

Your Grown-Up Faith

Blending the Three Elements of Belief

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KENNETH L. PARKER

**INSPIRED BY THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF
BLESSED JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN**



Liguori
LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Imprimi Potest:
Harry Grile, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri 63057

To order, call 800-325-9521
www.liguori.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Parker, Kenneth L.

Your grown-up faith: blending the three elements of belief/Kenneth L. Parker.—
1st ed.

p. cm.

“Inspired by the spiritual life of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman.”

1. Spiritual life—Catholic Church. 2. Faith development. 3. Newman, John Henry, 1801-1890. I. Newman, John Henry, 1801-1890. II. Title.

BX2178.P37 2012

248.4'82—dc22

p ISBN 978-0-7648-2221-6

e ISBN 978-0-7648-6738-5

2012030275

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Excerpts from *The British Museum Is Falling Down* by David Lodge, published by Secker & Warburg Limited, are reprinted by permission of the Random House Group Limited. All rights reserved.

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Printed in the United States of America
16 15 14 13 12 / 5 4 3 2 1
First Edition

Dedicated to my three sons,
Geoffrey, Emanuel, and Luke

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Preface

A project like this is never completed without the help and guidance of many mentors, friends, and loved ones. I am deeply grateful to Professor Lawrence Barmann, who has taught me so much about Baron Friedrich von Hügel, and his concept of the three elements of religion. This book is the fruit of hundreds of conversations and sessions with students, parishioners, and friends over the last twenty years. They have helped me understand the three elements of belief and sharpened my appreciation for this way of analyzing a believer's faith journey. The monks and oblates of Ascension Monastery in Jerome, Idaho, heard early versions of these chapters during a retreat in May 2011. Their enthusiasm convinced me to complete this project.

Luis Medina of Liguori Publications has been a consistent source of support and encouragement during the process of preparing this book. In the final stages of editing the text, students in the spring 2012 creative writing class at the Eastern Region Diagnostic and Corrections Center gave this book a serious read and close critique. Within that class, I am par-

ticularly indebted to Mr. Cory Gardner and Mr. Raymond Scott, who are the best copyeditors I have ever had! Thanks must also be extended to doctoral students at Saint Louis University, who took time out of a busy semester to offer advice and make recommendations. They helped me adjust theological nuances and clarify points of history and doctrine.

Finally, I thank my three sons, Geoffrey, Emanuel, and Luke, who remain a constant inspiration and source of joy. No father has ever been more blessed. I marvel at their kindness, generosity of spirit, and patience. Their contagious sense of humor keeps me laughing and helps me remember not to take myself too seriously. This book is dedicated to them in the hopes that they will remain true to their journey of faith, and learn in God's timing how to blend the three elements of belief.

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SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI
FEAST OF SAINT ATHANASIUS
MAY 2, 2012

Introduction

We must believe something; the difference between religious [people] and others is that the latter trust this world, the former the world unseen. Both of them have faith, but the one has faith in the surface of things, the other in the word of God.

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN
SERMONS BEARING ON SUBJECTS OF THE DAY (1844), 65

A smooth and easy life, an uninterrupted enjoyment of the goods of Providence, full meals, soft raiment, well-furnished homes, the pleasures of sense, the feeling of security, the consciousness of wealth—these, and the like, if we are not careful, choke up all the avenues of the soul, through which the light and breath of heaven might come to us.

