

Matrimony

Paula Huston

We are sunk deep in a slow river of people, pilgrims pushed so close together we can smell each other's sweat, and we have been in this line for over an hour. Pigeons, some of them with their toes singed off by the burning cobblestones, peck around our feet, murmuring in pigeon glossolalia; the industrially polluted waters that surround this sinking medieval city wink oily rainbows at the sun. A few feet ahead of us is the cathedral of San Marco, where the pilgrim river is forcing its way uphill and through a narrow gate, a metal police barricade guarded by two handsome young Venetians in black slacks and gray bowling shirts. Their dark eyes flash busily over us, passing quick but irrevocable judgment; when one of them holds up his blue sign, the river stops, swirls, and somebody steps out of it, turned away at the last moment at the very doors of the church.

“What do they think they're doing?” mutters a red-faced Brit with a Minolta around his neck. “Separating out the sheep from the goats?” There is nervous laughter in our section of the line, quickly quelled. We have been standing in the sun too long to risk the wrath of the gatekeepers.

The blue signs stop and start us; I look up and up, craning my neck to see the great domes of the Byzantine cathedral lifting above us into the hot sky, while behind me, my family shuffles and sighs. As usual, they are here under duress; I am the only one who cares if we get in, and because I care so very much, I'm not at all worried. How could they possibly keep me out?

But they do. The handsome young man waits until I've had a good peek at the holy mystery inside the doors, and then the sign is in my face. On this sign is a line drawing, a woman in shorts and a sleeveless top with a ghost-buster circle and white line through it. I'm being thrown out because I'm wearing shorts? "But everyone in this line is wearing shorts," I start to protest. "It's a hundred and five in the shade!"

"*Via!*" he barks at me.

I can't believe this, not after the wait, the heat, the days of driving on the dangerous roads of southern Europe. "Who do you think you are?" I demand, and the Brit mutters sharply, "Hear, hear," so I crank up the volume, hoping to enlist the support of the crowd. "What's wrong with you? You can't keep people from going inside a *church*." Before the other pilgrims have figured out a revolution is in the making, however, my husband takes me by the arm and hustles me off, our embarrassed offspring trailing behind us.

I am, of course, furious. “He was completely out of line,” I protest. “I couldn’t let him throw me out without *saying* something.”

But Michael, named for an archangel, is stripping off his white polo shirt, wet with sweat, and pulling it over my head. “There,” he says, stepping back and surveying me. “Now you’re fine.” I look down at myself. His sleeves come down below my elbows. The bottom edge of his shirt falls to my knees. Instead of the verboten shorts and sleeveless blouse, I am now wearing a polo shirt dress.

“Get back up there,” he says. “Don’t wait in line again. Go up to the other guy and he’ll let you in.” I look at him doubtfully. The sun glistens on his chest hair. Our kids have skulked off, pretending they don’t know us.

“Go on,” he urges. “You know I’m not into churches anyway.”

This is true, a sad gap between us.

I gird up my polo shirt and slip back into the pilgrim river, popping up silently as a fish before the second guard, who looks me over and starts to wave me through. The first guard, however, glances over at exactly the wrong moment, and I can see his brows lower; not only has he recognized me, one of the day’s more memorable troublemakers, but he’s spotted me cutting into the line. He plunges across the barricade, leaving his side unmanned, and I

watch ten lucky souls slip through the doors behind him as he comes my way. But I'm *Catholic*, I wail (a big lie) as he shunts me aside.

However, I am not one to admit defeat. Avoiding poor half-naked Mike, who has found a good dozing spot in the shade of a building, I track down my oldest, who is always a good sport. I whisper my secret plan in her ear, then haul her around to the left side of the church where, in a recessed portion of the church wall, is an open door, hidden by a thick velvet curtain that hangs motionless in the heat. When we peer inside, we find ourselves looking at banks of flickering tapers and petitioners on their knees: a dim side chapel. The curtain conceals another police barrier. "Come on," I whisper, and we clamor over the cold metal and are in.

For a moment I stand staring up at the magnificent ceiling of the main rotunda, delighted with my own derring-do. Off to the right, pilgrims are making their way toward the heart of the vast building, the tomb itself, and though I am tempted to head straight there, I decide to stop a little and pray, a rather sanctimonious decision, considering the circumstances. I give my daughter a reassuring look (she has taken up a post near the velvet curtain, nervously shifting from one foot to another) and arrange myself on a kneeler. No sooner have I closed my eyes, however, than a rough hand seizes my shoulder, shakes it, pulls me to my feet. It is him, and this time I'm done for.

He thrusts three fingers before my face, as if to say that this, my third violation, places me in the class of incorrigibles, the class of those who, for all eternity, will neither pray at St. Mark's tomb nor enter the gates of Heaven. For just a moment I see myself the way that the kneeling petitioners, most of whom are surreptitiously watching all this, must see me: a pushy American with neither dignity nor hope of redemption. For a moment, I am awash in shame. But then he hisses something contemptuous in Italian and fury takes me once again. I flip him off in Catholic, crossing myself so aggressively that he can't miss the message. I say, knowing he doesn't speak English, "If we were on a bus, you'd be staring down my blouse, you hypocrite." He takes a threatening step toward me. I say, as though this will change his mind, "I came all the way from California to see this."

