The Church, the Draft Board, and Me

A Memoir by George Amoss Jr.
Preface

“The Church, the Draft Board, and Me” recounts my conflicts with the Catholic Church, whose ethics were called into question by the war in Vietnam, and the U.S. Selective Service System, which refused to honor my conscientious objection to participation in war. In telling that story, it sketches my evolution from youthful candidate for the Catholic priesthood to adult a-theistic Quaker who still asserts that “God is love.” A postscript describes my path to membership in the Religious Society of Friends.

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Introduction: “Make love, not war”

In 1968, the war in Vietnam was raising acute questions of conscience for me. As a second-year undergrad, I was exempt from conscription, but I knew that I could eventually be drafted and ordered to kill. My friends at our fledgling community college were also struggling with the morality of war. Disturbed by what we were learning about the war through the media, we wanted to explore different perspectives on the ethics of violence.

An opportunity for that arose when the literary magazine staff, on which I served, was asked to suggest a speaker for the college. Unanimously, we chose the controversial poet and “peacenik” Allen Ginsberg. We were happily surprised when our suggestion was accepted, and we were delighted when Ginsberg agreed to come.

Early in March of 1969, a weathered Volkswagen bus brought Ginsberg and his lover, Peter Orlovsky, to our little campus. Ginsberg would spend many hours speaking with students, formally and informally, about freedom, tolerance, and peace. During a luncheon with the magazine staff, he encouraged us to write honestly and fearlessly. I was impressed not only by his words but also by the consistency of his demeanor with those words. Throughout the visit, his compassion and courage were evident — as was his seemingly casual use of profanity. One interaction between Ginsberg and a student has remained especially clear in my memory.

Many students at the college were vocal critics of the war, but there was one young man, already signed up for post-college service in the Marine Corps, who spoke forcefully in favor of it. Some of us called him “Gung-ho Eric.” Ginsberg was conversing with a group of us when Eric confronted him. “You say we shouldn’t be fighting the Communists in Vietnam?” he asked, the challenge obvious in his posture and tone. Ginsberg answered calmly: “That’s right.” “Well then,” replied Eric, “what do you suggest we do with all those Vietcong over there?” With a seemingly dismissive shrug, Ginsberg said, “Fuck ’em.” Eric’s eyes narrowed. “Mister,” he said, “you have a foul mouth.” “Which is foul,” Ginsberg asked softly, “to fuck ’em or to kill ’em?” Eric walked away, shaking his head.
“Which is foul?” The Roman Catholic Church had shaped my conscience to believe that nonmarital sex was evil, war was righteous, and morality was about personal salvation from hell. But when Ginsberg stated the issue starkly and provocatively, I had already been re-evaluating those beliefs for some time. In light of the question of war, Catholic morality was revealed as a house divided. The same Church that blessed war also taught that love was not only God’s greatest commandment but also his greatest gift, the infusion of his own nature into the soul. My heart and mind balked at the prospect of injuring or killing others whom the government had declared enemies: how could that be squared with “love your enemies; do good to those who hate you”?

The re-evaluation was soul-wrenching. To question the Church’s infallibility was to open a door through which moral and social anarchy might enter. For the Church taught that, while it alone had the power to define doctrine and morality, worldly authorities must be obeyed unless the Church determined they were violating divine law. For a Catholic, political and social power rested on the Church’s God-given authority. If that authority were to fall, then all other authority could fall with it. The legitimacy of all “the powers that be” was under impeachment.

To find myself in conscientious disagreement on the morality of war would break my relationships with church, state, culture, and family. But the critical process, once begun, could not be stopped. Simply to have acknowledged the possibility of dissent was already to have permitted the deconstruction of my Catholic identity. The war made the crucible inevitable.

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1. “Catholic philosophy … concedes to the State the full natural right of war, whether defensive, as in case of another’s attack in force upon it; offensive (more properly, coercive), where it finds it necessary to take the initiative in the application of force; or punitive, in the infliction of punishment for evil done against itself or, in some determined cases, against others. International law views the punitive right of war with suspicion; but, though it is open to wide abuse, its original existence under the natural law cannot well be disputed.” — *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913): this was the officially-approved reference compendium known by my teachers. The first version of a post-world-war, post-Vatican II replacement work, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, was not published until 1967. (For the entire article, see http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15546c.htm.)
The Church, Part 1: The Call

Until the possibility of conscription for war illuminated the Church’s contradictions, I had been an unquestioning and pious Catholic. During my freshman and senior years of high school, I was a candidate for the priesthood in boarding seminaries, and I came close to trying it a third time after high school. My motivation for those repeated attempts can be traced to experiences I had during grade school.

My parents were sober and industrious, but we were not financially well-off. During my eight years in Catholic grade school, we lived in a working-class area characterized by ignorance, intolerance, and occasional violence. Education beyond high school was seen as neither attainable nor necessary: a man who got a secure job in a unionized craft was considered to have done very well. From my perspective, the future looked bleak: I wanted as much education as I could get, and I didn’t want to pass most of my life performing rote tasks inside a noisy factory. One day, I stood in the school athletic field across the street from our home, looked around slowly at the tract houses that enclosed it, and vowed aloud, “This will not be my life.” I would find a way out.

I didn’t have far to look. The Catholic Church offered to lift a boy out of the blue-collar blind alley and into the most respected and important position a man could hold: the priesthood. Like many other devout Catholic boys, I was already considering that offer by the sixth grade. Then, in the latter years of grade school, I was befriended by two popular priests at our parish. Each of them singled me out for conversation, arranged for me to serve him as an altar boy, took me for ice cream and visits to churches in his impressive new car, and gave me gifts. They even addressed me by name in the confessional booth, as if in recognition that one day I should be sitting on the priest’s side of the screen.

If that looks today like grooming for abuse, that’s because, for one of them at least, it was. But that priest, Robert Hopkins, left me alone after the rectory housekeeper blocked his attempt to take me to his bedroom. We had just returned from an afternoon outing, and Father Hopkins said that he wanted to show me something in his room. He looked surprised when the housekeeper called to him from a doorway and asked where we were going. When he replied, “Upstairs,” she asked to speak with him privately. He was gone briefly, and he returned visibly angry. “She says we can’t go up there,” he said. “Go home.” I guessed that she must not have cleaned his room yet, but I was disappointed by his anger at her and hurt by his curt dismissal. I would attribute his subsequent coldness to embarrassment over that display of anger. Many years later, Hopkins would admit that he had sexually abused boys for decades. I then understood that I would have been among his victims had that brave woman not intervened.
The other priest, whose sermons occasionally included condemnation of women who wore shorts and halter tops across the street from the rectory, was soon transferred. One of the last times I saw him was when he gave us eighth-grade boys “the talk,” during which he told us that sex, which we must not experience until marriage, was effective at relieving tension. I would speak with him once after grade school, visiting him at the rectory after we moved into his new parish in 1965. During that brief audience, he would offer not even the hint of a smile for his former favorite. And he would say very little, other than to ask, “Do you have any sexual problems?” — and when I said that I didn’t, to dismiss me with, “I’m very busy.” Some time later, I would hear that he’d been sent somewhere for health treatment before being transferred again.

At the time of the grooming, I was a naïve boy who revered priests as alter Christi, “other Christs.” I interpreted the priests’ attentions to mean that two holy men saw something special in me: a calling from God, a “vocation,” to the priesthood. My desire to become a priest seemed confirmed as divinely inspired.

Wanting to learn more about priestly life, I consulted the classic recruiting digest, *The Guidepost: Religious Vocation Manual for Young Men*. I found that there are two basic forms of the Catholic priesthood: the *religious* and the *secular* (also called *diocesan*). I would need to choose between them. And if I opted for the religious priesthood, I would then need to choose a particular type of religious life from the variety catalogued in *The Guidepost*, which listed more than 130 distinct groups.

One might assume that all priests should be called “religious,” but in the Catholic Church the term “religious,” often used as a noun, refers to people who have professed vows (such as poverty, chastity, and obedience) as members of an officially approved religious institute. Ideally, religious priests live in communities called monasteries or friaries. Often, the communities are mixed: although all members make the vows, some are not, nor will ever become, priests. In theory, all members of such communities are brothers to each other. However (and despite Jesus’ explicit proscription: see Mt. 23:9), priests receive the title of “Father,” while members who are not priests are addressed as “Brother.”

The lives of religious are structured according to written rules, with set times for prayer, work, meals, and sleep. In addition to its rule of life, each institute has its traditions, spiritual practices, and written constitution. Those things determine the relationship of a religious to the outside world — in broad terms, where his or her institute falls on the spectrum between “active” and “contemplative” lifestyles. Active institutes require extensive interaction with the wider world; contemplative institutes allow little or none. An example of the former is the Dominican Order,

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3. The requirements of communal life, along with some of the rigid distinctions between priests and brothers, seem to have been relaxed in many institutes after the Second Vatican Council.
whose friars preach and teach (and were major figures in the Inquisition); perhaps the most extreme example of the latter is the Carthusian Order, whose monks remain cloistered (enclosed within the monastery), praying together periodically but spending much of their time, and even taking meals, alone in their cells (private living spaces). Some institutes attempt to blend the two elements.

My primary exposure to institutional religious life was through the nuns, members of the active institute called the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who taught us in grade school. When I served as altar boy in their convent, I thought that it must be lovely to live in such an orderly, peaceful, and sacred atmosphere. I also became acquainted with life in a men’s religious institute by participating in retreats at a Capuchin Franciscan seminary, a boarding school for candidates for the priesthood, in western Pennsylvania. (“Capuchin” refers to the long hood, or capuche, worn by members of that branch of the Franciscan Order.) The atmosphere there was like that of the convent, although on a much larger scale. In addition, I read books on monastic life by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, pored over The Guidepost, and corresponded with vocation directors (recruiters) for a number of religious institutes.

I didn’t need to research the other type of priestly life: the priests I’d known at my parish were all members of the secular clergy, so I was already familiar with that. Secular priests are said to live “in the world but not of it.” They make promises of chastity and obedience to the bishop. They do not, however, promise poverty; they may have possessions and even wealth. They may share a residence with other priests, but they are not bound by a rule of life; their days can be relatively unstructured.

Weighing those two basic options, I decided to join a religious institute. The nuns and the Capuchin friars had seemed at peace; our parish priests, however, seemed somewhat unsettled. There was an aura of loneliness and even ennui about those men; somehow, priesthood alone seemed not to fulfill them. That, I think, is what led me to seek a regulated community: I wanted the fraternal support, structured life, and routine asceticism that such a community would provide.

Accordingly, at the age of thirteen I began high school at the Carmelite Junior Seminary in Hamilton, Massachusetts, which I had selected from The Guidepost. The Carmelite Order’s Rule of Life offered a combination of prayer and active ministry. “Each one must remain in his cell or near it,” it states, “meditating day and night on the law of the Lord and keeping vigil in prayer, unless occupied with other lawful duties.” That seemed to prioritize contemplation while providing for active ministry as well. It was, I thought, an ideal way of life.

4. After Francis of Assisi stepped down from leadership, his followers, who would be known as Franciscans, became factional. Of the various groups they split into over time, four major orders were eventually allowed by Rome. They are the Order of Friars Minor (known simply as Franciscans), the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (said to be so named because they lived in convents, or friaries, instead of in hermitages or, as had the original brothers, anywhere someone provided shelter), the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin (named, as noted above, for the long hood they wear), and various institutes of the Third Order Regular of St. Francis (originally, members of Francis’s secular [lay], or third, order who were permitted to take vows).
And in many ways, the Carmelite seminary was an ideal place for me. The friars in Hamilton encouraged art, music, and the life of the intellect — within, of course, strict limits. (For example, I found a book of critical Bible analysis in our library, but the friar in charge of study hall took it from me, saying, “You’re too young for this. I’ll return it for you.”) Our freshman prefect, Father John Vianney Kelly, was a kind and generous man who understood and cared about young people. He took us to art galleries, helped us learn to draw and paint, and encouraged my interest in classical music. (I have written more about him in “For Father John.”) And the consistent daily schedule, with regular times for study, physical exercise, and prayer, fostered my development.

