

UPDATED & REVISED

*How to Handle*  
**WORRY**



*A Catholic Approach*

MARSHALL J. COOK

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## *Preface: A Brief Note about Your Author, an “Expert” on Worry*

I’ve taught for the University of Wisconsin-Madison for twenty-five years, and I speak at seminars and conferences all across the country. I’ve published several books on stress management and even been a guest on Oprah to discuss the topic.

When I approach the podium in some faraway city, clutching my handouts and notes, the moderator introduces me as an “expert.” Folks look to me for answers. They honor me by spending their precious time listening to me. So I’d better be an expert.

But I’m no Ted Williams expert. I’m a Charlie Lau expert.

Ted Williams hit .344 over nineteen seasons in major league baseball, which is way better than good. He hit 521 home runs, also an extraordinary mark. In 1941 he batted .406, making him the last player to hit over .400 for a full season. Williams was surely an expert on hitting; he could do it better than anyone who ever lived.

That’s not the kind of expert I am.

Charlie Lau batted just .255 over eleven seasons in the majors and hit just sixteen home runs. And yet, perhaps because he worked so hard and thought so much about hitting, Lau became an outstanding hitting instructor. Whenever he set out to teach a team to hit better, the team hit better. He had a system, and he worked hard to explain it effectively, so others could put it to good use.



If I'm any kind of an expert, I'm a Charlie Lau kind of expert. I know how to identify and deal with anxiety. I *know* worry, and I'm learning each day how to let faith defeat fear.

Writing is a tool of discovery for me. This will be our mutual exploration as we learn to confront and overcome our fears. Our fears are different; our strategies will be different. But we will share the journey.

“We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

## Introduction

A great deal has happened in our world in the eight years since I first wrote *How to Handle Worry: A Catholic Approach* (Pauline Books & Media, 1999). Much of it is bad news.

We now live in the “post-9/11” world. Since that fatal and tragic day in 2001, Americans have been aware of how vulnerable we really are.

We live in a perpetual state of tension, fighting a “war on terrorism” against an enemy none can see and few can understand. We even have a color-coded system of alerts to let us know how scared we should be at any given time.

The slaughter of innocents on our own soil in 2001 wasn’t the only traumatic event of the last seven years. To the “normal” natural disasters of earthquake and storm, fire, flood, and famine, add the horrific hurricane that at least temporarily destroyed a major American city, and a tsunami that wiped away whole towns and thousands of lives.

I’ve had my share of private tsunamis to deal with as well—as I suspect you have, too. Emergency surgery brought me closely in touch with my own mortality. I’ve grieved the deaths of friends and mourned the passing of more of the heroes of my youth. My wife Ellen and I are still mourning the recent death of her mother.

It’s a frightening and difficult world we live in.

But surely it was ever thus. Is the world really a more fearsome place now than before?

When I was growing up in Altadena—a peaceful small town in the shadow of the San Gabriel Mountains of southern California—I found school to be a terrifying place. Along with the three R's, I encountered the three T's: teasing, taunting, and tests of courage. You probably did, too.

The children of my day also experienced the dawning of the nuclear age. Without warning, our teacher would yell, "Drop!" and we would immediately scramble under our desks, bumping heads and scraping knees. There we huddled, arms over our heads, until given the all-clear.

How those rickety wooden desks were supposed to protect us from a nuclear bomb I've never quite understood, and apparently I didn't really believe it even then; my nightmares were frequently haunted by mushroom clouds.

I reached puberty—surely terrifying enough in any environment—about the same time the Russians launched *Sputnik*. The Soviets had beaten us into space, rendering us vulnerable to all sorts of previously undreamed of attacks. For me this did not mean more drop drills but an increase in the amount of math and science I was expected to learn. And some of those courses made me want to duck under my desk and cover my head.

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took off his shoe and pounded it on his desk at the United Nations, vowing to bury me and my fellow Americans. Missiles bearing nuclear warheads sprouted on Cuban soil, just ninety miles from our shores. The news brought pictures of black people being assaulted with fire hoses, threatened with dogs, and beaten with clubs—not in some faraway country but in the America I pledged allegiance to at school every morning.

As I got older, I protested America's involvement in the Vietnam War, facing the threat of imprisonment or immigration from the country I love. My heroes—John F. Kennedy, his

brother Robert, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—were cut down by assassins' bullets. Their deaths devastated me. Chaos seemed to rule the earth.

And perhaps it does.

### *The end of the world is near—again*

As the World Trade Towers fell, and the images flashed across our TV screens again and again, some people might have thought they were witnessing the beginning of the end—not just of the United States but of the world itself.

Others had expected the end to come with the new millennium and the “Y2K disaster” that would surely wipe out our collective computer consciousness and destroy civilization.