"Caly-*fomia*," he says, drawing out the "for" the way you would in "fornicate," and fake-spits on the cathedral paving stones. In this gesture is contained his immense disgust for the blight that is Hollywood, for beaches and bikinis and the idols of commercialism that are worshipped by his Euro-suave Italian brothers and sisters, for the rebellious American Catholic church, for the tourists who daily desecrate his sanctum. If he could, he'd throw me bodily back into the street.

But this time it is really over. I give him one last defiant glare and scramble back over the barricade, my humiliated daughter behind me. Then my fury collapses and I am crying, blubbing into my husband's polo shirt in the middle of the Piazza San Marco, wondering if there is, after all, a scarlet letter emblazoned across my chest, invisible except to the watchdogs of the Church. Wondering if the door will always be locked against me.



Many people don't realize that it is difficult to become a Catholic. I certainly never anticipated that my bid to enter the Church would become a vastly tangled affair that eventually required the annulment of my first marriage and a second wedding ceremony with Mike, who had already put in a good number of years as my legal spouse. In some vague, hazy way I assumed that Vatican II had ended "all that"—that the Church no longer much concerned itself with people's "private lives," those areas of our existence, specifically the bedroom, that we late twentieth-century individualists firmly believe to be "off limits," nobody's moral business but our own.

My ignorance in this line was rather typical, I believe. People outside the context of lifetime Catholicism take note of the big events: the Pope

visiting Mexico, the disgruntlement that sometimes flares within the ranks over the not-yet- and maybe never-lifted requirement of priestly celibacy. Outsiders are willing to concede that Catholicism is a mysterious religion, full of odd, incomprehensible ritual, but they tend to interpret this mystery as simple confusion, sorted out and pared down later by the Protestant reformers. Others are less restrained in their criticisms. These folk may find religion itself rather harmless, more of a yawn than anything else, yet something about Catholic worship raises their ire; something about it morally offends and disgusts them. For such people, the rituals may call up the complex, at times downright nasty history of the Church-in-the-world, or its refusal to accommodate certain basic facts about *how things are* these days. They may symbolize an antiquated patriarchy (priests, bishops, cardinals, Pope—all those *men*). However, such folk—and I used to be one of them—rarely conjecture about whether or not they could join if they wanted to. The Church is so enormous, after all; how can you explain a billion members without an open-door policy?

And so it was a great to surprise to me to discover that the Church does indeed bar the gates at times, that joining the Catholic church is not necessarily a matter of personal choice. “Surprise,” actually, doesn’t quite describe that discovery. The day I was told that I would have to drop out of

the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) program and seek an annulment before the Church could consider allowing me to participate in the sacraments as a full-fledged Catholic, I felt shock, pure and simple, in the sense of “the shock of the icy water took her breath away.” Like many Americans of my generation, I’d never before run up against the kind of authority that places the integrity of institution over individual “rights.” Along with shock, of course, came the simple human anger of being rejected, which erupted months later in those shamed tears at the door of San Marco.

As someone who had been AWOL from church for many years—not only AWOL but utterly faithless—a serious reassessment on my end was now in order. The important thing, I thought, was God. I’d finally found him again; I didn’t want to cloud that trembling, delicate new clarity on things. Did I really need corporate religion? Could I stick with this admittedly rocky new spiritual path without the inspiration of liturgical worship, sacrament, the warmth of a congregation shuffling in their pews around me? I knew that others had done it, at least for a while—religious geniuses like Paul, Francis, Teresa of Avila, George Fox. Yet their times of solitude all seemed to lead back to the same place: roles of leadership in the new, more vibrant version of the Church that grew up around them. Many of us, it seems, need the visceral unity of group worship, the shared symbols of “organized religion,”

the spiritual grit of religious discipline, the (at times) daunting authority of institution. I was afraid that if I tried to go it alone, I'd be tempted to take the path of least resistance, to create for myself a relationship with God that, more than anything, pleased and reassured me. Worse, that allowed me to remain aloof and critical.

My decision to proceed was not so much brave as it was desperate. I'd found something that spoke directly to the crying need within me and did so in ways that I could not command, surprising ways that kept me offbalance, less apt to think I was running the show on my own. True, I could have gone to another church, an "easier church," as they put it in RCIA, "around the corner." But an easier church might not do the job, might not be able to tame this thing in me that needed taming.

Though my own effort to become Catholic was complicated by the annulment procedure, my experience was not unique in one regard, which is that the Church takes you in when it wants to take you in, and not before. And the reason for this delay is that you need to know what you're getting into. You need, the Church believes, to understand the rituals that so intrigue, confuse, or horrify the non-initiate, and you most definitely need to know what you are doing when you partake of the Holy Sacraments. For this reason, would-be Catholics must go through a nine- to twelve-month

catechumenate modeled on the lengthy “apprenticeship” undertaken by first- and second-century converts.

Before my abrupt departure from RCIA, I got some explanations for what I’d already noticed: that the sacraments lie, in some very deep way, at the heart of Catholic worship. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the sacraments are “‘powers that come forth’ from the body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving.” They are continual reenactments of his life among us: “What was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries.” Twentieth-century theologian Edward Schillebeeckx explains them this way: “What Christ alone did in the objective redemption, although in our name and in the place of us all, he does now in the Sacraments.”

