

Sophia Tekien

And the Truth Made Me Free

Brought up in a strict Roman Catholic family where the emphasis was on God's punishment for sins, I was very much afraid of Him. From my early years, it was also impressed upon me that Jesus founded the Roman Catholic Church, and that only in the Catholic Church was He actually present (body and blood) in Holy Communion, and that "outside the Roman Church there was no salvation." I felt privileged indeed to have been born into the Catholic religion and wondered, "Why would anyone want to be anything else, since all other religions were founded by mere men?" Lest I defile myself, I would not even set foot into any of the Protestant churches.

God is Love

Although I became worldly-minded as I matured, I legalistically tried to keep the commandments and to regularly attend Mass on Sundays and holy days. I even made numerous novenas. One novena consisted of taking the sacraments on nine consecutive first Fridays of the month and this would help me get to heaven. I was also into astrology and leaned heavily on my horoscope readings concerning propitious days for my social activities. All in all, I considered myself to be a better than average Roman Catholic.

One day, while reading an autobiography of a convert to Catholicism, I was overwhelmed by his biblical references of God's love for us! God, Whom I so feared, was depicted as someone so loving, so caring. It was as if I fell in love with Him. I wanted nothing more than to know more about Him. Coupled with this awareness of God's love for me was an awareness of my sinfulness. I had a distinct sense that Jesus could rescue me from a path leading to hell! I was horrified as I realized I was on my way to hell and did not even know it.

So awed was I with this reflection on God's love and forgiveness, I had no desire to continue in my old lifestyle. Worldly pursuits lost their appeal. I hungered to know more about God and the Bible. However, Bible classes in the Roman Catholic Church were non-existent;

even reading the Bible was discouraged. The only place I thought would have such classes would be the convent. However, the mere idea repelled me.

Religious Life

After several months, when my unceasing desire to know God better through the Bible would not be stilled, I decided to check it out. Perhaps this was God's way of calling me to the religious life. I consoled myself with the idea that I would be with others who shared my aspirations and that I could teach others via the Bible instead of the catechism as I was taught.



Sophia gets ready to leave for the convent

In my search to know from which of the hundreds of religious orders to choose, I had a dream, which dispelled all doubts. In my dream I was in a simply furnished room with a crib and the infant Jesus beside my bed. Although the windows were wide open, there was fresh fallen snow on the ground. I awakened feeling the dream was of significance. When I later browsed through some brochures on religious life, I noted that the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity had an entrance date of August 5th, the feast of the Lady of the Snows. I felt God was answering my prayers by pointing to the exact place of His choice.

On the very next day, I boarded a train for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although I was not fully acquainted with the work they did, that was unimportant. God's will was! If He wanted me in this place, nothing else mattered. When the Reverend Mother who interviewed me confirmed my interpretation of the dream, I needed to hear no more. Arrangements were made for me to enter. The conviction that life with the *Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity* was precisely God's will for me would sustain me during the thirty-one years I spent there. My faith was now inextricably interwoven with my vocation.



Sophia, as she began convent life

After a month in the community, I began to realize my hopes for Bible study would not materialize. We had readings of Scripture in our prayers but **no Bible study** as such. Although very disappointed, I could not leave. Whenever tempted to do so, I would remember the dream and the thought that would confront me was, "Why did I come, to please self or God?" There was a kind of peace in what I thought was His will for me.

My First Mission

During my first mission, God seemed to be trying to tell me something, but I was too prejudiced to hear or understand. While taking the parish census, I met quite a few Protestants living in the area. Contrary to what I had been led to believe, I found them to be exceptionally prayerful and godly people. What impressed me most about them was their personal love of Christ and their knowledge and love for the Bible. Mentioning this to the sisters, I was teased, "Who is going to convert whom?"

Among some of these people, I met a Protestant minister who was a former Roman Catholic. He tried to explain to me what life was like for him and his family before he became a

Christian, how despite daily Mass and sacraments, they knew nothing about God and the Bible. He also tried to explain that Jesus is only symbolically present in Holy Communion, but I wouldn't listen. Although deeply moved by his prayers for me before I left, I felt he made a terrible mistake leaving the Catholic Church, which was founded by Christ Himself. After reading a booklet he gave me on the Gospel of John, I even returned to show him my Catholic belief in chapter six. In my ignorance of the Bible, I insisted our Lord **did** promise to give us His flesh to eat. In due time, the Lord would use this very chapter to open my eyes to the truth.

