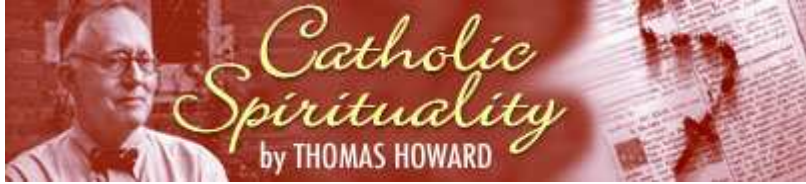


## Catholic Spirituality by Thomas Howard

An excerpt from his book, *The Night Is Far Spent: A Treasury of Thomas Howard*

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*Editor's Note:* In his books and articles, Thomas Howard has never been one to shy away from controversy. While attending the Evangelical Church of his parents and teaching English at an Evangelical college, Howard wrote his provocative best-seller *Evangelical is Not Enough*. Soon after entering the Anglican Communion, Howard began asking the kinds of questions that would eventually lead him into the Roman Catholic Church.



Throughout his pilgrimage of faith, Howard wrote numerous thought-provoking yet respectful articles on a wide range of topics for both

Protestant and Catholic publications, gaining him a wide and loyal following. Known for his wit and charm, Howard also was a sought after speaker for conferences and college graduations. Due to a request made by one of his faithful readers, this collection of Howard's best material has now been published: [\*The Night Is Far Spent: A Treasury of Thomas Howard\*](#). Liturgical reform and sacred architecture, women's ordination and hierarchical authority, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien--these and many other topics of interest to Protestants and Catholics alike are tackled by Howard with his characteristic thoughtfulness in these articles and speeches--many of them never before published--that span more than twenty years of his prolific career.

The following essay was originally a lecture given at Gordon College, June 1995.

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My guess is that a great clutter of bric-a-brac swims into your imagination when you hear of Catholic spirituality: rosaries, holy water stoups, crucifixes, little plastic Saint Christophers for your dashboard, and laminated holy cards depicting pastel-tinted saints with their eyes cast soulfully up into the ozone, not to mention all the polychrome statues and banks of candles flickering in little red glass cups (there are even electric candles that have a bogus flicker).

My guess is also that I am addressing at least three groups of people all stirred in together here in this assembly. The biggest group of you would locate yourselves in that wing of Protestantism known as Evangelicalism and will have been brought up in Evangelical households. A second group will tell us, "I was a Catholic until I was fifteen, then I met Jesus", or "I was Catholic until I was seventeen, then I became a Christian." A third group of you are Roman Catholic even as we speak and may possibly have discovered that some of your colleagues here are very far from satisfied that your Catholicism qualifies you as a Christian. There may also be a fourth group, namely, those of you who are trying to shuck off whatever remnants of the Christian religion are still clinging to you so that you can get on with your own agenda.

Let me see if I can throw any light on this topic of Catholic spirituality so that the whole array of us may grasp things in a fairly clear light.

As you know, all of us do what we do for reasons that have roots in our history and culture. Some Jews, for example, wear great fur hats and long black coats and white stockings. You need to inquire into their history before you decide that they have unstylish taste. Calvinists put the pulpit at the center of focus in their churches: they have passionate reasons for adopting this architectural arrangement. Evangelicals sing a certain kind of gospel song, or praise song, which finds its roots in modern American culture. I am speaking, of course, of tradition. To be human at all is to be deeply rooted in tradition. We would all agree that there are bad traditions and good traditions: suttee in India, I suppose, and the shackling of slaves would be bad traditions, whereas taking off one's hat in a church and standing up when a woman comes into the room would be good traditions. To say that something is traditional leaves open the question as to whether it ought to be changed. If it is frivolous, or brutish, or misbegotten, then we would all agree that change is indicated.

There is no such thing, as you know, as nontraditional Christianity. What we do when we meet with other believers for worship, and the sequence we follow, and the very phrases and vocabulary that crop up--these did not spring straight from the pages of the New Testament yesterday. John Wesley, or General William Booth, or Menno Simons, or John Calvin, or Martin Luther, or J. N. Darby, or John Wimber, or D. L. Moody, or Roger Williams, or A. J. Gordon, or Ignatius of Antioch, or Clement of Rome, or Justin Martyr, or Gregory I--these gentlemen stand there between you and the morning of Pentecost in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

Even if you strive mightily for spontaneity in your worship, for example, you find two things: first, there is an ancient tradition of efforts at spontaneity in worship--it is called Montanism--and secondly, you discover that your spontaneity very quickly jells into half a dozen or so phrases and gestures. We are all human, forsooth, and we can no more shuck off tradition than we can shuck off these bodies of ours.

