

MY WALK WITH GOD

High School Years

Ch V



In the 1950's, seemed to me to be a place. God's creation viable wherever I was a suburban town in a country setting. came into the town surrounded it to the

Central New Jersey beautiful, magical was vibrant and looked. Roosevelt that was very much Only one paved road and dirt roads

south and the east. A small running creek, flanked by a narrow wilderness area, divided the town in two. A grocery store carrying only the bare essentials, was the central meeting place across the street from the town's 8 room schoolhouse. Roosevelt was a planned community developed by the WPA Federal project during the great depression of the 1930's. Completed in 1937, the first residents were a collection of artists and garment workers from the low income areas of New York. The people came as part of a government social experiment. They were to work on the farms surrounding the town in the spring and summer; while in winter, months they would work in the government garment factory. The program did not become successful, and by about 1949 all of the houses had been sold to the residents. The factory and farms were no longer in operation because the government withdrew and ended the program.



By 1951 a company making buttons for the military purchased the factory and my father became the head engineer for the firm. When my family arrived in the town during the summer of '51, I was 14 years old and thought that God had given us a paradise to live in. I made, what I thought were friends, easily for the first time since we left

Pawtucket. Traveling around town on my bicycle was easy. With only 200 houses, the town was easily covered in less than an hour. The summer was before me and I had two more months left in which to explore before the beginning of school. Even though my bike had but one pedal, I could easily

keep up with the rest of the kids as we explored. There were extensive woods throughout the town where we could pretend to be explorers. One of the dirt roads to the east of town gave us access to Perrineville, and a small lake that was an ideal swimming hole for young teen age boys. As a 14 year old, I was enthralled with the world I saw about me and thankful that God had provided such a wonderland for my family and me to be a part of.

This relationship with God was new for me, as I was sure that He had a place in this creation for me, and for the rest of the community that was my new home. Part of the reason for His generosity, I was convinced, was that the residents of Roosevelt were descendants of the ancient Jewish nation of Israel. The garment workers of New York from which these people came were all Jewish, and the town was, in reality, an enclave of the Jewish environment that they left behind in Brooklyn. According to the Book of Exodus, they were His people and He was their God. That was not to say, that He was not our God too. As Christians, we were adopted into the family of God at Baptism. Thus Baptism had bought me into a kind of kinship with all our Jewish neighbors. It became unsettling to me, however, to find out that there were some people in our town that, even though they claimed to be Jewish, did not observe the Jewish religious traditions, or even attend the services at the local Synagogue on Saturday, their Sabbath. Later, I realized that there were Christians, even those who claimed to be Catholic, that did not observe the teachings of Jesus or attend Mass on Sunday. We called them Cafeteria Catholics or Christians because they selected only those teachings that suited their own lifestyle. This was all very distressing to me because, even though hard times had descended on my family, we always found solace in the time we spent at Mass on Sunday.



There was no church in our town, but 5 miles to the north was the town where we were to go to high school, and being a well established town since colonial times, had stores, banks, and other businesses. St. Anthony of Padua Church was there, and this parish served many of the small communities around the Hightstown area in all directions. Every Sunday our family would climb into my father's car and drive the five miles to Church. As we entered the small wooden 75 yr old Church building, the wooden floors would creek. There was a single confessional by the entrance in the rear of the church. Two rows of pews

flanked a single isle heading towards the altar. Even though the austerity of the interior was apparent, the Stations of The Cross were prominently displayed on either side of the church framed by stained glass windows on either side, that portrayed scenes from the Gospels.



As we walked to an empty pew, the scale of the church became more noticeable. It was rather compact with only a dozen rows of pews on either side of the isle, all butted against the outside walls of the church. The altar, behind a wooden altar rail, was adorned with a Crucifix and flowers, with a lectionary stand on the right hand side, ready for the reading of the Epistle at Mass. The tabernacle in the center of the altar had a grand red Sanctuary Light on it's right hand side. Unlike the main altar in St. Mary's in Pawtucket, whose altar and statuary was made from beautiful white marble; this altar in

St Anthony's was of painted wood with carved detail highlighted with gold paint. This was a reminder of the general economic austerity of the area and the congregation itself. There was a certain warmth, however, that I felt when entering the church. It was easily recognizable as a Catholic Church, and the home in Hightstown of the Blessed Sacrament, that is the Body, Blood, Soul & Divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The red Glow of the Sanctuary Vigil Light flooded the interior of the small church in the evening, when twilight darkened the church. It was a constant reminder that God was present, in residence, Body Soul and Divinity in the Blessed Sacrament; always there.

