers. Most of my friends had been raised as Protestants or Jews; many referred to themselves as agnostics. During my college years I started reading Protestant theology. The Church was no longer my sole spiritual teacher. I blended Catholicism with borrowed insights from Sartre and Zen and Buber and Miltonic Protestantism. And Freud.

I was a senior at Stanford during the last year of the Vatican Council. I cheered for the liberal bishops and cardinals at that great convocation. (The villains, in my view, were the conservatives of the Roman Curia.) I welcomed the Church’s attempts at reconciliation with other religions. I approved of the liberal encyclicals concerning ‘the Church in the modern world.’ But I was changing rather more quickly than the Council fathers were changing the Church. I was already a ‘new Catholic.’ I didn’t wait for the American bishops to terminate the observance of meatless Fridays before I ate what looked best in the dormitory cafeteria on Friday nights. Nor did I request a dispensation from a priest when a non-Catholic friend asked me to be his best man. I simply agreed and stood beside him in a Methodist church.

I would go to friends for advice when I was troubled; I didn’t go to priests anymore. I stopped going to Confession, not because my behavior conflicted with the teachings of the institutional Church but because I no longer thought to assess my behavior against those standards. A Catholic who lived most of his week without a sense of communal Catholicism, I relied upon conscience as never before. The priest who was the college chaplain would regularly say in his sermons that a Catholic must rely upon conscience as his ultimate guide. It seemed so to me. But I remember feeling uneasy when that priest was later excommunicated for having been secretly married.

Throughout college and graduate school, I thought of myself as an orthodox Catholic. I was a liberal Catholic. In all things save the liturgy I was a liberal. From the start I despised the liturgical reformation. In college chapels I would listen to folk singing and see plain altars draped with bright appliqué banners: ‘God is love.’ One Sunday I would watch dancers in leotards perform some kind of ballet in front of the altar; one Sunday there would be a rock mass; one Sunday the priest encouraged us to spend several minutes before the Offertory introducing ourselves, while a small band jazzy combo punched out a cocktail mix. I longed for the Latin mass. Incense. Music of Bach. Ceremonies of candles and acolytes.

Over the last several years, I have visited many Catholic churches in the several cities I have lived in: Palo Alto, New York, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, San Francisco. I have wandered on Sundays from church to church, but in all the churches I have had to listen to the new English mass. The proclamation of faith, the Creed, I hear recited by the congregation around me. ‘We believe in God....’ In the abandoned Latin service it was the priest alone who spoke the affirmation of faith. It was the priest who said, ‘Credo....’ using the first person singular. The differences between the old service and the new can be summarized in this change. At the old mass, the priest’s Credo (I believe) complexly reminded the congregation of the fact that each person stands before God as an individual, implying at the same time—because the priest
could join all voices in his — the union of believers, the consolation of communal faith. The listener was assured of his membership in the Church; he was not alone before God. (The Church would assist him.) By translating *credo* into the English first person plural, *we believe*, the Church no longer reminds the listener that he is alone. ‘We believe,’ the congregation is encouraged to say, celebrating community — but only that fact.

I would protest this simplification of the liturgy if I could. I would protest as well the diminished sense of the sacred in churches today. I would protest the use of folk music and the hand-holding. Finally, I cannot. I suspect that the reason I despise the new liturgy is because it is mine. It reflects and attempts to resolve the dilemma of Catholics just like me. The informal touches; the handshaking; the folk music; the insistence upon union — all these changes are aimed at serving Catholics who no longer live in a Catholic world. To such Catholics — increasingly alone in their faith — the Church says: You are part of a community of believers. You are not alone in your faith. Not solitary. We are together, Catholics. *We* believe. We believe. This assurance is necessary because, in a sense, it no longer is true.

The Catholic Church of my past required no such obvious reminders of community as smiles and handshakes before the Communion. The old mass proceeded with sure, blind pomp precisely because Catholics had faith in their public identity as Catholics; the old liturgy was ceremonial because of the Church’s assumption that worship is a public event. The lack of high ceremony in church today betrays a loss of faith in communal Catholicism. In obvious ways everyone in the congregation seems closer and more aware of each other. As a group, throughout mass, the congregation responds to the priest with various prayers; one listens to a steady flow of prayers said in English. But there is scant opportunity for private prayer. The Church cannot dare it.

A priest I once heard in a white middle-class parish defended the reformed liturgy by saying that it had become necessary to ‘de-Europeanize’ the Roman Catholic Church. He said that Catholicism must translate God’s Word into the many languages and cultures of the world. I suppose he is right. I do not think, however, that the primary impetus for liturgical reform came from Third World Catholics. I think rather that it came in response to a middle-class crisis of faith in North America and Western Europe. The new liturgy is suited especially to those who live in the secular city, alone in their faith for most of the week. It is not a liturgy suited to my parents or grandparents as much as to me.