But it was a lonely place, too. Hamilton was more than 400 miles distant from my home, and I was homesick. Further, although I was one of more than thirty freshmen living together, I had no close friendships. That was part of the program: “particular friendships” between classmates were not permitted; as a result, peer relationships were superficial.

In addition, association with students outside of one’s class year was forbidden. For a few weeks, I enjoyed conversations with a senior named Ray, who shared with me inspirational letters he had received from Father Dominic, a Carmelite friar in Washington, D.C. (Dominic, who had written of having a “manly love” for Christ, would later lose his position at a boys’ high school after admitting to sexual relationships with minors, some of them his students.) But those conversations stopped suddenly and inexplicably, leaving me to wonder what I’d done to cause Ray to avoid me. Eventually, he slipped around a corner and, glancing in fear over his shoulder, told me that he’d been ordered to stay away from me. He risked speaking to me that one last time because he wanted me to know what had happened. (During the ensuing summer vacation, Ray and I corresponded by mail. I later learned that he left the Carmelites after a year of college, and that his subsequent request for readmission was turned down. That was the last news I had of him.)

Later in the year, I was befriended by a young nun, a member of a Carmelite community that had come from Italy to work in the seminary’s kitchen. She would teach me basic Italian phrases while I helped her wash windows in the refectory. That friendship, too, lasted only weeks. One day when I arrived to help her, she told me apologetically that she’d been forbidden to spend time with me. My disappointment must have been obvious; I was close to tears. Although I was unable to acknowledge the implications, our brief friendship had assuaged a deep need for feminine companionship.

Reflexively, I turned to the Blessed Mother, reciting the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary during my free time each day. Often, I would kneel before a white stone statue of Mary on the
grounds and talk to her. I found some comfort in the relationship I imagined I had with Mary through those rituals. It didn’t occur to me that anyone would notice my extra devotions, but someone did: after a while I was told that, while prayer was important, my superiors wanted my free time used for recreation or study instead. When I knelt before the statue to tell Mary that I couldn’t visit regularly, I saw as if for the first time that the statue’s eyes were unrealistically carved. Mary was no longer there for me.

As the year went on, I tried to make a virtue of loneliness in other ways, even writing a series of short stories about a hermit. Tellingly, however, my hermit had extensive contact with other people, including women, in every episode — not unlike, I would later learn, my literary mentor Thomas Merton, who lived in a hermitage but corresponded with hundreds and had many visitors.5

Merton’s books, which I had continued to read while in Hamilton, also factored into my unhappiness there. Despite the promise of the Carmelite Rule, in practice it was “other lawful duties,” rather than meditation and prayer, that occupied much of the friars’ time. It seemed to me that the Carmelites fell short of the contemplative ideal extolled by Merton, a seemingly heroic life to which I wanted to believe God was calling me. During my first summer vacation from Hamilton, after Ray and I had talked it over by mail, I decided to postpone seminary while my discernment process continued. I needed a respite from the loneliness of seminary life. I hoped that a few more years’ maturity would make that life easier.

My parents enrolled me at Archbishop Curley High School, a Baltimore day school operated by Conventual Franciscan friars. At the time, I expected that I would graduate from Curley, but I spent only my sophomore and junior years there. It was during those years, as the more obvious manifestations of puberty appeared, that symptoms of chronic depression began to emerge.

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5. Michael Mott relates a revealing anecdote involving Merton, his abbot, and a psychoanalyst who knew Merton. “[The psychoanalyst] Zilboorg went on repeating in a level voice what he had said before about [Merton’s] hermitage idea being pathological: ‘You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying HERMIT’ … . [Merton] sat with tears streaming down his face … .” (Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Houghton Mifflin, 1986, p. 297.) Despite that, the abbot eventually permitted Merton to live apart from the community in a hermitage about a mile from the main monastery buildings. Within a year, Merton, then 53, would have an affair with a 19 year old woman.
The Church, Part 2: “The Habit Covers a Multitude of Sins”

I trace the emergence of depression to a day in my third year of high school when my confessor Father Alexander — who was weak in zoology as well as pastoral theology, I would later understand — withheld God’s forgiveness from me. Although I had followed his instructions to participate in Mass and confession more often, I had continued to “abuse” myself. “That’s disgusting,” he said in the confessional. “Not even the animals do that. You come in here every week and confess the same mortal sin. [Mortal means soul-damning; I’ll discuss that further in a sidebar.] Absolution requires a sincere intention to reform: clearly, you have no such intention. I will not absolve you until you’ve stopped committing that sin, and I forbid you to seek absolution from another priest.”

The result of that abortive confession was relentless self-loathing and fear of hell as I amassed mortal sins. Despite the shame and dread, I was unable to stop “committing that sin.” Further, my transgressions now included weekly sacrilege: not wanting my parents to know of my sinfulness, I continued to receive communion when they took me to Mass on Sundays; each reception while unshriven was yet another grievous sin. God had called me to his holy priesthood, and this was my response? During that time, I wrote a short poem to express my state of mind. I called it “Prison of Vice.”

How long must I bear
This filthy place?
Must I hide here forever?
There must be sunlight somewhere,
And fresh air; I know it.
But will I ever
Find the courage to break free,
To regain my lost humanity
And get out of this loathsome place?

It is surely significant that I can type those lines from memory over half a century later. Back then, I couldn’t see that “Prison of Catholicism” would have been a better title, that I was bound by what William Blake called “mind-forg’d manacles.” The Church had convinced me that the sickness was in my own failure to love and obey God.

6. “The habit covers a multitude of sins”: an insider joke, a pun on 1 Peter 4:8b (“love covers a multitude of sins”), that I heard from a Franciscan friar at dinner. He was patting his belly at the time.

7. William Blake, “London.” In 1948, Allen Ginsberg had a vision or “auditory illumination” of William Blake reading his poems; the experience shaped Ginsberg’s life as a poet. After hearing him speak about that, I developed a keen interest in Blake’s work. (Blake was the originator of a phrase that would become prominent in the hippie culture: “the doors of perception.” See Note 18.)
After months of despair, I revealed my situation to a young teacher whom I felt I could trust. I’ll call him Father X. “Ninety-eight out of a hundred males do that,” Father X said of the behavior I’d thought depraved, “and the other two are liars.” I was stunned.

Saying that Father Alexander must have misunderstood a settled matter of moral theology, Father X then explained the doctrine of “habitual sin.” When a person repeats a grievously sinful act so often that it becomes a fixed habit, he told me, that person is no longer able to consent fully to that act and is, therefore, no longer committing mortal sin. (The person may be committing “venial” sin, but such minor offenses do not damn the soul to hell and need not be confessed.) I just needed to confess the sin of allowing the habit to develop, he said; ongoing instances of a habitual act were not seriously sinful, and they were probably not sinful at all if the person regretted the habit, as I did. I formally confessed, and he absolved me. No longer damned and no longer doomed to repeatedly re-damn myself, I felt weightless with relief.

Although the doctrine of habitual sin was wondrously convenient, it was well-established in Catholic moral teaching. Here is an excerpt from a 1956 article in a Catholic journal of theology:

Moral theology admits that the habit of sin, considered in itself, may be and often is completely sinless. Even when a habit of sin has been contracted deliberately and sinfully, once the habitual sinner repents of the sin involved in contracting the habit and sincerely resolves to use efficacious means to correct the habit, the habit itself is considered involuntary and sinless. This means that, hereafter, and as long as he remains in the same good dispositions, the individual acts placed under the influence of habit are no longer attributed to him in causa. This means, further, that the formal guilt of any future individual acts, placed under the influence of the acquired habit, must be judged from the individual acts themselves, i.e., according to the amount of effective control he was able to exercise in each instance, considering all the internal and external circumstances of the act.

This is a commonplace of moral theology. It is emphasized here because when the priest meets a habitual sinner, either in or out of the confessional, he is dealing generally with a sinner who sincerely repents of his acquired habit and is willing to use the necessary means to correct his habit of sin.8

It may have been a commonplace among moral theologians, but I suspect that most Catholics would be as surprised to learn of it as I was. It may be too dangerous a doctrine to be widely propagated.

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Many years later, when my depression began to feel life-threatening, I consulted a psychologist. When I told him about the notion of “completely sinless” habitual sin, he said, “That can’t be right: that would be crazy! I have Catholic friends, and they wouldn’t believe crazy things.” (“But,” I thought, “you wouldn’t call ‘crazy’ the well-known doctrine that a child’s self-pleasuring merits the same eternal punishment as murder?”) I gave him a copy of a book I’d found that made reference to the concept. “It may be crazy,” I said as he read the relevant paragraph, “but it is what they teach.” He nodded, but it was evident that he couldn’t make sense of it. I was not surprised at his response: by then, I was well aware of the fundamental absurdity of the Catholic moral system.

At the time of my confession to Father X, however, the Catholic worldview, its madness cloaked by its universal acceptance in my milieu, was still my normal, unquestioned reality. Disinterested analysis was not a possibility for me then; I would not begin to think critically about religion and ethics until I stepped outside of Catholic culture after high school. Only then would I realize that the doctrine of habitual sin might harbor more than relief for adolescents possessed by hormonal demons. Even so, I did not suspect the depths of depravity that it could rationalize. It was still inconceivable that priests would rape children.

Almost fifty years after my confession to him, Father X was posthumously accused of molesting boys at Archbishop Curley and elsewhere. By that time, the myth of priestly purity had been exploded by the abuse scandal. I saw then the darker possibilities of the habitual sin doctrine — and of that confession, which had taken place not through a screen in a confessional box but face to face in an otherwise empty classroom.

The doctrine could be used to assert not only that “habitual” child abuse would not be sinful, but also that the abuser should not be held responsible for his actions: “Even when a habit of sin has been contracted deliberately, once the habitual sinner repents of the sin involved in contracting the habit and sincerely resolves to use efficacious means to correct the habit, acts placed under the influence of the habit are no longer attributed to him in causa.” That principle, which contrasts with secular law, may help explain the difference between the ecclesiastical and the public and legal perspectives on clerical child abuse. Given his daily prayer and sacrament, a habitually abusive priest — and his bishop or religious superior — could believe that he is already using “efficacious means to correct the habit” and is not, therefore, morally responsible for his raping of children. Perhaps it could even encourage priests — such as Father X, whose tally of male masturbators had not excluded them — to cultivate habits of sin.

Considering the accusations, I must acknowledge the possibility that Father X, seeing that I trusted him with my “sexual problems,” hoped to groom me. If he did, however, he sabotaged himself. His casuistry and absolution made it not only possible but seemingly imperative that I go to seminary, instead of returning to Curley and him, for my senior year. For the time being no longer hopelessly damned, I knew that I must “use the necessary means,” take every available measure, to overcome the vice. To fail to do so would be to fall again into mortal sin. For someone called to the priesthood, seminary life was one such means. Hoping in the curative
powers of public commitment, fraternal support, and intense religious practice — that a friar’s habit would help me overcome a bad habit — I felt that I must enroll in a seminary without delay.

