

CULTURAL CATHOLICS IN AMERICA:
NARRATIVE, AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY SINCE VATICAN II

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ABSTRACT

MARY ELLEN O'DONNELL: Cultural Catholics in America: Narrative, Authority and Identity since Vatican II
(Under the direction of Laurie Maffly-Kipp)

This dissertation interrogates the identifying category “cultural Catholic” in the United States and distinguishes the overarching elements that contribute to its construction and development. I argue that a deliberate connection to the Catholicism of one’s past—and its authoritative contexts—constitutes the key component of cultural Catholicism. Adults, removed from their childhood environments and reflecting on the influence of their religious upbringings, use narrative to highlight distinct circumstances that had long-lasting impacts. Selectively emphasizing particular memories, cultural Catholics, from a variety of geographic, ethnic and economic origins, construct similar pictures of their childhood environments. With this range of possible sources available, I have limited this investigation to texts by authors who were born between 1940 and 1965 and who self-identify as having been raised Catholic.

This first generation of cultural Catholics highlights three contexts of Catholic authority in mid-twentieth century America—the institutional Church, the family home, and the ethnic neighborhood—where, as children, they encountered definitive responsibilities and expectations. Their narratives emphasize the powerful Catholic forces occupying these different spaces. However, through the process of writing about their early religious experiences, they effectively reclaim a sense of agency regarding those environments. Cultural Catholics exhibit a sense of power over their Catholic past and

assume control of the way it takes shape in history. Further, they establish themselves in a new segment of society, one removed from their particularized origins and comfortably settled in professional surroundings, precisely by invoking the past in specific ways. Their stories allow them to perpetuate their connection to the tradition and communities that formed them. However, in the process, they construct a new position that allows them to be prominent figures in secular settings and still deeply shaped by the Catholic influences that characterized their youth.

To Michael

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

American Catholics have been hard to ignore over the years. They have appeared in newspaper stories and on television shows as the focus of complex dramas. The sex-abuse scandal in the Church left many people questioning its hierarchy and its integrity. Then, John Kerry's participation in the 2004 U.S. presidential election drew attention to the controversial relationship between Catholic adherence and democratic practice. Finally, the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI brought the Catholic Church into the media epicenter as Catholics and non-Catholics awaited white smoke from an aged chimney. These high-profile situations provoked many to consider just what it means to be Catholic.

Some identify true Catholics as those elderly women who fill the pews at daily mass and wrap rosary beads around their fingers. Others claim the best Catholics are the priests and churchmen who kept viewers tuned in to Pope Benedict's election. Historical figures such as Orestes Brownson, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day might also serve as model Catholics. However, alongside these idealized portraits of Catholicism are the more popular renditions of Catholic life, such as the mobster wives in "The Sopranos." Would they fit the bill? Are they truly Catholic? Should homosexuals or divorced persons be considered truly Catholic even though their lifestyles contradict Church teaching? While this question about who counts as a Catholic inevitably incites fierce

(and intriguing) debate among scholars and Church officials, it could never yield an answer that would satisfy the many parties with a stake in it. Indeed the concept of “Catholic” is a shifting category that expands or contracts according to the individual or institution evoking it.¹

Still, in recent years, observers and practitioners alike have begun to adopt a label for identifying a distinct world of Catholics. In discussions of Kerry’s candidacy and the Pope’s passing, the phrase “cultural Catholic” assumed a place in public discourse. Editorials and Internet blogs were seasoned with mentions of this term.² These current events, though, have only publicized a religious identity that has been developing over the last few decades. American adults have begun assuming this label “cultural Catholic” to locate themselves in relation to Catholicism even though they may distance themselves from the institutional Church. The term evokes a range of meanings. In fact, the definition of “cultural Catholic” often depends on the person asked to define it. Some would denigrate the concept as a disingenuous, even immoral, claim to Catholic identity, as it utterly snubs the ritual adherence commanded in the Church’s teachings. Others suggest it is merely a historical descriptor, noting a Catholic who does not practice but once did. Still others celebrate the term as an identity that allows them to romanticize and revel in Catholic particularity. While some argue it is an identity you choose, others

¹For a formal consideration of this question regarding what it means to be Catholic in the contemporary United States, see the reported results of the Survey of U.S. Catholics and related articles in *National Catholic Reporter Online*: William V. D’Antonio, *American Catholics from John Paul II to Benedict XVI* (The National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, 2005 [cited January 31 2006]); available from http://ncronline.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2005c/093005/093005a.php.

²See, for instance, Michael McGough, *Intellectual Capital: Michael McGough/Men of Faith with Interesting Differences* [Online News Editorial] (Post Gazette, 2004 [cited February 22 2006]); available from <http://postgazette.com/pg/04145/321047.stm>; Micketymoc, *Faith in the Father* [Weblog] (2005 [cited December 28 2005]); available from <http://micketymoc.bluechronicles.net/?m=200504&paged=2>; *Online Debate Net* (2004 [cited January 25 2006]); available from <http://onlinedebate.net/forums/showthread.php?t=708>.

contend that there is no choice: experience has made you one. Suffice it to say, determining the “cultural Catholic” is as impossible as defining the “true” Catholic. It spirals into countless conversations and debates that seem irresolvable.

The definition of a term is only as good as the way people employ it. Ludwig Wittgenstein wisely instructs us when he notes that “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”³ Therefore, this range of meanings and applications can provide a window into an increasingly visible segment of U.S. society. Rather than championing one conception over another, we can learn far more about this label by mapping the contours of its rhetorical landscape. This dissertation interrogates the identifying category “cultural Catholic” and distinguishes the overarching elements that contribute to its construction and development. A connection to the Catholicism of one’s past—and its authoritative contexts—constitutes the key component of cultural Catholicism. Adults, removed from their childhood environment and reflecting on the influence of their religious upbringings, highlight distinct circumstances that had long-lasting impacts. Selectively emphasizing particular memories, cultural Catholics construct similar pictures of childhood environments despite geographical, ethnic, and class differences. But these cultural Catholics, some self-identified and others wary of such a label, move past simple narrative descriptions of their past and accounts of their own triumphs over its restrictions. Through writing they reconstitute features of the Catholic communities in which they were raised. Further, they effectively write themselves into a different segment of American society—one often removed from their particularized origins—precisely by invoking the past in specific ways.

³Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations; the English Text of the Third Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), #43.

In this study, I closely examine representations of these worlds in the literature produced by cultural Catholics. Narrating the conditions of Catholic experience during the mid-twentieth century, authors represent religious life as it shaped them. After analyzing the narratives of their formative years, I consider why these Americans choose to write about this experience. Having endured the multiple sources of authority and the various prescribed identities, these adults seize the opportunity to control that past through writing. The process of representing Catholic life offers them a range of desirable outcomes: (1) they assume their own authority over the imposing experience of their upbringing; (2) they find a comfortable space where they can self-identify as both their professional, intellectual selves as well as the products of their childhood settings; (3) they begin to form a community of like-minded individuals through the public recognition of this influential past. Cultural Catholics have begun the work of establishing a new Catholic identity.

In these introductory pages, I explain the concepts and definitions required to move forward with this study. I first detail my own description of cultural Catholics and describe the criteria I employ for inclusion in this category. Next, I consider existing scholarship, which has provided solid foundations for this work on cultural Catholics. However, that scholarship also issues unsatisfactory conclusions and leaves many questions unanswered, thereby creating a need for this project. After establishing my understanding of this category, I introduce the sources for this study: first, the body of literature and my methodology for analysis and then, the authors who produce it. Though I cannot detail all the people considered in this dissertation, I provide a synopsis of a

representative group and explain why I chose them. Finally, I provide a quick look at the chapters that follow.

Classification of Cultural Catholics

For the purpose of this study, “cultural Catholics” are: (a) American adults (b) who were raised in Catholic environments (c) from which they claim to have moved away physically, religiously and/or emotionally (d) even as they self-consciously recognize the impact that Catholicism had upon their identities and (e) who identify with Catholicism more in terms of their past rather than their present relationship to the Church. Cultural Catholics fall within a range of faithfulness from occasional churchgoer to atheist. While they may or may not participate or believe in the efficacy of sacraments as adults, they nevertheless determine that their religious upbringing has shaped their perceptions of themselves and their surroundings.

Cultural Catholics set themselves apart from committed Catholics. While members of the first group may still engage in various practices of the Church, they relate to the tradition more in terms of their history with it. Their relationship results from their past participation in an authoritative environment that assigned them Catholic identities. Having left that world behind, they assume their own sense of authority with regard to their Catholic pasts in that they no longer feel obliged to submit to the Church. However, their formative years yielded a connection to Catholicism that, as adults, they reflexively recognize as having defined them. Committed Catholics, on the other hand, continue to orient their lives in accordance with the present Church, even if they disagree with aspects of it. Their identities as Catholics persist in light of their faith in the hierarchy and

doctrine of Catholicism, despite any desires among them to change certain elements. Like cultural Catholics, many committed Catholics have also experienced that all-encompassing upbringing and realize that it contributes to their religious identity, but it is not the primary source for them. Rather what makes someone a committed Catholic, first and foremost, is his or her ongoing dedication to practices, beliefs, and codes of the Church. The task of distinguishing cultural from committed Catholics does raise challenging questions and there is still much scholarship to be done in this area. For the purposes of this project, what I have outlined above differentiates cultural from committed Catholics.

Certainly, there are many adult Americans who grew up in those insular Catholic worlds and who would not fit into either of these two categories of cultural or committed Catholics, as I have described them. When these adults left the Church and its community, they left for good. The Church no longer affects the way they live so they are not committed Catholics; nor do they identify with that past even if they do acknowledge that they experienced it. So they fall beyond the bounds of cultural Catholicism as well. In contrast, cultural Catholics self-consciously point out the deep impact of Catholic authority during their childhood and adolescence. As this label takes shape throughout the dissertation, “cultural Catholic” does invoke a range of characteristics, but a key element remains the reflexive awareness of strong ties to the past.

As this self-definition is being increasingly deployed in the United States, we need to consider the historical contexts that have contributed to its emergence. The concept of “cultural Catholic” is a rather recent phenomenon, having been produced just in the last few decades. We can trace the beginning to the generation of Catholics who

grew up between World War II and the Second Vatican Council. This period of history involved circumstances that have yielded this classification, and I take up these circumstances in the second chapter. I deem this generation, those born between 1940 and 1965, the first generation of cultural Catholics; they will be my focus for this dissertation. I should note, however, that while some of the people I study self-identify using this label, many others might resist it. Nonetheless, I include them because they meet my criteria for designating “cultural Catholics.”

Key Starting Points

In the process of classifying a certain cohort, which I specify in more detail later, as “cultural Catholics,” I take up the concept of “cultural identity”—a subject of significant scholarship for over two decades now—as a helpful way of understanding a little-studied phenomenon among contemporary Americans. Stuart Hall provides a useful approach to identity-formation:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in an historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about using the resources of history, language and culture, in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within and not outside representation.⁴

Hall’s definition emphasizes the agency involved in claiming and creating identities. The subjects of this study serve as prime examples for Hall’s theory by using the resources of history, language, culture and, in this case, religious tradition, to determine how they

⁴Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity,’” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 4. See also Jean-François Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Paul Du Gay et al., *Identity: A Reader* (London: SAGE Publications in association with The Open University, 2000).

have been represented and how they might represent themselves. In the very process of selectively reflecting on their pasts, they create their own cultural identities.

The concept of cultural identity pervades the literature about contemporary Jews, as well. Discussions of the “secular Jew” utilize this category of cultural identity because it allows people to connect with the Jewish tradition without professing religious faith. My study of cultural Catholics similarly identifies a connection to a religious tradition without requiring belief in its creed or practice of its rituals. There is a key distinction, though: Catholics ultimately depend on a central institution to define them, whereas Jews distinguish themselves as an ethnic group. Clearly, ethnicity plays a critical role for different versions of Catholic identity, but without the Church, the foundation of its identity would be lost or diminished. Moreover, for cultural Catholics, this identity is based on their personal encounters with the religious institution and practices, which were such a critical part of their formation. Secular Jews, however, perceive their identity not necessarily as a result of certain experiences but rather as a consequence of their position in ancestral lineage.⁵

While the category of “cultural Catholic” has received minimal scholarly attention, particularly in comparison to work on the cultural Jew, for example, two authors do provide useful starting points for my analysis of this identity. In his essay “Not-Just-Cultural Catholics,” which introduces the edited collection *Catholic Lives Contemporary America*, Thomas Ferraro highlights this identifier and defines it. He writes, “As a catchphrase, *cultural Catholicism* suggests the development and

⁵For more on the secular or cultural Jew, Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880-1950*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); Laurence Silberstein, ed., *Mapping Jewish Identities (New Perspectives on Jewish Studies)* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); Howard Wettstein, ed., *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

deployment of Catholic ways of knowing and habits of being outside the official precincts and sanction, if not purview, of the Church.” Ferraro offers little detail about what those ways of knowing or habits of being might look like, but he does indicate who might exhibit them and where such habits may originate:

It should come as no surprise, then, that as folks with Catholic backgrounds move forthrightly into ‘secular’ ranks and the academy, the Catholic culture they bear (and reproduce and transform) reemerges as a cluster of performative predispositions—not only or primarily a choice of subject or pronounced belief. The national *habitus* affords critical distance on the Church and its members, yet even the criticism that ensues may exhibit Catholic modalities, tutored in the catechism and confessional, of course, but also in the pews, playgrounds, kitchens, bedrooms, and hospitals, where the lay practicum—including much of its mysticism—really happens.⁶

According to Ferraro, Americans who grew up Catholic but who have moved into positions of intellectual status and into the national habitus still show signs of their religious tradition. While their new perspective may provoke their criticism of the tradition, even their criticism discloses Catholic habits, internalized in the many and varied contexts of Catholic life. In this dissertation, I take Ferraro’s definition a few steps further by examining cultural Catholics’ *own* recognition of specific habits and representations of their sources. While Ferraro may claim he could pick out a cultural Catholic if he saw one, I claim that the cultural Catholics do the work themselves by demonstrating reflexively how influenced they have been by the tradition. I move beyond Ferraro’s vague description to analyze the details that cultural Catholics make readily available for observation.

⁶Thomas J. Ferraro, *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

In an important way, Ferraro's essay has opened the door for scholarship specifically focused on the concept of cultural Catholicism. By far, though, the best-known commentator on the subject of cultural Catholicism remains Andrew Greeley. This sociologist and priest scarcely mentions the phrase "cultural Catholic," but he has dedicated significant research to explain how people maintain a Catholic identity even when they disagree with teachings of the Church.⁷ The aesthetic experience of Catholicism provides Greeley the most satisfying explanation for the persistent religious attachment. He claims that Catholics remain Catholic because they like being Catholic, and that they like being Catholic because they enjoy the beauty and the stories central to Catholicism. A "sacramental imagination"—by which people recognize God's presence in everyday life—endures among Catholics, according to Greeley. He argues that this appealing religious sensibility keeps Catholics tied to their tradition, even if they disagree with institutionally sanctioned doctrine and ethics.

Greeley writes that in the mid-twentieth century, when the subjects of this study were coming of age, "Catholicism had, so to speak, two faces—the one of Sacrament and celebration and community, the other of rules and enforcement."⁸ He explains that while scores of people have turned their backs to Catholicism because of the rules and enforcement, more attention should be paid to the sacrament and celebration that ultimately give so many people reason to stay Catholic. "While institutional authority, doctrinal propositions, and ethical norms are components of a religious heritage—and

⁷See for example, Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Andrew M. Greeley, *The Communal Catholic: A Personal Manifesto* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

⁸Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 29.

important components—they do not exhaust the heritage,” he writes. “Religion is experience, image and story before it is anything else and after it is everything else. Catholics like their heritage because it has great stories.”⁹ Greeley sets as his task both explaining why so many people who disagree with the Church stay Catholic and making a case for the changes he believes the Church needs to make. In the end, the enchantment of the sacramental imagination resides at the heart of both parts of his task. The stories keep the Catholics in the Church, according to Greeley, and the Church ultimately needs to embrace the stories and the beauty and the charm and put them at the center of Catholic life.

Though Greeley rarely provides specific examples for the stories he so often invokes, they most commonly refer to the rituals and the sacraments that are characteristic of the tradition. He identifies them as the most important part of Catholicism and fears they are being lost: “Epiphany, the rosary, Friday abstinence, statues, Holy Days—none of them are essential, but until we find better metaphors for the presence of God’s personal love in the world, we would do well to conserve them instead of tossing them into the ash can of history.”¹⁰ What is essential for the Church, he explains, is the Eucharist. But he wants to argue that these other Catholic rituals and objects mentioned above, among others, provide constant reminders of God’s presence in the world and the nature of the Catholic faith. From what Greeley can determine, this is what remains so appealing about Catholicism and what Catholicism needs to embrace.

⁹Ibid., 105.

¹⁰Ibid., 137.

There are several problems with Greeley's conclusions. First, he moves too quickly past what he calls the "face" of Catholicism that involves rules and enforcement. He dismissively pushes aside this aspect of the tradition because he deems it the reason people leave the Church. The trouble with this argument, however, is that the rules and enforcement are often the primary way that Americans continue to identify with their Catholic heritage. In fact, the rules and enforcement are deeply embedded in any experience of the rosaries, Friday abstinences and statues he identifies. It would be impossible to extricate the stories and the aesthetic experience of the tradition from the thick context of authority in which they were learned, practiced and passed on. Recognizing the reflexivity practiced by cultural Catholics, one is forced to question Greeley's own position: what lies behind *his* depiction of this particular image of Catholicism? What is Greeley's motivation for his focus on the aesthetic in his representation of the tradition? Just as the sources I examine intentionally portray a distinct picture of Catholicism whose components require close examination, so too does Greeley's depict a rather particular version of Catholicism that should be interrogated.

Of course, while Greeley's conclusion and incentive should be questioned, his work does clear a necessary space for my research by suggesting that even when Catholics disagree with the Vatican, they might continue to identify as Catholics. This is an important first analytical step, but Greeley's characterization of the narrative connection to Catholicism only focuses on stories and images generated by the tradition, scripture, and hierarchy. He writes, "Our heritage is not a series of doctrinal propositions or moral imperatives. It is primarily a story of God's implacably forgiving love. Religion does not speak in abstract concepts, religion speaks in stories, in the language of images.

Human knowledge is primarily the knowledge of story. We tell one another stories to explain ourselves and the world in which we live.”¹¹ Indeed, religion speaks in stories.¹² Moreover, the subjects of my study tell stories. Still, theirs do not fit Greeley’s understanding of the story of “God’s implacably forgiving love.” Rather, they point to the struggle of overcoming sinfulness and the haunting expectations that come with their religious faith.

When Greeley so cleanly separates the “two faces” of Catholicism of the mid-twentieth century—the one of Sacrament and celebration and community and the other of rules and enforcement—he draws a false divide between two key aspects of the tradition. We risk overlooking a revealing element of cultural Catholicism if we divide one from the other so neatly. Cultural Catholics remember the *proper* ways to prepare for and receive the Eucharist; that statues deserved special forms of reverence. Though stories may have featured beauty and enchantment, cultural Catholics highlight the authoritative structure in which such stories were learned. Those writers I have identified as cultural Catholics do not distinguish the sacrament from the authority.

Rules compel cultural Catholics to continue identifying with the religious tradition of their youth. Certainly, the cultural Catholics I study appreciate elements of Greeley’s “sacramental imagination” and the training Catholicism provided for telling stories. Moreover, as discussed in the next section, they choose to reflect on their religious life in the aesthetic form of literature, so I do not imply that they simply

¹¹Ibid., 160.

¹²See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane; the Nature of Religion*, [1st American ed. (New York,: Harcourt, 1959)]; Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

disregard the aesthetic component Greeley emphasizes. It does have its place among cultural Catholics. However, these adults cannot so easily disentangle the beauty of Catholicism from the authority and expectations that shaped the contexts in which Catholic stories were taught. Cultural Catholics, now outside the insular realm of their childhood Catholicism, reflect on that experience and disclose the elements that characterize this identity-determining tradition. It is not God's implacably forgiving love that pursues them into adulthood. Rather, the pervasive institutional authority that characterized their childhood follows them. In literary representations, a rich source for understanding this topic, cultural Catholics depict a certain image of Catholic life and their own participation in it. By analyzing that image and questioning its significance, I highlight cultural Catholics' concentration on and characterization of this authority.

Sources and Methodology

For my analysis and classification of cultural Catholics, I utilize a collection of texts that has received minimal scholarly notice and yet offers a rich mine of material for investigation. These narratives offer one of the best and most accessible sources for beginning this kind of detailed study. Through their articulate prose, authors who grew up Catholic communicate a particular concept of what it means to inherit, embrace, reject or simply endure the Catholicism of their past. By narrating this defining history, they self-consciously reflect on its impact and the ways it has determined their own identities. Their connection to the tradition, as they portray it in text, rests primarily in the formative experience of growing up in a Catholic environment, even if they might practice occasionally as adults. They reveal that what makes them Catholic is their encounter with

the tradition's authoritative world during their youths. Their descriptions and stories expose the key components of their religious heritage as they recount Catholic childhood from the perspective of American adulthood. At the center of these narrations rests the reportedly "inescapable" Catholic authority experienced in many contexts.

In mining this textual record, I examine the literature for its representations of Catholic life. By narrating the experiences, characters, lessons, and influences of the Catholic tradition in fictional and autobiographical writing, these authors characterize the world that shaped cultural Catholics. I have limited my sources to selections of prose, but I do similarly treat works designated as fiction and as non-fiction. While I have no intention of erasing the difference between novels and memoirs—certainly they constitute distinct genres and authors purposefully elect one over the other—I do rely on each form in comparable ways. My approach to reading these sources arises out of the literary scholarship treating these genres. In his reflections on the autobiographical volumes of Marcel Proust, Walter Benjamin wrote, "We know that in his work Proust did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. And yet even this statement is imprecise and far too crude. For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection."¹³ While I remain a bit reluctant to classify my sources with Proust, Benjamin's remark does highlight a critical concept for reading autobiographical literature. Recent work on the genre has focused on this constructed—"woven" as Benjamin put it—story about one's past. It would be a mistake to read memoirs and autobiographies as documented histories. Rather, scholars tell us, they need

¹³Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 202.

to be considered as intended representations—with selected memories included and narrated and others purposely excluded for the desired effect of the story.¹⁴ One of my own sources in this dissertation, Patricia Hampl (b. 1946), writes of her memoir, “I didn’t want to ‘recapture the past.’ And I had nothing to confess except of course things I wouldn’t admit to. In any case, there’s no such thing as *telling all*. No book is as fictional as the one that begins ‘I remember.’”¹⁵ This element of creativity emphasized in autobiographical narratives pushes me as a reader and researcher to recognize the constructed nature of such sources. Memoirs never present straightforward reports of the past.¹⁶

Scholarship about novels points to a related ambiguity with regard to such literature’s basis in “fact.” Theorist and novelist David Lodge writes, “Novelists are and always have been split between, on the one hand, the desire to claim an imaginative and representative truth for their stories, and on the other the wish to guarantee and defend that truth-claim by reference to empirical facts...” Imagination bumps up against the ‘facts.’ For the novelist, it seems, both play a role in the work of fiction. Lodge describes

¹⁴For scholarly treatment of autobiographical literature, see Jill K. Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Paul John Eakin, *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect, Wisconsin Studies in American Autobiography* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); Philippe Lejeune and Paul John Eakin, *On Autobiography, Theory and History of Literature ; V. 52* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); James Olney, *Autobiography, Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); James Olney, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁵Patricia Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), 55-6.

¹⁶This concept has received serious media attention with the controversy surrounding James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*. For more on this topic see, Julia Glass, “Truer Than Fact,” *New York Times*, February 11 2006; Lev Grossman et al., “The Trouble with Memoirs,” *Time*, January 23 2006; Rebecca Winters Keegan, “O.K., Now He’s in a Million Little Pieces,” *Time*, February 6 2006; Marc Peyser, Karen Springen, and Jac Chebatoris, “The Ugly Truth,” *Newsweek*, January 23 2006.

his own fictional work: “(it) is in some significant sense a representation of the real world.”¹⁷ However, he further notes that novelists feel discomfort when readers insist on knowing about the specific details regarding which elements relate to the author’s *real* life. He says, “For what is objectionable about such a reading is that it seems to read the text as a sign of something more concrete, more authentic, more real, which the writer, could, if he or she cared to, hand over in its raw and naked truth.”¹⁸ A difficult balance must be achieved by the novelist (and recognized by the reader) between what is based on “the real world” and what is produced solely in the imagination. In analyzing various descriptions of Catholic life, then, I recognize that in autobiographical and fictional accounts, authors construct their stories using both their own experience and their creativity.¹⁹ There may be more emphasis on one or the other depending on the genre. Still, I do not seek to unearth the *veracity* of what they write, but rather focus on the aspects of Catholic life they choose to represent in the narrative form. In neither genre can the reader assume that what is represented really happened as described, but the reader can assume that the elements included have been selected and narrated intentionally. With this awareness, I approach the texts to discern which elements of Catholicism have been emphasized, and I try to determine the reasons for and consequences of such literary choices. In both autobiographical and fictional sources,

¹⁷David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1990), 15.

¹⁸Ibid., 16.

¹⁹For an in-depth consideration of inventiveness in narrative and historical discourse, note the scholarship of Hayden White: Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

authors narrate Catholic experience in terms of its all-encompassing authority. My task will be to classify the details of that authority and its impact.

A scholar could spend decades trying to examine all autobiographical and fictional literature about Catholic experience, so I have had to limit my sources to those that serve the study of cultural Catholics. As I mentioned earlier, I have selected only authors from the United States who were born between 1940 and 1965 and who have self-identified as having been raised Catholic. This precludes anyone with origins in a different faith tradition, including converts to Catholicism. Within these parameters, I further select writers whose works treat not the faith or theological experience of Catholicism but a social and contextual encounter with the tradition—the people, places, events and scenarios of Catholicism rest at the heart of their narratives. In many ways, my criteria for selecting sources follows divisions laid out by scholar Ross Labrie in his work *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, only I choose to *exclude* the sources he chooses to study. By considering Labrie’s characterization of his subjects, I intend to show what elements would preclude an author from my research. Labrie describes his sources:

It was that love of the Catholic Church in an ideal sense that kindled the imaginations of the writers considered in this study. All of these writers were stirred by the church’s ability to evoke a sense of the sacred by visualizing the sacramental presence of God in the world and by the church’s summons to sainthood... It was this religious passion—a passion *for* religion as much as a passion for life that stemmed from religion—that marked the work of these writers and that continues to provoke the imaginations of contemporary readers.²⁰

²⁰Ross Labrie, *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 276-7.

What Labrie describes here helps define my reasons for *leaving out* certain authors from my study. Those who capture Labrie's interest are, in my terms, committed rather than cultural Catholics. The writers I consider in this dissertation do not express a love for the Catholic Church nor a passion for religion. What they narrate instead is the way that the Catholic Church and its religion have shaped their identities even as they may have resisted it. Indeed, the works I take up fall closely in line with Labrie's description of characters in more contemporary works, which he seems to dismiss: "Less concerned about their transgressions from ecclesiastical practice and authority and considerably less focused on the church's role in transforming society, they are instead self-conscious about their upbringing as Catholic and tenuous about their beliefs as adults ..."²¹ These are the cultural Catholics whose work provides a window into this contemporary phenomenon.²²

With this general description of my sources provided, let's move to consider three of the many authors whose writing I study. Here, I offer a closer look at a representative few in more detail—Mary Gordon, David Plante, and Rita Ciresi. Mary Gordon was born in 1949 in Far Rockaway, New York. She attended parochial schools through high school (Holy Name of Mary School and Mary Louis Academy). She earned her BA degree in English from Barnard College and her MA in English and Creative Writing from Syracuse University. Gordon earned much acclaim for her first novel *Final Payments*

²¹Ibid., 277.

²²For more on Catholic writers and Catholic literature, see Anita Gandolfo, *Testing the Faith: The New Catholic Fiction in America, Contributions in American Studies, No. 100* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992); Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture ; [58]* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Arnold Sparr, *To Promote, Defend, and Redeem: The Catholic Literary Revival and the Cultural Transformation of American Catholicism, 1920-1960, Contributions to the Study of Religion, No. 25* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

(1979) and went on to publish several more novels, as well as collections of stories and essays, and a memoir. Her fiction focuses primarily on women's experience with regard to Catholicism, ethnicity, family, work, motherhood and other life contexts. She is currently a professor of English at Barnard College.²³

David Plante was born in 1940 in Providence, Rhode Island. He attended school at his family's parish, the French-speaking Notre Dame de Lourdes, and graduated from Boston College in 1961. Among his many critically-acclaimed novels, the best known have been from his "Francouer trilogy," which includes *The Family* (1978), *The Country* (1981), and *The Woods* (1982). He has also written two non-fiction books, *Difficult Women*, which treats his relationships with Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell, and Germaine Greer, and his memoir, *American Ghosts* (2005). In this study, I pay closest attention to his novel *The Catholic* (1986) and his memoir. Plante's novels deal predominantly with life in working-class Franco-American Catholic families and often feature homosexual male characters. Plante now teaches creative writing at Columbia University.²⁴

The last author for whom I offer a brief sketch here is Rita Ciresi. Ciresi was born in 1960 and grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. She did not attend Catholic school, but as a child, she was very connected to her local church, Saint Ann's, where she attended catechism and festivals.²⁵ She received her MFA from Penn State University, and her first award-winning collection of short stories, *Mother Rocket*, launched her writing career. She has followed it with three novels and another collection of stories. Ciresi's

²³Biographical data from Alma Bennett, *Mary Gordon, Twayne's United States Authors Series ; Tulas 671* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).

²⁴Biographical data from Ron Hansen, "Blooming Where Planted," *America: The National Catholic Weekly* 2005.

²⁵Biographical data from personal correspondence: Rita Ciresi, February 27 2006.

work principally addresses the Italian-American immigrant experience. She is director of the creative writing program at the University of South Florida.

On the surface, it may be seem obvious why I include these authors: all three have Catholic backgrounds. The challenge of this dissertation, however, has been to specify the nature of their discussions of Catholicism in order to define the category of “cultural Catholics.” Looking more closely at these writers, who exemplify the authors I have selected to study, we might discover commonalities beyond their general discussion of Catholicism. They were born during the critical middle decades of the twentieth century. Each was raised in a Catholic family and an insular, working class Catholic neighborhood, which was perceived as ethnically oriented and centered on a local parish. All three have successfully achieved status in their professional lives, and through higher education and publications, they have earned positions in academic institutions. In their respective ways, each writes so as to apply a lens to distinct aspects of Catholic life in the past—gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class, for example. By applying these different lenses, they offer a closer look at their experience of Catholic authority and its impact. For these reasons—well beyond a simple common interest in Catholicism—these authors provide a valuable source for distinguishing the characteristic features of cultural Catholics.

Chapter Overview

The authority that characterized Catholicism of the mid-twentieth century occupied different contexts and assumed distinct forms. These manifestations of authority comprised the Catholic world children inhabited. Three contexts emerge from the

literature as the most significant for cultural Catholics: the institutional Church, the family home and the ethnic neighborhood. As Ferraro notes, the catechism classroom and the confessional were places where Catholicism was learned and internalized, but so too were the kitchen, bedrooms, and playgrounds. I dedicate a chapter to each of the three spaces (school/church, home and neighborhood) and analyze the representations of Catholic authority in each one. Each location yielded particular lessons about how to be Catholic and what Catholicism entailed. While the sacraments and stories may have been introduced in these spaces, these cultural Catholics find it difficult to separate those introductions from the specific contexts in which they were learned. As we see in their writing, the lessons left indelible impressions that continue to influence their perceptions of themselves and their surroundings.

So why do these cultural Catholics continue to tell stories of being Catholic if they resist full participation in the Church? If we take Ferraro seriously when he writes that cultural Catholics perform their religious predispositions and if we accept the familiar statement by Greeley that religion is about stories, then these adults are exhibiting Catholic modalities by becoming storytellers and perpetuating the stories of their religious experience. Their stories take a very different form from those Greeley constantly mentions, but they are stories nonetheless. Moreover, through their writing, they assume their own authority over these experiences and determine how they might be related and interpreted. After years of living within the self-enclosed and self-supporting world of Catholicism, they reflect on the impact of that experience, and they relate that impact in their own voices. In these narratives, cultural Catholics indicate the aspects and encounters that have kept them connected to the tradition.

Even as they assert their own authority over the religious tradition that shaped their early lives, cultural Catholics distinguish themselves from the individualism that characterizes much religious identity in a post-secular landscape. Though these adults take the opportunity to represent their experiences in their own terms and reflect on their current relationships to Catholicism, they remain far-removed from the “Sheilaism” that scholars have identified among Americans. In their sociological analysis of religious commitment in the United States, Robert Bellah explores the phenomenon of Sheilaism.²⁶ One of his subjects, Sheila Larson, describes her faith as something personal to her. She does not go to Church nor participate in any organized religion. Instead, she practices what she calls “Sheilaism.” In a lecture shortly after the publication of this study, Bellah elaborated on this religious phenomenon. He claimed:

... the case of Sheila is not confined to people who haven’t been to church in a long time. On the basis of our interviews, and a great deal of other data, I think we can say that many people sitting in the pews of Protestant and even Catholic churches are Sheilaists who feel that religion is essentially a private matter and that there is no particular constraint on them placed by the historic church, or even by the Bible and the tradition.²⁷

This trend in the United States of personalizing religion to make it one’s own may appear to coincide with the development of this cohort of cultural Catholics. However, cultural Catholics directly oppose this religious tendency. Rather than making religion a private matter, they constantly bring religion into public view in their literary publications. While each work may have only one author’s name on it, each piece contributes to an ongoing

²⁶Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

²⁷Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Implications for Religion* (1986 [cited 9/20/05]; available from http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm).

conversation and puts this Catholic identity into a form accessible to everyone.

Furthermore, whether or not cultural Catholics choose to participate in the Church, they still feel the constraints of the tradition. Whereas Sheilaists feel no attachment to a community, cultural Catholics consciously decide to respond the doctrine and codes of their childhood religion. Moreover, their narratives contribute to an ongoing community being constructed through this literature. Each story adds a new dimension to a group of people whose religious upbringings link them together. Indeed, writers have in mind an audience who will recognize their depictions and the cultural position in which such circumstances have placed them.

In the chapters that follow, I offer a profile of cultural Catholics, which details the connection they maintain with Catholicism by way of representing elements of their formative pasts. I begin with a look at the historical circumstances out of which the first generation emerged. Chapter two traces the conditions that characterize the middle decades of the twentieth century and contributed to this identity. In chapters three, four and five, I focus on the distinct contexts of Catholic enclaves to consider how authors represent the authority they encountered and endured in these settings. I begin with the most formal of these structures, the institutional Church. By way of sacraments and schooling, this entity indoctrinated children into the ways of the religion. In the next chapter, I examine representations of the family. At home, parents and grandparents set examples and expectations for what it meant to be Catholic. In chapter five, I look at descriptions of neighborhoods. Perceptions and constructions of community life issued young Catholics ethnic and religious identities with which they continue to wrestle. The last chapter steps back to consider the function and consequence of the narratives

themselves. In this section of the dissertation, I suggest that in the act of writing about their influential encounters with Catholicism, cultural Catholics reclaim authority over the experience and assume control over the way it will go down in history. They write their own stories of Catholicism. In doing so, they perpetuate their connection to the tradition and the communities that formed them. Further, they construct a new community through writing that allows them to be prominent figures in secular settings and still deeply shaped by the Catholic influences that characterized their youths.

