

THE TRUTH AT THE HEART OF THE LIE

*How the Catholic Church
Lost Its Soul*

A memoir of faith



JAMES CARROLL





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When we are stripped down to a certain point, nothing leads anywhere any more, hope and despair are equally groundless, and the whole of life can be summed up in an image. A man's work is nothing but this slow journey to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

– Albert Camus, 1937

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PROLOGUE



In the Portico

When I was perhaps five years old, I encountered a monk. My mother loved to tell the story. She did not pick up on its creepiness, but at an early age I did.

We were standing in the so-called Rosary Portico of a monastery on the outskirts of Washington, DC, where I grew up. Apart from sepia tone images encountered in movies or museums, what is a monastery today? Or a monk? Or, for that matter, a rosary? In the twentieth century, they were important to many of us, many more of us then than now. Today, in the twenty-first century, there are some good people who keep votive candles alight in the alcoves of a few actual monasteries, but those figures can seem like curators of the past. Yet that was the world into which I was born, and I see now how strongly it shaped me.

I began by loving every corner of the Catholic Church, monks and rosaries included, and the monastery is an image to which I return still, associated as it is with my mother and, therefore, with

love. For many decades, the Catholic Church has been a pillar of my identity. That pillar is now cracked.

The Rosary Portico, when I stood there with my mother decades ago, was the columned arcade that enclosed the cloister – the inner garden and courtyard – of the monastery. The monk who greeted us was a stout Franciscan, a member of a religious order founded in 1209 by Francis of Assisi, the saint of the poor. That iconic figure from the Middle Ages has currency now mainly because of the present pope, who has the poor in mind, too. Alas, the good Pope Francis, for all his works of mercy, lays bare the Church's failure.

The monk's robe and the dangling beads that hung at his side had snagged my attention. My head did not quite reach the level of the white rope that encircled his ample waist. The rope, too, struck me because its draping vertical length was marked at intervals by three carefully placed knots. Then I noticed the sandals out of which his pudgy toes protruded. I'd never seen sandals on the bare feet of a grown-up man before. When my gaze lifted, I was transfixed by something else: the monk's head was bald, and from the lower part of his face a slew of wispy grey tendrils hung – the first beard I'd ever seen. When I later learnt it was called a goatee, I understood at once: I'd seen such facial hair on billy goats in my picture books.

The man's grin – moist lips, yellow teeth, dancing eyes – seemed odd but not frightening. A figure so unlike any I'd encountered before, he struck me as a sort of friendly ghost. At last I spoke. 'Why', I asked, 'do you have hair on your chin but not on your head?'

My mother yanked my arm disapprovingly, but she relaxed when the monk, joviality itself, laughed out loud. His hand, I recall, went to his shelf-like stomach, a self-satisfied petting. He

said, 'Just call me Brother Upside Down.'

I wasn't sure what his remark meant, but I sensed that it pleased him to have made it. His other hand dropped to my head, the briefest caress.

He and my mother laughed together then, exchanging glances above me. Since I had asked my question in earnest, I was mystified. What was so funny? I might have asked him why a man wears a dress. Or why that beaded necklace hung from his belt. Or, speaking of his belt, what was with that sash of white rope at his waist, with its knotted dangling end. I probably asked about the hair on his chin because that was only the last of several oddities to strike me.

Soon enough, the incident became a chestnut of family lore – a yarn endlessly repeated in our house. For a long time, as I listened to my mother regaling friends and relatives with what I'd said, I failed to get the joke. But the story always put me in mind of the complications of the monastery moment – how my mother had instinctively reacted by rebuking me with that jerk of my arm before the brother's laugh let her see my query not as the insult she'd feared it was, but as the bright quip of her charming five-year-old Jimmy. In an instant, I'd gone from being the object of reprimand to being a point of pride – a change in status that left me feeling uncertain about myself.

But one thing was very clear from the first moment in the portico to the subsequent retellings: the power of the monk was absolute. He had power over my mother, and therefore over my own standing in her affection. My mother's double-barrelled reaction had taught me that my simplest words could have two meanings – one bad, the other good. And her reaction also taught me that the authority in charge of which meaning applied was the man in the brown robe.

That made me wonder, *Who is he? And why is Mom so ready to support him, to take her cue about me from him?* My mother, of course, was a kind of deity to me, which made the moment a religious revelation. That she deferred to the figure in sandals meant he was even more exalted than she.

