

A series of concentric circles in a light gray color, centered behind the main title text.

When's **God** Gonna **Call Me** **BACK?**

**RECONNECTING
WITH YOUR CREATOR**

Marge Fenelon



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Introduction

I was at my nephew's wedding, milling around and catching up with extended family. One of my relatives approached, someone critical of my Catholic faith with whom I'd unsuccessfully debated religion in the past. As long as we talked about inconsequential things like the weather, we were OK. But if the Church came up, it could quickly escalate into full-blown war. I was on guard.

"So, I saw your book," she said, referring to *When's God Gonna Show Up?*, which was published earlier that year.

I froze.

"I didn't read it, but I looked through some of it," she said.

I braced myself for some kind of slam against my faith. I could already feel myself becoming irritated.

"You're a [expletive] good writer," she said.

I was stunned but still suspicious. "Thank you," I muttered, not knowing what else to say.

"My husband says you're a [expletive] good writer, too," she added.

"I'm glad he thinks so," I said, still fishing for words.

"You know, you should write a book like that for people like me."

Now I was really stunned. "People like you?"

"Yeah, people like me. You know, lapsed Catholics."

"Lapsed Catholics?"

"If you wrote a book like that for people like me," she said, "I'd come back to the Church."

Truthfully, I was so shocked that I don't even remember how I responded. I might not have responded at all, at least not at that moment. Had she not brought up her proposition again during the course of the evening, I would have thought it was just the wine talking. I assured her that I'd talk to my editor at Liguori Publications and see what I could do. The challenge was on.

You know the rest of the story, of course. You're holding it in your hands right now. While I haven't always been as good as I'd like to be, I've never left the Church. So, if I was going to write a book for lapsed Catholics, I'd have to do some research. *When's God Gonna Call Me Back?* is the culmination of that research.

I sent word through a variety of communication channels, asking three questions:

1. Why did you leave the Church?
2. What kept you away?
3. What brought you back?

Over a period of several months, I received stories from lapsed and episodic Catholics from all over the country—even some from foreign countries—describing their experiences.

I offered them a deal. If they'd be up front and honest with me, I'd withhold all judgment and refrain from any proselytizing. All I wanted to do was listen. I promised them complete confidentiality and the masking of any identifying factors, so that each individual could share without consequence.

It worked. The e-mails, letters, and phone calls poured in. Not only were they frank with me, they were starkly honest in sharing their experiences, confusion, pain, and—in the cases of those who eventually returned to the Church—absolute joy at coming home.

I marveled, cried, fretted, and laughed right along with them. As I opened each e-mail or letter and picked up the phone for each call, I prayed for the person who was about to share with me, asking God's grace and guidance for them and for all they carried in their hearts. I'm still praying for them and will continue to do so.

I'm completely humbled that these individuals trusted me enough to confide some of the most difficult things they've ever said to anyone. I'm proud of them for having had the courage to face their demons, so to speak, and for being brave enough to share their experiences. I'm grateful to them for generously opening up their hearts to others who may suffer from the same or similar circumstances. I know it wasn't easy for them.

I hope you're also grateful to them, because you're the beneficiaries of their strife and wisdom. Whether you're a lapsed or episodic Catholic or the relative or friend of one, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by reading this book. I'm sure you'll find a bit of yourself or your loved ones in the persons and circumstances described in these pages. Read them. Hear the voices behind them. Relate to them. Reflect on them. Pray about them. Allow yourself to take another look at the Catholic Church, this time through different eyes. I'm sure you'll be pleasantly surprised at what you see.

MARGE FENELON
YEAR FOR PRIESTS

Heading Out

I had to lay down the law early in our marriage. One night, as I wailed and carried on about a situation in which I felt I'd been treated unjustly, my husband tried to console me. In his calm, matter-of-fact way, he said, "Don't be angry."

Bang! I exploded. I railed at him, seething and clenching my fists. "Don't you ever again tell me not to be angry! I can be angry if I want! You have no idea how I feel!" Poor guy. All he was trying to do was comfort his distressed wife.

I, on the other hand, was furious and needed to vent my frustration. It was the first step in trying to figure things out. Being told not to be angry only made me angrier and more frustrated. It made me feel as though nobody cared about how I felt or what had happened to me. Mark did care, but as a brand-new husband he didn't know quite how to get that across to me.

After that, we developed a system in which Mark would graciously allow me to vent, listening carefully, nodding, and stopping me only for clarification. When I had finished venting, he would ask a single question: "Do you want me to do anything about this?"

Most of the time I'd decline his offer, but occasionally I'd accept.

The stories in this chapter remind me of that newlywed argument. The people involved have experienced injustice, trauma, heartbreak, and disillusionment. They needed to tell their stories—to vent, so to speak—without having anyone necessarily do anything about it. At times I had to seek clarification, but mostly I just listened. It's the first step in trying to figure things out.



Politics From the Pulpit

Jason hadn't been to Mass in at least three years. The last time he'd gone, he'd been disgruntled by the homily. The priest had been speaking about the secular media and its liberal views. He'd gone to church for Mass, not to hear about the liberal media. He left the church in a huff and couldn't bring himself to go back the next Sunday.

