

Growing up Catholic

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I was raised in a very Catholic family. Mom's side was Irish Catholic, which is like Catholic on steroids. I went to a Catholic grade school and high school. At each, we had mass every day. I sang in the church choir from the time I could sing. Eventually, I became an altar boy.

But that's not what I want to write about today. That's the setting. What I remember most about being raised as a Catholic are the rules. Men could not wear hats in church. Women in church were required to wear hats, or at least a veil that covered her hair, but that was better than the nuns; they had to wear habits hiding their hair completely. At the entrance to the church, there was a bowl of Holy Water. You were supposed to dip two fingers in it, then bless yourself, lest you bring your wickedness into the church.

Fasting was required on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and before every Sunday service. If you ate before church, you were not allowed to receive communion.

You couldn't eat meat on Friday, but fish or liver was alright. On the First Friday of each month, you were supposed to go to mass and confession. On Good Friday, you had to be completely silent from noon to three, and fast. Sassing your mother or father was punishable by kneeling in the corner and saying a rosary. Heck, almost anything could land you there. You always went to mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation. On some of the Holy Days, especially Good Friday, we had to Pray The Stations of the Cross: Fourteen Rosaries in a row. Confession must be made at least once a month. This requirement was satisfied if you went to mass on First Friday, but if you missed it, you needed to confess your failure. Every year, you had to make a Lenten Resolution to better yourself. This may have been Mom, not the church, but we prayed the rosary as a family every day during lent. Instead of almsgiving, because we were kids, we always had to give something up that we liked for the forty days of Lent. What we gave up might be soda, ice cream, our favorite television show, or something like that. It was absolutely imperative that we go to mass and get ashes on our forehead on Ash Wednesday. Talking in church during mass was absolutely forbidden. Talking in church before or after mass, must be in whispers. And, finally, every time you passed a church or a crucifix, you had to bless yourself.

As I grew older, I began to ask myself why these rules were in place. I was absolutely certain that God didn't really care if we ate a hamburger on a Friday.

It wasn't until I was in my thirties that I figured it all out. Jesus told us that He is *The Way*. In a prior article,¹ I wrote that *The Way* implied a path or a process to salvation over the flash of light that some prefer. Perhaps it's both or either, depending on the person.

If Jesus is *The Way*, which I do not doubt, then all these rules are steps along the way. These rules develop self-discipline and sensitivity. They are practice rules so that we have the tools to obey the real rules that are found in the bible. They may be there to act sort of like spiritual pushups designed to achieve our goal. We know we have achieved it when the pursued characteristics found in the Bible become embedded in our character and are no longer something we pursue. They are part of us.

The goal, of course, is to become more Christ-like. The goal is to become a person whom Jesus would like to hang out with.

¹ It's a Process, 2024.