9. Belief in the magical efficacy of the religious habit was instilled in me first of all by nuns at my grade school. It was reinforced and extended by the Carmelite Order, which claimed that in 1251 the Virgin Mary, while holding the scapular of St. Simon Stock’s habit, had said, “Whoever dies wearing this shall not suffer eternal fire”: truly, as The Guidepost would gush, an “astonishing promise of eternal salvation.” The word “habit” is from the Latin habitus, which refers not only to outward appearance but also to inward condition. A Carmelite prayer for investiture of the habit includes this: “May the Lord clothe you a new man, who is created according to God in justice and holiness of truth.” That recalls Paul’s exhortation in Romans 13:14: “Instead, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.”
Sidebar 1: The Absurdity of Catholic Morality

The house of cards that is the Catholic moral system was my childhood home. That system has profoundly influenced the psychology of much of the Western world. And yet, for those who, unlike the White Queen, have outgrown the ability to believe six impossible things before breakfast, it quickly collapses under critical analysis.

Sin: a Primer

Quoting Psalm 51, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that “Sin is an offense against God: ‘Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight.’” S1 The aggrieved party is *God*. Catholic morality is concerned primarily with the questions of which acts God finds offensive and which type of punishment — temporary or everlasting — he attaches to each offense. From that perspective, a sinner’s human victims are, literally, of no consequence. Further, many grievous sins, such as the desecration of a sacrament (as when I took communion while in a state of mortal sin) or the violation of a Church law, have no real victims.

Indeed, the archetypal sin is the disobedience of Adam and Eve, an act that would have had no victims had the offended God not chosen to impute it to the entire human race (and, inexplicably, to punish all creatures for the humans’ transgression). S2 Because of that imputation, the Church speaks of two categorically different types of sin. The first, a basic defect transmitted from Adam and Eve, is called original sin. Post-Eden, no one except Jesus, who was divine, and Mary his mother, who received a singular exemption called “immaculate conception,” is free of it. The rest of us are “conceived in sin,” S3 bearing the “stain” (Latin: *macula*) of original sin as part of our inheritance from “our first parents”: because they disobeyed God in the garden of Eden, we come into this world dirty and spiritually dead. S4 Only Christian baptism washes away that stain and imparts spiritual life to the soul; without a valid form of baptism, a soul cannot enter heaven. (The fate of the souls of unbaptized infants, being an insoluble problem in this system, remains undefined despite almost two millennia of speculation.)

The Church claims that through baptism “We are reborn from the state of slaves of sin into the freedom of the Sons of God.” S5 But it is evident that human nature is not changed by the

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S2. See Romans 5:12, 1 Cor. 15:21. Note also that in Eden animals ate plants, not each other.

S3. Psalm 51 (again), verse 5 — “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”


sacrament, and this is where the second type of sin comes in. Baptism notwithstanding, we will commit actual sin: acts (or refusals to act) that we commit willfully, despite knowing that they are forbidden by God. That is because, the Church asserts, we have also inherited concupiscence, the inclination to evil, as an essential characteristic of our “fallen” human nature — that nature which baptism into Christ fails, in real life, to remake. (Oddly, however, the sin of Adam and Eve was not caused by concupiscence, for their nature was not yet fallen.) It is virtually certain that a person will commit actual sin if he or she lives beyond the innocence of childhood — that is, ironically, into “the age of reason,” which is said to begin around one’s seventh year. Even after rebirth through baptism, we are natural sinners in need of supernatural help.

Fortunately, God provides that help through Holy Mother Church. Through her, God saves us from sin and its punishment in hell. She enlightens us about sin and rescues us from it, dispensing God's “grace” through rituals called sacraments, “the channels by which [Christ’s] saving merits are now conveyed to a sinful world.” As the “Minister of the Redemption of Christ,” the Church — the priesthood, really — supplies both strength for resisting our tendency to sin and sacramental absolution for our inevitable failures. The Church claims to be necessary because of sin; if her doctrine of sin is logically incoherent, therefore, the Church is invalidated.

Mortal Sin

As noted in our main narrative, some actual sins, called venial sins, do not have eternal consequences for the doer, but others condemn one’s soul to everlasting torment in hell. An actual sin that damns one’s soul, killing the spiritual life imparted by baptism and other sacraments, is called a mortal sin. The Baltimore Catechism, the standard manual for the teaching of doctrine in U.S. Catholic schools from 1885 until the time I graduated, says that “To make a mortal sin, three things are necessary: a grievous matter, sufficient reflection, and full consent of the will.” It continues: “‘Sufficient reflection’ means that we must know the thought, word or deed to be sinful at the time we are guilty of it; and ‘full consent of the will’ means that we must fully and wilfully yield to it.”

I’ll briefly examine each of those criteria, but first: a thought can damn a person to hell? So says the Church; but only, she adds, with “sufficient reflection and full consent of the will,” as if one could consider and consent to a thought before thinking it. Pondering that, I recall a traumatic experience from my grade school days. While walking home after sacramental confession one summer Saturday, I said to myself, “Your soul is clean now. Don’t think any bad thoughts, like of how fascinating women’s breasts are” — and then feared that I had just done so. At that age, I

S7. The term “Minister of the Redemption of Christ” is from Pope Paul VI’s Indulgentiarum Doctrina (Apostolic Constitution On Indulgences): see https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P6INDULG.HTM.
assumed that “lust” referred to thinking about the female body, which was an inherently pleasant experience, and I knew that Jesus himself had warned that “Whoever lusts after a woman in his heart has already committed adultery with her.” A pleasurable “impure thought” could be a mortal sin. (We had even been taught the theological term for it: “morose delectation.”) In panic, I ran the mile back to the church in order to make another confession, but I found it locked. It would be a dreadful week for me. I was even afraid to cross the street until I could confess on the following Saturday: we lived on a bus route, and nuns at school had often warned that if one were hit by a bus while in a state of mortal sin one would “go straight to hell.”

That inanity brings to mind the Church’s teaching on spontaneous nocturnal emissions of semen — “wet dreams.” We were instructed that, should we awaken during an emission, we must resolutely refuse to enjoy it; to consent to the pleasure would be to sin mortally. Luckily, I never had to attempt that impossibility. But when I was in grade school, one of my neighborhood friends would taunt a fellow who made a mistake by saying, “You could fuck up a wet dream.” Feeling that his ridicule could encourage his targets to damn themselves by consenting to non-marital sexual pleasure, I decided that he was an evil person whom I must avoid. I realize now that my continuing friendship might have mitigated some of the harshness of his family’s poverty, alcoholism, and abuse. But I was focused on saving my soul. And maybe I was also repressing the realization that yes, as a pious Catholic boy I was precisely a fool who would “fuck up a wet dream.”

Indoctrinating us as children to fear eternal torture for forbidden thoughts and involuntary bodily functions: every adult authority — priests, nuns and other teachers, parents, relatives — cooperated in that. Somehow, they couldn’t see that making Jesus into a terrifying punisher of such things does not comport with his “let the little children come to me,” or that it highlights the incoherence of the Church’s theology of sin — to which I now return.

In order to discuss the three criteria for mortal sin in more detail, we must first consider the concept of material sinfulness. Without the doer’s sufficient reflection and full consent of the will, says the Baltimore Catechism, a seriously evil thought, word, deed, or omission is materially but not actually sinful. That is, something that is objectively evil is done, but the doer is not morally responsible for it; indeed, he or she continues in God’s grace, retaining spiritual vitality and therefore remaining a good person. If the person is guilty at all, it is of venial sin, a relatively trivial imperfection that will be cleansed by “temporal punishment” in purgatory (which can be avoided through an indulgence) before the soul is admitted to heaven. That notion of material sinfulness leads to the paradox of a “habit of sin” that “is completely sinless” (my emphasis), which I explored in the previous section. The material or objective sinfulness of an act and the culpability of the actor are judged separately.

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The first criterion: a grievous matter

For an act to be a mortal sin, it must first of all be materially and grievously sinful. The right and ability to determine the moral nature of any act — that is, whether and how seriously an act in itself offends God — are claimed by the Church. But that claim is undermined by absurdities among the actual determinations.

Most egregiously, mortal sins run the gamut from the heinous to the victimless and the trivial. Such offenses as skipping Mass or eating meat on a “day of abstinence” earn the same punishment, eternal torture, as raping children or even murdering millions. (Arguably, that mindset of moral equivalence is a factor in the worldwide plague of child sex abuse, and its cover-up, by clerics. S12)

Further, specific sins can come and go. For example, usury, which originally meant charging any interest at all for a loan, was long said to be materially sinful, but later it was permitted and the word was redefined. Although the Holy Office of the Inquisition ruled that the original definition of usury as sin was infallible, their ruling was later ignored by the Church hierarchy, which itself makes money from interest. S13 Infallibly issued or not, the officially promulgated teaching was reversed over time. The issue of usury is historically fraught: when any form of usury was a sin, Christians were forbidden to lend at interest, but Jews, being damned anyway, were permitted, and even encouraged, to do so. As a consequence, some European Jewish families accumulated wealth that would be fiercely resented by Christians. We know what that helped lead to.

Another example is the use of torture and murder. Such measures are condemned today, but the Church made extensive use of them to enforce doctrinal conformity in the past. Indeed, they were justified by the two most influential Catholic theologians: St. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) argued for the physical punishment of heretics, and St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) defended their killing. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV’s “Ad exstirpanda” formally authorized the torture of suspected heretics. Subsequent popes reaffirmed the edict. S14 Official acceptance of religious terrorism continued into the modern era. The Catholic Encyclopedia, the standard reference compendium for much of the twentieth century, offered this rationalization of the methods employed by the Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada (d. 1498), who tortured

S12. In his book, In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy, Frédéric Martel alludes to a connection between that kind of thinking and the worldwide cover-up of clerical sex abuse: “If everything is mixed up together, sexual abuse and sin, paedophilia, homosexuality, prostitution, and the crime differs only in its extent and not in its nature, who is to be punished?” (2019, p. 250).


and burned thousands (and had all surviving Jews expelled from Spain): “Whether Torquemada’s ways of ferreting out and punishing heretics were justifiable is a matter that has to be decided not only by comparison with the penal standard of the fifteenth century, but also, and chiefly, by an inquiry into their necessity for the preservation of Christian Spain.”

Slavery is yet another. The Church’s position on slavery was long characterized by ambiguity and contradiction. Augustine and Aquinas accepted slavery as a consequence of the Fall. Some popes condemned it, while others owned slaves themselves. That ambiguity could characterize religious institutes as well. For example, Jesuits sometimes resisted the enslavement of indigenous people (as dramatized in the movie *The Mission*); however, in other circumstances they owned slaves and would eventually sell, rather than manumit, them. Proceeds from slave sales helped fund Fordham University and other Jesuit schools.

One may reasonably conclude, then, that some of the Church’s definitive teachings on major moral issues have been inconsistent, self-serving, and warped. But if the Church’s authority to define and classify sin is not absolutely trustworthy, then the first criterion is meaningless. And that subverts the second.

**The second criterion: sufficient reflection**

“‘Sufficient reflection’ means that we must know the thought, word or deed to be sinful at the time we are guilty of it.” I’ve already alluded to the impossibility of reflecting on a thought or involuntary bodily function before experiencing it. But is sufficient knowledge possible for any words and deeds? Given the failure of the first criterion, I argue that it is not. If we must “know the thought, word or deed to be sinful,” then certainty is necessary: it wouldn’t do for God to make us guess. But we’ve just seen that the moral judgments of the Church are not reliable. And without confidence in those judgments, it is not possible to *know* that a given act is evil in, as the nuns would say, the eyes of God. The invalidity of the Church’s claim to moral authority — that is, the absence of an objective, inerrant standard — defeats the second criterion as well as the first.