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN
PAROCHIAL AND PLAIN SERMONS (1840), 5:381

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You picked up this book because you want a “grown-up” faith. This is a natural human desire. John Henry Newman rightly observed, “we must believe something.” The real question is not if you believe, but what you believe. In the early twenty-first century, the great temptation is to let the immediacy of non-stop media and the pressures of everyday life crowd out those things that draw you into the presence of God and mature your spiritual life. Yet if your Christian faith does not mold who you are, the world will. Saint Paul said it best: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

But how do you make progress on your journey of faith? This book is designed to help you do just that. Like you, I struggled for years to understand what it means to be a person of faith. The longing was there, but I was conscious of different parts of me pulling in what seemed contradictory directions. They appeared to be in conflict. Is faith about believing what I have been taught by authorities in my life—by parents, teachers, priests, bishops, and the pope? Or should I be skeptical about everything that authorities have told me is true and seek out proofs that will satisfy my mind? Maybe faith is not about dogmas and rules at all and is more about listening to the “inner voice” that guides me through my unique life experiences—being spiritual but not religious. If you have puzzled over any of these aspects of your faith, then this book is intended for you.

Everyone's life experience is different, so you are probably wondering if I have anything useful to share. In this book I will tell you a bit about my story of faith and explain what I have learned about the common themes discovered in the lives of others. I particularly want to draw on the life and writings of Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, whose remarkable life of faith is a rich resource for all of us. Although he lived in the 1800s, Newman's Christian life provides a moving example of the blessings and challenges that come from being a Christian in the fullest possible sense. Emerging from all of this is something that I call the three elements of belief.

The Three Elements of Belief

Listen, O my son, to the precepts of thy master, and incline the ear of thy heart, and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of a loving Father, that by the toil of obedience thou mayest return to Him from whom by the sloth of disobedience thou has gone away. To thee, therefore, my speech is now directed, who, giving up thine own will, takest up the strong and most excellent arms of obedience to do battle for Christ the Lord, the true King.

PROLOGUE, RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT

In the spring of 1977 I heard these words for the first time while visiting Saint Andrew's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery

in the Mojave Desert of California. They pierced my heart and called me toward a new path in life. Though a Southerner who had only recently arrived in the Los Angeles basin—Hollywood, drugs, and sex had not lured me westward. I was a twenty-two-year-old Protestant seminarian studying at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. On Sundays, I often attended two or three different church services and spent my leisure hours in informal theological debates rather than dancing at discotheques or improving my tan on the beach.

Nevertheless, I was living in rebellion. As the son of a successful Protestant pastor and profoundly devout evangelical mother, I had fled to the other side of the country to escape a father who—I imagined—wanted more than to call me back from “the sloth of disobedience.” On more than one occasion, in the midst of heated encounters over my life and faith, Mother admonished me to accept Dad’s instructions. “Your father wants what is best for you,” she would say. “It is better to obey than to seek your own will.” I would not—could not—comply.

However, the path to which Benedict called me was not back to North Carolina and my earthly father, but toward an unthinkable future as a Roman Catholic—and even to consider the possibility of being a monk (a vocation I tested for five years after I became a Roman Catholic). Could this be the voice of God calling to me, though the words were written in the early sixth century? That question haunted me for the next six years as I struggled against the prospect of

such a painful, life-altering step. Surely God did not expect such a sacrifice.

After finishing a master's degree in historical theology at Fuller Seminary, I continued my studies at the University of Cambridge and focused my research on English Reformation Studies. In part I sought reasons for remaining a Protestant and grounds for rejecting Roman Catholicism. Out of love for my parents I yearned to return to my evangelical roots and live out the Christian faith within the parameters of my received heritage. Yet there was no escaping the call I had heard in the desert.

In the summer of 1981, during a seven-day retreat at Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight in the south of England, my future became more clear. Father Joseph Warradlow, the monastery's guestmaster and then only priest I knew in England, had devoted much of that week to exploring the reasons why I should not become a Catholic. I knew the history of the Church, its many failures, and the scandals of its structures and leaders. I had serious questions about doctrines and devotional practices that felt alien, incomprehensible, and even repulsive. Father Joseph warned me that becoming a Roman Catholic might sever me from the love of my parents and cause friends to shun me. Yet during an afternoon walk along the monastery's chestnut tree lane, I let go of fears about my future and set aside all the rational critiques I had amassed against the Roman Catholic Church. God was leading me down a path I did not know toward a spiritual home filled with unfamiliar

customs and beliefs. I prayed for guidance and relaxed in the hope that clarity would follow.

