

INTRODUCTION

GROWING UP CATHOLIC



What was it like growing up Catholic as a decidedly blue-collar member of the Baby Boom generation of the '50s and '60s? Well, for one thing it was crowded. Almost everybody had big families. I was the oldest of eleven children. We started out in a small rented row home in South Philadelphia and moved in 1958 to another small row home in Glenolden, Delaware County, just a few miles southwest of Philly. My parents bought the house for under \$10,000 with a thirty-year mortgage and took the entire thirty years to pay it off. I have no idea how we fit in that house. There was maybe 700 square feet of living space and what I would describe as 2½ bedrooms. The “half bedroom,” where I slept with one of my brothers, was a little bigger than a walk-in closet. Six of my siblings slept in two bunk beds in a small middle room. My parents slept in a slightly bigger front room, which somehow accommodated their bed and two cribs. There was one small bathroom.

We never thought of ourselves as poor, but we never had any money. I knew that, so I never asked for anything. When my shoes got holes in them, I used cardboard to cover the holes. When I walked to school on rainy days, the cardboard would get wet. Then my socks

would get wet. Then my socks would get holes in them too.

Despite the extremely low price of entry into our neighborhood, which was known as Briarcliffe, there were no black people. For that matter, there were no Hispanic people, no Asian people, and no Jewish people either. I don't think that I met a single person from outside my racial or cultural group until I was eighteen and began working summers at DuPont in West Philly. Everybody I knew was white and Catholic.

My family's move was part of the white flight from Northern industrial cities that marked the late 1950s and '60s. Actually our part of the suburbs was really just another version of South Philly with the addition of little postage stamps of grass and weeds. Nevertheless, the impetus for the move was partly to escape the racial integration of the inner city. If you were black, it was all but impossible to move into our neighborhood. By the early '60s there were maybe a couple of black families who tried to move into neighborhoods within a few miles of where I lived. The adults in my neighborhood referred to them as "blockbusters." Blockbusting was a practice whereby real estate agents frightened white homeowners into selling their homes at a loss with the prospect that their neighborhood was about to become racially integrated. But the term as used by the adults in my neighborhood described the black family that was moving in. They were "blockbusters," the racial integrators and would-be destroyers of the neighborhood who were supposedly backed financially by groups like the NAACP. That at least was the racist myth. Even people who weren't overtly racist believed that black people destroyed the neighborhood once they moved in.

I remember what happened when a black family moved into Folcroft, which was a town maybe three or four miles from where I lived. The house was stoned and vandalized, and the family was driven from

the neighborhood in just about no time. It was the summer of 1963. Today there are some black families living in the area where I grew up, but the neighborhoods are still overwhelmingly white, and the economic status of the people living there is about the same, relatively speaking.

So that was the environment—crowded, borderline poor, all white, almost one hundred percent Catholic and racist. Just about everybody went to Catholic school. Public school was out of the question. That was where the black and Protestant kids went.

Talk about crowded! It's hard to say what was more crowded—my house or the school I went to. I started out at St. Monica's in South Philly, but from the second grade on, I went to Our Lady of Fatima. In 1959, the year my sister, Maureen, entered first grade, there were six first grades with about 100 kids in each classroom. Each class was taught by a single nun. At both schools they were the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The so-called lay teachers were young women with little or no teaching credentials. My third-grade teacher was an eighteen-year-old woman who had just graduated from high school and was taking evening classes at a local college—I think it was St. Joe's.

Unfortunately all of the clichés about Catholic school in the '50s and '60s are true. School was boring and regimented. There was corporal punishment, too. Today a lot of what went down would rightfully be viewed as physical abuse and in some cases merit arrest. I hated every single second of grade school and high school except for maybe parts of kindergarten and first grade at St. Monica's. Time crept by slowly in those days. It seemed that a century had passed before I graduated from eighth grade.

Amazingly, I remember being kept after school in kindergarten. I was five years old. The class was singing a song, and I was amusing

myself by singing like a frog. The teacher, Sister Esperanza, stopped the song and cried out, "Who's singing like that!" I was instantly betrayed. Every kid within an aisle or two of me pointed at me, and I remember batting away their hands and arms from my face as I sank down in my desk. After school the classroom was empty except for me and the sister. She was doing work at her desk at the front of the class. I somehow got it into my head that if I was really quiet and sneaky, I could escape by crawling out of the class on my hands and knees and that she would never know the difference. And so that's what I did. I remember crawling out of the room and then when I got to the hallway running down the stairs and out of the school like a crazy person. The good sister must have had a sense of humor. She must have observed me the whole time, but she let me escape, and I never heard a word from her about the incident the next day at school.

What this little incident also reveals is that at the age of five I did in fact walk by myself to and from school most every day. Imagine anyone letting their kid do that today anywhere in the country let alone through the inner city streets of South Philly. My father worked all day at an oil refinery, and my mother was home at this point with my brother and sister. Before I finished first grade there were two more kids. That's five kids, six years old or younger. So I was pretty much on my own. This meant that my peers and I had a really odd kind of freedom when we weren't in school. We were out of the house all of the time with no adult supervision. In South Philly this meant lots of handball, lots of stickball and lots of fights. I had been in maybe a couple of dozen fights by the time I was seven and we moved.

