

Belonging

One Catholic's Journey

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Prologue

The wind picked up and the waves below the pier slapped the boards under my feet as they raced to break on the nearby shore. The now darkened clouds looked menacing, so I reeled in my fishing line, grabbed the metal bait box, and headed back with my grandson to our rented beach house, just ahead of a fast-moving thunderstorm.

It was June 2018. On entering the snug bayside house, I could hear a television anchor reporting the breaking news of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, DC. He had just been ordered to cease all public priestly functions following an investigation into the alleged sexual abuse of a teenager. Months later, McCarrick would lose his honorific title as cardinal, while further stories about the predatory history of this once influential church leader were reported.

This was an earthquake for American Catholics. McCarrick had been our archbishop, and he enjoyed celebrity status in the nation's capital where we lived. He was a constant presence at local charitable and social events and an active board member of two private foundations that formed part of a nonprofit organization I had directed for three decades.

We all thought that we knew Theodore McCarrick, but the news was telling us otherwise.

When we returned from our early summer vacation along the shore, our pastor at Holy Trinity Parish in Washington, DC, invited us to join him with other parish members to have a conversation about the tragic news and to allow us to share our grief and anger. The range of opinion spanned disbelief of the charges to utter disgust. Several asked, How could someone reach the heights of

office within the church and not have had such monstrous behavior impede his ecclesiastical career?

We discussed the church's good-faith efforts in 2002 to put in place a zero-tolerance policy for clergy sexual abuse in dioceses and religious orders in the United States. We puzzled over the irony of reforms that did not address the behavior of the hierarchy itself.

Our pastor announced further "listening sessions" and suggested that parishioners make their feelings known to the archdiocese, to the papal nuncio, and to fellow parishioners. We all returned home unsettled but grateful for the pastor's forum.

The summer weeks passed, and in mid-August another explosion of church news centered on a report of the attorney general of Pennsylvania. It revealed seventy years of horror involving over 301 sexually predatory priests in that state and one thousand of their victims. The report showed how the crimes of clergy had been hidden by Catholic dioceses and how well-orchestrated moves by bishops in the 1970s through the 1990s enabled such clergy to continue victimizing children.

The public flew into a fury at the pattern of practices and seeming indifference of bishops. Never before had civil authorities so systematically revealed the internal policies of Catholic dioceses in the dark arts of covering up criminal behavior.

In a perfect storm of scandal, Pope Francis traveled to Ireland that same month to attend a World Assembly of Families, only to be confronted by hostile protests over the decades of abuse by clergy and religious in that country. Before Pope Francis departed Ireland, a scathing letter of a former Vatican nuncio to the United States, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, accused the pope of allowing Cardinal McCarrick to function publicly despite alleged restrictions imposed by Francis's predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI. Viganò called for Francis to resign.

As journalists continued their extensive coverage of Viganò's claims, many Catholics, like me, were in a jumble of confusion and sadness. The Catholic Church meant everything to us. Like many Catholics I had been buffeted and had learned to accept the failures of the church throughout my life. In my career I had a ringside seat in the circles of church leadership. I had seen dark and

disappointing aspects of its management. Even so, I was shaken to the core by the summer of 2018 and its revelations about an institution that was central to my life.

I lay awake at night remembering the church of my early years and the benevolent presence of priests at our family dinner table and their presence during important events of my family's mourning, particularly the early death of my father. I reminisced as images of my years in the seminary—peaceful, purposeful, and joyful—passed through my consciousness as so many gentle consolations. I thought back to the difficult decision to choose a church-related lay career rather than the priesthood, remembering how lucky I was to find myself working as a social policy advocate for the church in the nation's capital. I thought about the exciting decades of working with philanthropists united in their charity for greater impact on Catholic institutions.

In remembering these happier days, I searched my own conscience, asking myself what more I could have done in my lifetime to prevent the turmoil, scandal, and division that were besieging my beloved church. How could I have done a better job in living up to the high expectations of the Catholic heroes who lined the path of my blessed life?

In Steven Spielberg's award-winning film *Saving Private Ryan*, the main character, James Francis Ryan, visits the Normandy American Cemetery decades after being rescued by those upon whose tombs he now gazes. As he remembers their selfless heroism, Ryan whispers prayerfully, "I've lived my life the best I could and hope that was enough. I hope in your eyes I've earned what all of you have done for me."

I was now haunted by similar thoughts. The church was a place of high-minded champions in my youth. It was not the chamber of horrors described today in the daily news. This church was where I found extraordinary goodness, truth, and integrity, and where I learned that love, compassion, and service were the pillars of earthly existence. The church's wisdom and those whom I had encountered on life's path who reflected these values held the most venerable place in my memories.

Yet the grim realities of the present day gave me the uneasy

feeling that I had missed something. *My head must have been buried in the sand*, I thought. *Was there something in the Catholic Church that I refused to see or acknowledge? In my long experience of working in Catholic institutions, had I been too idealistic and even naive?* Maybe.

I had seen the in-fighting, the refusal of church leaders to embrace the right path when confronted with an unjust administrative practice. I had witnessed petty careerism, church politics, mendacity, and venal preoccupations of clergy with wealth. I experienced close up the ideological divides within the hierarchy.

Still, despite all of this and even the latest news that stirs my anger, I remain left with hope and trust and a bone-deep conviction that Catholicism is doing more than any other institution to advance human dignity and freedom and to bring mercy and love where it is most needed. I have every expectation that the church will face its present problems, confess the grave misdeeds and injurious behavior of its leaders, and bring justice and accountability to bear on the harm it has done. I have this expectation not only because of the transformative powers of the Catholic Church so amply demonstrated through centuries, but also because of my lifelong interactions with this community of faith: my own experience of its immeasurable goodness along with its ignominious letdowns.

I invite readers to travel with me now as I take you through my own journey in Catholicism. Perhaps my story will help you understand why I remain hopeful and aid you in sorting out the conflicting feelings so many of us share.