
Part I

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FAITH
A Personal Exploration

*W*e are layered beings. Our lives are built on strata. Our bodies, for example, and in some measure our personalities, build upon the genetic codes that come to us from generation to generation. We are shaped by a slow-moving but steady, purposeful, and providential evolution. But we are not only layered in our physical existence. Where we stand in today's world socially, politically, economically, and educationally also depends on complex layers of history and culture that reside below the surface of our lives. The layers of history also belong to our spiritual lives. Our reach for transcendence and embrace of faith right now have their own spiritual layers in a history that supports, sustains, and expresses the spirituality that belongs to us in this moment.

To know ourselves, we must explore the layers of our lives. We need to pursue a personal archaeology, a study of the self as a layered reality, recognizing that every past layer of our lives—even our “pre-lives” in our ancestral heritage—has contributed to who we are today. And that includes who we are as believers, as people of faith. We can understand ourselves as believers and understand the faith we hold by studying the archaeology of our faith, exploring its development and unfolding it layer by layer. And that archaeology can take different forms.

There is the macrostudy of the layers of faith that is the work of specialists in history, theology, anthropology, and comparative religions. Yet, another archaeology of faith takes a more personal turn. It excavates the elements of spiritual experience that build one upon another until the latest stratum appears in focus—my faith today.

As I share my process of retrieving the layers of my personal faith, I invite you to consider the retrieval of your own history. Perhaps, at the end, you will share with me a deeper sense of faith's meaning. Perhaps you will be amazed with me as I marvel at how I came to this point of life and faith. Even after considerable reflection, it remains a mystery to me. And this may be another way of saying that I accept faith as a gift given to me, as God's grace and not the result of my own efforts. In your own way, you may also share another sense I have after these reflections: a sense of how imperfect my faith is after all these years. I believe, and I believe firmly, but I also question and sometimes seem to lack constancy and consistency. Perhaps this means that as a believer I am unfinished and that I belong to a still-unfolding history. In the end, we all share an extraordinary pattern of personal history intertwined with the history of faith. Exploring that history leads us to both better self-understanding and deeper understanding of the faith that holds our lives and journeys.

Chapter 1

CUPRAE FANUM: AT THE TEMPLE OF THE GODDESS CUPRA

The Human Foundations of Faith

*M*y story begins long before I existed. In fact, it begins during the Iron Age in central Italy in the sixth century BC—and probably even earlier. This, however, provides the first recovered remains of inscriptions and artifacts related to my ancestry in Italy. Where are these artifacts found?

Today the town is called Grottammare and is located in central Italy on the Adriatic coast. The town belongs to the larger region known as Le Marche, and within that region to the province of Ascoli-Piceno. It is my ancestral home. All four of my grandparents came from this place or very close nearby.

On one of my visits, cousins took me to the church of San Martino in Grottammare. The church is perched on a hillside. If you look down, you see the expanse of the Adriatic Sea. If you look up, you see the Sibylline range of the Apennine mountains often covered with some snow on the peaks. It is a spectacular panorama, the stuff of great postcards. At my first glance, the church of San Martino appeared to have the grace and beauty of many other small-sized, older churches in Italy, and so it

seemed unremarkable. Then, I did a double take. Jutting out over the door of the church was a large, white marble foot—just a foot jutting out and very obviously! I asked my cousins about it. They explained the origin of the mysterious white marble foot and, in the process, helped me begin to excavate the intricate history of faith and religion that belonged to my ancestors and, now, to me.

For several thousand years, this part of Italy was inhabited by the Picene people, one of the Italic tribes, others of which included the Etruscans, the Umbrians, the Sabines, and, of course, the ultimately ascendant Romans. Today the province is called Ascoli-Piceno. For the Picene people or, as the Romans called them, the Picentes, the spot now occupied by the church of San Martino was sacred ground. Here there was a temple dedicated to Cupra, a Picene goddess of fertility and a great figure of the nurturing mother. For agricultural people, as the Picentes were, the cult of Cupra promised some mastery over the uncertain forces of nature and, ultimately, the prospect of a sufficient harvest to guarantee survival.

What about the white marble foot jutting out over the door of San Martino? That, it seems, was the foot of a statue of Cupra, the lone remains of the temple built on this spot even before the Romans took it over. In fact, the ancient Roman name for today's town of Grottammare was *Cuprae Fanum*, that is, "Cupra's Temple."

