

Spiritual Blackmail: My Journey Through A Catholic Cult



Sherri Schettler

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SHERRI SCHETTLER

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DEDICATION

I write to give a message of hope to anyone struggling or feeling stuck in a situation, and to show that it is possible to find our faith, overcome fear, recover from trauma, and go on to be a successful and contributing member of society. The idea to share my story began in 2002 when I read the mind boggling report in the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* about “ligature strangulation,” and “beads” embedded into two women’s necks, that a man had used to “control them while he raped both.”¹ The article made me keenly aware that but for the sheer grace of God the headline could have been about *me*- about my body found in a park at midnight. I had once been a member in the women’s group and understood why they would be willing to be out in the dark for the “cause.” The disturbing indelible images the tragic news left in my mind served the good purpose of keeping me motivated to complete this project. My work here is a cautionary tale that reveals how easily the human mind can be influenced for good or ill, and in this regard, how the power of charismatic people should never be underestimated.

I dedicate this book in memory of my dad who encouraged me to see it to the end and who assured me, “It needs to be told, Sherri.” In telling my story, I anticipate the great personal bonus of simplifying my personal relationships. Because of its complexity, I’ve never felt comfortable sharing it around the water cooler, so to speak. Now, friends and strangers alike can read and take from my story what they wish. I have found already that, just by writing this book, I am in a different space in my life and free to move on in my life’s journey.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This memoir describes my experience of events surrounding my involvement with Francis Schuckardt and his Fatima Crusade, later known as the Tridentine Latin Rite Church and, currently, the Congregation of Mary Immaculate Queen. Although I believe my story reveals experiences, horrors, and challenges common to many who also were ensnared by Schuckardt's mesmerizing personality and spiritual domination, I do not claim to speak for anyone else. It is not my intention to cause harm. I have made every effort to be accurate about events and persons described here. I have retained the names of those organizations and persons whose names and histories are a matter of public record; most other names have been changed. For the sake of a better story flow, the timing of some non-essential events has been slightly modified. Some characters in the story are compressions of people I knew. I offer my apologies for any unintended inaccuracies in my recollection of the people and events described here.

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INTRODUCTION

In the decades before the Second Vatican Council, American Catholics were, if not a completely homogeneous group, a fairly cohesive faith community based on common traditions, dogmas, and doctrines. They all agreed that the Pope was the head of the Church, Christ's representative on earth and a direct descendant of St. Peter. Everyone knew the rules, essentially understood the structure, and generally trusted their pastors, bishops, and the Pope. Apart from progressive theologians and a few intellectually curious individuals, no one questioned the status quo; it had simply been handed down through the centuries and carried by immigrants and missionaries to North America.

Parish boundaries determined where a family worshipped and where children went to school. Attendance at daily mass and the reception of Holy Communion guaranteed holiness and the high regard of fellow Catholics. Nuns and priests were treated with respect. In many families, the greatest blessing was to have a son called to the priesthood or to have a daughter enter the convent. Some even thought that having a priest in the family guaranteed entrance into heaven for the rest of the family.

Five hundred years before, to protect herself from the threat of doctrinal error, the Church had canonized the liturgies, laws, and language. Although this had succeeded in preserving the Church's integrity throughout the following centuries, it now rendered the Church inadequate to cope with the challenges to faith unique to the Twentieth Century. The Church had become, in great part, a Westernized institution, whose antiquated legalities and arcane rituals had little appeal for the globalized, modern world. The harsh anathemas were a juxtaposition to Christians of the Orthodox and

Protestant varieties, promising little hope of reconciliation and eventual unity. If the Church was to continue as the saving Church of Christ for all men for all times, a new *modus operandi* was desperately needed.²

In response to this need, a number of theologians moved beyond the simple faith of the Catholics in the pews and began to question the efficacy of these laws and rituals, and the formerly accepted interpretations of many of the Church's doctrines. They urged a return to the pristine theology of Scripture and of the Church Fathers for a truer understanding of the life of Jesus, his family and friends, his teaching and death; in effect, they began to question much of what had been accepted by Roman Catholics throughout the preceding centuries.

Against this backdrop, the saintly Roncalli ascended the throne of Peter and took the name of John XXIII. With divinely guided insight, Roncalli recognized the challenges facing the modern Church, and within his first few months in the Vatican, the new Pope announced his intention to convene a worldwide council to, as he put it, open the windows of the Church and let in some fresh air.³

This was exciting news for many Catholics even if, at the outset, they could not imagine how the Second Vatican Council would affect their deepest beliefs, as well as their relationships with their families and friends and the Church itself. Sadly, the Church had not remained unscathed by the radical secularism that was undermining the very foundations of Christian civilization. Many priests and bishops saw the changes of the Council as a vehicle to implement their progressive ideologies within their flocks and parishes. Both good and bad effects, then, of Vatican II filtered into parishes around the world as the Latin mass was replaced by the local vernacular. In the United States, the new English mass was accompanied by contemporary music, replacing familiar hymns and organ melodies. Guitars and drums and an occasional flute became the norm. In many parishes, irreverent antics began to replace the former solemn rubrics, causing scandal and consternation among those in attendance.

For some, the new atmosphere emanating from Vatican II was welcomed and embraced, especially by the younger crowd. Their parents and grandparents, however, experienced confusion, alarm, and a deep sense of betrayal, compounded by a lack of education concerning the nature and purpose of the changes. To them it

seemed as if the secular revolution rending the fabric of society without the Church had entered the sanctuaries within. Not until well into the pontificate of the charismatic Wojtyla (John Paul II) would the dust stirred up by the “fresh air” of the Council settle. By then, unfortunately, many of these disappointed Catholics had decided that abandoning the Church of their childhood was the only answer.

My parents found themselves in this quandary as it became clearer to them that the “new” Church did not satisfy their spiritual needs. The choices they made had significant and long-term effects on their whole family, and especially on me, their daughter, although it was really never a question of right or wrong, for that determination was an individual matter that would play out over time and always would be subject to revision.

What follows is my story and how my parents’ decisions directed my life on a certain path, the effects of which I am still dealing with as an adult Catholic in the Twenty-First century. This book recounts what led me eventually away from that path, and it recounts, especially, the lessons I learned through those decades of a semi-cloistered existence.

At the outset, I wish to state that, despite the pain of separation from my family, my struggles with anger and confusion, and my ultimate disillusionment with those whom I had held up as spiritual leaders, I am grateful for the years I spent steeped in spiritual endeavors, especially the enormous number of hours dedicated to contemplation and prayer, alone as well as with others. I cherish the camaraderie I experienced with people who believed and sacrificed and rejoiced along with me. They witnessed to me that the joy of the Holy Spirit can flourish even in the most tangled thickets.