These rituals, I was told, are “efficacious signs”; not only do they stand for something of tremendous import—the absolute victory of love over evil—but they cause certain internal changes in the participants. According to the *Catechism*, “they bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions,” and this fruit is “both personal and ecclesial.” Those who partake of the sacraments, in other words, receive in a special way “the grace of the Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit heals and transforms those who receive him by conforming them to the Son of God.”

Thus, when Christ says in Matthew 5:48, “You must be made perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” this is not the kind of lofty-sounding idealism of which our age is so suspicious but a loving injunction to transform our pathetic, meager lives, to infuse them with new power. This enabling grace of which the *Catechism* speaks, though it can certainly come in a myriad of startling, individual ways, is available in a particularly intense form through the sacraments. Historically, Catholic belief in the centrality of the sacraments led to what nowadays seems like an odd, even suspect, form of worship: one that involves repetitious physical acts and codified oral responses, one that emphasizes the group encounter with Christ over, say, Luther’s individual experience of God.

That this difference in focus helped make for a definitive split between Catholics and Protestants was made clear to me early on. I was raised in the Lutheran church and didn’t leave it until my early thirties, at the time of my divorce, though of course I’d said my private farewell to God long before. As a child I absorbed the anti-Catholic prejudices of the mostly Midwestern congregation in which I grew up. I picked up the notion, for example, that Catholics worshipped idols and that they elevated their Pope higher than God. I was shocked to find out that they had to have as many babies as they could produce, whether they wanted them or not, or they’d be

excommunicated, a mysterious term that gave me a nervous thrill. I was left with the conviction that Catholics were simply, hugely wrong, that they'd gotten off the track around a thousand years ago and were now headed, two-by-two in those frilly white confirmation dresses of theirs, straight to hell.

What I grew up with was a dim, folkloric version of the original violent clash of the Reformation. And to some significant degree, the Reformation was about the sacraments. Both Luther and Calvin, for example, went to war with the long-held Catholic belief that the Sacraments were effective in spite of the mental state of their participants at any given moment—or, as the Church put it, *ex opere operato*, which means “by the work having been worked.”

The reformers sensed grave danger here: the possibility that the uncomprehending faithful might take Church ritual for magic. And certainly this was (and still is) a justifiable concern. The Church, as Evelyn Underhill reminds us, receives and conserves “all the successive deposits of racial experience, it is the very home of magic.” The modern church has bent over backward, some say too far, in its effort to avoid misusing its supernatural power.

Another major concern of the reformers was that the sacraments could act as impediments to a genuine, heartfelt, individual relationship with their Lord. Though Calvin retained Baptism and Eucharist, what moved him far

more was the “personal dialogue between the believer and God,” and he fought what he believed was a tendency to “convert the Supper into a dumb action.” Certain later groups went so far as to drop the sacraments entirely—the Quakers, for example—and others (the Evangelicals) emphasized the need for an emotional “sense” of God’s presence as a way to counteract what they feared had become rote ritualism.

So when the door of the Church came creaking shut for me that night at my RCIA class, it should not have been a surprise to me that the issue at stake was a sacrament. Though my first marriage, at nineteen, was a Lutheran one and Luther refused to recognize matrimony as Christ-ordained (“Not only is the sacramental character of matrimony without foundation in Scripture; but the very traditions, which claim such sacredness for it, are mere jest”), ironically enough for me, the Catholics believe that Christian marriage, whether it takes place before a priest or a Protestant minister, is indeed a sacramental covenant and constitutes an “indissoluble bond” that cannot be broken without spiritually serious repercussions. I was stuck, unable to move forward, until the Church could view the facts, discuss them in light of its doctrine, then make a decision about whether or not to grant me an annulment. This, the priest told me on the day I decided to go ahead with it, “could take a long, *long* time.”



The San Marco debacle felt, obviously, like an instant replay of that memorable night at RCIA. However, no matter how these double rejections rankled, deep down I knew that, given my history, they were probably no more than I deserved. Recently, in fact, a writer friend who knows about my past laughed out loud when I told him the San Marco tale, then quickly apologized. “Sorry, sorry, couldn’t help it, but—how perfect. The guard won’t let you into the church because of your sexy California shorts, but of course what he *doesn’t* know is ...” He trailed off, no doubt after a tardy realization that he was making a hurtful joke at my expense, but after a while I heard him chortling quietly to himself in the kitchen.

Though he’d managed to start an old scar aching, I understood. Sex *is* often funny, especially when it doesn’t involve oneself. It’s funny in its fleshy, urgent animality; it strips us of our pride and exposes us for what we are: “half beast, half angel,” as Bishop Berkeley put it, or creatures with one foot in the “Zoological Garden.” When we’re in the grip of mighty sex, we’re drunkards; we’re like, as Proverbs says, “one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging.”

Later, when we come to, we say wonderingly, “I lost myself,” and this is not so funny—that it is possible for an otherwise fully-functioning, intelligent human being to so completely cut loose. Renaissance poets, in fact, referred to sex as “the little death.” We do get a preview of death, or at least earthly carnal death, through this temporary annihilation of the thinking self. And this vacation from reason can even be a relief, a kind of pseudo-mysticism. Or, instead of flirting with oblivion this way, we go to the other extreme, try to fortify ourselves against death by clinging to the flesh of another. In our desperate yearning, we can become downright voracious, heedless of Simone Weil’s warning that when we try to “eat” beauty, to eat what we love, what we eat “is destroyed, it is no longer real.” Either way, however, at the brink of the little death we never feel more stupendously alive—so it is understandable that through the centuries, and in our time especially, we have been tempted to worship sex. Or at the very least, to construct elaborate and lofty self-justifications for indulging ourselves in it.