CHAPTER II

GROWING UP CATHOLIC IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICA

Artist Claudia DeMonte's elementary school classmates taunted her constantly. As children often do, they chose something over which she had no control—her name—and teased her relentlessly about it. The nature of the teasing, though, might have taken a different angle in another school. Students at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel would shout: "How come you're not named after a saint? Claudia's not a saint's name. It's against Church law not to be named after a saint."¹ This kind of childhood pestering was part of being Catholic for this artist born in 1947. DeMonte's reflections in an interview about growing up Italian in Queens during the middle decades of the twentieth century offer a glimpse into an important era of American Catholic history. This was a time and a place in which children heckled each other about saints on the playground, and almost everyone went to parochial school. It was a time when Catholics were living in ethnic enclaves but learning how to work in their American surroundings. Although Claudia DeMonte fled this world as a young adult, it continues to characterize her self-image. DeMonte's documented memories offer a helpful angle of vision on this period in American Catholic history. By considering her remarks alongside historians' work and

¹Claudia DeMonte, "The Whole World Was Italian," in *Growing up Italian: How Being Brought as an Italian-American Helped Shape the Characters, Lives and Fortunes of Twenty-Four Celebrated Americans*, ed. Linda Brandi Cateura (New York: William and Morrow Company, Inc., 1987), 54.

some primary sources, we can peek into the time and place that produced the first generation of cultural Catholics.

Recent scholarship on American Catholicism has paid close attention to the middle of the twentieth-century. In his edited volume, *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth Century America*, James O'Toole has collected essays that treat different elements of Catholic piety during the period. In the introduction, he provides a quick glimpse of American Catholicism at the time:

It all seemed ordinary ... Particular devotions changed over time, waxing and waning in popularity, but the habits endured. Going to Mass on Sunday, saying prayers privately and teaching their children to do the same, filling their homes with crucifixes and other religious images, participating in special services such as novenas, blending the church's calendar of feast and fast days with the secular cycles of work and citizenship, negotiating their conformity (or not) to the church's demands regarding sexual behavior and even diet—these were the means for sustaining their identity as church members.²

He notes that profound questions of theology mattered little compared to these deeply ingrained habits of devotion. Each essay deals with a different practice (prayer, Marian devotion, confession and the Eucharist) and traces the historical development of Catholics' engagement with them. O'Toole notes that the authors concentrate on the period roughly from 1925 to 1975. "Doing so," he writes, "allows us, we hope, to gain a better understanding of the process of change during that turbulent period."³ The articles

²James M. O'Toole, *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth-Century America*, *Cushwa Center Studies of Catholicism in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.

³*Ibid.*, 4.

compiled, then, establish the consequential nature of this historical era for the development of Catholic practice in the United States.⁴

Robert Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, also offers a look at this time period. He explains, "The Catholic practices and imaginings I discuss in this volume for the most part occurred in the middle years of the twentieth century, a time of extraordinary transformations in American Catholic life."⁵ He encapsulates the major transformations:

Twice Catholics made the passage from one way of life to another. First, the old inner-city immigrant communities born of the industrial era began to disappear as second, third, and fourth generations ... moved to other areas of cities and to the new rings of suburbs. Second, liturgical reforms initiated by the Second Vatican Council ... introduced new ways of relating to and thinking about the sacred among Catholics worldwide in the United States.⁶

DeMonte and the authors I study came of age during this time—a turbulent period involving extraordinary transformations. They were raised during the years when, as O'Toole puts it, "it all seemed ordinary," and they witnessed and experienced the dramatic changes that historians attribute to the time.

As these scholars note, men and women born between 1940 and 1965 grew up during a particular period of American Catholic history, when devotionism was prominent, social climbing was possible, and parish life governed. These individuals also represent the first generation impacted by the Second Vatican Council. While the term Vatican II surfaces in any work about twentieth century Catholicism, it helps to identify

⁴Joseph Chinnici on prayer; Paula Kane on Marian devotion; James O'Toole on Confession; Margaret McGinness on the Eucharist

⁵Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

⁶Ibid.

the repercussions of that gathering.⁷ The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) was an ecumenical meeting of bishops from around the world, held in Rome and called by Pope John XXIII shortly after his election as pope. Pope John XXIII expressed three purposes for holding this universal meeting of Church leaders: (1) spiritual renewal of the Church that would make it more faithful to Christ's will; (2) an updating (*aggiornamento*) of pastoral attitudes, habits and institutions to make the Church more effective in the changing modern world; (3) a restoration of the unity among Christians. The Council met over four periods, starting in October of 1962 and finishing in December of 1965. It produced four constitutions, nine decrees and three declarations, which addressed various issues pertaining to concerns about the hierarchical Church, divine revelation, liturgy and devotion, and the Church's place and role in the world. Of these, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy had the most immediate and pronounced impact on the life of Catholics around the globe. This constitution documented the changes that would occur in the central sacrament of the Holy Eucharist celebrated during Mass. It encouraged participation by the lay people in the congregation, by, among other things turning the altar to face the people (whereas before the priest had his back to them) and changing the language of the mass from Latin to the local vernacular. The Council also yielded a more ecumenical stance toward other religions and lifted the role of the laity to a more honored place in the Church. After a series of meetings, the look, feel and experience of

⁷Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); Robert A. Burns, *Roman Catholicism after Vatican II* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001); Paul John, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, 1st U.S. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

Catholicism had changed dramatically for all Catholics, Americans included.⁸ They had to figure out just how they would respond.

This generation of Americans felt the effects not just of Catholic developments, though. The cultural and societal circumstances that have impacted most non-Catholic Americans in their age group have naturally influenced this cohort of people as well. As members of the baby-boomer generation, they lived not only through Vatican II but also through the civil rights and feminist movements. The conditions that have produced baby-boomers therefore apply to this group as well. As we will see, authors reflect some of these general traits, and yet their specific representations and reclamations of Catholic life distinguish them from their typically “individualistic” baby-boomer comrades.⁹

To examine this crucial time in American Catholic history, I will use Claudia DeMonte’s documented experience to direct us through some of the key aspects that affect the authors I study. She will be our guide. We begin with her geographical location. A quick scan of my subjects’ birthplaces and educational beginnings yields a close correlation to this artist’s experience. Most of these writers were born and raised in

⁸For more on Vatican II, see Helen Rose Ebaugh, ed., *Vatican II and U.S. Catholicism* (Greenwich: JAI Press, 1991); Xavier Rynne, *Vatican Council II* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999); R.F. Trisco and A. Komonchak, "Vatican Council II," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003); *Vatican II the Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, (Northport, NY: Costello Pub., 1996).

⁹For reflections on this American generation deemed the “baby boomers,” see Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker, *The New Individualists: The Generation after the Organization Man*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991); Joe Queenan, *Balsamic Dreams: A Short but Self-Important History of the Baby Boomer Generation*, 1st ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 2001); Leonard Steinhorn, *The Greater Generation: In Defense of the Baby Boom Legacy*, 1st ed. January 2006 ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Press, 2006); Richard D. Thau and Jay S. Heflin, *Generations Apart: Xers Vs. Boomers Vs. The Elderly* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1997). For studies devoted to baby boomers and religion, see Catherine N. Albanese, "Baby Boomers, American Character, and the New Age: A Synthesis," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and Melton J. Gordon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993); Darren E. Sherkat, "Counterculture or Continuity? Competing Influences on Baby Boomers' Religious Orientations and Participation," *Social Forces* 76, no. 3 (1998).

urban or suburban areas in the Northeastern part of the country. While DeMonte's Astoria in Queens was not home to all of the authors, it was not too distant from their childhoods in Brooklyn, Long Island, suburban Connecticut, Philadelphia and Northern New Jersey. Of course, not every author who writes about being Catholic is from the Northeast. Chicago and St. Paul can claim some, as well, while still others grew up in the Southwest in New Mexico and California. It is hard to deny, though, that most of these writings were produced by Catholics from the Northeast and for this reason, DeMonte's reflections provide an enlightening lens onto what life was like there during those critical decades. So with the time and the place closely correlated to the cultural Catholics considered here, we turn to DeMonte's three critical realms of existence to examine the organizing categories for this dissertation: the institutional Church, the home and the neighborhood.

The Institutional Church

For Claudia DeMonte, her family's daily life revolved around the parish and their special occasions around the saints. She recalls witnessing her father's commitment to the local church. She writes, "The Catholic Church was his passion. Extremely religious, totally immersed, he was an usher in his church and he attended all the novenas and functions."¹⁰ Committed to his Catholicism, the parish was his center where he actively contributed as a volunteer. The clergy earned his utmost respect, and devotionism, such as local novenas, was a notable aspect of his practice. DeMonte took note of this commitment because it was something her father cherished and encouraged, and it certainly influenced the family's day-to-day existence. There was a special devotion

¹⁰DeMonte, "The Whole World Was Italian," 54.

DeMonte recalls: “Each year on his name day, St. Joseph’s feast day on March 19, we used to send him special greeting cards and eat zeppole di San Giuseppe all day. They were special pastries made only on St. Joseph’s Day.”¹¹ We begin to get a picture of DeMonte’s 1950s life in Queens where the church seemed to reign supreme.

Historian Charles Morris designates this kind of experience as typical of the time. He writes, “In its glory days, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, the Catholic Church constructed a virtual state-within-a-state so Catholics could live almost their entire lives within a thick cocoon of Catholic institutions.”¹² DeMonte was born into such a world that revolved mostly around the parish and its devotional functions, indeed a scene for which the historian Morris has a nostalgic fondness. Such romantic notions notwithstanding, in the decades following World War I, devotional practice was a prominent factor in Catholicism. This took various forms, but most popular were devotions to the Virgin Mary in the rosary, in novenas and in special feast days celebrating her apparitions. The devotion to Our Lady of Fatima, a rather popular devotion of the time, took on an especially strong anti-Communist quality during the Cold War of the 1940s and 1950s. Adoration of the Eucharist, frequent communion and (therefore) frequent confession also experienced a resurgence during these decades. Starting in the early part of the twentieth century and continuing through those middle decades, the pastoral technique of ‘retreats’ was popular. These retreats involved a weekend of prayer and devotional rituals for lay men and lay women under the leadership

¹¹Ibid.

¹² Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America's Most Powerful Church*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 1997), vii.

of ordained priests or women religious.¹³ All of these various practices increased lay participation in the Church and emphasized the importance of the local parish and clergy.

For children, another branch of the institutional church claimed religious energies: parochial school. In her study on the need for such schools, Mary Ryan observed in 1964:

The notion prevails, among Catholics and non-Catholics alike, that elementary schools, high schools and colleges under Catholic auspices are an essential aspect of Catholic life, and that belief in the necessity of a Catholic educational system is almost an article of Catholic faith. But, in actual fact, providing a general education for its children is an auxiliary service, not part of the essential mission of the Church.¹⁴

Regardless of its priority in the Church's documented mission, parochial schooling took precedence among American Catholics during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Claudia DeMonte experienced this first hand. She claims she had "a heavy-duty Catholic education."

DeMonte would have been involved in the upward rise in attendance that occurred during this period in parochial schools. Thomas Hunt reports that "in 1965-6, Catholic school enrollment reached an all-time high of 5.6 million pupils, constituting 87 percent of the country's nonpublic school enrollment."¹⁵ Why were so many Catholic parents choosing this form of education during this time? How was it defined, understood, and executed during this period of growth?

¹³For more on devotional Catholicism during this time period, see Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 384-8; Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Parish: A History from 1850 to the Present*, 2 vols. (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 345-6; Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 168-73.

¹⁴Mary Perkins Ryan, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer? Catholic Education in the Light of the Council*, [1st ed. (New York,: Holt, 1964), 6.

¹⁵Thomas Hunt, "Historical Overview of Catholic Schools in the United States," in *Catholic Schools in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Thomas Hunt (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 4.

In 1961, Father Leo Ward of the University of Notre Dame offered this description of the Catholic school's ideal:

Together with the teachers, the principal of a Catholic school is dedicated, and the whole work of the school is seen as a sacred work, co-creative with the total work of God in the world. Faith and fractions are almost as if out of the same book. The reason is simple. Just as we reject the principle of divorcing faith and works, so we reject the principle and the practice of divorcing the life of faith and the life of study.¹⁶

As Catholic parents were making their way into the American way of life through their advances in the work force and social classes (which I will discuss shortly), they perhaps recognized in their children a great potential for bringing Catholicism to many aspects of American culture. There was a growing feeling that Catholics could achieve success in the United States without abandoning their religious tradition and community. In fact, American Catholic historian Jay Dolan suggests that most thought a bit of Catholicism could only improve their national culture.¹⁷ Therefore, if these students could appropriately learn that their faith was innately connected to all other parts of life, they might successfully influence their national culture with a desirable dose of Catholicism—a prominent goal among Catholics at mid-century.

Another appealing aspect of the parochial school for parents might have been the moral guidance it provided to their little ones. Father Ward explains it this way: "Every little child has within him this immense power of freedom to develop and to be developed. We in the schools want to help him. Of course, thinking about any such power is beyond the child. But with the aid of doctrines and liturgy and sacraments, the child

¹⁶Leo R. Ward, "Principles for Principals," in *The Catholic Elementary School Principal*, ed. Sister M. Jerome Corcoran (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1961), 10.

¹⁷Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*, 152.

can be guided along lines that will enable him to begin to develop the power.” There were distinct steps for developing such power. Among them was what Ward labeled “built-in habits.” He explains: “In this regard, the child is, above all, learning to be generous and self-sacrificial. And he is learning at the same time to understand something. He is learning to understand both how to *be good* and that *being good* and *doing good* is *itself* a good thing. He does two great things at once—he develops a built-in habit of doing good, and he more and more understands good.”¹⁸ Generosity and self-sacrifice were teachable habits in the Catholic school, according to Fr. Ward, and they demanded attention and effort. With any success, these teachers inculcated an aptitude and appreciation for “being good”—however that might have been interpreted and enacted. The promised help with moral education of their children likely offered a relief for parents working to be both good Catholics and respectable Americans.

Learning to be good Catholics involved not only learning the habits of a moral person, but also learning how to practice the religion. In her reflections on the duties of the Catholic school principal, Sister M. Jerome Corcoran expressed how her contemporary educators assumed this responsibility as well. “Religious practice,” she wrote, “is a subtle influence which most directly concerns the parochial school. Parochial school teachers meet such instances of remissness as the following: Kathy is consistently absent from Sunday mass, Jimmy brings meat in his lunch on Friday, Eddie is missing when the Scouts have their Communion Sunday.”¹⁹ In 1961, the faculty and administrators assumed the responsibility for *subtly* influencing their students’ religious

¹⁸Ward, “Principles for Principals,” 12.

¹⁹Jerome Corcoran, *The Catholic Elementary School Principal* (Milwaukee,: Bruce Pub. Co., 1961), 294.

adherence even when it did not directly affect the school day. In fact, their adherence could not be limited even to the Church, but was evidenced by their lunchbox or their extracurricular activities.

This intense attention required qualified people. Sister Corcoran explains just what a principal would seek in a teacher: “*The Christian Education of Youth* points out that every teacher in a Catholic school should possess certain minimum of essentials: professional preparation, intelligence, good character, a love of Christ’s little ones, and an interest in the family and the nation. In other words, even before we say what a good teacher should *do*, we must know what she *is* as a person.”²⁰ Students learning to be good Catholics would need good Catholics as their examples and for this reason, there was significant emphasis on the personal character of every teacher, most of whom during this period were nuns. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, men and women from a variety of religious orders almost exclusively staffed the growing parochial school system as teachers and principals.²¹ Dedicated as they were to their religious institution, they set high standards for their pupils. Starting in the 1950s and continuing to the present, nuns’ presence in the classroom did begin to decline, in tandem with their decline in vocations, and lay teachers have been replacing them in the schools. Since the process took a few decades and only accelerated after Vatican II, the children attending schools during the 1950s and into the 1960s would have barely felt its impact. This atmosphere, characterized by education, example and observation and created mostly by women who

²⁰Ibid., 182.

²¹In 1936, out of 58,903 teachers in Catholic elementary schools, 55,467 were religious (ninety-four percent). See Harold A. Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit; the Story of Catholic Education in the United States* ([New York]: Macmillan, 1970), 226.

had dedicated their lives to the Church, characterized the daily life of most Catholic children born during the 1940s and 50s.²²

The Family Home

Not surprisingly, DeMonte's parents occupy a large part of her recorded memories. Her father, in particular, left a lasting impression, and he continues to influence her self-identity. Her admiration for her father is clear: "By the time my father died, he was of the upper middle class. If I can achieve as much as my father did, considering that he started from nothing and I started with a graduate degree and a support system, I would be king," she explains.²³ Her childhood witnessed a transition to an era when an Italian Catholic from New York could start from nothing and make his way into the upper middle class. There was an emerging sense that Catholics could move into the mainstream of American society even as they maintained a strong parish life. DeMonte's father even served as city councilman and as a member of the Constitutional Convention and the Electoral College. Despite his humble beginnings, he had earned not only a good living but also a voice on the political scene. In the post World War II era, he was of the generation that was continuing to prove that Catholics could not only be Catholic in the United States, but they could be accomplished and active citizens, as well.

This distinction has a long and storied past for Catholics. From the time the Church made its way to this country, its members struggled with fitting into the larger

²²For more on Catholic schools, see James Youniss, John J. Convey, and Jeffrey A. McLellan, *The Catholic Character of Catholic Schools* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).; James Youniss and John J. Convey, *Catholic Schools at the Crossroads : Survival and Transformation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).; Anthony S. Bryk, Valerie E. Lee, and Peter Blakeley Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit; the Story of Catholic Education in the United States*.

²³DeMonte, "The Whole World Was Italian," 53.

society while maintaining the religion's institutional integrity. What has been deemed the "Americanist controversy" pitted Catholics against one another in the 1890s regarding the level to which Catholics and the Church itself should adapt to life in the United States.²⁴ Such internal debates among Catholics yielded varying levels of accommodation of Catholicism to its American and modern circumstances. External conditions also contributed to ambivalence in the larger American context at the turn and early decades of the twentieth century. Even as American intellectuals were beginning to accept Catholics who had demonstrated a patriotic allegiance to the U.S., and as Catholics' involvement with labor unions brought them to the forefront of important social and political issues, the American Protective Association, an openly anti-Catholic group, was busy registering over one million members during the 1890s.²⁵ This organization had fallen apart, by the turn of the century, but Catholics faced another threat in the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s.²⁶

Still, even as anti-Catholicism took various organized forms, liberal Catholics found themselves at the center of American politics by the end of the 1920s. In his efforts to be nominated as the Democrat in the presidential election year of 1928, Alfred Smith,

²⁴For studies of the Americanist controversy among Catholics at the turn on the twentieth century and surrounding issues, see R. Scott Appleby, Patricia Byrne, and William L. Portier, *Creative Fidelity: American Catholic Intellectual Traditions, American Catholic Identities* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004); Thomas Timothy McAvoy, *The Americanist Heresy in Roman Catholicism, 1895-1900* ([Notre Dame, Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963); John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 91-165; Morris, *American Catholic*, 81-138.

²⁵See McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 124.

²⁶See John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

a Catholic from New York, pushed Catholics into the national public eye.²⁷ By claiming ignorance about papal bulls and encyclicals, he won the favor of many American liberals and the disdain of some devout Catholics. Many prominent intellectuals suggested that his presence on the scene marked great strides for toleration in the U.S. and others asserted that his unawareness of papal declarations proved that his Catholicism should not factor into voters' minds. It was becoming possible to be both entirely democratic and affiliated with the monarchical institution of the Catholic Church. Of course, Alfred Smith lost the presidential election, and historian John McGreevy reports that anti-Catholicism proved the decisive issue for voter behavior.²⁸ Despite this perceived setback for Catholics in the public sphere, they were indeed advancing into the American cultural and intellectual mainstreams. As DeMonte's narrative shows, Catholics were getting jobs and moving squarely into the middle class and onto the political scene by the 1950s.

Of course, DeMonte's encounter with Catholicism at home was not limited to the socio-economic aspects of being Catholic in this country. There was more to being Catholic as a member of her family. She recalls one of her father's biggest wishes: "If I had become a nun, he would have been very happy. He thought the greatest gift anyone could give him was a child who entered a religious order."²⁹ Obviously, she did not fulfill this parental wish, but her reference to her father's desire calls attention to the centrality of Catholicism in the family dynamic. In addition to expressing hopes for a child's vocation, parents and relatives had enormous influence on a child's Catholic life during

²⁷Edmund Arthur Moore, *A Catholic Runs for President; the Campaign of 1928* (New York,: Ronald Press Co., 1956); Richard O'Connor, *The First Hurrah: A Biography of Alfred E. Smith* (New York,: Putnam, 1970).

²⁸McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 151.

²⁹DeMonte, "The Whole World Was Italian," 54.

the mid-twentieth century. One of the critical ways that young Catholics were brought into practices of the faith was Marian devotion, taught particularly at home. In Paula Kane's contribution to O'Toole's collection, she offers a historical study of this devotion from what she calls "its heyday in the mid-twentieth century" through its decline after Vatican II. Kane details the various movements around devotion to Mary that materialized during these key decades. Robert Orsi also takes up this key issue in his volume. In his chapter, "The Many Names of the Mother of God," he writes that before Vatican II, "Marian devotions had been central to the making and sustaining of the social fabric of working-class and rural Catholic communities in the United States."³⁰ He details a few of these, such as parading images of Mary through the streets on feast days, hosting rosary nights in homes, dedicating Tuesday evening to novenas in honor of the Virgin. DeMonte herself saw the example set by her father's regular attendance at novenas. Honoring and treasuring this holy icon was a major element in most every Catholic home.

The Blessed Virgin was not the only icon that could be seen in Catholic homes. Most families still contained evidence of the domestic ideology promoted in Victorian America. Parents and grandparents, who would have lived through the end of the nineteenth century, held onto the items and images that had brought religion into their homes. Catholics successfully established "a proper spiritual environment in the home," explains Dolan, "by decorating the home with religious symbols of devotional

³⁰Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 52. On the Victorian period, see Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900, Religion in North America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

Catholicism.”³¹ Such symbols would have included crucifixes, statues, holy pictures and candles. These became everyday objects in the home and created an atmosphere of Catholic piety for the children who passed them daily.

The Ethnic Neighborhood

Between the parish and the home, the local community itself often issued rules and set expectations for young Catholics. It sometimes imposed “built-in habits” of its own, notably distinct from those at school. Claudia DeMonte’s story provides an example of this: “My family settled in an Italian neighborhood in Astoria, which is part of New York City and still live there.” This Italian character enveloped everything she knew as a child, even those aspects (and people) without the ethnic affiliation. She writes, “I grew up thinking that my mother was Italian. I mean, the whole world was Italian to me. My family was Italian and I had no idea my mother wasn’t. She acted like the Italian relatives, she outcooked them, she adopted the whole thing. If you asked her, she would probably say she *was* Italian.”³² In this acknowledgement of her young naiveté, the artist reveals the power of the ethnic community that surrounded her. Before she knew the difference, it defined everything and everyone she knew.

In his monographic study of a devotion in Harlem, Robert Orsi has brought attention to the importance of ethnic identity with regard to Catholic practice. His ethnographic history of the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel as it was celebrated from 1880 to 1950 illustrates the nature of daily life for Catholic Italian immigrants and their children in a particular section of Harlem. The community life he describes resembles

³¹Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 218.

³²DeMonte, “The Whole World Was Italian,” 51.

DeMonte's experience of being enveloped by the Italian identity of everyone in her surroundings—even those who might not have been Italian. Aside from producing cooks and an ethnic label, being Italian in DeMonte's neighborhood had consequences for the area's inhabitants. She recalls the family of "lower-class Italians" nearby. When DeMonte went to their family restaurant after she had graduated from college and before heading off to graduate school, the mother of the family said, "Graduate school? Graduate school and so thin? You'll never find a husband." Within this community, this meant she had failed. She explains, "No matter how well you do, if you are an Astoria girl and are not married in your early twenties, you are a failure."³³ While Astoria should not be mistaken for Harlem, her description closely matches what Orsi depicts in his study: "Life in Italian Harlem was very public ... People had to be very careful how they behaved in the streets ... They knew how attentive and critical their neighbors could be."³⁴ During this period in neighborhoods within American cities, young Catholics felt the substantial expectations of those in the community.

Ethnic identity affected life in tangible ways in these Catholic neighborhoods.³⁵ Being Italian during this time and in this place also meant that you did not get along with the Irish, nor even speak to them in some cases. This had immediate effects for children

³³Ibid., 55.

³⁴Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 92.

³⁵On the importance of space and place in American religion, see David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal, *American Sacred Space, Religion in North America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality*, Expanded ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Laurie Maffly-Kipp, "Eastward Ho! American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).

in DeMonte's situation: "One time, in the sixth grade, we had a teacher who was Irish and gave the Italian kids extra homework. Then the next year we had an Italian teacher who gave the Irish kids extra homework."³⁶ Of course, DeMonte and her classmates were not the only ones to feel this tension. Conflict among ethnic groups had been a consistent problem among Catholics in the U.S. since they began emigrating to this country. As immigrants moved to urban locations, they quickly discovered other groups from different places living nearby. And they did not always get along. The particular tension alluded to by DeMonte between Italians and Irish Catholics was a common problem, and at the heart of it was religious difference. Robert Orsi succinctly sums it up: "Irish American Catholics could not understand Italian popular spirituality."³⁷ To grasp this inability to understand requires a closer look at the historical context. For a variety of reasons that resulted from different circumstances, the Irish Americans claimed a significant portion of the Catholic clerics in the United States. They were strongly affiliated with the institutional Church. Italian devotion to saints and their popular practice, like the Festa studied by Orsi, posed a direct challenge to the Irish hierarchy.³⁸ This created and sustained tension between these two ethnic groups that manifested even in the classroom, as we see in DeMonte's example.

According to DeMonte, pursuing an advanced education required transgressing the Italian American norm. "It takes a while for people to assimilate and become rooted and get power," she explains. "In the neighborhood I grew up in, the Italians were held

³⁶DeMonte, "The Whole World Was Italian," 56.

³⁷Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 55.

³⁸See James Stuart Olson, *Catholic Immigrants in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1987).

back because of their attitude toward education. Education just wasn't that important to them.... The Italian kids who did go to college had unusual parents."³⁹ The often unacknowledged "built-in habits" of the neighborhood directly impacted children raised in such environments and required people like Claudia DeMonte to ignore the community's norm and chase her own ambitions. Fortunately for DeMonte, her parents did not abide by these ethnic norms. They raised their children to value education and to achieve their personal goals. DeMonte's father insisted that the young girl recognize every instrument in a piece of music. As she recalls, "There is no doubt today that I am an artist today because of that underlying parental support for the arts," and later recalls about her father, "He said to me that I could do anything."⁴⁰ In her adulthood, she notes that her mother, unlike her neighbors, never pressures her to have children. Her parents seemed to offer a support and a haven, while others in her community fault her for pursuing an education at the expense of starting a family. As it happens for most families, life inside and outside the home reciprocally affected these separate spheres.⁴¹ It would be impossible for DeMonte to prevent them from influencing her as she moved between them.

As DeMonte was experiencing the American world outside her neighborhood through education, scores of Catholics were moving out of these urban communities on a bigger scale, according to historians. Mark Massa writes:

Perhaps the single most important long-term factor in abetting the move of a significant portion of American Catholics into the verdant and

³⁹DeMonte, "The Whole World Was Italian," 56.

⁴⁰Ibid., 57, 9.

⁴¹See sections on extensions of the domus in Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 91-2.

affluent pastures of middle-class acceptance and affluence between 1945 and 1970 was the movement out of the ‘Catholic ghetto’—a nurturing by confining subculture marked by membership in ‘our’ institutions from cradle to grave—into the beckoning and pluralistic ranks of the American cultural mainstream.⁴²

As I noted earlier, the exodus from the neighborhood constitutes one of the two major transformations for Catholics during the mid-twentieth century as identified by Orsi, and while it certainly stands as a major marker for historians of American Catholicism, Orsi warns that it should not be considered a simple process.⁴³ He writes, “The old neighborhoods did not simply disappear. Individual families and family members made painful and difficult choices to stay or leave that had profound personal, political, religious and psychological consequences.” These decisions and consequences impact my sources in different ways, but despite the variety of circumstances, many families were facing this situation. Because it remains a complicated past, Orsi encourages readers to think of this historical period “as a braided one: many Catholics moved to suburbs, many others moved into city neighborhoods or held fast there, some members of a family entered the white-collar workforce while others continued in industry and manual labor ...”⁴⁴ Orsi reminds us about the complicated nature of historical change as it applies to the Roman Catholic cohort of the mid-twentieth century.

We should also keep in mind that movement out of the “ghetto” did not automatically signify a move away from parish-centered neighborhoods. Jay Dolan explains, “As people flocked to tree-lined suburbs and septic-tank developments, the

⁴²Mark Stephen Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1999), 2.

⁴³Jay Dolan has used this transformation as a historical marker. See also Morris, *American Catholic*.

⁴⁴Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 8-9.

church followed. The response of the church was quite simple. The parish of the immigrant neighborhood was transplanted to the American suburb.”⁴⁵ Of course, Orsi’s warning about simplifying the history would apply here, as well. Still, Dolan’s observation emphasizes that even as people were moving into suburbia and becoming a more accepted group in mainstream America, they maintained a loyalty to their Catholic identity.

The New Narratives

Her teachers, her priest, her family and her neighbors wielded enormous influence over Claudia DeMonte. As an adult, though, she is able to shape her surroundings. In her recorded interview with Linda Brandi Cateura, DeMonte highlights the parts of her past that most deeply affected her. This opportunity, the interview itself, allows her to remember and represent that history in a certain way. Within her recorded memories, we discover another way in which DeMonte has learned to reconfigure the past. She explains, “In my work as an artist, I have used autobiographical themes. My show last year was based on my Catholic upbringing. There is no saint by the name Claudia, and I made up a saint with that name ...”⁴⁶ The constant antagonism she suffered from her classmates during childhood left its mark. She claims that teasing had caused her shame and so as an artist and an adult, she finds a way to eliminate its cause. “To correct this situation,” she says, “at last Claudia was added to the list of saints. I created a whole life for her and a shrine. You know those big shrines they carry through the streets of Little Italy? I made one for St. Claudia.” DeMonte’s art offered her a way to make right what

⁴⁵Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 381.

⁴⁶DeMonte, “The Whole World Was Italian,” 54.

she had felt was missing. It allowed her to reconstitute one part of being Catholic that had bothered her to the core. In her case, it provided a sense of satisfaction.

Just as DeMonte's art offers her a level of agency and sense of satisfaction, though, it does not sever her from her Catholic origins. In fact, it draws her to them in new ways. Her work allows her to bring select aspects of it into the context she now occupies. Typical of the caricatured baby-boomer, DeMonte asserts *herself* into the old story. *Her* name is given saintly status. In Joe Queenan's reflection on the baby boomer generation, he writes. "Everything I had ever learned as a Baby Boomer had oriented me in a single direction: further into myself."⁴⁷ However, a closer look at DeMonte's described piece reveals that the shrine is about much more than just *herself*. It involves the desire to be a welcome and legitimate member of the community. Its creativity calls upon communal reverence and public ritual.⁴⁸ Without the context of community, particularly a Catholic community, her statue of St. Claudia has little meaning. In many ways, the piece is as much about belonging to a new form of that old world as it is about easing the pain from it. Moreover, her medium and subject evoke a Catholic aesthetic sensibility. So, just as DeMonte asserts her own authority over her Catholic experience, she also perpetuates a connection to it. Further, she invites others to become a part of the conversation by presenting her work publicly. She does not intend to keep her uneasy relationship to this religious past a private matter. Instead, she puts it on display so that

⁴⁷Queenan, *Balsamic Dreams: A Short but Self-Important History of the Baby Boomer Generation*, 6.

⁴⁸For surveys of ritual, see Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory*, 1st ed. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1990); Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, ed. Meyer Fortes, et al., *Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

others might access it and respond to it. Her shrine of Claudia establishes the opportunity for a new community.

In many ways, Claudia DeMonte's brief reflections encapsulate the heart of American Catholic history during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Her life in the 'suburban' borough of Queens in an ethnically Italian neighborhood and her enrollment at a parochial school mark her as a mid-century Catholic. For example, her parochial education links her with what historian Harold A Buetow, in the words of the Reverend Henry J. Brown, calls "a half-century of progress" for Catholics schools between 1918 and 1957.⁴⁹ Her schooling as well as her father's dedication to his parish might never had occurred if it weren't for the tremendous efforts to construct Catholic buildings during these decades. The period from 1920-60 has been closely tied to the concept of brick-and-mortar Catholicism.⁵⁰ DeMonte's father's upward mobility and her own opportunities for a lucrative career arise out of the historical moment that Massa deemed the single most important long-term factor for Catholics, occurring between 1945-1970. With all of these important developments meriting significant attention by scholars and occurring in overlapping time periods, we recognize this middle period of the century to be a dynamic, perhaps unsettling, but indeed critical moment in American Catholic history. Of course, all of these factors do not even include the transforming effects of Vatican II. And just like DeMonte, Catholic children were experiencing it on a local

⁴⁹Buetow, *Of Singular Benefit; the Story of Catholic Education in the United States*, 225.

⁵⁰Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 350-1.

level, learning what it meant to be a believer, an American, and a human being during this time of establishment, change, conviction and confusion.

What emerges clearly from the narratives I discuss, and from DeMonte's personal reflections outlined here, are three key social sites that shaped these formative years for Catholics born during the 1940s, 50s and early 60s. The first is the institutional Church, particularly the parish and the parochial school. The moral and religious authority inhabiting the brick-and-mortar buildings left an impression, and it influences the representations of this religious tradition. Second is the home—Catholic mothers and fathers, from those who kept devotional vigils to others who dragged unwilling children to weekly mass, shape the religious self-identity of many of these cultural Catholics who have grown up and into mainstream American life. Finally, the neighborhood, whether in the ghetto or the suburbs, leaves its mark: growing up Irish, Italian, German or Latina/o affects the authors' understanding of what it means to be a Catholic in this country.

As I turn now to the literature, we move away from historical treatment of this period to a study of its features based on authors' representations. What I highlight in the chapters that follow is not how closely the narratives coincide with what historians have said about the period or about the religion. Instead, my focus turns to the ways that these cultural Catholics characterize Catholic experience. I do provide some historical context along the way, but I also recognize that these narrated sources selectively exaggerate certain things while understating others. So, my goal is to determine which aspects of Catholic life surface consistently in these texts and why they might figure so prominently in the narratives.

CHAPTER III

LEARNING THE RULES IN THE CLASSROOM AND THE CONFESSIONAL

For Gina Cascone (b. 1955), the Lenten season offered a welcome respite from the daily recitation of the rosary in her Catholic schoolroom. However, once she realized that its replacement—the Stations of the Cross—would involve agonizingly long periods of kneeling, she yearned for the comfortably seated prayers to the Virgin. Since students had no choice but to participate—the nuns demanded it—the children would strategize ways of enduring the ritual. Cascone and her fellow female classmates did find a way to tolerate these sessions:

There is a trick to being able to kneel that long to Sister's liking. After about five minutes, your back started to ache and after ten, your knees got numb. If you made any obvious movements to alleviate your discomfort, Sister (who was always watching) would poke you in the small of your back ... What you had to do was learn to move only the hips, which were well concealed under those pleated wool skirts ... Then, you work on the knees ...¹

Between brief thoughts about the images inviting prayer—Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection—students were dealing with their own agony during the Stations of the Cross. With the nuns looming over them, they did their best to hide their discomfort for fear of consequences beyond a poke in the back. They prayed as instructed and did not ask for explanations; they simply learned the tricks to survival. Or so Cascone describes. In her depiction, it was a realm of rules, rituals and few questions.