On Sundays, the church was filled beyond capacity with people standing in the rear around the confessional and all the way back to the main entrance. It was the time after WWII and before The Vatican Council. There was a lot to be thankful for with the ending of the war. There was also a lot to pray for. This was during the worst time of the Korean War when so many soldiers were dying in North Korean prison camps. Mass was in Latin and we all had our missals through which we could follow the Mass in English. It was expected that, in order to prepare ourselves for Communion, the people would go to confession before approaching the altar rail to receive the Body of Christ. Who would want to eat the body of the Son Of Man, thus coming into an intimate relationship with Him, while harboring sin in their heart? I had loved to sing during our devotionals and

at Mass when we attended St. Mary's and Our Lady Queen of Peace, and found it sad that the music at St. Anthony's was so unfamiliar. I did hope that God, however, found it pleasing.

Because we lived in Roosevelt, 5 miles from St. Anthony's, and with my father's work schedule, our participation in Confession and Communion was limited. We did, however, always make it to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days. I missed our participation in the other devotions that I had become accustomed to while attending Catholic schools in the past. Even so, I always remembered the gifts that God provides us for us whenever I looked upon the holy reminders that we had in our home. A crucifix was displayed in all of our bedrooms and I still had my statues of Our Blessed Mother and St. Therese from our home in Rhode Island. Some years ago, I had received a statue of Mary in Her Immaculate Conception from the Sisters at St. Mary's in Pawtucket. I had given it to my mother and she still displayed it on her dresser. A picture of the Sacred Heart hung over my brother's bed and a mother of pearl Crucifix hung in our front hall. These, along with other sacramentals such as the Rosary, always took my thoughts back to the sacrifice that Jesus had given for us.

Even the Jewish people of our town of Roosevelt had their own reminders of God's work in the life of the nation or Israel. The Star of David, was a reminder of the blessings God provided them in establishing David as King, out of whose house a Savior is to be born. Then there was the Mezuzah, an abbreviation of the writings of the Torah, reminding them of the Covenant God had made with the Jews when He adopted them as His people.

The end of summer was coming and School would begin shortly. High School was in Hightstown and this was the first experience my brother and I had of riding a school bus. There were no Catholic Schools in the area so It was also the first time that we went to public school since 2nd grade. It was a significant transition, both academically and socially. The teachers in Hightstown were much less academically demanding, and, as a result, my performance as a student suffered and my poor student status previously displayed, in Catholic School was amplified in Hightstown. My performance was just adequate for a passing grade.

There was one consolation; at the start of the school day, while all the students were still in their home room, a time for prayer or reflection was provided. A different student every day on a rotating basis, would lead the class in prayer or read a passage from the Old Testament. That biblical reference

was selected because there would be a minimum of controversy among the various religions represented in the class. Even though I rarely participated, this was usually the highlight of my day. Jewish students would usually pick readings from the Psalms, or Genesis, while Christians would usually pick readings from the Prophets.

The only formal religious instruction at Church was provided for Sacramental preparation, and I had already received all of the Sacraments of Initiation, the only thing left for the middle to older teens was the monthly teen dance in the basement of the church. I don't recall that we opened or closed the evening with a prayer even though the younger priest at the parish would attend as a chaperon. The lack of religious instruction in my life left me in spiritual doldrums throughout the rest of my teen years.

Throughout high school, I became more introverted and felt the church and God was farther and farther away. Even though I had many acquaintances, I don't think I could call any of them close friends. My earlier friends in Roosevelt seemed to become more attuned to many of the socialist ideals that their families had adopted when they emigrated to America from Russia and eastern Europe. These ideals were easily accepted by them and consisted with their acceptance of the reformed, liberal Judaism that was part of their life. They looked upon the Bible as a historical story book that they were not a part of in today's modern society. I suppose they thought, to be accepted in the social, academic world of secularism, they needed to forgo the tenants of their historical faith. How sad it was, I thought, that the experiences of the Prophets were falling on deaf ears. While they seemed to ignore the Prophets, they were always ready to celebrate the traditional holidays of Rosh Hashaniah, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, and Passover. Of the older people in town, most were what my family called observant Jews, those who went to Synagogue regularly and observed the kosher laws. Even though the secular group were very lenient in the observance of Jewish Religious Traditions and blended quite easily into society, they were not as broad minded when it came to their children dating outside of their culture. As a result, the older I got, the more socially isolated the town became for me. God was always present however and I prayed every night to somehow be released from this self imposed prison I was building around myself.

Of course, I didn't know it at the time but God was making it very easy for me to escape from my prison. It was my senior year in High School and my home life was deteriorating. Due to circumstances beyond

my father's control, he had become a convicted alcoholic. He was never physically abusive but became more and more invisible psychologically and emotionally from our family. Even though he physically came home every night, he was effectively absent from our lives. Even though his personal demons of insecurity failure haunted him, it was always noticeable that he cared for his family. He took us all to church every Sunday and tried to attend our school functions as often as he was able. As much as I felt alienated from his fatherhood, I could not forget that the house we lived in was continually provided by him. At one point, in my junior year at school, his continued apathy towards we children and the difficulties displayed between he and my mother, I became convinced that things would be better in the family if I were not there. I made plans to depart, or run away, from home Realizing my plan would not take me further than possibly, Trenton, I gave up the plan in favor of holding out for High School graduation when I could join the Navy. My parents never became aware of my Navy plan until I had graduated the next year.

