

CALLED BY NAME

Following a Personal Spirituality

by
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Table of Contents

WHY?	5
GOD'S WAY	7
NO WAY	11
MY WAY	19
THEIR WAY	27
YOUR WAY	35
OUR WAY	37
HOME FREE!	41

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WHY?

"I have called you by name, you are mine, when you pass through the waters I will be with you." (Isaiah 43:1-2)

Father S., you have a big job," I announced portentously to my spiritual director many years ago. "I just read a biography of Catherine of Siena. You have to make me into her."

He laughed. "God already has St. Catherine, He wants St. Ronda."

I became a Catholic from an atheistic though Jewish background when I was twenty-one. I was surrounded by ardent Benedictine Oblates, disciples of the famous philosopher Dietrich Von Hildebrand. They were all lay people following a Benedictine spirituality in association with a monastery. I imagined that all strong Catholics find a home in one of the many spiritual traditions of the Church. After I got used to being simply a Catholic, I was sure I would find one of those ways to be right for me.

Fifty years later, having tried many different spiritualities, I believe that there are other ardent Catholics like me who just don't fit into one of those well-trodden paths such as Benedictine, Franciscan, Dominican, Carmelite, Jesuit, Devotional, Covenant Community Charismatic, Opus Dei, or any others.

I don't want to define myself as an eccentric loner. I want to follow a personal spirituality that includes all that I love in the traditional ways - that is somehow *my* way but also part of *our* way.

Spirituality can be defined as the way to God. Some seekers think of God as an impersonal divine energy.

We Christians know that spirituality is not a method but a person. Jesus proclaimed, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

We believe that God personally created each one of us to be part of humanity, but also unique selves. We join with other believers to follow God's way, but simultaneously make our own individual journey. We hope that, in spite of all our many faults and sins, we will let God demonstrate His creative and redemptive power as He forms us. We want to become persons with nothing but love in our hearts.

The goal of spirituality: God's Way, My Way, Their Way, Your Way, Our Way, is union with God in all His beauty, goodness, truth and love in heaven.

In the chapter No Way, I will describe times of feeling stuck in a morass of conflicts, wanting to give up on spirituality. I will show how I believe Jesus pulled me through. You will be asked to trace the workings of the Holy Spirit when you have felt stuck.

In the chapter My Way, I will outline the main themes of the spirituality that has kept me going all these many decades.

In the chapter Their Way, you will read about spiritual paths quite different than mine.

In the chapter Your Way, you will be provided with guidelines for crystallizing the individual way God has worked in your life.

In the chapter Our Way, I will show how following ones personal spirituality makes one close to other pilgrims.

Home Free will provide hope that even before eternal life we may come into a conviction that we are on the path God wants for us. As we explore these ways, I pray:

"God, our Father, Creator and Redeemer, reveal to each of us a personal spirituality that we may follow, no matter what the cost, to arrive at Your home."

For personal reflection and group sharing:

Why have you decided to explore more about personal spirituality at this time?

GOD'S WAY

As Catholics we are rooted in God's revelation to His people as shown in the Old Testament. There God tells Moses His name is I Am Who Am, interpreted to mean I am an absolute person. By person we understand not an embodied human person like us, but a pure Spirit characterized by divine intelligence and will.

We believe that God speaks to us in His Word, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and especially in the words spoken on earth by His Divine Son, Jesus Christ. We believe that the Trinity is personal: three persons in one nature. We believe that Jesus, after his Ascension into heaven, wants to continue His presence on earth through the Church He founded, in the proclamation of the Word; in the sacraments: visible signs of invisible grace; and in His people. He wants to get rid of sin by teaching us of its horror; redeeming us from the sins we are prone to, inspiring us to virtue and giving us the strength to grow in goodness.

We also see in studying Scripture that God came personally in many different ways to specific persons - Adam and Eve conversing with Him in the garden, Abraham, Moses, David, Deborah, Elijah, Job, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, the calling of each apostle. Jesus, the divine Son related in specific ways to individuals such as Mary Magdalene, Martha, one of the thieves on the Cross, Paul.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God is within each of us. He begs us to surrender ourselves to Him so that He can live within us building His kingdom of love "on earth, as it is in heaven."

Gabrielle Bossis, a French actress, a single woman, and mystic reports in her book *He and I* that Jesus once told her: "Take the place of John and Mary Magdalene and at the same time, be yourself, you, whom I wanted in this century, this period, this little moment of time on earth, my poor little bride."

Because the person of God is invisible, we can choose to ignore His presence. We can substitute for that personal call to our unique selves some kind of impersonal idealism, as if Jesus was a teacher only, and not also a brother, a friend, lover, and personal savior. We can fall into viewing Christ as a distant figure, setting up certain standards for the human race and insisting on obedience without any reference to personal love.

It is in my reception of the sacraments I come in faith and sometimes in experience, to know of the desire of Jesus to come to me personally. In the sacrament of baptism I am initiated into the life of grace, strengthened in confirmation. At Holy Mass I can receive Jesus into my body, heart and soul, every day, if I wish, in Holy Communion. It is in prayer that I come to know still more of His desire to be with me, Ronda, in my daily life.

In a Christian context, the word "spirituality" has two basic meanings: the ways of the Holy Spirit instructing His people; and also the interior life of struggle as all the powers of heaven work to purify and sanctify each of us.

When we use the word "spirituality" to refer to the Holy Spirit's work in the Church, we can speak of the reception by believers of the gifts such as wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11, 2) and also of the special charismatic gifts such as prophecy, healing, miracles, tongues. (1 Corinthians 12: 8-10)

We are to shun our vices and to enjoy the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5: 22-23)

Spirituality in this sense of the Holy Spirit's desire to use us to build the kingdom of love also includes our service of others in the family, in the workplace, in our

towns and countries. It includes our efforts to spread the word as evangelists in ordinary life or in the foreign missions.

In preaching to a congregation, the priest teaches us, admonishes us, and encourages us in the virtues, especially in faith, hope and charity, and in the gifts and the fruits of the Spirit.

When we speak of spirituality in the second sense, as the interior life, we come more in touch with our individual relationship to God. Here is where we deal with those personal quirks and difficulties that may not be shared by another Christian, at least not in the particular facets of them. Here is where personal spiritual direction can be so helpful.