I relate these events because they illustrate the theme of this book: the three elements of belief. During more than twenty years of teaching theology at Saint Louis University, I have been inspired by Friedrich von Hügel's book *The Mystical Element of Religion* and have taught my students what he called the "three elements of religion." This way of reflecting on religious experience is at once simple and profound. The three elements—the Child's Way, the Youth's Way, and the Adult's Way—are easily understood, for they are drawn from our lived experience. And use of this analogy will help you to recognize how all of these aspects of belief contribute to a "grown-up" faith.

John Henry Newman's life story is one of the best examples of how to blend these three elements of belief. He was formed in childhood to be a devout Protestant. In adolescence and early manhood, Newman struggled with questions about his faith; and after a long period of inner turmoil he slowly came to realize that he must become a Roman Catholic. His intentional Christian life gave him perceptive insights into the three elements of belief. As I have studied Newman's life and thought for over twenty years, in this book I use his experiences and writings—along with my own—to illustrate the three elements of belief.

The Child's Way—The First Element of Belief

My earliest memories are of the large Bible that sat on the coffee table in the living room, Dad's sing-song preaching voice (so typical of Southern ministers of that time), and Mother helping my older brother memorize Psalm 1 in his upper bunk bed while I lay quietly below, saying the words under my breath. My life began in a Southern state in the 1950s where fewer than one-half of one percent of the population was Roman Catholic. I knew that to be saved meant going to the front of church (what we called the mourner's bench), asking God to forgive my sins and being surrounded by adults who encouraged and prayed for me. From my grandmother I learned that the pope was the antichrist and that mainline Protestants were merely Sunday Christians. I lived among the chosen few, who were called to live in sinless perfection and faultless obedience to all of God's laws. These experiences formed my childhood religious imagination.

The Child's Way of religious belief is largely shaped by authorities and the religious environment they create. My early understanding of belief came through people, places, and things. Authorities, institutions, religious objects, and customs shaped what I took to be the external "facts" about Christian faith. For me, these beliefs came from the denominational tradition I was raised in. It was authority-focused and marked by trusting obedience. These memories affect me to this day and remain a powerful context for my life as a believer.

The Youth's Way—The Second Element of Belief

With the onset of puberty and teenage years came new experiences of the world. My parents took me on trips abroad to the Middle East and Europe. And as my teenage years advanced I traveled in South America, Africa, and Asia. I witnessed Christian worship in other churches and met persons who practiced other religions. One of my best friends in junior high school was Jewish. Though I had opportunities to preach to tribal peoples in Surinam as a teenager and smuggled Bibles into the Soviet Union in my early twenties, the religious experiences of those I sought to evangelize deeply troubled me. The sincerity and devotion of those outside my church tradition defied the categories I had been taught.

I puzzled over the behavioral prohibitions of my church. I wanted to go to the junior high school socials...and dance! Yet even more disturbing to my parents, as a teenager I began to puzzle about the core teachings of our church. In my college and seminary years, so much that I learned cast doubt on church teachings received as a child. Could anyone really achieve sinless perfection? Why was it so easy to sin and fall from grace, only to repeat the cycle at the mourner's bench over and over again? When I sought explanations, my questions met with exasperation or worse. When the authorities of my childhood faith failed to answer my questions, I sought knowledge from other sources.

This inquisitive, testing aspect of faith, with its curiosity

about religion's boundaries and possibilities is called the Youth's Way. This element of belief dominated my life from junior high school to doctoral studies at Cambridge University. Experiences outside home and the church community had stimulated an intense religious curiosity. There seemed to be contradictions between the "facts" of my childhood faith and the complexity of the world. While not consciously desiring to "rebel," I doubted the truth of certain doctrines and practices of my church. I wanted childhood authorities to take this impulse for rational discussion and debate seriously. When this trustful questioning met with fear, rebuke, and anger, I began to read books about Christianity and other religious traditions. I sought out people of faith who were not afraid of my questions. Religious experiences that stimulated new ways of thinking about and living out my faith were explored. This intellectual quest took directions that I did not intend or desire. After fifteen years of questioning and study, I reached a crossroad between the Child's Way that had formed my early religious imagination and the Youth's Way, which had grown out of a life of study and wide-ranging experiences.

