

Mr. Ms. Editor or Agent
123 Somewhere St.
Brooklyn, NY 12345

Dear Mr. or Ms. Editor or Agent,

My late husband, Ronald, was a laicized, married Catholic priest. His life, which has included ten years of service as a Maryknoll Priest in Korea and the adoption of our two wonderful girls, has been an exciting and joyous adventure for him. Growing into maturity was what was necessary for him to grow spiritually in the knowledge and love of God.

Genesis says that we are made in God's image and likeness. How? Ronald thought that when humans express unconditional love, they are most godlike. Although most of us are comparatively ordinary and don't have the potential to be a Mozart or an Einstein, Ronald believed that we all have the potential to live extraordinary lives of love and understanding that can give meaning to our lives.

JOURNEY TO JOY: FROM SPIRITUAL RIGIDITY TO FREEDOM is a 60,000-word spiritual autobiography. On behalf of my late husband, this query package includes a synopsis, an outline, and the first pages of the manuscript. [Author bio information here].

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Louise Rauckhorst

Synopsis

Journey to Joy: From Spiritual Rigidity to Freedom

By Ronald Rauckhorst

In the seminary, we were taught that ordination to the priesthood essentially changed us. Our souls were indelibly marked. As far as I can tell, this is a teaching that came into being around the 12th century and was used to bolster and support the rule of mandatory celibacy. I don't know of any evidence to support the claim that ordination changes a person essentially. In any case, I left the priesthood at age 38 because I experienced the Catholic Church as an institution that was more concerned with earthly goals and gains than spiritual growth.

I guess I should start with my family, who were very religious, and with my upbringing in Akron, Ohio. Our adherence to Catholicism was strengthened by the traditional German trait of stubbornness and my parents' expectations of unquestioning obedience and discipline. Although my family and religious discipline were meant to protect me from experiencing evil behavior and worldly temptation, they also gave me a feeling of superiority and fearful suspicion of whatever I might find in the secular world.

I now know that fear of difference allows one to dismiss or exclude another without any actual evidence or experience of evil. I remember as a teenager reading about Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. How stupid I was! I thought that anyone named after Martin Luther couldn't be all that good. To my way of thinking, Martin Luther was a heretic and against God, so Martin Luther King Jr. must really be a heretic as well.

After graduating from high school and entering seminary, the biggest shock of my sophomore year of college was learning that I had a speech impediment (one of my teachers lit into me about my "lazy lips"). A few months after arriving at Maryknoll College in Glen Ellyn, I was informed that I was to accompany two other students to Chicago to see a speech therapist. After asking me to repeat the word "closed" several times, the speech therapist informed me that I was not pronouncing the final sounds of some words, such as the final "t" and "d" sounds. I was amazed. I was twenty-one years old, and no one had ever before intimated that I had a speech impediment. In one 15-minute session, the speech therapist identified the problem and helped me hear it. Now that I could hear it, I could start to remediate the problem.

After finishing my education, I spent ten years as a priest in Korea. I am proud that I was able to do some good during my time there, and I deeply loved my work. However, Vatican II (The Roman Catholic Ecumenical Council 1962–1965), or, more specifically, the trenchant conservatism that later Church leaders displayed in response to the documents of Vatican II, challenged my passion for the institution of the Church. After spending my entire adult life as a priest, I left Maryknoll and the priesthood and later married my wonderful wife, Louise. We eventually adopted two girls, Ann and Lisa, from Korea, and I am now overjoyed by my many grandchildren and evolving relationship with God.

This book is an attempt to explain the person that I have become and how I have changed so drastically regarding what I believe today compared to what I used to believe. I would like to add that I think intellectual beliefs may guide my surface behavior, but the feelings underlying these beliefs are the real motivating factors. I can be free to love and grow only to the extent that I can come to grips with my negative feelings of fear, anger, hate, envy, and so on. My beliefs have changed over the years in relation to my growing awareness of the mystery of life. I look forward to continued life in the forever and to the ongoing experience of life and love and expanding awareness.