¹Gina Cascone, *Pagan Babies and Other Catholic Memories*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 122.

David Plante's protagonist in *The Catholic* offers a key concept needed for exploring the narrative worlds of cultural Catholics like Cascone. When he utters the sentence "My religion did not allow meaning outside itself, and in itself all its meanings were obvious," he depicts a memorable feature of a mid-twentieth century Catholic environment: a self-contained and self-supported world that forbid outside interpretation.² Those writers whose formative childhood years involved Catholic instruction, both at home and at school, suggest that little seemed to exist beyond the realm of Catholicism. This system firmly established its own rules and meaning, and it required no self-justification for the overwhelming authority propagated within it. Cascone recalls that she and her classmates did not question the need for doing the Stations of the Cross on their knees; rather, they made it tolerable because they knew they had to do it.

Martha Manning (b. 1952) concurs with Cascone's account when she describes in her memoir some of the most critical rulers in this self-contained realm: nuns. Regarding her own second-grade teacher, Manning writes, "Sister Jerome must have taken years to finesse her list of rules. They were pronounced as if she were reading from a tablet personally presented to her on Mount Sinai."³ Rules learned in an enclosed environment characterized childhood. At least, that is how it has been represented by Plante, Cascone, and Manning. In these examples, we see cultural Catholics who grow up and out of that environment and still insist that their experiences with the tradition have left their mark.

Patricia Hampl describes one way the simultaneous struggle and self-identification with this past play out among adults. She writes, "... educated out of it all,

²David Plante, *The Catholic*, 1st American ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1986), 91.

³Martha Manning, *Chasing Grace: Reflections of a Catholic Girl, Grown Up*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 36.

well climbed into the professions, the Catholics find each other at cocktail parties and get going. The nun stories, the first confession traumas—and a tone of rage and dismay that seems to bewilder even the tellers of these tales.”⁴ According to Hampl, there is an impulse to criticize the past, and still within that criticism is a kind of ambivalence about resenting it. Even as they communicate their frustrations with the intimidation of nuns and priests, they suggest that this Catholic tradition remains a part of them because of their history with it.

Just as this propensity among cultural Catholics to narrate the past and to foster new communities—even if only briefly—occurs at social gatherings according to Hampl, so too does it yield countless pages of autobiographical and fictional literature. As I noted in the introduction, cradle Catholics of the mid-twentieth century provide a body of texts that involve similar narrations of Catholic experience, highlighting the authority endured during childhood. By narrating their participation in this tradition, authors underscore those aspects of Catholicism that made the biggest impact and have remained with them into adulthood. These aspects continue affecting even their current perspectives on the world and themselves. As social scientist Paul Connerton notes, “We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects, and hence with reference to events and objects we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present. And we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which we are able to connect that present.”⁵ The persistence of aspects from Catholic childhoods influences the way these adults perceive themselves

⁴Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 50.

⁵Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember, Themes in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2.

and their surroundings, even as they are situated far from the insular Catholic environments they once inhabited.

In this chapter, I focus on narrations of Catholic schooling and sacraments. These experiences brought children into the realm of the institutional Catholic Church. In the context of parochial schools, children encountered the hierarchy of the Church and the authority wielded by the ordained. Those few considered here who did not attend Catholic school still experienced the authority in weekly catechism class and preparation for the sacraments. According to many narratives, the religious lessons, sacraments and masses impressed upon young Catholics not only the foundations and expressions of their faith, but also the correct and acceptable ways of being a Catholic. The religious authority that dominated the spaces of the classroom, the confessional and the pews characterizes literary representations of institutional Catholic instruction. As these cultural Catholics self-consciously reflect on their experiences in these contexts, they highlight four ways in which that authority impacted them: (1) it established high expectations and models for being Catholic; (2) it instilled a sense of either intimidation or insubordination and an incentive to follow the rules for fear of the consequences; (3) it imparted unconscious habits that disclose responses to authority; and (4) it created an intense self-awareness of one's own moral state and an inclination toward confession. By closely examining their representations of these impressive experiences, we might better understand the character of the cultural Catholic.

“I remember my early Catholic schooling and recall an experience of religion very different from anything I have known since,” recalls Richard Rodriguez (b. 1944) in his autobiography *Hunger for Memory*, “My grammar school years especially were the

years when the great Church doors opened to enclose me, filling my day as I was certain the Church filled all time.”⁶ Like many of the authors here, Rodriguez expresses overwhelming experience of being enfolded by the Catholic Church as a child in parochial school. It took him in and became his frame of reference for understanding place and time. The characters within this environment loomed large for children. As suggested in the examples that follow, nuns and priests in the classrooms and confessionals seemed to wield a power bestowed from above.

Moral Exemplars

By virtue of their roles in the Church, nuns and priests, set themselves apart from all other Catholics. In dedicating themselves to a celibate and holy life in the Church, nuns and priests assume a special connection to the institution (and presumably God). This special connection, in turn, commands attention, even fascination. Mary Gordon (b. 1949) writes about her memory of first seeing a nun at the age of three. The moment left an indelible impression:

Kneeling in the light falling on the pure blue of her habit, the whiteness of her hands, bouncing off her glasses, this nun knelt and showed me all I needed to know of perfect forms. Her spine was perfectly straight; her hands, white, were symmetrically folded (my first lesson in the Gothic). On one finger she wore the gold ring of her marriage to Christ. She was entirely still, and we were nothing to her; she was her function: a pray-er, one who prayed.⁷

⁶Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (Boston, Mass.: D.R. Godine, 1982), 80.

⁷Mary Gordon, *Seeing through Places: Reflections on Geography and Identity* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 143.

The nun in this scene is abstracted from any human context and perceived as pure, holy and defined entirely by her relationship with God in prayer. This embodied form of perfection sets a rather high standard as a Catholic model. In this description, the nun appears beyond anything earthly or within reach of this youth. As a representative of her religion, the Sister provides an image of the ideal—indeed a difficult model to emulate and one that earns ultimate respect.

A nun's vow of chastity and choice to leave her family for the convent surface consistently in this literature.⁸ Authors highlight this distinguishing factor. Its foreign and pious quality earns these women an additional degree of respect and moves them to a plane above the laity. Richard Rodriguez recalls regarding “with awe the ‘wedding ring’ on a nun’s finger, her black ‘wedding veil’—symbols of marriage to God.”⁹ These signifying aspects of her habit distinguish her. He further recalls, “Sister and Brother were terms I used in speaking to my teachers for twelve years. I never confused my teachers or the priests with actual family members; in fact they were most awesome for being without families.”¹⁰ This characteristic feature of being outside the family structure, of being solely dedicated to God and willing to sacrifice all other intimate relationships, puts these Catholics in a place above all others.

Mary Gordon’s fictional character Vincent in her novel *The Other Side* deals with a nun’s status on a very practical level. In the Catholic home for the elderly where he’s

⁸For more on the vows taken by women religious, see Catholic Church, International Committee on English in the Liturgy, and National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Rite of Religious Profession* (Washington, D.C.: Office for Publication and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1989); Judith A. Merkle, *A Different Touch: A Study of Vows in Religious Life* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998); Adrian L. Van Kaam, *The Vowed Life* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1968).

⁹Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, 84.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 97.

been living, a nun weeps because he must leave. Vincent wonders, “And by what name can he call her? Strange to comfort a weeping girl and call her Sister. She always says, ‘Call me Roberta. Bobbi.’ He can’t. She is who she is. A nun, and not like other people. Consecrated. She made promises. That she would never marry.”¹¹ Gordon’s character cannot bring himself to call the nun by her first name; she is above that kind of address—different and holy because of the life choices she has made. “Sister” marks her as a sanctified member of the Church, unlike a laywoman.

From the first day of Catholic school, as this literature suggests, children learn the special role and status of their religious teachers. Their superlative dedication to the tradition secures them a place of authority in the Catholic classroom. By the very sacrifices and commitments they have made, they set themselves apart from lay Catholics and exemplify just how pious a dedicated Catholic can be—giving up their lives to God. The attention to them in narrative indicates that their example set a high bar and students perceived that they were by default better Catholics. Young students learn this quickly and the lesson—one of Catholic rank—remains with them. Through such first-hand experience with those who have taken vows, their introduction to the hierarchical authority that characterizes the Church begins.

While nuns earned respect because of their personal sacrifice and reverent disposition, priests held distinction and possessed sacramental power.¹² In the patriarchal institution of the Church, men ruled and women supported the rulings. Indeed, nuns

¹¹Mary Gordon, *The Other Side* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1989), 267-8.

¹²For sources on Catholic priesthood, see Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984); Matthew Webb Levering, *On the Priesthood: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

summoned a level of deference because of their piety but priests occupied a role both sacred and commanding because they were part of the apostolic church. Both on and off the altar, they were designated as special and far above the general public, according to these writers. Richard Rodriguez recalls how a priest's home visit required special preparations. He writes, "The first English-speaking dinner guest at our house was a priest from Sacred Heart Church ... the visit was too important an event for me to forget. I remember how my mother dressed her four children in outfits it had taken her weeks to sew ..."¹³ Rodriguez's depiction establishes the special distinction it was for their family to have a priest into their home. These men of the Church were of a high status and left a remarkable impression upon their young parishioners. As Rodriguez shows, such high profile characters in the children's small worlds yielded a clear sense of hierarchy.

David Plante, in his memoir *American Ghosts*, indicates that the perception of priests as special and powerful remains with him well into adulthood. He recalls the total intimidation he felt when his friend Mary Gordon suggests they speak to the priest after a mass they attended together. He writes, "I had never been into the vestry. As devout as I'd been, I'd never been an altar boy and had never viewed Monsieur Cure as a man I could visit in the vestry after mass. I had never spoken to him outside of confession. I would have been as incapable of opening the door to the vestry—as Mary did matter-of-factly—as I would have the tabernacle on the altar."¹⁴ This depiction highlights the extraordinary nature attributed to priests—inhabiting a different world that clearly set them apart and made them nearly unapproachable—and suggests that Plante still feels the

¹³Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 82.

¹⁴David Plante, *American Ghosts*, 1st ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 222.

power in this nature. Before they were men they were priests, and this connection to the Church makes it difficult for Plante to consider even chatting with the priest.

This ordained representative of Catholicism sets a high standard for any religious practitioner. His special power during the mass gives him authority. Even though Plante claims elsewhere to have fallen away from the Church, he reports that he impulsively senses insecurity about approaching this ordained man as a fellow human being. He indicates that the lessons that he learned in childhood return to him to remind him that priests have power and authority and, therefore, cannot be approached just like any other human being. Through his writing, he depicts priests as above the laity and deserving of reverence. Even as an adult far removed from his childhood, he admits to this perception of the priest. He suggests that he cannot dismiss his Catholicism enough to ignore this characterization of the clergy.

Rules and Consequences

By means of their vows, in the case of the nuns, and by virtue of their capacity and status, in the instance of the priests, the ordained women and men set high standards for being Catholic. Their special place in the Church attributed to them a confirmed position of authority among young parochial students. However, that authority became even more pronounced when it came to direct interactions in the classroom. It was clear that nuns ruled this educational domain. They had the power to teach, reward, shame, celebrate or punish as each case required. In an autobiographical essay by Alice McDermott (b. 1953), the author describes the impact that such power could yield. She narrates a moment when, as an adult, she experienced a visceral response to the memory

of a certain nun's authority. The recollection overcomes McDermott when she and her husband are seeking a school for their son. She explains that they decided to visit their local parochial school, where McDermott arrives early and takes her own tour. She observes, "The Catholic school smell, which most especially brought back the terror and the tyranny of my own Catholic grammar school, where we were fifty or sixty to a classroom and Sr. Edwina stalked the place like a long-robed Captain Bligh. I was nearly hyperventilating as I met my husband at the principal's door, prepared to say, 'Let's run, let's get out of here. We can't perpetuate this madness ...'"¹⁵ Through her story, she draws attention to the strong, albeit somewhat painful, connection she still feels to that childhood experience. In exaggerated terms that mimic post-traumatic stress, she explains the memory of daunting nuns immediately returns her to that place and time. McDermott also points out that her husband, who is not Catholic, wandered around the school on his own only to become completely enthralled with its orderliness. Her intentional depiction of this scene suggests that because of her formative experience, she has such a strong reaction to the school. Even though she no longer has to answer to the nuns, she describes the panic even the memory can cause. She wants her readers to know how real this felt. In so doing, she claims the experience and makes it valid for herself. Controlling the details, McDermott depicts the scene in a way that portrays both her present distance from that world and the internal connection to it that she still feels.

In her memoir, Martha Manning details some of the specific ways in which nuns affected their young students. From McDermott's selection, a reader senses the potential for long-lasting impact, but Manning's narrative offers a closer look at that past. She

¹⁵Alice McDermott, "The Lunatic in the Pew (from Boston College Magazine)," in *The Best Catholic Writing 2004*, ed. Brian Doyle (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), 2.

writes, “Second grade was ... my first exposure to a particular kind of Catholic sin: nun sin. While pissing off a nun was not *technically* on any sin list, the displeasure and the consequences of transgressing one of the many rules within the nuns’ classroom kingdom seemed much worse than any other kind of hell.”¹⁶ Manning invents a whole new category of sin, one that completely bypasses God and applies only to the nuns. In the very act of naming a sin here, she bypasses the Church’s regular authority over this category. According to her narratives, transgressing these teachers threatened an unappealing possibility comparable to eternal punishment. Religious women meant business in the classroom, and according to Manning, one would be crazy to mess with them given their perceived power. Manning’s humorous reflection on this Catholic school classroom shows that it was not God lurking so much among the students as the nuns—or at least that is how this cultural Catholic represents it. Students learned to follow the rules because the figures of authority at the front of the classroom could so directly impact their lives, present and eternal. Nuns made it clear that rules should be followed and breaking them had severe and costly consequences. As she indicates here, Manning did not take this lightly.

When lessons extend from the classroom into the pews in these representations, as it does during recollections of First Communion practices, nuns retain their classroom power. In his memoir about moving from Puerto Rico to New York as a small child, Edward Rivera (1939-2001) suggests the real root of nuns’ commands in his description of the rehearsals and the pressures involved in the sacramental experience. Despite strict instructions from his teacher not to talk during First Communion practice, his classmate,

¹⁶Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 36.

Dom Grippe, began pestering him. Unfortunately, this particular classmate's family had serious (and scary) connections. If he got Dom in trouble, he could face the wrath of Dom's father's associates. Still, he knew there was a bigger threat than those associates. He explains, "... at that point, whatever menace they represented couldn't have been as terrible as Sister, who had the whole Church behind her, right back to Saint Peter and his Rock."¹⁷ In the narrative, Sister becomes this larger-than-life force with the entire Church, and whatever that entails for these children at her back. As Rivera reflects on the momentous experience of receiving First Communion, he pays little attention to the sacrament itself and more attention to the circumstances surrounding the ritual. The ceremony demanded certain actions, postures and behavior and these aspects stand out in his description. It was the authority under which he learned the proper way to behave throughout the Catholic rite of passage, not the meaning behind it, which he highlights.

Both examples, Manning's and Rivera's, emphasize the extraordinary power attributed to these Church representatives within their local Catholic worlds. They were not simply teachers for these students, but important members of a large, influential institution. The details of the institution did not matter so much as the fact that it bestowed authority upon these nuns. The punishments they doled out surpassed anything that ordinary—even if well-connected—lay people could threaten. According to these narratives, this circumstance defined their self-contained world—nuns enforced the rules and had significant backing. It was impossible, from their perspectives, that anything might dispute that fact.

¹⁷Edward Rivera, *Family Installments: Memories of Growing up Hispanic* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1983), 98.

Still, in their representations, both authors express doubt, or perhaps a glimpse into a different way of understanding these religious women of their past. The notion of religious authority certainly characterizes their depiction of these teachers and the relationships the teachers maintained with students. Yet both authors narrate a way of relating to these women that lay outside this dynamic of domination.

Manning recalls from her childhood “the envelope commandment,” which referred to her Sunday school teacher’s rule that any absence required a note from the student’s parents, with the note enclosed in a very specific way. She explains, “It had to be in a letter-sized envelope. The envelope had to be unsealed. It could not have any writing on the front or back.”¹⁸ The author emphasizes the specificity of the rules, effectively portraying the nun as regimented and entirely inflexible. She describes the fear she felt the week she herself needed a note and her father had done it all wrong: “Instantly I knew it was unacceptable. It was in a legal-sized envelope. On the front he had written, ‘Most Reverend Sister Miriam Jerome.’ And, as if that weren’t enough, it was sealed.” That night, she recalls, “I stayed up all night in dread of Sunday school. It was the kind of dread for which there is no comfort.”¹⁹ Here, Manning offers another depiction of this Catholic world where the rules were clear, the stakes high and the nuns in control. However, looking back on the moment when she handed her father’s note to the nun, Manning offers a new perspective on this religious woman. She recounts the instant she turned in the envelope: “She was flushed and I was sure I was dead meat. But then she beamed. ‘Please thank your father for the lovely note,’ she said, motioning for

¹⁸Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 36-7.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 37.

me to take my seat ... In that small space of time, she lost her pug face and her threatening stance. She looked softer somehow, almost human.”²⁰ Manning remembers being stunned by this response and surprised by the way it changed the Sister’s appearance. She describes becoming aware that a human being lived within the habit. As a child, this realization came only at choice moments and would not last long. The author admits that as a child she could not fully grasp what had transpired.

I didn’t get it. I didn’t get that, as opposed to the priests, the nuns were poor and had to be ingenious even to get paper for their personal use. But more than that, I didn’t get that nuns did the greatest amount of work and got the least amount of appreciation. I didn’t understand that my father’s respectful acknowledgement of ‘Most Reverend Sister Miriam Jerome’ would be worth far more to her than any virginal envelope.²¹

When she was still a child, she recalls, surrounded by her Catholic environment, it made little sense that her Sunday school teacher appreciated a note that broke all the rules. Indeed, she indicates that rules were the hallmark of Sunday school. As a child, she had no way of moving beyond her circumstances to observe the experience from outside the structure of hierarchy and the everyday routine. Now, an adult removed from the situation, she chooses to interpret, even create through her own narrative, the nun’s motivation for the rules and her reaction to the improperly submitted envelope. She recognizes the gendered dynamic and disadvantage the nun faced in meeting her own mundane needs, this one for paper. Manning was long impressed with the authority of the Church representatives. As an adult standing outside the tradition, she observes and evaluates the experiences that filled her day-to-day world. From this new vantage point, she implies that the fear instilled in her by this authority was likely unfounded. Sister

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 38.

Miriam Jerome, she recognizes, was as much a human being as an ambassador of the imposing institution. Out from under the shadow of that Church, Manning represents the tremendous effect of such encounters during childhood and her own ambivalence about that experience as an adult. With humor and sympathy, Manning constructs a new image of those nuns.

Edward Rivera narrates a similar discovery about the nuns' characters during childhood. By highlighting a moment when a nun related to students beyond the context of rules, he emphasizes the key correlation between women religious and the laws they enforced. In preparation for the First Communion, the narrator's teacher, Sister Felicia, had gathered a small group of young communicants who did not have the proper clothing for the ceremony and took them to get suits. This generous gesture seemed to conflict with Sister's normal interaction with the students. Rivera writes, "First they hit you and make certain embarrassing hints about your family habits and your man-eating ancestors, and then they treat you to a free purchase of clothes. The whole bunch of us had a lot to learn about these women, and a lot to be grateful for as well. Not that we had much choice, but still ..." ²² Like Manning, Rivera indicates that the nuns were capable of surprises, and such surprises could evoke an awareness of their humanity. Despite the unpleasant treatment that typified the school day, he describes having witnessed a new side to his teacher, one to be appreciated. Notably, though, he mentions that even if he could be grateful for his teachers, he had no choice but to endure them either way. Still, he describes the urge to maintain the nuns' authority, even if it did cause him problems. He describes Sister's conversation with the salesperson, and when the salesperson tries to

²²Rivera, *Family Installments*, 78.

mock the nun, the young boy is drawn to defend her. Rivera writes, “I didn’t like people pulling our nuns’ legs, and pretended not to understand his prank.”²³ The author’s reflexive descriptions of his response to the nun’s authority—an acknowledged obligation of having to put up with her but also a voluntary effort to protect her authority in public—exemplify a common tendency among cultural Catholics. That is, just as he claims the inescapability of religious authority during childhood he also perpetuates it. Rivera suggests that his experience in this formative world yielded a sense of authority he cannot escape and yet he constantly keeps alive this authority through his text.

As we have seen so far, nuns constitute the front lines of institutional Catholicism in literature because of their presence in the elementary classroom. Though priests were better known for their presence on the altar and in the confessional, they also contribute to formal education of young Catholics in these stories, as well. During the tender high school years priests would serve as teachers and this proximity to sacerdotal authority posed its challenges to young men. As David Plante explains in his autobiography *American Ghosts*, he experienced the power of priests at school and remembers discovering that such power would follow him. He recalls that the American Christian Brothers set the rules and made sure they were kept. He shares his response to their authority: “When I complained to my mother about the strictness of the brothers, under whose will my will would be subjugated for four years, she said, ‘One day, when you’re out in the world, you’ll be grateful.’ This obviously meant that out in the world I would always have to subjugate my will to the will of others in authority, even over my very

²³Ibid., 83.

body which was no longer free.”²⁴ Like nuns, priests as teachers governed daily life and controlled all action, thought, and intention, according to Plante. By learning to subjugate his will to these Church representatives, he understood that he was preparing for *life-long* subjugation. He suggests that this Catholic custom, as taught early on, was not something to be endured only for the four school years, but one that was intended to last forever. While this author attributes little credibility to the Church as an adult, he implies that he still feels the weight of priestly subjugation out of habit.

Subjugation was one unpleasant result of dealing with priests for teachers, but the high stakes involved with following their rules institutes quite another troubling aspect in these stories. Edward Rivera recalls his teachers’ warnings about preparing for exams, called Diocesans, to be taken at the end of each school year. He notes one priest’s warning: “‘If you blubbers want to graduate from Misericordia, you’re going to have to pass those Diocesans.’ He made the whole thing sound like a choice between salvation and hell.”²⁵ As Rivera relates the strong counsel of his ordained teachers and his perception of the threat implied, he mockingly narrates in terms of eternal paradise or punishment. He stresses the high stakes of every action within the rule-bound Catholic world they were occupying. As an adult, he suggests that this was absurd and unfair. He indicates, though, that as a teen he took it very seriously because there was no reason not to believe it. In Rivera’s narration, the Catholic imagination did not invoke comforting

²⁴Plante, *American Ghosts*, 63.

²⁵Rivera, *Family Installments*, 116.

encouragement but rather the threat of punishment for academic performance.²⁶ Students were given serious incentive to do their very best lest they face the consequences.

Students, even high school students, had little recourse but to accept the authoritative power of their religiously ordained teachers who ruled the classrooms. Its impact becomes unquestionably clear in narratives that depict the confrontation between authorial forces from school and the well-known authorial forces at home. Whether parents bow to the ordained women and men or whether they argue with them head on, authors highlight the dynamics of these interactions, always emphasizing the upper hand exerted by nuns and priests. When Sister Felicia, in Edward Rivera's chapter "First Communion," takes a group of students out to purchase them formal clothing, the children go along without asking questions. Upon learning of this gesture, though, Rivera's father insists that the boy refuse this generosity and arranges to speak with the teacher before the next day of school. Rivera writes:

He talked to Sister, in his own timid, formal way, just before Mass got going, and after I went to sit with my class in our designated section (between the eighth and eleventh Stations of the Cross) so I had no way of hearing the confidential exchange. I hoped he wouldn't say anything that would get me into trouble with Sister, and I hoped his English held up so she wouldn't feel scornful of him, and of me in connection, and get the impression that he himself could use a change of outfit.²⁷

In this moment, the boy perceives the unflappable authority of the nun, while he hopes his father does not embarrass either himself or his nervous son in the pew. With the advantage of English over the father, the nun has an immediate sense of power, but that certainly does not constitute the major source of intimidation. As Rivera narrates it,

²⁶We might note the divergence from Greeley's representations as discussed in the introduction.

²⁷Rivera, *Family Installments*, 88.

religious authority trumps parental authority—the young boy perceives the nun’s favor and hopes that his father can escape unscathed.

While it is one thing to perceive a father’s disadvantage in a discussion with a nun, it seems quite another to watch him willingly submit to a priest’s ultimate authority. Mary Gordon describes the way her father challenged one of the many priests from her childhood. She recalls in an autobiographical essay that the two men would often argue, her father yelling words like “orthodox” and “heresy,” behind closed doors. What followed shocked her: “After they were through with their arguing, my father and Father B. would come out into the hall. And what happened then would alarm me more than anything. My father would fall to his knees and ask Father B. for his blessing. Father B. would place his hands on my father’s head, whisper some Latin words, and make the sign of the cross above him.”²⁸ She explains that her father recognized his own right to confront Father B. as a man, but that he always respected the office of the priesthood.

Through her narrative, Gordon suggests that this powerful image of seeing her father surrender to the cleric had taught her a lesson about the relationship between laity and clergy. The latter would always have power over the former. With their designated role in the institutional Church, the special language they spoke for religious matters, and their physical gestures that could bestow a blessing from God, priests, she was learning, would always command the respect and submission of Catholic men and women of all ages, social status, and piety. Even if Gordon, as an adult, questions the legitimacy of priests’ authority, the image of her father submitting to Father B. remains difficult to forget and a part of her past that will always shape the way she perceives the Catholic

²⁸Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 153.

tradition. While she may reject their supremacy now, she intentionally shows how she was taught by word and example that priests deserved deference and reverence.

As observant children, these authors were paying close attention to the confrontations between parents and nuns or priests. Edward Rivera had little confidence that his father stood a chance against Sister Felicia, Mary Gordon was shocked at her father's surrender to Father B., and in the next example Maria Laurino (b. 1960) embraces the different challenges shown to institutional authority by her family elders. The religious devotion practiced by her Italian grandmother constituted the first of these. In her memoir *Were You Always an Italian?* she writes, "The solitary chants of this solemn woman expressed a devotion that would have disturbed the American Irish Catholic hierarchy, which was suspicious of the southern Italian attachment to the saints. The peasants' mystical intimacy with their icons threatened the authority of the local parish priest, who was for the Church the sole intermediary between the people and the divine."²⁹ This grandmother's challenge appears neither deliberate nor direct in the narrative of her granddaughter, simply a result of two distinct notions of Catholic practice, specific to ethnic identity as noted in chapter two. Still, it gives the author a justification for her own misgivings about her religion. She believes that she has "inherited a distrust of the institutional Church."³⁰ Even though she may have observed this alternative Catholic worship, she still endured the commanding power of the institution and appreciated the more direct confrontation to this authority executed by her mother, who went to church on her own time. Laurino writes, "... the simple act of

²⁹Maria Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian?: Ancestors and Other Icons of Italian America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 158.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 160.

arriving late for church was an antidote to a terror that I felt when inside the imposing religious structure. My mother's willingness to be the last parishioner helped alleviate some guilt and fear by allowing me to conceive of a Catholic faith in which rules were allowed to be broken."³¹ In remembering what it meant to be Catholic, she highlights the rules of the Church and their stifling effect on her. Even though she did not buy into them, she suggests that they were ever-present and she was constantly seeking help in ignoring them or avoiding them. She uses them to characterize her early religious experiences. However, she seems to relish the opportunities to bend or break the rules with her mother, who remains unconcerned with their existence. Laurino welcomes the justification for dismissing Church authority provided by her mom's brazen disregard of Catholic expectations.

Requirements and Habits

Cultural Catholics indicate that Catholic education created a culture consisting of rules and relationships specific to the religious tradition. As their stories indicate, young students' formations within the confines of the Church taught them to appreciate the authority of nuns and priests who were on the front lines of the institution. This culture of rules and authority secured many of these children as cultural Catholics for life. That is, even if they no longer follow doctrine or practice regularly, even if they emphasize the limitations among nuns and priests, cultural Catholics evidence in their literary representations the impact their education had upon them. The experience made religious authority a factor that has had to be confronted—it was made real during childhood even

³¹Ibid., 162-3.

if it is not respected or adhered to once these adults moved beyond their Catholic environments. Now, these cultural Catholics confront and perpetuate the authority in their writing. As they indicate in their reflections of this religious heritage, this acknowledgement of authority and the influence such overbearing authority had upon the young Catholics sets the foundation for the other influences of their Catholic upbringing. The Catholic practices and utterances that become part of one's behavior and interactions in the non-Catholic world constitute another represented result of their religious upbringing. Cultural Catholics report that sometimes they unconsciously respond to forces of Catholic authority that characterized their youths. In writing about these mechanical behaviors, they perpetuate the influence of the religious tradition.

In her essay "I Am Catholic," first published in her *New York Times* column, Anna Quindlen (b. 1952) discusses her Catholicism. She writes, "I could recite parts of the Baltimore Catechism in my sleep. Do I believe those words? I don't know."³² This self-defined cultural Catholic admits to disobeying the Church on its strict rules about not using birth control and to disagreeing with its position on banning abortion outright and forbidding the ordination of women. Still, the most important tool for teaching Catholic doctrine, *The Baltimore Catechism*, floats through her mind. Her ambivalence about believing it indicates that she no longer accepts it wholly as truth as she once did in school, but nor can she put it out of her mind or disregard its existence. So, why does it remain such a prominent part of her psyche?

The Church's pedagogical tool of choice during these writers' childhoods, *The Baltimore Catechism*, appears often in literature about growing up Catholic. Authors

³²Anna Quindlen, *Living out Loud*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1988), 158.

refer to the regular recitation of their religious instruction. Patricia Hampl suggests that these ritual question and answers sessions could even prove seductive. She writes:

The hierarchy we lived in, a great linked chain of religious being, seemed set to control every entrance and exit from the mind and heart. The sky-blue Baltimore Catechism, small and square, read like an owner's manual for a very complicated vehicle. There was something pleasant, lulling, rhythmic, like heavily rhymed poetry, about the singsong Q-and-A format. Who would not give over heart, if not mind, to the brisk assurance of the Baltimore prose ...³³

The ritual repetition of the catechism became something familiar and easy as these children were growing up. Its rhythm and reliability were a fixed part of religious instruction. Hampl points out that it was enticing and comfortable. Her remarks also indicate that there was little room for discussion or evaluation of the information presented in the catechism. This was something to be learned and repeated, not assessed. Further, *The Baltimore Catechism* put the world in simple and clear terms. There were designated questions and satisfactory answers that laid out the young Catholic's place in the world. There was little room for doubt. For example, one question asked, "Who made the world?" and would be answered "God made the world." To follow this up, "Who is God?" and the response: "God is the creator of heaven and earth and of all things." If there was any question where the young Catholic herself fell into this scheme, that concern was also answered. The question: "Why did God make you?" and the answer: "God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next."³⁴ Life was clearly spelled out and made perfectly

³³Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 47.

³⁴Michael A. McGuire, *Father McGuire's the New Baltimore Catechism*, Official rev. ed. (New York, Boston [etc.]: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1942).

knowable to the extent that it needed to be known. There was little reason to think that anything lay outside that neat structure.

As Quindlen indicates, the memorized questions and answers stay with these catechized Catholics as they grow up. Now that she has access to other explanations or at least to different questions, the unequivocal knowledge of her youth no longer seems so certain. Still, it continues to be a starting point for her. Even if she no longer trusts it completely, she can recite it and must determine which parts she is willing to accept as an adult. In a certain way, though, her acknowledgement of the very act of reciting it indicates a level of affiliation with this religious tradition. In his discussion of belief, social theorist Michel de Certeau writes, “As a first approximation, I define ‘belief’ not as the object of believing (a dogma, a program, etc) but as the subject’s investment in a proposition, the *act* of saying it and considering it as true—in other words, a ‘modality’ of the assertion and not its content ... That capacity (for believing) once supported the functioning of authority.”³⁵ Indeed this form of belief was instilled in the children during their religious instruction. They were not intended to understand completely just what they were reciting, but instead they were to say it and accept its truth, thereby confirming not only their participation in this religion but also the authority of those teaching its catechism. While the latter part no longer completely holds for cultural Catholics, the information remains and the habit of reciting it may occur even unconsciously, as Quindlen indicates. Without the conviction, Quindlen recognizes that she might still participate in “the *act* of saying it”—a crucial aspect of De Certeau’s definition and a sign of perpetuating the authority that instilled it.

³⁵Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 178.

Still others consider directly how the use of *The Baltimore Catechism* in the classroom both relied upon and bolstered the effect of nuns' and priests' authority. As Hampl suggested in the quote used earlier, the catechism was a pedagogical tool employed by the hierarchy to control what entered the minds and hearts of the students. Richard Rodriguez expresses the link between the catechism and authority even more explicitly. He writes, "My schooling belonged to another time. *The Baltimore Catechism* taught me to trust the authority of the Church. That was the central lesson conveyed through the experience of memorizing hundreds of questions and answers."³⁶ As Rodriguez describes it, the habit instilled through the process of memorization—the ability to regurgitate the religious instruction of their youths with little effort—then is not simply a product of this ritual from childhood but also an indication of the effect that Church authority had upon him and his classmates. In his construction of his early religious world, nuns and priests had the questions and the answers that explained his surroundings. He was responsible only for learning them correctly and committing them to memory.

In examining these narrations involving the catechism, I find that a Foucauldian approach to this remembered aspect of Catholic schooling helps theorize the effect created in the texts. In his discussion of "the examination," Foucault claims, "the examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment...In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth."³⁷ The described

³⁶Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 88-9.

³⁷Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

process of asking and answering questions on Catholic doctrine in such a formulaic, ritualized way exemplifies the examination process to which Foucault refers. As cultural Catholics point out, the ritual of learning *The Baltimore Catechism* enforced the power dynamic in play between clerical teachers and lay students. Moreover, their narrations of this pedagogical ritual suggest that it established a truth by providing clear answers to difficult questions and repeating the lesson over and over again without any kind of critical engagement. Either a youngster knew the answers (and thereby the truth) or studied hard in order to learn them. Now grown up and out of that world, these authors represent that learning experience as one of their primary ways of understanding the world around them. Even if they do not exactly use it or like it, they claim it shaped them.

