INVITATION TO CATHOLICISM

Beliefs † Teachings † Practices

FOR ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD FAITH

Alice Camille

Invitation to Catholicism

Beliefs + Teachings + Practices

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by Alice Camille

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Acknowledgments

Writing a book can be rather lonely work—like hiking the Grand Canyon without someone along to share the wonder and discovery of the journey. Happily, I was not alone in my journey through this book. My sister-in-law Susan Hancock Pedergnana agreed to be my "Protestant" reader, pointing out any obscure Catholic ideas I might have used without definition. My neighbor and long-suffering friend, Erin J. Boulton, was willing, as a recently professed Catholic who loves the church, to be my RCIA reader. My sister Evelyn Mautner also read every page and e-mailed me daily to assist and encourage me. (She also offered to leaflet all the cars in the supermarket parking lot with a free chapter, to boost sales.) Without Susan, Erin and Evie, this book would have been written in a vacuum. Thanks also to my fellow religious writer Paul Boudreau, who was my "computer guy" throughout, as well as fact-checker and heresy-spotter.

Dedication

To my parents,
Evelyn and Theodore Pedergnana,
from whose generous love and fidelity
I learned my faith.

Introduction

All stories begin somewhere. This one has its beginning at the deathbed of a friend. He was well loved and gentle in spirit, regarded by all as a wise and holy person. In his final illness, he told the story of his journey toward God. It surprised many of us who thought we knew him thoroughly.

My friend had been brought up in the country by parents who were indifferent to organized religion. While he was still a small boy, a neighbor offered to take him to church along with her brood, and so it was that he was introduced to the God of Christianity. It was not a highly influential encounter. What mattered to him more was the kindness and welcome of the neighbor and her family.

As a young man, my friend began to travel, first around the country and then around the world. He was astounded by the vastness of the world, the immense variety of human experience and culture. He was attracted in particular to the ways the people of many lands seek the face of their God. In order to understand this phenomenon, he decided to participate in it, immersing himself in each people's language, culture and worship. He became fluent in many tongues and sympathetic to the common yearning soul of humanity. He prayed in Arabic, kneeling on his prayer rug in mosques. He contemplated among Buddhists, attentive to the gong of his bowl. He wore his prayer shawl at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, reciting Hebrew texts and rocking back and forth with rabbis. He was very serious about each experience, respectful of every tradition he encountered.

But from each religious expression, he came away convinced that he could be only a visitor. His own spiritual home eluded him. He dabbled here and there among the congregations of the United States and finally shelved the religious quest altogether, moving to Utah to tend bar at a ski lodge.

As so often happens, once we stop our determined effort to find God, God finds us. My friend overheard coworkers at the

lodge talking about visiting a monastery down the road a ways. A Catholic monastery, complete with cowled monks! In the heart of Utah this seemed unlikely, so my friend decided to have a closer look. On the weekend, he drove to the monastery and asked for a room. Left alone with his thoughts, he found the experience restful and clarifying, so he made plans to visit again. This became his habit for months and years to come.

Eventually he developed a relationship with one of the monks, Father Patrick. Each time he came to the monastery, he would meet with the monk and volley questions at him—about God, Jesus, the Catholic church, and the absurdity of knowing anything for sure about the spiritual world. He'd seen it all, studied it all, and it was all the same. There was no way to know God, ultimately. "It's no use," he would tell the monk each time, feeling the despair in his words.

One day, my friend came to the monastery as usual, and asked to see Father Patrick. Word was sent to him that Father Patrick would not meet with him any more; there was no purpose to it. My friend had built up a fortress with his questions, and no answer the monk had to offer would penetrate it. There was nothing left to say.

My friend panicked, sending word back that he would go away and leave the monk alone if only he would meet with him one more time. Just once more. In the end, Father Patrick agreed and came to the small, bare sitting room where guests of the monastery were received.

The monk entered the room and said not a word. Kneeling down, he took off my friend's shoes and socks and kissed his feet with great tenderness. Then he stood up, bowed to my friend and left in silence.