When I go to church on Sunday I am forced to recognize a great deal about myself. I would rather go to a high ceremonial mass, reenact an hour or two its communal assurance. The sentimental solution would be ideal: to remain a liberal Catholic and to worship at a traditional mass. But now that I no longer live as a Catholic in a Catholic world, I cannot expect the liturgy — which reflects and cultivates my faith — to remain what it was. I will continue to go to the English mass. I will go because it is my liturgy. I will, however, often recall with nostalgia the faith I have lost. And I will be uneasy knowing that the old faith was lost as much by choice as it was inevitably lost. My education may have made it inevitable that I would become a citizen of the secular city, but I have come to embrace the city’s values: social mobility; pluralism; egalitarianism; self-reliance. By choice I do not confine myself to Catholic society. Most of my friends and nearly all of my intimates are non-
Catholics. With them I normally will observe the politesse of secular society concerning religion—say nothing about it. By choice I do not pray before eating lunch in a downtown restaurant. (My public day is not divided by prayer.) By choice I do not consult the movie ratings of the Legion of Decency, and my reading is not curtailed by the Index. By choice I am ruled by conscience rather than the authority of priests I consider my equals. I do not listen to papal pronouncements with which I disagree.

Recently, bishops and popes who have encouraged liturgical reforms have seemed surprised at the insistence of so many Catholics to determine for themselves the morality of such matters as divorce, homosexuality, contraception, abortion, and extramarital sex. But the Church fathers who initiated rituals that reflect a shared priesthood of laity and clergy should not be surprised by the independence of modern Catholics. The authoritarian Church belonged to another time. It was an upper-class Church; it was a lower-class Church; it was a hierarchical Church. It was my grandparents’ Church.

If I ask questions about religion that my grandparents didn’t ask, it is not because I am intellectually advanced. I wonder about the existence of God because, unlike my grandparents, I live much of my day in a secular city where I do not measure the hours with the tolling bells of a church. As a boy, I believed in God by believing in His Church. Now that my faith in communal Catholicism is so changed, my faith in God is without certain foundation. It occurs to me to ask that profound question of modern agnosticism: Is God dead?

I would cry into the void. . . . If I should lose my faith in God, I would have no place to go to where I could feel myself a man. The Catholic Church of my youth mediated with special grace between the public and private realms of my life, such was the extent of its faith in itself. That Church is no longer mine. I cling to the new Catholic Church. Though it leaves me unsatisfied, I fear giving it up, falling through space. Even in today’s Catholic Church, a Catholic Church of our age, it is possible for me to feel myself in the eye of God, while I kneel in the presence of others.

If God is dead, where shall I go for such an experience? In this modern post-religious age, secular institutions flounder to imitate the gift that is uniquely found in the temple and mosque and church. Secular institutions lack the key; they have no basis for claiming access to the realm of the private. When they try to deny their limits, secular institutions only lie. They pretend that there is no difference between public and private life. The worst are totalitarian governments. They respect no notion of privacy. They intrude into a family’s life. They ignore the individual’s right to be private. They would bulldoze the barrier separating the public from the private. They create the modern nightmare of institutional life.

(If God is dead I will cry into the void.)

There was a time in my life when it would never have occurred to me to make a confession like this one. There was a time when I would never have thought to discuss my spiritual life—even with other Catholics I knew intimately. It is true that in high school I read Augustine’s Confessions, but that extraordinary autobiography did not prompt my imitation. Just the reverse: There seemed to me something non-Catholic about the Confessions. I intuited that such revelations made Augustine a Protestant church father more than a Catholic father.

Years after, in college, I remember reading the diaries of seventeenth-century Puritans. To encounter ‘simple’ people—a
tradesman, a housewife, a farmer—describing their spiritual lives in detail amazed me. The Protestant confession was boldly different from the Catholic sacrament of Confession. The Protestants were public about their spiritual lives in a way that I, as a Catholic schoolboy, could never have been. Protestants were so public because they were otherwise alone in their faith. I marveled at the paradox implied by their writings. Those early 'pure' English Protestants, strangers to ceremony, and for their own reasons alien from the institutional Church, were attempting to form through their writings a new kind of Christian community—a community of those who share with each other only the experience of standing alone before God. It was then that I began to realize the difference separating the individualistic Protestant from the institutional Catholic. Now I realize that I have become like a Protestant Christian. I call myself a Christian.

My own Catholic Church in recent years has become more like a Protestant Church. Perhaps Protestants will teach Catholics like me how to remain believers when the sense one has for so much of one’s day is of being alone in faith. If, in fact, my spiritual fathers are those seventeenth-century Puritans, there is one important difference between their writings and mine. I am writing about my religious life, aware that most of my readers do not consider themselves religious. With them—with you—I am making this admission of faith. It is appropriate that I do so. The resolution of my spiritual dilemma, if there is to be one before death, will have to take place where it began, among persons who do not share my religious convictions. Persons like my good friends now, those who, smiling, wonder why I am more than an hour late for their Sunday brunch.