

Rocio Pestana Segovia

The Woman at the Well

The youngest in a family of four brothers and four sisters, I am a Spaniard who was born in Madrid. My family was profoundly involved in the Roman Catholic Church. One of my aunts, Maria Josefa Segovia, was the co-founder of a secular religious order, the *Institucion Teresiana*, dedicated to education.

My Early Years

At the age of two, I was taken along with two of my sisters to a convent boarding school. During the week, we lived in a house with members of the order who worked as public school teachers. On weekends we went home. Sometimes my mother visited us at the school in the afternoon and helped to feed us dinner. From age two to age seven, I was there acquiring my basic education. In the house there was a small chapel with an altar and tabernacle. There, from the time I was very small, I began to be conscious of all the religious practices of Roman Catholicism. I was taught to pray, to use holy water, and to follow the ritual of the Mass and the rest of the sacraments.

I made my first confession before a priest at the age of five and prepared for my first communion at age six. At this same age I began to read and write and to memorize the Catholic catechism of Astete in order to enjoy the privilege of Holy Communion. I remember clearly how expectantly I prepared for this event, firmly convinced that Jesus was really in the consecrated Host and would enter into my heart. I thank the Lord that He gave me a delicate conscience and a sensitivity to everything related to Him.

From my infancy, Jesus was the motive of my dreams, aspirations, and desires. He was my intimate Friend. I was taught about God, the Trinity, and Jesus Christ by both the Teresians and my family. I knew about the lives of many saints and martyrs, the history of the early church (according to the Catholic Church), exemplary lives of all time periods and many stories of Bible characters. All of this motivated me with a desire to imitate their lives. I sincerely wanted to

please God and dedicate my life to Him. I fervently worked to comply with all the ordinances of the church: daily Mass, confession, communion, fasting, alms, prayers for the dead in purgatory, indulgences, etc. We recited the rosary both at home and at school. I had private times of prayer and endeavored to be a regular helper in the sacristy of the school chapel.

When I was seven, I went to several different private schools for girls, in Madrid, in the mountain chain of Cordoba in the south of Spain, in Avila, in the province of Castilla, the city of “Saints and Knights”, and in Burgos. Always living far from family, each time I moved I was more attached to my special friendship with the Lord.

A Private Vow

At the age of fourteen, I felt the call to consecrate myself to the Lord, wanting to be totally His. I asked permission of my confessor to make a private vow of chastity. One of the happiest days of my life was January 21, 1961, when I committed myself to the Lord by this vow. I also put on a special “engagement” ring. After this, my purpose became definite; I decided to be a missionary. I proceeded to finish my secondary education with a goal to study nursing to be more useful on the mission field.

When I finished school at seventeen and told my family of my desire to be a missionary and to study nursing, I received no encouragement. They told me they could not help me financially and expected me to find employment, the sooner the better.

Unfettered Liberty

I had a difficult adolescence after I finished school. Although I was living with my family, I began to enjoy liberties I never had had. I began to have problems which I did not have the strength or spiritual maturity to face. Although I tried to find refuge and strength in the sacraments, as I had been taught, I was powerless, vulnerable, and lost in the “new” life the world offered me. I felt overwhelmed by my repeated sins and complete lack of control. I began to work and make money, but my family’s financial needs did not permit me to save enough for nursing school.

I smoked, drank, and never passed up a chance to enjoy life in one manner or another. Sometimes I was in total anguish because I felt so separated from the Lord. My confessor, an Augustinian priest, had scruples about giving me absolution for my sins because I was always repeating the same things over and over again. My situation was so desperate that more than once I was at the point of wanting to commit suicide.

A New Confessor

One day I came from church and in my distress entered running and crying into the Dominican monastery. A priest passed by the corner where I had hid myself and asked why I was crying. I started to talk with him. He waited patiently for my answers. He counseled me and offered the absolution for which I was so anxious, but that had been refused to me for, according to the Catholic religion, without the blessing of the priest, God would not pardon me. After that day the Dominican priest, P. Juan Luis Tena, was my confessor and helped me.

