

SO YOU'RE SEEKING TO RENEW YOUR FAITH

A FRIENDLY GUIDE
TO THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

TONY DOHERTY



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PREFACE

This book has been written for the vast number of Catholics who have left their Catholic schooling years ago and are now considering or attempting to make contact again as adults with this rich tradition—a tradition which may have undergone many changes over the intervening years; or, those who have no background in Catholic tradition, who may have not been baptized, and may simply be curious about the Catholic Church and wish to acquaint themselves with some of its teachings.

This book may help you to appreciate this ancient story in language which is simple and accessible.

The Catholic tradition discussed in this book has come from a long and colourful history, being influenced by the stories and traditions and religious practices of a huge variety of peoples from around the world. This small book in no way attempts to cover completely the extraordinary richness and depth of Catholic belief; there are libraries of books which have been written about such questions as: who is Jesus? What is the mystery of the Church? How do we make healthy moral choices today? ... and dozens of other central questions of faith. Instead, *So You're Seeking to Renew Your Faith in the Catholic Church* is designed to be a friendly and gentle

introduction to a few of the beliefs and values which make Catholics tick. It is a modest overview for people coming in touch with the Church, perhaps for the first time, or refreshing their acquaintance. For a significant and more in-depth summary of Catholic teachings, see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994).

Our hope with this book is that it may pique your interest, spark your curiosity, and help you to either return to the riches the Gospel has to offer, or introduce you to a community which can offer your life a wider and more satisfying dimension.

SAMPLE

BUT CATHOLIC IS MY LANGUAGE;
CATHOLIC IS THE COAT I WEAR,
CATHOLIC IS THE HOUSE IN WHICH I LIVE.
IT IS A HOUSE THAT NEEDS CLEANING,
A HOUSE IN WHICH SAVAGERY AND COWARDICE THRIVED,
WHERE EVIL HAS A ROOM WITH A VIEW,
WHERE FOOLISHNESS AND GREED HAVE PROMINENT PLACES AT THE TABLE.
BUT IT IS ALSO A HOUSE WHERE HOPE LIVES, AND HOPE IS THE GREATEST OF MERCIES,
THE MOST ENDURING OF GIFTS, THE MOST NUTRITIOUS OF FOODS.
HOPE IS WHAT WE DRINK FROM THE ODD STORY OF THE CARPENTER'S ODD STEPSON.
WHEN WE EAT HIS BODY IN THE LUDICROUS MIRACLE OF THE MASS,
WE HOPE IN HIM, AND WITH HIM,
FOREVER AND EVER,
WORLD WITHOUT END,
AMEN, AMEN, AMEN.

Brian Doyle: *Leaping, Revelations and Epiphanies*, Loyola Press, Chicago, 2003

In my boyhood I was conscious of very clear distinctions: fish on Fridays, Mass on Sundays and going to a particular school. But, forty years after the spirit of renewal of a Vatican Council and the changes that followed, plus forty years of conversations with people struggling to make sense of fractured lives, some of those past distinctions have disappeared. They are replaced by other images, other stories and other values that attempt to capture this distinctive genius.

Five decades ago, in a seminary for training priests, learned theologians opened up centuries of Catholic thinking, often disguised in arcane Latin, to a mixed bag of students. This was our foundation: Aquinas, Augustine, the Gospels, the councils of the Church, the ever-so-careful distinctions of Christian moral behaviour. Often they were words without music.

The music began quietly, however. Happily it has continued to grow. It came from the lives and stories of the people I met in those first years of ministry. In the crowded wards of a large metropolitan hospital, with all its tragedy and drama, the supposedly clear categories of Protestant, Jew, agnostic, Catholic (whether 'lapsed' or 'devout') melted away before the deeply anxious human beings facing life-threatening illness. Being sensitive to the fear of those facing cardiac surgery or struggling with terminal cancer of the lung required a delicate touch. Where do you find the words from the Gospel or any other spiritual source on earth, to say to a young mother holding her dying six-month-old child?

Working as a hospital chaplain was followed by something entirely different ... but just as testing: supporting and teaching volunteer teachers of religion going into government schools. How was I best to

support these generous volunteers, mostly women, taking on the task of sharing the Gospel with young people? How was I to extract from the vast store of Christian orthodoxy images and language that would communicate with restless adolescents in hot, jam-packed classrooms?