Before continuing to the third criterion, I can’t resist pointing out an amusing irony that would follow from acceptance of the first two. Without the Church, we would not learn that certain acts, which may seem quite innocent or justified to us, are materially sinful. And without that knowledge, we could not sin. Now as in Eden, therefore, ignorance is innocence, but with the knowledge of good and evil comes sin. (I am reminded of a dark joke about a dismayed aboriginal convert who had enjoyed an Edenic innocence until the missionary priest arrived. The punchline: “Why did you tell me?”) In other words, although it claims to be the body of Christ, the moralizing Church is, as it were, the institutional incarnation of the talking snake: the snake in shepherd’s clothing.

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The third criterion: full consent of the will

The remaining criterion fares no better than the others. “‘Full consent of the will’ means that we must fully and wilfully yield … .” In other words, if for some reason (e.g., somnolence, habit, intoxication, dementia, external coercion) one acts without being able to give complete conscious assent, then the act, whatever it may be, is not seriously sinful. The notion of habitual sin follows from that stipulation: if force of habit causes me to do something that is materially evil, then I have not given full consent of the will and am not guilty. As the “habitual sin” theologian stated, whether a specific materially sinful act is or is not actually sinful must be judged “according to the amount of effective control [one] was able to exercise in each instance, considering all the internal and external circumstances of the act” (emphasis added).

But there are myriad possible mitigating factors, many of which are not obvious. As aware as we now are of the power of the subconscious as well as of other forces both endogenous and exogenous — and, especially with regard to young people, the lengthy and fragile maturation process of the human brain, particularly of the executive function — we may reasonably doubt that “full consent of the will” is a meaningful construct. It is probably more accurate to picture consent as an asymptote: full consent can, perhaps, be approached but never attained.

Summing Up

Each of the three criteria is, then, null. But those nulls add up to untold suffering. Further, as critical examination exposes the fundamental absurdity of Catholic moral doctrine, it calls into question the legitimacy and efficacy of the hierarchy, priesthood, and sacramental apparatus. The edifice begins to collapse.
The Church, Part 3: Seminary Again

Since leaving the Carmelite Junior Seminary, I’d been in communication with the vocation director of the Discalced Carmelite Order, a more contemplative offshoot of the Carmelites. I’d become interested in the Discalced Carmelites when I read a book about their 16th-century cofounder, St. John of the Cross, while a seminarian in Hamilton. (Memorably, the book’s author referred to John as being, from the established Carmelite Order’s point of view, “recalcitrant.” The Carmelites imprisoned and frequently flogged the reformer for nine months.) The Discalced Carmelite Order seemed to take seriously the Carmelite Rule’s subordination of active ministerial work to community and prayer. It offered a meditative, prayerful lifestyle unencumbered by either the severe asceticism of fully monastic institutes or “the more active work of the Catholic priesthood (teaching, parishes, etc.),” as the order put it in *The Guidepost*. Their vocation director, Father Simon, had given me the best-selling recruiting book *Men in Sandals*, which idealized the friars’ life, as Merton’s books did that of monks, and included drawings such as one of a friar comparing his peaceful existence to that of a married man holding a squirming toddler while beset by whining girls, sparring boys, and nagging wife — an image that played to my fear of a working-class fate.

Father Simon had visited me at home several times. A wise director, he had discouraged me from entering the Discalced Carmelites’ minor seminary, and we had agreed that I would finish high school at Archbishop Curley before entering the order. It seemed the perfect plan — until my absolution by Father X created a sense of urgency. Soon after that, but without revealing my reasoning lest he find me unworthy, I told Father Simon that I no longer felt that I should wait. In response, he arranged for me to visit their minor seminary. He booked a seat on a flight to Boston for me; it was my first flight, and traveling alone made me feel like an adult. Meeting me at the airport, he took me first to the Discalced Carmelite house in Brookline, Massachusetts, an impressive place that had formerly been part of a wealthy person’s estate. The friars there seemed happy and at peace. After a meal made no less — and perhaps more — enjoyable by the human skull displayed on the table, Father Simon and I set off for the minor seminary in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

Unfortunately, the seminary was very different from the house in Brookline. While most of the friars in Peterborough lived in a historic mansion atop a hill, the few high school seminarians and their prefect lived in an old frame building below. Their residence was situated in a clearing amid

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10. The Discalced (unshod) Carmelite reform was initiated by Teresa of Avila. She was later joined by John of the Cross. Both were mystical writers who would be named “Doctor of the Church.” They stressed silent prayer, self-abnegation, and extreme detachment. Discalced Carmelite friars spend at least two hours each day in silent prayer/meditation.

trees and undergrowth, graced by none of the landscaping or gardening that I’d expected. “This will take some getting used to,” I thought.

During my first morning there, I met with the seminary prefect, whose disposition seemed to match his dismal surroundings. In his small office in the seminary residence, we spoke across an old wooden desk on which was a large ashtray piled with cigarette butts. The priest smoked constantly, lighting one from another. I don’t recall much of what we talked about; the powerful negative impression dominates my memory of the meeting. I do remember, however, that he mentioned the possibility of parish and missionary work, which *The Guidepost* had ruled out. Even in the Discalced Carmelite Order, I saw, the promise of a communal, contemplative lifestyle may not be honored. And how could a religious institute require routine asceticism — meatless meals, a thin mattress on a bed of boards — yet not only permit but facilitate the vice of chain-smoking? (Friars were vowed to poverty; cigarettes were supplied by the order.) Given my need for institutional support in resisting a vice, that was concerning.

I decided, however, that those concerns need not deter me. I could tell myself that an assignment was years ahead and that the odds of my getting a poor one were small. I could see the prefect’s chain-smoking as an anomaly, perhaps a concession to his relative isolation from the community of friars. And I could keep in mind that I’d be living in that dreary residence for less than a year. If I could maintain that attitude, I thought, I would still benefit from the fraternity and moral support of the seminary community.

But I soon learned that even that would not be available. In addition to being surrounded by bleakness and supervised by an uninspiring and scandalizing priest, I’d be living with young men who were not committed to the order and could not offer the companionship and encouragement I would need.

Although there was little to see other than partially-cleared woods, the prefect assigned two potential housemates to show me around. When we were safely out of his hearing, they asked if I had any cigarettes. Smoking was forbidden for them, but the place was so desolate, and their prefect’s smoking so conspicuous, that I couldn’t refuse their request. I fetched a pack from the bag in my room, and we went into the woods and smoked. Although they knew what was expected of them, the boys had little positive to say about the seminary. Neither of them planned to continue in the order after high school. Seeing the nicotine-hunger in their eyes, I gave them the pack as we walked back to the weathered residence. By then, I had decided that I could not live there.

Father Simon may have thought that the Peterborough visit would encourage me to stay at Curley until graduation, but he wasn’t aware of my belief that immediate return to seminary was a matter of spiritual life and death. Needing to find another order quickly, I turned to the Conventual Franciscans, to whom I was already known. The Franciscan orders were noted for their communal spirit. And Father Claude, a priest at Curley who had promised my parents that he’d “look out for” me after my transfer from the Carmelite Junior Seminary, had recently
introduced me to the Franciscans’ contemplative tradition. With that, I was able to convince myself that God was guiding me to become a Franciscan.

I was, therefore, disappointed when the Conventual vocation director said that the order would welcome me after graduation from Curley. Not to be defeated, I returned to *The Guidepost*. There I located a similar institute, not far from home, that would accept me into its minor seminary: the Third Order Regular of St. Francis of Penance, the “TOR Franciscans.” Penance, I thought, was just what I needed. And the TORs operated colleges, offering the appealing possibility of teaching on that level after ordination. Even the seminary’s geographical proximity seemed providential, not only because I’d been homesick in Massachusetts but also because my father had complained that his one trip there had ruined his car. God’s will seemed clear.

In August, I went off to the TOR seminary without informing Father Simon. He would appear at my family’s home a few weeks after I’d left, learn where I’d gone, and scold my parents: “This shows that he’s unstable. You shouldn’t have let him go.” Although Father Simon would himself leave the priesthood four years later, one of the thousands who did so in those times, he was right about me.

I was quite hopeful when I arrived at the seminary. But as the weeks and months passed, that hope was not fulfilled. In that small and close-knit community, my more secular perspective, developed during my two years at Curley, seemed intrusive; although housemates tried to include me, I felt like an outsider. Worse, I found that, despite the daily prayer and sacrament, seminary life was not entirely freeing me from my “habitual sin.” It was, however, reducing the frequency of the act, which, I feared, lessened the strength of habit; bizarrely, it would have been safer to leave the habit unchecked. Because we received communion every morning, I felt compelled to seek out a priest for confession after every failure, lest I risk desecrating the Eucharist again. My shame about that more or less secret fault closed the circle of isolation.

School wasn’t going well for me, either. The seminary was attached to a boarding institution called St. Francis Preparatory School.¹² I found the Prep’s atmosphere disheartening, not least because some staff members were sometimes verbally and even, rumor had it, physically abusive. (The natural atmosphere could be unpleasant, too: the beautiful campus was often bathed in toxic stink from the nearby paper mill, a phenomenon that would become for me a metaphor of religious life.) Much more discouraging, though, was my academic difficulty. Although I was doing well in my other courses, I had been placed, despite my pleas, in a math course that was more advanced than I was prepared for, and I was failing miserably. The teacher, who took my looks of frustration as commentary on his skills, was angry with me, once making

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¹² St. Francis Prep closed in 1989. The campus, in Spring Grove, Pennsylvania, was eventually sold to a right-wing Catholic organization.
me stand in class while he berated me: if I was so smart as to be a National Merit Scholar (a reporter and photographer had recently come from a Baltimore newspaper), then I must be intentionally refusing to accept his instruction. I would, he said, regret my insolence. When my midterm exam came back with a grade of 29%, I felt that the situation was hopeless.

Maybe, I thought, my academic and moral failures were God’s way of humbling me: maybe God wanted to break my pride in order to lead me into grace. He seemed to be showing me that I’d followed my own will, not his, in entering the TOR seminary. In any case, the stress, isolation, and depression were intolerable for me. In February, our prefect, Father Ronan — who, when I’d asked to be excused from watching a Bela Lugosi movie in order to study for that midterm exam, had said, “learning to follow orders is more important than getting good grades” — told me that I could not be taken out of the math class. Not long after that, I decided to withdraw from St. Francis.

When I told Father Ronan of my decision, he asked me to wait until he could speak with the vocation director. The director must have been anxious about the precipitous decline, reflecting a new trend across the U.S., in seminary enrollment: there were only 18 seminarians at St. Francis when I entered in 1966, compared to 39 just two years earlier.13 Not knowing about that decline, I was surprised when, a few days later, Father Ronan said that he’d been authorized to remove me from the math class after all. He also told me in confidence that a certain teacher, about whose verbal abuse of other seminarians I had complained, would not be returning in the fall, and he apologized that I could not be removed from the man’s classes. But it was too late: I had struggled through a disheartening semester and a painful decision process, and my course was set. He contacted my parents, and we chose a date for my departure. In the meantime, my parents arranged for my admission to the local public high school, their only option given that the final semester was underway.

Following the custom of the time, Father Ronan forbade me to tell any of my housemates that I would be leaving (an order that I discreetly disobeyed), and he arranged for my parents to come to the residence to pick me up one morning while the others were at breakfast in the main building. In the back seat of the car, with my unhappy parents in the front, I wept as we headed home. “Why are you crying?” my father asked irritably; “You chose to leave.” I couldn’t explain. My parents were quite disappointed. If I had stayed for only three more months, my mother pointed out, I would have graduated from a private prep school. Now, after they had sacrificed to give me a Catholic education, I would receive a diploma from the public school system. In my

13. Enrollment in U.S. seminaries peaked in 1963, the year I entered the Carmelite Junior Seminary. It held steady for another year, but then it began a precipitous decline that would culminate in the closing of almost all minor seminaries. The Carmelite seminary, where I had been one of more than a hundred students — and there was a significant overflow of students to a facility in Niagara Falls for the first two years of high school — closed in 1970. The campus was sold to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, which still occupies it. St. Francis Preparatory School yearbooks illustrate a rapid decline in the number of TOR seminarians there: the 1964 book pictures 39; the 1967 book shows 19 (including me, so the count was 18 at year end); the 1970 book, the last to list any seminarians at all, shows only six. For statistics and analysis of the trends, see (Fr.) Robert L. Anello’s 2011 dissertation, “Minor Setback or Major Disaster: The Rise and Demise of Minor Seminaries in the United States, 1958-1983” (published as a book in 2018), p. 20.
self-absorption, I had unwittingly broken a tacit contract with them. It was the beginning of a painful process of alienation.