My friend burst into tears. Suddenly his heart opened and he understood, beyond words, the answer to all his questions. He had encountered the love, compassion and humility of Christ, and knew his long search was over. That Easter he was baptized and received into the Catholic church.

Coming to the crossroads

For my friend, nothing could have been more strange and

unsought than the idea of joining the Catholic church. From the outside, Catholicism can seem foreign and complex, a step backward into the Middle Ages or onto another planet. Most of what non-Catholics know about the church comes from two sources: Hollywood (saints preserve us!) and ex-Catholics. Practicing Catholics are some of the quietest believers on earth, but ex-Catholics are usually ready to talk your ear off about why they don't practice their former faith.

To be sure, former Catholics often have very good reasons why they found the church wanting. Chief among these reasons is how they were treated (and perhaps mistreated) by the primary representatives of the church: parents, clergy and religious personnel, teachers at the parochial school, and other church members. Those wounds can take a long time to heal, and sometimes that healing has to take place in another community altogether. The church may be "the communion of saints," according to its creed, but even saints are sinners, prone to errors in judgment, foolishness and lapses in love. One of the great mysteries of Christianity is the call to forgiveness, and the church is not excluded from those who need to be forgiven and to seek forgiveness.

Many who pick up this book may find themselves at a crossroads of sorts. Perhaps you are like my friend, looking for God or a community of faith or answers to questions you can't even form in your mind. Or maybe you love someone who is a Catholic and you want to understand what that identity means to him or her. Some of you may be sifting through some unfinished business with the church, trying to understand what went wrong and what may still be right about the religion you left behind. Others may be lifelong Catholics who are looking for a way to get a sense of the "big picture" of Catholic belief. You've been on the inside for so long that it's hard to see the forest for the trees.

This book may serve as a topographical map of the terrain of Catholic belief. Unlike a catechism, it won't be full of doctrine and dogma and official pronouncements. For the last word on every subject of that nature, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has already been written. What I offer here, as

a lifelong believing Catholic, is a sense of what I find beautiful, joyful and good about Catholicism. It's the side of Catholic belief that doesn't appear much in news magazines and movie scripts. It is, I hope, a presentation of the church that demonstrates how a thinking person in the twenty-first century can embrace Catholicism without compromising reason. Furthermore, as a person deeply committed to a life of integrity and meaning, I want to present Catholic Christianity as a courageous choice that enlivens and supports the quest for fulfillment and true freedom.

If life has become unsatisfying, empty or desperate for many, it is because we seek answers that the world cannot give. As a professor at Princeton University observed not long ago, more and more children are being raised in homes that are "fatherless, godless, and jobless," the acknowledged formula for both depression and crime. If more of us are looking for a sense of love and belonging, something greater than the dollar to worship, some meaningful work for our hands, what we seek can be found in yielding to the image in which we are made: to the God who created us to be more than slaves to the clock and to our physical needs.

What's in this book

The organization of this book has a lot to do with the twenty years I've spent as a religious educator in parish work, campus ministry, and especially with the formation of adults who wish to enter the Catholic church formally through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). Each chapter ends with a set of questions for personal or group use, as well as suggestions on how to apply this topic to real living. Sometimes one good question is worth a whole essay, so even if you're reading this alone, scan the questions to see if one of them has your name on it.

The first chapter, on mystery, attempts to lay out basic ideas that religious people—Christians and then Catholics in particular—take for granted. It includes some of the "primary colors" with which we paint reality. For those with no formal religious experience or those who have had only a secular expo-

sure to religion, this may be especially helpful.

The next three chapters focus on the Trinity, as revealed through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, better known as the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible. The Bible is, hands down, the most important book you'll ever read, and I can't emphasize too strongly the need to develop a relationship with this book. But because it's large and old, and because many of us have learned to be afraid of its complexity, many lifelong Christians have yet to sit down with it personally. So I present a Cliff Notes-like version of it, with the hope that it will lessen your fear and increase the longing to go further in your spiritual search.

