

PART I

HOW DOES

FAITH WORK?

I was a Catholic who didn't believe in God. That is, until just before I turned thirty-three. They say faith is a gift. If that's the case, why do some people get it and others don't? Somehow, in my childhood, I was absent at that party.

Everything changed one Holy Saturday at a Navy base outside Tokyo, Japan. I was about to attend my first Easter Vigil, the most important liturgical celebration of the year for Catholics. Only two months earlier, I doubted there was a God, and now in a few short moments, I would celebrate his Resurrection from the dead. It was there I fully understood—for the first time—Christ was truly present in the Blessed Sacrament. I was startled and amazed to realize I had faith.

This book is an exploration of faith for Catholic parents—how to grow in faith and how to hand it on to your children. My quest to figure out what faith is and why mine was sidetracked, topics I explore in the next few chapters, became my mission to help Catholic parents discover the great beauty of the Catholic faith and teach them to effectively share that beauty with others—especially their own children. I want to help Catholic kids stop short of rejecting the Church the way I did. What I have learned through my quest is that religious education programs have holes and that parents are the key to filling them.

The truth is that kids need more than education to develop an active faith and personal adherence to God. Parish religious education programs and Catholic schools cannot match the faith formation potential of families. Fostering deep faith within a person requires intimate relationship, knowledge of that a person's deep needs, and a firm bond of trust. That's difficult to accomplish with ninety minutes once a week in a class of ten to fifteen (often more) students. As a parent, you have an intimate relationship with your children, know their deep needs, and have a firm bond of trust. Unlike parish catechists, you are in the perfect position to help your children develop deep faith. I know it seems daunting, but I think any parent can do this with a bit of study and some effort. You don't have to be a saint or a scholar to pull this off. The first step is to understand what faith is and how we get it. Without that knowledge, you're shooting in the dark.

1.

FAITH AT LAST

I was baptized into the Catholic Church as an infant. Like most Catholic kids I knew, I went to weekly religious education classes. They called it CCD (which, I learned years later, stands for *Confraternity of Christian Doctrine*). Southern Louisiana was Catholic country, and CCD was just what you did. For nine years, we all went, but it didn't mean a whole lot to us. We went to Mass on Sunday and CCD on Monday after school, and the rest of the week God never inhabited our thoughts. Along the way, we received the Sacraments of Penance (or Reconciliation, which many people refer to simply as *confession*), Eucharist (or First Communion), and Confirmation. I stopped attending CCD as soon as I was able—right after my Confirmation in eighth grade, though I continued attending Sunday Mass with my family.

By the time I started college at Louisiana State University (LSU), I was all done with the Church. There was no conscious decision to reject the Church; I just stopped going. I'm pretty sure I learned the basic tenants of Catholicism as a kid, but they held no spiritual meaning for me. The only thought I remember having about the Eucharist was that it tasted like cardboard.

FLYING AWAY FROM FAITH

While God wasn't on my mind in college, other things certainly were—such as girls and becoming a military pilot. I wanted to join

the air force because my uncle was an air force officer. He taught math at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, and spending time with him there gave me the flying bug. Air Force Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) at LSU led to full-blown infection, but after I saw Tom Cruise play a navy fighter pilot in the movie *Top Gun*, my interest switched to the navy. The romance of carrier flight ops, the allure of added danger, and the prospect of traveling the world was like a siren song that drew me in. The navy guaranteed me a slot in flight school if I could get through Aviation Officer Candidate School or AOCS (remember *An Officer and a Gentleman?*). So I quit college and signed up. Right before I left, I met a girl through a service organization affiliated with the Air Force ROTC. We dated long distance while I went through AOCS and then flight school in Pensacola, Florida. She pursued a master's degree in linguistics at LSU.

I finished flight school, got winged as a naval aviator, and a few months later married Shannon, the girl from LSU. My new bride had the exact same faith background as I did—she was a cradle Catholic who had left the Church in her teens for the same kinds of reasons. Like me, she felt no connection to the Church. We lived in San Diego for a few years and then transferred overseas to Atsugi Naval Air Facility in Japan. I had always wanted to live in Japan and was fascinated by the culture. Shannon's linguistics coursework focused on teaching English as a second language, so my posting was perfect for her. In Japan, through a series of events too long to record in full here, we returned to the Catholic Church.

COMING HOME AGAIN

Our coming back was a whirlwind. If you had been there and blinked, you might have missed it. We started seriously investigating Catholic teaching around Christmas 1997. By Lent, we

were praying the Rosary every day and attending Mass regularly. Over the course of that Lent, we became more and more deeply immersed in the life of the Catholic community at the base chapel—working with a ministry to the homeless, going to daily Mass, and teaching religious education classes on Sundays. Yes, it's true: we could barely fog a spiritual mirror with supernatural life, but we were asked to teach fourth-grade CCD. I loved it. I wanted to share everything I was learning with anyone who would listen. I probably shared too much! Shannon was also asked to be a sponsor for a woman named Martha, who was preparing to become Catholic through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). She took that role very seriously; after all, she was learning, too.