Actually, the end of the world seems to have been postponed dozens, even hundreds, of times. Predictions of the world's certain demise circulated widely in 1844 and again in 1914. More recently, groups like the Heaven's Gate cult have given horrific testimony to the strength and compelling nature of such predictions. Today the “Left Behind” novels, which describe end times, enjoy enormous popularity.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have been wrong so often in trying to pin a number to Armageddon, they've quit trying. A spokesman for the denomination, Robert Johnson, has said, “We learned our lesson.... The Bible has a list of about two dozen things to watch out for. They've all happened.”<sup>1</sup> As J. Gordon Melton, head of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, points out: “Everyone who predicted the end of the world had one thing in common. They were wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. John Dart, “Jehovah's Witnesses Abandon End-of-the-World Prediction” (Religion News Service, December 1, 1995).

2. *Ibid.*

If unwilling to put a specific date to it, many Christians still believe that the end time prophesized in the Book of Revelation is imminent.

How will it come when it comes? Perhaps dirty radioactive bombs or the accidental release of nuclear weapons will do us in. Some say it will be the fire of global warming, while others favor a new ice age. Pollution? A bacterial infection or virus? All seem like worthy candidates for the role of Earth's executioner.

If the world doesn't go out with a bang, one day it will most certainly go out with a whimper. The sun that sustains all life on earth won't last forever, after all; scientists predict that it will burn itself out in a mere five billion years, give or take a hundred million.

At least nobody seems to be too worried about that one yet.

### *How we hope to cope— and why it isn't working*

In the face of all this disaster—real, imagined, and prophesized—we've typically reacted as a culture by evading, avoiding, and denying.

We dull the senses with alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, food, and television, losing ourselves in endless, often mindless activity.

We treat aging as a disease, which many seem convinced is curable. We pursue eternal youth through chemical injections of poison to fill out wrinkles, liposuction to suck out fat, supplements to boost our energy, and drugs to keep us virile.

We have become gripped by a psychology of scarcity. There isn't enough for everyone—enough money, enough possessions, enough time; better grab as much for yourself as you can while the grabbing's good. This mentality is never more obvi-

ous than at the approach of the “holiday season,” which now seems to begin shortly after the Fall Equinox. “Got your shopping done yet?” folks start asking around Labor Day, and the day after Thanksgiving becomes a mass mall free-for-all, “the busiest shopping day of the year.”

Has “Make hay while the sun shines” replaced “In God we trust” as our national credo?

### *The paradox of the faith-filled, fearful Christian*

The Bible tells us that the world is not our home and that it will one day pass away. But it also tells us we don’t know when that’s going to happen.

And even if we did, why should we as believers worry about it? We say we believe in a loving Father-God who will send his Son to gather us, living and dead, at the end of time and bring us home.

Don’t we want that? Do we really even believe it? Why do we let anxiety rule us even in the presence of our faith?

While I was growing up fearful, I was also growing up Christian. I went to church every Sunday, prayed with fervor, and felt God’s daily presence in my life. As a young adult I converted to Catholicism, the faith of my father’s people and of my heart, reaffirming my belief in a loving God who gave us his only-begotten Son that we might have life in abundance for eternity in his presence.

I believed then, and I believe now, that Jesus Christ is the living Son of the living God, and that his death on the cross redeemed me and won for me my salvation.

And yet for years fear and faith coexisted in me, with fear often gaining the upper hand. Only in recent years has faith finally come to dominate—although not yet fully banish—fear.

How could this be?

More importantly, if you, too, have struggled with your dual nature as a faith-filled, fearful Catholic, how can you allow healing to occur in your soul, so that your faith can finally triumph?

That question propels this book into being. In these pages, we'll seek the path that leads away from anxiety and toward the peace that surpasses all earthly understanding.

Guided by the Word, we will name and face our fears, opening our hearts to God's healing love. When we do, we will learn to live more fully in faith, freed at last from needless anxiety.

*“Drag your thoughts away from your troubles...  
by the ears, by the heels, or any other way you can manage.”*

— MARK TWAIN

## CHAPTER I

### *Bringing Our Burdens to God*

At the chapel where I attend daily Mass, Father Victor from nearby Milwaukee often pinch-hits when Father Randy has to be elsewhere. Speaking in a thick Italian accent, Father Victor always begins the celebration of Eucharist by thanking God for calling us together for “the great gift of the Mass.”

Oh, but sometimes we don’t seem very enthusiastic about that gift!

As Catholics most of us believe that we are obligated to attend Mass on Sundays and on occasional other “Holy Days of Obligation.” And that’s how a lot of us act when we get there— as if we’re there under duress, because we’re obligated. We mumble our way through the responses, sink into a near coma or drift off into space during the homily, and stare vacantly during the hymn singing. We start struggling into our coats— if we even bothered to take them off in the first place—before the final blessing.