It would be ideal if every strong Christian had access to such direction. It is good to pray for a mentor. Usually we will feel attracted to someone who radiates certain qualities we wish we had in such abundance. Then we want to know how he or she became this kind of person and what suggestions might be offered to help us on our way. It is a grace to find such a guide. God also wants to help find our personal spirituality through reading. I pray this book will help you.

For personal reflection and group sharing:

How would you describe God's Way as you have experienced it in group or private settings?

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No Way

In times of discouragement we often feel that there is *no* way. We may think it will be enough to just survive this day, no less strive for holiness. We feel stuck. At one time, perhaps, we were full of excitement about Christian living. Love of God and neighbor filled our hearts with purpose. But now life seems impossible – with overwhelming problems, dreadful conflicts even with those closest to us, a hateful feeling that we, ourselves, might be the biggest reason for the difficulties.

When we feel as if there is no way is can be we are trying to walk down a path that is a dead end. That road might have taken us some of the distance at a past time, but not now. This need not be our fault. It may turn out that God wanted us to go down another path, so he blocked the old one. To change the analogy – a spiritual director once remarked “spirituality is not a matter of ‘one size fits all for all time.’”

A lot of spiritual issues have to do with personality and temperament. God does want to change our character from say self-centered to more concerned about the needs of others, but He rarely wants to change a personality in the sense of making a quiet inward person into a flaming orator or a passionate teacher into a recluse. If we insist on choices that violate the way God put us together when He created us, we will be often frustrated.

On our spiritual journey we also have to cope with the part of our personality that has to do with temperament: angry vs. laid-back; melancholy vs. optimistic. When a person of an angry, driving, temperament becomes holy it is not usually by doing nothing. When a casual relaxed person becomes holy it is not usually

through a high-stress job. Serious Christians with a tendency toward pessimism when holy become more hopeful but not jolly optimists. Joyful, fun-loving people when holy don't become grave, just more dedicated.

In this chapter, No Way, I will provide you with a short history of my times of being stuck and discouraged and how the Holy Spirit pulled me through. The context of my anecdotes you could find in my autobiography: *En Route to Eternity*. (For more information about books of mine mentioned in *Called by Name* go to www.rondachervin.com) As you read this chapter, think of times in your own life where you felt hopeless about ever becoming holy and how God pulled you through.

When I became a Catholic at twenty-one I was surrounded by wonderful holy lay people, most of them married. I felt no call to a consecrated life. I thought I would probably marry the holiest man I could find, have a large Catholic family and live happily ever after in time and in eternity. My spiritual practices included daily Mass, liturgy of the hours, rosary, and spiritual reading. I went to confession about once a month. I worked part-time as a secretary while pursuing doctoral studies in Catholic philosophy. I thought of the Church as "the way of truth," and philosophy as my path to ever-expanding and deepening knowledge of the truths of reason and the faith.

The first time this spirituality came to crisis was after my marriage to an atheistic Jewish man, Martin Chervin, who was seeking Jesus in the Church. He had almost become a Catholic when we were engaged but had trouble with the changes in the Church after Vatican II and postponed baptism for many years.

About two years into our marriage I felt rejected by my husband. Hindsight I realize we should have sought marriage counseling. Instead I sought solace in study of the mystical tradition of the Church, identifying myself more and more with the spirituality of contemplatives such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

God used my marital sorrows to bring me closer into His heart, into the spiritual way of love, but at the same time my marital problems got worse.

A few years later the charismatic spiritual way opened up to me. My twin-sister, Carla De Sola, also a convert, prayed over me and I received the gifts of tongues and prophecy. I soon became part of a growing prayer-group at Loyola Marymount University of Los Angeles where I was teaching philosophy. The gift of the Holy Spirit dramatically changed my idea of spirituality. Before I thought of God as way up there and prayers as standing on tip-toe to try to reach Him, occasionally touching His garment, as it were. After being prayed over I felt Jesus right inside me, not just after Holy Communion, but always – a vibrant presence. I loved the loud praise of God and Gospel-style singing of charismatics. Their vibrant way of communal prayer with swaying motions and clapping of hands fit better with my Jewish ancestry. I had been amazed that Catholics found it so easy to be silent and motionless in prayer.

In spite of this spiritual breakthrough my family problems increased. We had three live children: first twin daughters born to us in 1963. Then I had 3 miscarriages, one son, and 3 more miscarriages. I had a terrible time with motherhood. Even though I adored the uniquely precious selves of each of my children and delighted in their personalities, I hated the boring duties of daily life as a mother. I knew nothing about how to discipline children, since I myself was the product of a permissive upbringing. Mostly I expressed my frustration with angry outbursts at my out of control kids.

The word from God that helped me most to accept my motherly role was from G.K. Chesterton, "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly." Yes, the infinite value of a child is worth all the sacrifices. God knew how hard it was for me, and was pleased at how hard I tried, even if I failed a lot. My daughters are now loving wives, mothers, and wonderful creative writers. After much healing of all of us through counseling and prayer, I have a better relationship to each of them than ever before.

During the early childhood of my daughters and son my husband became disabled with asthma. I had to leave the house for at least five hours a day to work as a full-time professor to support the family. This gave me a

break from housewifery. It also left me fatigued to the maximum combining family and career.

For various reasons, during this time, I still felt rejected by my husband. I sought comfort in spiritual friendships with strong Catholics. One of these was truly holy, because the man in question was really holy, but others were questionable involving possessiveness, fantasies of greater fulfillment...someday, if, then, who knows. When a man I was greatly attached to quit the friendship fearing it was dangerous, I was thrown into a panic.

Happily this led me to an insightful Catholic psychotherapist who brought me out of despair into hope for gradual amelioration of the underlying marital problems. At the same time God intervened in a sensational manner. Some friends urged me to make a consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. As I prayed that she take my heart and give me hers, a blanket of peace fell upon my tired harried soul. Swiftly following came overwhelming contemplative graces such as illuminative visions and mystical locutions. I realized that no other saint could ever have been as advanced in prayer as Our Lady, free from original sin, who saw her divine Lord every day for so many years when He was on earth. Of course, she would want all His children to have the best graces to survive their crosses.