Back in Baltimore, I found the public school to be much less exacting. I continued, however, to lack confidence: I took no math there and did not explore course material much beyond the requirements. Thinking that God might be directing me to a less academically-demanding form of religious life, I spent a few days in a Capuchin Franciscan monastery of non-ordained brothers, but I found their work unappealing. What was God trying to tell me?
The Church, Part 4: Taking Flight

While I was struggling to discern God’s will, an unexpected opportunity arose: I was invited to study for the priesthood with former Archbishop Curley classmates at St. Joseph Cupertino Conventual Franciscan novitiate (a monastery for the spiritual formation of friars). I had learned at Curley that God had enabled Joseph of Cupertino to become a priest despite academic difficulties. Joseph became so holy as a priest, it was said, that he would levitate in ecstasy during prayer.\(^\text{14}\) It seemed that God was making a final offer to help me to, so to speak, redeem myself — that he was directing me once again to the life he wanted for me. The Conventual vocation director assured me that further misadventures in calculus would not be required. Feeling much less academic stress, wearing the Franciscan habit, and preparing to make vows at the end of the novitiate year, I thought, I should attain chastity and fulfill God’s will at last. I agreed to an entry date in mid-August.

By the beginning of August, however, my horizons had broadened. I had a girlfriend, a job, and a motorbike, and I was finding that the world outside of Catholic culture, not to mention the cloister, was not all evil. In fact, I was feeling much less depressed in that world than I had in the Catholic institutions. Loneliness was a specter looming in seminary. Further, I had at last begun to acknowledge that, as my moral failure at St. Francis suggested, complete sexual repression may not be possible for me. And, reflecting on Father Ronan’s reasoning about the movie, I realized that the suppression of individuality and initiative required by religious institutes may also be impossible for me. (I remember a recurring nightmare from that time. I was in a large monastery, the ground floor of which was on fire. Pursued by monks, I ran to the upper floor, hoping for an escape route. As I climbed out a window, planning to drop to a low section of roof, a monk pulled me back in. Clearly, it was a dream of claustrophobia: cloister-fear.)

I soon saw that the deeper reasons for my previous withdrawals from seminary could no longer be denied: I had to admit that I was not cut out for celibacy, isolation, servitude, and intellectual constriction. I must have been misreading God’s will: my real problem had not been finding the right religious institute but accepting that I could not live in any. With that admission, the way forward was clear. I would not go to St. Joseph; I would commit myself to living in and of the world. My “instability” was ended, but at the cost of my life’s longtime direction.

When I met with the Conventual vocation director to withdraw from the class of novices, he went straight for that lack of direction. “If you don’t become a priest,” he asked, “what will you do with your life?” I replied that I didn’t know, that I had a part-time job as a cashier in a grocery

\(^\text{14}\) St. Joseph of Cupertino (d. 1663), who was said to have been seen levitating more than 70 times, is known as “the flying friar” and is the patron saint of aviators and students. A 1962 film about his life, *The Reluctant Saint* (starring Maximilian Schell and Ricardo Montalban), was shown to us during a vocation retreat while I was a student at Archbishop Curley High School. Watching it again many years later, I would find the story delightfully crazy — particularly the brief closing scene (starting at 1:42:42 in the linked video).
store and would see what developed. “That’s it?” he asked, his gaze intense. “Do you want to spend your life doing that kind of work?” Laughing nervously, I said that I didn’t and, somehow, wouldn’t. I would find another way out. He paused for a moment, looking down at his desk. When his eyes met mine again, I could see that he’d accepted the situation. “At least don’t waste your potential,” he said. “You know I reviewed your records. You should be going to college.”

I knew that he was right. But it was much too late to apply to a traditional school. Further, I didn’t see how I could afford college. I had almost no money of my own. I had received only “honor” from the National Merit Scholarship Program because, planning to be in seminary through my college years, I had declined any financial award. Nor could I hope for assistance from my father: he believed that “if you want something, you work for it.” (Later, he would refuse my request that he provide income information for a scholarship application.) Not long after my meeting with the vocation director, however, a friend advised me that a nearby school, the relatively new Essex Community College, was both affordable and still accepting new students. I enrolled there immediately. Knowing that I’d need to continue working, and not knowing what secular career to prepare for, I registered for the minimum full-time load of 12 credits.
The Draft, Part 1: The Question of War

Soon after starting at the community college, I registered for the draft. As a full-time student, I would receive a deferment (category 2-S), but I knew that I could be ordered into the military after graduation: anyone who had been deferred would remain subject to the Selective Service System until age 35. Having heard that enlistees served shorter terms and might have more choice of job assignment, and thinking it prudent to join a group that might not be sent to Vietnam, I submitted my name for the waiting lists of both the Army and Navy Reserve Corps. When one of them accepted me, I thought, I would leave college, complete my military service, and then return to school. I did all of that without moral struggle, accepting it as normal and necessary.

As time passed, however, and I became increasingly aware of the horrific realities of war and of the inconsistency of the Catholic stance toward it, I found myself uncertain as to whether I could participate in military service of any kind. When the reserve forces called me, I politely declined: the question of conscience having arisen, I couldn’t act until it had been resolved.

Throughout my education in Catholic schools, I had been taught to believe that God approves war — indeed, that by God’s will the one true church had become established in Rome, to spread from there across the world, through the emperor Constantine’s victory in battle. Now, confronted by war’s reality, I wrestled with that. I made an intensive study of the gospel books, read everything I could find about Christian pacifism and just war doctrine, discussed the issue with peers and professors, and struggled to resolve the conflict between what I was reading, thinking, and feeling and what I had been taught. My religious and moral investigations were interwoven with my college work. For example, my English research paper affirmatively answered the question “Did Jesus Christ Preach Total Pacifism?” Reluctantly approving that topic, the professor had warned that I was setting myself up to fail because “everyone knows that Jesus didn’t preach that”; the paper, however, earned an “A.” Here is a brief excerpt:

The pacifist sees love as the supreme command of Christ, a command that cannot be qualified by circumstances and that must be obeyed “no matter what happens” [the phrase was from a previously quoted passage in Tolstoy’s My Religion]. The words of Christ are simple and clear: do not resist evil men; always return good for evil; love your enemies.

Having determined that the Church had betrayed Jesus by embracing war, I found it necessary to reevaluate Catholicism as a whole. That effort was helped by courses in philosophy and sociology, which provided me with tools for thinking critically about the Church as an
ideological system and human institution. By the spring of 1969, about two years after I’d agreed to enter St. Joseph Novitiate, my investigations had led me to a definitive rejection of Catholicism and a firm commitment to pacifism in the spirit of Jesus. Christ, I had found, had not been a moral casuist: Jesus was no Jesuit, so to speak, nor anything like a Catholic. Whereas a theologian might argue that a draftee, being under coercion from both the government and its enemy (and trained in the “habit” of violence?), is not morally responsible for what he does as a soldier, Jesus directed our concern away from rules and rationalizations to real relationship with God and others. He plainly stated love’s imperative: do good to the enemy, even when he harms you; live in the perfect nature of the God who “makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5:45). In other words, instead of calculating what you can get away with under moral law, forget about saving your soul (see Mt. 16:25 and parallels) and allow divine love to motivate your behavior “no matter what happens.”

The disinterested, universalized love that Jesus had lived and preached had been relegated by the Church to the status of wishful thinking: it would be a reality in the next world, and it may be foretasted now within a monastery, but it was not possible in the world in which most of us live. In the “real” world, that kind of loving could get you killed. Well, yes, I thought, it got Jesus killed. But serving as a soldier, which could require you to kill others, could get you killed, too. And of course we all die sooner or later. The urgent question was not of death but of life: how does a human being best live whatever time he or she may have? Jesus called us to a life motivated by love. If such living is possible — and, looking at people like him, we know that it is — then it should be embraced by those who recognize its beauty and power. Neither church nor state, I determined, could legitimately forbid that.
The Draft, Part 2: Conscience and Conflict

Although I planned to continue with my college education and therefore expected further draft deferment, I would not delay filing as a conscientious objector: having reached my decision, I would act on it. When the draft board required an annual update form in June, I included with it a request for Selective Service System Form 150, “Special Form for Conscientious Objector.”

Even before requesting that form, I was considered a troublemaker by the local board and its secretary, Elizabeth Simmons. A few months earlier, I had been instrumental in stopping their stripping of deferments from me and other college students who, although considered by our schools to be full-time and “making satisfactory progress,” were not carrying a “full load” of 15 or more credits every semester. Upon receiving 1-A (“available for military service”) draft cards, some students had panicked and enlisted, but I had met with the school’s director of admissions about the policy and its effects. He had then presented the issue to the regional director of the Selective Service System, who had subsequently ruled against the local board and instructed them to restore the 2-S deferments of those of us who remained in good standing at our schools. Given that recent history, I didn’t expect the board to be kindly disposed toward me.

Realizing that I would need knowledge of conscription law and the board’s procedures, I looked for help. That search led to my first encounter with the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. As I prepared my paperwork, I obtained free draft counseling from the American Friends Service Committee in Baltimore. (This is a good place to acknowledge, too, the indispensable assistance of C.C.C.O., the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, on whose publications the counselor and I relied.) Without even a hint of proselytizing for pacifism or Quakerism, the counselor helped me understand the law and the C.O. filing process.

He also stressed the need for letters of reference attesting to my sincerity. I asked five people for such letters. The first four worked at the community college: one was dean, one was admissions director, one was professor of political science, and one was guidance counselor. The fifth person was Father Robert, a Conventual Franciscan priest whom I’d known at Archbishop Curley. I asked all of them to write candidly, even if that meant stating that they did not support my claim, and to send me a copy of whatever they sent to the draft board.

I was confident that the men from the college would write in support of my sincerity. My request to Father Robert, however, was a gamble. I wanted a letter from a representative of the official Church, and I thought that one from a priest who did not agree with my pacifism yet acknowledged my sincerity would help my case. Like many of the priests I’d known, Father Robert had been conservative and authoritarian. I assumed that he would not agree with my position. I remember a little incident that illustrates his attitude.

15. My expectations shaped by the Catholic model, I assumed that the AFSC spoke and acted officially for the Religious Society of Friends. I understand differently now.
In late winter of 1965, Archbishop Curley High was preparing to present the musical “West Side Story” under the direction of Father Claude. Perhaps as a result of his promise to my parents, he had given me the part of Indio in the play. Wanting us to look like gang members with slicked-back D.A. (“duck’s ass”) hair styles, he had obtained permission for us to grow our hair longer than the dress code permitted. One day, Father Robert approached a student in the cafeteria, produced a pair of scissors, and cut off the boy’s Beatle bangs. He then approached me. “That hair’s too long, young man,” he said; “Hold still!” Leaning back to avoid his grasp, I replied, “I’m in the play, Father.” He turned wordlessly and walked away.

