

# "No More Dumb Catholics!"

By Jack Blessington

**D**uring a recent visit to one of our sons, now living in Oregon, we attended Mass at his parish church. The pastor, a large man with great presence and humor, and clearly well read in modern scriptural scholarship, challenges his flock. We were told about how he stood before them one Sunday, and began his sermon with this opening call to arms: "No More Dumb Catholics! Okay!" They know he means it, and they listen carefully. His sermons are theologically sound, in both Catholic doctrine and modern understanding of the Bible. He often teases them,

"Was anyone awake last week?" or "Does anyone have a clue to what I was trying to say last week?" They smile and laugh. They love him, and they are learning from him.

I wish I could be in such a church

lives have the narrow understanding of Catholicism presented by the Church prior to Vatican II. It would take such a priest, fully robed, with the altar behind him, to pierce the barriers born of such strict instruc-

became excited, and that excitement and the optimism his insights projected still drive my life. He loved the Church of Jesus, and the life of Francis of Assisi, but held little regard for Cardinals and Vatican politics. He remained Jewish, in the way he questioned, and he was deeply Christian in his regard for what Jesus represented as love and self-sacrifice: divinity in human form. Over the years, other friends have led me to many books and lectures. Some friends tell me similar stories. We are fortunate, and owe much to those who have shared their faith with us.

A few years ago, one of these scholarly friends suggested I read Marcus J. Borg's book, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" (Harper 1994). Borg is a Protestant and a biblical scholar, impressive and easy to read. Later, I attended lectures he gave in Connecticut. After one lecture, I spoke with him about how I hoped I might see him again when I visited our son in Portland, Oregon, where Borg teaches at a university. On my recent trip to Oregon, Borg was away; but his colleague and friend, John Dominic Crossan, was visiting and lecturing, so I attended his series.

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with some of my closest friends and some family who have retained the Catechism of their elementary education. So many good people in our

tion and training from another era. Those born before, or just after, World War II, were firmly trained and often warned about, "The pride that goeth before the fall." To read the Bible, with a modern and open interpretation, is to reverse so much taught us by people we respected as well educated and holy. We may not all be "Dumb Catholics," but we are part of a generation in which many of us are fearful or frozen Catholics. While we may be able to exclude readers of this publication and those who read similar writings, we all have people in our lives who view such publications, and many current theologians, with great caution or quick rejection.

It is likely that few of us can claim clear virtue regarding our own

## The Whisper of a Raccoon

By William Cleary

Are you wondering who this is, my God?  
Shh! I'll speak quietly. Keep your voice low.  
I am the Masked Raccoon, thief of the garden,  
Living in the woods incognito.

My father was an outlaw thief before me,  
My mother made her living on the sly,  
All our family wear these masks across our faces  
So we're tough to capture or identify.

Yet you're more clever, great detective Spirit,

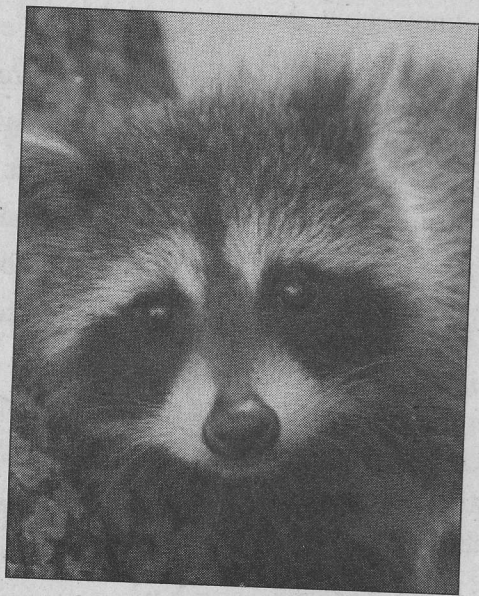
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Yet you're more clever, great detective Spirit,  
You're masked like me and hard to apprehend  
As you sneak about earth working your wonders,  
All but invisible to foe or friend.

One secret: See this tail that hangs behind me,  
Almost a foot of rings and bushy hair?  
If I get lost, just use my tail to find me,  
You'll know the rest of me is not far from there.