So there I was, waiting to experience my first Easter Vigil, the high point of the liturgical year. It begins outside the church, after dark, with the priest's lighting a small bonfire, the new fire that represents the light of Christ, the light of faith, entering the world. Later, borne on candles in the hands of all who have gathered, this light illuminates the entire darkened church—it represents the faith of every individual believer overcoming the darkness of an unbelieving world.

Shannon, Martha, and I huddled together in the chilly evening air outside the base chapel. I wasn't sure what all was going to happen at the Vigil, but I knew Martha was going to receive her First Communion and I had done that. As we were about to go in, I turned to Martha and said, "When I was a kid before I made my First Communion, I always wondered what the bread tasted like." I continued with a chuckle, "Then I found out. It tastes awful—just like cardboard."

And at that moment it struck me: the host wasn't just bread . . . it was Jesus! I was joking about Jesus!

I was taken aback, shocked with what I had just said and the amazing reality of the Eucharist that was just beginning to sink

in. Martha's face showed an uneasy look as well. I just smiled a little and shut up, embarrassed. We didn't say any more about that moment for the rest of the night. Though I had learned about the Real Presence as a child, before that night I had never believed in or cared what the Eucharist really was. It had never mattered that much to me. But that night, at that moment, it came to mean everything.

FAILED BY THE SYSTEM

That Easter Vigil experience changed my life. The Eucharist became more than an abstract concept to me; it became real and relevant. For the first time in my life, I had faith. I truly believed in this person, Jesus, who was real and alive and there. But more than that, I was overwhelmed by him. His truth penetrated everything I was. I wanted to follow his way of life, to think, judge, and act like him. I trusted he could lead me to happiness and fulfillment.

I began to study and seriously ponder the question of how I could have grown up in the Catholic Church not caring about God at all. It nagged at me. I had to know. Answering this question became a personal quest that eventually led me to leave my naval career and study theology at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio. I wanted to know what faith was all about and what had gone wrong with mine.

In some important ways, my story reveals much of what's wrong with Catholic religious education today. I should have known faith. I should have believed in the Real Presence and had a personal relationship with God. My parents did all the "right" things and outwardly fulfilled the obligation they undertook at my Baptism to raise me in the Church. They took me to Mass each week, sent me through the Catholic religious education system, and saw to it that I received the sacraments. I was fully educated

and officially initiated; after Confirmation I should have been on my way to becoming a practicing adult member of the Catholic Church.

But there was a slight hitch: I didn't want to be a member, and I didn't want to practice. The system had taught me everything except the *reason* why I should stay or care. The system didn't help develop my faith, and my parents didn't either. They trusted the system to do that and likely didn't know how to do more, which is the root of the problem for so many Catholic families today.

The average Catholic probably imagines that this system works like an assembly line. Go through the process and you come out on the other end fully equipped and ready to go, like a car with all the standard features. The notion that working through the process will set you on the path to heaven is widely accepted. And why wouldn't every parent believe in this process? It's the way most Catholic parishes are set up. However, it's not that simple. The standard features are not enough if the engine is missing. For the process to work, your children need more. Your children need *you*.

The sad truth is that my story is not uncommon. Youth and young adults are leaving the Catholic Church in droves. According to the Pew Research Center, four times more Catholics leave the Church than join. One out of every ten American adults is a former Catholic raised in the Church, and they most often leave before the age of twenty-three.¹ Those numbers are not just statistics. Every one represents a young person who reaches adulthood not knowing Jesus Christ in and through the Church. This saddens me because I believe the Catholic way is the best way to live. Those teens and young adults growing up without deep roots in Catholicism will instead find guidance, and identity, in the secular culture, their own desires for pleasure, and material success. That is destructive. We are failing to pass on to our children the attributes that truly matter: love for and faith in Jesus Christ, who

leads us to the Father. With that faith comes a certain set of values and a moral code that lead us to eternal life with God in heaven. We are failing to help our children lead happy, fruitful Christian lives that will eventually help them reach heaven.

REFLECT

What was your religious life like growing up? Did you always have a strong faith or did you fall away? Where are you in your faith life today, and how has that affected your parenting style in regard to your children's religious education? Are you willing to work on deepening your faith to help your children?

PRAY

Find a quiet place where you can spend time alone talking to God. Tell him all your concerns regarding this project of handing on faith to your children. Relate to God your doubts, fears, and hopes for your family. If your faith life is not where you want it to be, ask him for insight into what you can do to strengthen it. Then take some time to listen for thoughts, intuitions, and inspirations. That's how God speaks to you.

LIVE

This book covers how to help your kids grow in faith, but you can—you actually *need to*—grow along with them. If you want your children to have a strong, mature faith, you must have one first. There's no way around this truth. Two sayings sum it up: "Faith is more caught than taught" and "You can't give what you don't have." They're overused and a bit cliché, but that's because they're true.

The first one is true in most areas involving behavior and character building, but it's especially true of faith. We look to pattern

our lives after role models, people who are what we want to be in the future. Parents have the biggest influence over their children in this regard. Kids naturally pick up on cues about what is important in your life and adopt those things as important in their own lives.

The second saying complements the first. In many ways, faith is like an inheritance you pass down. What you say about faith has less impact on your kids if you're not living the faith. There's no credibility. Your kids may go along with you out of obedience, but your message won't be a part of them. And that's what it has to be. Don't worry; I'll help you build up your faith so your children can catch it from you.