As our forerunners in the ancient Faith moved out from that dazzling Pentecostal morning into the long haul of history, we find that the touchstone for their life together, and for their prayer, and for their worship, was apostolic. Christianity was not just a higgledy-piggledy aggregate of independent believers and groups scattered across Samaria and Asia Minor. You had to be in obedient, visible, organic communion with the apostles themselves. Then, as the decades roiled on and Peter and John and James and the others died, you found yourself under the authority of the men on whom they had laid their hands. These men were overseers, or pastors: *bishop* is the word that came into play very quickly. If you were a Christian, you said, "Polycarp is my bishop", or "Ignatius is my bishop." There was no such thing in the Church to which you and I owe our faith--there was no such thing as an independent, or individualistic, Christian.

Naturally, zealous types popped up out of the weeds every hour on the half hour, so to speak, saying, "Hi, guys: I'm starting me a church over here", or "I've got a word from the Lord", or "The Holy Ghost has revealed thus and such to me." These men were called heresiarchs by the Christians (there were some women, too).

Things were very strict, actually: if you doubt this, look at Saint Paul's Epistles or eavesdrop on the Council in Jerusalem, which the apostles convened to decide what you were supposed to do about certain matters of conscience. The Christians were not left organizing workshops and symposia to hash over issues: the apostles told you what to do and what to believe. This news may make you skittish, but all of us, Baptist, O.P.C., Coptic, R.C., or Grace Chapel, have to agree that that was the way the apostles did things, for good or ill. If we attempt a different scheme, we do so under the titanic gaze of that great cloud of witnesses who, says the Book of Hebrews, are watching us as we stumble along through our fragment of history.

To be a believer at all in those early days was to look on yourself, not so much as a private individual who had accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, but rather as one who had joined himself to this entity called the Church. If, say, you were a Christian shopkeeper in Antioch, and I, your pagan neighbor, having watched you and your fellow believers for a couple of years, came to you and said, "Um, I think I'd like to become a Christian", you would not say to me, "Oh! Great! Here's John 3:16. We can just bow our heads here, and you can repeat this prayer after me, and then you'll be a Christian." No. You would say to me, "Ah. You want to be a Christian, do you? Well--I'll introduce you to our bishop, Ignatius, and he will turn you over to some of the Christians for instruction for about a year, and you will be allowed to sit in on our worship (but you'll have to leave when we get to the Lord's Supper every week), and then, next year the bishop will baptize you, and then you'll be a Christian."

If this sounds peculiar to us modern American believers, our attitude toward it is an index of how far we have removed ourselves from the disciplines and traditions of the very men to whom we owe our faith. And incidentally here, that ancient scheme may be what lies at the bottom of the confusion Evangelicals sometimes encounter when they ask some Roman Catholic if he is "saved" or "born again". Most Catholics will mutter and hem and haw, and possibly croak out, "No--I'm a Catholic." In so doing, he is

groping for an identity that goes back to apostolic times. That word catholic came into play within a few decades after Pentecost. To be catholic was to be identified with Peter and John and Paul, and with Ignatius and Clement and Polycarp, and with that odd crowd in the Roman Empire who worshipped God and his servant Jesus (this is how they often phrased it). It was a profoundly corporate identity. Individualism had not taken control in those centuries, and, interestingly enough, it was at that time that what we see today as Roman Catholic piety began to form itself.

Which brings up a point: earnest Christian believers often speak of "going back to the Book of Acts", or of taking their cues from the New Testament alone, as though they were saying something trenchant. What they miss, of course, is that the infant Church did not take her cues from the New Testament (there was none), and secondly, that in this New Testament you can't find a blueprint for Christian worship (Acts 2:42 lists four ingredients of their meetings together, but does not tell us how they arranged things). And thirdly, of course, to insist too shrilly on a rigorous adherence to the letter of Acts 2:42 is to suggest that the seed which the Holy Ghost planted was a poor seed and never grew. A Roman Catholic sees the growth of the Church, and of her worship, not as a matter of naughty medieval popes Scotch-taping accretions onto the Church's worship until finally you get an extravaganza called a High Mass, but rather as the organic budding and flowering and fruit-bearing of a tree from a healthy seed--a tree big enough for all the birds of heaven to roost in, to borrow the Gospel phrase. So that, when you point out to a Catholic that his worship, the Mass, scarcely looks like those huddled gatherings in the Upper Room and so forth, he will be thinking of the habit that acorns have of growing into enormous oaks, which of course don't look like acorns at all.