Chapter Five is about the church. From writing a children's textbook on this topic I've learned that a whole book is not enough to cover what has evolved through twenty centuries of living and countless volumes of theologizing. So this single chapter is only Sandbox Theology 101, as my seminary teacher used to say. It gets you in the door—but once there, you're on your own.

The next three chapters are about the sacraments, and although they may seem like old hat to veteran Catholics and voodoo to those raised apart from the church, the approach here is not simply "seven sacred signs" but how to *live sacramentally.*

The last four chapters include topics that people ask questions about the most: prayer, Mary, morality, and the afterlife. An appendix including basic prayers used by Catholics and others can be found at the end.

Why I'm writing this book

There are hundreds of books in print right now about Catholicism, ranging in style from scholarly tomes to trendy little outlines. Many are written expressly for RCIA groups or Catholics returning after some time away or practicing church members looking for an update. One more volume in that sea of information might not seem significant, unless it's the one that finds you.

Rather than defending the need for still another book on

this topic, let me explain why I wrote *Invitation to Catholicism*. Let's go back to the beginning of this introduction, to the deathbed of my friend. He lived the last twenty-five years of his life as a thoroughly happy, jubilant Roman Catholic. He was, frankly, the best advertisement for the church that we cradle Catholics who knew him had ever seen. He spent every year of his post-baptismal life in exuberant evangelization for the sake of Christ. This cause inspired his living, as well as the lives of everyone around him. And it illuminated his dying, so that all that remained in his last hour was his breathing and the light of Christ.

Beyond the loss of someone I loved, all I could think of in his final hours was how dearly I want a death like his. Such a death, I feel sure, is available to all of us and is intended for us as surely as we take in our first breath. But as Flannery O'Connor, Southern writer and notorious Catholic, insisted, "The creative work of a Christian's life is to prepare his own death in Christ." Far from being macabre, this statement is as matter-of-fact as the idea that we are what we eat. We weave the future out of the frayed elements of the past, and we create all our tomorrows out of what we do with the precious bits of today. The spiritual quest is not a hobby or a luxury; it is our destiny. Sometimes it may seem that we just don't have time to find God or get our spiritual act together. But the truth is that time is not given to us for any other reason.

I hope that the time you spend here will not be wasted. May God bless you on your journey.

One

Room for Mystery

The word mystery used to be huge, evocative of worlds and possibilities that lie hidden to us. But contemporary use of the word has shriveled it to where it's no mystery at all. It now means hardly more than "whodunit," as in there's a body-on-the-floor, a weapon-in-the-lake, and three suspects-to-choose-from. Mystery as a genre has shrunk the concept down to manageable size, where we can tame it if only we pay attention to the clues and don't get seduced by the attractive stranger with the iron-clad alibi.

Mysteries of this kind are meant to be solved. These mysteries are really no more than facts that have yet to come to light. Mystery, in the popular sense, is a temporary state of ignorance, easily resolved by the clever person in the trench coat.

We treat mystery this way, I suspect, because of the scientific revolution. What was once the terrain of mystery—cosmic forces, star-embedded skies, the power of the elements, the wonder of the human mind, the ruthless dominion of disease and death—are now problems we are solving or have yet to solve. Mystery is a condition easily remedied by the clever person in the lab coat. When mystery becomes interchangeable with mere ignorance, then knowledge is the tool that will bring it under our control.

One can read articles that seek to explain love as a chemical response or heroism as a biologically comprehensible decision. God and religion have long ago been tossed into the dust bin of useless notions. The appeal of mystery in its former meaning—something that is at bottom patently incomprehensible but about which we can learn more and more—seems to challenge the foundation of scientific inquiry itself.