Through the years on this path, the periods of darkness and doubt were interspersed with amazing experiences of joy and faith, which I took to be God’s way of encouraging me on this path. Though I occasionally wonder how my life could have turned out differently, I am who I am today because of how I lived in the setting in which I was placed. God was there. He heard my prayers. I am filled with wonder and gratitude.

1

FINDING HOPE

On a hot day in late June 2001, I was happily on my way to the Saturn dealership in Aurora, Colorado. At age 40, I would be buying my first car—actually the first major purchase of my entire life. I had worked two jobs and rented a basement for a whole year to save enough money for the down payment. I couldn't afford many extra bells and whistles, but I could afford the ABS brakes and there would be zero APR on the sale. Of course, I had no idea what APR and ABS meant until I made a quick call to a friend for clarification.

The salesman, an affable middle-aged man named Dave, was happy to show me cars in my price range. It didn't take me long to pick out the car I wanted, a little green one. Dave asked if I'd like to have my picture taken beside the car. I immediately thought of my mother and how a happy photo of me would reassure her that I was okay.

While I sat in the dealership lobby flipping through brochures and daydreaming about the independence my own wheels would give me, the salesman disappeared behind an office door with the paperwork. He returned a few minutes later scratching his head and waving papers at me. "There's a problem," he announced, looking at me intently. "Nothing came up on your credit history. It's not a *bad* history—there's just *no* history at all."

Fortunately, I understood the "no credit" problem because of my first banking experience earlier that year while applying for my first credit card. So instead of panicking, my playful side kicked in.

"Oh, no credit?" I chirped, trying not to smile. "That could be because I was 'number eighty-nine' for twenty years."

Dave responded with a paced, "Okay," giving me the floor to say more.

"Of course, I had no paying job during my confinement," I said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Okay," Dave said slowly, sitting down across from me and leaning forward with full attention.

I smiled as I delivered another clue: "I wore the same clothing as everyone else, and we each had a cell."

At this point, his jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide. Suddenly I realized that all my clues had sounded like prison life, and I certainly didn't want to give that impression. Despite all that had happened in the convent, I felt grateful for all the beautiful things it had brought into my life.

"Just kidding," I laughed. "But would you believe I spent the last twenty years in a convent on the top of a mountain?"

Dave's eyes opened even wider. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

"Not kidding," I said with a straight face.

He stared at me for what seemed like a very long time. Perhaps he was trying to picture me in a nun's habit, or he might not have been familiar with the long traditional garb from the Middle Ages that I had worn in the convent. He looked at me in my chic street clothes, and I could see his confusion.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "I've never met anyone like you before, especially here trying to buy a car. You seem so normal. Am I *really* talking to an ex-nun??"

I sensed that Dave was ready to ask a list of questions, and I began to wonder if my joking around had been such a good idea. Would I end up alerting him to the convent's negative publicity in the recently published *The Smoke of Satan*?⁴ My shoulders tightened. How much more would I have to explain to this guy before I could leave here with my car?

I acknowledged that I truly had been a nun (one of the good ones, not the knuckle-cracking kind). To my great relief, Dave said nothing further about it during the remainder of the transaction. He gently explained to me that the only way I could buy the car was to have someone co-sign with me, then saw my confusion at the term "co-sign." I had a vague idea of why another signer might be needed, but I wasn't sure. Life outside the walls was still baffling to me.

Dave took time to explain everything clearly and carefully to make sure that I understood. I was grateful for his kindness, and he

reminded me of many other people I had met who, understanding that my background had not prepared me for twentieth-century living, had taken the time to educate me.

But now I needed to find a co-signer. Before shopping, I had reviewed my budget with some friends and was confident that I could make the payments. After all, I had spent decades living a life of sacrifice, so denying myself to make car payments did not seem hard to do. But now I was faced with what I dreaded most: asking my parents for help.

Ever since leaving the convent the summer before and living on my own in Denver, I continuously assured my parents in phone calls that God was blessing me day by day with confidence and opportunities for growth. I didn't want them to worry about me. I also wished I didn't have to ask them for help, because they had been doling out money for me throughout my boarding school years, and even for my personal needs and health insurance while I was in the convent. Now that I was on my own, I was determined not to be a further financial burden. I realized, however, that if I wanted the car, I had no option other than to dial their number. Dave moved the phone toward me and left the area to give me privacy.

"Hi, Mom," I began. As always, her voice was lilting, and she immediately began asking how I was doing.

I focused on all good news in the most cheerful voice I could muster. "I found another basement apartment closer to work, and it'll be the same kind of arrangement where I get to do chores for part of the rent! And I'm also getting a raise. I guess I'm doing a pretty good job as a teaching assistant."

Her voice reassured me, and she seemed convinced that I was okay.

I moved quickly to the topic of the call: "I've saved enough money to buy my very first car! I'm actually sitting here in the dealership."

"That's wonderful! Congratulations! What kind of car are you getting? And what color is it?"

"It's a cute little green Saturn with great gas mileage! But there's one problem: I need a co-signer. Are you and dad able to do that for me? I don't feel comfortable asking any of my new friends for that kind of favor."

Mom was quiet for a second, and then asked, "Can you call me back in a few minutes? I'd like to discuss this with your dad." My

parents always took time to discuss important things together. I was hopeful.

When I called back, my mom reiterated her joy. “Your dad and I are very proud of you, Sherri, for working so hard and saving up enough to do this— after everything you’ve been through. We want to do this for you. If you think you can’t make a payment sometime, though, please let us know so we can pay it. We don’t want our credit affected.”

What a relief! “Mom, Dad, I *really* appreciate this and I promise to let you know if I run into a problem with money.” As it turned out, I never had to call them about missing a payment.

Within a week I was the happy owner of the dark green, four-door Saturn. I had chosen green because it’s my favorite color and also because I like to attach special meanings to ordinary things. Even though my new path outside the cloister was steep and rocky, I felt like a little lamb, safe in the green pastures of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The sight of my green car each day helped me to focus on the many positive things in my life. My parents had always named their vehicles, and I named my new little motor friend *Hope*.

2

A HAPPY CATHOLIC FAMILY

March 13, 1961. Hinsdale, Illinois.

I was born on the cusp of the great upheaval of twentieth-century Catholicism, a battle between good and evil, between orthodoxy and the uncertain modern theology. While the Catholic world was focused on Rome, my mother and I were involved in a battle of our own: Both of us were trying to survive the effects of her burst appendix during the second term of pregnancy. I came dangerously close to dying in the womb at six months.

Overcoming the odds, I entered the world healthy on the feast of Our Lady of Miracles, a Portuguese Marian celebration dating back to the 1700s. My normal birth was so unusual, given my mother's condition, that it was written up in the medical journals of 1962.

I took my place in a loving Catholic family, the youngest of five children under age seven. We lived in a large, two-story home where colorful pictures of saints decorated the white walls. A two-foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary stood out among the simple furnishings. I had a little room at the top of the stairs, where my mom or dad tucked me in at night, reminding me to thank God for all my blessings and to pray for the starving kids in Asia.