For a number of years, for example, I was convinced that adultery was not really adultery if it involved “genuine love.” And because of this self-serving belief, during these same years I lived a double life: the first, a useful, respectable, cheerful one as wife and mother; the other, a fevered and ecstatic one as clandestine lover of another woman’s husband. And all this in a small

town where families regularly met one another at Farmer's Market, met again at the soccer field, again at PTA, again at the choir concert in the high school gym. For years I hummed with a high-pitched, glittering energy that sometimes and without warning would entirely drain out of me; all I could do at those times was creep into bed for a few days, sick of body, sick of soul. Otherwise, I was fully occupied with an impossible task: to maintain not just the appearance but the actuality of the first life, the normal, good life, while not giving up a single stolen moment of the second.

The inevitable explosion, when it finally came, flattened everything for miles around, a far greater swath of destruction than I'd ever, in my few rational moments during this lunatic time, allowed myself to imagine. Everything I valued lifted off the ground, turned over and over in that fiery, furious air, then fell back around me in pieces. Eventually, however, Mike and I refound each other in the wreckage. He'd lost his little girls; I was now a half-time mother. We two former celebrants were sober and exhausted, weighted down by the knowledge that what we'd so unthinkingly set into motion could not be stopped—that what we had unleashed would insinuate its way into the lives of our children and we could not save them from this.

There ensued a long shame-filled interlude, the shame made more acute, no doubt, by the small-town stage on which all this was taking place.

Eventually, we married, did our best to start over as a so-called “blended family,” but this sunny term in no way describes the dark reality of what we were facing, nor does it describe the tentative, guilty parenting of these early years. An interesting fact about shame, however, is that it cannot go on forever; something has to give. If I’d been open to religion then, I might have sought out a priest for confession, penance, absolution, but given my lack of faith, this seemed the height of hypocrisy. Instead, I tried to get rid of the awful burden by turning it back on the people we had wronged.

The seduction into self-righteous rage is as insidious as the seduction into lust, and often has more deadly consequences, because at the heart of it is the urge to destroy. “External Reason supposes that hell is far from us,” wrote Jacob Boehme. “But it is near us. Every one carries it within himself.” The first custody petition was filed innocently enough—no matter what we had done to their mother, Mike had the right to see his daughters, after all—but when she responded by hiring a criminal lawyer, the battle was engaged, a violent acting-out of her need for retribution and ours for an enemy. After numerous court appearances, probation reports, mediation sessions, and private counselors, however, we had very little to show for any of it. Mike’s visitation times were regularly blocked, holidays were a nightmare of tension (would we get them or wouldn’t we?), and worst of all, the poor girls had been

hounded into a state of permanent distrust. The legal bills amounted to \$55,000, money that we obviously didn't have and had to borrow, but the true price, of course, was inestimable.

When I first talked to the priest about an annulment, I told him just a little of my story, just enough for him to get the picture, and I said, hopelessly, that I could not imagine going back into a courtroom of any kind, not even one conducted by priests. He told me that he understood, but that the purpose of annulment was not to pass judgment on the divorce, but instead on whether or not one was capable of making the decision to marry in the first place. A number of conditions—coercion, mental illness, drug or alcohol addiction, even pregnancy—could impede or even invalidate one's ability to enter into a lifetime covenant. I would have to write an account of my life during my teenage years, and I'd have to find five witnesses who knew me then. My ex-husband would be offered the chance to respond. The priest explained that annulments granted by the Church in no way change the civil status of a marriage: Our two children would not lose their status as legal offspring, and the thirteen years we'd spent raising them as husband and wife would be in no sense "erased." The tribunal would instead focus on whether or not the "indissoluble bond" part of the relationship could be set aside so that I could complete the catechumenate.

The decision to divorce and all that led up to it, he added, were instead matters for confession. *Serious* matters for confession. He asked me to think very hard once again about why, after all this, I'd come to the door of the Church and then to decide whether or not this longing constituted a genuine call, a call compelling enough to resurrect such a painful history for all involved.

This was an important question. For what he wasn't saying out loud but no doubt thinking was, How is this, your fervent desire to join the Church, any different than your other fervent desires? How do you know that this is not simply a new version of the same old impulsive pattern? The answer was that I honestly *didn't* know. I still couldn't sort out very accurately what was moving me from the outside and what was moving me from within. And until fairly recently my life had been driven by a "complete and ungraduated response to stimulus—an all-or-nothing reaction," as Underhill puts it, to whatever impressive thing happened to cross my path. This instinctive reaction that knows no bounds can give the illusion of great power, and certainly in my life as a fiction writer, I'd learned to rely upon it. The critical and controlled had always seemed in comparison weak and boring, the antithesis of the rich and creative. Yet this Romanticism of mine was, I now knew, key to the mess I'd made of my life. Curiously, it was a required college

course that spurred this important revelation and led, ultimately, to a search for the God I'd scorned so long ago.