Best of all in this mystical period of my life was the feeling of being personally loved by God, heart to heart. In the past I read with envy passages in Teresa of Avila such as the famous one where Jesus addresses this beloved nun with the words: "You are Teresa of Jesus (her name in Carmel): I am Jesus of Teresa." Now I truly felt that Jesus was embracing me and making Himself Jesus of Ronda.

After these special graces, I loved to spend time at the foot of the tabernacle in a small university chapel, just letting Jesus pour His healing love into my tired wounded heart. Journal accounts of these graces are mostly to be found in my book *Becoming a Handmaid of the Lord*.

It was at this point that my long standing friendship with a Jewish convert mystic, Charles Rich, developed into a daily correspondence with much fruit as I helped him write a number of his books.

(See www.friendsofcharlesrich.com for information about his remarkable writings).

After some two years of psychotherapy and healing contemplative graces, at a charismatic healing service, I was able to forgive my husband unconditionally as I finally realized that non-forgiveness over such a long time was much worse than any of his failures. This ushered in a renewal of our marriage, and his conversion to the Catholic faith.

The next huge spiritual crisis came with the suicide of our son, Charlie at the age of nineteen. He was a deeply beloved child, a cellist, a composer, and a seeker for spiritual wisdom. He was diagnosed as manic-depressive but hid the dark side so well that we thought he would recover. Shortly after his leap to death from a bridge in Big Sur, California, the Lord consoled me with these interior words: 'I allowed it because his pain was so great. He was weaned from this world by his sufferings; got his foretaste of heaven from his joys; you will find him in My heart.'

Shortly before Charlie's death a spiritual friend tried to introduce me to the Mercy Chaplet. I resisted. It seemed like just one more pious devotion, less important than the contemplative prayer I was accustomed to. But after the shock of the suicide of my son, that chaplet became my favorite prayer. I came to realize that if it was God's mercy alone that gave me hope for Charlie, so it was what all of us needed desperately. Not a reward for our labors in the vineyard, but the balm of sheer mercy.

Two years after my son's death, in 1993, my husband collapsed with a fatal cardiac arrest. Widowhood ushered in new spiritual vistas. After a relatively short time of desperately seeking a second husband, I became convinced that Jesus wanted Himself to be my Second Bridegroom. This transition is described in more detail In *A Widow's Walk* and the novel *Last Fling*

Mostly, I have experienced widowhood as an invitation from Jesus to live in moment by moment commun-

ion with Him and with Mary and Joseph (I believe a special friend of widows – like his own wife, Mary became.)

A new spiritual impasse came when I tried to be part of an emerging community of sisters including late vocations. When that attempt failed, I joined a community where there were teams included priests, brothers, sisters, lay members, and consecrated widows. In the case of both religious communities it was impossible for me to accept their ideal of sacrifice. Both groups had a spirituality where instead of confronting injustices head-on, a member was urged instead to offer up the injustices as a sacrifice to God.

Even though I could see where other members of these groups were becoming sanctified through such sacrifices, I felt myself to be called specifically to be a fighter for justice.

Eventually I had to realize that it was not a matter of debate. Sacrifice is good and justice is good. Both ought to be manifest, but sometimes that is not the case. I would have to find my own personal spirituality where I could balance justice with love in a way I could accept. A consoling comment was made to me by my dear friend of fifty years standing, Alice Von Hildebrand. Concerning voluntary sacrifice she told me, "Ronda, it is not your charism to be a victim soul. You have suffered greatly in your life, and your charism is that you have so much joy in God in spite of it."

Presently I am trying to become a consecrated widow. More about this option will be found in the next chapter, *My Way*.

I cannot end this chapter called *No Way* without telling you more about my anger problem and the way my spirituality has changed because of the solution God sent me.

The peace of the Lord that came to me with giving my heart to Mary lasted for about two years but then I fell back into my angry ways, at family, machines, or circumstances. This continued, with years of monthly confessions of out of control anger. When I was teaching at Franciscan University of Steubenville in 1994, I ran

into a non-religious self-help group devoted to dealing with anger. It is called Recovery, Inc. for anger, anxiety and depression.

For more than ten years I have been attending this group which is world-wide and has been successfully helping people since 1940. The basics of the program are contained in my book *Taming the Lion Within: 5 Steps from Anger to Peace*. Part of Recovery, Inc.'s success involves a subtle change in attitudes toward life. The psychiatrist, Abraham Low, who founded this movement, believed that realistic people know how to live with frustrations in daily life and work around them. By contrast, idealistic, perfectionists, get upset all the time because of the discrepancy between their expectations and actualities. For example, in the group we train ourselves to "expect frustrations every five minutes," vs. imagining the day will go smoothly according to our plans.

Here is how I relate this basic insight about realism into a Christian world-view. I realize that I tend to think of life as a play with me as the heroine and the others as secondary characters or walk-ons present only to enhance my role! Naturally others resist this plan and then I get angrier and angrier. This, of course, is self-centered and contrary to how I should think as a Christian. God is the center and I am a dependent creature who needs to learn how to say the right lines so that the outcome of my life will be according to His plan for the total eventual happiness of all His followers. After many years of practice, instead of having five angry fits a day, I have about one a week. Progress, indeed.

This example of overcoming being stuck is significant partly because it involves finding insight through a non-religious program. We can picture ourselves overcoming the main flaws in our character by means of amazing graces. That sometimes happens. But sometimes God wants to help us through some practical common sense method. Of course, we need the grace of humility to think that going to a self-help group could be necessary for our improvement, vs. dreaming of beautiful instant solutions more pleasing to our pride.

Presently, the main obstacle to holiness I am working on with God's grace is the problem of moodiness.

Like many other women, possibly due to our bodily cycles (even if these are long past, they imprint patterns), I have a tendency to go up and down in moods ranging from grey boredom to flashing excitement and exhilaration. When I am in a low mood, the devil always tries to convince me that life is meaningless, and even if there is a God, I am doomed by my habitual flaws to a nervous breakdown, if not to Hell.

In case you have similar difficulties, here are some of the practices, natural and spiritual that help me when I am in a bad mood:

Physical: more exercise or more to eat.

Emotional: more variety in my activities.

Spiritual: sitting quietly before the Lord and begging for help to become more trusting and hopeful. Praying aloud a litany of gratitude for all the good gifts that fill my life is also mood changing.