In our large Irish-Polish Catholic family, one of my parents' first orders of business was to dress me in a little white gown that covered my body from neck to tiny toes and carry me across the street to St. Isaac Jogues Church to be sprinkled with holy water in Baptism. My parents had been students at St. Isaac Jogues Elementary School, so I was bound to become a regular there, along with my siblings.

My father worked for the U.S. Post Office during his entire career. My mother's job was staying home and raising the kids. We

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never had much money, but all of us learned from our parents to look at the bright side of life and to be thankful for what we had. I was well acquainted with the sticky comfort of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, the scratchy wool of Salvation Army blankets, and my big sister's baggy hand-me-downs. Still, life was good.

My dad liked to go for walks or runs around the neighborhood, and I think he enjoyed it more when one of my siblings or me joined him. He sang a lot and often made up bizarre stories or asked us funny questions to make us kids laugh. "Would you rather find three hundred dollars near a poisonous snake or see it floating in the middle of a large pool of quick sand?" was such a question. And he modeled his Catholic faith for us.

My mother, also solidly grounded in her faith, reminded us often that charity begins at home. We were expected to treat each other with kindness. This strong foundation of love gave me the strength I would need to endure the trials that were to come.

The winds of change had begun to blow through the Church, shaking up its longstanding traditions. Despite their strong faith, my parents were ill prepared for what lay ahead.

3

EARLY INFLUENCES

In 1963, when I was two years old and too young to notice, the widely beloved Pope John XXIII died of cancer. Upon the death of the Pontiff, the Second Vatican Council was closed, according to Church law. Upon his election by the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Giovanni Montini chose the name Paul VI and soon re-opened the Council so its work could be completed.

Scholars and professors, theologians and historians, Vatican officials, priests, bishops and cardinals, liberals and conservatives in Church matters—these and many more, including observers from other faiths, gathered in Rome from around the world. Their primary concern was to clarify and protect the central teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and to make them more understandable and relevant to the faithful in the modern world.

One of the first Vatican II changes to be implemented at the parish level concerned the liturgy. The “fresh wind” of the Council blew the Latin mass out the door and swirled the priests around to face the people rather than the altar. The Council affirmed a new spirit of ecumenism that embraced former “enemies”—Protestants, Jews, and Muslims, for example—recognizing them as sisters and brothers on different paths to the one God. These, the Council affirmed, were in real, though imperfect, communion with Catholics, and the Church now would actively engage in steps that would lead to reconciliation and unity.⁵

These and other changes came as a shock to many of the Catholic faithful, including my parents. They cringed at the sound of drums and guitars filling the sanctuary that previously had been reserved for sacred hymns and chants. They recoiled from shaking hands with

strangers at the Kiss of Peace and didn't like the introduction of clapping in church after the priest made certain announcements.

I was too young to appreciate my parents' consternation. But looking back, I can see how they tried to protect me and prepare me for the future. Our life at home continued as before, despite the initial concerns about religion, with the focus being on our growth and development.

My dad decided that I should learn to swim and, one day, while our family was vacationing at a lake, he tossed me into water over my head, all the while cheerfully yelling, "Swim! Swim!"

I made it back to his waiting arms without tears or panic. I felt completely safe with my dad and always assumed he had my best interests at heart. This feeling of trust was a great gift to me, and, as a bonus, I have loved swimming since that day.

My mother's special way of spending time with me at an early age was to take me on her lap and teach me the alphabet. She closed the family room door, so it was just the two of us, and brought out the magnetic alphabet board with brightly colored letters. She taught me the letters and sounds, and I soon learned to write words and to compose short sentences for her to read. I basked in her undivided attention, and my progress in language skills gave me a sense of accomplishment.

The feeling of security that my parents instilled in me and the cushion of their love paralleled the sense of refuge they had always found in their faith.

In the summer of 1967, our family moved to San Diego, where my parents bought a house on stilts on the edge of a canyon. The landscape of towering eucalyptus trees with a carpet of nasturtiums was breathtaking. My three older brothers, Alan, Kevin, and Patrick, and my older sister Sheila and I spent as much time as possible outside, building forts and sliding down the hills on flattened cardboard boxes.

All five of us attended St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School in Mission Hills. My mother was thrilled that my teacher was a nun, often saying "They belong to Christ." My only memory from Sister Grace's class is the horror at looking down at the little puddle at my feet. Sister had made me wait until prayers were over before letting me go to the bathroom. I couldn't wait.

We called my grandparents Gammy and Gampy, and when they occasionally came from Chicago to visit, we welcomed them eagerly. My parents took them and all five of us kids on special drives in our yellow station wagon to see the places we loved in San Diego. An added treat along the way was an ice cream cone. Once when my grandparents came for Christmas, the gifts spread across the entire living room.

My grandmother's piety made more of an impression on me than anything I can recall from my brief time at St. Vincent's. She sent me greeting cards for every special occasion and, along with a check, always enclosed a holy card in the envelope. One Christmas, she enclosed a plastic, glow-in-the-dark rosary, which I kept near my bed for years, taking it down now and then to make sure it still glowed. She wrote in nearly every card, "You are such a cheerful girl and lucky to have a wonderful family."

These gifts and the notes of encouragement she wrote were special gifts to me. I used the prayer cards to pray for the starving kids in Asia. I prayed, too, that my grandparents would come to visit more often.

Gammy would walk with us kids through the neighborhood, encouraging us to look for lost treasures. Sometimes we went to the library or to the convenience store for candy. Her company and conversation as we walked along were almost as fun as finding a lost treasure or anticipating a treat. She asked me questions about my life, my made-up songs, what I was reading, the stories I was writing, and what I liked about school. I told her everything I could think of.

My happiness must have been evident because she often replied, "Well, that's good because you've got to do things that make you happy." I have my grandmother to thank for keeping the happiness question alive in my mind over the years.

My grandfather, Gampy, was revered by our entire extended family as storyteller par excellence. He was highly intelligent and practical, and his ingenuity had helped to save his family during the Depression. He had been a professional baseball player but never told us stories about his own life. He would capture our attention the moment he launched into an adventure story, the words colored by his strong Boston accent.

"A long time ago," he would begin, "not so very *fab* from here, there lived a happy girl and boy, but they had a problem. Would you like to hear how they solved it?"

We'd beg him to continue—which he did while handing us a can of Spanish peanuts to munch on. His tales always contained a lesson, usually about the importance of helping others: hungry orphans, lonely older people, sick children, anyone in need. Our job was to decide on the best or most clever way to get help for these unfortunate people.

"Now, Sherri," he would say after outlining the situation, "put yourself in their shoes and think 'What would I do?'"

In my mind, I became the characters he described. Once, as a beautiful pink mermaid, I rode a friendly whale to the bottom of the sea to bring up lost gold for two destitute boys in Ireland. Helping others, I learned from my grandfather, even by risking my own safety in the process, was always the right thing to do.