This brings us to another point which I might be able to help with here. On this matter of the Mass, or the liturgy, as the apostolic Church called her worship, we blunder into something that might surprise you. When you go to the very, very earliest documents in the Church, you find that corporate worship had taken on a highly specific form. They met, not for a sermon mainly, nor for fellowship mainly, nor primarily for teaching, nor singing, nor anything else at all except the Eucharist. The Lord's Table, in other words. That, from the beginning, was what they meant by worship. They would have been stumped to find Christians two thousand years later gathering for corporate worship on the Lord's Day without celebrating the Eucharist.

And not only this: their worship did not take any old form. They knew nothing at all of spontaneity. Like the Lord Jesus, who had grown up in the synagogue, and like all the people of God right back to Moses and before, they would have known that, when you come together on a regular, recurring, long-term basis to offer the sacrifice of adoration at the Sapphire Throne, you need a form,. For the form sets you free from the shallow puddle of your own ad hoc resources of the moment and draws you into the dignity, nobility, and splendor attending the angelic worship of the Most High, and for which you and I yearn with fathomless yearning. For we mortals are, of course, ceremonial creatures. Hurrah for spontaneity in its place, but when we come to the great, central, profound mysteries that undergird our mortal life--birth, marriage, worship, and death--then we reach for a form. A ceremony. Every tribe, culture, society, and civilization has known this.

Why do we ceremonialize that which matters the most to us? Why do you brides dress up that way and walk so slowly down the aisle? Why do they drive the hearse so slowly? Why do you put those candles onto that birthday cake?

Because, you and I would protest, the ceremony, far from obscuring the event and far from cluttering things up, lo and behold, brings home to us the full weight of significance. Oh, to be sure, obstetrics and gynecology are to be praised for their assistance in getting our babies launched, but when we come to what it means--that a new person has appeared on the scene--ah, then, we need to go deeper than the obstetrics can carry us, and the only way we can do that is by means of ceremony. All Jews and all Orthodox and Roman Catholic and Anglican Christians count on this; and all Muslims and Hindus, and indeed people of every tribe and culture, will testify to this. So, if you tax a Roman Catholic friend about

why Catholics stick with a rigid form for worship, he will not quite grasp what you are urging on him. Surely, he would want to know, you don't seriously suppose that spontaneity is what we want when we come, as the holy people of God, week after week, century after century, to offer the sacrifice of adoration at the Sapphire Throne?

It may also be helpful here if I explain that not only the structure of the Mass itself--the first part, called the Synaxis, which contains all the scriptural readings, and the sermon and the creed and the prayers, and the second part, called the Anaphora, with the Great Thanksgiving and the Communion itself--that not only this structure, but also the very words themselves, go back to the first and second centuries. It is a tremendously moving thing, believe me, to read the texts of what those early Christians said and did when they gathered, and then to hear those same words in the liturgy in your local parish from Sunday to Sunday. A glorious and unbroken continuity unfurls itself: you know that you are linked with the apostles, the Fathers, the martyrs, the bishops and confessors, and the whole company of the faithful from Pentecost to our own day. A Roman Catholic has a difficult time grasping why Christians would wish to set this ancient liturgy on one side in favor of a modern blueprint.

But my guess is that by this time some of you may be murmuring, "Well--it's all very well, the noble antiquity of which you speak. But come: all these Irish plumbers and Sicilian pasta-cooks and Cuban taxi drivers--am I to believe that they are swept into such dizzy heights every time they go to Mass?"