But Father Robert and I had a more positive history, too. As Curley’s chaplain of the Third Order Secular of Saint Francis, an association for pious lay people, he had invested me in that order as Brother John of the Cross (the name reflected my connections with the Carmelite orders). Under his leadership, I had volunteered as a tutor in Baltimore. He could testify to both my religious sincerity and my social conscience. And although I knew that my disavowal of Catholicism, which I felt I must be frank about, would make it difficult for him to do so, I hoped that he would respond in a Franciscan spirit of love and toleration.

However, I would never know what Father Robert wrote to the draft board, or even if he did. The other four men — three of whom had served in the military, the fourth having volunteered but been rejected for physical reasons — sent me copies of letters they had written on my behalf. All four stressed my moral seriousness, sincerity, and activism. One even wrote that our conversations had caused him “to rethink my own position with respect to my own past military service and my attitude towards war.” Father Robert, who had last seen me when I was still a pious schoolboy planning to become a priest, asked me to explain my position. I replied honestly and at length, and I never heard from him again. Sidebar 2 will contain the text of my reply.

Soon after mailing my annual update and request for Form 150 for Conscientious Objectors, I received a letter from the draft board. In it, secretary Elizabeth Simmons implied that I had decided to file a C.O. claim because I expected to lose my 2-S student deferment. Here is the text of that letter.

We note from your file that you have been in college, Essex Community College, since September, 1967, and you indicate that you have completed 2 years of college. Since this is a 2-year college, and you indicate that you will be returning to the same college, next semester, you are apparently NOT making satisfactory progress. Kindly clarify the situation.

Please indicate your reason for claiming “conscientious objector” status at this time, since you did NOT make this claim when you registered ….
Kindly report in writing, your reasons, and submit when returning the enclosed SSS Form 150, by July 17, 1969.

The potential loss of the deferment was a surprise to me. Wanting to save some money before transferring, I had planned to stay at Essex Community College for a little longer as a full-time student, and I had stated that on the update report. I had not expected a problem: we had already obtained the ruling that full-time status (12 or more credits per semester) was sufficient to maintain a deferment. But I feared that the secretary’s “this is a 2-year college” argument might prevail, so I accepted that I couldn’t stay. I replied that I hadn’t known that the deferment was in jeopardy, that I was in good standing and in fact on the Dean’s List, and that, having now been advised that I could not remain at the community college, I would transfer to a four-year institution. I emphasized that my decision to file as a C.O. was not related to my deferment status.

On July 14, 1969, I filed the completed Form 150. The filing included my responses, which filled 20 pages, to the form’s four questions, along with supporting materials such as excerpts from the research paper and other of my writings. Much of my young mind’s moral reasoning on war is summed up in the following excerpt from my response to the form’s first demand, “Describe the nature of your belief which is the basis of your claim and state why you consider it to be based on religious training and belief.”

Perfection in love is our goal: it is the very purpose of our existence. ... For love to destroy its beloved would be for it to destroy itself. Thus war and the service of violence is [sic] incompatible with love. War is a compromise with evil, a rejection of the demands of divine love, and as such must be considered immoral. The ethics of love can never condone the purposeful destruction of human life, especially of innocent non-combatants, as in all modern wars, for the preservation of an abstract and arbitrary national boundary or principle, or worse, the accidental material wealth of a small segment of the world population which has no right to that wealth in the midst of poverty and starvation anyway.

Unwilling either to kill directly or to assist in the killing by serving as a medic or other support staff, I requested the classification of 1-O, “conscientious objector available for civilian work contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest.” There was an additional reason for my refusal to serve even in a non-combatant role in the military, something
that applied to Catholicism as well: the required surrender of conscience. Here is an excerpt from my discussion of that issue:

> It is required of every person who is a member of the military to swear an oath that he will obey all orders of his superiors, whether such orders are moral or not. But love must remain free if it is to remain alive. … Jesus Christ said, “Do not swear any oaths.”

> Love cannot promise to destroy itself and its objects for any reason. … Especially in a situation where violence and hatred are present, man must be free to make every decision that comes up in accordance with the demands of the Spirit of Love rather than the demands of a military operation by any government … .

A few years later, in 1975, I would visit a Quaker congregation and learn that, like my refusal of military service and oath-taking, my beliefs in perfection in love, freedom of conscience, and submission to the Spirit were consonant with the Quaker tradition. The Religious Society of Friends would welcome me with open arms, eventually accepting me into membership. In 1969, however, the draft board responded to my statement of conscience by reclassifying me 1-A, “available for military service,” on August 8.

In the meantime, I had transferred from the community college to the University of Baltimore. As required, when the board was notified of my acceptance at the university it rescinded the 1-A and gave me another 2-S deferment. (Elizabeth Simmons typed an expiration date of only eleven days later on the new draft card, though, triggering a request from me for a corrected card. After some argument, she produced one.) Around the same time, I requested a personal appearance in order to present my C.O. case to the board. While waiting for that hearing, I sent them more documents in support of my declaration of conscience.

Other stresses of my changed life were mounting as well. I was grieving my loss of the Catholic faith, which had provided meaning despite the repression and fear, even as I continued to feel deficient because I had not “made it” to the priesthood — irrational, yes, but somehow invincible. Newly aware of social realities, I was shocked by, and reacting against, the callous and casual racism and other injustices of U.S. society. Relationships at home had become increasingly difficult. My father was unable to accept my new beliefs and activities for peace and social justice, eventually saying that “They should lock you up and throw away the key” for refusing military service. My mother tried to help, despite her disappointment in me, but she was caught between us. I needed to move out of the house — and, in case I hadn’t figured that out for myself, was told so. Increasingly alienated from faith, family, and prevailing social mores, and under threat from my own country’s government, I found my depression worsening.
I would soon drop out of school. Not long after starting at the University of Baltimore, I was permanently expelled from a logic course for questioning the possibility of absolute knowledge. My question was polite and tentative, but the professor took offense, calling me “part of the subversive element that’s ruining our country.” While brooding over that, I also acknowledged that I would not be able to attend school after moving out of the family home: I’d need to work full time then, and the draft board did not grant deferments for part-time students. Investing energy at the university seemed pointless. I stopped attending, telling myself that I would find a way to complete my education after resolution of the draft issue. (I didn’t expect that almost 20 more years would pass before my baccalaureate, and then another 16 before my master’s, but that’s how things would work out.)

After allowing myself a few more weeks under the 2-S deferment, in late November I officially withdrew from the university, notified the draft board that I had done so, and reiterated my (already denied) request for 1-O classification. I also transferred from my part-time grocery cashier position to a full-time job stocking shelves at night. Earnings from that job allowed me to move into a small rental townhouse with two others — who would leave during the year’s lease period, to be replaced by a variety of impecunious hippies. Despite the resolution I’d made years before on the athletic field, at twenty I was a college dropout working a boring, dead-end job; spending most of my pay on rent and food; and facing the possibility of felony conviction and imprisonment, with the ensuing lifelong career limitations, for refusal of induction. The vocation director’s “at least don’t waste your potential” was proving all too prescient.

16. “A conviction for the felony of draft refusal may have many adverse long-term consequences, such as loss of citizenship rights and diminished private and public employment opportunities. Chief among those effects may be disqualification for those occupations which require state licensing.” — “Admission to the Bar Following Conviction For Refusal of Induction,” Yale Law Journal 78(8), 1969, p. 1352.
Sidebar 2: Letter to Father Robert

Following is the letter (slightly pared, but with 'sixties jargon and youthful pomposity preserved) that I sent to Father Robert, the Conventual Franciscan priest from whom I’d requested a letter of reference for the draft board, on June 28, 1969. Material in brackets has been added for clarity.

Dear Father Robert,

You have asked me to explain the beliefs I hold which have led me to request conscientious objector status from the Selective Service. Let me begin by emphasizing that these beliefs are the cornerstone of my philosophy of daily living, and as such they are important and central enough to me that I am quite prepared to go either to prison or into exile from my country rather than to violate them by submitting to induction into the military forces.

You may know that I almost entered the [Conventual Franciscan] novitiate in [August of] 1967; the reason that I did not was because I realized that I wanted to use the religious life as an escape from the doubt and guilt I was experiencing at that time. This was my own decision — it was something of a shock to the vocation director … . This experience made a deep impression on me, for at last I had learned the necessity of being completely honest with oneself and others if one is to act from the proper motive. Human dignity and freedom demand that every man examine himself thoroughly and, when he is satisfied that he has, to the best of his ability, cut through the pride, hypocrisy, and rationalization to his true conscience, begin to conform all his actions to the principles he finds there. This is what I have tried to do, and why I feel that I must take a stand now on the issue of war and military service. As Tolstoi once said, the only way to put an end to war and conscription for war is for all men to refuse to serve, and this is what I must do. To do anything else would be, in effect, to sell my soul for security.

My conviction on this matter is simply that war, especially in its modern forms, cannot in any way be justified. I say this for two reasons.

First, war and all violence seem to me to be directly opposed to the Christian concept of love. Christ taught us to love our enemies, not to kill them. I have read and re-read the words of Christ on this matter many times, and I have consulted commentaries by Catholics and non-Catholics, and it seems obvious to me that when Christ said “love your enemies” and “return good for evil” he meant exactly what he said.

I have been re-evaluating my beliefs since [leaving high school]. I am no longer an active member of the Church, for I feel that the Church has become much too hung up on the letter of the law rather than the spirit, which is the spirit of freedom through
love. I can find no relevance in a Church that will not accept the teachings of its God without watering them down or expounding and adding to them until they actually stifle the freedom that should grow out of genuine love for man and God. ... God is love — this is all we need to know. It does not seem important to me whether or not God is personal, a trinity, or even a judge. What is important is that God exists in every part of the cosmos and that each part must therefore act in unison with him and in recognition of the dignity of itself and all other parts." If we live thus morally, which is the same as living by love, I trust that if God is a personal God he will deal with us according to the fruits of our lives rather than the weakness and confusion of our reason.

I am telling you these things because I want you to be able to view my convictions in a true perspective. I quote Jesus Christ not because I am confident of his divinity, but because I am certain that his ethical teachings are the only teachings that are not contrary to our nature as parts of the divine unity, and that they embody the only truly rational way to live. Especially at this point in our history, we will not survive unless we can learn to live by love, to respect the divine dignity of every human being — in short, to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The only way this near miracle can happen is if individuals are willing to face the risks and begin living by love now. The divinity within us finds its expression in creative and constructive acts, and we have now reached the point where this divinity must be expressed or be silenced forever. ...

Second, I can find no justification for modern war because, by its very nature, it destroys that which it purports to be saving. Innocent non-combatants are constantly subjected to the terror and death wrought by such tactics as obliteration bombing. ... There is no morality, no love, here, only the "justification" of being on the "right" side. But how can one side be right if both commit the same crimes against humanity? Certainly Christ would not condone a plan that would save one man by destroying another equally innocent man.

These, then, are my basic reasons for applying for recognition as an objector to war. I am applying for 1-O (alternate service) status because, first of all, I can swear allegiance to no one except my own conscience, and, secondly, because the duty of everyone in uniform, including medical corpsmen, is to "contribute their utmost to the success of the command of which they are a part." In fact, that quote comes from a section of the Army field manual addressed specifically to medics. I will have no part in this destruction of human life. There is much constructive and necessary work to be done outside the military, and I would like to be free to get started.

* At the time, I was moving from Catholic theology to the panentheism of writers such as Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts. In the "Preface to the New [1972] Edition" of his Behold the Spirit, Watts would define panentheism as "the conception of God as the total energy-field of the universe ... in which every discernible part or process is a sort of microcosm or hologram" (p. xviii). Although today I would include such tropes under "'sixties jargon," they helped me begin the reframing of my religious training and experience.
I am applying at the present time because it is only now that I am certain that my convictions are the result of a sincere search for truth rather than rationalizations caused by escapist motives — and, as I said earlier, it is only recently that my beliefs have taken a definite form with regard to the nature of God and other such questions. To help convince you that I am sincere, I can tell you that I have declined opportunities to join both the Army and Navy reserves; although I had applied to them and was put on waiting lists, when they called me I found that I could not conscientiously enter. I am confident of a continued student deferment also … . In other words, I am applying now for no reason other than that I feel I must take a stand.

