THE DESCENT OF THE SPIRIT

Sarah Fisher was a happy, fifteen year old. The week before, she'd rejected a friend who'd offered her marijuana. It’s tough: when you’re in high school these days, pot is everywhere—people are smoking and dealing and whispering about what’s better, the stuff from Mexico or the stuff that someone’s cousin grew in his basement. This is the currency of hip youth, and yet all she wanted to do was say “no.” She wanted to say “never.” She wanted to say “not me, not you, not anyone.” But that’s so uncool, so dorky. Geeks say that. Moms say that. Narcs say that. Not sophomores. Not friends. Which left Sarah pretty much on her own. Not quite a pariah, but not in the in-crowd, either. Sort of in between. But now, Sarah had finally found her ally, her confidante, her friend for life: the Holy Spirit.

Turning away her buddy because of pot was hard enough: they’d been pals since sixth grade. But Sarah knew that life would get harder: it always does. Ahead was college, love, marriage, children, heartache—all the reckonings that life either blesses us with or denies us. To some extent, we all move in our own orbits, our own tracks, and now Sarah, reinforced by the Spirit, was alone no more. She was ready for the long haul, and she knew she would always have a companion—a divine companion—by her side.

Minutes before I met Sarah, she'd been confirmed with sixty-five other teens in a church in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., a spacious house of worship with exposed wooden beams and lots of light stream-
ing through the windows: a pleasant and unassuming place, where magic was struck whenever there was a confirmation. The previous week, Sarah hadn't yielded to her pot-smoking friend, and already, a few minutes after her confirmation, strengthened and emboldened by the Spirit, she was ready for “mortal combat” with anyone foolish enough to try to lead her astray. That was magic.

One sign that Sarah had been infused with the Spirit was that she was already anticipating the future. Most teenagers can’t see beyond the present—their sights don’t extend over that horizon. Unlike them, Sarah had perspective. “If I didn’t do this,” she said firmly, “I’d feel empty when I got married.” With that declaration of ultimate intent, one that looked down the road of her life with a maturity a few leaps ahead of her relatively scant decade and a half, Sarah, her parents, and some family friends went to a nearby Outback Steakhouse for dinner—steaks for two people, surf and turf for two others, a thick piece of salmon for the lone semi-vegetarian. Over dinner, Sarah’s father said how much her confirmation pleased him. “It fulfilled an obligation that I, as a Catholic parent, had to my daughter,” he reflected. “It was also really the first opportunity for Sarah to have any meaningful say in deciding her religious identity, in deciding how she will acknowledge that there are deeper levels of reality. Coming to grips with this is crucial for truly centering your life. The spiritual need—the divine spark—in each of us must be nourished or our lives are barren.”

Forty-nine years separated Sarah’s confirmation from her father’s—he was in Grosse Point, Michigan, in 1955. It was inevitable that they’d prepared for their confirmations differently—the church had changed immensely in that half century. “Sarah studied more Scripture,” he said, “and she had more discussions aimed at understanding. I memorized more questions and answers, virtually none of which I can remember now. I was happy that I answered all the questions and very impressed with the light slap on the cheek from the bishop, a symbol that we may have to go through hard knocks, and even be a martyr, to be Catholic. Now I think ‘martyrdom’ can be so much more subtle and insidious than simply being physically persecuted for the faith. Spiritual martyrdom is real in our society, especially today.”

The Spirit that descended into Sarah Fisher was formerly known as the
“Holy Ghost.” The name was changed because, as one priest told me, “it sounded too much like Casper,” the friendly cartoon ghost. Apparently, “spooky” is not a desirable quality when trying to convince youngsters that the religious life is the good life.3 Whatever it’s called, at any confirmation, the Spirit descends as a bishop lays his hands on the youngsters, asking God to send His Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. As he gently presses oil onto the forehead of each confirmand, the Spirit’s seven gifts descend—wisdom, knowledge, understanding, courage, reverence, wonder, and awe—all buffeting the teenager against the ways of the world.4

Sarah Fisher may have been the exception: she felt that Spirit, wanted that Spirit, needed that Spirit. But sitting next to me at the rear of the confirmation hall were three twelve-year-old girls, all confirmed the year before. They hadn’t necessarily enjoyed it, but it was part, they said, of being Catholic, and that’s what Catholics did. And their parents insisted on it anyway. It was as simple as that.

But had they felt the presence of the Holy Spirit at their confirmation? I inquired, pressing them gently for some sense of how they’d responded to the ceremony. Wasn’t the Spirit what this was all about? Being strengthened, fortified, armored against the world, protected against sinners and temptations, inspired by the Good News and the Holy Presence? They all giggled, thinking me silly. “Of course not,” said one girl, whose skimpy skirt was slightly out of place in a church on a lovely Sunday afternoon. “That stuff’s for little kids.”

Then she ran off, catching up with her friends, who were sauntering along to the modest reception in the banquet room. They were trying to look sophisticated while intuiting that at least a decade lay ahead of them before they really had a claim on sophistication—with or without the intervention of the Holy Spirit.

The year before, in England, I met a much younger Anglican who had a healthier perspective on the descent of the Spirit. “I really expected to be suddenly enlightened,” admitted nine-year-old Lauren. “This did not happen, and I came to realize that the influence of the Holy Spirit is not felt immediately, but over time.” Indeed, and that time varies for everyone. For all we know, by now little Lauren may be completely enveloped by the Holy Spirit—a veritable warrior for Christ before she even hits her eighth birth-
day. Or she could be as patient and wise as she was on the day of her confirmation, knowing that all comes in due time and with due reason.

One problem when talking about Christian initiations is that they are the most varied of all the major religions. And they’re held at different times, which does not ease the confusion. Only Catholics and Anglicans have confirmations, and they’re invariably for no one younger than nine or older than sixteen. Every denomination has baptisms—some reserve them for newborns, while others only baptize teenagers. A few baptize younger children or baptize people as often as they want. Every branch offers first communion, and most have a first confession. Quakers, being perennial outsiders, have absolutely nothing that’s mentioned in this paragraph.

This variety has much to do with how Christianity evolved. To create their new religion, Christians borrowed three rites that had been buried deep in Judaism. For centuries, Jews baptized either new converts or Jews who had sinned or been sick as a way to welcome them back into the community. Communion can be traced back to an ancient Jewish custom: communing with ancestors through a meal. And confirmation is a version of the ancient Jewish tradition of anointing males with oil to their foreheads when they become mature.

Christians took all this and made something new. Baptism became more miraculous and penetrating: a way to reach into the soul and purge the sin and transgression of rebelling against God, of balking at God’s rightful rule over His creation and forgetting that we’re mere stewards and caretakers—cogs, if you will, of his great plan. Baptisms cleansed and refreshed and renewed: you were beginning a new life, a fresh life, a life radically different from before. 