In addition to the questions and answers of *The Baltimore Catechism*, authors demonstrate that other refrains from their Catholic educations remain with them and creep up at the most unexpected times. Their writings suggest that even when one is securely situated in a secular environment, a person with their background remains susceptible to the powerful Catholic influence. In her novel *A Bigamist's Daughter*, Alice McDermott's introduction to the protagonist features her on the phone, scribbling notes. In the first few pages of the novel: "'Elizabeth writes, 'This is the day that the Lord hath made.' ... She hangs up the phone and stares at the paper. Remnants of Catholic brainwashing or God trying to get a message to her?'"³⁸ One of the many phrases learned in Catholic grade school provides the first characterization of this woman. The description exemplifies habits that cultural Catholics identify as a result of their Catholic upbringing. Elizabeth's pious expression in her doodling seems not to be a result of any

³⁸Alice McDermott, *A Bigamist's Daughter: A Novel*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1982), 6.

reverent prayer, but rather an unconscious manifestation of the lessons learned during childhood from her religious teachers. It happens often to this character. In another scene where she and her lover are walking through a park, Elizabeth expresses disappointment when her companion does not recognize any title of the movies she knows to have been filmed at that spot. Suddenly, the meaningfulness of the moment is lost. She makes a comparison in her mind: “Like watching the sunset with an atheist. She thinks of telling him this but fears the tangle of logic behind it; fears it’s an expression she learned from the nuns.”³⁹ It becomes difficult for McDermott’s character to distinguish her own thoughts from the innumerable phrases she internalized during elementary school. The impulse to compare this secular experience in the park to one involving religious belief comes naturally to Elizabeth, but she questions that reaction and instead attributes its cause to the lessons learned in her Catholic school classroom. The experience and her reflections on it confirm the important authority wielded by the nuns of her youth. As an adult, it becomes difficult for this character to recognize how much of her own response is determined by that experience. In presenting her this way, McDermott draws attention to the potentially conflicted and confusing position of one whose Catholic background seems to pursue her, even though she remains far from its people and places.

Like McDermott, Rita Ciresi also includes these automatic responses betraying Catholic education to characterize her protagonist. In the ways that Lise, in the novel *Pink Slip*, reacts to authority and perceives formal situations, Ciresi makes it clear that this self-described “lapsed Catholic” retains the habits from her childhood. For example, in one instance when an important person arrives to a work meeting, the narrator

³⁹Ibid., 111.

explains, “I bolted up from my chair as if the priest had entered the room during catechism assembly and the nuns had commanded: ‘Stand for Father!’”⁴⁰ Indeed the authority of the nuns and priests and the reverence with which children were taught to address them made a serious impression on this character. It has caused her to perceive most contexts of authority in ways similar to those of her childhood. At still another meeting, she describes its conclusion: “Peggy nodded and pronounced the meeting adjourned—a command that had the same effect as a priest saying, ‘Mass has ended. Go in peace.’”⁴¹ Ciresi draws her character to show how Lise’s perspective has been so shaped by the experience of growing up in a Catholic environment that she seems to make sense of events well outside that environment according to its terms. She may no longer attend mass regularly, but this character still habitually compares her surroundings to the ritual.

Confessional Inclinations

While absentminded recitations of *The Baltimore Catechism* and habitual acts of reverence season these narratives by and about grown up Catholics, one of the most consistent and pervasive remnants of the authorial Church in the literature is a hyperconscious awareness of one’s moral state and an inclination toward confession. The age of seven, as these authors report, brought with it a serious amount of responsibility. David Plante recalls that turning seven meant attaining, “according to the Church, the age of reason” and this signified that he was ready to receive the sacraments of Penance and

⁴⁰Rita Ciresi, *Pink Slip* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1999), 248.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 257.

Communion. Martha Manning remembers a similar rite of passage: “When I reached the sweet age of seven, the church determined me capable of recognizing, registering, reporting and repenting my sins.”⁴² At seven years old, the young Catholics became eligible (and required) to have their First Confession. It demanded significant preparation: an understanding of the concept of sin, memorization of the prayers, a repenting heart, etc. Even though they could not claim much life experience by this time, the responsibility that came with turning seven was something for which they had been prepared. Just as nuns and priests depicted in this literature made it clear which actions were acceptable for the classroom and the pew, they also reminded students daily which actions would make them worthy of salvation, and of course those that would automatically exclude them from it. The bad news, according to the literature, was that a salvation-worthy lifestyle usually precluded all of the most tempting behavior, and even deeds that might otherwise seem mundane or hard to recognize as risky. The good news was that one could always erase any sinfulness from the slate by means of confession. In this way, the nuns issued the problem by teaching the threat of Hell and constantly emphasizing the multitude of behaviors that fit the ‘sin’ category and might earn eternal punishment. Of course, priests offered the clear and reliable solution to this difficulty since they could administer the sacrament of Confession to a child of seven years old. So the nuns were certain to let these Catholics know what to be sorry for, and the priests were ready to forgive contrite hearts. According to these authors, young Catholics relied on both parts of the equation, and there were no options outside the formula.

⁴²Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 34.

As these students were learning what it meant to be a human being, they were made well aware of the pitfalls of sin that came with their existential state. From what they could tell, as the narratives suggest, there was simply no way to avoid it. If evading sin was out of the question, then, young Catholics figured out that they had every reason to make the best Confession they could so they might be forgiven these inevitable sins and have a chance at Heaven. This meant, naturally, that they had to know just what constituted a sin so they could confess it properly. This task proved the first challenge as Martha Manning notes: “second grade marked the beginning of years of what-if questions posed to priests and nuns for the purpose of testing the absolute boundaries of sin.” By compiling hypothetical situations for potential sin (for example touching oneself ‘down there’ but only to scratch an itch) and presenting them to the experts on the topic, priests and nuns, these children worked on developing their own expertise on sin.⁴³ In Manning’s portrayal, this effort to recognize sin becomes something of an obsession among these anxious students.

Much of the literature alludes to moments of discovering another sin to add to the list. They range in nature and degree, but they all count as sins. Edward Rivera recalls learning of one that might be expected: “Every penny we’d stolen from our mothers had to come out, whispered in Father Confessor’s neutral ear, in order to qualify ourselves for the Eucharist.”⁴⁴ In this case, there could be no fudging on the details or skimping on the amount stolen. The confession would only count if it disclosed “every penny.” Richard Rodriguez recalls learning of two offenses that might not have been so easily identified

⁴³Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴Rivera, *Family Installments*, 99.

by a developing Catholic. He writes, “When we were eleven years old, the nuns would warn us about the dangers of mixed marriage (between a Catholic and a non-Catholic). And we heard a priest say that it was a mortal sin to read newspaper accounts of a Billy Graham sermon.”⁴⁵ Constantly learning the behaviors that fell on the wrong side of the good-bad divide, the Catholics in these narratives were becoming more and more aware of what could put their souls at risk.

According to David Plante, though, it was not simply their souls that faced imminent danger. Their bodies could be severely punished as well. In his memoir, he describes a moment during a mass he attends with his parents, “out of habit,” as an adult. He refrains from receiving Communion but observes the others who proceed to the altar:

Watching the parishioners walk along the aisles to the Communion rail and kneel and open their mouths for the host, my mother among them, I recalled that the grammar-school nuns—who sat in their heavy black robes and veils in the front pews of the church with their present classes of students, fewer than when I’d been one of them—had told us that if we received Communion in a state of moral sin, our bowels would burst asunder in outrage at the sacrilege.⁴⁶

This was serious business. Not only did they risk eternity in Hell, but they might also endure excruciating physical pain in the meantime. Plante emphasizes the extreme nature of the nuns’ warnings, as he remembers them in the church years later. In his construction of this past, nuns had few limits when it came to convincing young children to confess.

In both autobiographical and fictional writing, authors highlight how such ominous advisories have produced personal struggles over their own states of sinfulness. With the stakes high in their Catholic world, they could not risk dying without

⁴⁵Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, 79.

⁴⁶Plante, *American Ghosts*, 128.

confessing. Mary Gordon recalls a summer Saturday afternoon during adolescence when she went to Church for Confession, “knowing (she) was in a state of mortal sin.” When she realized she would not have her pick of confessors and would have to go to Father W., she remembers, “I was sickened by my lack of choice.” As she narrates, though, she could not let potential embarrassment before this priest, a family friend, impede her receiving the sacrament. She writes, “To go on longer than I had to in a state of moral sin because of something so paltry as psychological discomfort would have been a serious error, perhaps even sinful in itself.”⁴⁷ Gordon’s description of the crucial moment emphasizes the intense motivation felt by this young Catholic. Through her textual representation, she suggests that she learned to evaluate her actions and thoughts constantly so that she would know when she needed to confess. Even if she no longer engages in this conscience-scouring practice, Gordon contributes to the picture of Catholic life the enormous pressure to remain in a state of grace.

Many authors depict similarly intense self-analysis. Even if they no longer believe in the doctrine of sin and salvation—or at least cannot claim it with the same unquestioned certainty they once did—they indicate that they are unable to shake the habit of assessing their moral state. A narrated exchange between friends David Plante, recalls the physical threat of sacrilege, and Mary Gordon, who vividly describes her need for confession as a young girl, suggests that this self-consciousness remains a part of them even when they no longer practice the religion. Plante narrates a time when Gordon asks him to meet her friend, a priest. Even though Plante claims to have left the religion, he falls back into his Catholic ways when she suggests they go to Church together for that

⁴⁷Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 175.

reason. She asks, “You wouldn’t receive Communion?” His reply: “I can’t. I haven’t been to confession in thirty years and I am in a state of sin, I joked. I am not a pure boy.” When she pushes him to go on Ash Wednesday, he explains, “If it were for Communion, I said, I couldn’t, because I’d be presuming on my immortality and committing a sacrilege. But I wouldn’t feel that by receiving ashes and being reminded of my mortality I’d be committing sacrilege.”⁴⁸ In the same work, Plante claims both that he does not believe in God, or salvation, or life after death, and that he still resorts to the doctrinal rules and feels obligated to obey the Church authority on sin. Plante emphasizes in this autobiographical depiction his inability to dismiss completely the childhood lessons on sin and morality even as he disregards religious faith. Through this crafted representation, he invites readers to consider how the doctrine of sin might leave a more powerful impression than belief in salvation and to wonder why sin would even matter if there were no God to offend. His self-portrayal highlights the conflicted position he maintains between his atheistic and Catholic perceptions.

This anxiety about sin or at least attention to sinfulness characterizes his protagonist in the novel *The Catholic*, as well. As a gay man, Dan constantly struggles with both Catholicism’s condemnation of homosexuality and, as a result of that condemnation, with his worth as a human being. He ultimately decides to give up his religion. Dan explains:

To be free of myself was to be free of my religion. But that I couldn’t, according to the Vatican, love Charlie’s body and love Christ’s at the same time was not really the reason for my sacrificing my love of Christ. What made me decide that I loved Charlie and I didn’t love Christ was that Christ made me think about my sinful self, whereas Charlie

⁴⁸Plante, *American Ghosts*, 212.

removed me from my world to one where there was no thinking about yourself and therefore were no sins.⁴⁹

The hyper-conscious self-analysis that comes with examining one's conscience for sins proves too difficult for this frustrated man. He clearly resents the Church authority that dictates whom and how he can love, and he also yearns to be free of the sinfulness he cannot help but experience while connected to his religion. Still, even though he claims to distance himself from it, he struggles to forget all its lessons. In a moment of personal crisis after a heart-wrenching break-up, the narrator experiences a confrontational inner dialogue. When the narrator himself claims that he doesn't understand what he's done wrong or what sin he's committed to cause this break-up, an inner voice responds, "You know, you know.... You wanted everything. You only thought of yourself. That's what's wrong with you. You only ever think of yourself, and you know that's a sin. You are in a constant state of sin. You, in the very fact that you are yourself, embodied sin. Your body is a sin. Your--" To this attack, the narrator claims this is nonsense since he does not even believe in sin, provoking this response: "The voice laughed. And what else don't you believe in? it asked." After such bickering, the voice finally says that Dan is in a state of sin but possessed by a state of grace. The narrator believes he has finally caught his opponent. He retorts: "For Christ's sake, if you had any religious training, you'd know you can't be possessed by grace and in a state of sin at the same time." This, however, does not win the narrator the argument against his own inner voice, for the voice answers: "Don't tell me I don't know religion. Of course you are in a state of sin. You'll always be in a state of sin. But your possession is the longing to be in the state of grace. And I

⁴⁹Plante, *The Catholic*, 5.

suspect that's the closest you'll ever come to grace."⁵⁰ Sinfulness haunts this character. Even though he seems determined to deny any belief in sin, he cannot escape his own disturbing accusations and demeaning conclusions about his moral condition. Plante's choice to characterize the protagonist of *The Catholic* with such agony over sin highlights his perception of the unavoidable, and sometimes detrimental, lessons of the Church.

In Rita Ciresi's novel *Pink Slip*, her narrator Lise also encounters guilt and fear about her sinful state, despite her separation from the Church. In reflecting on her abortion, she remembers the agony of considering the act. She narrates:

Although I thought of myself as a cheerfully lapsed Catholic, when I returned from the clinic I felt I had done something deeply wrong, and I was terrified of divine retribution. Hadn't been to church in years, not counting the obligatory Christmas and Easter masses I attended when I went home to visit Mama, but I still believed enough doctrine to feel that I had committed the most grievous sin on earth.⁵¹

Not unlike Plante's character who tries desperately *not* to believe, Ciresi's Lise does not really want to believe but admits to believing just enough to feel guilty and afraid. For her, it is not enough to have ceased regular religious practice to be free of sin. The catechism classes in which she learned about "the sins *that cried out for vengeance*" clearly affected this character and continue to shape her view of the world and herself.⁵² Her actions have consequences beyond her current circumstances. Even without complete commitment to Catholicism, she puts her actions into the category of sin and worries how they might bring her "divine retribution." These narratives, autobiographical and fictional, depict the lasting impact of concern about sin—even outside the formal

⁵⁰Ibid., 74-5.

⁵¹Ciresi, *Pink Slip*, 49.

⁵²Ibid., 56.

religion, these cultural Catholics have been made to pay close attention to their moral state and they continue to reflect on the lessons that instilled them with this habit.

On this topic, as on the issue of the *Catechism*, Michel Foucault's extensive work on authority provides a helpful category for interpreting the writers' concern with sinfulness. In his discussion of "the gaze," he describes: "An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost."⁵³ These adults no longer live under surveillance by Church officials who taught them about both sin and sacramental forgiveness. However, they continue to claim that even removed from their childhood supervisors, they still feel the gaze. Susan Cokal (b. 1965), in her essay "Immaculate Heart," exemplifies this literary tendency. She describes the tricky time of adolescence at Catholic school, where in the schoolyard near a statue of the Virgin Mary, she would play with the boys a game condemned by the nuns. It involves the boys rushing at her and she would either push them off or allow them near, depending on her level of affection for them. Her teachers do not leave their voiced disapproval of this game at "not a good way to play." Instead, they connect it to her moral state: "I am a bad girl, they tell me. A dirty little girl."⁵⁴ She was expected to be pure like the Virgin Mary, whose very image in the statue seemed to be watching her engage in this sinful activity. According to her representation, the responses and expectations so vehemently communicated to her made an impact. Even though she now

⁵³Michel Foucault, "Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 155.

⁵⁴Susan Cokal, "Immaculate Heart," in *Resurrecting Grace: Remembering Catholic Childhoods*, ed. Marilyn Sewell (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 142.

inhabits the world outside the small Catholic confines of her childhood, she writes that she cannot help but continue to feel the effect of the nuns' pressure to emulate the Virgin.

Upon returning to the site with her husband, she explains,

My husband will already know that I was actually a virgin until twenty-two, that I didn't even enjoy sex until my thirties, that mine was a long lonely adolescence as the kids at Immaculate Heart joined the nuns in thinking I was somehow unclean.

Then we will walk to the oak tree and I will put my arms around him and we will come together in one long, willing kiss in the presence of sin, even as the Immaculate Heart still beats, heavy, inside me.⁵⁵

Cokal emphasizes that her Catholic educational experience involved the gaze, by which she was observed and judged according to the moral or sinful nature of her actions. Even these many years later, as she stands unobserved by the nuns, she describes feeling the gaze from within: the Immaculate Heart beating heavy inside her. Her intended representation of this moment emphasizes a desire to make public what might be otherwise perceived as completely private. Highlighting the painful burden she carries with her, Cokal externalizes the sense of guilt she constantly feels. Her depiction of the scene suggests that her response is involuntary and yet through her very narration, she chooses to make it real all over again. In the last chapter, I will consider the power exerted in this process of recounting such experiences.

As difficult to endure as sinfulness may seem in these narratives, authors recognize that there was always a way of minimizing its effects. The sacrament of Confession, available only from a priest, offered a way of clearing one's conscience and getting back in God's good graces. Martha Manning recalls what the sacrament meant to her at the age of seven: "First confession was like the regular Saturday-night bath as a

⁵⁵Ibid., 146-7.

requisite for church on Sunday mornings. A bath for your soul.”⁵⁶ It offered hope to many and became a habit for most, according to this literature. Richard Rodriguez remarks, “Confession was a regular part of my grammar school years.” He recalls the formulaic ritual of it and the absolution it yielded. He remembers the way the prayer begins “Bless me, father, for I have sinned . . .” and the routine list of transgressions (such as “disobeyed my parents fourteen times”) so often repeated. Rodriguez notes the end result: “I was forgiven each time I sought forgiveness. The priest murmured Latin words of forgiveness in the confessional box. And I would leave the dark.”⁵⁷ For Rodriguez, it was habitual and familiar but also transforming each time it was experienced.

Alice McDermott includes Confession among the regular family religious rituals that filled her childhood: “My family attended ten o’clock Mass every Sunday without fail, confession once a month on Saturday if the nuns hadn’t taken care of it at school (or if our behavior required additional penance), and my brothers and I collected all our sacraments . . .”⁵⁸ McDermott perceives confession as a crucial part of the routine, an expected part of being Catholic for this family. Her conditions for attending Confession on Saturday indicate that her moral state required close monitoring—either the nuns had not arranged for the sacrament at school *or* there had been enough sinning to require extra confessing. In either case, it necessitated an awareness of one’s need for the Church to forgive any offenses that the nuns and priests had helped the child identify as sinful.

⁵⁶Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 34.

⁵⁷Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 85.

⁵⁸Alice McDermott, “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic: Portrait of a Novelist,” *Commonweal* (2000): 12.

Anna Quindlen likewise marks Confession as a distinctive element of her day-to-day religious life. In her column noted earlier, she claims that Catholicism “is not so much our faith as our past.” She explains, “And I believe in my own past. I was educated by nuns and given absolution by priests ... Saturday afternoons kneeling on Leatherette pads in the dim light of the confessional, listening for the sound of the priest sliding back the grille on his side ...”⁵⁹ The special places, sounds and people that distinguished this sacramental experience constitute what Quindlen understands to be her own personal history. Her life has been permanently marked by her memories of Confession.

Like anything regularly repeated, the tendency toward confession could become a habit or part of one’s everyday vocabulary. In a parenthetical note in her concise essay, “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic: Portrait of a Novelist,” McDermott suggests that confessional habit might be inherited. She writes, “I must confess (it’s a genetic thing no doubt) ...” and later, “And I must admit—the confession thing again ...”⁶⁰ Despite the tongue-in-cheek tone of her asides, an inheritance of and inclination toward confession is something that she associates with her Catholic upbringing. She also refers to the ritual of confession in her development of Elizabeth in the novel *A Bigamist’s Daughter*. Her main character reflects on her mother’s aversion to the act of prying and notes that she herself learned also to resist it. She observes, though, that this outlook contradicts something central to their lives, their religion. McDermott writes, “It seems ironic in light of our Catholicism, which makes a ritual of prying, of exposing your private life to another, albeit in a quiet, guarded atmosphere, a yellow-lighted darkroom of sorts, where

⁵⁹Quindlen, *Living out Loud*, 158.

⁶⁰McDermott, “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic,” 13.

the exposure will not be too great and the listener is sworn to secrecy ...”⁶¹ Whether coloring her writing with a particular language or depicting her fictional character’s perspective, confession marks Alice McDermott’s representation of what growing up in a Catholic environment entails.

Though the confessional tendency may appear as unconscious habit for these real and fictional Catholics in text, the literature does point to another deeply rooted reason for this propensity. Earlier I noted Richard Rodriguez’s appreciation for the outcome of each visit to the confessional. He says he was forgiven each time he sought forgiveness. The simplicity and guarantee of this sacramental effect holds enormous appeal for the Catholics struggling with the concept of sin. Martha Manning describes her own childhood yearning for this surefire restoration of a clean slate. She recalls her terrible betrayal of a friend when she was ten years old. In order to belong to the in-crowd at school, she had abandoned her best friend. She explains that the experience taught her “that often the greatest of sins are not the things we do but the things we fail to do.” At this young age, she learns an even harder lesson. She writes, “Lost in the dark forest without a moral compass, I longed for the times when someone else would judge my behavior, forgive me for it, and provide me with a clear formula for suddenly and magically making everything all better.”⁶² She wishes that a recitation of her wrongdoings and an issued penance could make the disloyalty disappear and could erase its effects. She realizes, of course, that entering a confessional and emerging ‘forgiven’

⁶¹McDermott, *A Bigamist's Daughter*, 29.

⁶²Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 52.

will not undo the hurtful actions. In a world where everything seems to have cut-and-dry answers, Manning seeks the absolution usually available through confession.

Mary Gordon narrates her own frustrating experience with the failure of the confessional. On that summer Saturday when she felt she was in a state of sin, she sacrificed her pride to secure her salvation and decided to confess to the family friend priest. She writes, “I offered my mortification to the Lord. I confessed my ‘private impurity,’ wanting only to be out of the dark box, out in the light of the church where I could be exalted.” We learn through her narration that she arrives feeling guilty and concerned for her soul, but Confession offers her hope to return to her life as an exalted Catholic, free of this most recent burden of sin. It does not work so neatly for her. To her confession of “private impurity,” Father W. responds, “You shouldn’t worry about things like that. What you did is nothing to worry about.” The encounter leaves the young Catholic mortified and confused. Gordon recalls, “For the first time, I felt no exaltation kneeling at the altar saying my penance. I was horribly afraid.”⁶³ By recalling this moment, Gordon emphasizes the significant impression made upon young Catholics by their nuns and priests that forgiveness could (almost) always be attained, that sin was horrible but as long as it was recognized and repented for, one’s soul could be clean again. When the process does not work quite so neatly, she acknowledges the tremendous disappointment caused. Authors show that lessons about sin and its possible consequences have instilled them with a strong desire for forgiveness and spotless soul that comes only in the purest form through the sacrament of Confession.

⁶³Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 177.

Ciresi's character Lise longs for the simplistic solution, as well. Upon leaving Confession as an adult, the narrator laments,

I remembered how easy it all seemed back in the days of catechism, marching into the confessional and admitting I had told a few lies and said and occasional *shit* or *damn*. Then I had slipped up to the altar and recited my three Hail Marys and two Our Fathers, leaving the church feeling utterly free and pure, as if the pressing weight of the cross itself had been lifted off my shoulders.⁶⁴

It might have seemed daunting at first, but as writers describe it, once the ritual was mastered and the prayers memorized, penance had enormous potential for these young practitioners. The promise of being pardoned, of being excused by the adults with power, remains an attractive possibility for these cultural Catholics. It seems God has little to do with the process in comparison to the priests and penitents themselves. Indeed the consequences of certain actions have been made crystal clear to Catholic children, not only for this life but also for the next. It brings peace of mind to think that penance might yield a more favorable consequence than unforgiven sin. The process, with its unmistakable rules and hierarchy in place, had once been abundantly clear.

As the literary representations of Catholic life constantly conjure the habit of self-analysis needed in examining one's conscience and in the process of confessing, they also may explain the impetus for their own existence. Indeed, the lessons about inspecting one's past—and past transgressions—provide a tool for considering the production of these narratives themselves. Writers have demonstrated that they took seriously the need for recalling and relating their sins. While they may no longer limit themselves to examining the rule-breaking activity, their literature perpetuates the habit of self-examination and narration. Moreover since many of these authors either do not

⁶⁴Ciresi, *Pink Slip*, 57.

experience the same relief from Confession that they did as children or simply reject the doctrine it presupposes, the sacrament no longer satisfies their need to narrate the past. Instead, they write. Encouraged to remain aware of the consequences of their actions, they have retained the habit of self-analysis. In these cases, it returns the writers to the Catholic environments that shaped them. While its meanings may not offer the same satisfactory answers they once did, these cultural Catholics feel compelled to reflect on that world and tell the story of their participation within it. They hold fast to the idea that the past continues to make them Catholic.

Narrative provides an opportune occasion for cultural Catholics to distill moments of their past that have had the most impact, or at least those that they intend to show as having been largely influential. Of course, Catholicism would not exist without its central institution, the Church. This literature shows that the institution sustains serious attention from cultural Catholics. However, more attention is paid to the way the church shaped their childhoods than how it affects them today. At the local level, members of the institution issued the rules that governed everyday life during the 1940s, 50s and 60s. As they renew this authority among nuns and priests, if only in their stories, these cultural Catholics remain tied to this formative world. In the next chapter, we shift away from the Church to consider the home. As it happens, according to these sources, children encountered different figures of Catholic authority there as well.

CHAPTER IV

INHERITING RELIGION IN THE HOME

After significant preparation—receiving school supplies, trying on his uniform, getting his hair cut—six-year-old Ed Stivender (b. 1946) was ready for his first day of Catholic school at Holy Cross Elementary. He knew he had been groomed in other important ways for this day: “My education as a Catholic had started long before now, however. I had been going to Church with my mother since baptism and learned to recite the Hail Mary and most of the Our Father. I knew how to bless myself, genuflect and take off my hat in Church. I was primed for this moment.”¹ Before any nun instructed him in the proper penitence for making confession or the required movements for receiving Holy Communion, this young Catholic had been schooled by his mother in the basics of prayer and practice.

Of course, it is not uncommon for parents and family elders to introduce children to the fundamentals of a religious tradition. Certainly Catholicism is only one among many religions whose practitioners follow in the faithful footsteps of family members. However, according to autobiographical and fictional literature treating Catholic life, the process of passing down the faith exceeds formal lessons. For many, it seems to run in the blood. “I am a Catholic by birth,” writes Alice McDermott.² “I was born a Catholic

¹Ed Stivender, *Raised Catholic: Can You Tell?* (Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1992), 13-4.

²McDermott, “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic,” 12.

and I think I will die one,” explains Anna Quindlen.³ Richard Rodriguez acknowledges, “I must confess—I am a Catholic by birth and by choice.”⁴ Born a Catholic. Catholic by birth. Not born into a Catholic family or Catholic from the moment of birth. Their language implies a kind of genetic inheritance. Fully aware that only the sacrament of baptism grants official entry into the Catholic Church and requires a priest’s administration, what do these authors mean by their self-descriptions and what do they intend to convey by this characterization?

In this chapter, I examine the critical and complex influence of the family for the identity of the cultural Catholic. As I showed in the previous chapter, nuns and priests in schools and parishes were prescribing the rules for life within the insular Catholic world. Young students were learning and internalizing the authority of the institutional Church to which they belonged. Meanwhile, parents and grandparents were expanding the boundaries to include the household within that world. Here I move away from the desks and the kneelers to examine the lessons within the home and among the family. While they could not have claimed apostolic succession nor have they professed vows of ordination, parents and grandparents still had significant power for determining what it meant to be Catholic for these individuals.

Indeed, Catholic life did not begin with the start of parochial school or one’s first mass. According to these authors, it began from the moment they emerged from the womb. The Catholic world encompassed them immediately and, according to their own self-descriptions, they had little choice in the matter. Their own helplessness regarding

³Quindlen, *Living out Loud*, 159.

⁴*Holy Visit, January 5, 1998* (PBS, 1998 [cited November 27 2005]); available from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/essays/january98/rodriguez_1-5.html.

their Catholicism as expressed in this literature—i.e. ‘I can’t help it, I was born this way’—serves two purposes for the writers: first, it frees them from a sense of responsibility for all that being Catholic might entail. They cannot be blamed for what is wrong with Catholicism, nor can they be expected to follow all of its rules and requirements since this religion was not something they freely chose. Second, the inheritance idea gives them an indisputable claim to a Catholic identity, despite the frustration and confusion it provokes in them as adults. Catholic by birth. They couldn’t help it and they can’t they deny it.

And yet, of course they can, but they still write about their Catholic heritage. Even far removed from their childhood homes and parish pews, they continue to choose it, describe it, identify themselves with it as though it defines them as human beings and demands explanation. But many of their explanations involve complicated contradictions. While continually representing their religious identity as an inherited trait, they narrate the social and experiential influences that shape their connections to it. They repeatedly use metaphors that suggest it was something passed along to them through the very process of conception and birth, but their stories expose the way their surroundings, not their DNA, shaped them into Catholics. While so many perceive and label their Catholicism as innate, they narrate how it was taught and learned. Lessons came from the Church and its ordained representatives, as I noted in the last chapter, but also from the influential figures who controlled their daily lives: parents and grandparents. Though it may have felt like these individuals simply passed down the religion through their genetic material, these narratives reveal how their activities and expectations socialized the children into the tradition.

Still others distinguish between the natural and cultivated aspects of Catholic identity. Rather than claiming they were “born Catholic,” many explain they were “raised Catholic.” This language clearly points to the influence of their environment—the lessons and examples that happened after one’s birth, not as a result of it. Even recognizing this outside persuasion, authors in this category still contend that it has been too powerfully ingrained to remove oneself from it. Even though they fully recognize that the religion was bestowed upon them—and does not emanate from within them—it remains a defining trait.

In both cases, then, those born and those raised Catholic, they are constructing their religious identity through particular experiences. While it may *seem* to be innate, it has been developed and encouraged to the point of appearing inescapable. So how do they represent the ways that being born into or raised by their particular families inevitably makes them Catholic? Though the narratives exhibit variety in the specific details, often as a result of the gender, ethnic or personal differences among the writers, the literature indicates four aspects of family life that connects these authors to a Catholic heritage: (1) the practices that were observed and learned in the home, some of which became life-long habits; (2) the objects and sacramentals that filled the spaces of the home and symbolized an atmosphere of piety and morality; (3) the enforcement of gendered roles and behavior based on ideal Catholic models; and (4) the association of one’s identity as a son or daughter with one’s identity as a Catholic. As their narratives portray, authors perceive the inescapability of their religious tradition through these four factors that blended the institutional Church’s expectations for moral and worthy human beings with the everyday activity involved in family relationships and habits of the home.

Not every family exhibits the same level of loyalty to the Church in their family devotions, but whether affirming or defying the Church, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers make demands for good Catholic living. Cultural Catholics narrate how this environment shaped the adults they have become.

Prayer and Other Practices

As I discussed in chapter two, the historical period in which these authors came of age featured specific conditions that provoked responses by the Catholic Church. In his article, "The Catholic Community at Prayer, 1926-1976," Joseph Chinnici details factors that continued and others that changed over these decades. He describes a shift in the early 1940s that distinguished prayer life during the depression from prayer life during World War II and into the Cold War. He writes, "In general, the devotional life of the community looked in two directions: outward toward society and inward toward the family."⁵ He describes the outward direction of devotion as combining loyalty to the Church with loyalty to democracy in public ritual. Inwardly, he explains, "The family became a miniature Church, a small religious cloister, an enclave protected against secularism by its prayer and social order ... Just as the popular devotions of the 1930s reflected Depression-era society, so also the two most significant prayer expressions of the postwar era embodied this turn toward the family in the context of anti-communism and secularism."⁶ These two expressions were the campaign for the family rosary and the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart. The first meant the regular praying of the rosary,

⁵Joseph Chinnici, "The Catholic Community at Prayer, 1926-1976," in *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practice in Twentieth Century America*, ed. James O'Toole (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 2004), 57.

⁶Ibid., 59.

while the second involved the display and blessing of this religious image in the home. In addition to these two major movements, Chinnici lists many more that were encouraged to boost piety and protect families and societies from the threat of communism.⁷ The literature reflects this emphasis on prayer and ties it closely to the religious life of the family.

Domestic prayer fills these narratives and keeps the family constantly connected to its faith. “The power of prayer infused everything we did as children. Prayer connected us to a world of heavenly expertise that we could draw on like senior partners or consultants. Saints and angels were there to help with all our needs, from lost mittens to lost causes: Saint Christopher when we traveled, Saint Francis when the cat was sick ...”⁸ Claire Gaudiani reflects on the host of protectors she enjoyed as a child. Nothing fell outside the domain of the saints and angels and there seemed to be a specific name to call for any situation that could befall one. This was and always had been the way of her world. As she describes it, an awareness of this heavenly presence and the practice of calling upon these helpers came almost naturally. It did not require convincing or pressure—it was just part of daily existence. This kind of knowledge and the habits it prompted constitute much of what these cultural Catholics characterize as the inheritance of their tradition. Religion was not marked off or assigned to a specific domain.⁹ It was

⁷Ibid., 60.

⁸Claire Guadiani, "Of Cheese and Choices," in *Beyond the Godfather: Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience*, ed. A. Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 118-9.

⁹For more on this concept of religion outside institutional boundaries in U.S. religious history, see David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Martin Marty, "Religion: A Private Affair, in Public Affairs," *Religion and American Culture* 3, no. 2 (1993); Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*.

everywhere and part of life in any context. In this section, I analyze the rituals and activities that occur day-to-day in these narratives and consider their role in constructing the enclosed world of these cultural Catholics' youths.

Like Gaudiani, Richard Rodriguez also recalls the regularity of prayer: "My family turned to God not in guilt so much as in need. We prayed for favors and at desperate times. I prayed for help in finding a quarter I had lost on my way home. I prayed with my family at times of illness and when my father was temporarily out of a job. And when there was death in the family, we prayed."¹⁰ Just as Gaudiani recalls, for Rodriguez prayer could help with every need in life, from the most mundane like lost quarters to the most momentous like a soul's salvation. It occurred always and everywhere. However, for Rodriguez, prayer was also a regular and ritualized event in the household. While it could (and should) have occurred spontaneously, he also describes the nightly occasion of prayer as it was encouraged by the Church: "Catholicism at home was shaped by the sounds of the 'family rosary:' tired voices repeating the syllables of the Hail Mary; our fingers inching forward on beads toward the point of beginning; my knees aching; the coming of sleep."¹¹ In his narration of their nightly routine, Rodriguez stresses the characterizing features of his domestic Catholicism: late, arduous, and very much embodied. It does not invite a young boy to participate but forces him to follow along without choice. Still, despite the difficulty of the posture and the hour of the ritual, prayer did provide the youngster comfort in the night. He recalls, "Those nights when I'd shudder awake from a nightmare, I'd remember

¹⁰Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, 85.

¹¹Ibid., 87.

my grandmother's instruction to make a sign of the cross in the direction of my window. (That way Satan would find his way barred.) Sitting up in bed, I'd aim the sign of the cross against the dim rectangle of light. Quickly, then, I'd say the Prayer to My Guardian Angel, which would enable me to fall back asleep."¹² Whether in the middle of the day or the middle of the night, prayer had become a habitual activity as it had been for his family before him. Observing and participating in both the unstructured and the synchronized moments of prayer, a young Rodriguez takes up the ritual as his own. It begins to come naturally and give him peace. Through his written reflections, he conveys the socialization involved in understanding himself to be Catholic by birth (if also, by choice). While it may have felt like he had always been so, being Catholic in this regard had required taxing lessons.

In Rodriguez's representation of this memorable aspect of his childhood, he confirms that many Catholic practices, though encouraged by the Church, are ultimately learned from and approved by the family. The feeling of security and support engendered by the ritual of prayer here emerges directly from the lessons from his parents and grandmother. Without that context, these practices would have little meaning for the youngster. Cultural Catholicism emerges from this complex world where distinct authoritative environments establish religious norms.

Mary Gordon also narrates nighttime rituals with her family; only hers included a medium beyond the host of saints. In her biographical essay, "My Grandmother's House," she recalls the regular trips to her grandmother's home for the special treat enjoyed by those Catholics who owned a television in the 1950s. She writes, "On

¹²Ibid.