I am sitting in a classroom, a living cliché: a woman in her late thirties finally trying to get a degree. Not only do I crave the education, I find that focusing on my studies is a good way to distract myself from the custody situation. My professor is lecturing on Hume, something to do with a great breakthrough he made in the—what was it? the eighteenth century? I'm trying my best to take good notes but I'm yawning and nearly asleep where I sit. After all, I'm not only a full-time student but a mother of four (I always put it this way, never mentioning that two are my seldom-seen stepdaughters), a wife, a university library employee, a writer. I'm doing my best, I think defensively. This is something I often do: defend myself to myself, as though I were two people in terrible disagreement. I struggle to pay attention, but so far this business—modern ethics—is dryer than dry. Then, however, my professor says something that makes my head come up. “What Hume was pointing out,” he says, “was a simple thing no one had spelled out quite so explicitly before, and that is the gap between ‘is’ and ‘ought.’”

This arrests me, for some reason, though at first I'm not even sure what it means. I look up Hume's own words on the subject:

In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with I have always remarked that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning and establishes the being of a God or makes observations concerning human affairs, when of a sudden I am surprised to find that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is* and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought* or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible, but is, however, of the last consequence.

I think about this, trying to figure out why it is so disturbing. What he is asking, I decide, is how we justify our morality. And I don't have a clue.

I go back and read earlier selections in the book—chapters on shame and honor, on teleological views of human nature, on virtue and vice. I'm thirty-eight, and I've never heard any of this until now, yet it is somehow familiar to me as my own heartbeat, like a native language long since forgotten. I want Hume to be wrong, I want there to be an anchor for goodness that's stronger than, as he puts it, "habit and convention," and I'm surprised at myself for wanting this so badly, considering where I've been in the past few years. Oddly enough, however, I would rather believe I've been

contravening some venerable, weighty, pure law of goodness than simply flying in the face of arbitrary social mores.

I take more ethics classes, all from the same professor, mostly because I am too embarrassed to trot my ignorance before anybody else in his department. I read bits of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, each making me more miserably aware of two problems: the depth of my ignorance and the confusion that reigns in my moral life. When I am not taking a class, I am asking questions. I can't seem to get enough of this business: It is as though I have been thirsty for years and am finally being offered an unlimited supply of fresh water, even though there are times this water burns going down.

The day arrives when I begin, almost without noticing it, to bring my own life into these discussions, and I realize that I have developed an urgent need to get better, to *be* better, though I'm not even sure what I mean by this. Almost in spite of myself, however, I am undergoing a different kind of "little death." I can feel the props beginning to give, the comforting fantasies to evaporate, but beyond this I can see nothing. Later, I will read John Ruysbroeck's description of this moment: "We behold that which we are!" Now, however, I am simply terrified. What will I be when all this stripping away is over? A cipher? A zero?

I confess some of this to my professor, who, because he has heard it many times before, knows how to listen and what not to say. He does assure me that I am not alone, that countless human beings have been down this road before me. I tell him how frightened I am, that I don't believe I have the courage or strength to change myself no matter how I want to. I tell him I wish I could believe in God, that this would probably help, but I can't, I gave up God when I was seventeen. When he asks me why, I tell him, a long litany of accusations based on a rebellious adolescent's misreading of the Gospels. He says, "There's a way to read the Bible that doesn't make God out to be a fool."



A year later, I am still struggling, but in a different way. I've accepted my professor's challenge—I've studied Christ's words—and what they've given me is a radiant vision of genuine goodness, genuine love. Radiant, but depressing, for given my nature, they seem utterly out of my reach. Though there will come a time that I can read and comprehend Saint Teresa's admonition to her daughters ("If you seek by force of arms to bring it to you, you lose the strength which you have"), I have not yet figured out that the more I flail away on my own, the further back I slip. I have not yet seen, as

Boehme did, that “because thou strivest against that out of which thou art come, thou breakest thyself off with thy own willing from God’s willing.”

I’m sitting in a pew in the local Catholic church, where I sometimes come to think about these things. The light is very bright high up where the windows are, softer below. The old white adobe walls, bulging fatly here and there, look soft too, not like the cold gray stone of the big European cathedrals, but homespun. The pews are simple, straight-backed, uncomfortable, green, scarred by a couple of centuries of schoolkids’ surreptitious carvings. One of Father Serra’s California mission churches, San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, established in 1772.

This time I have not come to sit but to meet my professor’s wife. I’ve met her before; she’s lovely and shy, and I like her, but this feels strange to me, as though I am being rushed into something, even though it was my idea. He’s told me about her; she sounds different from anybody else I know—*better* is perhaps a more appropriate word. She goes regularly to a monastery up the coast, she has monk friends, she says the rosary, all of which sounds unbelievably medieval and compelling. The truth is I am looking for a model, for living proof that we really *can* be transformed. I’m sure, however, she doesn’t suspect what I am up to and would no doubt be nervous if she did.

In the sanctuary are the usual types: a couple of old Filipino women with sparse black curls messing with an altar bouquet that's bigger than they are, a homeless human metal detector cruising the center aisle for loose change, a janitor tossing burned-down candles into a plastic garbage bag. And then I spot her, three rows back. Both of us, out of nervousness maybe, are early, and she doesn't suspect I've arrived, so she's taking this opportunity to pray. I stop and stare, never having studied a person deep in prayer before. She's down on the kneeler and her eyes are closed, and in the diffuse light with her head tipped slightly that way she looks beautiful, but I am impatient with this purely aesthetic judgment for it doesn't begin to capture what she seems. Then I see what makes her so unusual: her utter stillness. She has gone somewhere with someone she loves and they are conversing in private and she will have to haul herself back into this world when she is done.