The first generations of Christians took the Jewish ceremony of anointing with oil and laying on of hands and turned it into their confirmation ritual, which was eventually reserved for young adolescents. What was being confirmed were the promises that a proxy for these children had made at their baptisms. These babies hadn’t been able to swear that they would be faithful to God; they didn’t even know who God was. So adults did it for them. Now the babies—all grown-up—could make their own commitment to Jesus.

And communion became a way to bring people closer to Christ—closer,
in fact, than anyone had been when Jesus was alive. Wine and wafer transubstantiated into Jesus’ own blood and body, and people literally absorbed their Messiah into themselves. Catholics still believe this and still rely on this. As the Southern writer Flannery O’Conner said: “If the Host is only a symbol, I’d say the Hell with it.” She never did. And then there was the young girl in Belfast who took communion for the first time in the 1970s. Furious that the day was ruined when a boy threw a water balloon at her pretty new dress, she vowed revenge—on Jesus, who should have protected her. Messiahs are supposed to do that. How can you say you’re saving the world if bullies are still picking on little girls? The next week, she promised herself, she would give Jesus’ flesh a good chewing when the priest handed out communion. Apparently, she figured that would teach Jesus not to slack off.6

Let’s look at these initiations one by one, starting with baptism and working our way back to confirmation, where we’ll rejoin Sarah Fisher and her anti-drug campaign of one. That way, we’ll get a sense of how each plays out with Christians at different moments in their lives—cleansing their souls, strengthening their resolve, readying them for this world and the next one with a succession of charged illuminations and blessed transportations.

Baptism—the one almost-indispensable initiation for joining Jesus—is central to becoming a Christian; for Christians, in fact, it’s almost central to being human. After a particularly unpleasant experience, someone might say, “I need to take a bath—I feel dirty all over.” After murdering Duncan, for instance, Lady Macbeth complained that “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” We want to be “sweet”—clean, worthy, pure (even after murdering someone)—and baptism reaches where words, prayers, and wishes cannot travel and penetrate. Sweeping away the detritus, it refreshes and renews us. It makes us whole again.

Baptism has been called the “door of the sacraments” and “the door of the church.” Cynics have other names for it. H. L. Mencken called it the “water route to the celestial city,” which sounds like a travelogue about Venice; and in the 1960s, Radio Moscow called it a “dangerous health menace” and blamed it for the short life span of Russians—an average of thirty-two years—under the czars, an era when nearly every Russian baby was baptized. If these children weren’t among the thousands who soon died of
pneumonia, then they suffered from “weak hearts” and “weak lungs” as adults—all, of course, stemming from their brief dunking as babies.7

It all started, as most things do in Christianity, with Jesus. John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, suddenly appeared out of the desert, proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John was a wonder—“clothed in camel’s hair, a leather belt around his waist,” and feeding only on “locusts and wild honey.” People from throughout Judea, including, according to Mark, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, came to see John and hear him preach and be immersed in the Jordan, a broad but otherwise unimpressive river in what is now northern Israel. Joining them, Jesus emerged from the water and saw “the heavens break open and the Spirit descend on him, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight.’” From there, the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert, where for forty days and forty nights, he held off the temptations of the devil, readying himself for the battles that lay ahead. Finally leaving the desert, he began his ministry, telling the people of Nazareth, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Jesus preached, and he suffered, and the day before his crucifixion, he promised his disciples that the Spirit would not depart with his death. They, too, would sense, feel, and know it. It would not disappear with him: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses.” Forty days later, at the feast of Pentecost, exactly that happened: the Spirit filled the apostles, who began proclaiming “the mighty works of God,” and anyone who accepted their preaching received the “gift of the Holy Spirit” upon being baptized.8

For the first three hundred years after Jesus’ death, the relatively few people born as Christians were baptized on their deathbed, ensuring that no last-minute transgressions screwed up their afterlife. But after Christianity conquered the pagan world, baptisms flipped from the end of life to its beginning. The church, turning its attention inward, was infatuated with “original sin”—the new idea that everyone came into the world contaminated by the sins that Adam and Eve had generated when they disobeyed God. Suddenly, baptisms were touted as the cure for this cosmic infection.9

By the middle of the third century, church leaders weren’t debating whether babies should be baptized. Baptism was now an infallible proposition of the church. Rather, church leaders had to figure out when babies should be baptized: two days after birth or eight days, which is when Jew-
ish males were circumcised. They voted for the earlier time. Holding off baptism, even for a few days, was too risky: Who knew what kind of mischief those little tykes could get into? And finally, went one of the arguments, every baby was literally crying out to be baptized. The wailing that we usually associate with being hungry or soiled was really a plea to be baptized—fast—so they would be purged of the stain from that first sin. Those little babies, so new to the world, understood that life without baptism was really just a way station to hell. They might be newborns, but they weren’t dummies.10

The severity of this damnation proved to be too much by the Middle Ages, when more compassionate theologians proposed the idea of limbo for unbaptized babies. Here, the tots would spend eternity in total happiness although they would be denied the presence of God and perfect communion with Christ. Protestant reformers eliminated limbo from their theology, but this imperfect, incomplete afterlife remained a staple of Catholicism until 2005, when the Vatican signaled that it, too, was excising limbo from its architecture of the cosmos. This was a nod to reality: few Catholics were taking limbo seriously. As Rev. James Martin, the editor of the Jesuit publication America, said, “I’ve rarely baptized a baby where [limbo] has not come up, at least as a joke.” It was also done as a empathic gesture: In 2004 Pope John Paul II had charged the church’s International Theological Commission with devising “a more coherent and enlightened way” of describing the fate of blameless, innocent infants who die without a baptism.11

One possible unintended side effect of this newfound grace is that the urgency that previously enveloped baptism may fade. And with that, the generosity of Rome may eclipse the indispensability of a ceremony that assured endless generations of Christians that they were more than the elected. They were the saved.