Tuesdays, we went to her house to watch Bishop Sheen. Those nights after the moon vanished and the screen filled in its image, what you saw first was an empty chair. His. The bishop's. And then himself ..."¹³ She describes the power his image carried even from a screen: "his eyes seemed transparent. They knew everything. They looked into your sinful soul."¹⁴ Here was the power of the Church entering the realm of her family in a remarkable way. They gathered and listened. It was time to be together with the Bishop at the center, the adults bringing the young child into their ritual. Gordon explains, "I have no memory of what the bishop said, but I know I was convinced of its importance."¹⁵ Encouraged by the interest her elders showed in this churchman's words, the young girl follows along trustingly. The ritual did not end with the show, however: "After Bishop Sheen, we would go into the kitchen and kneel for the Rosary. Or my grandmother, my father and I would kneel. My mother and my aunt, both being crippled, were allowed to sit. After the regular prayers, we said a special prayer for the Conversion of Russia."¹⁶ From Gordon's depiction of this practice, a reader senses the mystical aura that surrounded the television set each Tuesday at her grandmother's house. The picture seemed almost magical and its subject completely authoritative. It summoned them to prayer—embodied, communal prayer. Of course, the key to the ritual was her family's insistence upon it and their attitude toward the bishop. Only in following their example does young Gordon recognize the importance of the man's words. She might not be capable of remembering life before this ritual or imagining life without it, but her

¹³Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 31.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 32.

narrative clearly exemplifies the socialization of these seemingly innate Catholic practices.

Grandmothers have a special connection to prayer, according to many narratives. A grandmother's home provides the site for another critical lesson in prayer and Catholic practice in the memoir of Esmeralda Santiago (b. 1948). In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, she describes her father's piety and her mother's indifference to religion, which leaves her confused and needy of a place to go for answers. While spending time with her grandmother, the young girl expresses a desire for the woman's religion:

From the stoop, I could hear the rhythmic clicks of her rosary beads and the soft hum of her voice reciting prayers whose music was familiar to me, but whose words I'd never learned. And I wished that I knew how to pray, because then I could speak to God and maybe He or one of His saints could explain things to me. But I didn't know any prayers, because Mami didn't believe in churches or holy people, and Papi, even though he read the Bible and could lead novenas for the dead, never talked to us about God.¹⁷

Unlike Gaudiani, Rodriguez and Gordon, who had been drawn into their family's prayer life without much choice—at least as they interpret it—Santiago depicts a child yearning for meaning that her elders find in prayer. Its familiarity as a result of her father's and grandmother's regular practice makes it an appealing activity for her. What she witnesses involves a welcome mix of rhythmic action with mystical belief, producing a desirable source of support. Their example and a sense of belonging draw her to this religious ritual.

What Santiago suspects and learns, of course, is that there is a proper way of doing it. It does not entail simply a conversation with God or the saints. Rather, it

¹⁷Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 92-3.

requires the right motions and words. We do it *this* way. After working her way slowly through the Our Father with her grandmother, stopping line by line to understand the meaning of each, she takes on the next task to discover the complicated nature of crossing herself. Her grandmother reviews each step and the young girl reflects, “I’d seen women cross themselves so many times, it had never occurred to me that there was a right way and a wrong way to do it ...”¹⁸ This was a crucial gesture to master, because her grandmother had explained that it was a mandatory part of saying the Lord’s Prayer. After much rehearsal by Santiago, the veteran Catholic tells the child to see if she can do it on her own from the beginning. Santiago takes the task seriously and attempts to perfect every aspect of the process: “I tried to look grave, eyes down, face expressionless, the way people in velorios looked when Papi led them in prayer. I lowered my voice to a near mumble, quieted my lips until they barely moved, and let the rhythm guide my words out and up to the sky where Abuela said Papa Dios, my other Father, lived.”¹⁹ Again the prayer necessitates an embodied reverence that she has observed and tries to mimic closely. Proper Catholic practice demands knowledge and skills learned from others. For the young Santiago, they do not come without study and effort. Most important, they require a teacher and example so that the appropriate veneration and performance might be learned through careful observation. Santiago’s narration of this interaction with her grandmother illustrates the crucial role of the family elders in educating the youngster in the ways of the Catholic religion. Pulled to her

¹⁸Ibid., 101.

¹⁹Ibid.

father's and grandmother's ritualized prayer, she gets socialized into the world of Catholic life, including its particular gestures and refrains.

Santiago's young narrator and her interest in her grandmother's religion would only bewilder the protagonist of Sandra Cisneros's (b. 1954) short story "Americans." Cisneros's narrator resents her grandmother's piety. In this brief tale, Cisneros portrays a young girl brought into the ritual world of her grandmother and though she seems to resist it, she obeys her grandmother's rules in Church. In the end, she reveals how she has even internalized certain guidelines that govern this Catholic realm. The narrator explains, "We're waiting for the awful grandmother who is inside dropping pesos into *la ofrenda* box before the altar to La Divina Providencia. Lighting votive candles and genuflecting. Blessing herself and kissing her thumb. Running a crystal rosary between her fingers."²⁰ With careful attention to the details of her grandmother's actions, the narrator relates her frustration with the woman's piety rather than her attraction to it. It makes little sense to the child and keeps her from the playful pastimes she prefers. Impatient, she enters the church to find her grandmother. Staring at her grandmother, she realizes, "There must be a long, long list of relatives who haven't gone to church. The awful grandmother knits the names of the dead and the living into one long prayer fringed with grandchildren born in that barbaric country with its barbarian ways."²¹ Cisneros's character observes the practice of prayer from a distance. Still, she understands her grandmother's motives and while she feels annoyed by the time it requires, she seems to trust the need for it. Moreover, she even identifies herself with the

²⁰Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek, and Other Stories*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1991), 17.

²¹*Ibid.*, 19.

church rules. Noticing an older couple outside the church, the girl observes, “They’re not from here. Ladies don’t come to church dressed in pants. And everyone knows men aren’t supposed to wear shorts.”²² Bored and frustrated as she might be, the youngster considers church dress code common knowledge. She may not engage directly with the faith of her grandmother, but she is a product of her grandmother’s religion in the way she perceives Church rules as unbreakable. The needy souls require prayers and though she may not be the one to say them, she would never disrupt her grandmother in prayer nor disregard the guidelines of her grandmother’s church. She falls into line with Catholic demands as her grandmother’s authority dictates. In this depiction, Cisneros shows how the beliefs and rules of the religion can be understood as separate from one another. While this young girl is not faithful, she remains compliant. The author emphasizes that she does not sense any expectation to believe, but she does feel compelled to respect the tradition’s norms.

Whether actively participating in prayer without considering alternatives, pursuing customs observed and admired, or tolerating practices that determine the shape of one’s day, the children portrayed in these narratives experience the regular effects of Catholic ritual among their family members. For good or for bad, these youngsters face daily the Catholic influence of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ faithful allegiance to the tradition. Indeed, it should be noted that the agents were almost always women, which I will consider later. For now, I will focus on the nature of the influence itself. Regardless of any clerical documents or institutional encouragement to which families may have been responding, authors portray the impact of this Catholic practice in light of their

²²Ibid., 20.

intimate connections to it through family elders. The Church remains secondary in these narrated moments. What matters, instead, is the familial atmosphere in which these habits were learned. Such details emphasize that before Catholicism was ever a reality in Church or school for these children, it defined their lives at home and shaped the circumstances of their worlds.

Artifacts and Images

In addition to witnessing regular practice, cultural Catholics were also surrounded by physical reminders of the religious tradition. Statues, relics, portraits and other religious objects filled the spaces of their intimate worlds and filled their minds with meaning. Even if they no longer attribute the same importance to this material miscellany, their attention to it in narrative reveals its lasting impression. “Although I am a distinctively lapsed Catholic, I still have the crosses I used to wear and a ‘Sacred Heart of Jesus’ pocket mirror my mother got from a funeral home and left in a pocketbook she borrowed from me.... It seemed like sacrilege to throw them in the trash so I stashed them in the back of a bureau drawer,” writes Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick (b. 1949).²³ Though the crosses no longer carry the same significance for this cultural Catholic, something about them prevents Torgovnick from throwing them away. Regardless of her faith or allegiance to the Church, she still attributes a mystical importance to them. She conveys that what she learned from her mother about these religious articles is hard to forget or ignore.

²³Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 103.

Religious objects and articles occupied many different spaces for Catholic families: bedrooms, parlors and even car dashboards. Maria Laurino recalls her grandmother's bedroom: "Her dresser was her private place of worship, her altar. On it, votive candles flickered in ruby red glass, and statues of Mary, Saint Joseph, and Saint Anthony cast a quiet calm alongside several crucifixes."²⁴ Gina Cascone recalls the safety she felt riding in her grandmother's car: "We traveled in the company of Jesus, Mary and Christopher. Jesus and Mary stood in two circular dents in the dashboard. All the cars I'd seen had these two indentations—minimum safety standards, two saints."²⁵ She notes that her grandmother had the added feature of an extra saint in Christopher. Being surrounded by such items had different effects on the young children: at times, it yielded a sense of company and protection; at others, it produced fear. Mary Gordon recalls a religious image in her grandmother's bedroom:

A picture of Christ with long, smooth, girlish hair, pointing to his Sacred Heart, the size and shape of a pimento or a tongue. Most mysterious: a picture made of slat. You turned your head one way: it was the scourging at the pillar. Another turn of the head produced Jesus Crowned with Thorns. If you looked absolutely straight ahead, you saw the Agony in the Garden. I spent hours looking at that picture, frightened, uncomprehending. It was part of my grandmother's hidden supernal path into the mystery of things, a hard road, unforgiving, made of beaten flesh.²⁶

This mystifying picture, with its multiple images, overwhelms the young Gordon and still she reports being too curious to resist it when she visits. Rather than offer a sense of

²⁴Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian*, 158.

²⁵Cascone, *Pagan Babies*, 97.

²⁶Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 25.

peace, it troubles the child. The author, narrating this experience, links it to an understanding of her grandmother's devotion.

Whether producing a feeling of security by the presence of saints or of terror by the power of the holy, these articles and images contribute to the religious identity constructed in youth and maintained in adulthood. In her book *Material Christianity*, historian Colleen McDannell analyzes the function of material culture in the religious lives of Americans. She writes:

The symbol systems of a particular religious language are not merely handed down, they must be learned through doing, seeing, and touching. Christian material culture does not simply reflect an existing reality. Experiencing the physical dimension of religion helps *bring about* religious values, norms, behaviors and attitudes. Practicing religion sets into play ways of thinking. It is the continual interaction with objects and images that makes one religious in a particular manner.²⁷

Here, McDannell emphasizes the on-going social construction of what it means to be religious. The statues and crucifixes may indeed evidence the faith tradition of one's grandmother, but they do more than reflect a set of beliefs. They constitute and perpetuate the norms of the tradition and invite observers to consider their significance and meaning. They solicit interaction and response. These authors illustrate the active role played by material objects in the development of their religious identity. Moreover, their stories show how they continue to interact with these articles, just like the example of Torgovnick who cannot bear to trash the crosses or Sacred Heart of Jesus mirror she still possesses. Rita Ciresi's fiction offers rich examples of this continuous engagement with Catholic images and objects. Her protagonist in the novel *Pink Slip* describes

²⁷Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.

walking through a museum with her Jewish boyfriend Strauss. They enter a room filled with plates depicting religious scenes. She reports:

I felt Catholicism emanating from every pore in my body. I wondered how Strauss reacted to these repeated images of the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Madonna and Child, the Crucifixion, the Deposition. What was it like not to believe in Christ in a world full of crosses? I thought about all the gold and silver crucifixes I had, lying dormant in my jewelry box (gifts from Auntie Beppina on my name day and Holy Communion and Confirmation), and the miraculous medal I wore after I had the abortion and was making a concerted effort to change my ways.²⁸

As McDannell suggests, the pictures and crucifixes trigger religious reflection.

Remarking on her response and relationship to these objects, Ciresi's narrator epitomizes the complicated process of "experiencing the physical dimension of religion." They elicit from the narrator a perceived connection both to a faith and to a moral code. Further, as McDannell suggests, these responses have been learned. Each of the examples noted so far connects the interactions with Catholic material culture to the family members who offered instruction about these items. Without the mothers', grandmothers' and aunts' association with these religious objects, they would not possess the same meaning. This material culture and its special connection to family members affect the religious identities of these cultural Catholics.

The role of material culture in the literature also contributes to the notion that Catholicism is not selected by these adults, but rather is a pervasive and unavoidable presence in their lives. It is the material environment in which they live. Though many authors, as shown, point out specific reactions to different images or symbols, others reveal the mundane ways these kinds of objects function in their everyday lives. Richard

²⁸Ciresi, *Pink Slip*, 188.

Rodriguez describes a picture of the Sacred Heart given to his family by a priest. He notes that it hung in a prominent position in the front room of every house his parents ever lived in: “It has been one of the few permanent fixtures in the environment of my life. Visitors to our house doubtlessly noticed it when they entered the door—saw it immediately as the sign we were Catholic. But I saw the picture too often to pay it much heed.”²⁹ The ever-present indication of his family’s religion had become an unremarkable part of his home. It was just another aspect of his daily existence. David Morgan considers this phenomenon. “Ordinary reality takes root,” he explains, “as we come to take its familiar features for granted, that is, as we forget or release from conscious attention the conditions that relate us to the world and to one another.”³⁰ The religious imagery that clearly demarcated his family as Catholic blended into Rodriguez’s ordinary reality. He no longer noticed the picture that affiliated him and his family with a faith in Christ.

Of course, by his very identification and discussion of this picture in his writing, Rodriguez indicates that he himself perceives this feature to have contributed to his Catholic identity. By including it in his autobiography, he perpetuates this material component of his past. Moreover, by emphasizing his ability to recognize its influence now despite being unaware of it as a child, Rodriguez highlights his new perspective on his religious upbringing. He displays his capacity to reflect on its impact and by recounting it so intentionally, Rodriguez shows how this new perspective yields a level of authority over the experience.

²⁹Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, 82.

³⁰David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 204.

In a similar vein, Rita Ciresi demonstrates familial Catholic objects blend into the domestic commonplace surroundings even in her adult life. Her narrator in the story “The Little Ice Age,” notes, “I ... was guilty of habit, of keeping things in the same old place. Even though I hadn’t lived in my parents’ house for years, I still carried the key with me every day. It was attached to a silver key tag that depicted the Vatican.” She lists the random assortment of things at the bottom of her purse, which includes “a St. Christopher holy card that said on the back CATHOLIC: In case of accident, call a priest.” She recalls, “Mama had given me the card when I went away to college ...” These two items rolling around in her pocketbook link her to her family and their Catholicism. These kitschy items might not evoke reverent devotion,³¹ but they accompany her in her daily routine and contribute to this character’s constructed identity. As Morgan’s comments suggest, while these objects blend into her ordinary reality and seem nearly meaningless, they continue to connect her to the religious world of her parents. Ciresi’s deliberate use of this detail in her depiction of this woman reveals a critical aspect of cultural Catholicism—and sometimes literally (in their purses)—cultural Catholics carry the remnants of their family’s religious influence into adulthood.

Because I am more interested in the representations of Catholicism by these writers, I have not detailed the sources of power that might have originally bestowed these religious articles with their significance for Catholic families. Certainly, a range of authorities from the priestly office to the miraculous narrative infuses these objects and

³¹For a consideration of “kitch” and its gendered implications in Catholic contexts, see McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 174-86.

images with special meaning for devout believers.³² The power surrounding this material culture that does contribute to an understanding of cultural Catholicism, however, is the effect such objects have upon the people who observe them. Again David Morgan notes, “As part of the very fabric of consciousness, religious images participate fundamentally in the social construction of reality.”³³ Confronted by these articles and faces in the intimate spaces of their lives—a jewelry box, a living room wall, a grandmother’s dresser—the people in these narratives are learning how they might participate in the world around them. Despite critiques of the concept “social construction” Morgan’s observation helps decipher the socialization process represented in these narratives.³⁴ Authors indicate that their social worlds are partly shaped by these influential images.

So we must ask: beyond a sense of piety and protection, what realities were being constructed in the minds of these children? David Plante suggests that images implied unattainable roles to family members based on the ideal models they represent. In his novel *The Catholic*, the narrator reflects:

I thought about the religious images of the Holy Family by which my family was assigned to certain ways of living. Everywhere in our small house images confronted us with signs that unless we lived in their terms, we were damned to have no relationships that would work. For us to have been a family fulfilled in the way a family was divinely meant to be fulfilled, my mother would have had to be a virgin, yet impregnated, not directly by the father of the son, but by a go-between, and that father not

³²For more on visual and material culture in American Christianity, see McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900*; David Morgan, *Protestants & Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

³³Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 207.

³⁴For a critique of this rhetoric, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

her husband; he, her husband, would have had to be the foster father of his wife's son, and to accept that, though his wife gave birth to a child, she remained a virgin, and he would have had to respect, throughout all their marriage, her virginity. And as for the son—³⁵

Thinking critically about what realities these images constructed, Plante's character identifies the roles and attitudes required to reach the high moral standards issued by the religious pictures. Each of his family members has a distinct role to fulfill and the demands of that role are specified by the details of the picture's story. Plante's narrator makes clear that these images, though perhaps blending into the background of one's everyday surroundings, were invested with meaning and were being seen and *read* by the young Catholics bombarded with them. Roland Barthes addresses why someone in this character's place might attribute a range of meanings to the image, meanings others might not consider. The theorist highlights "the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image" and notes that these knowledges yield different readings of images.³⁶ According to this theory, Plante's character, a product of his environment, sees and interprets based on a particular cultural, personal, and religious perspective. While his interpretation of the holy family images certainly begins with the denoted meaning of these historical characters, he also perceives it to be a model family because that lesson has been taught to him since he was a child. That knowledge passed on to him by his family unavoidably affects the way he reads the image. The language of the image issues a gendered moral ideal that contributes to his "social construction of reality."

³⁵Plante, *The Catholic*, 54.

³⁶Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 46-7.

Plante's protagonist in *The Catholic* has plenty of company in this constructed reality. The literature demonstrates how the religious objects and pictures that filled the spaces of homes were firmly connected to contexts of meaning established and perpetuated in the family. But it is significant that "the family" here has most commonly referred to *grandmothers* and *mothers*. Indeed, women have been the primary ambassadors of this religious tradition, in both the schools (nuns) and at home, according to the fictional and nonfictional narratives. As those most closely associated with the Catholic material culture mentioned in this literature, women have been represented in a designated role within the family's religious tradition. This had significant implications for gender construction among Catholics—the female roles taught and modeled within the Catholic family home.

Assumed and Assigned Gender Roles

"The American Catholic church has always counted on its women. In every conceivable setting—urban, rural, suburban—women have been the mainstays of the congregation, the tireless supporters of parish life whose labor-intensive projects have sustained everything from works of mercy to the school system," writes historian Mary Jo Weaver.³⁷ After decades of scholarship that neglected women's contributions to the Catholicism, they are finally receiving some credit for their role in the institutional Church. Their importance in this religious tradition coincides with the national trend in

³⁷Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 37.

the United States. As Ann Braude writes, “In America, women go to church.”³⁸ With countless authors recalling the days when mothers and grandmothers dragged them to mass, the fictional and nonfictional representations reflect this social reality. However, attention to women’s roles in the congregation fails to take into account their roles in the home and their lessons about what it means to be a Catholic woman.

Recalling the playful banter about saints and commandments enjoyed among her uncles, Maria Laurino writes, “These men played with faith, letting the women, the madonnas, be the standard-bearers of devotion, but never abandoned their religion. Men could be scoundrels like Saint Aloysius and of course be forgiven for their sins—as long as the women did the praying for them.”³⁹ As the standard-bearers of devotion, women are depicted here as maintaining significant responsibility for religion in the home and for the souls of their loved ones. Of course, their piety demanded a commitment to the moral standards expected and required of a Catholic woman during these middle decades of the twentieth century. Among the most crucial of these as represented in the literature was chastity and motherhood. Patricia Hampl writes, “The purpose of a Catholic education for girls was to produce good Catholic wives and mothers. No bones about that pre-feminist intention. The model was—who else?—Mary, the Virgin Mother.”⁴⁰ As a result of statues and prayer cards and fervent devotion, the Virgin Mary became a common household name. She provided the model example for womanhood. Historian Paula Kane writes, “The 1950s consolidated the conservative ideals of Catholic womanhood that had

³⁸Ann Braude, “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87.

³⁹Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian*, 158.

⁴⁰Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 62.

been on the rise throughout the century.... At a religious level a rhetoric of purity chose to emphasize the Madonna's motherhood, homemaking and modesty, and was especially addressed to adolescent girls."⁴¹ As Kane emphasizes, the esteemed life for a woman was one embraced in the home as a chaste wife and devoted mother. Both Kane and Hampl note the ultimate example provided: the ever-virgin Mary, Mother of God. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Catholic school classroom stressed the merit of following Mary's example. Martha Manning has remarked about Mary: "Through her I received the Catholic church's formulation of the perfect woman. I had it hammered into me, year after year, that Mary was the model to which I should aspire: pure, passive, and docile."⁴² So, the home became the most important context for the display of women's true religious devotion. What they did and did not do in the bedroom mattered. How they provided for their husbands and children in the kitchen and living rooms largely determined their virtue.

Authors here highlight this example and expectation and point out that these conventions only applied to women. Sexual ethics and the quality of parenting pertained little to men in the household. Patricia Hampl narrates a discovery about saints, the esteemed characters whose lives should be emulated: "Most of the women saints in the Missal had under their names the designation *Virgin and Martyr*, as if the categories were somehow a matched set. Occasionally a great female canonized for her piety and charitable works received the label *Queen and Widow*. The men were usually *Confessor*,

⁴¹Paula Kane, "Marian Devotion since 1940: Casualty or Continuation," in *Habits of Devotion: Catholic Religious Practices in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. James O'Toole (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 2004), 104.

⁴²Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 141.

or, sometimes *Martyr*, but none of them was ever *Virgin*.⁴³ Hampl's narration stresses that the very holiness of women in the canon of saints demanded a certain sexual status: either virgin or widow. As for the men, no one cared with whom or when they were succumbing to that ultimate, and usually sinful, temptation of sex.

The sexual ethics that applied to females surfaces regularly in this literature about growing up Catholic. At school, church and home, girls received serious pressure to remain chaste in ways that the boys completely escaped. This gendered ethic yielded a range of responses by girls, from tremendous guilt to outright rebellion and everything in between. What Hampl illustrates, though, is how this notion of the pure and innocent female pursued her into adulthood and continues to affect her sense of self: "You're so ... wholesome,' a man at a cocktail party said when I was past forty. 'I hope you don't mind my saying so.' I minded. I seethed, but I was crushed by my old convent courtesy and smiled the smile." In this moment of infuriation, she explains, her convent school education betrays her by pushing her to act too demurely. She recalls, "I wanted to betray it all, wanted to join that real world where no good girls are allowed, except as decorative touches here and there."⁴⁴ She believes that she wants to escape this characterization because it prevents her from something bigger and more real: "I was terrified I was missing out on Life, that thing called 'experience,' all because I'd been held in the cooing Catholic embrace too long and was forever marked. But marked by what? The indelible brand of innocence, which is to be marked by an absence, a vacancy. By nothing at all."⁴⁵

⁴³Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 48-9.

⁴⁴Ibid., 207.

⁴⁵Ibid..

As a woman, she feels marked, and yet marked by something that only erases her. She eventually comes around to make peace and, as puts it, “find use for” innocence, but this gendered requirement, she suggests, has always influenced her self-image and participation in the world.

Just as women primarily bear the burden of sexual purity, so too do they carry the weight of proper parenting. In her novel *Men and Angels*, Mary Gordon’s character Anne, an art historian, and her friend Barbara consider the biases of history when evaluating the artists of the past. In a conversation about the subject of Anne’s research, artist Caroline Watson, the two discuss the unfair criteria for judging talent. Anne says, “Sometimes I want to slam her for being a bad mother, then sometimes I think it didn’t matter, she was a great painter, so what was the difference.” Barbara replies, “Nobody gives a shit if Monet was a bad father.”⁴⁶ Gordon’s fictional characters give voice to the frustration caused by lessons taught and learned in Catholic households: that first and foremost a woman ought to be a pure and dedicated mother.

Catholic households, of course, were not the only ones in which this expectation existed during the middle decades of twentieth-century America. Indeed, Betty Friedan’s 1963 publication *The Feminine Mystique* drew attention to the construction of femininity among the entire middle class in the U.S. In this segment of society, she argued, women became prisoners in their own homes. Cultural Catholic authors belong to the generation that responded to Friedan’s critique and others that her work sparked. These authors have witnessed how such responses ultimately led to the reform labeled “second wave feminism.” A complicated movement, one of its results was a new assortment of socially

⁴⁶Mary Gordon, *Men and Angels*, Large print ed. (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1986), 171.

acceptable definitions of true womanhood. This massive cultural shift manifestly influences these authors' reflections on their childhood homes and has conditioned their narrations of what they remember. With new and broader conceptions of women, many authors express resentment about the circumstances that typified their American homes.⁴⁷

Still, firmly situated in the social milieu of their times, cultural Catholics emphasize that the gendered norms they learned were often, even within this broad historical context, specific to their religious tradition. The focus on the Virgin Mary, for example, emphasizes their choice to represent their frustrations with the gendered norms in terms of the norms' supposed Catholic origins. While American women everywhere faced similarly stifling restrictions, these authors point to the particularly Catholic nature of their situations. For example, when Anna Quindlen reflects on her own unhappiness about her limited options as a female, she writes, "... part of my dissatisfaction with my life was clearly, in retrospect, a dissatisfaction with the traditional roles available to me as a girl at the time, neither of which—nun or housewife, take your pick—particularly suited my temperament."⁴⁸ Quindlen depicts her perceived choices as closely tied to her Catholicism. Her readers can imagine her childhood environment as one where life in the

⁴⁷"Gender" as a historical category has only developed in recent decades. See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986). For a historical survey of gender in the U.S., see Sylvia D. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003). For considerations of feminism and reform movements, see Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Blanche Linden-Ward and Carol Hurd Green, *American Women in the 1960s: Changing the Future, American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993); Winifred D. Wandersee, *On the Move: American Women in the 1970s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988). For considerations of gender as it relates to race and ethnicity, see Karen Anderson, *Changing Woman: A History of Racial Ethnic Women in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

⁴⁸Anna Quindlen, *How Reading Changed My Life*, 1st ed., *The Library of Contemporary Thought* (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 1998), 27.

convent would be an admirable pursuit. So, daily existence for women, in these literary representations, involved specific obligations to Catholic expectations. In behavior and manner, girls were to emulate the Virgin Mary. With regard to life-long interests, motherhood and sisterhood (in the formal sense, of course) offered the most venerable options. With expanded perspectives resulting from widespread social movements, cultural Catholics can now pose Friedan-like questions to their domestic childhood settings.

Implied limitation characterizes the way many of these women writers represent their interpretation of the Virgin Mary and her implications for their potential engagement with the world. However, as one might expect of these authors by now, their response to this limitation was complicated. As religion scholar Robert Orsi has written,

Because Mary exists relationally, it is impossible to read out from theology or iconography the quality of people's experience of her or to anticipate its social implications. Devotional writers may have evoked a sorrowing, submissive Mary against the desires and aspirations of young women; indeed there is such a disciplinary literature of Marian piety and poetry, written by men and women, lay and religious, clearly intended to constrain women's imaginations, desires and behavior.⁴⁹

In this classification, it becomes clear that cultural Catholics were not the authors of the devotional literature, but rather, those who, with the hindsight of their post-feminist world, felt palpably this constraint on their imaginations, desires and behavior.

Reflections on the Virgin's image often follow a particular pattern of response among these authors. They depict two distinct stages of their interaction with the icon: first becoming angry at it and later redeeming the image outside the context of its original introduction to these cultural Catholics. The problematic trait these women writers

⁴⁹Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 62.

identify is Mary's silence and submissiveness. Manning recalls, "Her passivity irked me. All she seemed to do was endure everything ... Her reaction to so many events was silence. She just 'kept things in her heart.'"⁵⁰ Valued and esteemed among her Catholic devotees, Mary's propensity to remain calm, serene, prayerful and ultimately silent only annoys a young Manning who seeks a strong woman role-model. Beverly Donofrio (b. 1950) expresses a similar sentiment in her book, *Looking for Mary*. She recalls her feelings for the icon in her early adulthood. She writes, "...I hated Mary. I despised her abdicating her will to God's. Not that I believed in her since puberty, but she was a figurehead for a mythology I wanted nothing to do with: woman as ever-loving wimp."⁵¹ Donofrio's response to Mary echoes Manning's rejection of this figure as a model woman. They resent her willingness to accept the roles assigned to her and the consequences of that willingness for women.

Sandra Cisneros' anger with Mary similarly relates to her role in representing woman as submissive and silent. Hers particularly connects to its effect on the women in her own family who followed that model. Adoring Mary as the Blessed Mother believed to have appeared to a Mexican, her mother and grandmother dedicate themselves to the Virgin of Guadalupe whom Cisneros learns to resent:

Virgencita de Guadalupe. For a long time I wouldn't let you in my house. I couldn't see you without seeing my ma each time my father came home drunk and yelling, blaming everything that ever went wrong in his life on her.

I couldn't look at your folded hand without seeing my *abuela* mumbling, 'My son, my son, my son ...' Couldn't look at you without blaming you for all the pain my mother and her mother and all our

⁵⁰Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 142.

⁵¹Beverly Donofrio, *Looking for Mary, or, the Blessed Mother and Me* (New York: Viking Compass, 2000), 27.

mothers' mothers have put up with in the name of God. Couldn't let you in my house.
... I wasn't going to be my mother or my grandma. All that self-sacrifice, all that silent suffering.⁵²

Cisneros draws a direct connection between what she perceives as the Virgin's self-abdication and the suffering she witnessed her mother and grandmother endure as a result of following Mary's example. She understood that the Virgin of Guadalupe had acted as a justifying excuse for the extent to which her female elders sacrificed themselves for the men in their lives. She rejected that religious reasoning and held accountable the Catholic icon and what she symbolized, to the resulting detriment of women.

In these three examples, the Virgin Mary sustains serious criticism for the effects of her behavior on the well-being of all women. Of course, the problem of Mary rests not in her actions or attitudes for these authors, but in the way her story and her example has been used in various Catholic contexts. From school playgrounds to home altars, her image has been designated a moral compass for girls who were taught to follow in her chaste, motherly, and obedient ways, or at least in those ways that have been carefully selected and heralded by influential Catholics. Her example would have little meaning for these females without the constant reminders they received of her holiness and the expectations that they would emulate her saintly example. Such lessons issued frustrating gendered roles to young girls within the only environment they knew, their Catholic worlds consisting of their schools, their neighborhoods and most certainly their homes.

Now outside their Catholic worlds, these authors wrestle with the roles assigned them by means of the holy exemplar and recognize something redeeming and helpful in Mary's story and image. Martha Manning, once 'irked' by Mary's passivity, comes to

⁵²Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 127.

feel empathy for her as a mother. In the author's account of losing her daughter in a department store, she reflects on Mary's experience as the mother of a bold boy who disappeared for hours when he stayed at the temple. In this moment of understanding, Manning notes, "I realized that sometimes there is nothing else to do as a parent but reflect on those moments ... and 'hold them in your heart'."⁵³ When Manning can relate to Mary as a human being who most certainly struggled through the difficulties of parenthood, she begins both to appreciate her example and, as Mary did, to "pray for the patience to be able to let go. To be able to 'reflect on things' and 'hold them in (her) heart.'" Disregarding Mary's paradigm of perfection, Manning appreciates her for the shared challenge she faced in raising a child, in surrendering control when it was clear that her child had to enter into the world on his own.

Beverly Donofrio also relinquishes her hatred of Mary and embraces her for the crucial part she took in steering her son's life and for her on-going support for human beings who suffer in this world. Her memoir *Looking for Mary, or the Blessed Mother and Me* narrates her discovery of the Mary who offers solace, but not meekly, rather with incomparable strength and love. She comes to realize that this woman was far from an "ever-loving wimp;" Mary had been and continues to be a powerful, effective force of love.⁵⁴

Sandra Cisneros also arrives at a more complicated view of the Virgin, who at one time had seemed too flat and simple, too easily categorized. Cisneros admits that she had been mistaken. She writes, "I don't know how it all fell in to place. How I finally

⁵³Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 143.

⁵⁴Donofrio, *Looking for Mary*, 25.

understood who you are ... That you could have the power to rally a people when a country was born, and again during civil war, and during a farmworkers' strike in California made me think that maybe there is power in my mother's patience, strength in my grandmother's endurance." She continues to reflect on the many aspects and dimensions embodied in the complex Virgin, from the Aztec Tonantzin to Our Lady of Sorrows. With this new understanding learned outside any Catholic confines, she notes, "I wasn't ashamed, then, to be my mother's daughter, my grandmother's granddaughter, my ancestors' child."⁵⁵ When Cisneros realizes that this familiar icon might yield so many different interpretations and effect change through human beings, she begins to change her mind. No longer simply an ecclesiastical symbol to constrain or shame women, the Virgin becomes for Cisneros a powerful, inclusive figure who offers hope and who rightly earns the veneration of Cisneros' ancestors.

In these three representative examples, we witness the way the Virgin Mary's example, encouraged at school and emulated at home, enters into women's depiction of the impact Catholicism had upon their self-identities. Cultural Catholics do not simply remember the symbols of their past nostalgically, but rather, they reflect on them critically. Moreover, though these critical reflections focus on this religious icon, the characters truly at the center of their stories are the authors themselves. In each of these described interactions with the Virgin, the reader witnesses a transformation in the narrator herself. They indicate a change over time whereby they recognize vulnerable elements of their own humanity, whether as a mother or a daughter. They interpret this transformation in terms of their shifting responses to Mary. The authors attribute to her

⁵⁵Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*, 128.

this dynamic element of change even as they narrate their own moments of revelation. In so doing, they indicate the new ways that this old symbol, whose meaning has changed for them, continues to serve as a reference point for their lives. In the past, women either assumed or were assigned roles based on notions of piety and virtue rooted in the example of Mary perpetuated by the Church and the family. As these authors show, the symbol of Mary appears more complex now that they have moved outside of their childhood worlds. She remains a defining figure for them, but now they can identify with her voluntarily based on newly recognized meanings.

For many of these authors, the woman's place in the home issued a direct challenge and yielded frustration with the limitations imposed. However, writers exhibit ambivalence about this point. In fact, some writers recognize the strength of their mothers because of their very place in the home. Claire Gaudiani exemplifies such a response: "Although our mother never worked outside the home, my brothers and sisters and I always felt she had great power through the simplicity of prayer.... Our mother's prayer life, anchored in her parents' faith, created an awesome example of a powerful woman as I looked back on my childhood."⁵⁶ Rather than denying a woman a role in public, Catholicism in this representation gives a woman power at home. Gaudiani opts not to portray her mother as a disenfranchised person, but rather one who gladly accepts her role in the family and fulfills it with strength and achievement.

College educated and well established in their professional realms, these writers exemplify the post-feminist movement. However, their worldly success is not the only evidence of this. Even their complicated attitudes toward the women of their pasts—those

⁵⁶Gaudiani, "Of Cheese and Choices," 119.

intimately known or reverently admired—indicate feminist notions. Women in a variety of roles, they claim, can be empowered. Strong and inspiring womanhood itself might even include Catholicism; however, not the same Catholicism they knew as children and adolescents. Rather, for them, Catholic womanhood must be rethought in light of the expanded conceptions of women's roles in the world.