How differently we might behave if we thought of it as a Holy Day of Opportunity instead.

“If we really believed what we say we believe,” I once heard a radio evangelist say, “they couldn’t keep us away from church with shotguns. Why, we’d have to wear helmets and shoulder pads, because we’d be bouncing off the walls with excitement and joy.” We’d even be willing to die for the faith—as martyrs have done from the beginning of Christianity.

No, we don’t have to start behaving like holy rollers, jumping up and running around the church every time the Spirit strikes us. But shouldn’t we be showing more enthusiasm for the great gift of the Eucharist and the solace and support that come from communal worship?

If we really think about it, rule or no rule, don’t we go to Mass, at least on some level, because we want and need to?

“Not my brother or my sister, but it’s me, O Lord,” so the old song goes, “standing in the need of prayer.”

At each Mass we recite the prayer that Jesus himself gave us, the one we call the Lord’s Prayer. We pause while the priest petitions the Father on our behalf to deliver us from every evil, to grant us peace in our day, to free us from all sin, and to protect us from all anxiety “as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

We affirm this prayer with a communal “Amen”: we believe!

But do we? Do we *really* believe that God will keep his promise to grant us his peace and free us from every fear?

Granted, our belief is imperfect, our faith incomplete. The cry of the father whose child had an unclean spirit is our cry, too: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24). But shouldn’t even an imperfect faith in God’s perfect love protect us from the corrosive anxiety that can rob life of its joy?

“Do not fear, only believe,” Jesus tells the ruler of the synagogue, whose daughter has just died (Mk 5:36). We are to have

absolute faith in the saving power of Jesus, even in the face of death.

Can the truth really be that simple? It can and it is, but that doesn't mean it's easy. Somehow the simplest truths are the most elusive.

If we truly bring our worries and fears to God, allowing him to release us from our anxiety so that we may more fully love him, we will be acting contrary to our cultural teaching and example. Pessimism and cynicism are considered "natural" and "realistic," while the optimist is labeled a "Pollyanna," out of touch with the cold, hard facts of life.

It isn't true. The Word of Christ is true.

In the chapters that follow, we'll look at ways our culture fosters and nurtures our fears and explore Christ's teachings about anxiety and our reactions to his clear, simple truth. We'll discover together how to let him take away all our fears. We'll explore worry and stress as a universal part of the human condition. We'll examine the difference between useful worry—the kind that helps us to avoid danger, prepare for challenges, and solve problems—and the senseless anxiety that paralyzes us by robbing us of energy and will while it eats away at our faith.

We'll trace worry to its roots, learn why we cling to certain worries, and come to understand that the behaviors we adopt to ease the pain of anxiety often in fact intensify our fears and perpetuate our anxiety.

Since worry often becomes automatic, the expected response, it can feel like a natural instinct, which is to say it doesn't "feel" at all, and we aren't even aware of it. We'll learn to catch ourselves in the act of worrying, so we can choose another alternative.

We'll explore the limits of positive thinking, making sure we're seeing life as it is, not as we would like it to be. And we'll confront our anxiety rather than evade it. We'll name our

demons, giving them tangible shape and substance; then we'll let Christ expel them from us.

We'll even delineate different types and sources of worry, because they may require different responses. (Like the evil spirits Christ banishes in the New Testament, worries are legion.)

With dear, good Martha, we'll learn at times to put aside our chores to live wholly in the moment, in communion with our Lord. We'll stop "sweating the small stuff"—and give all the "large stuff" to God.

We'll even practice the gentle art of accepting the inevitable and letting go of the past. We'll renounce revenge in favor of forgiveness, following the higher road Christ invites us to walk with him. It's not enough, after all, to simply refrain from killing our brother or sister. We are to banish the killing impulse from our hearts—and with it the horrendous anxiety it produces in us.

Christ can heal us of all anxiety if we but let him. When we do, we'll re-encounter the central paradox of our faith, the teaching that we must willingly lose our lives in order to find full and abundant Life in him. We find freedom from fear in surrendering to God's will and accepting God's amazing promises for us, manifested in his Word and made flesh in his Son.

"Surrender" sounds so easy, but we know it to be so hard. This journey will require time, concentration, and energy.

Are you ready to start?

The path from faith to fear is the journey of a lifetime. We must pick ourselves—and each other—up every time we fall. We must forgive every time we fail.

We'll never be finished or "cured" as long as we live on this earth. We'll continue to confront fears every day of our lives,

and every day our faith will become stronger and anxiety will lose a bit more of its hold on us.

“Don’t be afraid; just have faith.” The truth really is that simple. But it defies intuition and emotion and transcends intellect and logic. It won’t be enough to learn about the journey; we must live it.