As Christianity developed, so too did styles for baptizing. Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians are sprinkled with water; Baptists (and many other Christians) are immersed in it. These differences started with the Roman emperor Constantine. On the eve of a major battle in 312 c.e., Constantine had a vision of a cross bearing this inscription: “Conquer with this!” He won the battle, Christianity won his heart, and Rome had a new state religion. Almost overnight, it was mandatory to baptize babies, a pol-
icy so successful that, by the close of the fourth century, nearly 90 percent of the empire’s population were Christians. Most had been baptized as infants. Not Constantine. It was common for Roman generals and politicians, the kind of people who fought military campaigns or carried out capital punishments, to delay their baptisms until close to death so all their sins would be expunged. Constantine did the same. On his deathbed in 337 C.E., he was too weak to be moved and too fragile to be immersed. Instead, water was sprinkled on him, the drops rinsing away sixty-four years of scheming, warring, plotting, and killing. Hours later, he died.12

This new form of baptizing caught on, although the vocabulary didn’t change: *rantizo*, Greek for “sprinkle,” has never displaced *baptizo*, Greek for “immerse.” Whether one is sprinkled or dunked, the meaning is the same. The ultimate difference lies in the timing, not in the quantity of water. For Baptists, the “age of accountability”—when they can begin to understand Jesus—is usually somewhere between nine and twelve years old. At this point you can be baptized, although as a Baptist minister half-jokingly admitted, “You can be baptized at any age, as long as you can hold your breath.” Predictably, the younger the child, the more reluctant the minister is to baptize him. A few years ago, for instance, when a five year old in Baltimore came forward to be baptized, his minister was not sure what to do: five year olds have little sense of salvation and sin and Jesus’ sacrifice at Calvary. In the end, the minister followed a colleague’s advice: “Baptize the boy. He’s making a commitment with everything he has right now. If you don’t do it, you’ll be rejecting him, and that pain will be with him the rest of his life.”13

The boy, who is still a good member of his church, taught his minister, a truly humble man, that the spirit moves at its own pace, one that may confound the usual ways of the church but pleases, as far as we can tell, a Creator who, apparently, has an impeccable and unknowable sense of timing.

The staging of baptisms can be grandiose or simple. Some Baptist churches feature a baptismal seat poised on a lever—down and up, in and out, and presto! You have been cleansed. The baptismal font in one Southern church could have doubled as a prop in an Andrew Lloyd Weber play: a black light—black for “sinner”—shines after someone enters the font; a red light—red for “blood,” since the prophet Isaiah said, “Your sins

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12 Magida, *Opening Doors* 6/5/06 11:31 AM Page 28

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be as scarlet”—blazes as sins are being washed away; and a white light—
white for purity—dazzles with the glory of salvation as the newly bap-
tized person leaves the font, pure and clean. More low-budget, rural churches
have baptisms in shallow streams or rivers, which may vaguely resemble
the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. The imagery is potent: nature
can do more for any soul than black and red spotlights. But outdoor bap-
tisms can be risky. In the 1960s in Kentucky, a preacher scurried down-
stream with a long stick to retrieve a wig that had floated away from a
woman he’d just baptized. Apparently, even people seeking salvation want
to look their best.

Oddly, macabre dangers lurk in indoor baptisteries, the large fonts that
you’d think would be safer than streams or rivers. In late October 2005, a
minister standing waist deep in the baptistery in University Baptist
Church in Waco, Texas, was fatally electrocuted as he adjusted his micro-
phone. Rev. Kyle Lake, who was only thirty-three years old, left behind
a wife, a five-year-old daughter, and twin three-year-old boys. Luckily, the
woman being baptized had not yet stepped into the water. The congrega-
gation, shaken and shattered, was determined to carry on. “I don’t know
how, when, why, where or what’s going to happen,” Ben Dudley, an ad-
ministrator of the church, told a thousand people at a remembrance ser-
vice for Rev. Lake, “but we will continue as a church in this community
because that is what Kyle would have wanted.”

Despite such rare tragedies, Baptists have given no thought to adopting the Catholic mode
of baptism. Sprinkling may be safer but it is surely less authentic than the
immersion method, used by John to baptize Jesus in the shallow currents
of the Jordan River.

Ordinarily, the Vatican recognizes Protestant baptisms, but not for Jean-
Jacques Rousseau. In 1728, when he was fifteen, motherless, and aban-
donied by his father, Rousseau ran away from his apprenticeship to an en-
graver, a mean old man who physically punished him for the slightest
infractions. Maybe because of his age or maybe because of his tempera-
ment, Rousseau appears to have impetuously decided to leave his home-
land and his faith. Stealing away from Geneva, he meandered through
the duchy of Savoy, where a Catholic priest whom Rousseau impressed
suggested he head to the cathedral town of Annecy, where a benevolent
lady there might take him under her protection as well as lead him toward
the Roman Church. In Annecy, he stayed briefly with Françoise-Louise-
Éléanore de la Tour, the baroness of Warens, who was delighted that such a precocious lad from Switzerland, a nation steeped in Protestantism, was so interested in Catholicism, the sworn enemy of the Reformation.

The authenticity of this overnight religious turnaround can be doubted. As Leo Damrusch says in his definitive biography Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius, “It was a major step to desert Calvinism in favor of the enemy it routinely denounced as the Whore of Babylon. Strictly speaking, this was not apostasy, since . . . [Rousseau] had not been confirmed and admitted to communion in Geneva. . . . All the same, it was a striking repudiation of the culture in which he had been raised, and in his unfinished last work he was still brooding about his defection. He settled on his favorite explanation of submission to external pressure: ‘Still a child and left to myself, enticed by caresses, seduced by vanity, lured by hope, forced by necessity, I became a Catholic.’”

The baroness sent Rousseau to Turin, the capital of the Savoy, to complete his conversion. The city—three times larger than Geneva, its opulence and wealth taking their cues from its elegant court—stunned Rousseau, who was unaccustomed to such show and glamour. He was immediately taken to the Hospice of the Catechumens, the place for persons seeking religious instruction. The large wooden doors were locked behind him, not to be opened until priests determined that his conversion was complete. An aged priest set to work on Rousseau, but since the young Genevese had some theological knowledge and was prone to argue, he was quickly passed along to a younger, brighter priest, who countered Rousseau’s quibbles with quotes from Saints Augustine and Gregory. Rousseau later claimed that he had stayed at the hospice for two months, but records show that he abjured the Protestant faith a mere nine days after arriving and was baptized two days later. Then, the vicar general of the Holy Office of the Inquisition quizzed Rousseau on his new faith. Dissatisfied with Rousseau’s answers, the vicar ordered that he be rebaptized, apparently thinking that the holy water would clinch the deal: whatever the priests hadn’t taught him, the waters would. With that, Rousseau later wrote, “They advised me to live as a good Christian and be faithful to grace; they wished me good luck, they closed the door on me, and everyone disappeared.” He was alone, he was Catholic, and he was almost broke. But he was thrilled to be out of the hospice, and the priests were possibly even more delighted that another Protestant had seen the true light of the pa-
pacy, and that the waters of baptism had thoroughly and conclusively done their job.17

More important than the stagecraft of a baptism is how it affects people. The currents of baptism are deep and unpredictable, with baptism at birth sometimes making a surprisingly significant dent on our souls. Louis IX of France, for instance, relished the baptism that he could not even remember above all else. “I think more of the place where I was baptized,” rhapsodized Louis IX, “than I do of the Cathedral of Rheims where I was crowned the king. It is a greater thing to be a child of God than to be the ruler of a kingdom. The latter I shall lose at death; the former will be my passport to everlasting glory.”