We almost never told our parents about anything that happened at school no matter how bad it was. I think I did tell my father once about some atrocity that had taken place, and he said something like, "Whatever they did, you must have deserved it."

What did the nuns do? Well, some of them carried around little wooden clickers. They liked to click away on them while they were barking out orders. They also used them as tools for issuing corporal punishment. I remember one time when the nun decided to punish every boy in the class. We had to get in line, march up to her and extend our hands palms down so that she could rap our knuckles with the wooden clicker. That hurt! My brother Jack's first grade teacher would punish the six year olds by putting them in the trash can at the front of the class. Once when I was in seventh grade I got kicked out of the class for talking and laughing. As I closed the door, the wind blew through the classroom, and the door slammed. It was so loud it was like a bomb going off. In two seconds the nun came flying out of the room like a bat out of hell. She grabbed me by the tie, lifted me off the floor and began slapping my face back and forth over and over like she was Moe and I was Curly. The whole time she was slapping me, I was trying to tell her what happened—huffing and puffing in between each slap—"I . . . didn't . . . slam . . . the . . . door . . . it . . . was . . . the wind . . . I . . . didn't . . . do . . . anything!"

The single worst incident I ever saw occurred when I was in eighth grade. Whenever somebody did something wrong, but the nuns didn't know who the guilty party was, they dealt with the situation by punishing every single person in the class. That way they were sure to get the bad guy. I have no idea what the crime was in this particular instance, but I recall that we were all sitting after school in total silence for a really long time. I'm talking about maybe fifty kids sitting after school way past when they were all supposed to be home. Again, just imagine the furor this would cause today. But back then I doubt that anybody's parents even noticed.

I don't know if we were all being loyal to the culprits or whether most of us had no idea what had even happened or who had been

involved, but the situation got so extreme that the nun finally decided to bring in the heavy artillery, i.e., the principal of the school, the Mother Superior. While the nun was telling the Mother Superior about whatever crime had been perpetrated and about the entire class's culpability in protecting the identity of the perpetrators, one boy whispered the words, "Sister's a bum." He spoke the words really quietly, but they resonated throughout the entire classroom. Mother Superior heard them clear as a bell. In those days all of the desks were connected on runners, so each row of desks began with a seat without a desk. The Mother Superior ordered the boy to come to the front of the class and lie face down across the seat at the head of the middle row of desks. She picked up one of those thick, heavy yardsticks that every classroom had in those days and proceeded to beat the boy mercilessly. She used both hands on every blow, hitting him as hard as she could each time. She kept it up until the thick yardstick actually broke in two. After that, I think we were all allowed to go home. I guess by then justice had been done. As for the boy, he was expelled from the school. We never saw him again.

I guess you could say that witnessing incidents like that one was an education in its own right. But as far as real education is concerned, I wonder to this day how most of the kids learned much at all. With so many kids, we were really just being warehoused a lot of the time. My worst experience with warehousing came in the fourth and fifth grades. When I was in the fourth grade, the school ran out of classrooms. They decided to take the smartest kids in the fourth and fifth grades and put them together in one room. We were taught half of the day and did "busy work" the other half of the day. Of course, this meant that I was experiencing everything the fourth and fifth grades had to offer at one and the same time, which of course wasn't all that much. But here's the really bad part. The next year they somehow had

enough classrooms, and I found myself placed in fifth grade, where I experienced the ineffable pleasure of listening all over again to everything that I had heard the previous year. It didn't help at all when I heard my aunt, who was an Immaculate Heart nun and a teacher in the Philadelphia Catholic schools, tell my father that if I had been in public school, I would have been allowed at some point in my elementary school career to skip a grade.

Whatever we did learn was accomplished mostly through repetition and memorization. Math was called "drill and mental." We memorized multiplication tables, were drilled in long division and were constantly taking quizzes, which were called "mentals." It's probably partly a result of this regimen that I am very good at doing calculations in my head. English was a combination of diagramming sentences, memorizing punctuation rules, learning vocabulary, doing spelling drills and a little reading. Religious instruction was memorizing *The Baltimore Catechism*. At one point I knew the answer to every question in that book. My favorite question and answer combination was "If God is everywhere, why do we not see Him?" "We do not see God, because He is a pure spirit and cannot be seen with bodily eyes." I still think that "bodily eyes" is one of the weirdest phrases anybody has ever come up with.

A number of important subjects got very little attention. We had no science at all, which is just amazing. History and geography were taught using really thin little blue books that you could have read in one sitting. Somehow we never managed to finish the books by the end of the school year. The biggest joke was a subject called "picture study." This was taught using a tiny little book with a handful of photographs of paintings. I remember one of the paintings was Jean-Francois Millet's *The Gleaners*. We would stare at the photograph, while the teacher read from a list of questions about the painting. That

was simply thrilling. We never got through the entire picture study book either. Finally, as far as independent thinking was concerned, it just wasn't part of the curriculum.

Of course, the worst part of the whole Catholic experience was the religion itself and all of the emphasis on sin and guilt. It seemed as though we were always in church. You had to go to church every Sunday, of course. Then there were so-called Holy Days of Obligation. You had to go to church on those days, too. New Year's Day was a Holy Day of Obligation. It was originally the feast day of the circumcision of Jesus. That's right. You had to go to church to celebrate the fact that the Son of the Creator of the Universe had the tip of his dick cut off. Maybe even the church decided this was too weird because New Year's Day is still a Holy Day, but now it's to celebrate the "Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God." The Assumption of Mary and the Immaculate Conception are Holy Days, too, and there are a few others as well, including of course, Christmas.