Entering the Convent

When I was almost eighteen, the minimum age to enter the novitiate for the Combonianos Missionaries, I had a sudden change of mind and decided to become a cloistered nun. I was

referred to the Convent of the Clarissas, the “Monastery of the Sacred Heart”, in Cantalapiedra, Salamanca, because my confessor’s mother and five of his sisters were at that same place. Soon I began to correspond with the nuns, especially with Sister Mary Grace. We decided that within a few months, I would go to the convent.

When I broke the news to my parents, they did not want to give their permission. This created a big problem in my family, but finally after much struggle, they gave their permission. I left for the convent on February 4, 1965.

I cannot describe the inner joy and expectations with which I entered this new life. On the other hand, there was sadness because of the opposition of my parents, especially that of my mother when she tried to release me to that which I had always desired, to be the Lord’s totally and completely.

Religious Life

I adapted to the religious life of “poverty, chastity, obedience and Cloister (solitude)”. The first and most inconvenient problem that I encountered was the cold. In these convents, the austerity and poverty of life was translated into complete denial of any material and personal convenience. One has to submit to the Lord by means of rules, work, prayer, discipline, sacrifices, and even bodily self-imposed suffering. There was no contact with the world, nothing that would gratify or satisfy the senses. Whether cold or hot, hungry or thirsty, discomfort, humiliation, want, etc., one

Rocio with her parents,
the day she took the habit of Clarissa

pretends that she is in a room filled with roses. I don’t know about my convent sisters, but it seemed to me as nothing compared to pleasing the Lord and making my salvation and the salvation of other souls sure. We had to be “co-redeemers with Jesus and Mary”. To intercede for the living and the dead, we were the dynamo, the hidden heart of the Holy Catholic Church. Our life of prayer and voluntary suffering was the key to success in the Christian life.

At last I was sure (or so I thought) that I had “arrived” in a secure harbor where I could practice all the sacraments. I was living a holy life separated from the evil and mundane. I prayed, worked, made special acts of self-imposed suffering, constant sacrifices and kept the rules of the convent, the religious life, and the Church. What more could the Lord ask that we had not already given? Apparently I was obedient, a hard worker, honest, completely dedicated to the glory of God.

In August of 1965, I took the habit of the Clarissas. One year later I made my first temporary vows and three years later the solemn and final vows. Now officially and permanently, I was consecrated to the Lord--“married” to the Lord or so I was taught.

My Godmother’s Gift

The day I was to take the habit, my family was invited to the ceremony. I was admitted to the Franciscan Order of the Clarissas on August 8, 1965. My family name was changed to “Sister Maria of the Holy Spirit”. Along with my parents, sisters and brothers, my baptismal

godmother, Ma. Antonia Ruiz, was invited also. She gave me a Bible and with the Mother Superior's permission, I began to read it. At first I read it from cover to cover but sometimes there were many things I did not understand. I enjoyed reading the New Testament more than the Old Testament. Because I wanted so much to know the Lord and love Him, I constantly read this precious book and also consulted sections of the Divine Office which were written in Latin. I took note of the references to the book of Psalms that we recited daily and in my free time read in Spanish. Because I had studied Latin in secondary school, soon it was possible for me to understand and translate it.

Thirsting for the Lord

The Gospel of John was read most assiduously by me during the nine years that I spent in the convent. I didn't understand the significance of salvation, but did come to know more about Who was speaking to me: "*I am the Good Shepherd*", or "*I am the Door*", "*I am the Way, the Truth, the Life*", "*He that is thirsty, come to Me and drink*". I particularly delighted in and meditated on the encounter Jesus had with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-26).

In the center of the convent there was a well which was surrounded by flowers and bushes. Many times I would sit there and pray, ardently desiring the presence of Jesus with all my mind, being, and will. "Lord, give me to drink, I thirst for Thee. Please give me living water!"