There are those who may question how I, an ordinary guy (a former priest!), dare to question the doctrine that the Church teaches. The problematic tendency is to identify our beliefs with our faith. What we believe

about God affects our lives and our faith, but belief and faith are not identical. Our beliefs can change and, in many instances, should change as our understanding of God and reality deepens. As adults who take responsibility for what we believe, we must question our beliefs. This is why I feel it is necessary, in spite of my faults and failures, to ensure that my voice is heard when I disagree.

Faith is different—it is beyond the traditions of any single religious denomination. Faith is our relationship with God. One may believe that God is waiting to punish every bad deed, or one may believe that God doesn't punish anyone. One may believe there is no God or that no one can know for sure. But faith is not an intellectual belief. Faith is a relationship. Therefore, questioning one's beliefs does not mean that one is losing their faith, that is, their relationship with God.

Outline

Journey to Joy: From Rigidity to Freedom

By Ronald Rauckhorst

CHAPTER 1 GETTING TO KNOW ME

For me, the Second Vatican Council changed everything. It caused me to reflect on and question my beliefs, so I was forced to see beyond my naïveté and realize the hypocrisy and resistance to change within the Church. I was changing, and many in Church leadership were not. What to do? My dilemma was being caught between commitment to my priestly vows and my deep anger at a Church that put its rules and regulations above the spiritual good of its people. When facing real-life ethical dilemmas, such as the acceptance of gay individuals and abortion in certain cases, I believe that you can only accept the uncertainty and make the best decision you can, trusting that our merciful God will respect our conscience, our intentions, and the intelligence He/She gave us.

Immediately after I retired from the priesthood, I began to see Dr. Edward Whitmont, a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst. He put me in touch with my shadow side, all the feelings I had rejected and repressed for most of my life. I really wasn't aware of my feelings at that time. I still consider myself a "faith-full" Catholic, although I disagree with some of the "official" teachings of the Church. Perhaps I am misguided, but I am joyous in my faith, my knowledge of God, and the freedom that flows from God's love. Giving up on the idea of making myself holy, accepting myself as I am, and trusting in God's love is enough.

CHAPTER 2 GROWING UP

The biggest trauma of my growing-up years was being sexually molested by an older neighborhood boy. I felt I had sinned. The nuns at school would say the greatest aspiration a boy could have would be to become a priest, but they always added the qualification that you had to have a "calling." By that, they meant God chose you to be a priest. I wanted to be as great a person as I could be, so the idea of becoming a priest really attracted me and made me feel that I had the "calling." I believed that it would also meet my need to repair my relationship with God.

After completing high school, I was in seminary training for nine years. Life in the seminary was controlled by bells: the first woke you at 6:30 a.m., and the next called you to morning prayers, meditation, and Mass. The next was for breakfast, followed by another for twenty minutes of morning chores. The rest of the morning was spent in classes, followed by lunch, followed by one hour of manual labor, followed by one hour of recreation, followed by twenty minutes to shower and get to class or study until dinnertime. After dinner, we had a recreation period, said the rosary in threes outside, then study hall. Finally, night prayers and off to bed.

In 1954, I graduated with a B.A. degree in Philosophy. My classmates and I then went to the Maryknoll Novitiate in Bedford, Massachusetts to study topics related to spirituality and to further develop our spiritual lives. It was also a "weeding out" year. Although there was an influx of seminarians in those years, all through college, there was always a steady trickle of guys leaving. In the Novitiate, the decision whether to stay or leave became more serious. This was the time to focus on our spirituality and vocation and whether we were going to commit ourselves to the life of a celibate priest. At the end of the novitiate year, we would take an oath to Maryknoll, become official members of The Foreign Mission Society of America (a.k.a. Maryknoll), and move on to the major seminary at Maryknoll's headquarters for four more years of study. At the end of the fourth year, we would be ordained as priests and immediately assigned to work in a foreign country.