The single worst part of the whole Catholic religion thing was having to go to confession, especially once you hit puberty when you were having sexual thoughts and spontaneous erections nonstop, and you were told that taking even momentary pleasure in any sexual thought was a mortal sin. You were actually supposed to go inside one end of a box and tell a guy sitting in the middle of the box about all sorts of embarrassing personal sexual stuff. That was really a species of abuse in and of itself.

I'm sure just about everybody who grew up in the Catholic Church during the Baby Boom days has stories to tell about going to confession. I certainly have a few. One innocent little story has to do with when the nuns dragged our entire third grade class over to church and forced us to go to confession because we were going to receive the sacrament of confirmation in a couple of days. Confirmation

was when you got an additional name—mine is James. Basically it involved the local bishop coming to your church and all of the priests and nuns acting like he was a real big shot. The bishop would give a really long and boring sermon, and then everybody who was getting confirmed had to get in line in order to go and stand in front of him. When you got there, he rubbed some oil on your forehead and tapped you on the cheek and then you sat down. It always seemed to me, and I think to most everybody else, that confirmation was kind of an unnecessary and useless sacrament. I would have certainly gotten rid of it if I had been the pope—speaking infallibly, of course.

Anyway, back when I was eight or nine years old, I probably went to confession about once a month. Coincidentally I had just gone to confession a few days before the nuns forced me to go because of my impending confirmation. When I got into the confession booth, I told the priest that it had been five days since my last confession and that I hadn't done anything wrong. Looking back, I should have just said that very same thing at every single confession I ever made. In any event I was probably in the confession booth for about ten seconds, and when I got back to my pew, I just sat down instead of kneeling and saying my penance. I didn't say my penance because the priest didn't give me any penance to say. Boom! Just like that, the second I sat down the nun came over and wanted to know what was going on. She must have seen me go in and out of the confessional in no time and then just sit down. I looked up at her and said quite sincerely and innocently, "I didn't do anything wrong." She looked at me and just walked away. I realize now that if I had just held on to that one thought—"I didn't do anything wrong"—for the next ten years or so, I would have escaped the whole Catholic guilt trip.

The worst experience I ever had in confession occurred when I was in the eighth grade. At this point I hated going to confession and

put it off as long as I could. This particular time I recall that it had been seven weeks since my last confession. Maybe that's a little longer between confessions than the church recommended back in those days but really not that bad when you think of it. Anyway, I had the great misfortune of making this confession to the pastor of Our Lady of Fatima. He was actually the founder of the church, and he was a fucking bastard. He got really bent out of shape that it had been such a long time since my last confession. But you'll never guess how he expressed his righteous anger. He said, "How would you like to go to Darby Township with all the niggers?" Darby Township was the local public school. To this day, I'm astounded by the pathological hatred and racism of that remark. What's more, the good pastor was basically threatening to violate the confidentiality of the confessional and expel me from Our Lady of Fatima all because I hadn't been to confession in seven weeks.

So that's my experience of Baby Boom Catholicism—way too many people, no money, racism, corporal punishment, bad education, boredom and a whole shitload of guilt. The only thing that saved me, and a lot of kids like me, was rock and roll and the Beatles. Hey, because of the weird freedom that we had in those days just by being lost in the crowd, I actually got to see the Beatles at JFK Stadium right at the height of the whole controversy when John Lennon said that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. I even went to the Electric Factory a few times—I saw Ten Years After open for the Jeff Beck Group with Ron Wood, Nicky Hopkins, Micky Waller and Rod Stewart on vocals. So I got to stand just a few feet away from Alvin Lee and Jeff Beck while they played the blues. Now that's what I call "salvation," and for that experience, all I can do is thank the Lord.

OK. YOU'RE DEAD—NOW WHAT?

Nobody knows what happens when you die. But if I were to bet the farm on what happens when you buy the farm, I would say nothing happens. You die and that's it—you're one and done.

If I'm wrong and there is something, the only people who know are dead people, and they're not talking. I don't count whatever voices John Edward and other mediums like him say they're hearing. That nonsense is in the same league as all of those alien sightings in the swamps of Alabama and Mississippi. If there are any aliens in our neighborhood and they want to let us know they're here, they need to land on the White House lawn or maybe in St. Peter's Square. Otherwise, I'm not paying attention. And if any dead person feels the urge to spill the beans about what's going on beyond the grave, if they want to be the first one to break the celestial code of silence, God's omertà, then they should just come right out and broadcast it to the world. Interrupt the flow of atheist comedy on *Real Time with Bill Maher*—just to serve him right—or if they want the biggest possible audience, break up the Super Bowl halftime show. It usually sucks anyway.

