

# *Friendship with God*

• an uncommon dialogue •



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# Friendship with God

## Chapter 1

I remember the first time that I decided I should be afraid of God. It was when He said that my mother was going to hell.

Okay, *He* didn't say it, exactly, but somebody said it on His behalf.

I was about six years old, and my mother, who considered herself somewhat of a mystic, was "reading the cards" at our kitchen table for a friend. People came to the house all the time to see what sort of divinations my mother could extract from an ordinary deck of playing cards. She was good at it, they said, and word of her abilities quietly spread.

As Mom was reading the cards on this particular day, her sister paid a surprise visit. I remember that my aunt was not very happy with the scene that she encountered when, knocking once, she came through the back screen door and into the house. Mom acted as if she'd been caught red-handed doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing. She made an awkward introduction of her lady friend, gathering up the cards quickly and stuffing them into her apron pocket.

Nothing more was said about it in that moment, but a bit later, when my aunt said good-bye, she happened to catch me in the backyard where I had gone to play.

"You know, " she said as I walked with her to her car, "your mom shouldn't be telling people their future with that deck of cards of hers. God is going to punish her for that."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because she is trafficking with the devil"—I remember this shivering phrase because of its peculiar sound to my ear—"and God will send her to straight to hell." She said this as blithely as if she were announcing that it was going to rain tomorrow. To this day I remember quaking with fear as she backed out of the driveway and drove off. I was scared to death that my Mom had angered God so badly. The fear of God was then and there deeply embedded inside me.

How could God, who is supposed to be the most benevolent creator in the universe, want to punish my mother, who was the most benevolent creature in my life, with everlasting damnation? This, my 6-year-old mind begged to know. And so I came to a 6-year-old conclusion: If God was cruel enough to do something like that to my mother, who, in the eyes of everyone who knew her, was practically a saint, then He must really be very easy to make mad—easier than *my father*—so we had all better watch our P's and Q's.

I remained scared of God for many years, because my fear was continually reinforced.

I remember being told in second grade Catechism that unless a baby was baptized, it would not go to heaven. This seemed so improbable, even to second-graders, that we used to try to "trip up" the nun by asking pin-her-in-the-corner questions like, "Sister, Sister, what if the parents are actually taking the baby to be baptized, and the whole family dies in a terrible car crash? Wouldn't that baby get to go with her parents to heaven?"

Our nun must have come from the Old School. For her, doctrine was doctrine, and there were no exceptions. "No," she sighed heavenly, "I'm afraid not."

"But where would the baby go?" one of my second grade school mates asked earnestly. "To hell or to purgatory?"

(In good Catholic households, nine is old enough to know exactly what "hell" is. It's the place God sends you to be punished for being bad. But it's only for those who have been *really* bad, because once you get there, you can't get out. You burn and burn in torment forever. If my Aunt had said that Mom was going to purgatory, I may have been able to understand. Purgatory, I knew, was for those who were only moderately bad; people who died with unconfessed Venial Sins on their soul. This is kind of a "spiritual misdemeanor." For these kinds of offenses, God had decreed that there should be a lighter sentence: a bit of torment, but only in proportion to the wrongdoing. After that, you got out. Especially if you had somebody on Earth praying for you. As a child I was always encouraged to pray for the suffering souls in purgatory. Perhaps with enough prayers, we were told, God would relent.)

"The baby would go to neither hell *nor* purgatory," Sister told us. "The baby would go to limbo."

*Limbo?*

“Limbo,” Sister repeated, explaining that this is where God sent babies and other people who, through no fault of their own, died without being baptized into the One True Faith. They weren’t being punished, exactly, but they would never get to see God.

Now try to grasp this. This is the God I grew up with. You may think I’m making this all up, but I’m not.

Fear of God is created by many religions, and is, in fact, by many religions, *encouraged*.

No one had to encourage me, I’ll tell you that. If you thought I was frightened by the Limbo thing, wait until you hear about the End Of The World thing.

Somewhere in the early Fifties I heard the story of the children of Fatima. This is a village in central Portugal, north of Lisbon, where the Blessed Virgin was said to have appeared on repeated occasions to two young girls and their smaller brother. Here’s what I was told about that:

The Blessed Virgin gave the children a Letter to the World, which was to be hand delivered to the Pope, who, in turn, was to open it and read its contents, but then re-seal the letter, revealing its message to the public years later, if necessary.

The Pope was said to have cried for three days after reading this letter, which was said to contain terrible news of God’s deep disappointment in us, and details of how He was going to have to punish the world if we didn’t heed this final warning and change our ways. It would be the End of the World, and there would be moaning, and gnashing of teeth, and unbelievable torment.

God, we were told in school, was angry enough to inflict the punishment right then and there, but was having mercy on us and giving us this one last chance, because of the intercession of the Holy Mother.

The story of Our Lady of Fatima filled my heart with terror. I ran to my Mother to ask her if it was true. Mom said that if the priests and nuns were telling us this, it must be so. Nervous and anxious, the kids in our class pelted Sister with questions about what we could do.

“Go to Mass every day,” she advised. “Say your rosary nightly. Do the Stations of the Cross often. Go to confession once a week. Do penance, and offer your suffering up to God as evidence that you have turned from sin. Receive Holy Communion. And say a Perfect Act of Contrition before going to sleep each night, so if you are taken before you wake, you’ll be worthy of joining the saints in heaven.”

Actually, it never occurred to me that I might *not* live ‘til morning until I was taught the childhood prayer...

*Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep  
And if I die before I wake  
I pray the Lord my soul to take*

A few weeks of that and I was afraid to go to bed. Deathly afraid, you might say. I cried every night, and nobody could figure out what was wrong. To this day, I have a fixation about sudden death. Often when I leave the house for a flight out of town—or even sometimes when I go to the *grocery store*—I’ll say to my wife Nancy, “If I don’t come back, remember that the last words I said to you were ‘I love you’.” It’s become a running joke with us, but there’s a tiny piece of me that’s dead serious (you should excuse the expression).

Anyway, I went to mass daily, said my rosary, did the Stations of the Cross, and, every night, made a Perfect Act of Contrition (*Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee...*) These things I did with the hope within my heart that God would see my good intentions, and spare my family and me if anything really bad had to happen to the world.

My next brush with the fear of God came when I was 13. My early childhood babysitter, Frankie Schultz, who lived across the street from us, had grown and was getting married. And he invited me — *me* — to be an usher in his wedding party! Whoa, was I proud. Until I got to school and told the nun.

“Where is the wedding taking place?” she asked suspiciously.

“St. Paul’s,” I innocently reported.

“St. Paul’s?” Her voice turned to ice. “That’s a Lutheran church, isn’t it?”

“Well, I don’t know. I didn’t ask. I guess I...”

“It is a Lutheran church, and you are not to go.”

“How come?” I asked.

“You are *forbidden*,” she declared, and something felt Very Final about that.

“But *why*?” I persisted nonetheless.

Sister looked at me as if she couldn't believe I was questioning her further. Then, clearly pulling from some deep inner source of infinite patience, she blinked twice and smiled.

"God does not want you in a heathen church, my child," the nun explained. "The people who go there do not believe as we believe. They do not teach the truth. It is a sin to attend church anywhere other than a Catholic Church. I'm sorry that your friend Frankie has chosen to be married there. God will not consecrate the marriage."

"Sister," I pressed, way, way past the toleration point, "what if I usher at the wedding anyway?"

"Well, then," she said with genuine concern, "woe be unto you."

Whew. Heavy stuff. This guy God was one tough hombre. There would no stepping out of line here.

Well, I stepped out of line. I wish I could report that I based my protest on higher moral grounds, but the truth is, I couldn't stand the thought of not getting to wear my white sport coat (with a pink carnation—just like Pat Boone was singing about!). I decided not to tell anyone what the nun had said, and I went to that wedding as an usher. Boy, was I scared! You may think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. All day long I waited for God to strike me down. All through the ceremony I remained watchful for the lies and untruths that I had been warned about, but all that the minister said were warm and wonderful things that made everyone in the church cry. Still, by the end of the service I was sopping wet.

That night I begged God on hands and knees to forgive me my transgression. I said the most perfect Act of Contrition you've ever heard. I lay there for hours, afraid to fall asleep, repeating over and over again, *if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take...*

Now I've told you these childhood stories — and I could tell you many more — for a reason. I want to impress on you how real my fear of God was. *Because my story is not unique.*

And, as I've said, it isn't just Roman Catholics who stand in frightful pose before the Lord. Far from it. Half the World's people believe God is going to "get them" if they are not good. More than half.

Fundamentalists of many religions strike fear into the hearts of their followers. You can't do this. Don't do that. Cut it out. Stop it, or God will punish you. And we're not talking about major prohibitions here, like Thou Shalt Not Kill. We're talking God being upset if you do something as simple as eat meat on Friday (He's changed His mind on that, though), consume pork *any* day of the week, get a divorce, fail to cover your female face with a veil, do not visit Mecca in your lifetime, do not stop all activities, roll out your carpet, and prostrate yourself three times a day, do not marry in the temple, fail to go to confession, do not attend church every Sunday, and on *all* Holy Days of Obligation, ....*whatever.*

We have to be careful with God. The only problem is, it's hard to know the rules, because there are so many. And the most difficult thing is, everyone's rules are *right*. Or so they say. Yet they can't *all* be right. So, how to choose, how to know? It's a nagging question, and not an unimportant one, given God's apparently small margin for error here.

Now along comes a book called *Friendship with God*. What can this mean? How can it be? Is it possible that God is not the Holy Desperado after all? Could it be that unbaptized babies do go to heaven? That wearing a veil or bowing to the East, remaining celibate or abstaining from pork have nothing to do with anything? That Allah loves us without condition? That Jehovah selects *all* of us to be with Him when the days of glory are at hand?

More fundamentally earthshaking, is it possible that we shouldn't be referring to God as "Him" at all? Could God be a *woman*? Or, even more phenomenally, without gender?

For a person raised as I was, even *thinking such thoughts* can be considered a sin.

Yet we have to think them. We have to address them. Our blind faith has led us down a blind alley. The human race has not progressed very far in the past two thousand years in terms of its spiritual evolution. We've heard teacher after teacher, master after master, lesson after lesson, and we're still exhibiting the same behaviors that have produced misery for our species from the beginning of time.

We are still killing our own kind, claiming ourselves to be better than others, running our world on power and greed, sexually repressing our society, mistreating and mal-educating our children, ignoring suffering, and, indeed, creating it.

It has been 2000 years since the birth of Christ, many more years since the time of the Buddha, the words of Confucius, the wisdom of the Tao, and we still haven't gotten the Main Questions figured out. Will there ever be a way to turn the answers we have already received into something workable, something that can function in our day-to-day lives?

I think there is. And I feel pretty certain about it, because I've discussed it a lot in my conversations with God.



# Excerpt

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