With the Virgin at the center of these stories, women have been consistently represented as the focus of religion at home. In their writing, some authors criticize this while others find ways to celebrate it. However, in either case, we are left with a question: where are the men, the fathers, in these settings? They do receive mentions from time to time. In many ways, they were the rule keepers who made certain the family stayed in line with demands from outside the home. Alice McDermott recalls her dad's regular contribution to the family's religion: "My father, in the great tradition of Catholic fathers everywhere, proclaimed, 'As long as you're living in my house you'll go to Mass on Sunday,' and then added, always, in a softer, wearier tone, 'Trust me. You'll need the church as you get older. You don't think you need it now, but as you live, you'll see. Trust me.'"⁵⁷ He was not instituting family prayer, but rather insisting on his children's participation in the Church. In this passage, McDermott clearly illustrates the in-charge attitude her father assumed with regard to his children's religion.

In Anna Quindlen's novel *Object Lessons*, the patriarch of the family, John Scanlan, insists that his granddaughter memorize the lists and information that he deems indicative of a good Catholic. Quindlen writes, "Maggie had been able to recite the deadly sins since first grade. The apostles were a throwaway question. Most recently her

⁵⁷McDermott, "Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic," 12.

grandfather had asked her to recite from memory the Passion According to St. Mark, and Maggie had been amazed when she learned it successfully.”⁵⁸ Resembling the exercises in the Catholic classroom, Scanlan drills young Maggie on her memorization of key Catholic data. This repetition, he assures her, will keep her firmly connected to the one true faith.

With the women exemplifying piety and virtue and the men upholding the rules and tradition, the family dynamic presents a particular understanding of what it meant to be Catholic in these narratives. As the nuns and priest were educating their students in the conventions of the Church, parents and grandparents were training youngsters to participate in domestic Catholicism. Selectively narrating such training, cultural Catholics emphasize both the parts that disturbed them as well as the elements that have evolved for them as a result of their own experiences and personal transformations. Their work emphasizes that for good or for bad, a Catholic past has powerfully contributed to their self-conceptions as gendered people. In their writing, they take the opportunity to illustrate that process and highlight the ways their new social locations affect old lessons but also the ways old ideas forever remain the starting points soliciting their responses.

Catholic Criteria for Kinship

Born Catholic. Catholic by birth. As I noted earlier, this rhetoric of genetic inheritance both divests the authors of any responsibility for being Catholic even as it firmly links them to the tradition. In their portrayal of life in the Catholic family, they evidence the layered socialization that takes place in the household. The literature depicts

⁵⁸Anna Quindlen, *Object Lessons* (Thorndike, Me.: Thorndike Press, 1991), 38.

one more aspect of this socialization process. Authors suggest that one's membership in a family involved the individual's religious identity. To be part of their families, it was assumed and expected that the boys and girls, men and women in these narratives would be Catholic.

Alice McDermott describes the centrality of religion to her family. She writes:

My father carried a worn scapular. My mother put a holy card of Saint Jude in the back window whenever she was praying for good weather. One of my brothers was an altar boy, the other spoke about becoming a priest. We ate spaghetti with tomato sauce on Friday nights. We were Catholics as inevitably as we were ourselves: the McDermott family on Emily Avenue, and with about as much self-consciousness and, it seemed, volition.⁵⁹

McDermott's description identifies the habits, rituals, and objects that represented her family's tradition and its pervasiveness among her family. She claims that Catholicism was one of the McDermott's' distinguishing traits. It was barely chosen and never considered. Catholicism determined their lives and their identities, and they never even had to think about it. Now outside that all-encompassing Catholic environment, this woman uses the distance to reflect self-consciously on its impact. She determines that the experience of growing up a McDermott has made her forever and always, regardless of her attitude to the Church, a Catholic. She is her parents' daughter so she is a Catholic.

Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick communicates a similar connection between her familial relationship and the Catholic tradition. She narrates the dramatic conclusion to her formal allegiance to the Church. She recalls declaring that her confession before receiving Confirmation would be her last. At the time, her friends didn't believe her, but she claims that she kept her promise and has never gone back to confession. Still, though,

⁵⁹McDermott, "Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic," 12.

she feels some connection to Catholicism. She writes, “I returned to that church only for one uncle’s funeral, then another’s, and then, just last year, for my father’s. It wasn’t the church that drew me. It was the family, the way that tradition expresses itself most for Italian Americans.”⁶⁰ Belonging to her Italian American family means being Catholic and going to their church. She resists the impulse but realizes there is a part of her that still longs to be included in that tradition. It’s part of being her uncles’ niece and her father’s daughter.

This connection to the Catholic tradition through membership in one’s family takes different forms among these texts. For David Plante, it involves practice and sacrament: “Away on my own, I had stopped going to Mass, but back home with my parents I had to go with them. I kept from them that I hadn’t been to Mass for a year as I kept from them that I had also stopped going to confession ...”⁶¹ While on his own, he admits, he has fallen away from participation in regular Catholic ritual, but when he is with his parents, he becomes their son again. And that entails going to Mass. He does not even entertain the idea of informing them that he has abandoned religious practice. Instead, he indicates how he falls seamlessly into the role of their son next to them in the pew.

Patricia Hampl intimates that going along with her parents’ religious devotion proved a more difficult challenge. Feeling the enormous pressure of her parents, she finally finds the nerve to tell her father the truth about her decision to stop going to mass. She recalls the Sunday morning when he casually asked her which mass she would be

⁶⁰Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, 153.

⁶¹Plante, *American Ghosts*, 128.

attending. She narrates: “‘I’m not going,’ I say, ‘I’m not going to Mass anymore.’ I can’t believe I’ve said it, this thing that has gnawed at me for months, years.” Finally liberated from her secret, she faces a daunting scene: “There is a god-like silence ... ‘Your choice,’ he says, managing to say the two bitter words without leaving a fingerprint of emotion on them.” As if that response were not difficult enough for the young woman to bear, she recalls the follow-up: “We never speak of it again. Though my mother, the voice of the marriage, says a week later in the kitchen, ‘You broke your father’s heart.’”⁶² This kind of attachment between a family’s Catholic practice and a daughter’s filial obligation puts this young eighteen-year-old in a tough position. Even if she does intend to abandon the church, she faces the heart-wrenching disappointment of her parents. When later, as an adult, she decides to visit Catholic pilgrimage sites and reports this news to her parents, the response remains consistent: “Later in the kitchen, the Voice gives me the word: ‘Your father is so proud of you.’”⁶³ Parental disappointment and pride directly correlate with Catholic affiliation.

As these authors relate, leaving Catholicism is not as easy as disregarding the Vatican’s policy on birth control or neglecting to go to Mass. For many of these authors, it necessitates abandoning one’s family. On some level, it requires the denial of being their parents’ child. By identifying as members of their families, cultural Catholics show, they simultaneously claim to be Catholic, at least on some level.

In these narratives, cultural Catholics construct a realm outside the supervision of nuns and priests, where they learned certain behavior and practice in line with their

⁶²Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 17.

⁶³Ibid.

religious tradition. The complicated nature of these stories suggests their ambivalence about Catholic home life during their youth. In some instances, it provided welcome and comforting ritual. In others, it imposed undesirable demands. As they write about these complex settings and the characters who occupied them, authors interpret them from new historical and social perspectives. Their memories and responses reflect not only their emotional and psychological ties to those formative surroundings but also the contemporary questions posed by their generation and times. Textual narratives provide writers a space for recognizing the deep impact of the past as well as confronting its troubling features in a public way.

In the next chapter, we shift our focus from inside the home to just outside it. While families may have been introducing children to ethnic practices, surrounding communities were actively contributing to constructions of ethnic Catholicism. By focusing on the neighborhood, I consider yet another context for Catholic lessons.

CHAPTER V

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN THE COMMUNITY

Between the institutional church and the domain of the Catholic family, children of the mid-twentieth century entered another realm that claimed their bodies and souls as it shaped their senses of self. Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick writes, “You can take the girl out of Bensonhurst (that much is clear); but you may not be able to take the Bensonhurst out of the girl.”¹ For cultural Catholics, surrounding communities largely determined their connections to the religious heritage that would forever influence their self-conceptions. Neighborhoods, and particularly the ethnic and socio-economic dimensions that distinguished certain neighborhoods during these decades, played a major role in the resulting identities they maintain as adults. In this chapter, I will examine how the elements of such communities are narrated in the writings of cultural Catholics. That is, I consider just what the Bensonhurst-left-in-the-girl looks like and why that original community is described as a Catholic space.

Cultural Catholics’ connections to their varied pasts cannot be understood without closely looking at their narrative representations of the spaces and places they inhabited. While readers have to assume that homogenous neighborhoods—both religiously and ethnically—did not exist so purely (nor as neatly divided) as these authors suggest, we do need to pay attention to their literary constructions of such landscapes. In both autobiographical and fictional stories, writers depict a world where one could be

¹Marianna Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10.

surrounded by Catholics and be claimed by an ethnic group. Of course, neither of these conditions came without certain expectations or identities. An investigation into these portrayals, then, yields helpful insight into the intentions and perceptions of cultural Catholics. Their representations of obligatory membership in certain communities, geographic and ethnic alike, reveals their correlating perception of an inherent Catholicism. To have origins in these places and peoples meant they were Catholic and, as they narrate, they had little choice in the matter. Of course, the stories evidence that the origins themselves have been constructed for cultural Catholics in assorted ways. Whether or not the authors reflect on that fact, though, they commonly assert that such origins have had life-long effects. Still, removed from the places and spaces that issued religious and ethnic identities as well as class status, cultural Catholics struggle between the worlds of the past and the present. They cannot turn their back on the formative circumstances of their childhood, but the terms of ethnic Catholic identity seem far displaced from the professional environments they now occupy.

As I focus on community origins in this chapter, I begin with the nature of the places as the writers describe them. For many, the neighborhood was enough to make them Catholic. Closed off as they claim they were from other religious peoples (with the exception of some Jewish families in certain areas), cultural Catholics represent that mere existence in those spaces could make one Catholic. In other depictions, the neighborhood assigned an ethnic identity *and* a Catholic one that naturally accompanied it. Textual descriptions construct places in mid-twentieth century American where ethnic identities were easily identifiable and clear-cut. Of course, being Italian-American or Irish-American, for example, involved certain norms and expectations for Catholics. As these

concepts were being constructed and renewed, children were learning that they had to meet certain criteria for living up to their memberships in the ethnic groups. These narrations themselves, then, continue the construction of these ethnic categories. In the last section, I analyze the curious position in which these authors find themselves as a result of their imposing backgrounds and their success outside those insular environments. For most of these authors, the ethnic, Catholic neighborhood included a particular economic class. Many would not have observed anything beyond the working class environment that their families occupied. These cultural Catholics, though, did manage to move beyond that status. So having pushed past the limiting expectations and circumstances of their youth and having achieved status in the American world outside it, they realize they are no longer fully members of their original community, nor do they completely fit into their new contexts. While they might resent (or sometimes value) the imposing conditions of their upbringings, these authors determine that the Catholic environment of their pasts sets them apart from their current worlds. In their narratives, they continue to choose these ethnic identities and depict them as inherently important parts of themselves. Just as they represent having internalized the rules and obligations of the Church and perceiving their religious heritage as a genetic inheritance, they suggest that neighborhood membership and ethnic affiliation infused them with a Catholic identity that persists.

Places, Their Creations, and Their Impositions

In an autobiographical essay, Mary Gordon vividly depicts the insular nature of her childhood surroundings:

One could be, at least in the time when I was growing up, a Catholic in New York and deal only in the most superficial ways with anyone non-Catholic. Until I went to college I had no genuine contact with anyone who wasn't Catholic. The tailor and the man who ran the candy store were Jews, and the women who worked in the public library were Protestants, but you allowed them only pleasantries. Real life, the friendships, the feuds, the passions of proximate existence, took place in the sectarian compound, a compound like any other, with its secrets—a secret language, secret customs, rites, which I now understand must have been very menacing at worst or at the best puzzling to the outside world.²

Though a reader may question the veracity of this claim, no one can challenge the author's memory or at least the choice to remember the neighborhood this way. So, with its compound-like quality, Gordon's childhood community completely surrounded her with Catholics. They were the only people with whom she or her family associated and she recognized herself as a true member of this clan. The place itself issued customs and rites and she was socialized into its habits. Now distanced from that neighborhood, Gordon acknowledges how peculiar it must have seemed to those outside it. Nevertheless, it characterized her youth and she perceives herself as a product of it.

Indeed, place can have extraordinary effects on a person. In an ethnographic description of Medicine Mountain in northern Wyoming, scholar Belden Lane details the impressive climb to the peak and the experience of feeling on top of the world when you reach it. He writes, "A curious transformation of consciousness occurs when 'an ordinary place' like this—a mere dot on the map—becomes gradually (or perhaps even suddenly) a place of extraordinary significance."³ Indeed, students of religion, particularly of Catholicism, are familiar with the importance that place and space can assume for

²Mary Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls: And Other Essays* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1991), 164.

³Belden Lane, "Giving Voice to Place: Three Models for Understanding American Sacred Space," *Religion and American Culture* 11, no. 1 (2001): 53-4.

religious people. Infused with a sense of the sacred, which derives from a multiplicity of sources considered by Lane, certain dots on the map assume special meaning and importance.⁴ One might have been hard-pressed in the mid-twentieth century to find a resident of Gordon's neighborhood who would liken walking through their streets to climbing Medicine Mountain or to designate any sacred status to their community. However, decades later, Gordon and other cultural Catholics attribute to places like it an incontrovertible significance and power. What once may have seemed like just an ordinary place, did possess, according to many, the ability to transform its inhabitants.

In her memoir *Virgin Time*, Patricia Hampl narrates her realization of how a specific place had changed her forever. After an uncomfortable interaction with a priest, whereby the priest provoked in her a sense of shame for suggesting that she praises the Lord with her pen, the author returns home: "When I got home from San Damiano that Sunday, I took a long walk through my neighborhood, which is also the neighborhood of my childhood and of everything that made me Catholic to begin with."⁵ During her walk, she recognizes the source of her discomfort, or at least its beginnings: "Had it been shame? Yes, but shame not merely of that moment. A shame bred much earlier. It belonged to the St. Paul streets, choked with lilacs and dirty slush, this brand of Catholicism burned into the tissue of my mind. I'd never succeeded in getting away from it." Her reaction to the priest's comment raises important questions about her self-perception as a writer, but I will consider that topic in the next chapter. For this part of

⁴For more on place, see Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993); Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁵Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 39.

the analysis, we must pay close attention to the significance she ascribes to the streets. This public space she inhabited as a child, she claims, had the power to impose on her a certain “brand of Catholicism,” one that could never be escaped. Certainly negative in view, this selection illustrates the overt connection made between one’s community of origin and religious identity.

What does it mean to be *from* such a place? She describes the critical markers of this space and the language it produced. “The parishes of the diocese, unmarked and ghostly as they were,” she recalls, “posted borders more decisive than the street signs we passed on our way to St. Luke’s grade school, or later, walking in the other direction to the girls-only convent high school.”⁶ Such borders naturally yielded divisions that defined one’s origin. “We were like people with dual citizenship,” writes Hampl, “I lived on Linwood Avenue but I *belonged* to St. Luke’s. That was the lingo.” She reflects on the amusing result of this lingo. Narrating an interaction at a school dance, Hampl recounts, “‘I’m from Holy Spirit,’ the boy said, as if he’d been beamed in to stand by the tepid Cokes and tuna sandwiches and the bowls of sweating potato chips on the refreshments table. Parish members did not blush to describe themselves as being ‘from Immaculate Conception.’ Somewhere north, near the city line, there was a parish frankly named Maternity of Mary.”⁷ Recalling these identifiers, phrases that would immediately place a person where she “belonged,” Hampl conveys the complete lack of self-reflexivity surrounding the use of such language. The Catholic parishes had not only become part of

⁶Ibid., 41.

⁷Ibid., 42.

everyday vocabulary, but they also closely implicated every person who hailed from them with the narratives of the Church and its faith.

Such normative description was not limited to Minnesota, certainly. Alice McDermott refers to this tendency in her novel *Child of My Heart* when her narrator's parents realize that their New York pasts match closely those of some new friends. In reporting the efforts of establishing the connection, the narrator reflects on the curious habit:

Circuitous and circumstantial lineages that seemed to encompass all the years of their youth and the breadth of the five boroughs, and were always linked—even then I thought there was something medieval about it—to the names of Catholic parishes, as if no identity of friend or cousin or coworker could be truly established without first determining where she had been baptized or schooled or married or (their phrase again) buried from—no landmark of their histories truly confirmed without the name of the nearest church to authenticate it.⁸

The places of their youths disclosed these individuals' identities for McDermott's characters, and both the sites and the residents along with them had become inescapably connected to the Catholic parishes. Since these adults were defined by their relationship to churches of their past, Catholicism remained forever part of their life stories. It was the key to explaining their origins and therefore a necessary component in the narration of their identities.

While their origins in a particular area would automatically ascribe Catholicism to children, it seems, for some the neighborhood could assign another kind of identity based on ethnicity. We recall Claudia DeMonte, the artist considered in chapter two, who claims, "... the whole world was Italian to me." Growing up in a particular area, DeMonte's Astoria in Queens for example, often meant being surrounded by people

⁸Alice McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002), 144-5.

affiliated with certain ethnicities. If you grew up in Bensonhurst, it was also likely you were Italian, according to Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick. Of course, depending on which street you lived, you could also be Irish or Jewish.⁹ Naturally for Torgovnick, if you fell into the Italian or the Irish category, you were most definitely Catholic. She describes the clear-cut distinctions that persist among people from this neighborhood: “Jews are suspect but (the old Italian women admit) ‘they make good husbands.’ The Irish are okay, fellow Catholics, but not really ‘like us’; they make bad husbands because they drink and gamble.”¹⁰ Us and them. Good and bad. Even decades later, the divisions remain clear-cut and certainly recognizable, according to Torgovnick. If you came from a certain place, you were likely of a certain ethnic heritage and depending on what that heritage was, you might automatically fall into the Catholic category.

Even if the neighborhood was not entirely homogenous, and Italian-Americans found themselves living next to Irish-Americans, for example, Catholicism could still seem pervasive. Maria Laurino recalls how the ethnic neighborhood could even be a context for lessons on Catholicism. She explains, “Religious instruction came from neighbors as well as nuns, and an early prayer I learned is still vivid in my memory. Our next-door neighbor, a kind but strict teacher and devout Irish Catholic who saw my religious upbringing as part of her duty, taught me this bedtime ditty ...”¹¹ She goes on to recite the prayer learned, which was a request that if she were to die, that her soul be protected. She says it created great fear in her and still haunts her in some way. Her

⁹A similarly homogenous ethnic community is portrayed in Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*.

¹⁰Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, 7.

¹¹Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian*, 162.

memory reveals the clearly distinguishable ethnicity of those around her. While she knew that her family was Italian-American, she had no doubt that her neighbor was Irish-American. Ethnic heritage, then, was like common knowledge. More importantly for the concept of cultural Catholics, ethnicity issued particular expectations and ways of being Catholic. In Laurino's narration, we notice that not only does she highlight the neighbor's instruction but that the role of instructor seems to go hand-in-hand with her Irishness. This woman was not just a devout Catholic, but was a devout Irish Catholic and it seems linked to her position as teacher. This encounter between the woman (in a position of authority) and the young girl (a student by default) shapes the narrator's conception of ethnic identity and the religious affiliation that accompanies it. In the role of educator, the Irish-American becomes a kind of representative of the tradition with a responsibility to educate the youth. Being Italian, the young child is assumed to be Catholic and a willing recipient of religious instruction.

In recent theoretical work on ethnic identity in the United States, scholars have shown that this category and the defining criteria for different ethnicities are constantly changing and evolving as people continue to construct them. Distant from the historical conditions that ghettoized certain European immigrant communities in the past, white American adults can embrace an opportunity to control their ethnic self-conceptions. This possibility would not have existed for the ancestors of cultural Catholics, who no longer face the material challenges their grandparents would have endured. Instead, they can find meaning and identity in their ethnic ties. Scholar Mary Waters shares her conclusions from her 1990 study: "Ethnicity does have meaning for the individuals I interviewed ... Increasingly however, the substance attached to that label is constructed

by the individual and the family.”¹² Even though ethnicity might be perceived as an inherited trait, its character and effects have actually been created by those who claim it. Werner Sollors further contributes to this understanding when he describes the essays in his collection *The Invention of Ethnicity*. He writes, “Countervailing the folk beliefs (shared by some academics) in ethnic purity, ‘ethnicity’ here emerges not as a thing (let alone a static, permanent, or ‘pure’ thing) but as the result of interactions. Ethnicity does not serve as a totalizing metaphor but simply as a perspective onto psychological, historical, social and cultural forces.”¹³ Just like what he observes in those pieces, writings by cultural Catholics highlight the interactions among neighbors and family members that ultimately yield ideas about ethnic norms. There remains nothing pure about ethnicity, but rather it seems to be part of the underlying circumstances and provides a category for understanding difference. Sollors also claims that while individual ethnicities may appear to have organic differences, it should be understood that the development of ethnicities involves inventive acts. The reason they may seem like natural categories is that certain power relations exerted at particular moments in time have gone unnoticed.¹⁴

Theoretical research on ethnic identity provides a helpful lens for reading the narratives of cultural Catholics. With the concepts of invention and construction in mind,

¹²Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 115.

¹³Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xix-xx.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, xvi. For other discussions of ethnic identity as construction, see Wendy F. Katkin, Ned C. Landsman, and Andrea Tyree, *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). For a consideration of ethnicity as a category, see Werner Sollors, *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1996).

I approach their texts to determine how they link their ethnicities (considered products of birth and location) with Catholicism as they construct these identities. First, we discover the rather basic correlation between particular heritages and this religion. To be of a certain people, they suggest, means that you are naturally Catholic. We see this pertain, for example, to Latina/o, Italian and Irish Americans. Ana Castillo (b. 1953) and Guillermo Gomez-Peña (b. 1955) remark that despite their own resistance to Catholicism, it remains an undeniable part of how they understand themselves. In an interview published in a volume titled *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, Castillo remarks on a fundamental element she perceives in Latina and Chicana women. She claims, “One of the guiding principles of our life is Catholicism. And as much as we try not to ascribe to it, it’s completely permeating into our psyche.”¹⁵ While the meanings of “Latina” and “Chicana” might be contested in different contexts, her comment refers to the women who descend from peoples of Spanish-speaking areas and who now live in the United States. She puts herself into this category and asserts that her very connection to it has burdened her with a relentless Catholic identity. Similarly Guillermo Gomez-Peña shares his own realization that his roots in Mexico ultimately make him Catholic. He writes, “In the late 1970s, I realized that although I was a strong critic of institutionalized Catholicism, whether I liked it or not I was culturally and ethnically a Catholic, and that my (ex-Catholic) agnosticism was merely the other side of the same coin. In other words, five hundred years of Mexican Catholicism couldn’t be

¹⁵Ana Castillo, “La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self,” in *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1991).

erased with political awareness.”¹⁶ Both Castillo and Gomez-Pena point to psychological connections, rather than neighborhood borders, to establish the source of the Catholicism existing within them. And while this particular ethnic dimension of American Catholicism is a more recent addition than European examples, their self-narrations contribute to similar discourse by cultural Catholics. As they construct their ethnic identities, they include an unremitting Catholicism in that concept.

In her reflections about the development of her concept of being Italian, Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick links the ethnicity directly to a Catholic sacrament. Regarding her upbringing, she writes, “When I think of Italian American girlhood, I think about being parceled and bound. I think of the little brides of Christ, all lined up in identical white veils and dresses, waiting to be confirmed at age thirteen.”¹⁷ The memory of participating in this sacrament, a gendered ritual demanding its particular dress for the boys and girls, contributes to her construction of an Italian background. It blatantly conjures the pressing authority of the Church and the neighborhood in its description of the performative ritual. “Parceled and bound,” she engaged in this regular rite of passage, which was required as an Italian-American and which put her on display for the parish. Even though children of other ethnicities would have experienced a similar ritual, she associates this specifically with being Italian. Her description reveals the unquestioned connection between an Italian heritage and the Catholic tradition.

In her essay on being Italian, Regina Barreca’s (b. 1957) recollection of the singular moment during which she first self-identifies as Italian involves the Virgin

¹⁶Guillermo Gomez-Peña, “The Two Guadalupe,” in *Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa De Las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, ed. Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 178-9.

¹⁷Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, 153.

Mary—not exactly devotion to her, but her image just the same. It also involved Barreca’s mother. She writes:

When did I consciously think of myself as Italian? I was trying to break a statue of the Virgin Mary while listening to my parents fight with my brother when they found dope under his bed and my mother came upstairs, cigarette dangling from her lips like Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*, saw me smashing the statue, and casually remarked, ‘That’s very Italian.’ It was hardly the slogan for Prince Spaghetti Day or anything, but it took, like a dye or an inoculation, and marked me.¹⁸

A curiously iconoclastic experience defines Barreca’s discovery of her own Italian-ness.

However, even though she narrates her attempt at destroying the statue, this Catholic image plays a central role in this critical moment for the young girl. She forever remembers its connection to her ethnic revelation. Of course, her mother also plays a crucial part in this moment. She, in fact, gives meaning to the moment itself, and while it seems like an organic manifestation of her Italian heritage, the narrative exemplifies another process: her mother’s construction of her Italian identity. Even though the experience supposedly reveals her beginning in the grand story of the Italian heritage, it might not be quite so naturally authentic. Sollors’ observation that power dynamics often play a role in the creation of ethnic identity, as noted earlier, provides a helpful tool for understanding this text. Though hardly camouflaged, the mother in this narration constructs for the girl her Italian heritage. Had her mother, in a position of power over the girl, not made the observation, “That’s very Italian,” Barreca would likely have never made the connection. But now, as a result of that moment with the Virgin Mary statue, it

¹⁸Regina Barreca, “My Aunts Taught Me to Dance,” in *Beyond the Godfather: Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience*, ed. A. Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 23.

remains with her like a dye that has marked her. She accepted the designation at the time and it continues to define her.

With Catholicism permeating the psyches of Chicana women and inoculating the bodies of an Italian-American, we turn to the Irish. Alice McDermott, in attempting to explain her subject matter, has explained, “I really think probably that Catholicism has me by the throat and the soul more than Irishness, but that might be saying the same thing. They may be one and the same.”¹⁹ The tendency to equate this religious tradition with this ethnic heritage mirrors the constructions above. It remains impossible for this author to determine which of these forces has her “by the throat” because for her they are inherently connected—perhaps even the same thing. This curiously violent imagery suggests she is a victim of these Irish and Catholic influences. As she depicts her situation, she has no choice but to succumb to their power. By representing her situation as such, she disguises the ultimate authority she does possess in choosing to draw her characters and compose her stories.

Mary Gordon describes how this concept was something ingrained from her youth. In her essay “Girl Child in a Women’s World,” the author shows that she learned how a certain ethnicity could bind someone to Catholicism. The connection was so strong, however, that an ethnic identity outside the known norm could also preclude any connection to the tradition. Gordon recalls her caretaker, Mrs. Kirk. Though she was told Mrs. Kirk was Catholic, she did not believe it: “...although Mrs. Kirk’s family traced their allegiance to the Church back for centuries, I found it unconvincing. They were

¹⁹Tom Smith, *Transcript of the Book Show (1992)* [Website] (New York State Writers Institute, 1998 [cited March 4 2006]); available from <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/olv2n3.html#mcdermott>.

neither Irish nor Italian like the other people in my parish.”²⁰ Catholics, for this child, were of Irish or Italian descent, nothing outside that paradigm. If your identifiable ethnicity (and it seems ethnicity was always clearly marked) happened to fall into some other category, it meant that your Catholicism was suspect. Naturally, this worked the other way so that if you fell into either of the two categories, it meant you were Catholic according to the rules of her world. Mary Gordon may have been surrounded by Irish and Italian Catholics in Queens, NY, but so too on the other side of the country were the Irish seriously represented in the Church. Richard Rodriguez, growing up in Sacramento, California, also learned to assume the nature of this close association between Irish Americans and Catholics. His experience in school and in his parish evidenced a correspondence between being Irish and being Catholic. He writes, “Ireland! I cannot imagine American Catholicism apart from the Irish.”²¹ Being Irish, whether looking at it from the inside or outside, meant being Catholic.

Implications and Norms of Ethnic Constructions

As Rodriguez’s claim suggests, though, these ethnic Catholic identities issued norms and expectations particular to each heritage and its members were required to fill those roles. The constructions of ethnic identity included not simply a generic Catholic connection, but a specific set of characteristics to go along with their religious practice. Up to this point, my discussion of ethnicity has been limited to Irish, Italian and Latino/a Catholicism and some of the interaction among them. While it would be a grave mistake

²⁰Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 63.

²¹Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1992), 191.

to suggest that these three categories are the only ones that exist (indeed, Franco-American David Plante would take issue with such a statement), I find that these three are the most widely represented in the literature and therefore demand closer consideration in a profile of cultural Catholics. In what follows, I further narrow my scope to examine the ways that constructions of Irish and Italian identities for these narrators implicated them in particular aspects of Catholicism and the obligations associated with the tradition.

The element of death, highlighted in the neighbor's bedtime prayer that frightened a young Laurino, emerges as a theme in narratives characterizing the Irish-American community's Catholic practice. Going to wakes—those ritual viewings of the body after a person has died—turns out to be a requirement for the Irish. In fact, missing the wake of a neighbor might even be considered a sin.

Martha Manning recalls the moment she learned she was Irish. It was at a relative's wake, her first. She recalls, "My cousin looked at me impatiently and insisted, 'Of course you're Irish: half the people here are O'Neills. You are an O'Neill.'" With this declaration from someone who seemed to have more information than she, Manning entered a whole new world of obligations. She continues, "I knew our family was very Catholic, but no one ever mentioned anything about Irish. Once my cousin convinced me that we were, in fact, Irish, I shuddered in anticipation of all the wakes in front of me."²² Similarly Dan Barry (b. 1958) recounts a conversation with his mother that confirms the obligatory nature of this practice. After the death of a neighbor, Barry's mom feels tremendous guilt about having to miss the wake. The son shares:

The right thing, of course, would have been for the Barrys Up the Street to attend the wake. Although the families had not talked in years,

²²Manning, *Chasing Grace*, 202.

there was still that bond among pioneers. But my father's headaches had prevented the Barrys from getting to the funeral home on either of the two nights, my mother explained. I could tell that she felt uneasy about this; the Irish go to wakes, period. I could tell too that she wanted absolution from her eldest.²³

With what she deems as little choice in the matter, Manning resigns herself to a lifetime full of wakes. Sensing the severity of his mother's guilt, Barry recognizes her need for absolution on account of missing the ritual event. Their descriptions illustrate how such a duty could be learned and perceived as unavoidable. As Irish Catholics, they were obliged and expected to perpetuate this practice. It came with the territory, a territory whose construction they might have been witnessing in process but whose norms seemed to claim them whole.

This Irish Catholic category also came with descriptive markers (with help from agents producing them) that determined everyday behavior—a kind of general understanding about proper conduct. In her novel *Child of My Heart*, Alice McDermott (b. 1953) includes the expectations perceived by a young girl because of her ethnic, religious affiliation. Teresa, the novel's fifteen-year-old narrator, discovers that wealthy families on Long Island believe she would make an ideal baby-sitter. She explains her draw: "Pretty, intelligent, mature in speech although undeveloped physically (another plus), well immersed in my parents' old-fashioned Irish Catholic manners (inherited from their parents, who had spent their careers in service to this very breed of American rich), and best of all beloved by children and pets."²⁴ In a list of other appealing traits, she falls into a long lineage of Irish Catholics and as such, would be expected to embody the

²³Dan Barry, *Pull Me Up: A Memoir*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 203.

²⁴McDermott, *Child of My Heart*, 14.

etiquette for which they were known. Their historical economic position as immigrants contributed to their reputation of making good servants, of course, but their manners were understood to be a distinct result of their Irish Catholicism. By including this characterizing feature of her protagonist, McDermott emphasizes the assigned roles to Irish as Catholics and the consequential assumptions based on that identity. A teenager developing her own sense of self recognizes others' perceptions of her as an Irish Catholic and the social expectations that such a classification assigns. Being Irish and Catholic involves much more than sacraments or the Holy Trinity. It has a specific brand and issues an all-encompassing character.

The anticipation of her proper manners may precede Alice McDermott's narrator, but in a darker depiction, Mary Gordon's characters often suffer a lack of joy and a sense of guilt as a result of being Irish Catholic. One character in her novel *The Other Side* reflects on the detrimental effect of his family's Irishness: "... they could never be happy, any of them, coming from people like the Irish ... The sickle-cell anemia of the Irish: they had to thwart joy in their lives. You saw it everywhere in Irish history; they wouldn't allow themselves to prosper. They didn't believe in prosperity."²⁵ In another of her novels, *Spending*, a character says bluntly, "I suffer from Irish Catholic guilt about prosperity."²⁶ Gordon's repeated use of this descriptive feature conveys a rather negative consequence of a person's Irish Catholic identity. It implies that part of being Irish, as one learns from his or her predecessors, involves a response that could hardly be controlled or prevented. Either following a commitment to avoid the temptation of

²⁵Gordon, *The Other Side*, 160.

²⁶Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls*, 211.

prosperity or feeling guilty about indulging, an Irish Catholic faces a struggle one way or another, according to Mary Gordon's fiction. Her depiction highlights the unappealing nature of this learned behavior and suggests that the characters perceive no way of avoiding it.

Wakes, manners, and guilt aside, a crucial characterization of Irish Catholics in the United States has been their close affiliation with the institutional church. The American clerical hierarchy, in which priests from Ireland and of Irish decent predominated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, maintains an Irish identity in these texts.²⁷ Nuns, too, particularly the teachers in the school, also are regularly connected to this ethnicity. Mary Gordon has asserted, "I think we have to remember that the Catholic Church in America is the Irish Church."²⁸ The historical conditions that shaped this view left a lasting impression on those who, as Manning did, were convinced that they themselves were Irish. Because of interactions and encounters in the parish and neighborhood—like the interactions Sollors notes—many who self-identified with an Irish-American group also assumed a connection to the Church. They had witnessed and learned that this was a natural connection. One was never simply Irish, but rather Irish and Catholic. In an interview, Gordon expressed it clearly as she described her subject matter of the time: "I am writing about the Irish now, so there is perforce an inclusion of Catholic issues...."²⁹ Emerging from the pages of these texts, we

²⁷See Dolores Liptak, "The Irish Take Charge," *Makers of the Catholic Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Olson, *Catholic Immigrants in America*, 15-46; James M. O'Toole, "'the Newer Catholic Races:' the Varieties of Ethnic Catholicism," in *Militant and Triumphant: William Henry O'Connell and the Catholic Church of Boston, 1859-1944* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

²⁸Mary Gordon and Alma Bennett, *Conversations with Mary Gordon, Literary Conversations Series* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 10.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 53.

discover cultural Catholics of Irish descent, dutifully aware of obligations, manners and the Church. They had learned that these Catholic attributes were part of what made them Irish. Even though they may have resented such an imposition, their texts claim that they were formed in the process.