Frankly I don't know what purpose it serves to keep the whole afterlife thing so mysterious. I know the Gospel writers have Jesus talk about it, and the Catholic Church and the other churches never stop talking about it, but to be honest, nobody's really satisfied with those explanations—not even the truest of the true believers. I don't know why God doesn't just give us a YouTube video of heaven, hell,

purgatory and limbo and put the whole thing to rest. I'll bet it would easily beat all the records for most YouTube views. I'll bet God would just blow away "Gangnam Style," Justin Bieber, "Charlie bit my finger—again!" and everybody else.

On the other hand, if there is nothing, it would be good to know that too—maybe not before you die but how about a split second afterwards? I agree with what George Carlin said about all of this. If there is nothing, it would be great if, when you died, there was a voice that said, "There's nothing," and you got to say "OK" or "fuck" or "Goddamn it" or whatever you chose to say, and then you would be immediately annihilated. That would be cool.

Actually I hope I'm wrong and there is something after you die. Obviously, I don't want to be stuck in a pizza oven (i.e., go to hell), and I don't want to stare at God for eternity, but if I can opt out of the Beatific Vision and just keep on keeping on with a minimum of bother, I'm all for it. Who wants to be annihilated? Not me. But besides that, I really hope that there is a God and an afterlife, because I have a bone or two to pick with the Creator of the Universe, and I'd love to have the chance to pick those bones.

But before I get to the bones I want to pick, there is one other issue that occurs to me if there is a God and there is an afterlife and you do get the chance to meet your maker. And that is—which God shows up? Is it the Old Testament God, the New Testament God, God, the Son—that would be Jesus—or the Holy Spirit? After all, he's God too even though nobody takes him seriously. I mean he does like to show up as a bird most of the time. I sort of think of him as the Fredo of the Trinity.

My preference would be for all of them to show up. Maybe they could just clear their calendars for the meeting. I know they could all gang up on me, and that would be four on one, but then we could get all of the questions out in the open. I mean, if you think about it, it's

kind of unfair for any of them to get all judgmental about a puny little human being, like me, in the first place. But I say bring it on. Let's just have it out. I'm dead anyway, so at this point I have to think that I just don't give a shit.

So just for fun, let's pretend they all show up. Here's my first question: Since you are an all-knowing God, you obviously knew before you created the universe and created human beings who was going to heaven and who was going to hell. The Catholic Church says that you have to be baptized to go to heaven. The Catholic Church also says that it is the one true church. Some Catholics actually take this to mean that if you aren't Catholic, you can't go to heaven. Everybody else goes to hell. Others take a more flexible view. Let's not get bogged down in all the differences of opinion here. Let's just say that, however you slice it, tens of billions of people, maybe hundreds of billions of people, have already gone to hell. Depending upon how long human beings continue to live on this planet, we could be talking in the fullness of time about trillions and trillions of people in hell. As I've said elsewhere, maybe the number of people in hell is ultimately googol. I won't even get into the question of whether intelligent life forms on the billions and billions of planets in the universe go to hell, too. In that case we're talking about an extremely serious number of zeros. So let's just say that any way you look at it, there's quite a crowd in hell. My question to God is if you knew this was going to happen ahead of time—why did you create the universe? Why did you create human beings and other intelligent life forms just to end up torturing them all because you didn't like what they believed or how they behaved? I'd like an answer to that question because It seems to me that God's decision to create the universe, knowing that trillions of people and other intelligent life forms were definitely going to hell, is clearly the most despicable act imaginable.

Now I have to admit that if that's my first question, we are off to a pretty rocky start. Any one of the four Gods could take it personally—maybe not Jesus or the Holy Spirit because I don't think they personally take credit for creating the universe, but either the Old Testament God (OTG) or the New Testament God (NTG) could get pretty upset. But as I said, I'm dead, so at this point I'm just letting it all hang out. Besides, I think it would be pretty lame, even for God, to just send me to hell at that point, so I figure no matter what, I'd still have the chance to ask a few more questions.

So here's question number two. It's actually kind of embarrassing, but I just have to ask it. It's basically if you are an all powerful God, then why is the universe such a mess and why do you have so many nasty things in it? I find it very hard to believe that there would be any Black Holes if God actually knew what he was doing when he created the universe. If I were God and I were proud of my creation, I certainly wouldn't have billions of Black Holes sucking up so much of my beautiful universe, sucking it all up like gigantic vacuum cleaners into who knows where. Does that make any sense? No. Also, what's up with all of the natural disasters? Hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, droughts, earthquakes, tornados. I won't list them all. I want an explanation from OTG or NTG why this is all good. I'd also like to know why there are so many nasty ugly things on this earth, like viruses and bacteria and roaches and mosquitoes and bed bugs. I'd really like God to explain exactly how any of these things are good ideas.

Now at this point I'm sure I'm really pissing off at least OTG and NTG. Maybe not Jesus, the kinder, gentler God, and maybe not the Holy Spirit, because I'm thinking that maybe he resents OTG and NTG and would actually like to hear somebody give them a hard time.

If I am wearing out my welcome at this point I would just go to some quick hitting questions, like, why do you like being feared? Why

do you want to be worshipped and adored all of the time? I mean it's just so narcissistic. And what about prayer? Why do you always have to be persuaded to do the right thing and help out people who are in trouble? Usually it's your fault that they're in trouble in the first place. If you don't know what I'm talking about just refer to my question about natural disasters. Also, why do you take everything so personally? What's it to you how people think and behave? And why did sending your Son to earth to be murdered make you feel better about all of the bad behavior? That has to be the craziest idea I ever heard of. You're mad at the whole human race because they do stuff you don't like, which you call sin, but you forgive them once you have some of the bad people you're already mad at kill him. Boy, would I like to get some kind of explanation for that insanity! Also, I would love to ask Jesus how he really feels to this day about having been sent on a suicide mission.