Traces of the cult of Cupra remain even today, although, of course, many of these elements were baptized and legitimated for Christian use. For example, in the interior of the church of San Martino is a fresco of the "Madonna of Milk," the nursing mother Mary, which seems to be a transposition of an aspect of Cupra's cult as the nurturing mother, a devotion

that was especially popular in the countryside. Another trace can be found in Grottammare's annual celebration at the beginning of July, ostensibly a commemoration of the visit of Pope Alexander III in AD 1177, but which evokes the solstice celebrations of the *dea mater*, the mother goddess, which were observed well before the Christian era.



I can imagine the origins of the cult of Cupra in the overwhelming sense of vulnerability that my ancestors must have felt. They depended on the land, on the weather, and on the strength of their bodies to grow enough food to survive. They faced uncertainty, and they clearly knew their own powerlessness. And yet precisely here, in their vulnerability, they also had an intuition of a strong, reliable, and benevolent presence. They sought reliable protection, and they turned to venerate Cupra.

The pagan roots of my Christian faith are really the human foundations of faith. There is something in the human spirit that rebels against being subject to arbitrary forces. That human spirit intuits even obscurely a transcendent and even protective presence at work in our lives.

My faith begins with basic human experiences, especially the experience of vulnerability. And as often as a deceptive sense of self sufficiency or—worse—a sense of mastery or control over life tries to take hold of me, I must return to my pagan and human roots and then begin again with my vulnerability.

When St. Paul was in Athens preaching to an elite group of intellectuals and civic leaders, he knew that he could bring his listeners to the Christian faith by beginning with their pagan and human roots. He said: "As I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I

proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:23–25).

The dilemmas and aspirations of humanity are not marginal to faith. They are, in fact, foundational for faith. Both in my history and in the preaching of Paul, we find verification for an ancient principle: *gratia supponit naturam*, grace supposes or builds on nature.

To stand before Cupra's foot on the site of her ancient temple challenges me to know my humanity, my poverty, and my pagan faith. This knowledge lays an essential and enduring foundation for the Christian faith.

*How does my faith intersect
with basic questions, dilemmas,
and aspirations of my life?*

Chapter 2

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ROMANS

Handing on Faith from Generation to Generation

The Romans, of course, steadily took over the Italian peninsula on their way to creating the empire. In the year 299 BC, according to the Roman historian Livy, the Romans concluded a treaty *cum Picenti populo*, with the Picene people. Over the course of thirty years, however, relations between the Picenes and the Romans soured. After what appears to have been a Picene rebellion in the year 269 BC, the Romans definitively subjugated and incorporated the population. As often happened, the Romans fostered a *modus vivendi* with the Picenes. In fact, the Romans valued Picene soldiers who had a reputation as ferocious warriors.

The Romans built the Via Salaria, the Salt Way road, which connected the city of Rome with the south Picene territory and the city of Ausculum and eventually the Adriatic Sea at Castrum Truentinum, today's Porto d'Ascoli, just a few miles south of Grottammare. On religious matters of the conquered people, the Romans followed a policy of accommodation. In fact, they would even foster local religious practice

with gestures designed to build goodwill and encourage cooperation with Roman governance. This accommodation and encouragement bring us back to the church of San Martino and the site of the ancient temple of Cupra.

As I stood in front of the door of the church of San Martino with Cupra's white foot jutting out over the door, I looked over my left shoulder. There was a crumbling wall made of stones. My cousins told me that this was a contribution to the temple that Emperor Hadrian made in the year AD 125 to ingratiate himself with the local population. The Romans were happy, for their own purposes, to support any and all local religions, provided these religions did not pose any challenge to Roman sovereignty. This condition later proved to be the decisive factor that set Christianity on a collision course with the Roman empire.

By the time Hadrian had the wall built by the temple of Cupra in Grottammare in AD 125, Christians had already been living in Rome for more than sixty years. Paul had written his Letter to the Romans addressed to a Christian community traditionally situated in the environs of today's Santa Maria in Trastevere church. Eventually both Peter and Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome. The persecution by Nero had sought to stamp out this relatively small but upstart Jewish cult that challenged not only the gods of Rome but also seemed bent on subverting Rome's social-political order. Christians living in Rome and in the empire in AD 125 would be able to anticipate intermittent persecutions that attempted to stamp out their new and presumably dangerous religion for about the next two hundred years.