Although I live to snatch ripe corn and apples,  
And pilfer juicy loot from field and farm,  
I'm grateful, God, your kindness gave me cunning  
To wear a mask that keeps me safe from harm.



of us are fearful or frozen Catholics. While we may be able to exclude readers of this publication and those who read similar writings, we all have people in our lives who view such publications, and many current theologians, with great caution or quick rejection.

It is likely that few of us can claim clear virtue regarding our own path to a more open theology and a more hope-filled faith. Many of us fell into it like the fortunate parishioners in that Oregon parish. For many of us, someone recommended to us a particular retreat, a book, or suggested a course on Merton or Teilhard, or we may have read a number of recommended writers (Chittister, Boyd, McBrien, etc.), each leading us to a richer faith. This is true in my life. Decades ago, a colleague recommended I take a graduate course with a professor at Fordham University. The professor was Robert Pollack, a Scottish-born Jew, who converted to Catholicism while at Harvard. He taught courses on St. Augustine, John Dewey and other American philosophers. I almost dropped out of his Augustine course; I was lost. He spoke of a faith that had a different language, one with greater depth and joy. I was confused.

Then one day, as he lectured, the lights went on inside of me, I

and easy to read. Later, I attended lectures he gave in Connecticut. After one lecture, I spoke with him about how I hoped I might see him again when I visited our son in Portland, Oregon, where Borg teaches at a university. On my recent trip to Oregon, Borg was away; but his colleague and friend, John Dominic Crossan, was visiting and lecturing, so I attended his series. Crossan is a former Catholic monk and a scripture scholar, both deep and witty. On my flight to Oregon, I read his book, "A Long Way from Tipperary" (Harper 2000). It is about what he discovered in his search for the truth, and I am glad I read it.

In this book, Crossan tells how he and another scholar tried to come up with one-liners or a sound bite to capture a moment on TV, or in the press, given that interview time is often so brief. Interviewers love these one-liners. But his attempts at one-liners failed because one part was always left out, and the key point lost. One such was published as, "God says, Caesar sucks".... The lost phrase was, "The bad news is, God says Caesar's us." Crossan spends time in his lecturing asking us to notice that Christianity is a religion based on love, not power. Another failed sound bite was aired as, "Jesus was a peasant with an atti-

formed me into someone who can truly enjoy life, always ready for new experiences.

Your life with Mother, your shared enjoyment, and gifts of musical talent, were building blocks in our family's togetherness and enjoyment. Evenings out in the "wilderness" of the South Dakota prairies became a time of family fun. You had chosen a gifted young woman as the love of your life. One of her gifts was her love of playing the piano. You, with your musical ear, could play anything on the clarinet after Mother had played it once on the piano. And so, our evenings almost always included singing and dancing.

belief in a Higher Power, whom I, like you, call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now, my hope, my desire, is to become a beacon of hope to our family, friends and community, by following your example. Thank you, Dad. ■

*Rosalie Malone lives with her husband Tom in West Hartford, Conn. Married for 64 years, they are the parents of six, grandparents of 17, and great grandparents of four. Both continue to be active, and are beacons of hope to their family and friends.*

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tude." While accurate, it lost another key point. The lost part was, "As a historian, I reconstruct the historical Jesus as a peasant with an attitude. As a Christian, I believe his attitude to be the attitude of God." Reading Crossan, I liked that line: Jesus had an attitude. It was God's attitude. Jesus was about love, not power. That seems clearly to be the God-attitude our faith calls us to develop.

Borg and Crossan have now co-authored "The Last Week" (Harper 2006), their scholarly approach about Jesus' final days in Jerusalem. Such writing may or may not appeal to everyone, but these scholars, and

others, will keep us from being dumb about our religion and our faith. This collaborative work ends with an exploration of the role of power in our life, and the role of justice and love in our life. Jesus was about something other than power. Such an insight can help make us more enlightened Catholics. Here is how they end this book:

"Holy Week and the journey of Lent are about an alternative procession and an alternative journey. The alternative procession is what we see on Palm Sunday, an anti-imperial and nonviolent procession. Now as then, that procession leads

to a capital city, an imperial center, and a place of collaboration between religion and violence. Now as then, the alternative journey is the path of personal transformation that leads to journeying with the risen Jesus, just as it did for his followers on the road to Emmaus. Holy Week as the annual remembrance of Jesus's last week presents us with the always relevant questions: Which journey are we on? Which procession are we in?" ■

*Jack Blessington is a writer, educator and television producer. He lives in Connecticut.*

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