OK, so with that last question, I would be done. Now I would assume it would be time for me to be judged. At least that's what the Catholic Church says happens when you die. It's Judgment Day for you. Well, here's another little memo from me to the deity. Who the hell are you to judge me? Nobody has the right to judge me, but least of all God. Did I ask to be born? No. Did I choose my parents? No. Did I select my genes? No. How about my race, ethnicity, country of origin, economic status, sexual orientation, IQ, and the list goes on. I had no control over any of that. Who does? Well, in the scenario we have before us here, a scenario in which there is a God and he created everything—that would be him. So God decides that I'm born and selects all of the critical inputs that make me who I am, and then he judges me for how it all turns out. Once you set all of those inputs, I would say you've pretty much determined how everything is going to turn out. So God wants to judge me when he's the one responsible for

me. I should judge him on why he didn't give me a few better breaks.

So I would just tell him, sorry, I'm not interested in being judged. However, I suspect that the result would be pretty much the same as if you told a police officer who was arresting you that you didn't really feel that it was necessary for him to take you to jail. So, assuming I have to be judged, I wonder if I'm entitled to defend myself. I'm sure it's almost impossible under the circumstances to get a defense attorney since I imagine that just about every lawyer gets sent straight to hell. So I would have to defend myself. But I think I have a pretty good defense. Not only did I not choose any of the critical inputs that make me think and behave the way I do, I know that the whole free will thing is just a total crock of shit, and I'm sure God knows it too. I just don't think he's gotten called on this crucial point very often, and he would never bring it up himself. But here's the real scoop: You and I don't consciously decide what we do. Our brains direct all of our thoughts and actions for us before we're aware of what we are doing. I'm sorry, but this is a scientific fact. Check it out. So, speaking for myself, I have to say that my brain is the culprit, not me. It is the one pulling the puppet strings on me, the puppet. So don't blame me, God. Blame my brain, you know, the one you gave me.

We hold people responsible for their actions here on earth to protect individual rights and maintain order in society. All of the people unfortunate enough to have been given criminal brains (by you, God) have to be punished for their crimes and separated from society. But this form of responsibility and punishment makes no sense whatsoever on what I would call the celestial level. I'm betting that even Hitler behaves himself now that he's dead. But even if he doesn't, who cares? What harm can he do? Everybody he's with is already dead.

Free will sounds like a great thing until you realize that it serves as the lynchpin for the whole concept of sin and for all of the guilt trips

attached to sin and for all of the horrific punishments that all of the mean and sick holy people hope befall their enemies in the wonderful afterlife. Once you realize that there is no such thing as free will, all of the nonsense about sin and guilt just disappears.

So that's my defense. It's not my fault, God. It's yours. After all, you created everything in the first place—you, not me, not any other human being, are responsible for everything. You're the bad guy.

If this defense doesn't work and God lowers the boom on me, so be it. At least I've had my say. I don't let anybody push me around. Bullies can go fuck themselves. I will always stand up for myself. I do it now while I'm alive, and I'll do it, too, if given the chance, when I'm dead—come hell or high water.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY

There is one woman that the Catholic Church absolutely loves—you might even say adores. That's Mary, the Mother of God, i.e., the Mother of Jesus. So there's this huge inverse relationship between Mary and just about every other woman who ever lived. Mary is venerated, while women throughout history have been denigrated by the Catholic Church. But here's the thing: Is Mary really a woman? It's kind of hard to think of her that way. She's really more like a goddess.

First of all, we really don't know anything about her. As I've pointed out, the Gospels were written anywhere from sixty to more than a hundred years after Jesus was born, and there are only a few references in them to Mary anyway. What's more, there are a number of scenes where, as I've noted, there is no credible source. Almost all of the scenes involving Mary before Jesus was born or when he was a child come from Luke's Gospel:

- The angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she will be impregnated by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Messiah.
- Mary visits Elizabeth, who will be the mother of John the Baptist, and recites a formally constructed hymn of praise, the Magnificat.
- She gives birth to Jesus. Shepherds and angels show up.

- Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for a purification ceremony.
- Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve, somehow leave without him and have to go back to get him. When they find Jesus and Mary tells him how worried they were, Jesus cops an attitude and says that she should have known that he had to be out on his own preaching and teaching.

None of these scenes appears in the other Gospels. The Angel Gabriel's visit to Joseph in a dream to inform him of Mary's impregnation by the Holy Spirit, the visit of the Wise Men, the flight to Egypt and the return to Nazareth are from Matthew's Gospel. In John's Gospel we have the story of the wedding feast of Cana, and Mary tells Jesus to fix the wine problem. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell of an incident where Mary and Jesus' brothers come to where he is preaching and wish to see him, but Jesus is not interested. He says that his disciples are his mother and brothers. (Note: There is a debate over what the relationship of these so-called "brothers" was to Jesus. There is of course no debate about it in the Catholic Church. They maintain Mary's perpetual virginity and say that the "brothers" were Jesus' cousins.)