Worry is another miserable trait. Recently Jesus seemed to whisper in my ear: "If you trusted in me you would never have to worry again. Whenever you feel tempted to worry ask yourself: What would I do now if I trusted in my Jesus?"

For personal reflection and group sharing:

When have you felt in crisis with a need for new elements in your relationship to Jesus to bring hope?

How has He helped you?

What is one of your main character flaws, such as anger?

What do you need to do to break the pattern?

MY WAY

Maybe because I am a philosopher by trade, I like to describe my spiritual way in terms of concepts: The Way of Truth, the Way of Beauty, the Way of Love, the Way of Freedom and The Way of Simplicity.

The Way of Truth

Being brought up as an atheist, it was the yearning for truth that propelled me into the study of philosophy and finally to finding that truth was a person: God. As a professor, writer and speaker I am always trying to overcome obstacles and grow in the Spirit through understanding things better. In my profession, expressing the truths God helps me find to others is a strong reinforcement of their validity. A good way to overcome doubt for an analytic person is to run through the basic proofs of God's existence, the immateriality and immortality of the soul, and how skepticism and relativism are check-mated by the reality of truth and goodness. A more concrete example of the way of truth as a spiritual path is this: when I get cynical because of defects I see around me, I realize that being overly critical is false. It leaves out the enormous reality of the goodness in people for which I should be grateful. Even though I may sometimes have to be critical in order to help change something unjust, my mind and speech should not be flooded by carping, bitter, comments about the behavior of others.

The Way of Beauty

A key moment in my conversion was admiring the beauty of Chartres Cathedral in France and remembering the famous line of Keats, "Beauty if truth, truth beauty." How could such a sublime masterpiece be based on superstitious nonsense, as I was brought up to believe the Catholic faith was?

Throughout each day forms of beauty that lift my spirit to God include the faces of those I love; the fascination of nature; classical music, especially the great Masses; art, especially pictures of Jesus and Mary; dance, especially sacred dance (my twin-sister is a sacred dancer); writing, especially perfect lines found in contemplative works and poetry.

Much of my spontaneous prayer time is spent in praising the Lord for these forms of beauty. Just as we enjoy reading about the creators of the beautiful things we love, I can't wait to meet face to face the Creator of all beauty and live in His "new heaven and new earth."

The Way of Love

There are many forms of love. I am best at delighted appreciation of others; and poorest at physical serving of their needs. It has been a life-long struggle to be willing to do the slightest menial task with grace vs. with dutiful gnashing of teeth. My prayer is that the love of Jesus for others would urge me on to use my hands to serve them in their neediness. Lord, have mercy. What I do have lots of gifts for is serving others through teaching and writing and speaking. This comes easy. A friend made this profound comment to me: Whatever is easy is because it is a gift!

Loving God has also been a struggle in certain ways. I am an extremely active person, liking to be busy every minute of the day. Even though I desperately need to sit in prayer and let God love me, there is a part of me that is restless when trying to be receptive.

A few years ago I got a much deeper insight into this problem. One of my favorite picture of Jesus was painted by El Greco. I was staring at a copy of it, when I

heard Jesus speaking in my heart with the words of St. Maria Magdalena de Pazzi: "Love is not Loved!"

Here is what I wrote:

"When I stared into your sad El Greco eyes, my Jesus, those words "Love is not Loved!" came to me not as a general statement but as directed by You to me. It seems that you want me to know just how wounding it is for You that I will not trust the love that You went to such lengths to prove to me. Now staring at the pure whiteness of Your presence in the host in the monstrance and, then, down at your face in the painting, I can think of many reasons why I don't love Love enough:

- is it easier for me to love you as truth because truth is strong and love is vulnerable?
- is it easier for me to love you as beauty because beauty is sublime and love is messy?
- is it easier for me to love you as mercy because mercy is balm and love is strenuous?

"When I look into your tragic eyes, my Jesus, I think the reason might be deeper still. Terror of surrender to your Divine heart whose beat is so loud I could no longer hear my own? Fear that after diving into the waves you might cast me out on the shore even more helpless to survive?

"Or, more simply still, that I could refuse you nothing, no matter how painful, if I was close enough to know you wanted something from me I don't want to give up.

"I hear you telling me that I cannot experience the fullness of your love for me if I am afraid to come closer. 'Perfect love casts out fear.' Surrender!

"Yet a perfect unison of heartbeat with Jesus would render me more like you, Mother Mary. You certainly did not emerge from your surrender to the Holy Spirit as a dead fish. No! Rather as Queen of Apostles!"

The Way of Freedom

One of my main motives for becoming a Catholic was finding absolute truth about God and morality so as to be delivered from the chaos of atheism and skepticism

about morality. I always hope to be obedient to the Holy Spirit in the moral norms and religious requirements of the Church.

At the same time, I have a dislike of conformity in non-essentials such as ways of dress, postures, or speech.

Catherine Dougherty, founder of the lay apostolate, Madonna House, wrote, "People growing in liberty don't all have the same haircuts and look the same and wear the same smiles. Each one is different, each one is growing in his own way." (Quoted in the book by Jean Vanier, *Be Not Afraid*.)

I love the spontaneity of the saints. St. Philip Neri, an Italian priest-founder, wanted to overcome the proud stiffness of some of his disciples who came from the noble classes. Under obedience he made them do outrageous things such as shaving off half a head of hair or doing clownish stunts in the streets. After an extraordinary grace, Philip's heart expanded in such a way that those who came to confess their sins could hear it beating loudly. He would grab a man weeping with contrition and hold him to his breast so that God's love could flow better from him to his penitent.

Or think of St. Teresa of Avila's response to the first sight of a portrait made of her after many months of patiently posing. "My God, you've succeeded in making me look ugly!" she exclaimed, in this way providing women for all ages with proof that even a saint can have a little feminine vanity.

John Paul II, originally a dramatist before becoming a priest, never failed to astound Catholics with his freedom of spirit. Can you imagine any former 20th century pope letting someone make a comic book out of his life-story? Or singing his favorite hymns for a CD?