With the passing of the years, I was more and more dissatisfied with myself. I wanted to be better day after day, but how? How could I satisfy my Lord? How could I grow more and more in holiness? It was a struggle and an anxiety to the point that I was becoming unbalanced physically and emotionally.

I saw in the Gospel of John, in the prayer of the Last Supper when Jesus prayed for His own that He said, "*I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil*" (John 17:15). In my desire for holiness, I saw in the same prayer, "*Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth*" (John 17:17).

In the convent we were totally separated from the world, virtually on another planet. Yet in the same passage I read, "*As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world*" (John 17:18). We wanted to make ourselves believe that cloistered nuns were the "cream of the cream" of religious life. With the passing of time, however, I met with more and more contradictions to this view. There were too many rules and practices that were the same as those of the Pharisees who so despised the Lord. Distinctions were made between nuns and visitors, between rich and poor families. Many times I heard the statement that a "white" lie used to save a difficult situation or to defend something or someone is to make good use of "the left hand" and therefore is not a sin. Rules and traditions and rigidity of obedience incapacitated one to make decisions. Things were always well-protected for appearances and there was a formality of innumerable regulations.



Rocio, as a cloistered nun

Struggle Within

A great struggle began between what my mind was learning about God, the spiritual life, and the life we were living in the convent. This struggle brought me to the point of physical illness. I was taken to the doctor because I suddenly lost my voice. The Mother Superior thought that I had tuberculosis of the throat, as was the case with another nun at that time.

Yet another nun, because of her distress of mind threw herself into the convent's well. Her cries, not for help but of inconsolable mental torment, were heard throughout the entire convent, "I'm condemned, I'm condemned". She didn't know how to swim, yet she was floating and we were able to take her out alive. Her panic because of eternal condemnation gave me food for thought. During "Operation Rescue", Mother Superior kept repeating, "My daughter, stop condemning yourself" but the nun kept on wailing, "I'm condemned". Even now I remember this terrible experience with pain, for many still follow the same path, believing in what is dead and empty.

Of my nine years in the convent, the last three were spent in an internal struggle that had no respite. I could not understand how at first I had been so happy and now I had absolutely no contentment. I asked help of the spiritual father of my aunt, the Teresiana nun. Father Amalio Valcarcel was at that time the secretary to the Master General of the Dominican Fathers in Rome. In His providence, God permitted the priest to make a trip to Spain and he took advantage of that opportunity to visit me in the convent. After hearing what was happening to me and that I preferred to die than to renounce my monastic life, he told me something very simple that helped me understand and make a final decision.

With much compassion and patience he said, "My daughter, does it not seem to you that you have known God at least a little bit in these years of religious life?" "Yes," I answered. "Then, don't you believe that God is more of a Father and Mother to you than your own parents, that He doesn't want to torture you, and that if He wants you to be here, He will give you the necessary happiness and peace to persevere in this way of life?"

On Eagle's Wings

I admitted with a broken heart that I could not continue in peace. Father Valcarcel took it upon himself to convince the Mother Superior to let me go for a while to the home of my parents to determine what God's will was for my life. They asked permission of the Bishop of Salamanca. I was permitted to leave and to stay with my family for a set length of time after which I had to decide whether to return to the convent or to solicit secularization through the Pontifical Curia in Rome.

When my family learned of this decision, they hurried to come and get me. That day in March of 1974 I thought I would die. Never in all my life, before or after, have I suffered such profound sorrow. I was in indescribable agony. They did not let me say goodbye to the nuns who had been my dear "sisters" during these years. With a cold and sorrowful benediction, the Mother Superior, with two sisters of the board, accompanied me to the door of the convent. The sound of each turn of the locks and doors were like blows to my heart. I couldn't believe what was happening, that my dear Lord was letting me go. I believed I was abandoning Him. Wasn't He all-powerful? Could He not stop the process? Did He not know how I loved Him and that

this separation made me fearful? Where was He in this hour? As a devouring fire within me, my heart cried, “My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?”