The only other appearance of Mary in the Gospels is at Jesus' crucifixion. That's according to John. The other three Gospels don't say that she was there. That's it. She's mentioned once in Acts. She's in the room with the disciples when they replace Judas with Mathias. She is never mentioned again. Like Joseph, she just disappears.

When you think about it, it makes sense that Joseph and Mary both have limited roles in the Gospels. Joseph isn't Jesus' father—that's

God, the Father and/or the Holy Spirit since he's the one who impregnated Mary. Joseph is just there at the beginning as a kind of foster father or protector. After that, he isn't needed. So he just drops out of the story. Frankly, after miraculously conceiving and then giving birth to Jesus, Mary isn't needed either. Jesus had to have a mother because, well, everybody has one. In his case, apparently she had to be a virgin. The Catholic Church goes even further and says that she had to be born free of original sin too—that's the Immaculate Conception—and she had to be absolutely perfect and free of sin for her entire life as well. So Mary fills this goddess-like maternal role, but beyond that she's extraneous to the story and to Jesus' mission. He certainly sees it that way since he rebuffs her at the temple when he's twelve and when she approaches him while he's preaching to his disciples.

Fortunately the Catholic Church does step in to give Mary a sendoff befitting the goddess that she is. On the basis of absolutely nothing, the church decided that Mary was assumed into heaven. Assumed. That's what they call it. Does anybody know what that means? How can you be assumed into anything? Does that mean that when she died, her body just disappeared? It just evaporated and went to heaven? Or did Mary never even die in the first place? Was it just sort of time for her to go—and she went? Did she float off into the sky like Jesus did when he ascended into heaven? Or did she have a kind of limo service at her disposal, like Elijah did when he was picked up by the fiery horses with their fiery chariot? I guess we'll just never know.

I also think it's extremely odd that the church waited until 1950 to decide that Mary was assumed into heaven—at least they waited that long to declare infallibly that it is an article of faith. They also waited until 1854 to declare her Immaculate Conception an article of faith. If they were both true, what's up with the incredible delay?

In any event, you do have to give Mary credit. She must have

been really annoyed that she only had a cameo role in the Gospels. But, boy, has she been making up for it ever since. Over the centuries she's made more miraculous appearances in more places around the world to more children and mentally ill, delusional people than anybody else. It's not even close. Nobody has come back to us from the other side—in Mary's case you can't say back from the dead—more than she has. I'll bet she's appeared tens of thousands of times. So-called Marian experts have estimated that there have been more than 20,000 Marian apparitions in the last 1,000 years. I'm sure though that nobody knows the actual number. Just think of all the times Mary appeared and people decided to keep it to themselves. I know I would.

There's another nice thing about Mary's appearances. Every time she appears somewhere and the appearance becomes famous, Mary gets a new name. How's that for recognition!

Here are some of Mary's most famous appearances:

Our Lady of Fatima: Hey! That's the name of the elementary school that I went to when I was a kid. Anyway, here's the incredible story: On May 13, 1917, in Fatima, Portugal, Mary appeared to three children—ages seven, nine and ten—while they were tending sheep. This was the first of six monthly appearances—all on the 13th day of the month. According to the oldest child, Lúcia Santos, Mary told the children that they should do penance and make sacrifices. As a result the children engaged in acts of self-mortification, such as flagellation, binding and refusing to drink water. These “sacrifices” are supposedly pleasing to God. They persuade him to forgive dead sinners, reduce their sentence in Purgatory and let them into heaven sooner. Mary also gave the children three secrets, which were to be revealed to the world at a later date.

The monthly apparitions drew huge crowds. There was apparently

an expectation that Mary would produce a miracle at some point as proof of her appearances. In October, Lúcia told people in the crowd to look at the sun. Lots of people stared into the sun. They reported that the sun then behaved unusually. It changed color, spun like a wheel and danced around in the sky. While the sun was dancing, the children reported seeing, not only Mary, but Jesus and Joseph too. This was the last of Mary's appearances at Fatima. Also, I don't know if it was embarrassed by its performance or what the story is, but there is no evidence that the sun ever danced again.

The church investigated the apparitions and declared them "worthy of belief." That is the rather curious phrase they use when they decide that it's OK for people to believe that miraculous events have occurred. The two younger children, Jacinta and Francisco, died in the Spanish flu epidemic at the ages of nine and ten, respectively, and were beatified by Pope John Paul II in 2000.

Lúcia became a nun and continued to have apparitions of Mary throughout her life. On at least one occasion she also had an apparition of Jesus. He taught her two prayers and gave her another secret message. So far as I know, the content of Jesus' message has never been made public. Lúcia revealed the first two secret messages of Fatima in 1941. Message number one was a vision of hell. Message number two basically said that people should devote themselves to the Immaculate Heart of Mary to help out dead souls and that the world should repent or God would send a war to punish everybody. Apparently that was World War II. Mary was particularly interested in making sure that the people of Russia consecrated themselves to her Immaculate Heart. If they didn't, she said that lots of people would be killed and entire nations would be annihilated—sounds like a prediction of nuclear war. Thank God that hasn't happened yet.