That Sunday turned into many Sundays. His wife was distressed over his refusal to go to Mass and begged him to return. This went on week after week. Deep inside, Jason missed going to church, and he felt badly that he was hurting his wife. So, one Sunday morning, he woke up and decided to give it another try. Perhaps things would be different this time. His wife was ecstatic.

Things weren't different. In fact, from Jason's perspective, they were even worse. This Sunday, the homily was about politics and taking God along into the voting booth. The priest was encouraging the congregation to vote for a prolife candidate and speaking against the culture of death and its threat to society. Jason understood the Church's stance on abortion, but didn't think it should be preached from the pulpit. Additionally, he didn't understand why the Church spoke against abortion but not war. Wasn't the Church concerned

about the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who died in wars? And what about the death penalty? Why didn't the Church preach to people about voting for candidates who opposed that? Wasn't that a "life issue" as well? And what about protecting the child after birth? None of this made any sense to Jason, but it made him furious.

He and his wife didn't even stay for the rest of Mass. They left, and Jason swore that he'd never go back. He didn't go to church to hear about politics; he went to pray and celebrate Mass. He believed that the Church had no place in politics, and politics had no place in the Church. This didn't seem like the Church in which Jason had grown up, and he wondered if it wasn't so much that he had left the Church, but that the Church had left him.

When things stop making sense, it can seem as if the world is caving in around us. This is especially true in regard to the Church. Apparent incongruence can leave us feeling as though somehow the rug has been pulled out from under us.

The Church has been involved in politics in one way or another since Old Testament times. In spite of the prophet Samuel's warnings that a king would enslave, tax, and send the Israelites to war, they insisted on having a king appointed to reign over them. Saul was chosen king over Israel, and from then on, the Israelites struggled to balance morals and governance.

Jesus himself was caught in a political struggle. He preached the Truth in the Temple on numerous occasions, knowing that eventually his words might incite antagonism. The scribes and Pharisees watched his every move, waiting for the right moment to charge him with blasphemy. The moment finally came late one night in a quiet garden on the Mount of Olives. They captured Jesus and took him to the court of Pontius Pilate. To ensure a conviction, they tried to

convince Pilate that Jesus had attempted to incite an insurrection. Pilate knew Jesus was innocent of the charges levied against him and wanted to release him. All Jesus had to do was deny that he was the Son of God, and he would be free. Yet he stood for the Truth, even though he knew that he would suffer a horrifying death at the hands of Roman executioners because of it. Fearing political upheaval and insurgency, Pilate agreed to have Jesus crucified. Finding the correct balance between morality and governance isn't easy for anyone.

What does Scripture say?

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. The Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.” Samuel then said to the people of Israel, “Each of you return home.”

1 SAMUEL 8:19–22

What does my heart say?

- How do I form my political opinions?
- Why would the Catholic Church care about the laws and policies of a particular nation?
- Why might the Israelites have wanted a king to reign over them?



Don't Upset Your Mother

As a child and teenager, Roberta had been a devout Catholic. She practiced her faith, attended Mass and reconciliation regularly, and wanted to become a nun when she grew up. On the outside, she seemed like a typical, happy youngster growing up in a typical, happy, Catholic family.

After high school, she entered college and majored in music theory. Then things began to change. There wasn't anything typical or happy about Roberta anymore. She slipped into depression and attempted suicide several times. After each attempt, she tried to rally herself, tried to get reinvolvement in the Church, tried to make life seem normal again. It wouldn't.

On her last attempt, she went into a coma. A priest came, gave her the anointing of the sick, and prayed over her. Her mother had died some years before, but someone had saved her rosary and hung it on Roberta's bedpost. When she awoke, her nurse explained to her all that had happened while she'd been comatose. Then the nurse gave her a card with a prayer to Saint Luke.

"You won't make it if you keep going on this way," the nurse said. Roberta knew she was right.

She began seeing a therapist and had conversations with several priests. She went to Mass occasionally, but was frequently turned off by the homilies. One in particular really bothered her.

"The priest seemed so anti-gay," she said. "A lot of my friends were gay, and yet they had great relationships with their partners. Most of them had suffered sexual abuse as children and only felt safe with another woman."

There was another, underlying reason Roberta had difficulty with

the sermons. She, too, had suffered abuse as a child. Her mother suffered from serious mental illness, and the family members had to watch their every move lest they do something to set her off. Roberta remembers frequent warnings from her father not to do anything that would upset her mother.

One of Roberta's most vivid memories of her mother occurred when she was very young and had gotten into some kind of trouble. Her mother commanded her to kneel down on the floor and ask God's forgiveness for what she had done. Her mother told her that the ground was going to open and the devil would come out to swallow her up. All the while, she was beating Roberta with a belt.