If I leave right now, I think, I will have gotten what I came for, which is proof that people really do this, really live this way, with one foot in two realms. And the secret path is prayer, its worldly fruits the love and the goodness I so crave. Later, I will see this explained by the famous Indian Christian, Sadhu Sundar Singh: "Prayer is as important as breathing." Later, I will find the writings of Saint John Chrysostom: "Nothing is equal to prayer; for what is impossible it makes possible, what is difficult, easy." Now,

however, I'm simply arrested by this stolen glimpse of a woman talking with God.



Later I understood that this moment was a turning point for me, for shortly thereafter I began to go to morning Mass—at first, mostly out of curiosity, for I knew nothing about Catholicism, this religion that seemed to have so powerfully shaped my professor's wife. I kept to myself and took my cues from the other early morning faithful. Much of what went on was physical, which at first surprised me; I hadn't thought religion had much to do with the body. There was a dancelike rhythm to it—genuflect, kneel, stand, kneel—that felt choreographically wedded to the liturgy.

Slowly, as the ritual became less alien to me, I found myself missing it when I couldn't be there, wanting to be present even though I couldn't participate. I saw that the center of Mass is the Eucharist, that Communion is the fulcrum around which everything else turns. For a long time I was too shy to go up, instead kneeling in my pew with head down and eyes closed, listening to the shuffle of people moving past me, the priest intoning, "The body of Christ, the body of Christ, the body of Christ." For some reason, the

hush, the shuffle, the chanted words always made me cry, and I sensed that this had as much to do with the physical, the presence of the faithful around me, as it did with the spiritual presence that hovered over us like incense.

Underhill describes this phenomenon well: “It is one of the most beautiful features of a real and living corporate religion, that within it ordinary people at all levels help each other to be a little more supernatural than each would have been alone.”

Inevitably, the day arrived when I joined the throng, crossing my arms over my chest when I got to the raised plate of bread, as I had seen other non-Catholics do. For several long moments I stopped breathing as the priest leaned forward to give me his blessing. This, too, made my heart swell and weep, and I was amazed that this sacramental stuff could sweep me around so powerfully, even as a nonparticipant on the periphery. Later I came to believe that certain kinds of pain, deep deserved guilt being one of them, lie beyond the reach of analysis or assurance, perhaps beyond language at all, and that this silent, aching place can only be touched through a physical and spiritual acting-out, a ritual infused with grace.

All this, then, is what I thought about as I pondered whether to pursue the annulment. Some people, people I cared about, would be upset. Most wouldn't understand. My conviction, however, was that my life, the only one

I'd ever be given to live, would be a better thing if it took place inside, rather than outside, the Church, and so I filed the petition. After eighteen months, however, the tribunal had not yet made its decision. I didn't know if my case was a particularly difficult one or if they were just overwhelmed with divorced people, but I kept going to Mass anyway and tried to remain hopeful. Besides, a year and a half of crossing my arms during the Eucharist was having an odd, helpful effect on me: I was finally up against something I couldn't manipulate, cajole, threaten, or deceive into complying with my wishes, and I was learning that my will and its demands were not paramount. I could even think of the San Marco cathedral guard with some (certainly not yet wholehearted) sympathy. Strangely, the Catholics, by keeping me out, had done more to shore me up than any amount of reading Plato or Kant had ever been able to do. Maybe, I thought, the sacraments had a reverse gear that took care of nonparticipants like me. Or maybe the more significant moral lessons got learned when you put your body on the line as I did each time I made myself, in public, stand before the priest only to be turned away.

One day one of these priests called me, a man with whom I'd never had a conversation before, though he'd often enough blessed me during Mass. Father John asked if there was some reason I was not taking Communion. I explained, and he promised to call the tribunal himself to see

where my case stood by now, all of which made me feel amazed and hopeful. When he got back to me, it was to pass on the word that there were more questions on their way from the Diocesan offices, which duly arrived and which I answered. His third call, several months later, brought me the long-awaited happy news: The annulment had been granted.

“You’re *kidding*,” I said. “On what grounds?”

He hesitated. “Gross immaturity?”

I laughed.

“But that’s true of a lot of people,” he assured me. “Especially at nineteen.”

I was grinning into the phone. “What happens now?”

“First your ex-husband has an automatic appeal. If he chooses not to respond, the decision becomes final in several weeks. Then you and your current husband—Mike, isn’t it?—will have to remarry in the Church.” There was a pause. “Mike has never been married before, has he?”

Sudden dark silence. I thought of the thousands of dollars in attorney’s fees, the nightmarish and tempestuous years when our life had been one with hers. “Yes,” I said very quietly. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

Father John paused. I could hear his own disappointment in the long interval. Finally: “I don’t supposed he’d be willing to go through the annulment process himself?”

“No.” I said this flatly. Mike did not want to be Catholic, had in fact found my growing devotion to the Church a profoundly unsettling bit of business, and there was no way, given our history with the civil court system, I would even ask. “No, Father, that’s it, I’m afraid. If they’re going to require that, I can’t go any further.” I felt somewhat numb, as though I’d just taken a hefty blow to the back of the neck, but for once not like crying.