In order to leave, my sisters had to support me by the arms because my feet would not support me. I was unable to speak, only able to cry. Without strength, I was taken to Madrid under a black sky that also cried in a torrential rain erasing the silhouette of the convent hidden on the horizon. Where was my God?

Blind in my life of vanity and sin, I did not see the powerful and loving arms of God taking me out of these circumstances to offer me the salvation for which I longed, if only I could find it! As it is written in Deuteronomy 32:10-12, *“He found him in a desert land, and in the waste, howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings, So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.”*

Life on the Outside

My adjustment to new life on the outside world was slow and difficult. I was disconnected from everything and everyone. Noises of everyday life were, among other things, a source of stress to me. I was twenty-seven years old and as immature as an adolescent that faced life for the first time. Without the protection of the habit and the “intonation” of the rules and regulations that resounded like the convent bells, I was easy prey to my own sinful nature that for so many years had been insulated from reality under the cloak of religious “good works”.

I had no power in me, no discernment, no direction. Foolishly believing that the Lord had abandoned me, I rebelled against any form of rules and regulations. I was not even able to attend Church. It seemed empty to me, making me feel restless inside, estranging me more and more from all religious practice. I was not able to go to Mass, communion, confession, or even read the Bible. These things not only had no meaning to me, they perturbed me. Soon I began to smoke and drink and to dress myself without modesty. I struggled against my conscience, wanting to do most of the time what I knew was against the law of God and everything moral.

Still desiring to study to be a nurse, this time my family helped me. The school of nursing I was to attend was far from Madrid and far from my family in the city of Barcelona in the northeast of Spain. Again, I moved away and began to study. Although the pursuit of this career gave me much satisfaction, I knew that in my personal life I was losing control of myself and slipping into deep depression.

The High Cost of Ungodly Counsel

It was recommended to me that I counsel with a psychiatrist who was also a priest. Unfortunately the cure was worse than the sickness. The counsel given under professional and priestly authority put me in the most dangerous situation of my life. When I told him my personal history and what I had left, he counseled that it was “necessary therapy” to be “myself”. “All your life you have been very repressed; you must give yourself the opportunity to be open; let your instincts and desires give you enjoyment of life that you have never had. Lie, rob if you want, get angry if necessary, fornicate, drink, smoke (he smoked enthusiastically as he gave me counsel), enjoy yourself with men, don’t bury yourself with study on the weekends, go out, have a good time, etc. Don’t worry, don’t think about what is sin and what isn’t. If your conscience

troubles you, throw your guilt on me, roll it on my shoulders.” “But Father,” I said, “this is against the law of God.” “Don’t worry,” he answered, “this is for your well-being, it’s part of your therapy .”

I spent those years studying nursing and “recuperating” personally at a very high cost. At the same time that I was building a career, my spiritual and personal life was deteriorating more and more. My conscience was being seared.

I passed the summer in Puerto Rico in the home of my brother and another summer in England, never missing an opportunity to have a good time and “see the world”. It was a season full of abandonment and personal self-destruction.

A Papal Visit

On finishing my nursing studies and obtaining a degree, my parents gave me a trip to Italy as a graduation gift with a view to my visiting the Pope. I arrived in Rome in August of 1978. The Dominican father that helped me leave the convent was waiting, for my parents had alerted him. He accompanied me on my tour through the “holy city”, and gave me a special ticket to attend one of the Pope’s audiences. I did not really want to go but, since I did not want to offend the priest by turning down the invitation, I went. The entire performance seemed a ridiculous show. I abhorred all the veneration and enthusiasm for a mere man. Looking at the crowd, I could not understand what was going on with them. I wanted to run away as far as I could; I was ashamed of this hysterical gathering. Even though I had taken no active part in the activities, I considered the luxury, pomp, artifice and empty words an insult to God and repugnant to me. I wanted to go home as soon as possible to my own country. In Assisi, I made a general confession, trying to reconcile myself with the Lord. I attended Mass. This new fervor lasted only until my return to Spain, at which time I promptly returned to my old way of life.

From Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic

In this situation, with so many problems, and looking in vain for permanent employment as a nurse, I decided to go to another country to pursue my nursing career. I went to Puerto Rico where my brother had lived for some years. He offered me his hospitality and help while I got on my feet. Once again, with a broken heart, I left family, friends, and country.

I spent some difficult months in this beautiful isle of the Caribbean, trying to find work and to establish permanent American residency. Because of bureaucratic procedures, both objectives took more time than indicated by immigration authorities. It became imperative that I leave U.S. soil, at least for the time being. Desperate, I thought of returning to almost any part of Europe and joining some counter-culture group to lose myself somewhere or perhaps to perish. Why keep up the struggle? I was at the end of my rope.

My brother, knowing something of the possibilities I was considering, suggested that I go to find work in the Dominican Republic. He was sure that I would find employment there because of the scarcity of graduate nurses in that country. Meanwhile, he would continue working to obtain a resident American visa for me so I could return to Puerto Rico.

Without much enthusiasm, I assented to his proposal and left straightaway for the Dominican Republic in September of 1981. In Santo Domingo I quickly made new friends and got a fairly good position in one of the best clinics in the city. I began to feel a little more cheerful and hopeful. It was at the clinic that I encountered Christian believers for the first time.

They were a couple who invited me to a Bible study and then to a service at their church. Attending a Protestant service was a new and exciting experience I did not want to pass up.

A Conviction of Sin

The Saturday evening before the appointed Sunday I was to attend church with this couple, I went out for supper and dancing with one of my friends, a divorced doctor who had an entertaining evening in mind. My conscience was entreating me not to go out with this man, but rebellious and weak as usual, I went out to enjoy myself as much as possible. Early in the morning, however, while crossing the street, I heard the strident crow of a rooster. Suddenly, it was like a sword had pierced my soul. I immediately remembered Peter denying Jesus. I could stand no more. Leaving the “friend” standing there, I ran down the street crying, not knowing where I was, only looking up to heaven and screaming for help and pardon. From the depths of my being I cried to God, “Save me, help me, I can’t do it alone. I am lost without You, please pardon me and save me!” Without my knowing it, the Holy Spirit had commenced His work in me by means of the conviction of sin.

I had to ask directions to find my way to my apartment. I was, in every sense of the word, lost in the middle of the night in a big city. But now, the Great Consoler was with me. The following day, I collected myself to go to the Sunday service to which the couple had invited me. It was a recently organized fundamentalist Baptist church whose pastor was an American missionary, Paul Joles. The service was held in the living room of his house. When I arrived in the middle of the Sunday School class, they were talking about the Holy Spirit. That morning was the continuation of what had happened the night before when my conversion had really begun. Now I began to “see” and to “understand” what had been before “veiled” to me. Christ, through His Word, caused me to understand the plan of salvation, “...*that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures*” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Having been convicted of sin by God’s Word, confirming that we are all sinners (Romans 3:23, Isaiah 59:2), that sin is separation from God (Romans 3:26), and that this separation leads to death and certain judgment (Hebrews 9:27, II Thessalonians 1:8-9), the Lord did not leave me there.

There is a solution: Jesus Christ. He paid the penalty for our sins and is the way to God (I Timothy 2:5-6, I Peter 3:18). Salvation is the precious gift of His grace (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:16). How wonderful is the grace of God which is so mercifully offered to all who believe in Him! Amazing grace, that He lifted me from darkness into His marvelous light, from sin to pardon, from death to life! Grace that found a lost sheep and brought the prodigal daughter home to the embrace of the Father Who receives me with unconditional love.

How can I express what happened that morning! Exploding from grief turned into joy, a flood of tears flowed from my broken spirit and I fell at the feet of Jesus. Like the woman at the well, I was cleansed and given living water. I knew this was the new birth that gave me life in Him and liberty that I had never known. The words spoken from the cross, “*It is finished*” (John 19: 30) were understood. Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). At the same time, He is our High Priest and Intercessor, the Propitiation (completely satisfactory payment) for sin.