CHAPTER 3 EARLY MISSIONARY LIFE IN KOREA

I was ordained on June 13, 1959 and assigned to Korea. Upon arriving in Korea, we were immediately driven to Maryknoll's Center House in Seoul and began eight months of language study. In many ways, it felt like an extension of our studies at Maryknoll, except we were studying Korean and were surrounded by rice paddies. We could look out the back of the Center building and see the three famous mountain peaks that rose up just north of the city. When I visited Korea in 1989, those spectacular mountain peaks were no longer visible. They were obscured by the exhaust pollution from the many vehicles that now choked the streets of Seoul. The oxcarts were gone. Korea had gone modern.

Chin Chon: My First Assignment

I traveled for the first time to Chin Chon parish in the city of Chong Ju, where I would later be assigned, for Christmas of 1959. Today, I don't remember a lot of the details of that first trip. Mostly, I remember how strange and different everything was. Chin Chon seemed to be at the end of the world. Later, when I lived there, I discovered that this was not the case—some of the mission stations farther out in the country were much more remote. Perhaps the most memorable event of the trip was the walk from the bus station in Chong Ju to Bishop Parady's house with my classmates. It was nighttime and snowing lightly, so everything was white, and strange, and beautiful.

I never saw any physical effects of the war in Korea, such as bombed-out buildings, but the war was very much part of everyone's awareness. Many had personally suffered or been separated from their family members, and the search for spies was constant. The Korean people themselves seemed very open to foreigners and to Americans in particular. They were very grateful that Americans had fought on their side and preserved their freedom.

Despite their Buddhist traditions, Koreans were very open to Christianity. I think this was partly due to the distribution of relief goods after the war, which was often run by Christian churches. The Christian population was growing and has continued to grow since then. I believe that many of the Christian churches in the area now focus on respecting and understanding their Buddhist traditions, rather than simply focusing on proselytizing.

After language school, I was assigned by my Maryknoll Regional Superior to the Chong Ju diocese as the curate, or assistant pastor, at Bill Ahearn's parish. I spent nearly a full year there, filling in at other parishes when those priests were due for their vacations. This was a great experience for me, and I got to know many of the parishes and towns, the catechists, and how different priests managed their parishes.

Chong Ho Won

I had been an assistant pastor for nearly a year at Chin Chon when, in late spring of 1961, I was reassigned to be an assistant pastor in Chong Ho Won. This parish was about 30 miles north of Chin Chon and 50 or 60 miles south of Seoul. The Chong Ho Won church and rectory were built partway up the side of a mountain overlooking a large valley. It was very picturesque.

A difficulty I encountered in Chong Ho Won was due to my poor understanding of Father Ryan, the Pastor—in the evenings, he liked to go into the village below us and visit with certain families, which enabled him to learn a lot about what was happening among the people in the parish. Sometimes they drank Korean rice wine, and I saw him drunk on at least one occasion. He believed he could imbibe without anyone knowing when he'd had too much, but he was incorrect. Only later did I realize that Father Ryan's drinking was a defense—part of his attempt to remain a good priest. Two years later, he became the first

Maryknoller in Korea to leave the priesthood. I've always felt ashamed that I wasn't more aware of and understanding about Father Ryan's personal struggles.

Mou Ki

In the spring of 1962, I was assigned to the parish in Mou Ki as pastor. Being assigned to Mou Ki was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. I was the only one in town who spoke English. To survive, I really had to learn conversational Korean. It was total immersion, sink or swim, and I finally began to hear and understand the language and to feel less helpless. I managed to build mudbrick chapels at three mission stations while I was there. These chapels seated around 100 people sitting on the floor and were a big addition to each village, since they could also be used as village meeting halls.

First Return Visit to the U.S.