How science meets religion

Science is not the natural enemy of the spiritual quest, though some fundamentalist approaches to religion have viewed science with great misgivings. Science is a noble enterprise, with its many fruits laid at the service of humanity. All of us are beneficiaries of its gifts, in this generation more than in any other. But science will fail us if we view truth through the lens of scientific inquiry alone. What science cannot offer is an answer to the *why* questions that most humans start asking at the age of two. A child asks her father why the ocean is blue, and her dad rattles off a twenty-minute exposition on the properties of light and water and the workings of the eye and brain. Having proven his thesis, he finishes with great satisfaction, but the child stares at the restless body of water before her and asks again, "But why blue?"

Or why is there an ocean, or a father and child, or anything, instead of nothing? Why time, space, history? Why being of any kind? Why the ability to ask why? Why an asker of any question, and a universe answering or mutely refusing an answer? Here we enter the realm of protoscience, or philosophy. Why does a woman suddenly miscarry a healthy child, seemingly without medical cause? Even if science attempts a response, the reply is meaningless in the arena of grief. "But why has this happened to my child, to me?" the woman asks. For this, chaos theory or statistical probability has nothing useful to offer.

When it comes to the problem of human suffering and the reality of evil, nothing that science or philosophy has come up with can make these two disappear for good. All over the globe, from the rising of the sun to its setting, people are asking questions that cannot be answered with a pill or a theory. And they may carry the questions in their hearts for all of their lives.

The spiritual quest

The enterprise of religion has been around a long time. It does not preclude or exclude scientific discovery or science-born truths, though many speak as if it did. The goal of religion is not to take things apart to see what makes them tick, but to see

beyond the pieces to the Maker of the whole. If the goal of science is human knowledge, the endpoint of religion is knowing and being known by the One who is and was and is to come.

The distinction between science and religion is critical, because to attempt to use religion in place of science—or vice versa—causes intellectual or moral schizophrenia. Many people of the twenty-first century who reject the religious enterprise see it in conflict with the truths of science. They feel compelled to make a choice between the two, and the educated mind finds it hard to vote against intellectual freedom.

To those who feel such a conflict, relax. Nobody is asking you to turn off your brain. What is needed is to activate another faculty entirely: the living spirit within you.

Religious truth does not challenge scientific knowledge, any more than it attempts to trump historical truth, mathematical truth or the inquiry systems of any other discipline. As theologian William Herr has noted, if a thing is true, it has to be compatible with faith. Religious truth, particularly as it applies to the Old and New Testaments, addresses the matters of meaning and purpose and direction that exist beyond or beneath the questions that other disciplines ask. The story in Genesis about the Garden of Eden does not seek to address the dating of dinosaur bones or the beginning of the human race. The story of the Great Flood was not written as a historical record of a "perfect storm." The idea of the Israelites wandering forty years in a desert that could be crossed easily in a short period of time is not about having a poor sense of direction. And the theological concept of Trinity is not a math problem of how three equals one under certain circumstances. Religious truth is broader than temporal, tangible fact. To grasp the difference, we may look to the ancient discipline of myth making.

A word about myth

Popular usage has it all wrong about myth. We use the word to dismiss something as patently false: "That's a myth." On the contrary, a myth encapsulates truths about the human condition that lie deep beneath the surface. Its domain is the presentation of those elements of human reality that are not simply

historically true—true for some particular person, place or moment in time—but universally true: true about people, life, the way things are everywhere and in every age. Mythological truth is most naturally presented in storytelling and poetry. Here human experience is communicated not as a means of historical record keeping but to advance human self-understanding: This is what human beings have done or are capable of doing. This is how it is, and how we are.

Of course it must be said that not all we learn by means of myth is true. A lot of myth making depends on the person, people or culture behind it. Think about the personal myths you carry around from your family of origin, the proverbs you were taught to guide you through life. You may have heard simple prejudice pronounced as fact: "Those kinds of people are like that." Or paranoia presented as truth: "Watch your back. People are not to be trusted." You may have also imbibed the American myth, the inner story of a people that is still evolving its themes: "Hard work will be rewarded" or "Anyone can grow up to be president."

Myth making travels a long, winding road from Homer's epics and Aesop's fables to the parables of Jesus to the American dream. Although it is a dynamic and creative avenue of human truth, it does not nail us to the floorboards of predestination but presents us with decisions for us to make with our freedom. It leaves room for mystery.