The veil fell from my eyes and I saw that I was accepted in Christ. So many things happened. This was the Christ I had longed to know, to love and to serve, the God of the Bible Who saves through His redeeming Blood shed once for all, Christ Jesus Who does not need the help of sacraments, personal works, nor priests and saints to intercede or redeem me. He gives the gift of salvation by His sufficient and holy grace, if we believe in Him.

I started to take the first steps in my new life in Christ: the study of the Bible, and the baptism of the believer, my first public testimony. A long letter was written to the priest in Spain, (the one who helped me leave the convent). I shared with him the joy of my faith and my new life guided by the Lord. These were clear evidences that I belonged to Christ and not to some religion.

Living Water

When the missionary-pastor who preached the Word when I had been born-again by grace was called to the United States, he gave me a word of advice and the best warning I had ever received: “Read your Bible every day, whether you feel like it or not, because through the Word of God you will find all that is necessary to continue persevering and growing in the Lord and for all that you may need.” I faithfully followed this advice without much effort because I had an insatiable thirst to know more and more about the Holy Scriptures. In this way, I drew nearer and nearer to God and discovered His will for my life. Today, I can say that thanks to the Lord’s grace, I have read the Bible through sixteen times, once for each year since my conversion. What a tremendous blessing!

My desire for the Word of God motivated me enough to enter the Quisqueyan Bible Institute in Santo Domingo. The founder and director of that institute was another American Missionary, Rev. Larry Dobson. There I was able to follow a systematic study of the Word, enjoying the privilege of being a student in a healthy and joyful atmosphere under teaching according to biblical principles and doctrines.

The in-depth study of the Scriptures brought great peace and emotional stability in my life even though I had to work and study very hard. This effort was a joy, not a burden. Knowing and living by the Word of God is an inexhaustible source of blessings. In my own life I was beginning to realize what Paul declared, “*I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me*” (Galatians 2:20).

In my past life as a Catholic nun, I wanted to do everything. I struggled to be better. I sacrificed myself to the extreme, to win, to help Christ save the lost souls, to do everything well enough to buy my way to heaven. What was happening now? Christ has done it for me, Christ saves me, Christ produces good works in my life so I can do them to please Him, not to buy His approval. “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them*” (Ephesians 2:10). What a joyous discovery! Thank you, Lord.

Serving the Lord

While studying the Scriptures during the second year at the institute in Santo Domingo, I felt the Lord’s calling to dedicate myself completely to His service. With my diploma of a “Christian Worker” I sought the Lord’s will as to the area where I could serve Him. I visited my parents in Spain, leaving myself open to the Lord’s work in my country. When this attempt

proved fruitless, I returned to Santo Domingo and decided to start with something I had desired for a long time yet was never able to accomplish. I decided to open the doors of my heart and my house to the abandoned or parentless children wherever I could find them, or whenever circumstance brought them to me. With the approval of the local church and the pastor, I began this ministry and soon had a board of directors composed of various couples from the church.



Rocio, after she had left the convent.

The children started to arrive at my home in a providential manner. Surprisingly, many of them only a few months old, others just a few years old. In three years, we had eleven small children ranging up to nine years of age. With the children came pressures and economic problems. Even bigger were the spiritual problems and battles which took place with the weariness of being alone. The attacks of the enemy grew oppressively worse. In the same measure, the providence and generosity of our Lord helped us to resolve our difficulties and to continue our work. In a real way, I was able to experience and rejoice in the words, *“I know Whom I have believed”* (II Timothy 1:12).

He is Faithful

There is another important chapter in this testimony that I want to share with you because it may help someone understand how the Lord operates for good in all the details of life. Sometimes, when a religious person such as a Catholic, leaves the “consecrated” life and returns to the “world”, and gets married, in the religious atmosphere this is almost taken as an offense, as though the departure from religious life were purely for sexual motives. How sad!

I wanted to be totally consecrated to the Lord. Catholic teaching instructs about the marvels and privileges of celibacy, pretending that this manner of single life for the love of God exceeds in honor and virtue that of marriage. After my conversion to Christ, in the light of the Scriptures, I learned how erroneous and false are the teachings and practice of celibacy.