I sensed that this higher status of his was a function of the place in which we were standing. Therefore, I was drawn not so much to the monk as to the enigmatic milieu from which I felt his power came. The Church. I never became a monk myself – not quite – but I was a monastery man from then on.

It would be years before I was initiated into the mystery of the three vows a monk takes – poverty, chastity, obedience – symbolised, as I would learn, by the three knots in the man's dangling cincture. But I had already grasped what was essential to the monk's vocation. Surrendering every claim to the normal happiness of money, family, status and mobility, the monk stakes everything on the existence of God – God understood as individualised, immediately available and radically committed to those who call upon His name.

The monk's God was not the philosophical abstraction with which I would later wrestle – Aristotle's Prime Mover, Thomas Aquinas's being itself, Paul Tillich's ultimate concern. Nor was the monk's God the rarefied haze of goodwill in which I would eventually be tempted to lose myself, a woo-woo transcendent aura that forces no proposition, receives no petition, requires no obedience, but is vaguely thought to live benignly as the inner life of life itself. No, the monk's God was a God who could number the few hairs on the monk's head, know the monk's name, require kindness, demand justice, offer salvation, uphold both the vast cosmos and the monk's own pulse. A God who was a most intimate personal presence, to be compared, at that point in my life, only to a parent.

I learnt, well before having words for it, that the Catholic religion is a religion not of mystical union in which the self disappears into an ultimate quietude – Nirvana, as the Buddhist's emptiness or the Hindu's release from cycles of birth and death – but a religion of conscious relationship, in which one's fulfilment comes from knowing and being known by the One who is radically apart, the source of everything. Not just known – but loved.

If that loving Other does not exist – if that God does not exist – the vowed life of the monk, priest or nun makes no sense. I got that. I intuited, even at age five, the radical thrill of the monk's gamble, a roll of the dice on which his – or on which anyone's – whole life is wagered. For the first time, I saw God, even if indirectly, which is, of course, the only way it's done. And having seen, I heard, too. I would not know what I'd heard until much later. I'd heard the whisper of a kind of call.

So, yes, that brown-robed monk was, for me, the first of those 'great and simple images' of which Albert Camus wrote, images in the presence of which my heart opened. The monk's monastery was another. So was that string of beads at his waist, which I soon learnt was the rosary for which the Rosary Portico where we stood was named.

HERE AT MY desk in my home office now, I raise my eyes to the yellowing card that has been pinned to the wall above me for years, on which are printed the lines from Camus: 'A man's work is nothing but this slow journey to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.'¹ Circling back in memory, I am in a late stage of that journey, with the pillars of the Catholic Church crumbling on every side, shaking the very structure of the faith. Of

my faith. Yet these images – monk, monastery, portico – still mark the way.

The word ‘rosary’ comes from a Latin word meaning ‘circle of roses’, the flowers that make us Catholics think of the mother of Jesus – the one we call Our Lady. We say our most important prayers to her, and we use the fifty beads of the rosary as a way of counting them. When, at age seven or so, I was given my own beads, I somehow knew, from then on, to think of myself as Catholic. I knew who God was, and I knew that I was His.

From the gooseneck lamp here at my desk hangs a rosary to this day. That says something important about me, but so does the fact that, as I see now, I will not likely recite its prayers again. Still, the God I met in the Rosary Portico when I was five – the God I associate with love – remains the only God in whose presence my chastened heart can hope to open yet again. Whether it will or not is the question.

In this book, I aim to tell three stories. One is a saga of history, of how the Catholic Church, from the days of the Roman Empire through the feudal Middle Ages, reinterpreted Scripture and the meaning of Jesus to become a bastion of male supremacy and theological doom, one empowering a clerical elite – priests – who became, for the believers, the self-serving gatekeepers of eternity.

The second story tells of how the malignity of that clericalism has been laid bare in recent years by the scandal of priests sexually abusing children, while bishops have protected the predators instead of their victims – a deviance so deeply driven into the Catholic culture that not even the brave and charismatic Pope Francis has been able or willing to uproot it.

And the third story is my own – how Jimmy, how I, became a priest; then a writer, and an op-ed columnist for *The Boston Globe*, even as that paper’s Spotlight team broke the Church’s sexual

abuse scandal; and, finally, a shattered believer forced to confront the corruption at the heart of my faith.