Louis was so devout that he never signed himself as “Louis, King,” but as “Louis of Poissy,” after the town south of Paris where he’d been baptized in 1214. Tutored in Latin and the arts of war and government, Louis was raised by his mother, Queen Blanche, to be above all in awe of anything related to religion. “I love you, my dear son,” she often said as he was growing up, “but I would rather see you dead at my feet than that you should commit a mortal sin.” (Affection in the royal household was apparently confused with a surfeit of piety.) Throughout his reign, Louis made his mother proud, protecting vassals from oppression by their lords, reforming the legal system so every citizen had a better chance of receiving justice, and founding a hospital for poor blind men and a home for reformed prostitutes. Beggars were fed from the king’s table, and Louis ate their leftovers and washed their feet. He was probably the only king in Europe who heard two masses daily and traveled with priests who chanted the hours.18

This was no ordinary monarch, and it’s hard to know what other kings thought of him, besides simply noting that his reputation was so impeccable that foreign rulers regularly approached him to arbitrate their disputes. Louis’s zeal, in fact, may have encouraged Baudoin II, the emperor of Constantinople, to approach him about buying relics associated with the Passion of Christ. (The bankrupt emperor was happier to part with his holy possessions than risk the embarrassment of going belly up.) In 1241 Louis paid the equivalent of $200,000 for Christ’s crown of thorns, a nail from the Cross, and actual fragments from the Cross itself—the holiest pieces of lumber in history. They were transferred to Paris, where Louis
began constructing a shrine worthy of them—the Sainte Chapelle. One hundred feet long and fifty-five feet wide, the chapel was placed in the courtyard of the royal palace, which was then on the Île de la Cité. The chapel, a bejeweled reliquary for the greatest treasures in all Christendom, was a fitting gift to the followers of Jesus from a king whose entire life had changed as he was dipped into a baptismal font in Poissy.19

Unfortunately, most of the chapel’s relics have disappeared. During the French Revolution, mobs grabbed them—selling some, trashing others, losing most. The few that survived—a nail from the Cross and a piece of the Cross itself—were eventually housed at Notre Dame Cathedral, where they can be seen today.

Six centuries later, a New England poet was dismayed that her parents and their Congregationalist minister had tried to determine her fate by baptizing her when she was a baby: “I’ve stopped being theirs,” Emily Dickinson wrote when she was thirty-two,

The name they dropped upon my face,
With water in the country church . . .
Baptized, before, without the choice.

Dickinson decided to live by her design, pursuing salvation on her terms and not yielding to what her elders deemed best. A weaver of rhythms and words, she was wresting her life (and her destiny) from the font where she’d been baptized. For her, Jesus was life and always would be. But the “original sin” which had been “washed away” in Amherst’s Congregational church was balderdash. Baptism wouldn’t save her, she figured, because these waters were dammed up by narrow minds and constricted imaginations. Only she could save herself, and that she would do, as she wrote in another poem, by “dwell[ing] in possibility . . . to gather Paradise.”20

But delaying baptism by a few years does not necessarily guarantee that it will be any more warmly embraced than how Emily Dickinson embraced hers. In August 1973, for instance, a nine-year-old girl who would never have the wealth of Louis IX or the fame of Emily Dickinson was “absolutely frightened” at her baptism in Knoxville, Tennessee. Luckily, her fear was abated by sharing the stage with “my three good friends—Suzanne, Christy, and Lisa. We wore white robes that tied around our waists. When
our turn came, we walked the five steps into the baptismal font, which was about eight by eight feet. The preacher—never a woman in the wealthy Southern Baptist church—covered my mouth and nose with a handkerchief, and I tried to keep my feet down and bend my knees, because that’s what I’d been told to do. He said those magic words as I held my breath, and he dunked me backward into the water. I wanted to smile at my mother, whom I saw just out of the corner of my eye. But I caught her mouthing, ‘Don’t smile.’ The preacher pulled me back up and said some more words, which I couldn’t hear because water was in my ears. Suddenly, I was free to go. I walked up the five stairs on the other side of the font, where my mother dried me off with a towel. Not long after that, we went home for a reception, mostly cake and coffee, something, really, more for the grownups than for me or my friends.”

In a slightly faded color photo taken at the reception back home, Michelle Duvall is standing behind a folding bridge table. Everything around her is bare—no tablecloth, no pictures on the wall a few feet behind her, no furniture in the tightly cropped picture relieve the surreal spookiness of seeing her almost suspended in time and space, captive to what her parents wanted and to what she had acquiesced. The brown on the wall, on the table, on the few inches of carpet caught by the lens is relieved by her white dress trimmed with yellow; by two white candleholders, each holding a lit yellow candle; by a yellow doily under a white platter which is holding, of course, a brown cake—a chocolate cake. Also, she is positively beaming, although in later years she would measure the day with a more biting, more acerbic calculation that the entire production had been waged more for her mother and for appearances than for her own soul. “I’m not sure that anyone in my immediate family knew what it meant to take Jesus as your personal savior,” she said in 2005. “All I did know was that baptism made sure I wouldn’t go to Hell. Being at the church almost every single day affected me more than the baptism. I went there Sunday morning for Bible class and services, and Sunday evening for advanced Bible class, and Wednesday evening for services, and several nights a week for teen club and puppet club and clown club. Around seventh grade, I began realizing that this wasn’t working for me. I couldn’t understand how there could be a ‘forgiving’ God and a Hell. I couldn’t stomach that too many people were either avoiding my questions or giving me cant.

“My mother says I’m a Christian because I received Jesus at my bap-
tism. ‘Once saved, always saved.’ It didn’t bring me closer to God. If I’d been baptized when I was in fifteen or sixteen, at least I would have been more conscious of it. But that doesn’t mean it would have meant any more to me.”

By the time she was nineteen, a full decade after her baptism, Michelle could not wait to leave her faith and her region. Nothing of endurance had come from church, baptism, or mother. Ready for what lay beyond these borders, she would not settle for a world with a church that never spoke to her, a baptism that hadn’t moved her, and a mother who, she sadly realized, had never heard her.

Surprisingly, anyone can perform a baptism: Christians, pagans, heretics, atheists, even people from other faiths. All that’s required is the right intention; the words “I baptize thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”; and almost any kind of water—salt water, marsh water, mineral water, dew, melted snow, melted hail. In a pinch, soda water will do.