The holy Bible from the beginning teaches how God, as He created all things, saw that everything He created was good, including man. But, the first time God said that something was not good was when he saw that man was alone! *“And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help fit for him”* (Genesis 2:18). In all the Old Testament, marriage is the normal condition of man and woman; in the New Testament, Paul, in the first letter to Timothy, speaks of the signs of apostasy, pointing out that one of them would be the prohibition to marry (I Tim 4: 1-5). In naming the qualifications of a bishop, Paul assumes the candidate is married (1 Tim 3:2).

Years before I went into the convent, I arrived at a point at which I wanted no man in my life. I broke off with my then boyfriend for fear of loving God less. I had been taught that one could live a “cleaner” and more dedicated life to serve the Lord when in the single state. All this, however high-sounding it may seem, is not supported by the Scriptures! No man or institution has the right to demand celibacy in order to be able to serve in the ministry of the church. Most

of the godly men and women of the Bible were married. If anyone decides not to marry, it is to be of his own free will, not something imposed from the outside. Exceptions such as the prophet, Jeremiah, were single with a determined purpose from the Lord, not from human sources or institutions as was the case with ancient pagan practices of celibacy in the worship of idols. Later this practice was established by the Catholic Church. In Matthew 19: 11-12, Jesus declares that the decision in life to be single is made freely under a special call.

From the time of my conversion, I had been praying to the Lord that He would provide me with a good Christian husband who would protect me and be my spiritual leader in my new Christian life. Year after year with many difficulties, I was praying and waiting for the Lord's reply. The life of a single woman is neither easy nor secure, especially far from family and the protection of a church or mission organization. I was now in my forties and had responsibility for the care of eleven children and the orphanage. Who in his right mind would marry anyone living in that scenario? It seemed to be a lost cause.

But God is faithful and gracious, and once more He demonstrated His paternal love in an incredible way in my life. From four thousand miles away, He provided the man that He had prepared for me. One fine day in January of 1990, I received a letter from an unknown American that had heard of me in a church in his home state of Oregon through missionaries who told of trips they had made to the Dominican Republic. This man Fred Zwirner a widower, alone some five years, decided that same day to write me a letter. He stated in his letter that he very much wanted to meet me. It all began this way. We soon wrote letters back and forth and made some telephone calls.

Three months later he visited me in Santo Domingo. I remember my first words to him when we met in the airport: "Welcome to my life!" We fell deeply in love with one another, a confirmation of what God had already arranged. Two weeks later we were engaged to be married. On June 22, 1990, two months later, we were married in Corvallis, Oregon. What a joy and blessing!



Rocio with Fred Zwirner on the day of their wedding, June 22, 1990

My husband is the external manifestation of God's love in my life. He is God's "umbrella" of protection and guidance, my spiritual leader, the expression of His tender and merciful love. Through this union, He made a tremendous change in my life, filling it with abundance, joy, security, and indescribable peace. For these reasons, I wanted to include this personal aspect of my life in this testimony.

Only in obedience to the Word of God in all His counsel do we find the Rock, the stability and the joy of Christian living. Not only in this life but in the life that

follows, we will praise Him with His angels and the other saints through all eternity. He is faithful to His promises (John 3:16 and John 5: 24).

Let me conclude by appropriating the words of the apostle Paul, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For in it is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, the just shall live by faith.”* (Romans 1:16-17) Our misery and ruin show us our need for salvation. The gospel makes known the righteousness the Lord has prepared for us true believers. While God is a just and holy God we are guilty sinners. It is necessary we should have a righteousness in which to live before Him. Blessed be His name, there is such a righteousness brought in by Jesus Christ and revealed in His gospel of grace. The consequence of Jesus Christ’s faithfulness in all that He did, culminating in His death on the cross, is that His righteousness is credited to the believer, as the Scripture says, *“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”*. (2 Corinthians 5:21) This gospel is now my joy, my life, my all.