In the Youth's Way, logical explanations for tenets of belief are demanded, and there is resistance to relying on authorities for answers where reason can be applied. It is an experience of faith that is rational, inquisitive, and marked by curiosity. For someone like me, this element of belief became a dominant aspect of my faith. It remains a strong dimension of my life

as a believer and explains why I enjoy studying and teaching theology. This desire to understand is a compulsion.

The Adult's Way—The Third Element of Belief

In the afternoon sun of that summer day at Quarr Abbey, the inner conviction to become a Roman Catholic marked the emergence of the third element of belief in my life. The Adult's Way is the element of belief which is a step beyond the received religion of the Child's Way and the rationally analyzed belief systems of the Youth's Way. It is one that leads toward an experiential faith, that is not an external "fact" or a "system of ideas" to be analyzed, but a lived, internalized faith. Mental prayer, contemplative reading of sacred and revered texts, and the sacraments become aids to this inner growth of faith. These nourish the soul.

This third element has also been called the Ethico-Mystical Way because the conviction to act runs beyond what external authorities can impart and systems of belief can explain. It is a turning point, when faith becomes an interior, guiding principle. It defines who you are and motivates your choices. My growth into the Catholic Church was not intended or even desired but became a call to action that could not be resisted without serious harm to my Christian life. The Adult's Way has been the compass that has guided my spiritual journey down to the present.

In the Adult's Way, Christian belief is internalized, the

limits of human religious authorities are acknowledged, and the insufficiency of human reason is recognized. There is a profound need to discover through active commitment the full meaning of the deepest principles of belief. This experience causes a fundamental change, or conversion, in one's life. It is an experience of faith that is ethical, mystical, and marked by compassion and love for God and neighbor.

How to Use this Book

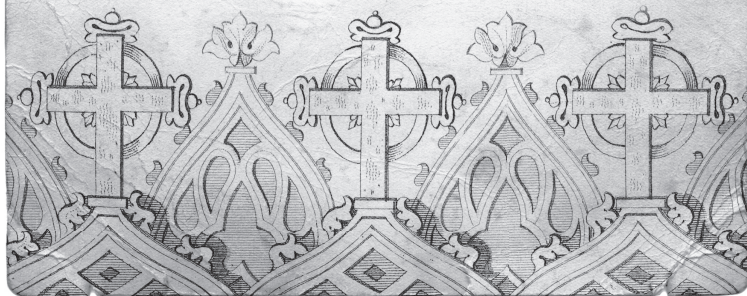
This book is intended to help you explore the meaning of the three elements of belief—the Child's Way, the Youth's Way, and the Adult's Way—in your life, and consider how these elements of belief, balanced in your life, can lead to greater insight into your experience of God, the Christian community that nurtures your faith, and the world which needs your example of living a “grown-up” faith.

Two chapters will be devoted to each of the three elements, and the concluding chapter will address how a healthy interaction of the three elements of belief can assist in the growth of even the most mature Christian. Like you, my own journey of faith continues to challenge and change me; but perhaps God can use this book to guide you toward deeper reflection on these matters. May Saint Benedict's closing words of the Prologue guide your thoughts as you read this book; for “as we advance in the...faith, we shall run the way of God's commandments with expanded hearts and unspeakable sweetness of love.”

SECTION I

The First Element of Belief

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CHAPTER ONE

Receiving a Religious Imagination

Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.

LUKE 18:17

Christianity is not a matter of opinion, but an external fact, entering into, carried out in, indivisible from, the history of the world.

