

Growing up Procedural Catholic
by Ginger Wolnik
November 12, 2014

Just follow all the rules and you will go to heaven when you die! That statement summarized my early religious education. Nothing spiritual was there; it was all about memorizing catechism by rote. The catechism's strange words and awkward phrasing had little meaning to me, but I was a good student and always got an A for religion on my Catholic school report card.

My parents were both Roman Catholic and believed it was a mortal sin to miss Sunday Mass. We also had to attend church every Holy Day of Obligation, which if we were lucky, fell on a Sunday. If it fell on a weekday, then my class went to Mass, but it was part of the school day. The only extra inconvenience was when one fell on a Saturday. There was also one strange holy day during summer, the Feast of the Assumption. As a child, it just meant a probable wasted summer vacation day. Another mortal sin was to attend a non-Catholic service. One time when I was fairly young, we were traveling and found ourselves in an unfamiliar town on a Sunday. We entered what we thought was a Catholic Church, but my parents soon realized it was some Protestant denomination. We fled in horror!

My parents were not wealthy, but sending their children to Catholic school was their highest priority. For me it was extremely important, it meant that I did not have to go to Sunday school after Mass! We had religion every day, so we learned all the rules better and were more prepared for First Communion and Confirmation than the Catholic kids who went to public school. Their families were less likely to attend Mass every Sunday; my mother referred to them as "Christmas and Easter Catholics."

When I started school, the Mass was in Latin and I learned all the prayers and responses in Latin. There was no translation, it was all just sounds to be memorized, but I was good at it. I felt sanctimonious about Catholicism being the one, true religion because I believed we were following a ritual unchanged for two thousand years, directly descending from Jesus' teachings.

My First Communion was probably the epitome of my belief in God. I took it very seriously and made sure that I did not commit even the tiniest venial sin after the First Confession the night before, so I would be prepared to enter the State of Grace. When I returned to the pew after receiving the Body of Christ for the first time, I felt under a spell. It was like an out of body experience, a strange glow while almost in a trance. Unfortunately, my sin-free state was broken when a girl next to me whispered a question. I tried to resist answering, but she kept asking, so I finally whispered: "I don't know." The spell was broken; I had sinned by talking in church. If I were to die before the next confession, I would go to purgatory instead of directly to heaven. I never managed to achieve that state again, it was probably a hallucination.

Each week our class went to confession so that our sins would be forgiven, giving us a clean slate and a guaranteed shot at heaven. Even then I realized that the sins of little children were minor and petty; we were not bank robbers or murderers! It was suggested that we could confess such transgressions as being disobedient to our parents and fighting with our siblings, things that were almost impossible to avoid. One week, I honestly could not think of a single incident of even these conflicts. However, the nuns made it clear to us that if we told the priest that we had nothing to confess, he would think us disingenuous and committing the sin of pride. So, I felt I had to commit the lesser sin of lying and just confessed the usual "fought with my sister" that week, even though I hadn't. I was very apprehensive about saying this deliberate lie to avoid being suspected of lying, but was given the usual penance of "say three Hail Marys." You see, saying prayers was punishment, not anything I would ever want to do!

I grew up in Florida and first thought that the nuns who taught us were infallible. However, that belief was shattered after the Cuban Missile Crisis. My teacher told us that if we were attacked, we should all seek sanctuary in the chapel because God would not let us be harmed inside His House; the church building itself could not be bombed. Because of my grandparents' Polish heritage, I was obsessed with WWII and had seen photos in books of bombed-out Warsaw, including the ruins of churches. Also, my

favorite TV show was *Combat!* which often had the heroes hiding from the Germans in shells of French churches. I asked my mother about this and she said the nun probably lied to us so we would not be afraid. However, I felt my faith in them was betrayed.

The next crack in my faith occurred in 1964 when several reforms were made to the Mass. The prayers and responses were changed to English, the altar was turned around so the priest could face the people and the distribution of Communion was different. I was dumbfounded that such major changes could be made in my lifetime after all those centuries. I felt cheated out of being part of something that was never supposed to change.

The next year was my class's Confirmation. This was a special, one-time sacrament that would "confirm" us as Soldiers of Christ. We had to pass a verbal test given by the local bishop, so we memorized the whole catechism. Many of the kids were very nervous, but the actual test was one easy question per student, so we all passed. We were told that we might be called upon someday for martyrdom. Saints in the past had been gruesomely tortured to death as a test of their faith; we all had to vow to defend the Roman Catholic Church with our lives if necessary. I wasn't sure how letting someone torture me was supposed to help anyone, but if that is what it took to go to heaven, I would have to do it.

Even though my parents seemed very religious, as I got older I noticed that all they did was go through the motions. My father liked to get up very early and attend the first Mass every Sunday so he could eat afterwards; in those days you had to fast at least three hours before Communion. He would often bring home an assorted box of fresh donuts. My mother would take all five of us kids with her to the last Mass. She was usually late; we would arrive just before the Gospel and leave right after Communion, thus fulfilling the minimum requirements for attendance. I don't recall her ever socializing with anyone; she would grab us and rush out to be the first car out of the parking lot. As far as I knew, all anyone did was attend Mass and leave, I was unaware that people participated in any other way in the Church.

I do have some positive memories of the Catholic rituals. For some reason I always liked the smell of the incense that was burned at some of the special Masses. Getting my forehead marked on Ash Wednesday seemed fun; so were the crossed candles for the Blessing of the Throats. Palm Sunday was easy in Florida; we would weave elaborate crosses with the abundant fronds. Most Sundays after Mass, we enjoyed the donuts that my father usually bought, especially the chocolate éclair he got just for me!

By the time I started high school, I noticed enough discrepancies in the Catholic Church teachings and my mother's hypocritical behavior to start becoming cynical. However I enjoyed attending the girl's high school, Sacred Heart of Mary, which was academically advanced and surprisingly progressive. Instead of memorizing catechism, the religion class was about social activism. We learned about Jesuit priests and some orders of nuns who marched against the Vietnam War and promoted racial civil rights. One of my teachers, who was one of those new nuns who did not wear a habit, taught us critical thinking and to question authority. That ultimately led me to decide that religion itself was all made up.

I no longer believed in God, but saw no reason to have a confrontation with my parents over it. When I got my driver's license, I told my parents that I wanted to start attending the mid-morning High Mass, which no one else wanted to go to. That allowed me to sneak off to hike in Deer Grove, the local forest preserve; I just had to make sure to return home at the expected time. Walking alone among the trees gave me more peace and contentment than religion ever did; I thought of it as my church in the wood.

Years later as an adult, I discovered the Unitarian Universalists. This is a completely different religion; people are spiritual, not mindlessly following rituals. Thinking is encouraged, not blind faith. Kind actions and charitable deeds are what count, not dogma. Best of all, there is no requirement to believe in the supernatural, just respect those who do. I also learned similar things about Buddhists, Quakers and Secular Humanists, but UU seemed the best fit for me. I have found many former Catholics in this new community and we try to keep the good parts of our upbringing while building a better life for all!