Having completed my first six-year tour in Korea, I returned to the States in late October for the required six months. I was quite surprised by what an adjustment it was to return to life in the United States. I felt overwhelmed by the sheer abundance and variety of food and products when I went into an ordinary supermarket. The stay was extended to almost a year because of a chronic hepatitis diagnosis that required a prolonged period of rest. After ten months in the U.S., with the provision that I would be living in the Center House in Seoul and attending language school for nine months, the doctor gave me permission to return. Only after language school would I be assigned to physically demanding parish work in the countryside.

The Roman Catholic Ecumenical Council 1962–1965

Pope John XXIII surprised everyone when he called for this Council, which is more commonly referred to as "Vatican II," proclaiming that he wanted *aggiornamento* (an Italian word that means "bring up to date"). The Council took place during my first tour in Korea, and it produced 16 powerful documents that pointed toward radical changes in how the Church perceived itself, worshipped, and related to the modern world. Collegiality and dialogue became the rules of the day and were meant to extend from the Pope down to every church member, including laypersons. However, Pope John XXIII died before the Council ended, and Pope Paul VI went against the recommendations of the commission to affirm a ban on contraception. A majority of Catholics, however, did not accept the Pope's teaching, preferring to follow their own conscience. This brief review of the impact of Vatican Council II on the Roman Catholic Church has been presented to help the reader understand the profound effect it had on me when I returned to Korea in September 1966.

CHAPTER 4 RETURN TO KOREA

Po Un

The Po Un rectory and church were built on a hill above the town, which, in turn, was surrounded by mountains. The church could be seen from just about anywhere in the valley. It was a beautiful location, but the assignment came with a bit of unhelpful baggage—I was soon embroiled in a disagreement between the parish's two catechists that eventually resulted in both of their resignations. Although I made a few missteps, I later overheard a parishioner complimenting my willingness to get involved and resolve the situation.

Yong Dong and the Pig Project

Soon enough, my time at Po Un was up. In 1968, I was reassigned to the neighboring parish of Yong Dong as pastor. Yong Dong was near the southern tip of the diocese, but it was on both the main highway and the

railroad line between Seoul and Pusan. When I and some of the other local priests surveyed the parishioners to find out what might raise their standard of living, it quickly became apparent that the most promising project would be to introduce Landrace pig farming (these pigs grow to maturity more quickly than those that were common in Korea at the time). We decided to introduce the project as a co-op and to combine it with the establishment of a credit union—eventually, the project was turned over completely to the co-op. I don't know the ultimate fate of the pig project or whether it is in existence today, some 52 years later. However, it was still operating successfully 20 years later and had made a very positive impact on the local economy.

Winds of Change—Rethinking My Vocation

At this time, the Church was experiencing all the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. There was a lot of intellectual ferment throughout the Church and, most particularly for me, among the Maryknollers. I was struggling with two major concerns. The first was about how we, as missionaries, should begin to live out the changes brought up by the Council. The second, of course, had to do with mandatory celibacy. Bishop Pardy seemed to be focused on modeling our diocese on an American diocese instead of crafting an approach that was unique to Korea. After I and a few other priests walked out of a meeting in protest, we were labeled rebels and sent to far corners of the country.

I didn't feel that I was a rebel. The documents of the Second Vatican Council had turned everything upside down. The ideas and attitudes about the Church and religion that had governed my behavior were all in question. In the seminary, I had studied hard and learned the "truth" and based my life on that truth. Now, I had to question what I believed. This left me very angry. I had lost all my certitude. I left Yong Dong and Korea at the end of October 1969. At that time, I expected to return, but I also had some doubt about this in the back of my mind.

While taking psychology and pastoral counseling classes in New York, it became clear that I needed to, at least, take a break from the priesthood. I wrote four letters: to my parents (the hardest letter I ever wrote), to Maryknoll (requesting a year's leave), to my superior in Korea, and to the other priests of the Southern Tier (many of these priests also left soon after). I never considered returning to the priesthood. Before the year was up, I had petitioned Maryknoll and the Vatican to be laicized.