Sometimes Gampy challenged us with "what if?" scenarios. When he saw our puzzled looks, he'd smile and push us to think harder, always testing our ideas with his customary question: "Is that logical?" I have my grandfather to thank for those three words, which often come to mind and which served me well during the turbulent years to come.

4

EARLY CATHOLIC EDUCATION

The stilts supporting our home in Mission Hills were a source of constant worry for my parents. We heard frequent reports of houses in the area sliding down the hillside to total ruin. Just the thought of such a catastrophe was frightening. So it came as no surprise when one day, in the summer of 1969, my parents announced that we would be moving again.

We packed up our used furniture and secondhand clothes, along with the extensive religious book collection cherished by my parents. The statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, a gift to my mother from her mother, was carefully wrapped in a blanket and solemnly carried from their bedroom to the waiting moving van.

Whenever any of us kids admired the statue, she said that it had belonged to her mother, whose name was Mary. It turned out that Mary was not our mother's biological mother—a fact that she discovered, much to her shock, when she was eighteen years old. I learned about it from my dad when I was twelve and asked him why she was crying.

Her heart must have cracked the day when she found her birth certificate among her adopted mother's things. She never asked her adoptive parents about it but, in later years she and my dad spent a great deal of time and money trying to locate her birth mother, only to find out that she did not want to be contacted. That news cast a pall of sadness over the rest of my mother's life. I believe that this rejection by her birth mother led to her great devotion to the Virgin Mary, as a way of filling the void in her life and the pain in her heart.

My parents found our new ranch-style home in Imperial Beach, near San Diego and about five miles north of the Mexican border. It

was a twenty-minute walk to the beach, where our family and friends spent lots of time swimming, bodysurfing, or just walking up and down the shoreline.

Our house was relaxed and homey, and we kids had assigned chores like feeding the dogs, taking out the trash, and mowing the lawn. There was always a little sand on the floor from our frequent beach visits, and swimsuits were draped from tree branches in the yard or over the backs of chairs, giving the whole place a lived-in look.

Sometimes my dad announced that he was going to jog up to the strand leading to the city of Coronado. If I didn't feel like running, I'd wait for him on one of the jetties, watching the sea creatures, building a sandcastle, or searching for treasures along the shore.

My parents didn't have much money, although they somehow managed to scrape enough together for church and family occasions. Generally, though, we were on the lookout for bargains. My siblings and I would head to the grocery store for early morning sales where day-old bread was sold at deep discount. We waited with our cart, ready to zoom in the second the doors opened.

We were not poor enough to qualify for free lunches at school, but we couldn't afford to buy lunches either. My mom packed sack lunches, usually containing a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and an apple.

On Tuesday nights, my mother took us to devotions at St. Charles Church, where, in addition to prayers and songs, Father Juarez led the Rosary. The church had been built in the late 60s in a modern architectural style. Even the statues were modernized, so different from the traditional statue of Mary in our home. Nevertheless, the church felt serene and peaceful to me, and I basked in the smell of incense. I was proud to be able to keep up with the rosary prayers.

One evening, as my mother was giving me a bath, she explained to me that I would be receiving Jesus at church the following morning. She described the little wafer that would be placed on my tongue and instructed me to reverently return to my place in the pew and pray the Our Father and Hail Mary. She practiced these prayers with me as she dribbled warm, bubbly water over my body.

I didn't understand much about this event and really hadn't concerned myself with it until that night. I knew my brothers and sisters before me had all received Jesus this way. They had each

received some sort of gift from our parents, and the whole family had gone out to celebrate.

After my bath, my mother entered my bedroom beaming as she handed me a bag of glistening white items for my "special day." There was a white chain rosary and a shiny, white zippered bag with an embossed cross on it, a pair of white lacy ankle socks, white patent leather shoes, a knee-length white dress, and a white veil. Everything was brand new—a real treat for me because second-hand clothes were the norm in our family.

"This is one of the few times in your life when you will wear all white, because it's so special to receive Holy Communion for the first time," my mother said, her voice cracking.

The next day, I stood solemnly before the altar in my white outfit. I received the host on my tongue and returned to my place, where I began to pray as instructed. I was shocked when the girl next to me spoke.

"Oooh, it tastes weird," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I believed I was talking to Jesus, and her comment made me feel badly for him. I opened my eyes and cocked my head toward her. "We're supposed to say our prayers," I admonished in a harsh whisper.

During those years, we took a number of road trips to various places such as San Francisco, the Redwood Forest, Palm Springs, and Hollywood. When we visited the famous Grauman's Chinese Theater, I put my hand into Doris Day's cement handprint.

As usual, my father took the opportunity to instill an attitude in me that I could do whatever I wanted in life: "Because you're pretty and have a good personality and lots of talent, especially as a singer, you could be as famous and successful as Doris Day."

"Really, Dad?"

"Yes, but you'll have to work hard and probably have to leave home."

This incident was seared into my memory. I now understood that it was possible to achieve whatever I desired.

What a tremendous grace it was for me to grow up in a caring family, doing so many things together. Being carried along in an atmosphere of continuous family love was something I wouldn't appreciate until years later, though. I never dreamed that my happy, carefree days in sunny California would soon be cut short by forces that would sweep over us like a tidal wave covering the shore.

5

CLOUDS FORMING

Imperial Beach was a tough city in the 1970s, with gangs and drugs permeating the community. As we kids grew older, our parents found it increasingly difficult to keep us sheltered from all the bad influences.

In seventh grade, I went to my friend Brenda's all-girl slumber party. Until then, my mother hadn't let me sleep at anyone else's home, saying that I was too young. When Brenda's party came up, I assured my mother that I would be safe, and she allowed me to go.

In the middle of the night, we sneaked out and strung toilet paper around the grounds of several houses. Just as my friends and I were finishing up a house, the lights went on and we had no time to run away. We hid, hearts pounding, behind some bushes near the front porch. It had been so much fun until that moment. But no one found us, and when we figured it was safe to come out, we ran back to Brenda's house. I don't know how my parents found out about the incident, including the fact that the police had been looking for us.

"You can't be doing these things, Sherri!" my mother warned me in a stern voice.

I told her I was sorry—and I told myself that I would have to be more careful and clever in my adventures.

My parents were constantly battling with my older siblings about their music, their friends, their parties, and staying out too late. (It would be more than forty years before they would learn that a neighbor had introduced my brother Kevin to drugs when he was only twelve!) The police even showed up at our door a few times because of the older kids' antics. By the time I was thirteen, my three

oldest siblings had moved out of our home. Sheila had her own place across town. Alan had rushed off to the Army after an early graduation. Kevin was living on the beach.