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

CERTAIN DIFFICULTIES FELT BY ANGLICANS (1857), 290

The Church is a collection of souls, brought together in one by God's secret grace,
though that grace comes to them through visible instruments,
and unites them to a visible hierarchy.
What is seen is not the whole of the Church,
but the visible part of it.

JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

SERMONS PREACHED ON VARIOUS OCCASIONS, (1857), 65

John Henry Newman once observed, “children’s minds are impressible in a very singular way, such as is not common afterwards.” If you are like me, you look back on your childhood and probably remember only vignettes and have forgotten all the rest. In matters of faith, Newman concluded that these form the basis for your religious imagination, which is “traceable to a few external circumstances” (*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 4:46, 1849). Often a single event or memory can shape crucial aspects of your Christian faith and how you practice your beliefs.

Newman’s observations can be illustrated in the early childhood experiences of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who as a young girl grew up in a family and location that instilled a rich religious imagination. The impact was so profound that she entered the Carmelite Convent in Lisieux, France, at age fifteen, and lived an exemplary life until her tragically young death at age twenty-four in 1897. Under obedience to her mother superior, she wrote an autobiography called *Story of a Soul*. One of her earliest memories was of blessed bread.

Until the rise of frequent communion in the Roman Catholic Church at the urging of Pope Pius X in 1905, the more common experience at Sunday Mass was receiving ordinary bread that had been blessed at the offertory (*pain bénit*). Nineteenth-century French Catholics commonly took blessed bread home to those unable to attend because of sickness or other impediments. For young children, this

became their experience of “communion” in the years prior to receiving the Eucharist.

Thérèse of Lisieux described this practice as one of her first memories of religion. During her earliest years, Thérèse’s mother stayed home with her rather than take her to Mass. Her slightly older sister Céline commonly returned with blessed bread for her little sister, though on occasion the supply at church ran out and she returned empty-handed. Thérèse remembered on at least one Sunday complaining that she could not go without her “Mass” and asking her sister to make blessed bread for her.

Céline immediately opened the cupulations, took out the bread, cut a tiny bit off, and after saying a Hail Mary quite solemnly on her knees, triumphantly presented it to me; and I, making the sign of the cross, ate it with devotion, fancying it tasted exactly like the real blessed bread.

Clearly, Thérèse was a precociously religious child. Her mother reported in a letter to Thérèse’s older sister, Marie, “Céline said the other day: ‘How can God be in such a tiny host?’ Thérèse answered: ‘That is not strange, because God is Almighty!’ ‘And what does Almighty mean?’ [Céline asked. Thérèse replied,] ‘It means that He can do whatever He likes.’”

While it is tempting for some to read Thérèse’s *Story of a Soul* with a cynical attitude because of its sweet, innocent

tone, her earliest memories are examples of the Child's Way. The child gains her impressions of religion from what she sees and is told. It is a fact, a thing—the foundation on which her Christian belief is built.

The five senses play a dominant role in shaping the Child's Way. To the young child's senses, symbols and places, images and objects, ritualized gestures and postures all play a role in understanding the outward realities of religious practice. Through parents, older siblings, clergy, and teachers, an "authoritative" understanding of religion is cultivated. I use the word "authoritative" because this is knowledge mediated by trusted people, institutions, and traditional practices. It is rooted in the past, in custom, and in communal patterns of belief and ritual that are an external reality.

For Thérèse, God's presence in the world—and God's capacity to be present in the Eucharist—were self-evident realities. For the authority she granted her slightly older sibling, to bless bread in the absence of bread blessed by a priest, illustrates the trust a child often places in those who help shape his or her religious imagination.¹

I recall being struck by the power of these childhood experiences during a conversation with a prominent Roman Catholic scholar at Cambridge University. As I prepared to become a Catholic during 1981 and 1982, this theologian took

1 Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion: As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1923), 51.