In the meantime, as my mother strove to keep our household together, she always had everything ready every night when my father might get home. Supper was always on the table with the house always clean and all our clothes clean and ironed. In addition she was able to make a little money on the side by sewing for friends and neighbors in the town. I later found out that every night, after bedtime, she prayed the Rosary as my father slept drunk with alcohol. With the few dollars I gathered through odd jobs around town, I made a small contribution to her. During these times, God seemed very far away but I knew He was there somewhere. In my prayers every night, my plight was primarily my focus. My introverted personality saw everything in the world as happening to me. Even so, I still strove to keep busy during the day.



My father did see my need to occupy myself with something in order to keep from becoming obsessed with the difficulties at home. He took the effort to buy me a walk behind plow. I loved it. It was powered by a 5 hp gasoline engine that pulled it through the garden soil. It also came with a set of disks for breaking up dirt clods and smoothing the field in preparation for planting. After plowing our field, other neighbors saw the finished product and hired me to prepare their fields too. During this season I made enough money to buy my own rotary lawn

mower. This provided me income for the rest of the summer and the next. I thank God for these opportunities to keep me occupied with less time to feel sorry for myself.

It should be noted that all of the events I describe are those of an 86 year old, recalling experiences that occurred 70 or more years ago. That being said, I still live a life of sin and conversion and thank God every day for Confession for without it, the world would be mired in pride, vengeance, envy, gluttony, arrogance and all the other vices that tare down humanity. While life is engulfed with sin, sin demands forgiveness, and forgiveness nourishes life. That is not to say that life begets sin but that because of our sin, God came to bring us life in His Salvation. Without forgiveness there is no salvation or life eternal with God.

I am jumping to a conclusion so I will cease to digress;

It is the end of my senior year in high school and the beginning of, as I thought, independence. For a long time, the desire to leave the family nest, so to say, was growing stronger. Leaving the family nest was not in any way a desire to give up on any of the tenants of life and faith that had guided me throughout my 17 years. How naive I was to think that I was now a mature man ready to take on the world. Even in my confusion, I had no doubt that God would be my help especially when I would give in to Him and ask for His help. My preparations for leaving home had not gone forgotten in the last couple of years as work and school had occupied me. Now it coming closer to the time where I could and needed to make the break. I had a sadness for my mother because I didn't want to leave her, submerged in all the troubles of the family, alone. Leaving my father, however did not fill me with any anxiety at all.

The week of my high school graduation I gathered buss fare to Trenton. I had a destination. The Post office was on the route the buss took to the city center. The driver let me off on the corner and I proceeded to the Navy Recruiting Station inside the Post Office. I was 17 years old.



Now I found out that I needed my parents consent in order to join the US Navy. The recruiter however gave me all the necessary testing and told me that my father had to come to the recruiting office to sign his approval. Now what to do? I left and while waiting for the return buss to Hightstown I prayed. Jesus, forgive me my sins and help me through my delima He was with me as I returned

home and that night I brought the subject up after dinner, “Pa”, I started, “I want to join the Navy”. I could tell there was apprehension in my mother;s eyes but my father showed no concern at all. At least I couldn't detect any. The next Saturday, my father and I drove into Trenton and he signed the papers for my enlistment.

During the waiting period for an assignment to an open slot at the recruit training center. My job at the local grocery store kept me busy. It would be August before I received my orders. One thing I needed to do before leaving home was to go to Confession at St. Anthony's in Hightstown. I was entering a new life and wanted very much to be prepared. The best way that I know to do this was to be prepared in spirit and to go with God. I hoped to go with Him with a clean soul. By this time I had gotten my drivers license and didn't need to rely on others in order to get to town.

Finally the day arrived. My father promised to take me to the train station in Trenton the morning of August 17th. It was 7:00AM when we arrived at the station. It was the first time in many years that I saw concern for me in my fathers eyes. The train for Philadelphia was arriving and as we said good by we shook hands and there was a pause and I realized that he might actually love me, for this effort he showed in getting me to the station on time, was most unusual. It appeared that he showed a little pride in me. I had always thought he would be glad to be rid of me, but now that didn't seem to be so.

NOTES

from the future

It is with sadness that I see the hopes of the people in those years, routed in humanism, reveal themselves as unattainable due to all of the sins identified in scripture; that is pride envy arrogance and selfishness, come to sight in the society that we had built with our own hands. Where do we look for God? The Navy did give me a new perspective on life, one where, only with the help of God, we can be of service to mankind.