Letting anyone say that prayer, summon that intent, and sprinkle that water has produced all kinds of mischief. I know an eighty-year woman in Brooklyn—a devout Catholic who has never missed a Sunday service or a weekly confession, even as her husband was giving more hours to the racetrack than to church. His wife, knowing he would never consent to having their five kids baptized, carried each one, within days after their birth, into the bathroom, closed the door, sprinkled some tap water on them, and whispered, “I baptize thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.” Years later, her husband learned what she had done and stormed out of the house. Soon his betting—and his losses—increased. The only possible benefit was that he was remembering the name of the Lord more often; unfortunately, that was usually as a curse every time one of his horses came in last.

One notorious case of baptism gone awry involved little Edgardo Mortara—a six-year-old Jewish boy in Italy whose family’s servant girl claimed she had secretly baptized him when he was a baby. He was very ill, she said later, and she was worried that if he died, he would go to Hell. In 1858, hearing about the baptism, Catholic authorities kidnapped the boy. This was in accord with the papal law which ruled that part of Italy: the baptism had made him Christian, and Jews were forbidden from raising

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Christians, even their own children. Jews were especially alarmed about Edgardo’s kidnapping, not just because their own children were now in constant danger, but, as David Kertzer writes in *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, “Having endured centuries of forced sermons . . . and having been brought up on cautionary tales of fanatic converts torching Talmuds and baptizing hapless Jewish children, . . . [the Jews] knew just what kind of devil Edgardo . . . could turn into.”

Throughout Europe, Protestants demonstrated and diplomats protested. Thinly veiled plays based on Edgardo’s kidnapping were produced in Paris, Milan, and New York, with the American performance pandering to the anti-Catholic tide sweeping the United States: a mad pope screams for inquisitors to “imprison every Jew” and Edgardo’s father’s fingers are dislocated and hot oil is poured on his arms. Worse is threatened for little Edgardo: “to rack thy son and burn his eyeballs out, to lay his feet and make him walk on sand, to roast his flesh and lay him on crushed glass.” In all these plays, Edgardo is part victim, part villain, with the Jews in particular fearing that the boy would grow into an unwitting weapon in the campaign to convert them to Christ; and everyone but Catholics deeming Edgardo’s “rescue” no more than a glorified kidnapping.

Also in Manhattan, two thousand people swarmed to a rally, where the pope was denounced as the “Prince of Darkness” and a Jewish humorist cleverly asked the crowd, “What would happen if a band of Jews sneaked into the Vatican, . . . seized the Pope, held him down and circumcised him? Surely, that would not make a Pope a Jew, any more than the sprinkling of water made a child of a Jew a Christian.”

Edgardo stayed with the pope, living in various Catholic boarding schools and sometimes in the Vatican itself, always under the protection of the Holy Father, who thundered that he “couldn’t care less what the world thinks.” Eventually, Edgardo became a priest. Confirming Jews’ initial fears that he would become one of the Vatican’s more insidious weapons against them, he specialized in missionizing to the Jews. He was formidable as a propagandist for the church, evidence that at least one Jew who had seen the light was basking in it. But not every Catholic endorsed Edgardo’s efforts to brings Jews to the church. When he came to New York in 1897 to evangelize among the city’s Jews, the local archbishop blocked his efforts, saying they embarrassed the church.

Edgardo died in a monastery in Belgium in 1940, an eighty-eight-year-old...
old man who’d been happily devoted to his “second father”—Pius IX; who’d preached fervently about the power, love, and compassion of Jesus Christ; and who had been “saved” by an illiterate servant girl who’d sprinkled water on him when no one was looking, taking upon herself the authority, indeed the privilege, of salvaging his young, impressionable, and otherwise doomed soul.

Protestants cringe at transubstantiation—the Catholic belief that communion is Christ. For Protestants, communion is a symbol, an image, a rough and never-quite-sufficient apprehension of their Lord: for them it was sufficient that Jesus had come to earth. That was the miracle. Having Jesus return in mass after mass, communion after communion, would cheapen that miracle. It would also cheapen the faith of anyone taking communion: you don’t need Jesus’ body or blood to accept the Resurrection. That’s so empirical that it’s almost in another category from faith.

But whether as a symbol or real blood and real flesh, taking communion for the first time, usually when you’re seven or eight, can be a moving experience, even if youngsters really don’t understand what they are doing. For years, they watched everyone else in church take communion. Now it’s their turn to enter the mystery, which they do with excitement and anticipation and, if they’re Catholic, some apprehension. It’s one thing to pray to God. It’s another to absorb Him.

For many families, first communion is a chance to explain to your child—and yourself—what you believe and why, something impossible at an infant baptism. And it can help you reassess why you belong to a church or why you don’t. When it was time, for instance, for their daughter to have her first communion, the Leonards of Long Island balked. For years they had skirted around organized religion, and now that Annie was seven, it was time to make some type of commitment. “If we ever wanted Annie to know what it meant to be Catholic,” Joan Leonard said, “we couldn’t skip her first communion.”

They shopped around for churches in their part of Long Island, settled on St. Anthony’s, and enrolled Annie in the twelve sessions of instruction that would qualify her for communion. Annie hated it. Few of her friends were Catholic, and none of them went to St. Anthony’s. She only perked up in her classes at St. Anthony’s when she got to color the saints in the prayer book. She was bored, and everyone knew it. “What’d you learn to-
day, Annie?” her father would ask when she got home. “Um, forgiveness,” Annie would mutter. “Can I go roller-blading now?” So much for a theological discussion.

Unexpectedly, Annie’s classes brought her mother back to religion. Going to the church so often reminded her of “the artifacts of my childhood—the fonts, the missals, the scapulars, the rosaries.” One day, Joan spotted a small statue of her patron saint on a high shelf in the church gift shop—St. Joan, “tall and fierce in her green pants and royal blue tunic. . . . Despite my long struggle with my own faith, the belief that someone or something should protect us . . . from all the harm in the world beckoned to me.” Joan paid $57 and returned home with the Maid of Orleans.

When her communion day finally arrived, Annie wore a lovely white dress and a veil and everyone gushed over her. Annie ate it up—until they got to the church and she ripped oª the veil. “I’m not wearing it,” she announced. “It itches. None of my friends have to do this. Nobody on our block is here. I’m the only one here.”

Joan prayed, then quietly said, “You’re not the only one here, honey. Take a look at these.” She pulled three photos out of her purse. There was Annie’s great-grandmother, young and somber in high-button shoes; and Annie’s grandmother, serene and poised, except for the veil that had slid down to her eyebrows; and Annie’s mother, a 1950s tomboy forcing a smile for the camera. Each photo was taken at first communion.

Looking at the pictures, Annie asked, “So all the girls in our family made their first communion?” When her mother nodded, Annie said, “Then I’ll be the fourth. At least my veil isn’t as bad as Grandma’s.”

Joan secured Annie’s veil, and a few minutes later, she and her husband walked Annie down the aisle as the priest recited, “Let us proclaim the mystery of the faith.”