My adolescent transgressions, though minor in comparison with theirs, were mounting as well. I would tell my mom that I was going roller-skating or to the movies, and I would go, but afterward I'd hang out in the parking lot with my friends, sipping spiked soda and listening to Janis Joplin. I was starting to find notes in my locker from boys at school, and a handsome older boy with piercing, blue eyes and wavy, brown hair especially caught my eye.

My mother's reaction to any emotional matters or dilemmas we shared with her was to say, "Go ask a priest," or "Go talk to the Boss"—which we knew meant God. "If you think it's okay with Him, then it's okay with me. Just don't bring the red lights home," she often admonished, referring to the police.

When I was fourteen, I attended the weekly Confirmation preparation classes. A laywoman led the discussions while we teenagers sat on the desks in a circle. We talked about Confirmation as a way of becoming stronger members in the faith community.

On the big day, I stood in a long line, wearing the customary red robe and waiting for my turn to approach the bishop for the symbolic "slap" on the face that would remind me I must be ready to defend my faith. But at the moment when I stood before the bishop, I was thinking more about making sure that my hair fell correctly for the flashing cameras than about becoming a stronger member of the faith community. More than anything else, I thought of this event as a way to move up in the ranks. The congratulations I got afterward seemed like those I had received for my softball trophies or swim-meet ribbons.

Later that week, my mother asked me, "Sherri, what did you learn in your Confirmation class?" She obviously sensed that I didn't have a clue about the sacredness of the sacrament.

I remember joking, "Um, that I was going to get a slap in the face?"

Her mouth fell open. "Sherri, I'm serious. What did you learn about the sacrament?"

In my teenage way, I answered, "I just told you all I know." But I was remembering all of my socializing during the classes and wondering what I had missed.

She quizzed me about the prayers I was supposed to know and was shocked to learn that no one had required us to memorize the Apostles' Creed, a prayer comprising the main tenets of the Catholic faith. Sadly, she told me I should have paid more attention in class. "A soldier for Christ should know what Christ teaches," she said, but until that moment I had no sense that the sacrament involved my personal response. I hadn't thought about the battles I would face as a soldier for Christ. My mother, however, took the sacraments very seriously.

My parents were rooted in the old Catholic ways, and the changes initiated by Vatican II caused them a great deal of consternation. They were frustrated that their children did not seem to be receiving the same solid grounding in their faith that all Catholics previously shared in common. They wondered what would guide their children over life's rocky roads, especially in those days when there were so many more dangers all around.

6

A SEARCH FOR RELIGIOUS SECURITY

In the spring of 1975, my mom started looking for a parish with a more traditional mass. One Sunday, as I was getting ready for mass at St. Charles, I noticed that her car wasn't in the driveway.

"Where's Mom?" I asked my dad.

"She went downtown for mass to see if it's any different. We don't like the guitars and drums," he explained.

It turned out that she did find a church she liked better, and she stopped going to mass with the family altogether. One day, as she came out of the new church in downtown San Diego, she found a flyer on her windshield advertising a lecture by a priest from the Fatima Crusade. She decided to check it out.

"John," she said to my father afterward, "you have to come with me to hear this priest. 'I think he'll help us understand why the mass at St. Charles has changed since Vatican Two.'"

One night, after returning from one of these lectures, my parents sat on the porch talking it over. The window from the second bathroom opened onto the porch, and we often stood on the toilet, eavesdropping on their conversations. Whenever we made a slight noise, their voices got softer. But they never were completely successful in keeping their conversations private. That was the case this time.

My parents were recounting what the priests had discussed at the lecture—strange and shocking things that they never would have thought possible. According to these priests, the traditions of their beloved Church had been turned upside down by the Second Vatican Council, which had been infiltrated by evil conspirators who then seized control of the Church. But the priests claimed that there

remained a small contingent of true believers—the only real Catholics left on the planet—and they lived in Idaho.

“Wow!” I thought. “That’s pretty weird.”

Until I overheard that discussion, my religion had consisted of going to mass, occasionally saying the Rosary at Tuesday night devotions, and cherishing the religious articles given to me by my grandmother. I had given up treats during Lent and prayed for starving children every night, but I’d never heard anything like this before. And why were my parents so conflicted about their faith?

“It’s really hard to believe that the Pope isn’t the true pope,” my dad said, adding, “My parents will never believe this.” He was right about that. They never did.

The Fatima people put a big emphasis on devotions to the Virgin Mary, and it was at about this time that the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which had been kept locked in my parents’ bedroom, was brought out and given a prominent spot on a dresser in the living room.

About once a week during the month of May, my dad called the family together and, on our knees before the statue, we prayed about the strange things the people in the Fatima Crusade were saying: “We need to pray the Rosary, asking for guidance about God’s will concerning the Church. It’s very hard to swallow that the Church is in trouble and that Pope Paul the Sixth is not a true pope.”

It wasn’t long before the Fatima priests, who regularly said mass and lectured in the San Diego area, began urging my parents to stop attending mass at St. Charles. “You need to stop going to the modern mass,” Brother Denis Chicoine counseled my father. “Instead of going to church on Sunday, just stay home and read the mass prayers.”

I could see my dad’s anxiety on his face as he said to us, “Let’s pray that we will discern God’s will in this very difficult situation.”

Though we had just learned that satanic conspirators were in charge of the Vatican and that our beloved Pope Paul might be the antichrist, our family was preparing to celebrate my grandparents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary. Any problems with the Church were going to have to take a back seat until after the big celebration. It was time for a road trip to Chicago for the big family reunion.

As a typical teenager, I wondered if my relatives would admire my curvy figure, golden tan, and long, blond hair. After several years of

being apart, I was both apprehensive and excited about seeing these family members.

The week we spent there was every bit as fun as I had hoped for. The party was a blast, especially for us younger ones, who were sneaking sips from the grown-ups' cocktails. The crash-course, ballroom dance lessons my dad had given me at home paid off as I whirled around the floor with confidence and reveled in the compliments from my dance partners. I felt special to be part of the huge crowd rallying around my awesome grandparents, whom I deeply loved and respected. I wished we didn't live so far apart, and it was hard to say goodbye. It would have been so much harder had I realized I was also saying goodbye to the life I loved.

In the back seat of our little blue Datsun, I consoled myself with the thought that some adventures awaited us on the way home. As I watched my parents intensely studying a map and writing directions on a paper plate, I figured we would be going to some fun spots. But we never ended up at any tourist attractions. Instead, our vacation turned into a mission to check out a bunch of "holy places," as my mother called them.

7

THE HOLY PLACES

Like many other confused Catholics during the time of change initiated by Vatican II, my parents had begun hunting for places where priests and nuns still practiced the Catholic faith in a more traditional way. The changes in the Church were making them increasingly uneasy, and they subscribed to several Catholic periodicals as part of their search for authentic faith. They were determined to get out and see for themselves how other parishes were handling the changes.