I honestly must admit I learned more from those women about the genuine Catholic spirit and tradition and the reality of the Gospel than I ever was able to teach them.

They were simply my best teachers. Hundreds followed, with the easy warmth of their friendship, the biting grief of their lives, the addictions they struggled with, the complexities of their marriages and family relationships, their life-giving humour—most of all their

humour—all on a search of one kind or another, simply trying to make sense of it all and live a full and satisfying human life. A gentle melody came whispering through the lives of the people to whom I was supposed to be the minister: a melody which enriched the language of this Catholic tradition immeasurably.

The questions of life's complex journey continue to surface. The issues of life and death embedded in the Gospel account of Jesus didn't necessarily become clearer. But they did become more stimulating.

What does it really mean to be a Catholic Christian? How do I break open the timeless words of the Gospel and allow them to be appreciated

anew by the women and men gripped by daily challenges of simply surviving? For that is the world, I quickly came to realise, that most people inhabit.

The words of the Gospels are powerful. But how do I connect them with a young woman working a 60-hour week in a legal firm, or a single father concerned about childcare and raising his two children, or countless others

IN THE WORD 'QUESTION'.
THERE IS THE BEAUTIFUL WORD
'QUEST'. I LOVE THAT WORD.
WE ARE ALL PARTNERS IN THE
QUEST. THE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
HAVE NO ANSWERS. YOU ARE
MY QUESTION AND
I AM YOURS—AND THEN
THERE IS DIALOGUE. THE
MOMENT WE HAVE ANSWERS,
THERE IS NO DIALOGUE.
QUESTIONS UNITE PEOPLE.
ANSWERS DIVIDE THEM.

ELIE WEISEL

INTRODUCTION

trying to negotiate the pressure of contemporary culture.

One of the first things I learnt is that you can't speak to people in a foreign language. It must be *their* language, *their* words. It must be about *their* concerns and *their* stories. To learn a person's language requires a great investment in listening—simply paying attention, making the effort to hear what is being said—and the even more demanding skill of discerning what is not being said. You have to find ways to hear somebody's story before you can even find the vocabulary to start the conversation.

'Sharing the Christian faith with others,' a wise

African missionary once claimed, 'is the process of bringing the Gospel to people where they are, not where we would like them to be.' But how do I do that? How do I answer the questions of adults searching for meaning? It is like catching sunlight in a bottle.

I offer the following pages as an introduction to those seeking to understand more about the Catholic Church, in the hope they will also catch some of that sunlight.



THE REWARDS OF BEING PART OF THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

WHAT I WAS BEFORE I BECAME A CATHOLIC

I was baptized into the Anglian Faith as an infant and later sent to a Catholic primary school—McAuley Rose Bay—and then to a Catholic secondary school—Holy Cross at Woollahra. Holy Cross was a Convent school with a number of Sisters living and teaching there. I attended Mass weekly but never participated.

Why I Converted to Catholicism

After belonging to the Church for over forty years (my husband is Catholic) and after having three children baptized/confirmed as Catholics, I was feeling that something was missing. Just attending Mass without fully participating in the Eucharist was leaving me with an unfulfilled feeling.

My husband never pressured me to convert, but had kept our family on track without my help for over fifteen years. He asked that our children attend Catholic schools and, through our children's school, I met a group of women who participated in a weekly Bible group, a group of educated women who dissected and discussed parts of the Bible.

This group—led by a remarkable women: Sister Mary Shanahan—were the inspiration that led me to where I am today in faith and family through Sister Mary.

How I Converted to Catholicism

The raising of our family as Catholics was probably the biggest aid. And not once did anyone try and convert me; but it was always there for me when I was ready.

I attended RCIA (Rite of Catholic Initiation) classes led by Mary and attended by four other women and one man (the rest of the women in our group attended to support us). The classes are part of a six-month process and involve weekly

meetings and prayer, and the study of scriptures and Catholic traditions. The process of preparation is an intensely enriching experience that served to deepen my faith.

We all attended an emotional ceremony in the School Chapel, where our Parish Priest, Monsignor Tony Doherty, completed our journey. The afternoon was beautiful and spiritual, and gave me a great sense of completion. I attend Mass weekly

and deeply enjoy the sense of community in the Parish.