As a result of her childhood abuse, Roberta suffers from a dissociative disorder that causes her to assume alternate identities. She doesn't easily get close to others and has difficulty with physical intimacy. Her therapist has been able to help her live a productive life. But her search for an opening back into the Church continues. She wants more than anything to find a way to share her gift for music, but she never seems to quite fit in. Each time she thinks she's found the Church entrance, something keeps her from walking through.

Childhood abuse of any kind can leave us feeling lost, inadequate, and disconnected from those around us. It can even leave us disconnected from ourselves. When the abuse involves religious practices and concepts used as threats or punishments, we can develop an aversion to the Catholic faith rather than to the abuse itself. The rituals that should bring us peace and comfort instead dredge up fear and bad memories. This can place a wall between us and the Church—a wall that can only be scaled through patience, determination, and the grace of God.

What does Scripture say?

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

MATTHEW 19:13–15

What does my heart say?

- How has my childhood affected my view of the Catholic Church?
- What part of my past is holding me back from deepening my faith?
- How can I allow myself to become a child in Jesus’ presence, to allow him to lay his hands on me?



Men in Long, Black Dresses

Angie could feel her blood begin to boil. Slowly the anger built inside of her, like a volcano that could no longer be contained. She could barely sit still in the pew as she listened to the homily that Sunday. The pastor was talking about abortion, describing the process and its effects on the fetus, delineating the teaching of the Church and its reasons for forbidding abortion.

How dare he tell me what to do with my body, Angie fumed. What does he know about unwanted pregnancy? He’s never been

pregnant, and he never will be. All he does all day is wander around in that long dress of his telling everybody what to do.

Angie couldn't take any more. The incongruity of the situation spun her into a raging fury. She didn't want to listen to this man who seemed so removed from the real world. Who was he to tell her what to do with her own body? He had no right to say what he was saying. She scooted to the end of her pew, rose, ignored the eyes of her fellow parishioners, and walked out of the church. She never went back.

Few of us have an innate inclination to accept authority, particularly when we think that we have nothing in common with the person exercising that authority. We say, "If you haven't walked in my shoes, how can you tell me which steps to take in them?" It's even more difficult when the authority comes from a source that we feel has no business in our private lives. We simply don't like to be told what to do.

Sometimes, however, we need to be told what to do. Our human reasoning isn't perfect, and we can wander into treacherous situations without even being aware that we're in danger.

There's nothing I dislike more than being told what to do. The spirit of obedience doesn't come naturally to me. I've always been the kind of person who likes to figure things out for myself, who ends up learning everything the hard way, who tends to experience the wrong turns before finding the right path.

After my father died, my brother—eleven years older than me—tried to offer me some guidance. I was just fifteen years old, and I rebuffed every bit of advice and scoffed at every admonition. How could he know what it was like to be a fatherless, fifteen-year-old girl? What gave him the right to tell me what to do with my life?

I remember my brother urging me to attend college in Milwaukee rather than stay at home and attend the local community college as I'd

planned. I ignored his recommendation and went to the community college anyway. Only later did I realize the folly of my stubbornness. I ended up in a relationship that held me back rather than helped me grow and wasted time on credits that didn't transfer into my major.

My brother wasn't trying to tell me what to do just for the sake of telling me what to do. He was trying to guide me away from a situation that could cause me harm and affect my future, because he was able to see things from a different perspective.

So it is with the Church. The Church stands against abortion because every human has an inalienable right to life, and that life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception until death. What's more, the Church seeks to protect not only the lives of unborn children, but all life—yours and mine. Our priests and bishops don't tell us what to do just for the sake of telling us what to do. They see things from a different perspective than we do and are trying to guide us away from situations that could cause us harm and affect our future—our eternal future.

What does Scripture say?

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

MATTHEW 21:23

What does my heart say?

- How do I respond to authority in my life?
- Do I see the Church as a valid authority? Why or why not?
- When have I rebuffed authority and regretted it later?



Like Nun Other

Betty was the daughter of Eastern European immigrants. Her parents had suffered at the hands of the Nazis in World War II and were sponsored by a West Coast Jewish family to come to the United States. They hadn't much more to live on than their Catholic faith and their determination.

Still, they managed to send Betty to a Catholic grade school run by an order of teaching nuns. The family spoke their native language at home, giving Betty a distinctive accent that was a point of contention in postwar America. At school, she was considered an oddity and had difficulty making friends. Being scorned by the other children was bad enough, but Betty also felt scorned by the nuns. It seemed that they were always finding reasons to punish her and make her feel bad about herself. She witnessed other students receiving the same treatment and older nuns verbally abusing younger nuns in front of the students.

One day, it became too much for Betty. A nun lost her temper and called another student a "stupid diabetic" because the student was having difficulty understanding math and also had diabetes. Betty lost her temper. She stood up and reprimanded the nun for her behavior. The nun grabbed her by the neck and threw her out of the classroom. At that same moment, the pastor happened to walk past the classroom. The nun told him Betty was being insubordinate and should be expelled. After a private conversation with Betty, the pastor disciplined the teacher. But the damage had already been done: From that point forward, Betty began her journey away from the Catholic Church.

Insult was added to injury when another nun, presumably suffer-