Once I traveled far to see Mother Teresa of Calcutta in person. She was giving a graduation address in a town that happened to be infested with gnats. Since the whole program was outdoors, she calmly swatted these gnats throughout the ceremony! In this way she banished forever any stiff plaster saint image I might have had of her.

For myself, not a saint, of course, freedom of spirit includes dressing in old hippie-like clothing just because I like it and wearing comfortable Birkenstocks even when giving talks. I also like to sharing openly about humiliating or funny incidents in my life. Recently I was de-fanged with dentures in place of my previous very prominent large sharp teeth. A week after this operation I had to give a two hour talk. I made this announcement:

“Well, folks. I had a choice. Either cancel the talk because of the pain of the dentures; not wear them and look like an old hag; or wear them half the time and then remove them. I decided on the last possibility. After the break when you see me without my teeth, don’t clap your hands over your mouths with horror, but blow me a kiss.” The people in the audience laughed and laughed and I enjoyed the free kisses.

Relating the Way of Freedom to prayer, even though I have a daily schedule, I am not rigid about it. I like to be child-like and just say to Mary, for instance, You don’t mind if I pray my rosary while trying to get to sleep because you are my mother.

I love when Jesus manifests His freedom of spirit by breaking into my formal prayer with an explosion of fresh grace or a special word in my heart.

The Way of Simplicity

Most of my youth was spent in family circumstances that would be called lower middle class. We were poorer than many surrounding us but we always had enough to eat, a roof over our heads, and clothing to wear.

When I married a successful book sales manager, I expected to move up to middle-middle class. So it was. But something happened early on that changed my outlook. My twin-sister met a pre-hippie Franciscan style single Catholic man who lived without any income at all as a street evangelist. He persuaded her to join him for a pilgrimage without carrying even a purse. Sure enough people in the towns they passed through fed and housed them as they danced and sang and preached their way across the country.

I was stunned by this witness. Even though there was no way as a mother of small children and wife of a

business man that I could imitate my sister's life-style, I developed a disgust of luxury.

When my husband became disabled and I became the bread-winner I insisted on tithing Mother Teresa's order so that more of our money could be shared with the poorest of the poor. Over time I cultivated, as if it were a hobby, a practice of eliminating from my own purchases anything I didn't really need. This did not impoverish me, since due to bodily weaknesses I have a legitimate need for plentiful food, good heating, and air conditioning. By preference I buy my clothing at thrift shops, so more can go to Mother Teresa, and carry cloth sacks instead of expensive pocket books, etc. etc.

When my husband died I was free to give into this passion for simple living on an even more lavish basis. Immediately I gave away our big cars to a son-in-law and bought a small car. Then I started living in rooms instead of houses. At present everything I own, fits into a van and my wish is to die with only a string rosary to my name. As a result, living on social security, a pension, speaker's fees and royalties, I am easily able to give about \$1,000 a month to the poorest of the poor. Alleluia. The way I think of it is this: if I saw in front of me a mother with a starving baby on her lap would I think buying a fifth blouse or skirt more important than giving her money for food?

Lest you think this qualifies for canonization I should mention that I still require good heat, air-conditioning and good food and become rabid if I can't have them, so I am nothing like St. Francis or St. Clare.

To end this chapter, *My Way*, I want to tell you more about my pursuit of the vocation of consecrated widow. In the New Testament we read about different types of widows: gossipy, drunken ones, and others who lived only for Christ and the Church. (See 1 Timothy 5:3-16) The latter formed an order of widows, the first consecrated women in the early Church. Gradually over time such consecrated women were assumed into the religious orders of nuns and sisters.

Since Vatican II there has been a movement to revive consecrated widows. There are presently such con-

secrated widows in France, Italy, Spain, Poland and Czechoslovakia but not yet in the United States.

The Vatican is working on a rite for consecrated widows. This would not essentially be a group living together (though consecrated widows could choose to live in a group) but rather individuals who want to live much as did the consecrated widows described in the New Testament either alone or in their families. Come to think of it, such a life fits well someone who wants to follow a personal spirituality rather than one shared with a group. In preparation for the possibility of a public consecration, I am living my life as a widow within the home of one of my daughters with this informal rule:

Private promise not to remarry ever (any priest can receive such a promise from a lay person)

Simple life – giving everything away to the poor I don't need as necessity.

- Daily Mass and frequent Confession.
- Daily Rosary.
- Chaplet of Divine Mercy.
- Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours and Office of Readings and other spiritual readings.
- Silent prayer – adoration or in my little oratory at home.

Presently I am living with one of my daughters and her family. I devote most of my time to apostolic endeavors such as speaking, writing and teaching. I am not under strict obedience but I do listen to the advice of my priest spiritual director and my pastor. If you are a devout widow you might want to pray about a life-style for yourself that you would want to try with the help of a spiritual director or pastor. For more information, see the topic Future Consecrated Widows on my website, www.rondachervin.com.

For personal reflection and group sharing:

What were elements in My Way that are part of Your Way?

What elements not in Your Way presently might you want to experiment with?

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Their Way

Here I will describe some spiritual paths I have witnessed that are quite different from the one I follow. I have fictionalized the stories to avoid any embarrassment. Funny how we can bridle just as much from being praised for our virtues as blamed for our faults! Is it because we are afraid of being mocked if we fall below our own high standard?

As you read you might want to star passages that reflect your own sentiments as you prepare to outline your own way.

The Way of Service

This description is about a father, but many mothers; other family members; singles in the workplace; priests in parishes and members of religious orders dedicated to helping the needy will readily identify.

A friend of mine is the father of four children. He is a devout Catholic whose faith caught fire in his college years. Frank, let's call him, is the first to arise in the household, since his wife is catching another half hour after having been up with the baby in the night.

Frank starts the day with a morning offering dedicating his activities to Jesus, Mary and Joseph for graces for his family and for the souls in purgatory, especially the dead he has known personally.

He eats his own breakfast and reads the newspaper, praying for those he reads about who are in tragic circumstances. His kids arrive in the kitchen one by one. He greets each with a cheerful "Good morning, God bless you," and helps the littler ones pour their cereal or fixes them eggs and toast.

When the older ones have left on their school buses he and his wife take the youngest ones to early Mass sitting in the cry-room if necessary. Frank sees the readings of the liturgy of the day as his marching orders. His holy communion gives him strength for the challenges of work.