Annie’s communion brought Joan’s family back to church. This time, they stayed. All of them. “We rediscovered,” Joan said, “a Catholicism that was more about love than guilt or fear. I guess St. Joan is still watching over us.”

And then there’s confirmation, the final ritual, in most Christian denominations, for coming of age. For centuries, confirmation meant accepting the catechism—fully and faithfully and unquestioningly and unswervingly. This was the stuff of truth and doctrine, a compilation of questions and answers—anywhere from a few hundred to two thousand (the record was
set in 1891 by the Baltimore Catechism)—that cover the practical (“At prayer, the most becoming position of the body is kneeling upright”), the theological (Adam’s sin “darkened our understanding, weakened our will, and left in us a strong inclination to evil”), and the cautionary (“we must accept . . . [the Catholic Church’s] teaching as our infallible rule of faith”). Youngsters were terrified that at their confirmation, the bishop would ask—in front of the entire congregation—any question from the catechism, and that the only acceptable response was the one they’d memorized word-for-word in class.

But William H. Cardinal Keeler, who was confirmed in 1939 while in second grade at St. Matthias School in Bala Cynwyd, a suburb of Philadelphia, still remembers some of the questions and answers more than half a century after the event. The entire confirmation, in fact, still lives in Keeler’s memory, although he is now in his late sixties: “The sister who prepared us for it did it with a lot of enthusiasm. We were told we were going to receive a special gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, to make us a ‘soldier of Christ.’ This military terminology was from the Baltimore Catechism, which had been prescribed by the plenary of Baltimore in 1884. I didn’t know that at the time, of course.

“For the confirmation, we were dressed in our school uniforms—the boys in white shirts and blue ties and the girls in white shirts and pleated skirts—and we filled up the front pews in the church, the boys on one side of the aisle and the girls on the other. The organ music was uplifting, and everybody was singing, and the prayers were in Latin, and when we said, ‘Amen,’ we could feel that the Lord was near. The bishop made a sign with the holy chrism, or oil, on our foreheads, followed by a slap—a ceremonial slap—to remind us that we should be willing to suffer for our faith. People would later say, ‘Oh, my! A slap!’ It was a gentle slap, although it was electrifying because we knew what the symbolism meant: that we should be ready to suffer.

“It made a tremendous impact on us. I don’t think I would have said to someone, ‘You can’t do that because you were just confirmed.’ But I did say to myself, ‘I better do what Mother or Dad tells me to do because that’s one way to show that I’m following through on my confirmation.’ Now being a ‘soldier for Christ’ meant we had to do the right thing as almost a public person now, not just a private person.”

These days, churches care more about understanding catechism than
memorizing it, and bishops rarely grill the youngsters who are being confirmed. The entire confirmation, in fact, is more relaxed. Catholics, for instance, are no longer called “soldiers of Christ,” a slogan that sounded as if they should be ready to slip on a suit of armor and head off to the latest crusade. Rather, the slogan meant that they should be ready to do battle with their “spiritual enemies”—soul against soul and heart against heart. In the 1980s the phrase was dropped as too shrill, too strident: an image from another era. The loss was not much lamented.

It's the rare youngster who has the strength and willpower not to be confirmed. Going against the grain is not quite heresy, but it's not blessed, either. Over a decade ago, Brittany Kirsch was about as good a Catholic girl as you could find on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas. Always bright—she entered first grade when she was four and would enter college when she was sixteen—she attended parochial school and thrived there. The services every Sunday in Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Thomas were “illuminated,” she recalls, “with extraordinary stained glass windows.” In sixth grade, Kirsch spent weekends with the nuns who were her teachers, sleeping at their convent and assisting them at a shelter for battered women, taking this so much to heart that she seriously deliberated spending her life as her nun friends did: devoted to God, “married” to Jesus, teaching kids like herself, and spreading joy and virtue among the poor and abused. The nuns handled this newfound ambition “appropriately,” Kirsch says, “neither encouraging nor discouraging me or my best friend who was also doing this. They answered our questions honestly, and let us know it was something we would decide for ourselves when we were older. We had mass in the convent, just my friend and me and three or four nuns. It was odd to celebrate mass in such a small group. We also played board games and made meals and hung out. It was like a slumber party with a religious undertone.”

As Kirsch got older, her devotion gave way to doubt. While traveling with her family in the late 1970s, she attended church in Europe and North America, and a disturbing discrepancy emerged. “I understood that the pulpit in my church wasn’t used as a bully pulpit. The homily was never about social issues. Rather, it was always about how to be a good Christian. This was almost in the abstract and had little to do with the world around us. In other countries, I heard homilies that were calls to social action,” which mirrored her own progressive politics—women’s equality in
the church, gay rights, abortion rights. She yearned for a church that mustered the courage to speak truth to power and Gospel to poverty and inequality.

“I quickly understood,” she says, “what it meant to be one of billions in a wider church, to belong to a church so heavily dominated by the pope. Before, I’d had a narrow appreciation of the church. Now, I began to believe that it was the church that was narrow.”

When Kirsch was about fourteen, her church announced that catechism class would soon begin for teenagers intending to be confirmed. “Very consciously,” she says, she decided to abstain. “There wasn’t much discussion about this in my house. And there also wasn’t much social cost: “My friends were curious about my decision, but I wasn’t ostracized.” From her vantage point, there wasn’t much religious cost, either. Convinced that her relationship to God superseded her relationship to the church, she was certain that her connection to God would not change. She didn’t necessarily need the church. She needed what the church promised, and she could find that herself.

Kirsch attended her friends’ confirmation, the one she would have participated in had she followed church doctrine. “It was joyous,” she recalls, “although I wanted to shake them and ask if they knew what they were doing. The bishop said the Holy Spirit was empowering them. The Spirit was in me, too. There’s enough Spirit for everyone.”

Sixteen years later, Kirsch is a medical researcher in a midsized city in New England. She attends a fairly liberal Catholic church that discusses—openly, sometimes fervently—such issues as gay rights and abolishing the death penalty. She does not regret missing her confirmation: her heart is firmly with God. But in some ways, the church, with its politics and rigid bureaucracy, intrudes on her intimacy with God, complicating an already inexplicable relationship, since communing with the divine is hard to attain and even harder to explain. She sometimes wonders why she continues her churchgoing. Habit? Perhaps. A link to her family and her youth and her ancestors? Possibly. The tendrils of faith have their own logic, impenetrable to outsiders and often almost as inexplicable to those who express that faith.

Kirsch may have mellowed since balking at being confirmed when she was a teenager. Now, she says, she would rethink having a confirmation, but only if her family made it clear that this was immensely important to
them or if she was “seriously” dating a Catholic, since confirmation is re-
quired for a wedding in the church.