I have undertaken this work of history, memory, conscience and identity – the deconstruction of a self – prompted by a crisis of faith that I see now has been long in coming. Yet a forthright grappling with one's inner turmoil can itself be an opening to transcendence. This book, therefore, also aims to be the tribute that the excavation of one person's quite particular consciousness pays to the experience that may be shared with others – an experience of the unseen world of faith and imagination that lies just beyond the ever-receding horizon of our longing.

I was inextricably woven into my mother's unarticulated sense of that world beyond: she made me an intimate sharer of her faith. Her unuttered prayers were answered when, as a young man, I entered the religious life of the Church and, after seven years in seminary, was ordained a priest. My priesthood, though, was caught up in the political and cultural typhoon of the 1960s and 1970s, and lasted only five years. From 1969 until 1974, I was the Catholic chaplain at Boston University, presiding over a modest bowfront student centre called Newman House, which aimed to be a tranquil oasis for young people caught in the crush of a frightening time. Celebrating Mass was the crux of what I did each day. I was not that much older than the BU students I served, but they loved the calming still point of the Eucharist, and so did I.

Ironically, the priestly ministry, in sponsoring my civil rights work and prompting my enlistment in the peace movement during the Vietnam War, made me a radical. Soon enough, I was in conflict with the conservative Catholic hierarchy, being reprimanded over minor matters (not wearing the Roman collar) and major ones (what, actually, had I said in my sermon?). It only gradually dawned on me that there was a tragic flaw deep inside

the institution to which I'd given my life, and that it had to do with the clerical culture I was part of – a decadence in the priesthood itself. *My priesthood.*

The nub at the centre of the notorious Roman Catholic sexual predation is an idolatry of the priest and of the priestly status that goes by the name of 'clericalism'. It is a malignity marked by a cult of secrecy; a high-flown theological misogyny that demeans all women and fosters an unbridled male supremacy; a suppression of normal erotic desire; a hierarchical domination of priest over laypeople; and a basing of that power on threats of a doom-laden afterlife, drawn from a misreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The inbuilt rank-obsession of the clerical system also thwarts the virtues of otherwise good priests, and perverts the message of selfless love that the Church was established to proclaim.

Generating a neurotic pathology in many priests, and prompting many others to protect themselves and the institution instead of victims, clericalism, I will argue in this book, is both the root cause and the corrupter, the ongoing enabler of the present Catholic catastrophe. The priesthood itself is warped. Against such a sweeping indictment, defenders of the Church as it is insist that a distinction must be drawn between the still admirable priesthood and the degeneracy of those clergymen who have betrayed it.² But by now it is clear that the entire milieu within which priests live and exercise ministry – its theology, aesthetic, lifestyle, heritage, values and structure of authority – is the issue.

Without remotely understanding its bite, I saw such clericalism up close. Indeed, I lived it. In the confessions I heard in the early seventies, young people were racked with guilt not because of authentic sinfulness, but by a Church-imposed sexual repressiveness I was expected to affirm. Just by celebrating those cosy Masses, I was also helping to enforce an unjust exclusion of women from

equal membership in the Church. I valued the community life I shared with my fellow priests, but I sensed the crippling loneliness that, for many, was the flip side of the priestly fraternity, the insubstantial cronyism that the priesthood offered.

In protest marches meant to question authority, it was my clerical status that gave my participation weight, and on the streets it was my fellow demonstrators who wanted me to be there because of my Roman collar. Yet in encounters with my Church superiors, I saw that submission was the virtue that counted most. My surrendering of my will was, theoretically, to God. In practice, it was only to the boss.

I realised that the price of my idealised power as a priest was the actual powerlessness of an existential humiliation that went with my place: I was low, low down on the clerical pyramid that privileged the higher-ups – Monsignors, bishops, archbishops, cardinals and the pope. That sacred hierarchy established a pattern of kissing up and kicking down, with every priest, including me, licensed to regard the disempowered laity – especially women – with paternal condescension. Clericalism *is* the pyramid, a structure of domination that must be protected at all costs by everyone occupying a niche in it – which is why bishops and most priests so routinely shield the clerical abusers instead of their victims. The clerical pyramid is the predator's safe house; the Church's sanctuary is *his* sanctuary.

That I soon enough quit the priesthood is part of what follows, but if I had stayed a priest, I see now, my faith, such as it was, would have been debased by the very same clericalism that drove me away.