God as mystery

Religious mystery is not for solving, as we have said, but rather simply for acknowledging. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). God alone is God, an infinite, eternal and therefore incomprehensible Other from the perspective of finite, mortal, limited humanity. When it comes to reality, we are sitting in the cheap seats, and what we can see from here is humble compared to the vastness of God's timeless, limitless perspective. Just grasping the reality of our mortality teaches us not simply about ourselves but about God. What we are, God is not. And what God is, we are not. God is maker, and we are made; we are creatures before the Creator.

Isn't it surprising how few people live as though this were true? We often live as if we believe we are God: titans with limitless energy who will never die, with no needs, in total control of the flow of events. Mortality is a fact we don't even consider until illness or disability strikes, a loved one dies, or we hit the wall of our own limitations. Somewhat clinically, theologians call these experiences of our mortality "teachable moments." When we suffer, suddenly our inner atheist gets religion, big time.

When we do respect the mystery of God, however, we also honor our own human nature. We know who God is and who we are. The freedom of this knowledge presents the possibility of unspeakable cooperation between what we can do and what God can do. The first step in acknowledging the Sacred, then, is embracing humility by facing who we are. The second is using our freedom to learn who we can become.

A new way of seeing

Opening the window on mystery offers a new way of seeing and interpreting the world around us. Most people who "get religion" of some kind don't lapse into visions, at least not right away. A sense of the God-embedded nature of things comes upon us in a more organic way. In fact, the natural world is the best place to begin to understand the presence of God-with-us, since creation was God's first utterance. God's desire is not to remain hidden from the created world but to be known by it and through it.

In light of this, we discover that we can approach the infinite God through the finite world. This leads to an important tenet of Catholic belief: Common things hold sacred realities. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," as Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. If you want to know about the majesty of God, stand among the Rocky Mountains and look around. If you want to know God's beauty, gaze over the edge of the Grand Canyon. If you want to know God's abundance, travel the lush farms of the heartland of America. If you want to know the awe-inspiring power of God, go to Death Valley when the high winds are blowing. The God who created

these marvels contains all these possibilities within the divine imagination.

We also learn about God through certain signs and symbols that have been given to us through the tradition of believers. These common things—bread and wine, water and oil—teach us about the life that God offers us in every ordinary moment of our days. God uses ordinary items for divine purposes. And each of us, out of the ordinariness of our lives, is invited to become aware of ourselves as children of God, living stones built into a new temple where God chooses to dwell (1 Peter 2:5).

The Catholic way of seeing extends beyond the recognition of God's self-revelation in the wonders of creation and in common, ordinary things. We also see one another as the revelation of God. The story of Jesus who was both human like us and divine Son of God affirms this way of seeing. We are urged to see Christ in every person, to uncover the divine face in the lowliest and most unexpected face of all (Matthew 25:40). Our use of sacramental signs, as in baptism, Eucharist, and the anointing of the sick, expands our appreciation of the sacredness of all times, places and persons. The vision of God's holy presence in all that is—what we can call the sacramental worldview of Catholicism—goes beyond our moments of ritual to all the hours of human existence and experience. (We will explore the meaning of the sacramental worldview in more detail in Chapters Six to Eight.)

A new language

It used to be said of a person who accepted a creed or joined a church that he or she had "had a conversion." That is still true, although the word *conversion* implies more than the formal acceptance of a creed or a church. Religious conversion means making a formal assent to a new way of "seeing" and involves, for Catholics, baptism and a profession of faith, which is an affirmation of the God we know as Trinity and of the community we know as church. But that is only the first step of conversion. The fuller meaning resides in turning over the whole of ourselves to God.

Our understanding of conversion is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Hebrew word for conversion is *t'shuvah* or "turning." It involves turning away from the self and toward God. It does not imply a negation of the self but an orientation to "right relationship" between God and ourselves. Giving to God what belongs to God reveals our rightful identity: not as servants of the world but as the beloved of Love itself.