A legitimate question Touché. And the answer, of course, is no--no more than your average Hebrew saw the glory of God every time the Levites blew the trumpets, nor than your average Presbyterian lawyer or Episcopalian CEO or Gordon College undergraduate, sees that glory when the organ, or the guitars, strike up the opening hymn. We mortals don't do very well with this business of worship. Where was your mind--where was min---during the singing of the hymn a few minutes ago? Alas. But all of us, Baptist, Pentecostal, or Catholic, would reach for Saint Augustine's maxim *abusus non tollit usus*, if some nonreligious friend of ours suggested that we ought to abandon our worship practices since most of the time our minds are wandering anyway. "The abuse of a thing does not take away its proper use." We don't throw in the towel on chapel at Gordon because people's minds wander or they read a magazine in their laps. We soldier on, keeping the gate of the tabernacle open, so to speak, so that good and holy souls may come and offer their offerings, and so that others of us, finding ourselves in these precincts, may perhaps be roused to our duties toward the Divine Majesty.

Let me touch on one other point about Roman Catholic worship and piety that, I think, constitutes a scandal to Protestant Christians. It is this business of the physical. Catholics kneel, and bow, and cross themselves. Some even strike their breast during the Agnus Dei ("Lamb of God"). And there is often incense. The celebrant wears elaborate vestments. There are candles, and holy water, and bread and wine. It is not at all the Geneva or Zurich or Edinburgh pattern of things. Isn't it all, really, pagan?

Well, yes, if you mean that pagans use incense and bow and light candles. But the minute we say that we know we are in trouble, since pagans also gather for worship, and pray, and listen to teaching, just as we Christians do. And pagans kneel, the way many of you do at your bedside. Clearly we can't adopt the rule that says, If the pagans do it, we Christians mustn't. The point is, we men bow, and kneel, and gather, and lift up holy hands. The rub comes when you ask which deity is being invoked. If it is Baa! or Osiris, then you have paganism. If it is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then you have Christian worship.

But again--hasn't the New Testament put an end to all ceremony? Isn't worship a matter strictly of the inner man now?

Well, yes, if you mean that the Father seeks those who will worship him in spirit and in truth. But of course, that's not a New Testament innovation: the prophets were forever harrying Israel about the same thing. And John Knox and Jonathan Edwards and Søren Kierkegaard harried the Protestants about their farcical and empty worship rituals. Catholics have no corner on this difficulty.

So--granting that it is always difficult for us mortals to bring together and keep together the outward form (the singing in Gordon chapel of "Crown Him with Many Crowns", say) and the inner reality (my heart actually aspiring thus to crown the mystic Lamb)--granting this severe difficulty, shouldn't we pare things down to a stark minimum so that the danger of mere mumbo-jumbo is diminished?

Possibly so. On the other hand, of course, you and I are not Gnostics. We are not Manicheans. Those were the people who wanted religion to be a matter of our flying off into a vacuous and disembodied ether, jettisoning these embarrassing flesh-and-blood bodies of ours, with all of the sneezing and wheezing they bring along. All of those highminded, nineteenth-century Bostonians like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott and William Ellery Channing, were quasi-Manicheans. They wanted Christianity to be fumigated and cerebral. Sit in your New England church on a wooden pew and think about God. But please--no smells and bells. Please.

You and I would answer Emerson and company by pointing out that Christianity, far from being the religion merely of the Book, like Islam, is profoundly fleshly. But after the altars and lambs and heifers and burned fat of the Old Testament, we get spiritual: right? Wrong. There is a Conceiving--of a babe in the womb of a young girl. There is parturition, and circumcision. There is water to wine at a wedding. And there is your salvation and mine, wrought, not by edicts handed down from the heavens, but by thorns and splinters and nails and gashes. But then we get spiritual--right? Wrong again. A body, out of the sepulchre. And worse yet--that body--our human flesh, taken up at the Ascension into the midmost mysteries of the Holy Trinity. When's the last time you heard a sermon on the implications of the Ascension? And then, of course, not just a book, but Bread and Wine, given to us, day by day, for as long as history lasts. A very physical religion we belong to.

This is what is bespoken in the Roman Mass. The Mass is sacramental worship, as they say: that is, the physical is understood as being the nexus between the seen and the unseen; between time and eternity; just as it was on the altars of Israel, and in the flesh of the Incarnate Son of God, and on the Cross, and in the Resurrection and the Ascension. And you and I are more than souls, or intellects. Jesus Christ has saved the whole man, kneecaps, eardrums, nostrils, and all: hence Christians kneel to pray, and play guitars in their worship, and bring incense. It is good for my heart that my knees touch the floor. It is good for my soul that my neck muscles bend a bit when I say grace at lunch. These physical things belong to the seamless personhood that is me. Emerson had it all wrong.