The close association between the Irish and the clergy offers an important point of difference for the Italian authors. Just as the Irish are given and assume certain typical traits, clerical ties among them, so too do Italians take on distinctive features with regard to their Catholicism. In Maria Laurino's *Were You Always an Italian?* she describes her grandmother's Italian piety. She writes, "The solitary chants of this solemn woman expressed a devotion that would have disturbed the American Irish Catholic hierarchy, which was suspicious of the southern Italian attachment to saints."³⁰ Learning the categorical features of each ethnic identity during childhood, Laurino recognizes that her grandmother's devotion represents a typical "southern Italian attachment to saints" and assumes that any reaction from the Church would be typified by Irish priests who would undoubtedly, based on their Irishness and natural affiliation with the institution, criticize this practice.

Laurino's first-person account of the tension between the Irish hierarchy and the Italian laity concurs with scholarship on this social dimension of the Church in the U.S.³¹ Just as it would be hard to argue with the high numbers of Irish priests, so too would it be difficult to deny a devotion to the saints practiced among the Italians who settled in the

³⁰Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian*, 158.

³¹See Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Dolores Ann Liptak, "The Italian Challenge," in *Immigrants and Their Church, Makers of the Catholic Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1989); Morris, *American Catholic*, 128-31.

United States and their descendents. However, Laurino's narrative highlights the local manifestation of this phenomenon and the impact of the lesson on a young girl. She was learning what implications an Italian or Irish affiliation might have. Describing moments when their Italian heritage resonated with them, authors normally include a religious dimension in their stories. Many such narratives also entail a source of authority looming over the connection between the Italian identity and the Catholic ritual or icon linked to it. Italian Americans identify another characteristic element that contributed to their construction of an ethnic identity: good food enjoyed among loads of people. The event was more than a meal, though; it was understood as sacrament. In the Introduction to the collection of essays *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, scholar Thomas Ferraro remarks on the film *Big Night*. He comments on the film's religious aura, despite the absence of obvious markers such as a crucifix or picture of the Pope. He observes:

... (the film's) evocation of 'gustatory sacramentalism speaks with unprecedented power and clarity to a complex of Catholic practices that I was raised with (among other forms) and continue to pursue (with difficulty but not alone). By gustatory sacramentalism, I mean food prepared with fierce dedication and fiercer hope: a banquet table made open to those who have always been there *and* to those this day passing by, and a resplendent, consistent conviviality that renews love while forcing the hand of integrity.³²

Ferraro's reflection on this film treating an Italian-American family in New Jersey in the 1950s reveals his personal connection to its themes. Food, he learned, was to be given incomparable attention and love in its preparation and was to serve only as the centerpiece for a communal event where family and friends gather to eat. He further observed the sacramental nature of this experience. To come together like this was to

³²Ferraro, *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, 1.

invite God into the picture. Eating, in the film's scene, extends beyond an ordinary custom to evoke the powerful sense of community and love available in the sacraments.

This idea emerges in the writing of other self-identified Italian Americans, suggesting that the ritual cultural event resonates with Catholicism. Claire Gaudiani writes, "... stories from my Italian ancestry and my life experience in my Italian American household made me a feminine misfit in my own generation."³³ This alienation results from the significance that she was taught to attribute to her role in the kitchen as a woman from an Italian family. This does not coincide with the women's liberation movement of the 1970s. She recalls a conversation with a group of academic women colleagues at the end of a conference. She writes, "Conversation turned to weight, nutrition, cooking, and family traditions around food. I began to explain to my colleagues that in my family women cooked so well that food became 'the at home sacraments,' ..." ³⁴ As she narrates another gendered expectation within an Italian community, she evokes religious language to convey the level of importance credited to food in its communal preparation and consumption. She senses confusion and concern from her companions. Nevertheless, the activity she observed as a child defined her ethnic heritage and was understood in Catholic terms. She persists in this constructed aspect of her Italian identity.

The sacramental metaphor also signals that Catholicism manifested itself for families and communities well outside the institutional Church. Still, it seems that the religious implications were strong enough for Alane Salierno Mason that she connects it

³³Gaudiani, "Of Cheese and Choices," 121.

³⁴Ibid.

directly with formal Catholicism. Just as Dan Barry's mother considered missing a wake sinful for the Irish, so does Salierno Mason imply that contradicting the Italian way of eating calls for absolution. She writes, "... a dozen times a week I eat alone in a way that is against my cultural religion. Should I tell the priest, next time I go to confession, the number of times I took my food in vain?"³⁵ Her humorous interpretation of a commandment in relation to the act of eating conveys the close association between her Italian and Catholic codes for conduct. The potential consequences of disobeying the authorities who passed on to her this cultural religion are ominous.

Specific constructions of ethnicity are only supported by the more universally conceived expectations for Italian Catholics in this literature. In addition to the discrete instances and rituals that emphasize their combined ethnic and religious heritages, authors draw a connection between a generalized Italian identity and expectations regarding religious dedication or moral behavior. Maria Laurino reports a perceived pressure: "As a woman from southern Italian stock, I was expected to be devout ..."³⁶ This gendered norm imposes on Laurino a religious obligation. She puts herself squarely into this ethnic category and then acknowledges the Catholic identity and commitment that the very category assigns to her. Alane Salierno Mason indicates a similar level of expectation among her cultural community. Reflecting on her nosy neighbors who seem too interested in her love life and male visitors, she writes, "I've tried to rationalize... Perhaps because they see me in church, because they know I have Italian blood, they

³⁵Alane Salierno Mason, "The Exegesis of Eating," in *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture*, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2002), 266.

³⁶Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian*, 172.

think I should live exactly as they do?”³⁷ Her “Italian blood” is closely linked to her religious affiliation and the combination yields a standard for behavior to which she feels accountable. In both of these examples, the authors clearly indicate the inextricable link between their ethnic and religious heritages and the behavioral norms associated with this dual identity.

Class Then and Now

Depicting neighborhoods filled with Catholics constructing particular ethnic identities related to their religious tradition, these authors highlight the influence of such communities during their formative years. Still these lessons were not the only ones learned in these enclosed environments. Mary Gordon, who claims that she knew only Catholics growing up, describes that this did not limit her exposure to issues of class. In fact, it gave her an up-close view. She writes of her parish: “Anachronistically limited, its hierarchies clear, its loyalties assumed and stated and then in practice always undermined, it has at its center issues of money. You learned from the parish how the watermarks of class and privilege work.”³⁸ Presented as an organized community for Catholic practice, the parish also taught some of the earliest lessons about economic status and its power. One could experience these lessons without leaving the community, but might not realize their larger significance, Gordon suggests. Maria Laurino takes this characterization of the parish even further by detailing the negative consequences of these class distinctions within the religious community for her own family. She writes:

³⁷Alane Salierno Mason, "Respect: An Italian-American Story--Personal Narrative of a Third-Generation Italian American," *Commonweal* 124, no. 17 (1997): 67.

³⁸Gordon, *Good Boys and Dead Girls*, 164.

The people my parents knew from the town of Millburn, the Italian Americans from the old neighborhood, sat in the back rows, veiled heads bowed, fingering rosary beads. These ladies in mournful black, vestiges of a nineteenth-century southern Italian culture, understood the social order as intimately as their prayers. The wealthy Irish-American parishioners, the majority in our church, wore bright prints and self-assured smiles, and mingled with each other in the front pews. Where did we fit in? Probably somewhere in between, in those middle rows where we sat by ourselves. The equality we were all supposed to experience in the eyes of God never reached those pews; the working-class women in the back accepted their place and remained there week after week.³⁹

Her depiction, like Gordon's, also requires a perspective far removed from the circumstances of the parish and similarly emphasizes the troubling makeup of the class divisions within the parish. Of course, what becomes clear from the whole of this literature is that these levels of social status served only as a warm-up for what someone would find outside the parish. The conditions of advantage and their consequences only increased when one glanced beyond these insular communities to what lay outside them: America. Rita Ciresi represents this situation poignantly when her fictional character Lisa recalls a performance during elementary school. She describes the scene: "we stood as fifth-graders on the front steps of the Hartford capitol two weeks before election day and sang, 'Buon giorno, mio caro.' To a group of dark-suited state senators, who felt obliged to show their appreciation of Italian-American culture with a polite round of Protestant applause."⁴⁰ Her sarcastic tone about the patronizing response to the concert reveals the clear separation perceived between the young Italian Catholic on stage and the American Protestant men in charge. They existed on different planes and it seems nearly impossible for the ethnic Catholic to dream of achieving the status of the American Protestant. While

³⁹Laurino, *Were You Always an Italian*, 164.

⁴⁰Ciresi, *Pink Slip*, 86.

the Irish, because of money and political savvy, may have had a leg-up on other ethnic groups when it came to success outside the “sectarian compound,” Catholics from all ethnic communities had their work cut out for them if they intended to move beyond their neighborhoods, as Gordon and Laurino indicate they have done. What would it require to achieve success over and above what has been accomplished in the ethnic Catholic enclaves? How might these Catholics from places like Bensonhurst ever become one of the dark-suited state senators themselves? Or would they even want to achieve that?

As these textual representations reveal—with little surprise to historians—this desire to move beyond the ethnic world of Catholics differs from one generation to the next.⁴¹ Certainly, this directly correlates to the very possibility of doing so. Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick emphasizes the distinct nature of her experience when compared to those who preceded her. It yields a particular concept of ethnicity and opportunity addressed in her writing. She reflects on stories about an immigrant past and determines: “These stories nourished me—but they are the stories of my parents’ and grandparents’ generation. What I tell here is different from the story of arrival. It is the story of assimilation—one that Italian Americans of my generation are uniquely prepared to tell, and that females need to tell most of all.”⁴² Her generation—the one who witnessed its parents and grandparents struggle to make it in the United States and who have achieved success by American standards on their own despite limitations imposed on them—are in a unique position to narrate assimilation. She reveals the key to this process: education.

⁴¹See Peter Kivisto, *Incorporating Diversity: Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age* (Boulder, Colo.: Paradigm Publishers, 2005); Peter Kivisto, Dag Blanck, and Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, *American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis after Fifty Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Rub  n G. Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁴²Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, x.

Only by moving up in social status through higher education did these cultural Catholics have any chance of leaving their ethnic enclaves.

Of course, they faced difficulty not only from a secular (or Protestant) America but also, as noted earlier, from the expectations set within their communities. As Torgovnick notes, the pursuit of education threatened one's connection to one's childhood home. She writes, "My own mother could not understand my desire to go to college, thinking that I should instead become a secretary.... She rightly sensed (I see now in retrospect) that college would remove me from her world."⁴³ Expected to remain within the confines of the Catholic community, this generation's members received resistance when they took steps to go outside it. The parents and grandparents, the immigrants' to whom Torgovnick referred, perceived the threat of education to their community. Mary Gordon conveys the concern: "The more you learned, the more likely you were to leave home."⁴⁴ Indeed, they were right. Education provided opportunities for ethnic Catholics to surpass the economic status to which their childhood communities had held them. Just as Patricia Hampl describes the adult Catholics who find each other at cocktail parties, they are "educated out of it all, well-climbed into the professions."⁴⁵ And still, educated out of it all, they continue to identify with the ethnic Catholic communities that proved so confining during childhood and adolescence. Torgovnick points to this curious habit: "I want to feel privileged and entitled. At the same time, I identify, I *like to identify*, with outsiders."⁴⁶ So she does both. Her education and professional success as a

⁴³Ibid., 118.

⁴⁴Gordon and Bennett, *Conversations with Mary Gordon*, 10.

⁴⁵Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 50.

⁴⁶Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, x.

professor allow her privilege and entitlement, while her past, the Bensonhurst that remains within her, permits her to claim outsider status.

In the following selection, we can observe how the concept of ethnic identity was attributed enormous importance during cultural Catholics' youth (the likely reason for holding onto it) and how that marker remains far removed from their lives in the educational settings they now occupy. John Agresto (b. 1946) writes:

Every now and then, my very Italian grandmother would embarrass me greatly. Once I had my colleague from graduate school and his fiancée over for dinner. Looking at the woman my grandmother began the quiz: 'You Italian?' (The young woman was nearly six foot, blonde, with green eyes, but Grandma was never much of a noticer.) 'No.' 'You Irish?' 'No.' 'You Jewish?' 'No.' 'You Portuguese?' 'No. I guess I'm part German, part Scandinavian, maybe some Russian, mostly just a mix of things.' Downcast eyes, turned head. My grandmother then said softly: 'How terrible not to be somebody.'⁴⁷

Without any defined and known ethnic heritage, this young woman had little chance to "be somebody"—a terrible fate for anyone according to a "very Italian" grandmother. According to Agresto, this matriarch has declared that to have ethnicity provides one an identity, a desirable membership in a particular group. However, the grandson's narrated squirming during this interaction evidences his discomfort with the grandmother's declaration in front of his graduate school comrades. In the world of his academic life and among its inhabitants, the attitudes of his "very Italian grandmother" provoke discomfort, and he links those attitudes directly to her Italian-ness. He reports this interaction as something to be expected, though, as in "the quiz"—a predictable event in the grandmother's presence. So, while he narrates his own embarrassment, this kind of

⁴⁷John Agresto, "What Grandma Knew," in *Beyond the Godfather: Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience*, ed. A. Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 150.

interrogation is nothing new. Certainly, he has experienced lessons about the importance of his own ethnic heritage from his grandmother. One senses that he has been taught that it makes him ‘somebody,’ and that this offers tremendous benefit, even if those in his graduate program do not appreciate it. Still, he finds himself in an awkward position when people from both his worlds meet.

In this literature then, we see that education effectively removes these people from the lower class that defined many ethnic Catholic environments. Perhaps, it was really education—or a lack of it—that had defined their surroundings all along, not ethnicity or religion. Torgovnick writes, “Teaching at Duke, I sometimes feel that ethnicity makes no difference—that universities have made me simply part of ‘the educated class.’” Despite those moments of doubt, though, she continues, “Then, invariably, life shows me that ethnicity matters.”⁴⁸ So ultimately, we must ask: why and how does ethnicity matter? When these children have risen to the challenge of higher education and made it into the ranks of the academy or the publishing industry, why do they hang onto their ethnicity and consequently their Catholicism? Perhaps, because they have internalized the message of Agresto’s grandmother: it makes them somebody.

As we probe these representations of ethnic identifiers, we must acknowledge not only these textual sources but also the historical circumstances that contribute to authors’ attention to ethnicity. Having witnessed the disintegration of “the melting pot,” cultural Catholics have participated in American society’s shifting interest in differences among racial, religious and ethnic subgroups. The civil rights movement and the discourse surrounding this cultural development in the United States inevitably affect writers who

⁴⁸Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, viii.

describe their ethnic origins.⁴⁹ While there has emerged significant critical scholarship about the consequences of categorizing and championing ethnic identities (especially its effect on race relations, since the *choice* of ethnic identity is effectively available only to white people), we have to suspect that the chic quality of ethnicity that emerged during the 1960s and 70s has influenced these depictions of twentieth century Catholic life.⁵⁰ Of course, these authors do not portray this aspect of their pasts as simply a stylish feature, but also as an imposing factor. Still, we must remember that these men and women write from historically situated positions and have been influenced by this American phenomenon. Now successfully established in their professional worlds, they may remember that in the United States, ethnicity has served as an effective category for claiming difference. They have observed outside their grandmothers' kitchens that it can make a person *a somebody*.

Agresto articulates that it does indeed provide a desirably distinguishing element:

Why we should respect ethnicity—or race or heritage—is fairly clear. We can talk about the enrichment ethnicity brings to both our personal and national lives. Beyond the silly and superficial habit we have of reducing ethnicity to food, heritage adds interest, charm, and above all, diversity of outlook, talents, and ways of life to country and depth and religion to our private lives. Like religion, ethnicity helps form our character and shape our horizons.

⁴⁹For surveys of the civil rights movement, see Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984); Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Norton, 1990). For a first-person account, see Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996). On issues of race and ethnicity construction, see Ernesto Châavez, *"Mi Raza Primero!" (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Joseph Tilden Rhea, *Race Pride and the American Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). For considerations of the influence of religion on ethnic and racial identity, see Craig R. Prentiss, *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction* (New York: New York University, 2003).

⁵⁰For a critique, see E. San Juan, "The Cult of Ethnicity and the Fetish of Pluralism: A Counterhegemonic Critique," *Cultural Critique*, no. 18 (1991).

But the analogy to religion is even more apt because like religion, ethnicity both collects and divides us. It separates us from others as it connects us to our own.⁵¹

Ethnicity provides the solution to the dilemma. It allows these cultural Catholics to feel entitled and accomplished while they remain outsiders and distinct members of a group, both desirable positions for them. Of course, we recall that Agresto himself felt embarrassed by his grandmother's overbearing Italian-ness. He could not help this heritage and he reports that it made him uncomfortable in the presence of his graduate school colleagues. However, here he credits ethnicity with forming his character and shaping his horizons. His experience, perhaps a little rosier in its representation here, speaks to the experience of many cultural Catholics. They show the ways their insular childhood environment, governed by ethnic and Catholic norms, imposed expectations and limitations that they resisted. Having successfully progressed beyond those undesirable circumstances, they find that they do not entirely fit into their new American contexts, either. Like Agresto, they perceive acutely that their pasts set them apart from this new status. So, they remain caught between them: ultimately defined by the ethnic Catholicism of their neighborhoods even as they resent the challenges to which those neighborhoods subjected them.

A View of the Narrated Neighborhood

So with these narrative depictions in mind, let's step back to imagine what one of these neighborhoods, fitting the categories of an ethnic and Catholic environment, might have looked and felt like during the mid-twentieth century. Putting these pieces together

⁵¹Agresto, "What Grandma Knew," 151.

helps us sense what cultural Catholics are representing.⁵² So I have chosen to profile one well-known and notably ethnic area. Inevitably, the mention of Brooklyn's most famous neighborhood Bensonhurst—the setting for comedies such as “The Honeymooners” and “Welcome Back, Kotter”—calls up the tragic death of Yusef Hawkins. The African American boy's 1989 murder in the Italian neighborhood provoked on-going protests and discussions about the disturbing racial climate of the area. They continue even today.⁵³ The ethnic and racial provinciality that still reigns there has a notable history. If we could go back in time, before the terrible tragedy and the media attention it garnered, we would glimpse the ethnic enclave that was (and still is) Bensonhurst. What was it like to grow up in Bensonhurst in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s? Based on the descriptions considered, along with other observations of this place, let's get this sense of neighborhood that cultural Catholics so often recount.

If you were born and raised in Bensonhurst during the middle decades of the twentieth century, there was a good chance your ancestors had immigrated from southern Italy within the last generation or two. Italian Americans inhabited the majority of the area's two-story brick houses, often living with distant relatives or sharing their homes with other families. A familiar refrain, “the Mafia protects the neighborhood,” could be heard whispered among the fathers and repeated in the schoolyards. There was a sense

⁵²Much of this description is culled from Torgovnick's essay, “On Being White, Female and Born in Bensonhurst” in *Crossing Ocean Parkway* and Maria Laurino's chapter “Bensonhurst” in *Were You Always an Italian*.

⁵³For more on this event and its aftermath, see John Cassidy, “New York Killing Sparks Race Riots; Killing of Yusuf Hawkins,” *The Sunday Times*, September 3 1989; John DeSantis, *For the Color of His Skin: The Murder of Yusuf Hawkins and the Trial of Bensonhurst* (New York: Pharos Books, 1991); Daniela Gerson, “New Demographics Fail to Wipe out an Old Problem in Bensonhurst,” *The New York Sun*, April 23 2004; Stefano Luconi, “‘Italians against Racism:’ the Murder of Yusuf Hawkins (R.I.P.) and My March on Bensonhurst,” in *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003); Susan Sachs, “Recalling Yusuf Hawkins and Hate That Killed Him,” *New York Times*, August 22 1999.

among the neighbors that they did not have to fear the threat of ‘coloreds’ infiltrating the area.⁵⁴ Their security was insured by their Italian comrades, even if that security came at a cost.

As an Italian child or adolescent in Bensonhurst, your early experiences with the world would originate from within a working class family. Money and economic status would rarely come up in conversation, but it would determine much of everyday life. As a young girl, your likely career path would be secretarial (or maternal) and as a boy, vocational. Your ethnic and economic status would preclude you, almost de facto, from the option to attend college.

Though your chances of being Italian were high if born in this neighborhood, you would likely have some contact with other ethnic groups, who inhabited their own streets. Irish and Jewish families occupied their designated zones, which were marked off by major market corridors, such as 86th Street, Kings Highway and Bay Parkway. Still, you would have had particular ideas about these other ethnic peoples based on lessons that came regularly from Italian parents and grandparents.

Strolling through the streets on any given evening, you would most certainly be surveyed by the adults sitting on their stoops to supervise children and to gossip. As a child, you would speak respectfully to these onlookers, who had almost the same say in your behavior and upbringing as your family elders did. And if found guilty of reprehensible conduct, you would have to answer to the neighbors without any chance of convincing them that their scale for right and wrong might be flawed.

⁵⁴Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, 3.

Italian and accountable to your fellow citizens of the street, you would undoubtedly be Catholic. You would receive all the sacraments at the parish nearby and would probably pass a statue of the Madonna as you walked out your front walkway. Because all your neighbors were Italian, they too would have been Catholic, but the parish priest would more likely be Irish and either intimidating or ignored. As fellow Catholics and Italians, the neighbors helped each other in times of trouble and especially sickness. When someone died, they provided to the family food, mass cards and flowers and attended the funeral. This duty and others, you would grow up to learn in Bensonhurst, were expected and fulfilled.

As we imagine this community—its brick houses, big families, inquisitive neighbors—we might also imagine its powerful impressions on a person whose childhood was once defined by it and whose adulthood is now distinguished from it. Bensonhurst, and the places like it scattered across the U.S. (especially in the Northeast), emerge from these narratives as all-encompassing and particular communities. Growing up in such places, authors claim, one had little choice but to be Catholic. As they narrate it, their very existences in those spaces bound them to the tradition. Further, they point out the ethnic codes that were clearly communicated and closely followed. The Italian Catholics in Bensonhurst would make certain their children understood what it meant to be Italian Catholic. While these constructions may have seemed natural when they learned them as children, they now seem questionable when they recall them as adults. Still, cultural Catholics perpetuate these constructions in their texts. Removed from these characteristic communities, authors hold onto the ethnic qualities that make each one of

them a somebody. If you were once a girl from Bensonhurst, it might seem nearly impossible to take the Bensonhurst out of the girl.

So, there you are a product of these surroundings, but then what happens when you pursue an education beyond the norm of this world? How do you maintain a connection to this defining past as you move farther from it by way of profession and class? These were some of the questions undoubtedly facing cultural Catholics. In the next chapter, we see one response to this situation: they write. So, we shift gears from grasping the various and related ways they have represented their Catholic pasts to considering the motivations for and consequences of doing so.

CHAPTER VI

MAKING MEMORY ON THE PAGE

“Narrative is language’s bottom line—the placing of what matters into a meaningful order,” writes Josephine Gattuso Hending.¹ Narrative becomes a critical tool, according to Hending’s definition. It establishes and perpetuates a particular order of things. Of course, narrative can never be its own agent. So, who gets to design, tell, or write the narrative? Who determines the meaning assigned to that which matters? Moreover, who decides what matters? These questions drive this last chapter, which examines the motivations for and consequences of writing for cultural Catholics. In their narratives—autobiographical or fictional—cultural Catholics effectively construct a story, which they claim has shaped their identities. As Alice McDermott suggests, “Incident (in novels and in life) is momentary, and temporary, but the memory of an incident, the story told about it, the meaning it takes on or loses over time, is life-long and fluid, and that's what interests me and what I hope will prove interesting to readers.”² The incidents of their formative upbringings have passed and no longer bear relevance. What counts, instead, is the story and memory of them. At the keyboard, authors assume the power to control the meanings of their pasts. Having endured what they deem an

¹Josephine Gattuso Hendin, “A Usable Past: Writing to the Hybrid Future,” in *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women's Writing*, ed. Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003), 196.

²Carole Burns, *Off the Page: Alice McDermott* [Transcript] (Washingtonpost.com, 2003 [cited January 7 2006]); available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31756-2003Aug22.html>.

imposing Catholic authority in so many contexts, they finally assume some authority in narrative.

Of course, these authoritative acts of writing allow them both a proximity to and distance from this Catholic past. In fact, their very interest in stories and their propensity to tell them, according to many, emerges directly out of their experience in the Church. By narrating Catholic lives, they maintain a connection to that element of their identities and allow others access to its impact upon them. They do not move away from the conditions of their Catholic youths entirely. Instead they pursue them through their writing, just as the tradition seems to continue to pursue them. At the same time, though, the very act of narrating Catholic life puts them at a distance from it. Rather than participating in it, they must remove themselves from it to gain a perspective from the outside that allows them to tell stories. In this chapter, I consider this distinctive position for cultural Catholics, whose work both ties them to that past even as it gives them power to control it. Even well beyond the circumstances of their youths, cultural Catholics are able to assign meaning to the formative environments in a way that both reflects participation in those worlds at the same time that it distinguishes the participants from that Catholic past.

Graduated from their higher educational institutions and established in professional settings far removed from the class and economic constraints of their youths, the subjects of this study have made it. They challenged the limitations they faced and surpassed them; for instance Anna Quindlen's false choice between becoming a housewife or nun is no longer an issue. Certainly, the children of these cultural Catholics will enjoy more opportunities and advantages than they did themselves because of where

they stand now. Still, despite their success in breaking free from the confining world of their youths, the past nags them. It will not let them forget it. No matter how many letters they might see after their printed name, they are the same people who were born or raised Catholic—in the schools, parishes, families and neighborhoods that such an upbringing entailed. So they confront it. And then they name it. In naming it, they find a way to control it. Linda Wagner-Martin writes: “All writing is some incomprehensible mix of impulse and reason, strands of memory crossing immediate details and provoking the writer to telling—or to naming. Recounting the experience, or perhaps only the emotions connected with it, is the writer’s naming, making concrete words out of vague suffused feeling.”³ In naming this past, by giving it concrete words, authors begin the process of laying claim to it and understanding it.⁴ Indeed, provoked by the strands of memory that intersect with the details of their everyday lives, authors find a way of making sense of the nagging past. They begin by giving language to it. In this way, writing allows them to confront their Catholic history, determine its effects upon them and ultimately shape the way it will be remembered by assigning it to narrative. Along the way, they demonstrate the tools, habits and vocabulary they learned within that formative environment and the ways they have appropriated them for this writing purpose.

Individuated power over the past is not the only appealing consequence for these writers, though. As they compose their narratives, they do so not simply to experience the

³Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 70.

⁴Feminist scholarship treats the importance of naming. See Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader, World and Word Series* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1990); Naomi Scheman, "Anger and the Politics of Naming," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

delight in the solitary activity but also so that their stories will be read. These authors must have an audience in mind, and that audience becomes a public forum in which to share the experience of Catholic life. This literature aims not to entertain the nuns and priests of their youth, of course. Instead it engages with other readers who might recognize with empathy the moments and characters described. Through the creation of this body of literature, then, cultural Catholics effectively begin a new community consisting of like-minded writers and readers.

Naming Secrets and Controlling Words

Not until these cultural Catholics give language to their experience can they consider its impact upon them or learn about their relationship to it. In their writing, though, they give words to this past and allow it to come to the surface. David Plante reflects on the motivation for this process:

...But the agony of writing was to find in it a secret—a secret that was, like some inner bright globe, touched on but that remained, however much one's touch penetrated it, inexhaustible... To be possessed by that secret and to possess that possession, that was what writing was about. To bring that secret up out of its depths beneath any blankness, to make it seen, heard, felt, smelled, tasted, that was what writing was about. To believe, above all, that there *was* a secret to be brought up and out into images—into, simply, *one* image—that referred themselves—that referred *itself*—back to the existence of the inner globe of that secret, that was what writing was all about.⁵

Dragged out from the depths into the light, the experience of a Catholic upbringing is made accessible through the language of its narrators. This is their goal, I would argue, according to Plante's description and despite the agony it might cause, it characterizes the very act of writing for these cultural Catholics. Of course, this particular action of writing

⁵Plante, *American Ghosts*, 141.

requires a belief in the buried secret. So only the person provoked by something beneath the surface would feel the urge to write since, according to Plante, only she or he would perceive any secret needing close attention. Cultural Catholics sense that their experience in those insular worlds constitutes a “secret” to be mined. Through writing, they give it language so as to access it for inspection. Richard Rodriguez concurs. He asserts, “...the act of revelation helps the writer better understand his own feelings, one can describe oneself to oneself. One names what was only previously darkly felt.”⁶ The mining and inspections themselves naturally yield different results, as we will see later. The key here is that the process only becomes possible by the act of naming, which occurs clearly in writing.

The very act of using language to achieve this task evidences the first sign of their claims to authority outside their Catholic environments. Language had often been either seen as out of reach or considered a waste of effort. In their attempts to learn the proper gestures and moral conduct of good Catholics, many children in these narratives either were denied access to certain words or assumed that words did not merit serious attention. There was too much else for which they would be held accountable. Of course, they were required to know certain prayers and responses, but outside those parameters, language was not high on the priority list, or it was just beyond their range. Edward Rivera narrates the confusion that words elicited in the already overwhelming experience of receiving his First Communion. When Sister Mary Felicia lists the alternate names for the Eucharist, the students get lost in this new language:

‘The Real Presence,’ she had called it during our First Communion rehearsals, confusing every boy and girl in our classroom. She also called

⁶Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, 187.

it 'the Eucharistic banquet' (which Almendras later twisted into 'You carry this blanket, man'), the 'mystical body,' the 'sacrament of charity,' the 'central sacrament,' the 'source of grace,' the 'gift of His body,' the 'abiding presence,' the 'consecrated species,' and the 'sacramental dispensation.' She told us, 'His body broken and torn is why the priest breaks the bread into pieces,' and other explanations and strange new Catholic words that had everyone in class confused.⁷

Of course, they were forever left in the dark about these mystifying terms. He recalls, "She never got around to explaining the difference between a 'real' presence and a fake one. We had to take her word for all sorts of things, so this mysterious presence was nothing new."⁸ Without knowledge of the conceptual or theological meanings behind these puzzling labels, the children must take their teacher's word for it. In a way, she serves as the keeper of the words and controls their access to them.

In a different vein, Mary Gordon recalls a limitation in her inability to understand certain words. Restricted not as a result of her religious tradition, but of her gender, she senses a boundary around those words she could and could not use. She remembers a picture of her mother's bosses and its caption *The Jones Beach Jetty*, and writes, "In all the years that I looked at that photograph, of the two bald, serious-faced men, I had no idea what a jetty was, or why it might be important. It seemed a male word, a word I would have no possible access to."⁹ Divided and guarded, words present an obstacle for the young observer. She perceives the term not simply as something outside her current vocabulary but rather as one whose meaning she had no right to know.

⁷Rivera, *Family Installments*, 99.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Gordon, *Seeing through Places*, 86.

So for many cultural Catholics, their choice to *write* is itself subversive. By surfacing the secret, which Plante identifies, in their own words without restrictions on which ones they can use, they claim a level of control that many suggest was denied them during their youths. They assert total power over the process of naming these experiences in their own terms. This is the first and necessary step that begins the process of narrating their pasts. Only by fully claiming language, do they have any chance to put “what matters into a meaningful order.”

For one particular author, though, the very limitation she perceives in her current use of language traces back to her Catholic past even as it allows her to tell her stories. Alice McDermott reflects on the process of writing novels and acknowledges the moment at which she realizes the story to be told has taken shape. She describes her response to this recognition: “It is a sense of both resignation and delight: This is my material, this is the story I have chosen to tell, this is the language I must use because the language itself, my own particular choice of words, has been shaped by the particular and cumulative experiences of my life and I would have to live another life time in order to discover an alternative.” She notes that while other languages and stories may prove more compelling or intelligent, the one she has is hers, for better or worse. And she recognizes its source: “Catholicism, I began to see, was also mine, inextricably mine, the fabric of my life and thoughts. It was the native language of my spirit...”¹⁰ McDermott’s reflections indicate that Catholicism has actually provided her the language with which she writes. She claims that it limits her: she remains unable to use any other language than that which she has always known. She cannot affect that condition, and she suggests that her life and

¹⁰McDermott, “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic,” 15.

experience has dictated that restriction. Resigned to this notion, she nevertheless asserts control over this language. First, she makes the effort to move outside her perspective to reflect on it. Acknowledging the centrality of her Catholic experience requires shifting to the peripheries of it so as to observe it. The initial step in exerting some authority over this past is the ability to acknowledge its far-reaching effects. She had to be aware of her material before she can manipulate it in any way. The next step, then, involves making choices within this limited language. Taking this “fabric of her life and thoughts” and using it to write, she puts herself in the position to make of it what she will. She assumes the power to mold it into the product she creates as an author. Of course, this analysis of McDermott’s use of her Catholic language requires that as readers, we trust her representation. In fact, though, on the very surface of this account, she has shaped Catholicism to be most useful for her. Representing it as her native language, she characterizes and categorizes it. In that very act, she asserts her authority as a writer about her Catholic past.

Claiming and manipulating the language of Catholic experience, cultural Catholics discover the useful nature of words. Words become their tools. Importantly, though, these tools cannot take just any form to function effectively. The written word—and not the spoken word—offers the most powerful tool for them. Comparing the written form against the spoken, Anna Quindlen remarks, “... the act of reading, the act of seeing a story on the page as opposed to hearing it told—of translating story into specific and immutable language, putting that language down in concrete form with the aid of the arbitrary characters our language offers, of then handing the story on to others in a

transactional relationship—that is infinitely more complex...”¹¹ She begins with considering the reader’s activity, but then quickly moves to the production of the text. For her, it involves a story’s translation from something mutable to something immutable. By assigning it “concrete form,” the story can exist solely as the writer has marked it down. This is what these cultural Catholics do—they mark down their stories, and they have full control over the language of its translation. Of course, that is not the end of the process. They write not simply for their own pleasure but also, as Quindlen notes, to hand the story on to others. The writers cannot control the interpretation that happens past that point, but they do sense power over the product they pass on.

Another clear distinction perceived in the written word is its personal nature, even as it demands such a public act. The solitude in which writing occurs, unlike speaking, allows for a different level of revelation. Richard Rodriguez comments on a duplicitous quality of the written word. He reflects, “I sit here in silence writing this small volume of words, and it seems to me the most public thing I ever have done,” and then only paragraphs later claims, “Writing, I have come to value written words as never before. One can use *spoken* words to reveal one’s personal self to strangers. But *written* words heighten the feeling of privacy. They permit the most thorough and careful exploration...”¹² Curiously, writing autobiography and fiction for public consumption inherently involves unrestricted access to what gets published on the page. However, at the same time, according to this author, the process of writing creates a feeling of privacy that invites thorough and careful exploration. It clears a space both for probing the

¹¹Quindlen, *How Reading Changed My Life*, 16.

¹²Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 188.

unnamed feelings, experiences, ideas and stories that remain in the dark and for bringing them to light. Still, given this freedom, the authors ultimately control what goes onto the page and how it is framed. Cultural Catholics, by writing, also assume this freedom and this control over their religious backgrounds. The activity of giving words to these experiences encourages them to explore their pasts. Written words “permit” (a curious choice of terms by Rodriguez) cultural Catholics to look closely at their own lives, which have been under inspection as long as they can remember. In the process of writing, they finally control exactly what might be available for future inspection of their words.