Another word that influences our understanding of conversion is the Greek word *metanoia*, which means "a change of heart." Since the books of our scriptures are written in Hebrew and Greek, the insight of key phrases in these languages helps us to grasp more fully the meaning behind our use of the words. "Change is never the same," as the old irony goes, and conversion means we can't go on being the same once we have professed that God is in charge and we are not. The earth moves under our feet when we profess faith in God. Everything changes, and that includes us.

Theologian Bernard Lonergan has identified five aspects of conversion in our lives: religious, moral, conversion of the head, conversion of the heart, and a social dimension of conversion as well. After religious conversion (we've made the assent; we have been "still" long enough to know that God is God), we find that our language has changed. We no longer ascribe events to luck or chance but to grace or providence. We no longer speak cynically but with hope. We no longer look for the bad news and the gossip but put our hope in the unrelenting good news of the gospel.

Next, we face the challenge of moral conversion. That means what it sounds like: Our lives have to change in keeping with our words. Moral conversion means practicing what we preach. If God is sovereign, if God rules, then God's ways take precedence over our inclinations to do otherwise. The scriptures contain the Ten Commandments from the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 5:6–21), nine Beatitudes from the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 5:3–11), and all kinds of good advice to use as guidelines on how to live. More will be said about moral conversion in Chapter Eleven.

Conversion of the head and heart, or intellectual and affec-

tive (emotional) conversion, accompany this process. We usually think of events happening in a linear way, but conversion follows its own route, so don't expect to check these off your list in a straight line. Think of these five aspects of conversion as spokes on a wheel rather than a ladder to climb. We probably won't conquer them one by one, but rather we will return to each over and over as our life in faith deepens.

Intellectual conversion is the movement away from superstitious or rigid thinking about religion. Just as we didn't learn everything about life by the age of thirteen, so we have not learned everything there is to know about God in Sunday school, religion class, or up to the present moment. Graduating from parochial school or finishing the RCIA process won't teach a prospective believer all there is to know about God, any more than getting a Ph.D. in theology will. The search for God and knowledge about God is a lifelong process. We have to keep learning, even if it means asking uncomfortable questions and upsetting our smooth system of beliefs now and then. Life itself, with its unsettling turns, is a great promoter of intellectual conversion.

Conversion of the heart, or affective conversion, is the process of unlearning most of what our hearts have learned so far in life. It is the softening of hearts made hard by broken dreams, betrayals of trust, lack of forgiveness and experiences of sorrow. Affective conversion is making ourselves vulnerable again to love, forgiveness, compassion and trust. It's a darn fool thing to do, by worldly standards. But to one who is wandering the wheel of conversion, it is the only way of becoming more like the One in whose image we were made and long to be. We become like children again, trading in our world-weary hearts of stone for hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19).

Even as we till the soil of moral, intellectual and affective conversion, however, we have to contend with one more thing: social transformation, or what Lonergan calls "socio-political conversion." The other forms of conversion seem rather personal and private, but mature Christianity is not a private matter. The gist of socio-political conversion—and it's every bit the mouthful it implies—means no less than the transformation of

our relationship to all the structures around us. Many of the systems that support our lives—political, economic, professional—are tainted with the same corruption (known as sin in religious language) that has touched our personal lives. Just as we must surrender to the grace that frees us interiorly from the effects of sin, so we also have an obligation to commit ourselves to the transformation of society as well.

"Getting religion," we can see, is not enough. It is not the end of the story of conversion, only the beginning.

A language beyond words

Think of the words that shape reality as our culture defines it: democracy, progress, upward mobility, freedom, individuality. People undergoing the effects of religious conversion find themselves with a whole new vocabulary for the description of reality. Sin (missing the mark of love), grace (God's endless presence and supply of help) and salvation (not being lost to the control of sin but rescued for unending joy) are three of the handiest words to keep in your front pocket after religious conversion. They will help you to understand what is happening to you—but don't expect them to play well with family or friends who have not shared your experience. Sin, grace and salvation tell the whole story, but only for those who have "arrived."