CHAPTER 5 LOUISE

Having left Maryknoll and the active priesthood, I saw no reason to remain celibate. However, I had never dated in my entire life. The closest I had come to it was attending the junior prom with a high school classmate. When I was 38, at a wedding of my Korean colleague, Bill Ahearn, I met Louise Hartnett, a tall, strikingly beautiful blonde. It was a small wedding, with maybe fifteen people present, and I think everyone there was either an ex-nun or a former priest. After the wedding, she suggested that she show me around Boston. It happened to be an especially cold, windy day—typical of Boston in January. I couldn't have cared less about the weather. It just felt so good walking alongside this woman.

Every weekend after that, I was on the Eastern Airlines shuttle to Boston. By April, I decided to propose, and we married soon after on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. After our honeymoon in Switzerland, we returned to New York City and took up residence in an apartment in the Fifth Avenue Hotel in lower Manhattan.

I eventually enrolled at Fordham to get an advanced degree in School Psychology, after which we returned to Boston, where I had found a job. Louise still commuted back to New York in those years to finish a doctoral degree in Nursing Education. Despite our efforts, it was several years before Louise became pregnant. Our initial excitement and great joy were quickly followed by our anguish over the termination of the pregnancy, as our baby would have been born with a serious birth defect. I came to realize how such an

event can destroy a marriage—Louise’s grief and disappointment were immense, and it almost felt that she had left me during that time. Throughout our fifty years of marriage, we have had some serious disagreements, but nothing we haven’t been able to work out. Our political, religious, parental, and psychological beliefs complement each other and have helped us grow together.

CHAPTER 6 ANN AND LISA

During the 1980–81 school year, Louise was awarded a Robert Wood Johnson Nurse Faculty Fellowship in Primary Care at the University of Maryland. During that year, we moved to Baltimore, and she completed their Adult Nurse Practitioner Program. While there, we received a mailer advertising a six-week course on “Family Building Through Adoption” to be held at Loyola University and sponsored by Catholic Charities. We had previously thought about adoption, but had not followed up on it, so we decided to attend the classes, get the information, and finally decide one way or the other.

The Adoption Process

We decided to begin the process of adoption. After trying unsuccessfully to adopt from within America, we decided to try an international adoption from Korea. We were connected with “Friends of the Children of Vietnam,” an agency in Colorado that handled overseas adoptions. Within a month or so, we were told about two Korean girls, ages 11 and 6, who had been placed for adoption. The agency sent a picture of the two beautiful girls, and we said, “Yes.” After waiting with bated breath for several months, our daughters arrived.

Our New Daughters’ Arrival

When they arrived, each was carrying a small backpack. They had no other belongings but the clothes on their backs. They were both very skinny and looked frightened. Everything was new to them, including the strange-looking people who were going to be their new parents. The younger, Hei Ran (Lisa), was six and a half years old. She came willingly into my arms. Eleven-year-old Hyang Joon (Ann) took Louise’s hand. Although Ann initially struggled, even adopting a hunger strike to convince us to send her back to her grandmother in Korea, both girls eventually settled into their new lives.

Settling Down with Our New Family

Soon after, we moved to Beverly, Massachusetts. The house had a large yard in which Lisa found all sorts of small wildflowers to pick. The house was big enough for the girls to have their own bedrooms, but they weren’t too interested in that at first. For the rest of the summer, they continued to sleep on the floor beside our bed. When school started, both girls did well, although learning English was a major challenge.