I might wind this up here by mentioning one item that is as sticky as any of the items on the list of questions that good Evangelicals have about Roman Catholic piety. I mean the Rosary.

If anything on earth looks like the vain repetition the Bible warns us against, it would certainly be the Rosary. It entails seemingly endless repetitions of the Hail Mary. That can't possibly be "prayer", surely?

Let me see if I can help you see at least the reason Catholics appreciate the Rosary. First, we all know how terribly difficult it is to fix our minds in Christian meditation. If you have attempted it yourself, you know that your worst enemy is wandering thoughts. You also know that you very quickly run out of things to say when you are pondering one of the Gospel mysteries (and surely if one is a serious Christian one will have as part of one's daily exercises just such meditating and pondering). The Rosary supplies us with a way of tarrying (that is the key word, actually) in a systematic and progressive way, in the presence of all the great events of our salvation, in the company of the one who was most receptive to the Lord, namely, the Virgin Mary, who said, you will remember, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done unto me according to Thy word." Alas--that is what you and I, in our father Adam and our mother Eve did not say in Eden; and it is one way of summing up this whole process of growth in the Christian life we have embarked on. If only I can learn, increasingly, to say, from my heart, "Be it done unto me according to Thy word."

The Rosary presents us with fifteen of the Gospel events--the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and so forth--and, by giving us a sort of refrain to murmur as we place

ourselves *in conspectu Dei* at each scene--the way charismatics will murmur "Jesus! Jesus!" or the way we Evangelicals repeat "Alleluia!" or "Crown him! crown him!" in a hymn--by giving us a quiet refrain to keep on our tongues as we tarry, it helps us to stay in place. The words are like ball bearings, so to speak. They assist our poor scattered faculties to stay in line. And of course, the "Hail Mary" is biblical: we are simply repeating Gabriel's salutation to this woman--we are one of the many generations who want to call her blessed, as she herself sang in the Magnificat. For of course she was the one of us who was taken most intimately into the whole drama of redemption: the patriarchs and prophets and kings and apostles all bore witness to the Word: Mary bore the Word. She is the fulfillment of Genesis 3:15. Insofar as we increasingly unite our own aspirations with hers, we move closer and closer into intimate union with the Lord. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord": if only I can learn to say that, in a thousand situations all day long when irritation, or resentment, or lust, or impatience surge up in me. "Be it done unto me according to Thy word." It is a wonderful frame of mind for a Christian to aspire to. The Rosary, day by day, presents to us those events upon which our souls ought to be habitually dwelling and helps us to tarry in those Gospel precincts.

My time is up. I have scarcely touched on this matter of the Virgin Mary and have said nothing of the Pope, or of prayers to the saints, and Purgatory, and so many other things that seem an outrage to ardent Evangelical imagination. As a form of shorthand, I may simply say that every single one of these notions and practices is profoundly centered on Jesus Christ who, says the Roman Catholic Church, echoing Saint Paul, is "the one mediator between God and man".

There are gigantic matters that we could talk about. For my part, I want to say a most fervent and heartfelt thanks to Gordon College or having me here today. All my memories of my fifteen years on the faculty here are good memories. God bless and prosper Gordon College, say I.

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**Thomas Howard** was raised in a prominent Evangelical home (his sister is well-known author and former missionary Elisabeth Elliot), became Episcopalian in his mid-twenties, then entered the Catholic Church in 1985, at the age of fifty. Howard is a highly acclaimed writer and scholar, noted for his studies of Inklings C.S. Lewis (*Narnia & Beyond: A Guide to the Fiction of C.S. Lewis* [2006, 1987]) and Charles Williams (*The Novels of Charles Williams* [1991]), as well as books including *Christ the Tiger* (1967), *Chance or the Dance?* (1969), *Hallowed be This House* (1976), *Evangelical is Not Enough* (1984), *If Your Mind Wanders at Mass* (1995), *On Being Catholic* (1997), *The Secret of New York Revealed*, and *Lead, Kindly Light: My Journey to Rome*, the story of his embrace of Catholicism, and *Dove Descending: A Journey Into T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*. Read more about and by Thomas Howard [here](#).

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