Nicole Murphy:
Catholic Convert



One of the ways for our family to hand down our Catholic story was to opt to be a part of a Catholic school. In order to support our family's faith we have chosen Catholic education for both our children.

As parents, we try to be models for our children. They understand that they are fortunate to have the many privileges afforded them as children growing up comfortably in Australia. We expect and encourage our children to think of others who are less fortunate and to contribute what they can to improve the circumstances for others. As students of a Catholic school, they have been actively involved in social justice programs and the wider school community has fostered in them an attitude of compassion and service.

In order for both our son and daughter to have a faith which is relevant in our society they have to be encouraged to question. As students at a Catholic school they are allowed to explore and challenge their faith, often surprising us as parents with their interpretations and their understanding of a loving and living God.

Our children can also be our teachers; part of the Catholic education that our children receive is the daily ritual of prayer. They are encouraged to create a sacred space within the classroom, to take time to *quiet their minds* and to get in touch with God however they feel comfortable. While many

THE REWARDS OF BEING PART OF THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

of the very beautiful, traditional Catholic prayers are taught (and should still be), this ‘time out’ of a busy day for Christian meditation is a practice our children have brought home, and one which our whole family now make use of (time permitting!). This skill of meditation and reflection is one that children will carry through the rest of their lives. Modern Catholic children are being taught about a loving God—a God of forgiveness—and they are encouraged to have a personal relationship with God from the very start of their time at school.

With so many outside influences and distractions, it is important to find a school, a parish, a community which will uplift our children and teach them how to respect themselves and their friends. A school which echoes the beliefs of parents goes some way to inoculating children from being constantly bombarded with so many very negative images in popular culture.

As Catholic parents, we are also excited to share a history with our children. The rituals and stories of our Catholic faith are being passed on to our children at home, but also by dedicated and thoughtful teachers on school. These teachers are just as willing to share the Catholic story and its traditions with those who are not Catholic. Just as teachers are keen to explain the latest thinking in maths education, or reading support strategies, so they are available to explain the very beautiful—but sometime complex—rituals and teachings of a modern Catholic Church.

We want for each of our children the gift of a relevant and living faith and, in our experience, our children are very fortunate to learn and grow in an environment where they will truly come to know God and to see Him daily.

Alison Green: Catholic Parent

Growing up in a Catholic family means you don’t initially ‘choose’ to be Catholic—it’s just the

way things are. It’s only much later, as we grow in understanding, that the realisation dawns and we must make choices around being Catholic every day. Choosing to work in a Catholic organisation is one of them. Discussions centred on work are not always easy in a secular context—particularly in the current climate. It can either bring the conversation to a sudden halt ... or open a floodgate of questions. Neither is particularly useful in a social setting!



Why we work where we work involves much more than answering an advertisement and submitting an updated CV. The path to being where I work now has been much more of a ‘long and winding road’ with much of it only being understood with the benefit of hindsight. It has become a way of life rather than a job or a career.

I began working in a Catholic workplace over thirty years ago. I don’t remember much in the way of a long drawn-out decision around this—it

just seemed to fit well with me. I have never been one to map out a specific career path or work to a five-year plan. Things just seemed to happen so that I was in the right place at the right time, and I just needed to respond to a new challenge or opportunity every now and then. Doing a particular course, taking on a particular role, having wonderful mentors who recognise something in us that we don’t even realise ourselves, all contribute to why we are where we are.

Sometimes doors opened for me when I wanted them to ... other times they didn’t. I have always believed absolutely, however, that God placed me in certain positions at certain times to fulfil certain roles or tasks. In many ways, we are never fully qualified for the jobs we apply for. We have certain qualifications, skill sets, experience: but growing into the job, making it our own and attempting on a daily basis to discover why God wants us here in this place at this time can be a great opportunity ... and an even greater challenge!

Monica Dutton: Youth Co-ordinator for Good Samaritans

WHAT DO CATHOLICS BELIEVE?

What Catholics believe is summed up in a series of short formal statements called creeds, taken from the Latin word *credere* meaning 'to believe'.