I am sure that you will remember my participation in the inner city tutoring program with the Third Order as further evidence of my belief in the dignity of man and the necessity for constructive action. I would like to thank you for your time and assistance, and I would also like to request that if you feel that I am sincere, but you do not agree with my beliefs, you would mention this in your letter. If you would like to discuss this further, please call … .
The Draft, Part 3: Watching and Waiting

As I’d expected, the draft board lost no time in reclassifying me as 1-A after learning that I’d dropped out of school. However, President Nixon’s first annual draft lottery, held on December 1, 1969 for the year 1970, introduced a significant new factor: I received a high number, 288 (of 366), meaning that I might not be ordered for induction during my one year of eligibility. The odds in my favor seemed to improve even more when, a week later, Nixon announced a significant withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. Nonetheless, on January 7, 1970, the board notified me that the hearing I had requested was scheduled for January 20.

The hearing didn’t go well. (And I didn’t help myself by mentioning, when asked about influences, Allen Ginsberg. A board member exclaimed, “I read about him in the paper. He’s that homosexual Communist who was corrupting the innocent girls at Goucher College!”) The board made it clear that they would not acknowledge the sincerity of my claim. Indeed, after noting that I had studied for the priesthood, one of the members snarled, “I lost my arm in service to my country, boy, and I’m a Catholic. I know that a person who was raised Catholic can’t be a conscientious objector.” I had addressed that issue in my responses on Form 150, presenting Catholicism, with its teaching that God is love, as the starting point from which my faith and practice, and even my sense of self, had developed to their present form. I referred to those responses while arguing for a broader reading of the draft law’s phrase “by reason of religious training and belief,” but my attempts were in vain. Finally, I could only reply that my conscience would not be violated: “no matter what” the government did to me, I would never be a soldier; I would neither kill nor surrender my freedom of conscience. With that, I was dismissed.

During the hearing, secretary Elizabeth Simmons had remained at her desk outside of the hearing room. She knew the outcome nonetheless. “You got away from us last year,” she said as I walked toward the exit, “but we’ll get you next time.”

As if to underline that threat, the board issued a new 1-A draft card to me on January 21, the day after the hearing. Two days later, they ordered me to present myself for a pre-induction physical (and cursory psychological) examination on February 13. Given my high lottery number, the order was blatantly untimely. (Confirming the sense I had then that the order was irregular, the Selective Service System Web site states that 215 was the highest number ever called for physicals.17) At first I considered refusing, but after more thought I decided to comply. There were at least three reasons to do so. First, my approach from the outset had been to cooperate respectfully with the system in all ways short of submitting to induction into the military, and I wanted to continue in that. Second, delinquents — including men who refused the physical — had, by law, been given highest priority for induction, and I didn’t know whether that would

17. “The APN (highest number) called for a physical was 215 for … 1970 through 1976”: see https://www.sss.gov/about/history-and-records/lotter1. (The page may need multiple reloads before displaying.)
trump the lottery number. Third, refusing the order could prejudice my case if I were to find a pro bono attorney and go to court: I would not be able to argue that I had exhausted all possible remedies offered by the government. (The examination was considered a potential remedy because one might fail it and consequently be exempted from the draft.) Perhaps, I thought, the board — or its secretary — had the latter two outcomes in mind. Therefore, early on a cold February morning, I was among a group of unhappy young men transported by bus from the draft board’s office to Fort Holabird. The examiners at Holabird would find me “fully acceptable for induction into the armed forces.”

I immediately filed an appeal of the local board’s denial of my C.O. claim. At the time, I was not aware that the state’s appeal board would forward my case to the Department of Justice for investigation by the FBI. (Eventually, I would learn that some acquaintances had received telephone inquiries about my character.) But as weeks and then months went by, I was very much aware that the Selective Service System had not communicated with me since receiving my appeal request. I feared that they were intentionally delaying the appeal hearing and maintaining my eligibility for induction, leaving me in limbo in order to keep me potentially available. If the draft got close to my number, I assumed, they would hear and deny the appeal in short order. That conclusion seemed confirmed when, on April 30, Nixon announced the expansion of the war into Cambodia. As college campuses erupted in protest, the Ohio National Guard killed four students — two of whom had simply been walking to class — and wounded nine others at Kent State University. For many of my generation, that was further confirmation that the federal government, controlled by the “military-industrial complex,” had become the enemy of the citizens it existed to serve. I continued to take Simmons at her word.

For much of 1970, I lived with a sense of dread, always aware of the possibility of federal prison — which, for a young, frail conscientious objector, could include being beaten and raped. Early in the year, I inveigled my way into a daytime job as a pump jockey at an acquaintance’s service station, but the change didn’t ease my depression. And by late spring I would lose that job, apparently because I had let my hair grow long. Although I subsequently applied for a variety of jobs, from laborer in a factory to groundskeeper for the School Sisters of Notre Dame motherhouse, I could not get hired. Indeed, at the factory I was warned to get off the premises before any of the workers could see me, because they would surely beat up a long-haired hippie. I was also turned down for a ward attendant position at a state psychiatric hospital — ironically, a job that I might have been assigned by the draft board had they given me the 1-O classification. (A year or so later, after the state was sued over the hospital’s refusal to hire long-haired men, I would be hired for that position. I have written about the experience of working there in “Asylum Memories.”) It was a time of poverty, depression, anxiety.
And drug use. Like many peers, I used psychedelic drugs to experience new modes of consciousness. The religions in which we had been raised had revealed themselves to be not only unbelievable but harmful, and our recognition of that reality had undermined our sense of identity and belonging. We were trying to make sense of, and find spiritual grounding for, our lives. We were alienated also from American society, which we saw as obsessed with consumerism and violence; it was not a world we wanted to live in. Nor did that world want us as we declined to serve as pawns in its pursuit of lucre and the resultant wars. Because we violated the accepted appearance code, refusing to signal middle-class normalcy, we couldn’t get work to support ourselves legally — and so were called “lazy” and “criminal,” an experience that gave us a measure of empathy for economically oppressed people. From the perspective of society, church, and state, we were outlaw monstrosities; defiantly reflecting society’s opinion of us, we referred to ourselves as “freaks.” Our use of psychedelic drugs was an expression of that defiance, but it was also part of our search for a more humane way of being in the world.

The drugs, which were easily obtained, were reported to open “the doors of perception.”\(^{18}\) Whether or not we succeeded in finding insight through them, we had little or nothing to lose by trying. In the attempt, however, we found that our experience of both inner and outer worlds was indeed opened. A psychedelic substance such as LSD could sideline subliminal schemas that shape everyday experience, thereby freeing one temporarily from “mind-forg’d manacles.” Through those “trips” into different modes of experience, we found that knowing the relativity of one’s received worldview, even of one’s sense of self, could be liberating and enriching. As author Michael Pollan would put it after taking psilocybin decades later, “That I could survive the dissolution of my ego without struggle or turning into a puddle was something to be grateful for, but even better was the discovery that there might be another vantage — one less neurotic and more generous — from which to engage reality.”\(^{19}\)

It was an adventure that I accepted frequently and with gratitude, undeterred by a “bad trip” that had me seeing snakes in the draperies and putting my hand through solid objects (including people) — dramatic if frightening demonstrations of the inherently interpretive nature of human awareness. Scary or not, the immediate effects of the drugs, unlike the everyday American madness, would dissipate after eight to twelve hours. But the knowledge that human existence could be experienced differently would remain.

Thus did I watch and wait, my depression and anxiety sometimes suspended by psychedelic experiences, for the Selective Service System’s next move. For much of the year, I expected to

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18. Aldous Huxley was one of many authors extolling psychedelic drugs as gateways to spiritual breakthroughs: other popular writers included Carlos Castaneda, Alan Watts, and of course Timothy Leary. (For a current treatment that is refreshingly free of the metaphysical interpretations imposed on the experiences by Huxley and followers, see the Michael Pollan book referenced in Note 19, below.) The phrase “the doors of perception,” which Huxley used as the title of a book-length essay, is from William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. / For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”

be given a formal hearing and then called for induction — which would mean trial and imprisonment — at any time.
The Draft, Part 4: Decision

As winter arrived, however, the picture changed. A counselor told me that the Selective Service System had not yet called men with lottery numbers above 195 and did not expect to do so. Barring a sudden, major expansion of the war, they would not reach my number, 288, in the few remaining weeks of the year. He also told me that any man who had not been eligible for conscription for at least some part of his assigned lottery year could be added to a subsequent year’s draft pool. And he pointed out that, because of my C.O. claim and appeal, the government could argue that I had not yet been eligible during that year.20

Given all of that, I had two options: (1) to allow the appeal process to continue, which could extend into the coming year(s) the possibility of incarceration, or (2) to drop my appeal before year’s end, thereby becoming draft-eligible in 1970, and wait out the year’s final days. Given the unlikelihood of my having to refuse an order for induction during that brief time, the latter option should put it all behind me as of January 1, but it raised a new question of conscience: how did I feel about abandoning the C.O. case?

It seemed to me that the Selective Service System’s objective was to force me to choose between killing and imprisonment. When those had been my only options, the choice had been obvious: the state could incarcerate me, but it could not coerce my conscience. Now, the lottery was offering a way to avoid both. Should I take that way out, or should I continue to press for official recognition as a C.O., now solely as witness against war and conscription?

Although I had participated in protests against the war in Vietnam, promoting pacifism as national policy had not been my intention. My rejection of any and all war was a matter of personal conscience, not a political position: even when the counterculture seemed strongest, I understood that nonviolence was counter, a deviation from widely-accepted moral standards. My stance, I would later find, was similar to that of early Quakers, who in 1660 avowed that “All bloody principles and practices, we, as to our own particulars, do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever” [emphasis mine].21 Those Friends, however, had thought that the peoples of the world might soon be led to a radical change of heart that would bring lasting peace. I had no such hope.

Nor had conscription itself been a target of my refusal. I had cooperated fully, asking only for “alternative civilian service,” non-military work for the common good. From the outset, I had conceived the situation starkly: I was being ordered to maim and kill, and that I could not do.

20. Although I had been classified as 1-A, “available for military service,” during the year, I could not be drafted until all properly requested hearings and appeals had been completed.

I saw, too, that as a free man I could work for human welfare in ways that were more productive than submitting to imprisonment. And without the ever-present worry about prison, I should be less depressed and anxious and therefore more able to engage in such work. I decided that I would accept the lottery’s offer of immediate liberation, but without recanting my declaration of pacifism. On December 22, 1970, still classified as 1-A, I sent a registered letter to the local board, informing them simply that I was withdrawing my appeal and was therefore subject to the 1970 lottery. Someone at the board — not Elizabeth Simmons — signed for my letter on the following day.

As that letter was being delivered, I was setting off, in the company of a young man who hoped to emigrate to Canada, for Boston. Arriving there during a snowstorm with just a few dollars between us, we learned that the person who had promised us lodging had reneged. I called a seminarian friend who was studying in Massachusetts, and he referred me to the “street priest,” Paul Shanley. Father Paul — who decades later would become infamous in the clerical sex abuse scandal, ultimately serving twelve years in prison — arranged for us to stay with some generous people. At his Christmas dinner-Mass for runaways, Father Paul suggested that I visit him at his home for spiritual counseling. When I did so, however, I found that it was a ploy: what he wanted was sex. His “counseling” reminded me of my encounter with the parish priest in 1965, when the priest’s only interest in me had taken the form of “do you have any sexual problems?”