Parenting Lessons Learned

After one year in America, English was no longer a problem for the girls. Personality-wise, Lisa was always confident, eager, and ready to try whatever. Ann, though, sometimes still struggled. There were times when she seemed happy and bubbly and was a real joy to be around, but it didn’t take much to set her off. I was raised in a German Catholic family where misbehavior was dealt with physically, and I grew up thinking that this punitive approach was how all kids were raised. It took me years of professional experience and the study of psychology to learn that the punitive approach did not work well. Ann had lost her biological family, her friends, her country, and her language. It’s no surprise that she was angry. Patience and love, not punishment, were what was called for. Of course, we also shared many good times with our girls, including introducing them to Halloween, birthdays, and Christmas.

CHAPTER 7 RETURNING TO CHURCH ATTENDANCE

After I left Maryknoll and the priesthood, I had continued to attend Mass regularly. After a few months, I realized that each time I left church, I felt angrier than when I entered. This wasn't right. I still hadn't come to terms with my anger at the Church's resistance to change and, therefore, my need to leave the priesthood, so I stopped going altogether. For me, this was a major event. I didn't feel that I had lost my faith, but I certainly had stopped practicing it. Now, however, with the girls joining our family, we felt that we should give our children a religious base. We returned to attending church on a regular basis and had Ann and Lisa prepare for baptism, be baptized, and then receive their First Communion. By that time, I had resolved most of my anger toward the Church and again began to feel at home there.

Ann and Lisa Grow Up

Ann and Lisa were opposites in many ways. One example was the way they responded to commands. If I told Ann to do something, she would often object and then go do it. Lisa, on the other hand, would agree to do whatever was asked but then not do it. In any case, both girls were very strong people who excelled at swimming and music. After those initial months, I never had trouble relating to Ann—we learned to put up with her moods and were amazed at how charming and cooperative she could be, and Lisa amazed us with her enthusiasm and eagerness to try new things.

Ann's and Lisa's High School Days

For about five years of the girls' childhood, we lived in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Ann did very well in school until her senior year, when she met her first boyfriend. We were concerned about her drop in grades, yet we were pleased that she was relating well with her classmates and with boys. Since she had come on the American scene late, it was good that she was now enjoying social growth as well. She was not retreating into her introversion, so we never made an issue about her grades. Essentially, it was an issue of trust: Ann never gave us a reason to mistrust her, so we never did.

Lisa's high school experience was quite different from Ann's. We expected that Lisa would display some acting-out behavior in her teen years, as the emotional load she carried from losing her birth parents and family and being sent off to America was bound to catch up with her. I think it was an identity issue related to looking so different from her parents and most of her peers. The summer after Ann graduated from high school and before Lisa was due to start high school, we moved to California. Lisa had trouble making friends at her new school. Eventually, she made the decision to drop out, though she did get her GED via evening classes, and began to work as a waitress. After saving enough money, she returned to Korea for a visit, during which she met her birth mother and extended family. Arguments with her uncle and a lack of connection with her birth mother led to her returning to America earlier than expected and getting on with being American and with her life here.

Ann's and Lisa's College Experiences

Lisa, who was struggling to stay engaged with classes at the local community college, was traveling with Louise when they ran across a magazine article about children with attention deficit disorder (ADD). We decided to have Lisa tested by a psychologist, who determined that she had mild ADD. She soon found that Ritalin, especially for certain classes or before tests, was very helpful for her. I kicked myself—I had graduate-level credentials in School Psychology and had tested many children for learning disabilities, yet I had been misled by Lisa's intelligence and lack of hyperactivity. I had violated my own rule, which was to believe children when they told me they had a problem.

Ann eventually enrolled in the School of Hotel Management at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. She rented an apartment and found a job at a nearby restaurant that helped pay for her school and apartment expenses. It was there, while working as a hostess, that she met Jim Petty, a frequent patron of the restaurant and her future husband. She finished school and received her degree in 1995.