At the high school where Frank teaches history, he has lots of opportunities to serve. In his classes he emphasizes facts that demonstrate love of neighbor such as the way soldiers in a battle risk their lives helping their buddies survive or how political figures developed initiatives to help the previously marginalized. When Church holidays approach he intertwines lots of theology into his public school classes, telling them the history of Easter or Christmas, and of course of the holidays of other religions as well.

In every class there are some young people who have troubles at home and need a firm but loving fatherly figure like Frank to encourage them. After school he spends an hour coaching the baseball team of one of his sons in a stadium near his home. He likes to correct mistakes made by team members in such a way that they don't become discouraged.

Once home he leads grace at the table, making it more than a ritual for the children by specifying, "Thank you God for meat and rice and salad and dessert. After dinner he helps his wife by clearing up the dishes and then takes one kid or another to music lessons or sports.

Before bed the family gathers for the rosary. The little children join in at will, but as each one is able, they get to lead one decade. He and his wife tuck each little child in bed - the teens get a final God bless you.

At 2 AM Sunday mornings Frank volunteers for Adoration at the parish. Although reluctant at first, now after many years, he finds this weekly time alone with the Lord in the silence of the night to be the spiritual high point of his week. He brings to the Eucharistic Jesus all his cares, asks forgiveness for any failures and thanks Him for the good things of the past week.

About once a month Frank goes to confession to leave behind times he thinks he let God down by giving in, mostly to angry irritability at the frustrations of life.

The Way of Peace

A single woman, Carol, even as a little girl was the peacemaker of the family. When there was friction in the home she would go to each of the “combatants,” with soothing words and favors until they gave in and let go of their anger.

At a catechism class in her teens, Carol was surprised to realize that what seemed to come naturally to her was actually one of Jesus’ beatitudes – blessed be the peace-makers. She was happy to know that Jesus Himself was inspiring and helping her to bring peace into conflict situations.

At High School, before entering the cafeteria, Carol liked to say a little prayer: Jesus help me to be your peace-maker. She sat at different tables and made it a point when anyone was ridiculing someone to mention what she found likable about the same person. Of course she knew that some people thought she herself was ridiculous – that stupid goody-goody, but most of the kids wanted to be her friend because she was so up-beat.

Now Carol works in a woman’s health club supervising exercise programs. Mostly it is the older women sign up for the early swim. They come in talking about their aches and pains, but after their aerobic exercises they look more jaunty. She thinks that the work-out works out some of the tension and leaves the body more peaceful which lightens the mind as well.

The day-time middle-aged crowd comes in disgruntled – tired out from home wars, Carol imagines. The words she picks up when she passes the snack bar are usually angry or bitter. To break into this mood, Carol likes to compliment them on their clothing, hair styles, or weight loss. Carol’s manner of supervising them includes funny comments. Generally the same women, after class, on their second round at the club café, are talking animatedly about good times of the past or plans for the future.

Whenever possible Carol drops in to a later afternoon Mass on the way home. She finds it soothing to leave the bustling noise of the crowds in the streets of her city and the continual buzz of the traffic to enter the holy atmosphere of the large old Church. At the Our Father she makes sure to forgive anyone who frustrated her during the day.

Carol follows the news closely, especially looking for local opportunities of peaceful protest of injustices. Realizing that even peace advocates carry angry attitudes toward the opposition, she tries to come against sarcasm in conversation with words such as these: "Let's stop right now and pray for all those who don't understand our platform."

Carol is looking for a husband who will put family first and not let out frustrations at work on herself and the children the way her father did.

The Way of Fidelity

This friend of mine, Max, was a child of World War II where his early youth was spent indoors in hiding from the enemy. The bleakness of this time with no friends his own age or outdoor play, was broken up by his parents' spiritual practices. In the winter, when it was still dark the little family would sneak out to 6 AM Mass. They stayed in the basement of a large house. The owner, a carpenter, came downstairs every day at 11 AM to apportion work for his father in exchange for their food.

Little Max took in the anxiety always present in their unusual circumstances. There was security, though, in the rhythm of their prayers. Before his home-schooling, his mother and father prayed from the Daytime prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours. At lunchtime there was the grace prayer. In late afternoon there were the cadences of the Latin chanting of the Psalms for Vespers and Night Prayer before bed.

When Max was then they escaped to the United States. Everything was different in their new country; new language, new city, new people, except for Mass and the daily islands of prayer. Even though Max rarely

experienced any heightened sense of God's presence during these practices, he did feel strengthened by them. Later, as a man, he continued the faithful performance of these spiritual works. Without them he might have felt so frustrated by the annoyances of daily life that he would have given up.

After Vatican II when spontaneous prayers from the heart were coming into prominence, Max resisted. He did pray with his own words when it came to urgent petitions, but, he thought that no prayer of his own devising could ever match the beauty and depth of the centuries old words of Holy Mass and the prayers of the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours.

Having been brought up as an only child, Max felt uncomfortable in groups. Once his wife dragged him to a charismatic prayer meeting she liked to attend. He could admire the sincerity of the people present, but it just wasn't his way – all that loud singing and prophecy.

Fidelity to the Church, to his wife and family, to the customers in his store, that was what brought peace, security and hope.

The Way of Trust in Divine Providence

A friend of mine, Susan, is a wife and mother. She was a practicing Catholic, going to Sunday Mass, serving the needs of husband and children, and also writing fiction on the side. In times of stress, she used to tell God that she would suffer anything He wanted if He would only grant her wish for some benefit for a loved one.

Unexpectedly, one day at a quiet moment when she was praying for a son with a medical problem, she heard Jesus speaking in her heart words of wisdom and comfort. When these communications became more frequent, it was natural for Susan, a writer, to jot down the words of Jesus in a notebook. Many of them involved her personal problems such as trying to give up smoking or dealing with pesky children. Jesus wanted to show her that He knew how difficult her life was, but that He was with her all the time, allowing these challenges so that she could grow.

When she had filled up about fifty such pages, the locutions took a different turn. It seemed that Jesus

wanted her to start writing down messages for others that could be published. He told her that He wants to return to the hearts of His people. Through these messages He wants to form lay apostles.