There are a number of these statements dating back to the earliest centuries of Christianity when they were used as statements of faith by those being initiated into the Church. When an infant is baptised, his or her godparents and all those gathered, recite the Creed (called the 'Apostles Creed') as a sign of accepting the beliefs of this particular community of faith on the infant's behalf.

THE APOSTLE'S CREED

I BELIEVE IN GOD,
THE FATHER ALMIGHTY,
CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH,
AND IN JESUS CHRIST, HIS ONLY SON, OUR LORD,
WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT,
BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY,
SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE,
WAS CRUCIFIED, DIED AND WAS BURIED;
HE DESCENDED INTO HELL;
ON THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN
FROM THE DEAD;
HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN,
AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD
THE FATHER ALMIGHTY;
FROM THERE HE WILL COME TO JUDGE
THE LIVING AND THE DEAD.
I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT,
THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH,
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS,
THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS,
THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY,
AND LIFE EVERLASTING.

AMEN.

A BELIEF THAT BEGINS WITH JESUS

JESUS SANG A SONG

In everything he said
and everything he did
Jesus sang a song.

Sometimes when he cured a person
he sang softly and gently
a song of love.

Sometimes when he told
his tantalising stories
he sang a haunting melody,
the sort of melody
you find yourself
humming through the day
without even knowing
you are doing it.

He sang about his Father in heaven,
the source of all life,
who was caught up in
an outrageous love of each of us.

Sometimes when defending
the little people, the poor,
his voice grew strong and powerful
until at his own death,
he sang so powerfully

that his voice filled the world
and its history.
His whole life was a song.

His young friends who first heard him
were hypnotized by the song
and began singing it to others.

They didn't sing it as well as Jesus did;
they forgot some of the words,
their voices sometimes went flat,
they even argued about the melody,
but they sang to the best of their
ability.

And the people who heard them
thought in their turn
that this was the most beautiful song
they had ever heard.

And so the song of Jesus gradually
spread out from Jerusalem into
other lands.

Parents sang it to their children
and it began to be passed down
through the generations
and through the centuries.

The song was about
giving life to others,
that they might have life in abundance.

Among the last places on earth
that the song reached was the land
that would be called Australia.

The melody was carried in convict ships
and among the families
of early settlers,
with the men who built our railroads,
and the women who
shaped our homes,
those who explored the outback
and those who built our cities.

It inspired the women and men
who built our schools
and designed our hospitals.

Happily the song continues to be sung.

Based upon a story by
Bishop Geoffrey Robinson.
Adapted with permission

The front door of a parish priest's house attracts a wide range of human stories. They could populate a Bryce Courtenay novel. In the middle of a quiet Sunday afternoon, the doorbell rang. 'Are you the priest?' The caller was a young man, Asian appearance, tall, well-presented and polite.

'I want you to tell me something about Jesus,' he said.

There are times when the song can be sung easily and then there are other times... Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, the priest invited his young visitor into the presbytery. Where to start?

'How about a cup of coffee?'

Heating up the jug, the priest asked himself: how many millions of people on this planet, over the two millennia, have held the name Jesus sacred. It is hard to escape the conclusion that few have really understood him and even fewer still have tried to put into practice what he wanted to see done. The priest keenly realised this himself, from his own sometimes feeble efforts. The great Indian leader of non-violence and his nation's liberation, Mohandas Gandhi, claimed he loved and respected the message of Christ, but he failed to recognise its

genius in the disappointing lives of Christians.

The question asked by the young visitor, 'Who is Jesus?' is asked by a substantial percentage of the six and a half billion people living today. It occupies the minds, shapes the lifestyle and dictates a code of behaviour for countless millions. The number of Christian groups and communities, large and small, cannot be measured. The story of Jesus has been put into song, meditated upon, argued over, preached about. It has been the subject of countless writers, poets, architects and musicians.

The supreme irony is that some of the things he opposed most strongly in his time are now preached throughout the world in his name.

The priest and the visitor settled down with their coffee.

'Tell me something about yourself.'

The stories flowed.

'Now let me say something about this person who inspires everything we do around here,' the priest began.

Handwritten signature

SAMPLE

JESUS CAME TO CHANGE THE WORLD BY TRANSFORMING
THE HUMAN HEART IN LOVE, ONE HEART AT A TIME.