Ann's and Lisa's Marriages and Families

Soon after her marriage, Ann assumed the role of stepmother to her husband Jim's three children while their mother was on a trip. Emi, Jess, and Eli were welcomed into the family from that moment on. Later, Ann and Tom adopted an infant daughter, Sara, who is now 25 and recently married a jazz musician named Gabe. Lisa married and had a son (Andrew, now 22) with her first husband, Tony. They have since divorced, and she has remarried a golfer who shares her love of dogs. It has been a joy to watch our grandchildren grow up, just as it has been a wonder to watch Ann and Lisa grow and mature in so many wonderful ways.

CHAPTER 8 MY AWAKENING TO COMMUNICATION WITH THE SPIRIT WORLD

For the skeptic, there is no absolute, indisputable scientific evidence of psychic gifts. I should know—I used to be one! However, after much reading on the topic, it seems to me that the claims of psychics can neither be proven nor disproven scientifically. Neither can the existence of God or any purely spiritual reality be proven scientifically, yet millions of people believe in the existence of God and the existence of the spirit world. They do so based on their personal experiences. After flippantly telling an acquaintance that I'd never met my spirit guide, she abruptly appeared to me on a plane. Since then, I've had two extraordinary dreams that included her presence.

My Real-Life Encounters With an Intuitive/Medium

Although I had done a lot of reading about intuitives and mediums, I never really expected to meet one. Then, one winter evening in 2005, Louise and I attended a singing bowl meditation at Stillpoint, a local center in Las Vegas devoted to spiritual development. Suzanne, who was playing the singing bowls, introduced herself as an intuitive and medium. After the meditation, she told me I had a "blood sucker" hanging on to me, which I initially laughed off but realized might refer to a distant acquaintance who had recently been exhausting my energy. Louise and I met Suzanne for coffee, and she told us more about her abilities, impressing us along the way with information about our lives.

Further Encounters with Suzanne

Suzanne had a storefront business where she practiced massage and other holistic therapies and conducted intuitive readings. Since Louise and I had our first appointments in 2005, we've returned many times. In my experience, Suzanne is a remarkable intuitive. Most often, she shares what the Archangel Raphael, her main spirit guide, is telling her, but there are always other spirits chiming in, as well.

Learning About My Spirit Guides

An interesting thing I have learned from the many readings I have had is the identity of my spirit guides. Over time, Suzanne has identified five different guides that hang around me. She has identified the most prevalent and verbal guide as my friend Ben, who was a Maryknoll priest and went to Korea with me. I saw him for the last time at Maryknoll in 1999, at the 40th anniversary of our ordination and class reunion. Ben had been diagnosed with bone cancer and died in 2001. Suzanne also mentioned Archangel Metatron, Dr. Whitmore (my former psychologist), a spirit named Abigail or Abby, who says she loved me in a prior life,

and Layla, the aunt of an extraordinary young woman I was briefly attracted to before I met Louise.

Summary Thoughts and Insights

I am immensely grateful for the new understanding of spirits and the spiritual world I have gained from my readings with Suzanne. Time has no meaning for them, nor is there any space between them and us. Because of my growing awareness of this spiritual world that surrounds us, I know that I am walking through heaven all the time, even though I'm not always fully aware of it. It seems to me that hell needs to be similarly rethought—not a pit of fire but simply the absence of love. We create hell when we refuse to love, and our main purpose on this earth is to grow in our capacity to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves. If life is eternal and God is infinite, why would He/She limit how much we can grow in love to one lifetime? I now believe that reincarnation, returning to a new earthly life, is one of the options to help a soul continue to grow.

As mentioned in the beginning of this spiritual autobiography, I am truly just an ordinary guy who sometimes finds it hard to forgive. In my judgment, Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and many in the Church hierarchy were/are not very good at their jobs and are too invested in protecting their power and authority. Their stress on maintaining the party line and refusal to consider any ideas that differ from their own are distressingly sad. Talk about dictators! To me, they don't seem to understand at all what the spiritual life is about. Yet, as one who has often failed to live according to the spirit of the Gospel, how can I condemn them? They can call me a hypocrite, too. I need to forgive them, despite my deep disagreement with them.