Once my brother and I realized where all of these side trips were leading, the fun of traveling turned into the torture of long car rides to unexciting destinations. All we really wanted was to go home.

The first place we stopped was the Necedah Shrine in Wisconsin. We had to whisper on the grounds as well as in the house where a lady named Mary Ann Van Hoof supposedly had visions and received messages from the Mother of Christ about the end times as well as the evils resulting from the reforms of Vatican II. The guides seemed overly excited and weird; I couldn't get out of there fast enough. (I know now that this shrine was based on a false apparition, that Mary Ann Van Hoof was famous for her loud diatribes against Pope Paul VI, and that the shrine was eventually condemned locally and by Rome.)⁶

Undaunted, my parents continued their search. The second place we visited was the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Prairies, in Powers Lake, North Dakota, where we met a kind priest named Father Nelson. This shrine was the site of an annual pilgrimage of Catholic faithful. It included a small boarding school and a convent of Franciscan Sisters who ran a retirement home.⁷ I met a few of the

sisters in their bookstore; one of them, with her eyes on my brother and me, recommended the book, *The Evils of Rock and Roll*, to my mother. Their *Mary Faithful* magazine was published every two months, and the Marian Hour radio rosary program was recorded every Sunday and broadcast over hundreds of radio stations. (We learned many years later that Fr. Nelson had died in mysterious circumstances; the money had disappeared, and the mission had fallen into ruin.)

My brother Patrick and I were in the back seat on these trips, which was fine because we got along great and shared the same crazy sense of humor. We eased the boredom of this long and tedious pilgrimage by joking around, reading books, and playing car games to help the time go by. But, as the visits to the holy places took longer each time, my brother grew extremely restless. He worried about missing his sixteenth birthday celebration in San Diego. I felt sorry for him. I felt sorry for me, too, but, in my case, a cool time with my friends celebrating my birthday wasn't hanging in the balance.

We eventually arrived at yet another church in North Dakota, hoping it would be the last one. Then, just as we thought we'd be heading south toward San Diego, my mom announced, "There's one more place I'd like to visit before we go home."

She showed my dad a magazine she had brought with her. "I'd really like to see this place, John."

From the back seat we could see that it was in the top left corner of the U.S. map in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, far out of our way back to San Diego. Despite my tears and my brother's begging to go home, my dad headed west.

We arrived in Coeur d'Alene late on a Friday afternoon and, with no Motel 6 in sight, we ended up at the Pink Flamingo.

My parents told us to watch TV or otherwise occupy ourselves while they went to visit the church. They didn't know when they'd be back. I welcomed the opportunity to have some quiet time. We had been cooped up in the car for days, and the stuff my parents had been discussing sounded bizarre and scary to me.

They were gone long enough for my brother and me to take a walk down Sherman Avenue. We stopped at a convenience store to replenish our candy stash, then headed for the lake. I noted how absolutely beautiful the lake was and hoped there would be time to go for a swim the next day. July in Idaho was very hot, but the swim never happened.

When my parents returned, they were quite excited about the church and eager to show us this place where the mass was celebrated just as it had been when they were children. Impatient to get home, we tried to get out of it, but they insisted that we go.

We checked out of the hotel and drove a few blocks up Fourth Street to a place called St. Joseph's Chapel. We were expecting to see a church but, instead, we turned into an alley and parked in front of a long cement block building with paper covering the windows. It looked like the back of a second-hand store, or a bar, or maybe a Laundromat. There were no indications outside that anything religious was going on inside.

My dad led my brother through the door, but a nun with a sweet smile and sparkling eyes blocked the entrance before my mom and I could go in. She explained that neither of us was dressed properly for the House of God and gave each of us a thick, long-sleeved sweater and a bonnet. "I know it's often hard for visitors because they aren't accustomed to our modesty standard," she said.

I couldn't see anything wrong with what we were wearing. My halter dress covered most of me, and my mother's knee length moo-moo seemed fine, too. But the nun's look, despite her smile, commanded obedience, so we put on the ugly sweaters and bonnets and entered the so-called church. It did resemble a church on the inside. There was an altar in front and a confessional off to one side. The candles and statues softened the atmosphere, but it was so hot that my mother and I had beads of perspiration forming on our foreheads and trickling down to the heavy sweaters.

We observed the Latin mass in strict silence with a room full of people bowing their heads, striking their chests, and periodically stretching out their arms straight from their sides, all of this while kneeling on the cement floor. The women and girls wore hats and long, bulky dresses despite the ninety-degree weather. When mass was over, they backed out of the church, then greeted each other with smiles and the words "Praised be Jesus and Mary!"

After mass, the nun who had met us at the door came outside and introduced herself as Sr. Mary Pelagia. Then she encouraged us. "I know it doesn't seem like a real church, but we're just so grateful to have a place for Fr. Clement to say mass for us. There aren't many priests left who are willing to say it in Latin."

This nun's smile and friendliness impressed me. *But, man, it must be hot in all those clothes!* I thought as I waved goodbye through the car window; *I wonder how she does it.*

My parents were overjoyed to have found a place where mass was celebrated as it should be. And, the existence of a seminary, a convent, and a school there made the place extremely enticing to them.

The leader of the church group was Bishop Francis K. Schuckardt. He was drawing thousands of people who felt as my parents did about Vatican II. We learned that many families were moving to northern Idaho to be full-time members of the group.

Before we headed home, my mother visited with the nuns who told her about their summer camp for teens. They suggested that my parents might want to send us kids there to spend a week with other Catholic teens, reviewing our faith and recreating by the lake. Mom enthusiastically chatted about the camp on the way home, but I didn't get the feeling it was mandatory that we go.

8

A GRUESOME CAMP EXPERIENCE

I was glad to be home at last and excited about preparing for my first year of high school.

My mom was full of anticipation of her own, watching each day for the mail to be delivered. Then one day a letter showed up, the one she had been waiting for. It was a list of the items my brother and I would need to bring to the camp.

Three weeks later, I was back in the car with my brother and my mom, headed for the weeklong Espiritu Youth Seminar at Twin lakes, Idaho.

My attitude was not good. There were no cute cut-offs or tank tops in my suitcase this time. Long A-line skirts, long-sleeved blouses, knee socks and hair coverings were more like it, not exactly normal "camp" apparel.

"Just see if you can learn anything or make some Catholic friends," my mother earnestly counseled.

"Cindy is Catholic," I answered, referring to my good friend back in Imperial Beach.

We had been running late and drove up to the camp site just in time to see separated lines of boys and girls walking toward a big log cabin. Bells were tolling in the background. I thought the place could serve as a fun camping site, but equally well as the scene of a good horror movie. I took in as much as possible: the place was secluded in the middle of a forest; there was a nice lakeside area, and cabins were scattered around.