The spirituality that comes through in the many little booklets now published is characterized by a call to trust in God's providence. We must know that in every encounter in our daily life, Jesus awaits an opportunity to show His love through us.

I am including here an excerpt that I particularly savored from one of the messages Susan shared with me:

"Dear children, you were each created by the Father. He takes the greatest joy in watching your progress as you learn how to love during your time in the world. You experience difficulties in this regard but you overcome these difficulties and you grow and advance. This process of learning to love and rejecting all that is not love is the real point of your time on earth.

"If you were told that you would be coming to heaven soon, how would you treat the souls around you? How would you view them differently if you knew that your time with them was limited? Well, little souls, I am reminding you today that your time with each of the souls around you is finite. Time will pass and your time with that soul will be over. If you love each soul in your life, you will be at peace when your time together is finished. You will feel satisfaction in that you will know that you tried to love them, despite the difficulties that arose to make this challenging.

"These difficulties or obstacles to love originate from two sources. One source of difficulty is your own failings and the other source of difficulty is the failings of the other soul. These difficulties, which are expected, must be overcome so that you can treat each other with the pure love that you will experience in heaven. When you find another soul unlovable, remember that you will most likely be with that soul in heaven and you will love each other perfectly there. It will greatly please and console the heavenly Father if you begin treating others this way on earth.

“If you had to do this alone, you would surely struggle and possibly find yourself without the forgiveness necessary to love each other as we love in heaven. But you do not proceed alone. You proceed with all of heaven and with Me, Jesus Christ. I have given you many examples of how I loved during My time on earth. Read about Me in Scripture, dear apostles, and then be gentle as I was gentle. Be kind as I was kind. Be respectful as I was respectful. Be forgiving as I was forgiving. I am with you in each moment and you may ask me for the grace to love each soul in your life. I will send you this grace and together, you and I will prepare you to love like a resident of heaven. In this process, you will find great joy. This joy is only the very beginning of My reward to you. Be at peace. Your God created you to love and He will teach you how to do this.”

(If you would like to read more of these messages go to your search engine on the web and look for *Direction For Our Times*.)

For personal reflection and group sharing:

Did you sense that the Holy Spirit was trying to reach you through any of the descriptions in the chapter Their Way? If so, write down concepts you want to ponder in their possible application to your journey.

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YOUR WAY

Perhaps you feel uncertain and, maybe, a little anxious. Your life might not have been as dramatic as some of the ones you have been reading about or your spiritual experiences as clear. Take courage, intensity is not the same as depth. A life not marked by excitement may have even more intrinsic beauty.

You might be able to formulate the spiritual way you are following in a few simple sentences or pages. It would be good to make one version that you keep in a safe place to read, especially at times when you feel stuck. If you want to you could illustrate Your Way or put in photographs.

If you need a little more guidance in writing about Your Way, here are some questions you might ask yourself:

What passages in Scripture are the ones that help or inspire you the most?

Have you ever heard a word in your heart from God?

How has your spirituality changed over the years?

What is the key obstacle in your character to holiness? If you are not sure ask those close to you.

Do you have a spiritual director or mentor. If so, what are the main paths he or she has laid out for you? If not, do you want to pray that God send you such a guide?

What kinds of spiritual practices do you like the most? Daily? Occasionally? On Christian holidays?

Does your relationship with God flourish if you keep a schedule of formal prayer or more in spontaneous conversation with Him or both?

Are there any forms of spirituality pursued by friends or mentors you might want to try, such as daily Mass, more time in Adoration or quiet prayer at home or on walks?

What spiritual experiences that you hear about do you long for? Do you think you can pray that God give you such graces should they be good for your growth in holiness, even if you feel unworthy?

Would you enjoy keeping a journal of your encounters with God in prayer, or in your relationships, in nature, in the arts?

Might you need to spend more time doing spiritual reading of the great masters or the lives of saints or heroes or going to conferences or retreats?

If some of these questions lead you to try changing your old way in some respect, consider formulating Your Way more precisely after experimenting.

The bottom line is "by their fruits you shall know them." A good personal way for you to follow is one that brings you strength and hope amidst all the difficulties of life.

OUR WAY

I came into the Church in New York City where there were hundreds of people I didn't know personally at Sunday Mass. Even at daily Mass I only knew my friends from the circle of believers who brought me into the Church.

Since then I have been in parishes across the country, many of them small enough so that I knew the names of many of the daily communicants and a lot about some of their life struggles. Right now, for instance, it is inspiring for me to see in the pew in front of me an older woman in her 80's who fell and broke her hip. It was many hours before she was found. I thought I might never see her again, but after three months there she is driving to daily Mass, pushing her way up the aisle with her walker waving sweetly at the sight of her friends. Another parishioner had a stroke that left him blind. His wife brings him to Mass and his smile when he hears our voices is as broad as before. A four-foot tall, eighty-year old Guatemalan walks three miles to daily Mass.

How much hope it gives me to see these acquaintances with the help of family and friends, still managing to get to the font of grace in the sacraments in spite of the accidents and disabilities I fear so much.

There is a section of pews in the front of the Church where the deaf can see the Mass in sign-language and also spaces for those in wheel chairs.

My heart is lifted up when I see certain expressions on the faces of others at Mass – there is a woman so absorbed in prayer before and during the liturgy that you would think she was alone before an apparition. There

are large families of Hispanics patiently dealing with the antics of restless children. Now there's a cultural group that is, at least not yet, contracepting themselves out of existence!

Our Way includes the smaller circles of Catholics I relate to because of some common value such as those who love the Latin Mass, or high liturgical music, of charismatic witness talks.

And then there is the pastor in our one-priest Church indefatigable as he says his five weekend Masses. The most impressive feat was his learning the Hmong language (the Hmong are mountain people from Laos who fled the communists) to be able to say the Mass for them in their mother tongue.

The words and actions of the Liturgy itself bind us in community. Taking us out of the little space in our own heads of worries and plans, we are joined together in prayer with every Catholic in the whole world in worship, praise, contrition, thanksgiving, and wider petitions. In Holy Communion, in the Body and Blood of the Lord, we are even mystically one with those who have gone before.