The Bible includes not one Gospel story of Jesus, but four. Each has its own distinctive perspective on his life. The Gospels are not biographies and were never intended to be. Their purpose was to show how Jesus could be relevant to people who lived outside Palestine, a generation or two after Jesus' death. Attempting to describe his personality in a few sentences runs the great risk of missing the point, but at times like this, that is exactly what is being asked for.

In the Gospels, read every Sunday in a parish church, certain things stand out. Jesus heals the sick, he is compassionate and patient, yet never fails to challenge those he meets. He challenges them to seek a fuller, more human life. He grew up with people who seemed locked into a religious idea that shrivelled their minds, an empty legalism that gripped their lives, particularly the minds of the religious leaders. Often he simply shares meals with people, mixing easily in company seen by others as dubious, even compromising. He forgives sinners. He feeds the hungry. He casts out demons and restores women and men to life. He tells stories about a better way of relating to one another.

Jesus had a special phrase, which described what sort of world he was trying to bring about. It was 'the kingdom of heaven' or 'the reign of God'. This described a new way of relating to one another with an expanded sense of compassion and respect. He spoke about a new community imbued with new appreciation of justice, peace and love.

At the heart of the Gospels, Christians believe that in Jesus we see God existing within a normal, human life. When you come to think of it, this is the only way we can get our head around this immense mystery. Jesus Christ, we believe, is the Son of God. He makes God present to us.

The Gospels are full of stories told by Jesus. In one of the most celebrated he sets out to try to describe this ultimate mystery of who is God and what is his relationship with us. The story is known as 'The Prodigal Son'. It is the tale of a father crushed by his avaricious son, who demands his inheritance before the appropriate time—while the father is still living. The son leaves home,

wastes the entire amount and is left destitute. The high point of the story describes the old man receiving his bankrupt son back into the family home with a level of forgiveness and unconditional generosity which can scarcely be imagined.

In this way Jesus describes the God whom he called 'Father'. But even this word which Jesus uses when speaking about his Father is powerful. He employs the Hebrew term *Abba*, an immensely intimate name which a Jewish child would use, best translated as 'Daddy'.

To try to catch the essence of the person of Jesus is to understand two things: the intimate relationship he enjoyed with God his father and the relationship he developed with the people he met.

Firstly, Jesus assured the people of his own time, struggling with their distorted religious ideas, that their God was a father who was compassionate, patient and limitlessly forgiving.

Secondly, it was through the unique relationships he achieved with those he met—above all those on the margins of polite society—the honesty and respect he offered them, the healing, the empathy with which he listened to their dreams and their fears, that he revealed God's essence. It was the warmth of his smile, the look in his eyes, the manner in which he could stir something deep in people's memory, that he personified the astonishing love that his gentle and gracious God has for his people.

For a believer, coming to know Jesus is more than an intellectual pursuit, a matter of amassing a number of stories. It is to develop a personal relationship, a mystical and emotional experience, much like falling in love.

That's the story we try to tell here in our parish, the priest concludes. At times, I fear, not very well and not very convincingly. But it is life-giving story we celebrate here every Sunday. Why not join us one day and hear a little more about what it means? We call it the good news.

The young man puts down his cup, thanks the priest, and leaves the house on his continuing search for life's meaning.

IF YOU WERE TO ASK ME POINT-BLANK: 'WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO LIVE SPIRITUALLY?' I WOULD HAVE TO REPLY: 'LIVING WITH JESUS AT THE CENTRE.' THERE ARE ALWAYS COUNTLESS QUESTIONS, PROBLEMS, DISCUSSIONS AND DIFFICULTIES THAT DEMAND ONE'S ATTENTION. DESPITE THIS, WHEN I LOOK BACK OVER THE LAST THIRTY YEARS OF MY LIFE, I CAN SAY THAT, FOR ME, THE PERSON OF JESUS HAS COME TO BE MORE AND MORE IMPORTANT. SPECIFICALLY, THIS MEANS THAT WHAT MATTERS INCREASINGLY IS GETTING TO KNOW JESUS AND LIVING IN SOLIDARITY WITH HIM.

Henri Nouwen, *Jesus: a Gospel*, Orbis Books, New York, 2001