A nun with a familiar face approached our car; it was Sister Mary Pelagia, smiling as usual. If I had to be in this place, seeing her there made it a little easier. At least I felt that I somewhat knew someone. I

stepped out of the car and set my blue suitcase on the ground. Within seconds, another smiling sister walked over, winked at me, and then picked up my suitcase and took it away, up a little hill to a cabin.

Sister Mary Pelagia told my mother that the first evening meal for the campers was about to begin. I had already watched my suitcase disappear, and now my mother was driving away. Patrick had already been whisked away by one of the religious brothers;⁸ we hadn't even had time to exchange a word. He had given me the peace sign before he walked off. While he seemed to be taking it all in stride, I was having a hard time holding back my tears.

Sister Mary Pelagia tried to cheer me up. "The first day is kind of hard because you don't know anyone, but there's recreation every day and you'll get to meet all the girls."

"Okay," I replied with a half smile. I just wanted to know where my suitcase was. No one except my mother had ever seen my underwear before, and it would be so embarrassing if Sister opened it. I mustered up my courage and tried to sound at ease, "Where did Sister take my suitcase?"

"Oh look; Sister is waving to you from up there! That's Sister Mary Fabiola; she always helps the new students settle in." She pointed up the hill to the cabin I would soon be assigned to.

I saw Sister but not my suitcase. Sister Mary Pelagia said goodbye and left me to walk by myself to the cabin. *Settle in?* I wondered. I soon found out what that meant.

Sister Mary Fabiola brought me inside the cabin where all of my stuff from my suitcase was placed in two neat piles. In response to my questioning look, she indicated that one pile was approved and the other was not.

She further explained things, "This book (the one Fr. Nelson had given me) won't be good for your soul. We have a library here full of good books for you. This blouse is immodest, so you will have to wear a vest that I can lend you." Then she had me stand in the doorway so the sun could shine through my skirt. "I thought so," she confirmed. "Your slip is not thick enough," and she opened a little paper bag she had next to her and handed me a fully gathered cotton slip.

I put it on, but it was a challenge. I didn't like the extra bulk it gave to my A-line skirt. I also hated being told what to do. About fifteen minutes later, she escorted me down the hill to the refectory for my first meal at camp.

The Fatima Crusaders' idea of summer youth camp was more like a religious training camp where silence and other rules were strictly enforced. Church services, classes, and lectures were the main events. All of this took place in a very beautiful natural setting with a lake surrounded by woods. I dearly loved water and swimming, but I was never allowed to get close to the lake. I reminisced about my first swimming lesson when my dad yelled "Swim!!" and it seemed to me that I was now in another sink or swim situation.

The girls at this camp looked very old-fashioned. Their long, braided hair and skirts to the floor reminded me of characters in the TV series, *Here Come the Brides*, which was set in the 1860s. They wore tee shirts underneath their long-sleeved blouses, vests, and brown or black polished shoes. No one wore make-up. I felt like I was stepping back in time.

Some of the girls were wearing bandanas on their heads. When I asked someone about it, she explained that these girls had been reported for socializing with boys; the punishment for this was having their heads shaved. One of the girls in my cabin had had beautiful, long, blond hair when I arrived; then, three days later it was all cut off. Apparently, this girl had also done some associating with boys. I was very shocked by all this.

On the first day of camp I managed to insinuate myself into a group of girls who were laughing while playing volleyball. Their exercise clothes were just as long as their regular clothes, so I didn't understand why they had bothered to change at all. Desperate for exercise, I was happy just to be moving about, no matter what we were wearing.

The girls tried to make comments softly to each other, but the supervising nun usually caught it and said, "Okay, girls, let's keep the game going." I got the impression that the girls were trying to talk about the shaved heads. Although the girls with the shaved heads were allowed to play volleyball with the other girls, the rule of no communication between the two groups was strictly enforced.

I couldn't help thinking about the shaved heads the whole week. I wanted to look at them when I knew they were near, to satisfy my curiosity. *Were they really bald?* I wondered. I also wanted to offer them a smile to ease the pain I'd seen on their faces. But, not only was talking forbidden, we were also instructed to "mortify" our eyes at all times, except during recreation. That meant we weren't allowed to

look around, so we usually didn't know who was near us at any given time, even at meals.

Undaunted, I still looked for ways to have a good time and salvage something from my summer. I tried to find my new friend, Liz, every chance I got, which was challenging since I was not allowed to look around. Liz was also a new "non-Fatima Crusade" girl at the camp, about five years older than I, and assigned to the same cabin as mine. One day, when we were allowed to say hello to our cabin mates, Liz and I connected immediately, exchanging jokes about the long clothes we were forced to wear in the heat. Things got even better when she was assigned to the bunk on top of mine. We talked all week with our eyes and secret notes, and she sneaked me junk food that she had smuggled in.

I got pretty good at glancing around with stealth, especially in the cafeteria and the makeshift chapel. At mealtime, I would pretend to be looking at the bowl being passed to me but quickly sneak in a look around. In the chapel, I would shift my eyes back and forth when I felt the speaker wasn't looking in my direction.

One afternoon, I got another big shock when I saw my brother and another boy walking on their knees down a rocky, dirt path toward the restroom. I found out later that they were being punished for giggling during a silent time. They had laughed when someone had stepped on a toothbrush that had fallen on the floor.

Other than the constant lectures by various priests and nuns, there was to be total silence at the camp. I spent a lot of time on my knees on hard floors, and the discomfort distracted me from listening to what they were talking about. As the priest rambled on in the stuffy chapel, my mind would drift back to the many fun outings my family had enjoyed on the Strand over the years.

On summer weekends my mom would often say, "John, where can we take the kids?" They would ask for our input and we'd often chime in with "Bahia Bay!" Everyone would jump into action, loading up the lemon yellow station wagon with toys and towels and coolers of food and drinks. We always forgot something, but no one sweated the small stuff. As soon as we pulled into the beach parking lot, one of my brothers would jump out and claim a picnic table. Our mom would sit there keeping an eye on our stuff while we all played in the water. The swimming lessons she had taken at the pool had never helped her to overcome her fear of water. I always felt sorry that she couldn't enjoy swimming with the rest of us.

I surfaced from my daydream just in time to catch a comment about how praying the Rosary was the best weapon of defense against “the enemies who were trying to destroy us.” Somehow, praying the Rosary at camp took much longer than I was accustomed to. These people had a lot of add-ons; and they wore their rosaries around their necks, which I had never seen before.

The only exceptions to the rule of silence were our daily periods of recreation. The bell tolling across the campgrounds, announcing a schedule change or recreation period, was always the most welcomed sound to my ears.

I soon lost interest in checking out the boys at camp because they seemed unwilling to return my smiles the few times I was able to catch their attention. To say the least, I did not have much fun at the Fatima Crusaders’ summer camp, but at least I got out of there with my long, golden locks intact.