The one thing Kirsch regrets is that her decision hurt her godparents.
“They feel like they failed,” she said. “One of their ‘duties’ was to make
sure I was confirmed. But I’ve told them many times that they were won-
derful and that they gave me the best possible gift: they taught me how
to think.”

Maybe Kirsch did have a confirmation: a confirmation of knowledge, of
taking on personal responsibility. Perhaps she was confirmed in the task
of being herself, which is no light chore. And yet, if she had considered
leaving Catholicism, the Quakers most likely would have opened their arms
to her. While other Christians were arguing about the timing of baptisms
and whether a few drops of water in the right hands can actually save souls,
Quakers were content in having no outward baptisms, no confirmations,
and no communion. In fact Friends, convinced that outer religious prac-
tices pale beside the inner light with which God communicates to us, have
no rites and sacraments.

This smacks of religious minimalism: less is more. Bauhaus meets God.
It sounds Spartan, maybe severe, a rude rejection of how 99 percent of
Christians celebrate their Lord and are waiting, patiently, for His return.
But as Deborah Suess, a Quaker minister in Greensboro, North Carolina,
explains, Quakers are not quite as plain as they appear. They do have rites.
These are just more circumspect, more personal, more quiet than they are
in other Christian denominations.

“Whenever anyone asks ‘Do you have communion or baptism?’” ex-
plains Suess, “I always say, ‘Yes, but it’s an inward experience. It is our
hope that communion takes place whenever we take a bite of anything
or take a breath of air.’ And Quaker meeting also provides a palpable sense
of communion.”

Quakers, then, exalt in the ordinariness of the everyday: eating, breath-
ing, walking, talking. In simple, modest gestures. In the grand hush of the
light, which you enter with gratitude.

And yet, some Quaker meetings have events that resemble rites of pas-

gage. As teenagers approach the age of eligibility for the armed forces, their
minister or a meeting elder may ask them to write a statement explaining
their understanding of pacifism, a key belief among Friends. The minis-

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ters do this not only to help younger Quakers clarify their thoughts about the military, but also as a “matter of witness”—a carefully reasoned rejection of war and violence, refuted with a calm quiet that’s as fierce and determined as any soldier in the thick of combat.

Some Quaker meetings ask teens who have been in the church for several years if they want to become members. If they respond “Maybe, but not now,” the offer still stands. If they respond “No,” then, says Suess, “We tell them we love them and that they can always worship with us.” If they respond “Yes,” they write a letter to the governing body of their local meeting explaining why they want to join. Two elders meet with them, probing their faith and gauging whether the Friends are a good fit for them. If the candidates progress beyond this point, they are officially welcomed as Friends at a Sunday meeting. It’s all very simple. It’s all very plain. No Holy Spirit descends. No wafers turn into the body of Christ. No wine magically transforms into the blood of Christ. No one is purged of sin and born anew. Sometimes a little quiet, a little light, and a lot of concentration can be as powerful as a cathedral full of bishops and cardinals or streams and rivers lined with people eager to be baptized. The Lord truly does move in mysterious ways.33

And then there are the Mormons—often misunderstood or misrepresented as a cult; or as non-Christian, even anti-Christian; or as a haven for polygamists. Members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints—not those who have been excommunicated for aberrations and heresies, for living on the wrong side of the law and the wrong side of God—have what’s tantamount to several initiations. First there are a baptism and a confirmation. Mormons trace these back into uncharted, primeval history, with baptisms originating with God (not with Jesus or John the Baptist, as other Christians say) and with Adam, the first person, they say, to receive the sacrament. A decade or so after Mormons are baptized and confirmed, there is a demanding test of their commitment to the faith and of their understanding of it: a lengthy mission (twenty-four months for men, eighteen for women), often to another country and always away from home. The purpose is to spread the Word and gain converts. And finally, Mormons have an official induction—called “the endowment”—into the church itself. An endowment usually occurs before they embark on a mission or before they get married, whichever comes first. Receiving your endowment and,
especially, baptism and confirmation is church doctrine—indispensable to salvation; being a missionary is fundamental to character building and faith testing.

Mormon males are “commanded” to go on missions, although that does not make them mandatory. “How could they be?” notes Kathryn Summers, a Mormon living in northern Maryland. “There’s no enforcement of any commandment. We are also commanded to pay tithing, to avoid alcohol and tobacco, to attend church weekly, to be honest in all our interactions with others, to turn the other cheek, and so much more. The degree to which we obey God’s commandments varies from person to person and from moment to moment.”

Men can go on missions after they turn nineteen. Women are eligible when they turn twenty-one, which is when Summers left her family’s home in Silver Spring, Maryland, for Portugal—“an amazing, foundational experience,” she states emphatically. Most of the time she was stationed in Lisbon, but for a few months she was located in two villages north of the city. No matter where she was, she lived and breathed Mormonism around the clock. Being a missionary is almost like being in a semi-cloistered monastery that lets you venture into the world: Summers rose at 6:30 in the morning and studied Scripture for two hours, then knocked on doors or introduced herself to people on the street, telling them about the church. Overall, she explained the basics of Latter-Day doctrine with these lessons, culminating in invitations to attend church, read the Book of Mormon, avoid harmful substances, and finally to be baptized and formally join the church.

Summers worked nine to ten hours a day, with no TV and no movies and no dating, and had only a half-day off a week away to buy food and take care of laundry. Her focus was constantly on the church, on its teachings, on saving souls, on learning and knowing what she believed and why she believed it, and on “seeing,” she said, “the choices that you make and that other people make and gaining a far deeper appreciation of human nature.” Seventy-six people she taught came into the church, although she also vividly recalls discussions with one man that helped reconnect him with his own (non-Mormon) church. To her, the experience was less about swelling the ranks of the Saints than “about loving people. It was really, really hard work, and I was really exhausted. But I felt that people’s happiness depended on what I did.”
The young man whom Summers would marry soon after returning from Portugal—John Friese—had spent his two years as a missionary in a locale far less exotic than Portugal: Charlotte, North Carolina. A convert to the church only two years before, he had the zealotry of a newcomer. “To me, this was a lifeboat, and people were sinking,” he told me. “All I wanted to do was get people into the boat. I wanted them to have the same happiness that I had.”  