But this is far more than one man's story, for Roman Catholicism has broken faith not only with its members but with the world. The ethical collapse of the Church must be seen in the context of

the twenty-first century's undermining of social cohesion everywhere: the hollowing out of journalism; the evaporation of civic movements; the broad discrediting of political authority; the unsettling of traditional norms of meaning before the onslaught of digital media, screen technologies and artificial intelligence. Stressed by manifestations of white supremacy, predatory capitalism, nationalist populism and mass migration, liberal democracy itself, so apparently ascendant at the end of the twentieth century, is undergoing a crisis of confidence. As if such cultural traumas were not enough, environmental degradation and a reignited nuclear arms race have brought the prospect of human self-extinction out of the realm of science fiction and into the province of the possible. The human condition itself is undergoing transformations that no one understands, much less controls.

All of this was brought shockingly to the fore by the coronavirus pandemic that swept the world in 2020, just as I was finishing the writing of this book. The criminally inadequate responses to Covid-19 of many governments, especially the United States, not only led to the unnecessary deaths of tens of thousands, but also showed how essential human norms had already been betrayed.

The Catholic Church's upheaval is part of this large human problem, but the Church has made things worse for the world community with its twenty-first-century disqualification as a major centre of moral value – what it had been, despite its failings, for two millennia.

The Catholic Church was the soul of Christendom, and that positive legacy, too, was on display during the coronavirus pandemic. Something precious could be seen in the timeless figure of Pope Francis standing in the rain alone in the deserted St Peter's Square, an icon of suffering that spoke to and for the world.³

Images of Italy's empty churches during the lockdown epitomised a global sense of loss. Ironically, that loss itself hinted at the way an unnamed legacy of Roman Catholicism was still sacred to the broad culture, even if that culture could not normally perceive it. Why should such images – the pope alone in the rain, the vast basilicas vacant – have registered so widely during the crushing health crisis? Perhaps because Christendom was an unacknowledged source of the secular humanism that replaced it, and the bequeathals of Christendom remain a buried touchstone of worth, even for a post-religious society. That such a bastion of the common good had been breached by the dereliction of priests suggests that the stakes in the Catholic sexual abuse catastrophe are enormous, not just for the faithful but for everyone.

But recognitions tied to the scale of suffering caused by the pandemic, itself a transcendent challenge to meaning, made the self-defilement of Catholicism in this era seem worse. The grief that many Catholics feel for their ethically wounded Church has merged with grief for the wounds of the very planet. How does belief stand up to such distress? This book tracks one man's experience of that trouble – in my religion, my nation, my era and my life. This is a journey from broken faith to chosen hope.

BEFORE ANY OF that, though, there were, yes, those 'great and simple images' Camus wrote about, early images in the presence of which my heart first opened. What drew me to God was my mother's love and her religious devotedness: her respect for the monastery, Our Lady's rose, Our Lady's beads, the monk with his vows, the portico, the Church. *Those* images.

But as years passed, and the sepia tones of those early religious encounters were washed by experiences of the real world, I began

to sense the rough dimensions – struggle, disappointment, grief – that shot through the actual lives of the Irish who'd come to America, the people among whom I grew up, including Mom. There was far more to their devotion – to her devotion – than mere piety. Eventually, I learnt of my mother's actual experience: how her Irish-born father carried the post-traumatic weight of the Great Hunger, the mid-nineteenth-century Irish Potato Famine, which drove him and millions of others from Ireland and home; how he had been broken by life in America, becoming a drunk who abandoned his family and disappeared – a story so common that there was a name for it, 'Irish divorce'. Without her father to support the family, my mother quit school at thirteen or fourteen to go to work, a precocious breadwinner. To land a job at the phone company, her reliable, if substitute, father figure – the priest at her parish – had given her permission to lie about her age, a lesson in the ethics of what mattered most.

With rescue like that behind her, why shouldn't the Church, centred on the priest, have been the indestructible bedrock of her identity? The Church was the ground of her survival and of her strength, an experience she had in common with everyone she loved. In the way her faith underwrote her lifelong sense of self-worth, she was Irish to the bone. So, even in America, my mother's love for the ould sod was absolute, and I inherited it. And that's why this reckoning with the Church, and with myself, begins in Ireland. It was once unthinkable that I could ever feel relief that my mother is no longer alive. But then came the Ryan Report.

My historical and personal journey begins there, but – because of all that report betokened – it turns now on a question I cannot avoid: *What if the beating pulse of those first 'great and simple images' of myself and of my life was a lie?*