9

THE FATIMA CRUSADERS

Our faith had not been all consuming until we started studying with the Fatima people. Up until then, it had pretty much amounted to saying grace before meals, attending Sunday mass and Tuesday night devotions, praying the family rosary and keeping—sort of—our parents' holy admonitions in mind.

The Fatima Crusaders, on the other hand, were very zealous and strict at all times, not only because they feared that the end of the world was just around the corner but, also, because they believed their strict, devout ways would set an example for others to emulate, which would ultimately restore the Catholic Faith to what it had been.

Formed in 1967 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, the radical group was named in honor of the series of Marian apparitions three young shepherd children were said to have received in Fatima, Portugal, in 1916. In her apparitions, the Virgin Mary had urged the faithful to repent and pray for the conversion of Russia and to avoid a catastrophic world war. The final apparition, called the "Miracle of the Sun," was observed by tens of thousands of pilgrims, some of whom saw the sun move while others saw beautiful colors. There was never a scientific explanation for the event.⁹

Mary reportedly shared three "secrets" with the children, which were put into letters. The first two concerned a description of hell and the way to avoid it. The third secret was sealed in a letter with an admonition not to open it until 1960. That year, the Vatican issued a press release announcing that the secret would most probably remain under absolute seal. (It was finally opened in 2000.)¹⁰

The secret contents of the third letter caused a great deal of consternation within the Fatima Crusade. Everyone speculated about the warnings it might contain—everything from worldwide, nuclear annihilation to deep rifts in the Roman Catholic Church leading to rival papacies.

The leader of the Fatima Crusade, Francis Schuckardt, used the mystery surrounding the third secret to instill fear and loyalty in the members of the community. He assured his followers that the secret's contents surely concerned the recent changes in the Church and the worldwide apostasy that had occurred as a result. There could be no doubt that the current Pope had fallen into heresy and taken the majority of the Church—both clergy and laity—with him. The Crusaders viewed themselves as the hope of the world, the only true believers. And they viewed their leader, Bishop Schuckardt, as Mary's specially chosen shepherd who would guide and preserve this remnant flock while the rest of the Church was in the tight grasp of the devil.

Thus, the Fatima community had a great mission in addition to protecting the sacraments and the Latin mass: they were literally “holding the space” for true Catholicism until the Vatican would realize the errors of the Council and restore the Church as it had been before 1962.

The Crusaders supported each other, inspired each other, and served as ever-watchful companions who went to great lengths to keep everyone faithful to the bishop and the rest of the community. Fear of infiltration or the luring away of members by non-believing families or friends was a constant concern for everyone in the community. Crusaders were forbidden to have contact with family who were not part of the community. It never seemed to dawn on the Crusaders that their strong faith should be able to hold up in the face of challenges in the form of news, or life beyond the walls, or books presenting differing points of view.

No, it was a very fragile faith that Bishop Schuckardt was protecting by keeping his Fatima Crusade completely closed off from the outside world.

10

CATHOLIC PARENTS IN A QUANDARY

Like many other Catholic parents, my mom and dad took their responsibilities seriously, not just for the education of their children but also for the salvation of their souls. Just as they had grown up in a Catholic environment, they sent us kids to Catholic school or catechism classes and encouraged us to attend various devotions. My older siblings went their own way as soon as they could, but my brother Patrick and I were still young when things began to change in the Church.

Throughout my parents' lives, the Catholic Church was *the* way to salvation. Sisters and priests were respected and deferred to, and their words and decisions were rarely questioned, at least in public.

Despite the Bible's foundational importance in Catholicism, most Catholics never read Scripture; they became familiar with Gospel stories by hearing them at mass on Sunday. If they were lucky, the priest would expound on the Gospel story in his sermon.

The pastor of the parish and the principal of the school, usually a nun, established all local policies and had the final word on any misunderstandings or conflicts. For many parents, this shift of responsibility was a kind of relief but, at the same time, it diminished their ability to make good choices regarding spiritual matters to some extent. Before Vatican II, it had seemed comfortable and reasonable to leave most decisions to the clergy and the sisters.

For my parents and many people like them, the liturgical changes were the most noticeable and upsetting. The idea was to change the mass from an occasion in which the priest, facing the altar, said prayers in Latin while the people sat in the pews, (some following along, some saying the rosary, some mentally absent) to a liturgy in

which the people participated in their own language, with the priest facing them in community.

In addition to changes in liturgy, Vatican II emphasized the value of the "laity," the faithful people, in matters of faith. Some Catholics received this responsibility with great joy; for others, it was destabilizing and frightening.

My parents were upset and confused by the changes they experienced, apparently without the benefit of effective explanations by their pastor. This, along with other loosening of social mores, made them uneasy. They felt that they had already lost control of their three older children, and they worried that my brother and I might succumb to harmful influences due to this new "opening up" of society and the Church.

Thus, they were ripe for the picking by the followers of Francis Schuckardt who were proselytizing in the San Diego area as well as in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. While we were at camp, my mom stayed in Coeur d'Alene where she got an earful about the Fatima Crusade, their worldview, and how they lived in community. Before we headed back home, one of the local families had invited us to dinner.

I was not allowed to sit beside the only boy at the big dining room table. He was seated at the far end, and Patrick had been strategically placed between us. The family's two girls were already out of school and older than Patrick. They were allowed to sit across from him since they were not considered "a temptation." (In hindsight, this dinner would have been a great episode for *Candid Camera*. They could have filmed the girl edging closer to the boy at the end of the table and then turned to the rest of the characters at the table as they grew increasingly uncomfortable.)

Their dad was not at the head of the table. He was a "non-believer" who had been abandoned by his wife when she fled with her children to be with the Fatima group in Coeur d'Alene.

After a lot of small talk about where they once lived in Chula Vista and where our family lived, Patrick and I got tired of listening and asked to be excused to get some gum for the trip home.

"The store is right around the corner but, in Our Lady's Community, you have to be twenty-one years old to go out into the world alone," our host informed us.

A feeling of impending doom welled up inside me but, luckily, our mother said we could go if we came right back. During the

dinner, the woman explained how happy she was about all the rules for kids because there was so much temptation in the world.

"Our young people are never in mixed company until they are preparing for marriage," she said, "and most children live at home until they marry or enter the religious life." Then she proudly announced that her daughter was in the convent at Coeur d'Alene.

My mom smiled and nodded in agreement about the dangers. She was probably seeing the red lights of Imperial Beach in her mind.

My mind drifted back to my cute boyfriend, Rich. We had been spending time together, but my mother didn't know about him. Thanks to her "birds and bees" talk with me, things hadn't gone too far with Rich. One time when we were cuddling, I had the courage to tell him, "No, we can't until we're married." And he understood.

"That's cool," he said as he pulled away and added, "Yeah, my sister is paying for her big mistake with that baby of hers, and she's only fifteen."

By the time we got back to Imperial Beach, the "damage" had been done as far as my mother's conversion was concerned, but I tried not to notice.