In 2000 Pope John Paul II revealed the third secret of Fatima. It

was essentially an apocalyptic vision in which an angel repeatedly shouts the word, “Penance” and the Pope, bishops and priests are martyred. Conspiracy theories have grown up claiming that this was not the real secret message or maybe only part of the secret message and that the church is refusing to make public the transcription of an apocalyptic message from Mary.

Lucia died in 2005 at the age of 97. In 2008 Pope Benedict XVI waived the five-year waiting period and began Lucia’s beatification process.

Our Lady of Lourdes: In 1858 in Lourdes, France, Mary appeared repeatedly to Bernadette Soubirous, a fourteen-year-old girl. The appearances took place by a cave. When word spread about the apparitions, water was drawn from a nearby spring and distributed to sick and disabled people. There were many reported cures. People travel to Lourdes to this very day to be cured of their ills by drinking or bathing in the water. The church has validated the apparitions and confirmed many of the cures. Bernadette died in 1879 at the age of 35. She was canonized in 1933 by Pope Pius XI. You can buy a small bottle of Lourdes water for just \$24.99 at www.directfromlourdes.com/. The bottle is inscribed with a beautiful 3D plaque that shows Bernadette kneeling before Mary. The site maintains that you are purchasing authentic Lourdes water and that it is fresh and safe to drink.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel: According to tradition, or maybe I should say, legend has it, that around the middle of the 13th century Mary appeared in Cambridge, England, to Simon Stock, a Carmelite monk. She told him that if you are wearing a brown scapular when you die, you are sure of going to heaven. Later a belief developed that if you died wearing the brown scapular, Mary would personally make

sure that you got out of Purgatory really fast—actually the Saturday after you died. So, if at all possible, it obviously would work out best if you died really late on a Friday evening. I didn't even know that they had days of the week in the afterlife. Actually even the church doubts that this apparition ever occurred, but it still highly recommends wearing a brown scapular, and Simon Stock is still a saint. A scapular originally referred to a sleeveless cloth garment that monks wore over their heads, and it really wasn't all that fashionable. It looked a little, well, monkish. But that's changed, and now it's just a small cloth neck-lace, so you can wear a scapular all of the time without anybody even knowing about it, no problem. That way you make sure you keep your ticket to heaven with you at all times.

Our Lady of Guadalupe: In 1531 Mary appeared to Juan Diego in the desert near Mexico City. She wanted to let him know that she'd like a church built there. Despite doubts that Juan Diego existed, he was canonized in 2002.

Our Lady of Laus: From 1664 to 1718, in Saint-Étienne-le-Laus, France, Mary repeatedly appeared to Benoîte Rencurel, a shepherd. The Vatican approved the apparitions in 2008. In 2009 Benoîte was declared "Venerable."

Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal: In 1830, Mary appeared to Catherine Labouré in a convent in Paris. Catherine had previously seen apparitions of St. Vincent and Jesus. In the first encounter with Mary, Catherine heard her speak to her. In her second encounter Mary gave Catherine the design for a medal. Catherine was canonized in 1947.

Our Lady of Good Help: In 1859 Mary appeared in Bay Settlement, Wisconsin, to Adele Brise, a Belgian immigrant. Her message was to pray for the conversion of sinners. In 2010 the bishop of Green Bay approved the apparition, but it has not yet received formal Vatican approval.

Our Lady of Hope: In 1871 Mary appeared to a group of children in Pontmain, France. They saw her floating in the sky. At one point a banner appeared at her feet with a message about the importance of prayer. The town was about to be invaded by the Prussian army, but immediately after the apparition, the army inexplicably turned back. The church has officially approved this apparition.

Our Lady of Akita: In 1973 in a remote area outside of Akita, Japan, Mary appeared to Sister Agnes Katsuko Sasagawa. Mary's message was to pray the rosary or bad things will happen. In addition to the apparition a statue of Mary started to cry. The crying was televised nationally. Over a six-year period the statue cried 101 times. I really wish somebody would find a way to cheer up that statue. The statue also got the stigmata, i.e., its hands had wounds like the crucified Christ. Sister Agnes supposedly got the stigmata too. In 1988 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger declared the apparition and the weeping statue "worthy of belief."

Our Lady of Cuapa: In 1980, Mary appeared repeatedly in Cuapa, Nicaragua, during the civil war between the Contras and the Sandinista government, to Bernardo Martinez, a man who worked at the local church. Before the first apparition Bernardo saw the statue of Mary in the church light up by itself. When Mary appeared, she told Bernardo to pray the rosary, promote peace and burn bad books. I wonder what

Mary thinks of the First Amendment? Anyway, based on this information the auxiliary Bishop of Managua, who was pro-Contra, burned books associated with the Sandinista government.