CHAPTER 9 BECOMING OPEN TO LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

The Catholic Church has been suspicious of mysticism and has tended to dismiss or ignore it, not really accepting it as spiritually valid. My concern here is that we tend to ignore or discourage visions or other intuitive experiences. God is everywhere and in everything, so we are constantly in touch with God.

The problem is that most of us just aren't aware of the Divine Presence as we go through our daily lives because we don't feel it. We have to take it on faith. When we dismiss truths outside of our belief system, such as those that a medium might offer to us, we cheat ourselves. It is important to be able to integrate truths from different sources. By questioning our beliefs, we can change and grow; otherwise, we are destined to die defending indefensible prejudices. More important than our beliefs is our faith, our personal relationship with God, and our experience of God. There is a lot about the spiritual life that we don't understand. We are experiencing spiritual life all the time through our search for meaning and purpose and the values that guide our lives. Truth, as God's revelation, brings us to an awareness of God. And, because God is all about unconditional love, spiritual life is a matter of the heart more than of the mind.

As is evident from the previous chapters, I now question a lot of what the Roman Catholic Church teaches. The certainty I had when just going along with what the Church taught has been lost. Being true to my conscience and myself requires living with uncertainty. To my surprise, I have not lost my faith. Rather, I have found a deeper level of faith by taking responsibility for my beliefs, accepting uncertainty, and just trying to be as trusting and open to our loving God as I can be. I no longer feel guilty about questioning Church teachings.

CHAPTER 10 MY CREED

I have made it clear in previous chapters that I strongly disagree with the way Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI exercised their authority in the Roman Catholic Church, but I haven't specified in which areas I think they have erred. First, I disagree with the Church's stance toward LGBT individuals, especially the

labeling of their sexual behavior as being “inherently evil” or “disordered.” Second, I oppose the mandatory celibacy of the priesthood, which I believe serves to perpetuate a caste system that protects the clergy’s power and status. Third, I strongly disagree with the Church’s discriminatory treatment of women and believe women should be present at all levels of leadership.

In my opinion, sexuality is another realm in which the teaching authority of the Church has grave difficulty. Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which condemned artificial birth control, was never well received by many bishops, priests, and lay Catholics worldwide. Most pastors do not preach against artificial birth control, and it is estimated that over 80% of Catholics in America reject or ignore Pope Paul VI’s decree.

Then there is the topic of abortion, probably the most controversial of all. The Church has not always banned all abortions, and it’s difficult to define when life begins. I am basically pro-life and believe that human life should be supported from conception until the end of life. However, I also believe that abortion can be a moral choice to save the life of a mother, in cases of rape and incest, or in various circumstances that negatively affect the mother and her fetus. The circumstances or context surrounding an act do make a moral difference, and I suspect that even a few bishops would question the absolute ban against abortions but don’t dare to do so openly in today’s Church.

Part of my major disagreement with the Church government has been the silencing of all disagreement. If any person—whether cardinal, bishop, priest, theologian, or lay person—voices an opinion contrary to the “official” teaching of the Church, that person is considered to be not only disloyal but often heretical. The official refusal to allow any discussion of these issues seems to me to be both spiritually unhealthy and theologically suspect. If the American experience has taught us anything, it is the importance of the right to free speech. Primacy of conscience, the right to follow one’s conscience, even when it is contrary to Church teaching, is too often ignored and not taught to the faithful.

EPILOGUE

It feels so wonderful to know that I am part of this awesome cosmos and part of the human race. I belong, and I am not alone. That is the kind of feeling I have when I am aware of being in the Presence of the constant flow of Divine Love. I feel that nothing that happens can ever take that relationship away from me. I can revel in that Presence and enjoy it. I feel Love no matter my circumstances—I can be in physical pain, be upset, or be terribly worried over my life circumstances, yet I am still basically happy. As the mystic Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–1416) related, “...all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” This summarizes the “journey to joy” I have been describing in this book.