“Paula,” said my kindhearted friend. He’d never addressed me by my first name that way before; it sounded curiously intimate and had the effect of comforting me. “There may be a way. I’m going to look into it. Don’t lose faith, please.”



At some point in the weeks that followed, I reread Mark’s account of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus so adeptly rearranging the molecules of five loaves and two fishes that everyone in the place gets a full meal plus extra—surely one of the more stupendous miracles on record. Later, and in

spite of having so recently served as the miracle feast clean-up crew, the disciples have once again worked themselves into a state of high anxiety because their stomachs are growling. Jesus says to them, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Are your hearts hardened? Do you still not see or understand? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember?” I thought about the bread of the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, given up for me, and the fact that though I might be forever banished from the table, I was still one of the hungry crowd. And that the Jesus I’d read about in the Gospels always, in some way, fed the hungry.

Father John finally called back. “There’s a way,” he said, “if you are willing. It’s called ‘internal forum,’ and it allows a priest to use his own best judgment in certain special cases.” He waited for me to say something, which I didn’t, then explained, “I think it would be better for one of you to be taking communion on a regular basis than neither of you. That’s my judgment.” He stopped again, but I, for some reason, was suddenly thick as mud. He said, “Mike would have to agree, in front of me, to be remarried in the Church, and nobody could attend but your children and two witnesses. On that day, you’d become a Catholic. What do you think?”

A week later we assemble in the Old Mission Church on a Saturday afternoon: my husband, the kids, and (unsurprisingly) my professor and his

wife. Father John seems happy to see us, happy that this long project is finally drawing to a satisfying close, and he signals me to follow him back into the sacristy for a moment so that we can talk alone before the small ceremony begins. There, among the hanging vestments, the half-burned candles, the big sinks that are used for washing out communion goblets and wafer plates, he confesses that he's not completely sure of the ritual required in this circumstance—that normally all this is done on Easter Vigil with the rest of the catechumens in a fairly lengthy and elaborate program that involves bare feet, white robes, etc., and that we have, at this moment, none of this at hand. Not even so much as a congregation in the pews. We scratch our heads—somehow, we've reached an anticlimactic moment without meaning to—and then he says, “What about the Apostle's Creed? Can you say it from memory?”

This, for the average Catholic, would be the equivalent of a curveball, since it is the Nicene Creed that gets recited in Mass and not its shorter, blunter brother. However, my Lutheran childhood now saves me, for when it comes to creeds the Lutherans prefer to get right to the point. I dutifully recite the lines that begin, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in His only Son, Jesus Christ....” and with only a little stumbling, declare my faith in the “Holy Catholic Church, the communion of

saints, the forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting.” Father John and I look at each other. “Amen,” I add firmly. He nods, then traces a cross on my forehead with his thumb, blessing me the way he’s blessed me for nearly two years now, and then we break into mutual grins, and I hug him. “Thank you,” I say into his robe, “so much.” He nods, pats my shoulder, then steers me toward the small door beyond which my husband, children, and friends wait for us in front of the altar.

And thus I go through the marriage ceremony for the third time, shivering a little inside, as I did both times before, at its awful weight and portent. The first vow, made when I was only nineteen, seems, in spite of the tribunal’s declaration of annulment, still a curiously living thing, a shadowy, uninvited guest at this present ceremony, as though the bond between people who have borne children together is not severable. I think of Saint Augustine’s declaration that “when man and wife are once united by marriage ... as long as both live, there remains something attached to the marriage, which neither mutual separation nor union with a third can remove.” I look up at Mike and wonder if he is being visited by his own ghosts.

In preparation for this day, I have read about the sacrament of Matrimony and its long history, the fact that it was not officially, in print, recognized as a sacrament until the beginning of the thirteenth century. I

learned that the chief ends of this sacrament—which is unique among the seven sacraments in that it is conferred by each spouse on the other rather than by the priest—are “to enable the husband and wife to aid each other in securing the salvation of their souls ... to propagate or keep up the existence of the human race by bringing children into the world to serve God [and] to prevent sins against the holy virtue of purity by faithfully obeying the laws of the marriage state.” These are noble ends, worthy ends, but unfortunately condemn by their very worthiness and goodness the vows we are about to make, for Mike, at this point in his life at least, is little interested in the salvation of his soul, I am biologically incapable of bearing more children, and we have already violated, in our previous lives, the laws of the marriage state. I begin thinking gloomy thoughts, which fortunately Father John interrupts with his opening blessing: “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.”

We few Catholics present at this little ceremony make the holy sign—forehead, heart, left shoulder, right shoulder, heart—giving ourselves over with an anticipatory sigh to the incoming, outgoing tides of the Mass. The reading is from Revelations, the “wedding feast of the Lamb,” and I glance past Mike’s profile (he is listening hard) and catch my professor’s eye; he winks at me, and in that twinkling wink is an acknowledgment of all the long and convoluted

history behind my standing before this altar, this priest, this great crucifix hanging from a white adobe wall. Father John says, looking straight at me, “The sacrament of Matrimony gives the husband and wife grace to bear each other’s weaknesses. They must be patient with each other’s faults and bad habits, and forgive one another easily, just as God forgives us every day.” I think of all I have been forgiven and of the inevitable new heap of crimes and misdemeanors, the dross and fallout of intimate human relationships, that lie ahead for Mike and me. I think that one of the many disciplines of marriage may indeed be daily, mutual forgiveness, and I wonder if I will ever be capable of practicing it. Father John says, “The power of marriage is that you can help each other overcome these faults by being mirrors for one another. When things become difficult between you, remember that the sacrament imparts special grace to help you through.”