All of these apparitions create new devotions to Mary. There are also numerous devotions not generated by her appearances. These include devotions to:

Our Lady of Sorrows:

According to www.churchsupplywarehouse.com this devotional title along with “the Sorrowful Mother or Mother of Sorrows (Latin: *Mater Dolorosa*), Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows or Our Lady of the Seven Dolours are names by which the Blessed Virgin Mary is referred to in relation to sorrows in her life. Under this title, she is the patron saint of Slovakia, the state of Mississippi, the Congregation of Holy Cross [and] Mola di Bari, Italy.” Mary’s Seven Sorrows are:

1. The prophecy of Simeon
2. The flight into Egypt
3. The loss of the Child Jesus in the temple. (I’m sorry, Mary, but I still can’t figure out how you and Joseph went home without Jesus. Shouldn’t you know if your child is with you or not?)
4. The meeting of Jesus and Mary on the Way of the Cross (Sorry again, but I can’t find this meeting in the Gospels.)
5. The Crucifixion
6. The taking down of the Body of Jesus from the Cross
7. The burial of Jesus

You can buy a picture (artist's rendering, of course) of Our Lady of Sorrows from www.churchsupplywarehouse.com for \$125. Check for prices on pictures of the other devotions.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help (aka Our Lady of Perpetual Succor):

This devotion is based on a painted wooden icon that depicts Mary holding the Baby Jesus. There are two angels floating around in the picture as well. They're both holding onto instruments used in Jesus' torture and execution. The Archangel Michael is holding a lance and a sponge, while the Archangel Gabriel is holding a cross and nails. The angels have scared the Baby Jesus, and he has run to his mother for help. You can get a high-resolution JPEG of this image from www.restoredtraditions.com for just \$15; a higher resolution JPEG is \$50. They have JPEGs available for most of the devotions.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary: This is a devotion to Mary that focuses on the spiritual life of Mary, her perfect love for God and her love for her son, Jesus. As the Immaculate Heart, Mary is depicted with her heart exposed, like the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The heart is typically pierced by seven wounds and wrapped in roses. The Immaculate Heart appears on the Miraculous Medal. On the medal the heart is pierced by a sword.

The New Eve: This is a new devotion to Mary as an expectant mother. There is a statue portraying Mary as the New Eve in which Mary is well into her last trimester. Go to the St. Anthony's Guild of Rutherford, NJ website at www.stanthonyguild.org and take a look at the statue. I don't know. I'm not usually attracted to pregnant women, but I think Mary is looking pretty sexy here. I'm just being honest.
www.anthonian.org/resources/marythe-new-eve

Our Lady, Star of the Sea: This is a devotion to Mary as a guide to fishermen and others traveling on the sea. There's an Our Lady Star of the Sea church in Staten Island. Actually, there are quite a few Our Lady Star of the Sea churches around the country. Some of them use the original Latin title, *Stella Maris*. There's one in Philly—my old hometown.

I should add that Our Lady protects other types of travel too. For example, Our Lady of Loreto protects pilots, so that should help out all of us frequent flyers. FYI: “Loreto” refers to the house in which Mary was born. How's that? Well, here's the explanation c/o www.catholicfire.blogspot.com: “The title Our Lady of Loreto refers to the Holy House of Loreto, the house in which Mary was born, and where the Annunciation occurred, and to an ancient statue of Our Lady which is found there. Tradition says that a band of angels scooped up the little house from the Holy Land, and transported it first to Tersato, Dalmatia in 1291, Reananti in 1294, and finally to Loreto, Italy where it has been for centuries. It was this flight that led to her patronage of people involved in aviation.” Actually that little explanation clears up everything, including why Our Lady of Loreto is the patron of pilots. It's because angels flew her house to Loreto, Italy. OK.

There are lots of other devotional names of Mary. These include Mary as the Seat of Wisdom (the Throne of Wisdom), the Ark of the New Covenant, the Mediatrix, the Co-Redemptrix, Virgin of Tenderness, Holy Virgin of Virgins, Cause of Our Joy, Queen of Peace, Our Lady of All Nations, Our Lady of Victory; Mary, Help of Christians and Our Lady of the Rosary. I could go on, but I won't.

Of course, the primary devotion to Mary is praying the rosary. According to Pope Leo XII, known as the “Rosary Pope” because he issued eleven encyclicals and five apostolic letters on the rosary: “the Rosary is the most excellent form of prayer and the most efficacious

means of attaining eternal life. It is the remedy for all our evils, the root of all our blessings. There is no more excellent way of praying.”

There are numerous religious orders of nuns, priests and brothers dedicated to Mary. These include the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; the Marist Fathers and Brothers; the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary; the Marianists; the Congregation of Marians of the Immaculate Conception; the Maryknoll Sisters; the Franciscan Friars of Mary Immaculate; the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate; the Brothers of Mercy of Our Lady of Perpetual Help; and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

There are also numerous lay organizations that are dedicated to Mary. These include the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, the Legion of Mary, the Sodality of Our Lady, Our Lady's Rosary Makers, the Secular Order of the Servants of Mary and the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites. In case, you're wondering, "discalced" means "barefoot." This was St. Teresa of Avila's idea. She thought that going barefoot would signify a return to how the original Carmelites went about their business and that it would represent an additional level of austerity and self-sacrifice. Obviously Teresa was right. Just try running out "discalced" to your mailbox in the middle of a big February snowstorm, and you'll get the point right away.

So what can I say to sum it all up? I would simply say that there is definitely something about Mary. Some people get mad when you say she's adored. They say the Catholic Church doesn't support adoration of Mary. Adoration is only for God. Well, whatever you want to call it, Mary is giving her Son, Jesus, and God, the Father, a pretty good run for their money when it comes to adoration.

And just think: When Mary miraculously conceived Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, she was probably no more than twelve years old.