But in addition to religious words we Catholics have the language of ritual, which we use to communicate the same understanding. Why ritual? The Reformation of the sixteenth century, which resulted in what we today call Protestantism, asked this question critically. At that time, the church was divided over many serious issues, one of which was the way in which God seeks to be made known among us. Martin Luther and others insisted that the authority of God's word is spoken among us *sola scriptura*, "only in scripture." Anything beyond that was of human origin and therefore carried less authority. Although some mainstream Protestant denominations today, such as Episcopalians and Lutherans, employ a great deal of ritual in their worship similar to that of Catholics, many other denominations rely almost exclusively on the proclamation of scripture and the sermon as the center of their gathering.

The authentic expression of Catholic Christian faith continues to hold that God is known in many ways, including the incarnational approach of ritual. To *incarnate* means to "enflesh" the abstract, to "embody" what is spirit. In ritual, we incarnate what we mean by our very actions, as when we put a hand on our hearts to pledge loyalty to our country. The celebration of the Mass is evenly divided between a ritual of scripture and one of sacrament, expressing the same truth in two ways: in story and in symbol. God is made known to us in the readings from the Old and New Testaments as well as in the bread and wine, which we hold in faith to be the body and blood of Christ. The seven sacraments of the church are all ritual encounters with God's presence and grace. In our formulaic greetings ("The Lord be with you." "And also with you.") and in our ritual gestures (making the sign of the cross over ourselves, the bending of one knee known as genuflection, sharing the sign of peace with a handshake or hug), we give witness to our common faith with our whole person and share that witness with one another.

Ritual language and gesture, of course, are no alien observance in our society. We observe proper rites in our stadiums, courtrooms and classrooms, as well as in the ordinary greetings we exchange on the street. Ritual is a natural and orderly way we honor people and events and convey meaning in our lives. Birthday parties, a toast, observance of holidays and anniversaries, and the habitual way in which we begin every day suggest that the role of ritual is both useful and beneficial.

Ritual, above all, helps us to remember. We are fragile beings, and a lifetime gives us a lot to hold in our memory. We want to make sure we don't forget the important people and the crucial events and places that have shaped who we are and where we are going. If ritual helps us to find our keys by putting them in the same place all the time, won't it help us to remember more ultimate things, like why we are here and what we are striving to become?

The need for community

People on a religious quest will often ask this question of

INVITATION TO CATHOLICISM

Beliefs ✝ Teachings ✝ Practices

"Catholicism can seem foreign or complex, a step backward into the Middle Ages or onto another planet. *Invitation to Catholicism* offers a sense of what is beautiful, joyful and good about Catholicism. It is a presentation of the church [beliefs, teachings, practices] that demonstrates how a thinking person in the twenty-first century can embrace Catholicism without compromising reason."

From the Introduction

Everyone from inquirers and catechumens to lifelong Catholics will welcome the easy-to-understand, logical explanations found in this clear, concise overview of Catholic beliefs and church teachings. God, Jesus, Mary and the saints, the Bible, Mass, sacraments and prayer, plus moral and virtuous Christian living are all presented in a gentle yet persuasive manner that encourages acceptance and fosters genuine understanding. The appendix contains a treasury of Catholic prayers and devotions.

Discussion questions and activities at the end of each chapter make *Invitation to Catholicism* ideal for RCIA and adult study groups. It is perfect for Catholics who want to move beyond the basic knowledge they received as children in religion classes. It offers a contemporary explanation of Catholicism that is grounded in the history and traditions of the church. Non-Catholics will find it a handy guide to what Catholics believe today.

ALICE CAMILLE has directed religious education, RCIA and adult spirituality programs at parishes across America. She has authored a lectionary commentary series, religious education curriculum, and the book, Seven Last Words: Lenten Relections for Today's Believers. *The Catholic Press Association has awarded her first prize for Best Regular Column in a Catholic magazine.*

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