These are stunning words, *special grace*, and I know that he doesn’t mean them metaphorically. According to the Sacrament of Matrimony, we are now something more than the sum of two shaky human beings occupying the same space and trying to make a go of it. I love this idea, I want to hang onto it, but it’s like jumping for handfuls of mist. Instead, our little ceremony ends, the kids give us somewhat dubious hugs, we all go out for frozen yogurt. Before taking up our normal, nonsacramental lives once again, we stop for a

single group wedding photo on the bridge over the creek beside the Old Mission. And that's it. I'm Catholic, duly married in the Church, and all, I think, will now be well.



A long tradition that begins with Paul in Ephesians uses marriage as an analogy for the relationship between Christ and his people: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. He gave himself up for her to make her holy.” (5:25-26) Then he adds, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall be made into one. This is a great foreshadowing; I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church.” (5:31-32) At the time Mike and I remarried, I had a better understanding of the spiritual half of this equation than I did the human. For in spite of the long years we'd already shared, we'd not yet caught up with one another, and our history still dogged us, shadowy but real. Without realizing it, I wanted “one flesh” to mean “one person.” I wanted Mike to stop “hanging back,” to quit resisting the urge I thought I could discern in him toward confession, penance, absolution: *my* path.

Instead, we entered a bleak time, the bleakest in our marriage, and ironically this hit just when everything else finally calmed down. Three of our

four kids were in colleges out of state, and the last, busy with her final years of high school, rarely came to see us anymore. At first this was nice—we could breathe, look around—and then it got very quiet, and then it became frightening. Our house began to feel like a cheerless, childless sepulcher. I caught Mike giving me surreptitious, sidelong glances, heavy with doubt, as though he was wondering what on earth ever possessed him to go to hell and back for *this*. We started not sleeping. We both lost weight. Mortified, we realized we'd become weary of one another's company at the very moment everyone had gone off and left us alone together. We began to bicker, to squabble, to pick, this unhealthy practice becoming so second-nature so very quickly that we were both taken aback when our oldest daughter pointed it out on a visit home at Christmas. "What's up with you guys?" was how she put it, confirming that we had somehow managed not to tear at each other through all those truly awful years (court, police, child counselors) but now were. This was embarrassing and had alarming undertones.

Then one day I went alone to the wedding of a friend, a good-sized Catholic wedding at the Mission. I caught the groom for a hug before he went to take his place beside the altar, and he whispered to me that chaos could break loose, that one of the more volatile homeless women had wandered into the church earlier that day and torn most of the wedding bows off the

pews, threatening to come back. I laughed and told him not to worry, he had bigger things to think about right then. For the fact is, we all know this woman, know how obnoxious she gets, and we are proud to belong to the kind of church that lets her through the door in spite of this. The notoriously tough institution that so warmly offers Christ's universal love. I sat in the pew where I'd sat so often, and I watched my friend and his bride, both of them young and handsome, free of the webby ghosts that Mike and I will always share, as they made their public covenant. Who knew what they might face together in the terrible intimacy of matrimony? And then it came to me that faith in a marriage is a small analog to faith in God, and that I had somehow forgotten this. I had somehow sealed my marriage off from the rest of my spiritual life and come to the grim conclusion that it was up to me, and me alone, to fix whatever had gone wrong. And I asked for an infusion of that special matrimonial grace I'd forgotten about for so long.

Things slowly seemed to heal. Where, for a while, there had been a frightening void, there was once again something bigger than the two of us—the sacramental combination Father John had told us about. As much a part of each of us as a limb, and not nearly so expendable. It was a start, and I was grateful for it, grateful that though for a time we'd been strange and appalled

with one another, we now seemed to be rediscovering, like long-lost cousins at a family reunion, our common root.



But, like the loaves, like the fishes, there is much more on the way, a scene that comes one day while I am walking, so vivid in its details it seems a waking dream. In it, I see us and what we might be, what is meant for the two of us together in this mysterious thing called marriage. I see that there is a way to harness our “fiery energies” to the “service of the light” and that, as Augustine shows us, it is the right ordering of the still-present love and desire between us that will lead us into virtue. Virtue, of course, being nothing else but the ancient name for the power of goodness, the tremendous power of the Holy Spirit who enters when he is invited. I see that what I once dared only hope for is after all a glorious reality, open to every one of us, regardless of the darkness through which we have passed. And I finally know for certain that “All will be well. All will be well. And every kind of thing will be well.”

Sources

Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

Thomas Bokenkotter, *Dynamic Catholicism: A Historical Catechism* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I*. Trans. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953).

Catechism of the Catholic Church (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

The Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: Robert Appleton, 1914).

Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy, Vol. VI*. (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

Council of Trent, Twenty-fourth Session, “Doctrine on the Sacrament of Matrimony,” 1613.

Pope John Paul II, “Pope John Paul II on Marriage: the Redemption of the Body and the Sacramentality of Marriage.” General Audience of November 28, 1984.

Evelyn Underhill, *The Life of the Spirit Today* (London: Methuen, 1922).