How often when I have been in serious conflict with other Catholics over doctrinal issues or administrative policies, the words of the Our Father at every Mass, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," have forced me to overcome disillusion or rage. An extreme instance of this bonding after rejection took place after a long term feud with a priest I was working for on a project. Several years afterwards I was at a large Mass where I knew I would have to see him at the reception. I dreaded it. Even though I had prayed and prayed for a spirit of forgiveness, I was not sure seeing him again would not catapult me back to the worst of my previous anger. Instead, God gave me the grace to greet him from afar with a friendly wave. Then when I got close I was able to give him a big hug with these humorous words, "I know you are praying for me father, because you have to love your enemies and I was one of them." He laughed and warmly asked how I was doing. Telling about this to some of my allies from that

feud I shared, "If this is what forgiveness is like on earth, think what heaven will be like!"

Another part of Our Way is how passages from Scripture are interwoven in the speech of Christians, aptly punctuating advice. "Now, Ronda, are you remembering about Jesus saying "If you only call a man a fool you are in danger of hell-fire."

And important, too, is the humor of our people based on so much shared tradition. An example? In a rousing speech about evangelization, to respond to Protestant claims that Catholics treat Mary like a goddess, a seminarian was providing the usual answers about veneration of Our Lady being different from worship. He ended his speech with this quip: "Why do we say those prayers, well, maybe we just like them."

Our Way includes appreciation of the vocations we are not called to. I see celibate priests and brothers and sisters in religious orders. I consider, "God wanted me to know His love through the blessings and deficiencies of spousal love, but these men and women witness to how His love is enough. He sends them, as well, the human love they need, but without the security of commitment. I see single men and women who devote most of their free time after work to helping others in Church and community. How brave and focused they can be.

Along Our Way, I can admire and be inspired by virtues I don't yet have – that one's serene disposition in the face of adversity; that one's sweet graciousness in serving roles; that one's hope when all seems lost.

Even though Jesus once told me that I should not try to join groups within the Church, but be a kind of missionary speaker to many groups, I have enjoyed many benefits from temporary membership such as being a Benedictine Oblate, part of charismatic prayer group, rosary groups praying in front of abortion clinics, and Legion of Mary teams for evangelization. In spite of inevitable personality conflicts, how much good comes from such groups as the St. Vincent de Paul Society working together to help the poor. Even if you are trying to follow a personal spirituality, you may be enriched by fellowship with such groups in the Church as well.

Our common Christian way also provides tremendous help in times of crisis or long-term crosses. At the time of the death of my son and then that of my husband the administrators and colleagues at the seminary where I was teaching and the parish folk engulfed me in empathetic love and prayer.

What would I have done without the series of spiritual directors who give me good advice when I am ready to throw in the towel. A humorous example took place during a vacation many years ago. I was having a rip-roaring argument with my husband, ending with me stalking off threatening divorce. Wanting to be alone, I started off on the beach near our hotel toward a remote pier. Who do I see walking toward me but my spiritual director, on a break during a workshop he was attending at a nearby Church. I ran up to him, "Fr. X, I need to go to confession immediately." By the time I found my husband sitting it out at a café table overlooking the ocean, I was ready for reconciliation.

Along Our Way we also meet those with such a spiritual affinity that they become soul-friends. Since heaven will not be "the alone to the Alone," but the kingdom of God, it helps prepare us for an eternity of love when we can experience communion now with others of like vision.

For personal reflection and group sharing:

What aspects of Our Way mentioned in this chapter are ones you cherish?

Are there some I didn't mention that are key to your experience in the Church?

HOME FREE!

The faith of the heart is the fruit of special anointing of the Spirit. When one is under this anointing, to believe becomes a kind of knowledge, vision, interior illumination. You hear Jesus affirm: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life'...and you feel within yourself, with all your being, that what you hear is true. Jesus is truly the same yesterday, today and always, able to capture the hearts of men of today with no less force than when he 'captured' John and Paul.'" (Fr. Cantalamessa, Zenit web site, 12/11/2005)

A more homey expression of this truth I heard on a CD made in Hollywood. A team was sent out from a TV station to make their way through the areas of the city where street-people spend their days. They came upon a disheveled old man sitting on the sidewalk. Asked what he thought about his life he replied in a sing-song voice: His blood never failed me!" Bemused by this unexpected response the team made a disc with this saying repeated over and over again in the man's voice, with a soft musical background. It became a best-seller!

For me His Love Never Failed Me illustrates that Home Free is not just about saints but also about repentant sinners, like myself.

By entitling the last chapter of this little book Home Free, I don't mean that being "called by name" to follow one's own spirituality means we ever arrive at some constant state of pure love for God and neighbor, with canonization guaranteed.

"It isn't over until it's over," as they say about baseball games. At any moment Providence can throw us a curve ball. Just the same, there is a difference. Struggling

along in a confused manner, victim of sins and addictions, and circumstances, usually in an emotionally destabilized state, is quite different from coming toward the end of a spiritual path where we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

What makes me think now, at almost seventy years old, that I am Home Free?

- My chief vice of anger no longer dominates my life.
- I do not just pretend to love my neighbor and my “enemies” but actually feel a compassionate sense of their sufferings. Most of the time, I can pray for them from the heart and genuinely wish them well.
- No longer do I walk blind-folded into quicksand, but if I do fall into it, I know where my life-line is.
- I don’t flagellate myself for every set-back in self-control, but instead, firmly believing that Jesus will pick me up, accept my sorrow for my sins and faults, and put me back on the Way.
- I don’t spend so much time any more envying the gifts, talents, and virtues of others. I appreciate them and hope they appreciate mine. When others don’t like me or disapprove of what I do, it doesn’t throw me into such a tailspin as before. I feel hurt, but not devastated, because I believe in God’s perfect love for me and in the love family and friends have for me despite my shortcomings. I think of myself more as a funny little creature than as a failed saint. Even though I wish my prayer-life consisted of ecstasy or prayer of peaceful quiet, I am more accepting of the fact that by my fault or God’s will, a steady good state of communion with God will only come in heaven. The dry, duller periods of prayer and even my purposeful distraction in prayer, do not mean that God will abandon me.
- I love the little way of prayer such as “Jesus, Mary, Joseph, save souls,” or “Jesus, I trust in you,” or just “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”
- I rejoice every time there is more love in my heart, since my idea of holiness is to have nothing but love in the heart: suffering, joyful and glorious love.