Saddened, I cut short my stay in Boston and returned to Baltimore. When I arrived home and saw the signed return receipt from the draft board, my relief was akin to that I had felt when Father X rescued me from hell. Although I was broke, alienated from my family, and soon to be homeless, I was free. And my conscience was largely intact, even if, as earlier with the “habitual sin” escape clause, deliverance had been attained in a way that felt too easy.

When my final draft card arrived, it bore the classification 1-H, “not currently subject to processing for induction.” “Not currently,” I said as I signed the card; “they never give up hope.” But I knew that, like the Catholic Church before it, the Selective Service System had lost its power to imprison me.
Postscript: Becoming an A-theistic Quaker

After my struggles with the Catholic Church and the Selective Service System, I continued my exploration of religion. Eventually, I became a member of the Religious Society of Friends. In 1999, I described that passage in a piece called “The Making of a Quaker Atheist” for the inaugural issue of *Quaker Theology*. The following sketch is adapted from that essay.

As we saw in the preceding narrative, my analysis of Jesus’ attitude toward violence revealed that the Catholic Church, which claimed him as its cornerstone, had abandoned his teachings and spirit. With the stone removed, the structure crumbled. The dust settled slowly, but when it had, I found that the sanctuary had been empty. The Christian God, my God, was but a creation of the Church, a fresco on a now-fallen wall. He had terrified me at times, but he had been the heart of my world. I longed for him and for the meaning he had provided.

I turned to Buddhism, a faith born, like Christianity, in a profound reaction against human suffering. Whereas Jesus had expected that God would end all pain by creating a new world, the Buddha had taught a way to overcome suffering. Buddhism sought liberation through personal effort, but it seemed to leave open the possibility of a divine reality. Captivated, I pored over sutras, Zen dialogues, and *Madhyamika* dialectic.22 Joining a local group that met regularly for Zen meditation (*zazen*), I learned to allow my mind to become calm and detached, a practice that would later enrich my Quaker worship.

But Buddhism lacked the person and vision of Jesus. I was moved by his ideal of the Kingdom of God, a world of peace, justice, and well-being. And I sensed that the story of his crucifixion could symbolize a divine self-emptying (kenosis) at the heart of all things. Hoping to find a way to believe in his presence again, I studied the works of Bible scholars and contemporary theologians. For a dozen years, I struggled to work out both a theology of a suffering, kenotic God and an exegesis that would make New Testament eschatology — expectation of the imminent end of the world — something other than a barrier to belief. It was an effort that would ultimately fail; for a time, however, both disciplines being elastic, it opened the possibility of a return to Christian faith.

It was during that time that I began to worship among Friends at Little Falls Meeting in the countryside north of Baltimore.

22. For an introduction to *Madhyamika*, see the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy article [here](https://www.iep.utm.edu/madhy). Given the parallels between *Madhyamika* (or *Madhyamaka*) and Derridean “differential” logic, it is not surprising that I should be drawn to Derridean thought later in life. For more on those parallels, see “Derrida and Madhyamika Buddhism: From Linguistic Deconstruction to Criticism of Onto-theologies.” See also Robert Magliola’s groundbreaking work, *Derrida on the Mend* — a rich book that, I have found, amply rewards the continual effort it calls forth.
That Quaker Meeting traces its founding to William Amos Jr., who resigned from the militia and became a Quaker in 1738. William was of the Amos(s) family’s first native-born Maryland generation; I am of the eighth. When, in 1975, my grandfather told me of that family connection, I visited Little Falls on a day when the meetinghouse was unoccupied. My eye was caught by a wooden sign posted by the door. It testified to a belief, “based on the life and teaching of Jesus,” in responding to evil with good.

WHAT FRIENDS BELIEVE…

The basis of Quaker life and practice is the conviction that there is something of God’s spirit in us all: that every soul can have immediate communion with God.

When Friends meet together, they do not rely on priests, clergy, or leaders. The meeting begins in living silence, one in which the clamor of everyday life is stilled and we can hear God’s voice. Then there may be brief passages of vocal prayer or ministry from any of those present. When thus seeking God consistently, we can at all times and in any place sense the eternal which is behind the succession of ordinary events.  

This for us is the sacramental life which need not be marked by outward rites. This attitude could only be founded on the life and teaching of Jesus. It involves an attempt to accept literally the command to love God and one another. It rules out war. It recognizes evil but meets it with that active good will which outlasts it or transforms it. Such beliefs have involved sacrifice and much suffering.

Our numbers are not large. Membership is open to those who share our outlook and who in worshipping with us find themselves “at home.” That simple expression is not out of place, for the Quaker way of life leads us to think of men and women all over the world as parts of the family of God.

23. That phrase recalls for me William Blake’s verse from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, quoted in Note 18: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. / For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”
Feeling in sympathy with that statement, I returned on Sunday to join the small group of Friends for worship. When I was invited to stay for their business meeting afterward, I accepted, and my life was changed.

The Friends, concerned over their dwindling numbers, were planning to renovate an old schoolhouse on the property to provide classroom and meeting space, a kitchen, and washrooms, which the place then lacked. The project seemed essential to the survival of the congregation, but one member was rejecting the architect’s design on grounds that, I thought, approached being irrational. Despite their evident sense of urgency, the other Friends labored patiently and lovingly with the dissenter. When it became clear that he could not set his concerns aside, the issue was held over for further study.

I was astonished: never before had I seen a group of people so single-mindedly put love and respect above “getting things done.”

I became a regular attender at Little Falls. As I participated in their worship and business practice, learned of their work and witness, and experienced their respect for and challenges to individual and community consciences, I became convinced that the Friends were living in the spirit of Jesus. Through them, I was able to believe – unlike, ironically, some of those Friends themselves — in the present guiding activity of Christ. That faith was strong and sure enough, I felt, to warrant belief in the resurrection of Jesus and therefore in the Christian God. I had recovered — reconstructed — my God.

Naturally, I felt that my experience of God should be much as it had been when I was young, excepting those characteristics, which I attributed to Roman Catholicism, that had darkened my life with fear. However, the Quakerism of Little Falls Meeting, although it had helped lead me back to Christian faith, was no longer explicitly Christocentric. Nor did it offer context for the exegetical and theological explorations I’d come to love. So I used my family’s move into Baltimore City as an opportunity to “visit other churches,” as I put it to one of the Friends. I soon found that the local Episcopal church, where an acquaintance served as priest, offered beautiful services and relative freedom of thought in a traditional setting. It seemed to be just what I needed, and, within three years of my discovery of Quakerism, I was ritually received into the Episcopal Church.

The sacred beauty and joy of the liturgy outweighed, I told myself, the Church’s failure to embrace equality, justice, and nonviolence. (“There is an Episcopal Peace Fellowship,” the rector told me, “but it’s not very active. You could try to start a chapter in this parish, but I mentioned it here a few years ago and found that there’s no interest in that sort of thing.”) And I took the Church’s recent decision to ordain women as a sign of a growing sensitivity.

But those things could not, I would find, quiet my concerns for long. Nor could they shield God from harsh reality. When my grandfather, who had been crippled for much of his life with a
painful, degenerative disease, died of cancer, my faith failed once more. Already weakened by
the churches’ complicity in injustice and violence, it could not withstand the sight of that beloved
man’s agony of body and spirit. No good God would allow such things, I knew. The Christian
God had once more been revealed as fantasy. Twice-dead, he would not be raised again.

After that abortive return to Christianity, I wanted to abandon religion completely. But religion
had sensitized me to the dark side of life, to the violence, injustice, and pain that characterize our
world; I couldn’t keep my gaze averted. And I had seen a spirit of committed and courageous
love among Friends, some of whom did not hold traditional Christian beliefs, that I had
encountered nowhere else.

A friend who was active in another Quaker congregation happened to
call at that time, and we began a series of conversations that led to my
attendance at Homewood Friends Meeting in Baltimore. As I began
again to know the power of Quaker practice, I dove into reading of
Quaker history and spirituality. At the same time, I satisfied my desire
for broader intellectual inquiry by completing a college program of
comparative religion, scripture criticism, and seminars on moral
questions.

Over time, my experiences and studies came together in a synthesis that I
expressed in an ancient image: “being Christ.” Jesus was not a
supernatural being, I’d concluded, and his resurrection was a scripture-based myth born of
desperate hope; nonetheless, in his willingness to give himself to and for the Kingdom, Jesus
did incarnate a holy spirit, a deeply human spirit that dares to envision and work toward a loving
world.

I knew that Jesus’ spirit could live in contemporary human beings: I’d met that spirit among the
Friends, and I’d felt it stir within me in response to their “answering that of God” in me. To learn
to live in that spirit, to join with others as the heart and hands of Christ in the world, would be, I
decided, the finest thing any human being could do. Quakerism focused directly on that
challenge, letting everything else fall away; while the churches looked for Christ primarily in
ritual and scripture, Friends quietly worked to make the Christ-spirit actively present here and
now.

I shared the Quaker thirst for Jesus’ Kingdom of God, found inspiration in the silent communion
of worship, and experienced the power of group discernment to awaken wisdom and love. Back
among Friends, I had come home. In response to my request for membership in the Religious
Society of Friends, Homewood Meeting graciously received me, asking not whether I believed in
God or would conform myself to a set of rules, but whether I was committed to the people and
practices of that Quaker community, particularly to seeking to live in the spirit we see in Jesus. I

24. See my “Resurrection?”
accepted membership with joy and a sense of responsibility to contribute to the life of the congregation and the Society as best I could.

One part of that contribution would be to work at interpreting my experience of Quakerism for myself and others. I knew first-hand the power of our silent worship, but how could I conceptualize my worship directed to no God? And how understand the ability of our business practice to transcend our differences in unity of spirit?

Seeking insight into the foundational experiences of our movement, I turned to the writings of George Fox. In his journal, Fox recounted that, nearing despair at the failure of traditional Christian teachings to “speak to [his] condition,” not knowing what to believe or how to act in order to fulfill God’s will, he had been inspired to see that the divine spirit of Christ could teach him, and all people, directly. In fact, Fox had decided, only the inwardly-received leading of the living Christ could be relied upon. “There is one,” the voice of insight had told him, “even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.” Thus was born the Quaker movement, which would call people to disregard human teachings and to discern and obey the leading of the spirit of Christ, the inner light, within them. Such obedience, Fox believed, would lead to love’s perfection, to the realization of the Kingdom of God inwardly and outwardly, here and now. Through faith in and obedience to that light, Friends would be the incarnation of Christ, the human face of God-who-is-love, in the world.

And there I found the key: the dynamic essence of Quaker faith and practice is nothing more or less than the actualization of love.

If some of us can no longer claim supernatural guidance, it is nonetheless true that our Quaker faith and worship continue to ground our lives in love, empowering us to live compassionately and courageously. And if we can no longer expect the arrival “in power” of the Kingdom of God, it is nonetheless true that the work of Friends for relief of suffering, equality of persons, tolerance, freedom, peace, and justice continue to make the world a better place. The lives of Friends today and throughout our history prove that, whether a supernatural Christ-being lives or not, what Fox believed to be Christ’s light within the human heart is real.

From the beginning, Friends have known that something in us seeks what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, and that through our uniquely powerful practice of waiting together upon its inspiration, we bring that something, that holy spirit of human love, to the fore. Discerning its voice and living as it leads us, we become, corporately and severally, the living body of Christ. In sharing that conviction, that experience, I am a Quaker.

25. Mark 9:1 (which, in my opinion, should be Mark 8:39): “And he said to them, ‘Amen I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they have seen the kingdom of God come in power.’”