Assuming Agency and Approaching the Blank Page

We might ask why these adults would even choose to leave a record for *any* kind of inspection. Haven’t they endured enough careful observation that they would want to avoid any further provocations for it? Not according to Patricia Hampl, who writes, “If we refuse to do the work of creating this personal version of the past, someone else will do it for us.”¹³ These people have long experienced the authority of others assigning to them rules, options, and even identities. They are now in the position to disturb that longstanding dynamic. With the opportunity to tell their own stories, they perceive a sense of agency previously unavailable. If they do not seize the opportunity, she claims, they will lose it. The process has even bigger consequences, she argues, “The version we dare to write is the only truth, the only relationship we can have with the past. Refuse to write your life and you have no life.”¹⁴ Just as McDermott suggests, the incident fades

¹³Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 32.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

quickly but the story lives on. By taking advantage of their chance to tell the story, they finally have power over the past and the way it will be remembered.

In this way, the blank page offers an invitation. Michel de Certeau reflects on the process of writing and its “Cartesian move” of distinguishing the subject from the object. He explains, “In front of his blank page, every child is already put in the position of the industrialist, the urban planner, or the Cartesian philosopher—the position of having to manage a space that is his own and distinct from all others and in which he can exercise his own will.” He continues, “... on the blank page, an itinerant, progressive, and regulated practice—a ‘walk’—composes the artifact of another ‘world’ that is not received but rather made.”¹⁵ The activity of writing, for de Certeau, presents the possibility for creation. It invites the subject to fill the page in accord only with his will. Accepting the role of *author*, the subject asserts control—*authority*—over the object of his narrative. In this case, the object happens to be Catholic experience, that is, the object is *made* to be Catholic experience.

Should we assume, then, that authors are making up every detail in their writing? Concocting stories that have no connection to a real past? Well, as Patricia Hampl explains, “I write from my life *and* from imagination. That’s what it is to write about—or from—the past.”¹⁶ As noted in the introduction, significant scholarship has paid close attention to the issues of representation in autobiographical or “life-writing.”¹⁷ Many critics have demonstrated that self-revelatory works involve considerable construction of

¹⁵Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 134-5.

¹⁶Hampl, *Virgin Time*, 55.

¹⁷See Olney, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*. (see also intro, n. 14)

history; for it would be impossible to report clearly and faithfully every detail of past events. As Edward M. Bruner explains, “In a life history... the distinction is between life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience), and life as told (expression). Only a naïve positivist would believe that expressions are equivalent to reality, and we recognize in everyday life the gap between experience and its symbolic manifestation in expression.”¹⁸ Indeed, we do not expect “life as told” simply to hold a mirror to “life as lived.” Considerable interpretation occurs between the two, affected by circumstances in the past and the present. Taking up the pen or sitting before the computer, then, cultural Catholics engage in this process of interpreting their past. They construct the story that will endure, and while it is certainly based on their experience, we know that it cannot entirely reproduce that past. As writers, they make choices about which events, people, and circumstances will have a place in their story, and they control the characterizations of these elements. As Hampl puts it, they “create their personal versions of the past.”

Cultural Catholics remain self-conscious in their writing about this tempting opportunity available through text. They affirm that the enduring nature of narrative serves as a promising motivator for engaging in this challenging work. Trusting that their words will determine the shape their life stories will take—in fact, that their words will give stories to their lives—in autobiographical *and* fictional works, they embrace the blank page with all its possibility. In her memoir, Louise DeSalvo (b. 1942) shares the therapeutic effect she enjoys in the process of writing:

¹⁸Victor Witter Turner and Edward M. Bruner, *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). See also, Wojciech Kalaga and Tadeusz Rachwał, *Memory--Remembering--Forgetting, Literary and Cultural Theory, V. 2* (Frankfurt am Main ; New York: P. Lang, 1999); Rebecca Rupp, *Committed to Memory: How We Remember and Why We Forget*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown, 1998); Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1996).

I think, as I write, that my journal acts as a kind of ‘fixer,’ as in photography. Like the chemical that you use to stabilize an image, to make it permanent. But I begin to see, too, that the other meanings of ‘fixer’ also apply to why I write. I use my journal, my writing, as a way of making things better, of fixing things, and of healing myself, as a way of taking a ‘fix’ on my life. Of seeing where I am, and plotting a course for the future.¹⁹

In writing, DeSalvo perceives her ability to preserve certain aspects of her life. The process provides a tool for stabilizing things. However, that’s not all. Not only does she recognize her ability to preserve interpretations of her experiences, she believes that writing allows her to fix things in the way of improving them. Translating her thoughts and feelings into prose provides the chance to assess her circumstances and even the tools for controlling what lies ahead. Whatever pain or sadness or frustration she may have suffered, she discovers that writing about it made it real and that, in turn, allowed her to make things better. In her writing, she did not have to answer to the dominant characters of her past. She could tell her own story and in doing so make life a little more manageable on her own terms.

Fixing things in the way of making them permanent and of controlling exactly what will be preserved also influences David Plante in his urge to write. He narrates the way that specific moments with his lover have a tremendous impact upon him and that writing ensures that these experiences will endure. Curiously, though, the experiences directly relate to his confined upbringing. Writing not only provides a way of memorializing these singular moments but also of securing distance from that powerful past. Plante describes a series of moments with Nikos, his lover, and the feeling they trigger: “... I would if only for a moment, think: I *am* free.” He later details that from

¹⁹Louise A. DeSalvo, *Vertigo: A Memoir* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 5.

which he feels free as a result of Nikos' love: "I was free of the laws of sexual, familial, social, political, and even religious duty that I had been commanded to abide by in ways that would have subjugated me to an authority that was as imposed as Roman law on that village in remote Gaul."²⁰ Feeling free of this imposed authority as a result of these interactions, Plante turns to writing. He explains his response to these wonderful moments, "Later, I would record those moments in my diary, for, even though they passed, I had documented them, and I could, looking back at my diary, read an account that verified them." His written words lodge these instances in history. His accounts will determine the memory of these moments. Documenting them, he makes them real, verifiable, and accessible. He takes control of the past through writing. This tendency toward writing and the satisfaction he finds in it demonstrate the sense of power he discovers in this activity. He shares (again, through his written words, of course) the authority that has dominated him and conveys a sense of independence that is gained not simply through these encounters with Nikos, but further through the ability to confirm them in writing.

In one more example from autobiography, Mary Gordon expresses her intention to construct a story that would endure and "fix" things as she wrote them. In her memoir about her father, she notes her goal for the work. Referring to a Jewish holiday—her father was a convert from Judaism to Catholicism—she writes, "Each year at Rosh Hashanah, Jews pray, 'May you be inscribed in the book of life.' This is what I've tried to do. To place or re-place both my father and myself in the book of life. The book of the

²⁰Plante, *American Ghosts*, 282-3.

living.”²¹ Constructing the narratives of these characters, her father and herself, she perceives the power to establish their place in a larger context. She determines how they will be perceived by the living and she guarantees that they themselves will live on through these stories. Gordon effectively creates her personal version of the past, as Hampl advocates, and in so doing shapes her history and the memory of it.

Autobiographical writing presents the opportunity to shape one’s life in narrative rather straightforwardly. Authors select which “memories” will be included and recount them so the reader can enter the world of the person’s past—or at least the form provided. Fiction, however, represents a more complicated opportunity for the writer who aims to create her own version of the past. And yet, it becomes a comparable tool for giving meaning to one’s life. Alice McDermott considers this occasion in fiction in her essay “Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic: Portrait of a Novelist.” Conveying her discomfort with the autobiographical nature of the essay (“and while I would much prefer wielding this unwieldy pronoun (I) in a work of fiction,” she admits) she shares her development as a novelist. She had to work hard to learn how to write. The turning-point in her development involved her discovery of William Faulkner’s 1950 Nobel Prize acceptance speech in which he revealed the key to writing well: pursuing the “verities and truths of the heart—the authorities and truths without which any story is ephemeral and doomed.” Taking the counsel of this American writer, McDermott applied it to every aspect of her fictional work. As she continued to advance, she learned the great advantage and power available in literature. She shares, “Fiction made the chaos bearable, fiction transformed the absurdity of our brief lives by giving context and purpose and significance to every

²¹Mary Gordon, *The Shadow Man*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1996), 10.

gesture, every desire, every detail... Fiction, if only briefly, if only in the space of the novel or the story itself, gave form to our existence, the form that it seemed our hearts so persistently desired.”²² It not only gives forms to existence, but, she suggests, it goes one step further: “Fiction itself, even the most pessimistic fiction, the most absurdist fiction, revealed our need to see the stuff of life made into something that stands against time.”²³ Like Desalvo, Plante and Gordon, who recognize the potential for permanence in writing, so does McDermott perceive in fiction the satisfaction of human beings’ need to endure. Giving context, purpose and form to the details of existence, fiction offers an outlet for making sense of one’s life. It gives the past its story.

Cultural Catholics perceive the power available in writing. It offers them De Certeau’s “blank page” on which they can exercise their wills. Having lived in the various contexts of authority according to which they narrate their early lives, they embrace their chances as adults to determine the way that world will be remembered. They provide context and thereby significance to the details of their Catholic childhoods. This does not mean that all authors necessarily resent their experiences in these insular environments. Writing about it does not immediately signify only negative interpretations of this background. Rather, it indicates a desire—a need, as some claim—to assume control over how it will stand against time. Certainly, there are those who highlight the unpleasant elements and others whose reminiscences convey a more inviting atmosphere. What relates these distinct versions are the authors’ attempts to acknowledge their positions outside those places and to create the places anew with their words.

²²McDermott, "Confessions of a Reluctant Catholic," 14.

²³Ibid.

Acknowledging the Other Voices in the Process

Despite the obvious agency assumed through the activity of writing, scholar Paul J. Eakin does issue a warning about attributing too much self-sufficiency to the author, particularly of autobiography. He writes, “Why do we so easily forget that the first person of autobiography is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation? Because autobiography promotes an illusion of self-determination: *I* write my story; *I* say who I am; *I* create my self.”²⁴ Eakin pushes readers and writers alike to acknowledge the unavoidable relational character of human beings. Nothing could be quite this “I”-driven. The process of life-writing is not as solitary or secluded as it might seem. Rather, there is an entire network of people who contribute to the activity of writing one’s life and the writing of one’s life consequently displays the relational quality of the subject. This certainly applies to the literature of cultural Catholics. Nevertheless, though this qualifier might limit the autonomy of the authors, it does not diminish the authority that writing establishes for cultural Catholics. Writers fully recognize the influence that others have had upon them not only in their lives but in their writing, as well. These individuals dictate the words on the page and the shape of the stories, but their narratives demonstrate their keen awareness of the presence of others in this process.

When Richard Rodriguez considers the dual nature—both personal and public—of his work, he also recognizes whom this affects. His autobiography’s final chapter, titled “Mr. Secrets,” treats this thorny nature of writing. Even as he feels the freedom to probe his life and the solitude offered by the process of writing, his mother is with him.

²⁴Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 43.

He explains, “I am writing about those very things my mother has asked me not to reveal.” After first publishing an autobiographical essay, his mother wrote him a letter and asked, “Why do you need to tell the *gringos* about how ‘divided’ you feel from the family?”²⁵ Richard Rodriguez is not alone in his writing room. Despite feelings of isolation and loneliness, he knows that he is directly ignoring his mother’s plea to write about anything other than his intimate past. She is with him and yet he ignores her. He declares, “My mother’s question will go unanswered to her face. Like everything else on these pages, my reasons for writing will be revealed to public readers I never expect to meet.”²⁶ Is he really creating himself, Paul Eakin might ask, or is he simply responding to the people and circumstances that surround him? Is it really *his story* to tell, or is it the sum of many people’s stories, including his mother’s?

These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Autobiographical writing requires the illusion of creating one’s story on his or her own; however, this would be impossible. As human beings, these writers, are naturally social creatures and affected—shaped even—by their surroundings. They are not the sole *creators* of their “selves.” Still, the very act of embarking on the task of narrating their lives allows them to represent selectively influential aspects of these surroundings and to play the most important role in determining which of the plural selves, identified by Eakin, might find a place on the page. By categorizing these writers as cultural Catholics, I fully recognize the plural origins of their first person voices. In fact, I recognize it as the key reason they write at all. Multiple circumstances in all different environments from their youths through their

²⁵Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, 175.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 176-7.

adulthoods necessarily form their senses of identity. Writing is a way of exploring these many sources. Still, despite this plurality of origins, the author does direct the story told and the “I” in autobiography—as well as the characters in fiction—constructed through narrative.

So what do these authors discover upon exploring these many sources? When they take the willful step to observe their plural origins—for even if they cannot completely move beyond their individual perspectives, they make the conscious effort to attempt it—how do they represent those social networks? It may come as no surprise that they represent the distinct contexts of authority experienced during their formative years—the authority of the Church, the authority of the family and the authority of geography and ethnicity. However, more interestingly, they indicate the influence of these contexts not only on their development as human beings, but also as writers. Up to this point in the chapter, the motivations I have identified among these authors could apply to all writers, regardless of religious affiliation. Certainly, any person engaged in this activity claims language and clears a space for making stories permanent. However, cultural Catholics portray these elements of the process, for them, as distinctively Catholic. Indeed the institutional church, the home and the neighborhood, and the respective religious authority of each, have deeply affected their approaches to their work. As they represent it, they not only write *about* Catholic experience, but they also write as they do *because of* Catholic experience. The spaces they clear for writing, it seems, are filled with traces of their Catholic past.

Nuns, as we witnessed in chapter three, managed the classroom and enforced the rules. Their lessons extended even beyond the school walls and their authority could be

felt palpably wherever a Catholic child encountered them. Louise DeSalvo felt this deeply during childhood and aimed to win the approval of her teacher Sister Mary. She hoped to secure the honor of crowning the Virgin Mary statue during the school's special ceremony held each May. Naturally, her school teacher had the full power to choose which child would be given this enviable responsibility. If she could live up to the nun's standards—in both her behavior and her academic achievement—she would earn this role. She reports the pressure and the drive to succeed, but she also communicates that her experience in Sr. Mary's classroom stayed with her long after the day she placed the crown on the revered statue. DeSalvo remarks on the lessons of her Catholic school classroom: "They will stay with me for a lifetime, long after I renounce my faith. They will inform my intellectual work."²⁷ She details a few of these lessons: "The virtue of work. The spiritual soulful nature of work. That work is another form of prayer... That there is beauty in the structure of a well-balanced sentence. That language must be used carefully, correctly, and precisely ..."²⁸ Despite intimidation and occasional frustration felt in the classroom during childhood, as portrayed in her text, she discovers later the far-reaching and positive effects of her encounter with her teachers. The nuns' authority may have felt overbearing during her youth, yet their lessons constitute one of the most significant origins of her passion. She learned to appreciate language, writing and work as a result of them. Not only did these women teach her the religion that claimed her early on, but they also provided her with the tools that would allow her to distance herself from it as an adult. As a cultural Catholic, DeSalvo finds a way to move outside the

²⁷DeSalvo, *Vertigo*, 82.

²⁸Ibid.

influential environment of her youth to narrate its effects and highlight some of the many individuals responsible for her development.

The institutional Church also had an impact on writing by cultural Catholics outside the classroom, as Rita Ciresi shows. This novelist claims, “When young, Catholic authors were taught to examine their conscience carefully. Although we may no longer make the sacrament of confession, through the act of writing, we make good confessions for our characters.”²⁹ Her self-conscious observation points to both the long-lasting effects she attributes to her Catholic background and also, more importantly for this chapter, to her capacity for establishing enough distance from it to notice this result. Though the early encounters with confession may have involved submitting to the Church authority, through writing, authors determine the sins *and* the rewards or punishments for their characters. They are able to put the ingrained habit of examining their consciences to work for them as they create their stories.

David Plante also narrates moments in the classroom or confessional that have affected his writing, but now his work helps us examine a second node in the network of social relations that shape these writers: the home. As we saw in chapter four, surrounded by religious objects and images, young Catholics were expected to live up to the moral and pious standards of their parents. For Plante, as he describes in his essay, “My Parents, My Religion, My Writing,” this was a matter of his prose, as well. He recalls, particularly, his father’s concept of the boy’s talent: “To be a writer was to have a

²⁹Rita Ciresi, “Toward a New Catholic Novel: The Italian-American Woman Writer and the Church,” in *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women's Writing*, ed. Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003), 53.

vocation in the same way a priest had a vocation, though not quite so elevated.”³⁰ His parents’ perspective on writing in general had bigger implications for their son. He explains their understanding of writing and its consequences for him, “... a good book lifts the reader (and the writer) morally, spiritually. And how does it do that? By praising God. And so I, in trying to write, tried to praise God.”³¹ Even in the context of writing, he perceived the pressure to live up to his parents’ religion, which they had passed on to him. However, he notes that when he moved outside that world, he no longer felt the same expectations but that he did continue to sense the residual effect of that upbringing. He claims, “And now, years later, confirmed in my atheism, I know that whatever depth there is to my writing has to do with my religion.” No longer aiming to praise God through this activity, he still credits Catholicism with the foundation for his work. Those early lessons and driving forces continue to shape his writing, only now he is able to recognize self-consciously that development and share it through his narrative.

Just as Catholic authority is depicted at school, church, home and in the neighborhood, so too do each of these situations surface as determining factors in authors’ writing. Like the school, confessional and home, as we have seen, not surprisingly the community surrounding parishes inevitably surfaces as a major factor in the development of several authors. Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick writes, “Now, as I write about ‘the neighborhood,’ I recognize that although I’ve come far in physical and material distance, the emotional distance is harder to gauge. Bensonhurst has everything to do with who I am and even with what I write. ‘We can never cease to be ourselves’

³⁰David Plante, “My Parents, My Religion, and My Writing,” in *Catholic Lives Contemporary America*, ed. Thomas Ferraro (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 223-4.

³¹Ibid., 225.

(Conrad, *The Secret Agent*).”³² Certainly, Torgovnick refers to the construction of the neighborhood as it was conceived and is remembered. Her writing itself contributes to that very construction. Still, in the process of writing, she sheds light on the significance this source of identity has had upon her formation as a person and an author. This activity provides her the opportunity to consider the impact of Bensonhurst and she takes advantage by narrating to the reader the persistent connection. Even as she claims her inability to remove herself completely from that place, she establishes distance from it in the very act of observing her relationship to it. She further controls the perpetuated attachment to Bensonhurst by asserting its inevitable influence.

Writing to Bridge Worlds

It seems a reader would have to work hard to fall into the trap Paul Eakin points out when he warns against assuming their full autonomy—the “I’s” of these stories have long, intricate histories that involve many people and circumstances. It seems nearly impossible to mistake each narrator as a singular creator of the story. The authors highlight the complex network of their origins. Of course, even Eakin himself would emphasize that these narratives are nothing if not constructed by the writers. In so doing, they act upon the past and shape it to make sense. He explains, “As makers themselves, autobiographers are primed to recognize the constructed nature of the past, yet they need at the same time to believe that in writing about the past they are performing an act of recovery: narrative teleology models the trajectory of continuous identity, reporting the

³²Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, 11.

supreme fiction of memory as fact.”³³ Eakin’s observation points to the tricky position of the autobiographer: perched between the knowledge of their construction of the past and the desire to interpret their writing as recapturing that same past for themselves. Through their narratives, they have been able to compose a unified identity—the “I” of the stories remains the same from beginning to end.³⁴ This advantage in writing offers a critical tool for cultural Catholics, who occupy a space between two settings. Many of these authors reveal that they feel unsettled—no longer full-fledged members of their childhood communities nor completely comfortable in their new intellectual or professional roles.

Writing provides them an outlet for establishing their positions between these distinct environments. This applies not only to autobiography, the subject of Eakin’s scholarship. It refers also to fiction. As noted in the Introduction, fiction is necessarily based on real life one way or another. So, in their writing, they discover a mode of exploring and expressing this tension through unified characters, whether those characters are ostensibly the authors themselves or their deliberate inventions. As so many show, their Catholic background has everything to do with what they write and yet, their writing clearly sets them apart from that upbringing. Louise Desalvo explains:

Even as I write ... I am wary of what I am writing. I am, inescapably, an Italian-American woman with origins in the working class. I come from a people who, even now, seriously distrust educated women, who value family loyalty. The story I want to tell is that of how I tried to create (am still trying to create) a life that was different from the one that was scripted for me by my culture ...³⁵

³³Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, 98.

³⁴See Kathleen M. Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters, *Autobiography & Postmodernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); Marianne Gullestad, *Imagined Childhoods: Self and Society in Autobiographical Accounts* (Oslo; Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1996); John T. Hodgson, *The Search for the Self: Childhood in Autobiography and Fiction since 1940, Writing on Writing*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

³⁵DeSalvo, *Vertigo*, xviii.

Her sentiment is shared by many who have a difficult time reconciling their current places in the professional worlds with their beginnings in the insular Catholic places of the past. Desalvo's origins are inescapable, yet somehow she finds herself writing in a situation far removed from her formative childhood environment. David Plante reports a similar kind of disconnection between his childhood and adulthood, but his manifests itself differently. Unlike Desalvo working hard to distance herself from her beginnings, Plante experiences the past and present coming into contact in a disorienting way. Having returned to his hometown and neighborhood with his good friend Mary Gordon, he finds it overwhelming when his two distinct worlds come together. He reports his observation to Mary over dinner, "'For all my fantasies when I was growing up in Providence,' I said, 'never, never would I have fantasized about having dinner here with a fellow writer. My fantasies about being a writer were all based somewhere far, far outside Providence.'"³⁶ These two poles of their life experience—their childhood environments and their roles as writers—seem to him completely separate and even contradictory. While they both reside very much at the center of his identity by his account, these disparate parts of his life oppose each other. How can he be who he was as a Catholic child and who he is now as an adult intellectual? What allows him to sustain both these identities? Writing. Even though he senses the discrete separation between his identities in the process of writing itself, this activity fully allows him to connect the two critical elements of his character—his past as a Catholic and his present as an intellectual. As Mary Gordon points out, "... it seems to me if literature gives us anything, it's the opportunity to say not either/or, but

³⁶Plante, *American Ghosts*, 220.

yes/and..."³⁷ These writers are not *either* Catholics *or* intellectuals. They are both. They are cultural Catholics. This does not mean that committed Catholics cannot be intellectual, of course; nor does it imply that those who are not writing about their Catholic pasts are not intellectual. Rather, it pertains to these specific writers, who perceive a disconnection between these two parts of their lives—the authority they once endured and the power they now perceive. Their writing, the literature they produce, allows them to stand between these two worlds and claim them both.

In her introduction to a collection of essays by Italian American women writers, Mary Ann Mannino (b. 1943) shares her discovery of narrative's useful function as a bridge between two self-concepts. She explains:

... when I took my first course in creative writing, I found, to my surprise, that many of my stories focused on my schizophrenic existence. My short stories were sometimes about Italian immigrants trying to make it in the land of opportunity and other times about bored, middle-class Americans questioning America's claim that wealth equated happiness. I was doing what writers seem compelled to do—order conflict by turning it into words on a page.³⁸

Stuck somewhere between these contexts, Mannino's prose allows her to make sense of this curious position. This split experience mirrors the work of many cultural Catholics who narrate their religious upbringing. Living these multiple identities may result in feeling scattered and detached, but writing has allowed them to bring these plural selves together and sort through them. In her stories, Manning can narrate both the experience of the struggling immigrant and that of the assimilated American because her own life has

³⁷Gordon and Bennett, *Conversations with Mary Gordon*, 176.

³⁸Mary Ann Mannino, "Introduction," in *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women's Writing*, ed. Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003), 3.

given her access to both. Literature, as Gordon asserts, provides the possibility to be “both/and.”

When we examine the case of Mary Gordon herself, we detect a different manifestation of this phenomenon. For her, the intellectual life was not a distant dream during her childhood. She tells Patrick H. Samway in an interview for the Jesuit magazine *America* in 1994: “You have to understand I have no memory of a self that is not a writing self. Both my father and my teachers at an all-girls high school taught me that it was quite possible for young women to become writers.”³⁹ So it would appear that she would perceive little distance between her life as a young Catholic and her life as a writer; however, when she moved out of those early surroundings, she did, in fact, experience a separation between her Catholic life and her intellectual pursuits. When Gordon arrived at Barnard College as an undergraduate, despite her family’s wish that she would attend the Jesuit Fordham University, she discovered a new world where she was taken seriously and nurtured by her teachers. They held her to new standards: “They were the standards of the world, not of the parish.” This opened a new door for her. She writes, “What was exciting to me was that the world was mine. I felt enormously free. In those days, Catholics said they were interested in the world, but they really weren’t. They only put a toe in the world and extracted what would fit comfortably into the parish setting. I saw the contradiction in that. I really wanted to see everything.”⁴⁰ “The world,” for Gordon, existed separately from the Catholic parish. It became available to her

³⁹Gordon and Bennett, *Conversations with Mary Gordon*, 99.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

through her education at Barnard. She gains freedom and access to all that she never knew when she begins her college experience, especially when she begins writing.

Even though the activity itself had been encouraged, the circumstances dramatically affected the nature of this experience and she believes they were limiting. So, to develop her identity as a writer required her self-alienation from the church, as she describes it. We learn, of course, that as her education and career progressed, she did—on some level—return to the parish and to the Catholic environment that shaped her. She effectively connects these two contexts through her writing. Having gained a perspective outside that insular world, she can now reflect on its impact on her personal and intellectual development. She explains, “As Flannery O’Connor says, you learn everything important that you need to write about by the age of six. By that age, most of what I had learned was imbued with an intense kind of Catholicism, which is what shaped my whole family.”⁴¹ She had to move well beyond the confined environment to immerse herself fully into “the world” she discovers outside it. But even from within that new and broader context, she is able to narrate the Catholic experience of her past. Her literature allows her to exist—in one form or another—in both realms.

In a similar example, Patricia Hampl recalls her determination to leave behind the world of her Catholic upbringing by means of her education, only to find that she returns to it in her writing. She explains: “When I started college at the University of Minneapolis, I lost no time dumping the Catholic world my family had so carefully given me in St. Paul. In fact, that’s why I went there: I understood many people had succeeded in losing their religion at the University. I didn’t miss a beat turning down a scholarship

⁴¹Ibid., 81.

at a Catholic college...” Intentionally pursuing a curriculum that would encourage distance between her and her religious tradition, she starts on the path of separation. For the most part, it seemed to have worked. She continues, “For years, decades even, I considered it one solid accomplishment that I had escaped the nuns.” By engaging in the secular education of her University, as Gordon had done at Barnard, Hampl believes she has achieved her goal of leaving that Catholic past behind. However, her work would prove differently, as she notes: “Result: I spent the better part of five years writing a memoir about growing up Catholic, a book which took me for extended stays at several monasteries and Catholic shrines in Europe and America. The central character of the book: a contemplative nun, the very figure I was determined to dodge.”⁴² In creating her version of the past, she tells her Catholic story. Determined as she was to escape it, she returns to it in her text. By highlighting her desire to get away from Catholicism and her seemingly involuntary return to it, Hampl shows how her writing brings her back to her origins at the same time it provides a needed distance from it. She does not return to the same Catholicism she left. Instead, she approaches it through writing on her own terms.

As Gordon and Hampl represent their situations, they find themselves balanced between two different places that both inform their identities. The academic settings to which each fled separately allowed them to establish roles in an intellectual and secular environment. However, even from within this new location, they realize how much their Catholic upbringing has determined who they are. In some ways, it constitutes a dual existence and makes for a conflicted self-identity. Rita Ciresi acknowledges a similar sense of conflict in the lives of her fellow Italian American women, who consider

⁴²Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories*, 201.

themselves Catholic on some level even if their commitment might be negligible. She sympathizes with this struggle between two seemingly disparate self-concepts, the Catholic and the worldly. She writes:

Like everyone else on the planet, I've had a few 'dark nights of the soul.' These moments—and hours—in which I have questioned my faith in myself and in God have helped me write about Italian American women who live conflicted lives—who say prayers every night but who wake up in the morning and reach for a leopard-skin purse and high heels instead of a rosary and a habit.⁴³

Playing with rather stereotyped symbols of femininity in both the Catholic and the secular realms, Ciresi highlights the gap perceived between these distinct sources of selfhood. In fact, the gap breeds conflict. So what is her proposed solution? To write about it. Narrative provides a bridge for the gap. Characters *can* and *do* pray at night and wear high heels the next morning, leaving behind the rosary. Ciresi, and cultural Catholics like her, reach for neither the heels nor the rosary (or their masculine equivalents) but instead, they reach for the pen. With these dueling objects lying beside them in the room or in their minds only, they reconcile them on the page.

Creating Community

If you were seeking out Patricia Hampl at a cocktail party, you would do well to look for a small group of individuals and listen for the mention of nuns and confession. At least, that is the clue she gives in her memoir. She claims adults with Catholic backgrounds often find each other in these social settings and engage in the ritualistic recollections about the common aspects of their past. Literature serves a similar function in creating this space for recounting the scenes and people that filled childhood worlds

⁴³Ciresi, "Toward a Catholic Novel," 58.

with an unforgettable Catholicism. Through representing the influential and idiosyncratic nature of their upbringings, authors purposely construct a community where they distinguish themselves from both the norms that governed those childhood environments as well as the secular contexts they now occupy. Literature offers a space somewhere between these two settings.

In his work *Cultures of Letters*, Richard H. Brodhead analyzes three disparate writing projects in nineteenth century Chicago to consider how each was intended for a particular public. His work raises a critical question for this dissertation by reflecting on how a conceived audience affects the composition of a work. He writes:

Each of my scenes of writing ties literary production to a group with a distinct social character and historical situation. But it needs to be insisted that these differently constituted social publics did not just provide different audiences for writing. They provided audiences for different kinds of writing: each supplied a public for the particular selection or version of writing that spoke to its cultural identity and social needs.⁴⁴

Brodhead emphasizes the direct correlation between a prospective audience and the production of certain texts. Various segments of society, exhibiting distinct qualities and desires, invite the writing of different literatures. Authors recognize these potential readers and engage them in a kind of literary conversation through their work.

So who do cultural Catholics imagine at the other end of the writing process? Clearly, authors do not narrate their childhood experiences with nuns, priests and parents in mind as readers. Having moved far from those authorial figures, the writers address an audience closer to their own social situations. Well established in their professional worlds, cultural Catholics write for a group of readers who would likely recognize the

⁴⁴Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 6.

authors' conflicted positions. Through their work, then, they create a conversation about the distinctive nature of their childhoods that sets them apart from the places and settings they now inhabit. By writing (and reading), they institute a community of Americans who have fully integrated into secular contexts but who also perceive powerful connections to the Catholicism of their past.

The emergence of anthologies and collections of this literature evidences the community established by cultural Catholics through stories.⁴⁵ Compiling narratives about childhood Catholicism by adults who have succeeded in business, the arts, politics and the academy, these anthologies set apart a cohort of accomplished Americans and distinguish them by their religious past. Editors and contributors to these volumes, as well as individual authors, prompt discussions regarding what it means for someone to be a prominent figure in a non-Catholic American context while she or he continues to self-identify with the ethnic, social and religious milieus of one's youth. They construct communities where cultural Catholics can participate fully in their contemporary settings and simultaneously belong to a separate group marked by this authoritative religious upbringing they represent. Through writing, cultural Catholics find a way to perpetuate the particularities of their formative childhoods. However, they no longer have to answer to the authority that characterized those early experiences. Instead, within this constructed community, they actively shape the portrayals of that world and use such representations to distinguish themselves from their current surroundings.

⁴⁵See Peter Occhiogrosso, *Once a Catholic: Prominent Catholics and Ex-Catholics Reveal the Influence of the Church on Their Lives and Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Marilyn Sewell, *Resurrecting Grace: Remembering Catholic Childhoods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Greg Tobin, *Saints and Sinners: The American Catholic Experience through Stories, Memoirs, Essays, and Commentary*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

Engaging in narrative to confirm one's new membership in a group is not an original phenomenon in the United States. We recognize this pattern in conversion narratives, for example, which have their place in the American literary canon. In a way, cultural Catholics' stories and the conversion narratives dating to the seventeenth century serve similar purposes for their respective writers. Lisa M. Gordis writes, "The conversion narrative is not a transparent account of spiritual history, but rather a literary form which itself helps to define and constitute the writer's conversion. Authors of conversion narratives do not simply describe their experiences, but rather place those experiences in the context of familiar paradigms."⁴⁶ Gordis reminds her readers of the constructed nature of these narratives, which I have similarly emphasized with regard to cultural Catholics. The activity of writing provides my subjects a forum not for objectively reporting their childhood circumstances, but rather for defining the past they claim has shaped their identities. Further, cultural Catholics have begun the process of establishing a paradigm for their narratives that involves the authoritative contexts of Catholic communities. While the content of these genres both focus on a defining past, their comparative quality applies more to the form and function of the stories than to the represented circumstances. The commonality between the two does indicate that, to some extent, cultural Catholics' narratives fit into a larger context of American literature. Writing centuries later, these contemporary examples parallel the country's earliest texts

⁴⁶Lisa M. Gordis, "The Conversion Narrative in Early America," in *A Companion to the Literatures of Colonial America*, ed. Susan Castillo, *Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 371.

on religious self-identity.⁴⁷ So, just as they are establishing this new community, they are aligning themselves with a long American literary tradition.

Conclusion

The mid-twentieth century proved a telling time in the development of American Catholicism. The transformation of ethnic enclaves and the peak of devotionism combined with the upward mobility newly available to American Catholics and the momentous changes from Vatican II, characterized this time in history for Catholicism in the United States. Because it proved such an influential experience to grow up in that environment, many adults still claim that it contributes to their current self-conceptions. They are cultural Catholics—they remain associated with the tradition primarily because they experienced its formative influence during their youth. These adults declare that, as a result of this upbringing, they cannot help but be Catholic in some way. In addition to the specific moment in Catholic history, their generation's character within the broader American culture has affected their representations of Catholic experience. As baby boomers who lived through the civil rights movement and feminist reforms, these writers reflect on their past from a certain cultural perspective that their parents and grandparents would not have known.

In my analysis of their literary representations of Catholic life, I have pointed out that despite some diversity among the authors with regard to ethnicity, gender, age, class

⁴⁷For further reading on American conversion narratives, see Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, *Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Karl Frederick Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992); Rodger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998); Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience; Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (New York,: Schocken Books, 1972).

and location, they all place authority at the center of their stories. Authority surfaces in three distinct contexts, though each certainly intersects with the other. At school and in church, children learned the strict rules they needed to follow as Catholics. Nuns and priests, they suggest, imposed upon them the rigorous guidelines of the tradition that claimed them. At home, the authors imply, they encountered a different kind of Catholic authority whereby family members and daily life around the house imposed religious and moral expectations. Then, even in the spaces between the institutional church and the home, cultural Catholics identify one more context of authority in their narratives. They demonstrate how the constructions of ethnic and religious identity that occurred within their neighborhoods ascribed identities and issued norms for a person's character and behavior.

Of course, as I noted along the way and showed most overtly in this last chapter, authors ultimately control Catholic experience by representing it in text. By writing the formative elements of this tradition, they actually exert their own authority over all those powerful Catholic forces they endured as children and adolescents. They grasp the chance to shape the memory of those settings and circumstances. Moreover, this activity offers an ideal way of staying connected to that past on their own terms. Educated and removed from their old surroundings and well settled into American professions (especially the academy), writing offers a welcome opportunity for cultural Catholics to reflect on the way the tradition has shaped them and to do it as they choose. Through their narratives they perpetuate their associations with the past by renewing them on the page, and they effectively form communities with others in similar situations. By asserting authority over their Catholic experience even as they continually insist on its

inescapably formative influence, these authors set the stage for the identity of cultural Catholics.

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