Whether you’re in Lisbon or North Carolina, missionaries have a baptism by fire: you’re plunged into another world, an almost exclusively non-Mormon one. And you keep the faith. If all goes right, non-Mormons feel its heat and its balm and its strength. Confirmation and baptism are what cleanse and prepare you for this adventure. They make you worthy and pure and strong. With baptism, the sins you created—not inherited—are washed away, since Mormons don’t subscribe to the notion of original sin. You’re also now accountable for all your actions and mistakes and glories and accomplishments. And since the Saints have priests galore, many males have numerous opportunities to baptize someone, often a close relative, sometime during their life. Boys become deacons when they are twelve, preachers at fourteen, priests at sixteen, and elders at nineteen or older. Since a priest—any priest—can perform a baptism, it is not uncommon for fathers to baptize their own children and, sometimes, even for newly ordained sixteen-year-old priests to baptize their own siblings. That’s what happened when Kathryn Summers’s brother Michael, ordained for only a few months, baptized his eight-year-old sister, Lisa. This was the first baptism he performed and was a turning point for both him and Lisa. But since a priest who performs a baptism often feels a certain responsibility for shaping the character of the person he’s initiated as well as that person’s safety, Michael—to this day—looks out for Lisa’s well-being. Brother and sister, already joined by blood and by faith, are now knitted together, ever more tightly, by duty.

Confirmation—essentially laying on of hands and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost—is usually done immediately after baptism. If baptism is performed on a Saturday, then confirmation invariably takes place the next day during the congregational meeting. Only a priest who is in the highest category of Latter-Day Saints religious leaders—the Melchizedek priesthood—can officiate at a confirmation. Here, as in many aspects of
doctrine, Mormons veer from traditional Christian teachings. In Genesis (14:18–20), Melchizedek appears to Abraham and is identified as “a priest of God Most High”; and Psalms (110–14) names Melchizedek as a representative of the priestly line through which the future king of Israel’s Davidic line was ordained; and since the New Testament (Hebrews 7:3) calls Melchizedek a king “without father or mother or genealogy,” some Christians take this to mean that Melchizedek is truly an angel, not a mortal. Some even say that he is actually Jesus.

With all this “heresy” arrayed against Mormons, most Christians reject Mormon confirmations and baptisms as null and void. Confirmations, because they are conducted by fraudulent priests who have usurped Jesus; baptisms, because, while the Mormon invocation at a baptism is virtually identical to what more mainstream Christians say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” Mormons are not referring to the usual concept of the trinity. For other Christians, the trinity is three entries who comprise different qualities of one divinity; for Mormons, the trinity is three separate gods who come together, in effect, as one cooperative divinity. Realizing that, in 2001 the Vatican ruled that the Mormon trinity was so odd that “one cannot even consider this doctrine to be a heresy arising from a false understanding of Christian doctrine.”

The Vatican’s ruling was especially severe since it reversed over a century of recognizing Mormon baptisms. Generally, the church, according to L’osservatore Romano, “had the tendency” to overlook incorrect intentions of the person officiating at a baptism precisely because baptism was so indispensable for salvation. But growing doubts about the Mormons’ creed spurred Rome to make a wholesale reexamination of the Saints and to find them wanting.

None of this fazes Kathryn Summers. Forty years old and thin, with a curly halo of frizzy red hair, she was sure when baptized in 1974 that her sins had been so thoroughly washed away, that she was so clean, so pure that, after changing into dry clothes for the rest of the service, she “just remained in [her] seat [at a Mormon chapel in Maryland], not wanting to do anything that might be a sin.” One false move, one slip of the tongue, one wayward thought, and she would be sullied and soiled, as sinful as if there had been no baptism. As she recalls, most likely her repose was broken by her mother “insisting that I come do something, probably talk to someone. Naturally,” Summers said with a smile, “she wouldn’t have known
why I was sitting there. At home, I tried sitting in my room again, this
time for maybe twenty minutes or so until my mom called to me. I was
then the oldest of four (soon to be five) children, so she would have needed
help with something. I was pretty dismayed. It wasn’t until years later that
someone explained to me that the purpose of taking the sacrament every
week was to renew the covenant of baptism. It would have greatly helped
my eight-year-old self to have understood that particular doctrine.”

The next day, there was again disappointment. At her confirmation,
Summers “didn’t feel anything clear or definite when I received the gift of
the Holy Ghost.” Again officiating, as he had at her baptism, was her fa-
ther; assisting him were other Melchizedek priests, all gathered in a circle
around Summers, with their right hands on her head and their left hands
on the shoulder of the next man. Meanwhile, her father put both of his
hands on Summers’s head and blessed her: “Kathryn Summers, by the au-
thority of the Melchizedek priesthood which we hold, I confirm you a
member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and say unto
you: ‘Receive the Holy Ghost.’” He then added a more personal blessing
based, Summers said, “on what he felt prompted to say by the Spirit.” With
that, she said, it became her duty “to receive the Spirit, to learn how to
recognize it and follow its guidance, and to live so that I can be worthy of
the constant companionship of the Spirit.”

That day, she says, “[I] tried hard to see if I did, in fact, feel different,
but I just didn’t. So then I felt like I was probably lacking in faith, that I
wasn’t worthy of the Holy Ghost.” The Spirit may have eluded her then,
but she believes that she felt its “influence many times while growing up.”
But she didn’t consciously realize she was feeling its power until her first
year in college: “I was in my dorm room reading a passage in the Book of
Mormon about the physical resurrection. Suddenly I had an extremely
powerful witness that this was the truth about why we were alive, that I
had specifically been sent to earth to learn and to grow and to choose, and
that the stuff I was reading in the Book of Mormon was, in fact, the truth
that I needed to guide me back to God.

“For me, the influence of the Holy Ghost is a powerful feeling of peace-
ful, stabilizing, precious truth. It puts the whirling sense of self and world
to rest. I feel loved, and I feel hope and strength, even when the particu-
lar message from God might be that I have erred and need to do better.
Nothing in mortality compares to those moments. I have a brush with
eternity, and I feel the power of God. The Spirit stands ready to visit me at all times. I only have to turn toward him or seek him.”

It took several years for Kathryn Summers to know that what she felt was the Holy Spirit. It took Sarah Fisher, who was a few years older than Summers when she had her confirmation—a Catholic confirmation—an instant to know she’d been touched by the Spirit of the Lord. A year after the confirmation—now sixteen years old and as spiritually invigorated as at the confirmation itself—she was still fending off “friends” offering her marijuana and other illicit temptations and spurning pubescent suitors who wanted her to do what she was not ready to do. The Holy Spirit had sustained Sarah for a full twelve months, which is far more than the few seconds that most people—if they’re lucky—say they sense its presence and its vigor and its penetrating, illuminating buoyancy. Sarah was confident that this was no fleeting relationship with the Spirit, a close encounter of the very brief kind.

“As I see it,” she said with a wisdom beyond her teen years, “these sacraments are like a ladder. Each takes you another step closer to Heaven. Each fulfills you, and each takes you higher and higher until you know Jesus and you’re walking with Jesus and you get to spend the rest of your life—all eternity—with Jesus. I couldn’t think of anything better.”