On another occasion, a Protestant patient whom I visited in a tuberculosis sanatorium asked me, "Sister, are you saved?" My reaction was, "Poor thing, none of us knows for sure we are saved until we die." According to Roman Catholic teaching, it is a sin of presumption to claim to know you are saved. Nevertheless, I could not help but think, "What wonderful Catholics these Protestants would make. They know their Bible and seem so close to God, so different from the Roman Catholic population who disdainfully regard sin as something they could simply confess tomorrow."

Since one of my incentives in entering religious life was to teach from the Bible, I had hoped the children in CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) classes could use a book with Bible stories. The priest, however, was not in accord with the suggestion. He was convinced that drilling the children with catechism answers was the only way.

Empty Efforts

In due time, despite my staunch Roman Catholic belief in the Real Presence in Holy Communion, I began to wonder if in fact one did get to know Jesus better through frequent reception of the sacraments. Year after year I saw no change in myself, in the sisters I lived with, or in the children we taught in CCD classes. One priest tried to assure me that Jesus in Holy Communion would teach me all I needed to know about Him.

In my attempts to grow spiritually by trying to tackle one fault at a time, I only succeeded in becoming depressed and needing professional help. One Roman Catholic psychologist advised me that I was a perfectionist with a scrupulous conscience and suggested I read the seventh chapter of Romans. Without proper understanding of the Bible, I agreed I was probably striving for the unattainable. The crux of the message, that only Jesus could accomplish in me what I was trying to do by my own efforts, eluded me. Through the many years that followed, a brief sentence characterized my thinking: "Something is missing." Nevertheless, I dared not even think of leaving. That would be tantamount to turning my back on God.

The Word of Truth

In due course, I met people who were excited about the Bible and Jesus. Listening to their stories made me realize that God's call in my life was evident back in 1951. Later that call would find seed in His written Word, and the Holy Spirit would quicken me; i.e., He would give me new life in Jesus Christ. At these meetings, I began to learn what the Bible says about the need to be born again and that when we are saved we are forgiven not only of our past sins, but present and future sins as well. As it says in Romans 8:1, "*There is, therefore, now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*" It was overwhelming to realize that somehow I might never have to stand in judgment for any of my sins.

Through Christian friends, I also learned of a Christian radio station that broadcasted Christ-centered music and biblically-oriented messages twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That station was such a tremendous blessing; I never changed my dial. I soon began to learn more about the Bible than I had in the previous twenty years as a Catholic nun. I hungered more than ever for a foundational understanding of God's Word. I longed for more time to just listen to this station. I would have been willing to do any mundane work if only I could tune in and hear more. I began to envy the laity who "on the outside" seemed to have more opportunities for Bible studies and group sharing than I had "on the inside."

Leaves of Absence

In 1977, during a crisis situation in one of my sister's lives, I asked for a leave of absence in order to spend some time with her. The full reason, however, was twofold: I also needed time to evaluate my vocation.

I returned after nine months. My old conviction that the religious life was God's will for me was compounded by our religious community's Founder's Conferences on "Perseverance." A quote from one that struck me is, "Think, should you be tempted to leave here, where will you die? How will you die? How many will be lost because they are in the world?" With such admonitions in mind, I dared not leave. I was afraid I would lose my faith.

Although I accepted other assignments, my heart was not in them. I found no satisfaction (as pastoral minister) in urging those fallen away from the faith to come to Mass and receive the sacraments. I knew they and I needed to know more about God, the Bible, and His wonderful plan of salvation. What I was learning listening to the Christian radio station concerning salvation simply did not match with the traditional teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

In December of 1983, when I showed no enthusiasm about reassignment, I was told to ask for ex-claustration, a leave of absence of up to three years, which would be permanent if I did not change. In as much as we were taught that the Superior's voice is the will of God, I was obedient. God was freeing me.

I started my leave of absence on January 19, 1984, and I went to live with one of my sisters in Whiting, New Jersey. In God's providence, I had the opportunity to go to a place from which I heard many conferences on the Christian radio. A missionary couple that lived next door took me to a conference. Here I heard wonderful, clear expositions of the Bible and caused me to ponder again my decades' old question, "Which was the more important way to know God, the sacraments or the Bible?"

Disenchantment

During daily Bible studies at a conference's summer program, I heard something that had a pivotal effect on my life. Through reports given by missionaries on furlough, I learned the godless state of life in France and Italy, both predominantly Roman Catholic countries. Neither of the countries knew much about the Bible, but could care less. When the missionary to Italy, a former Roman Catholic, told us that although Italy is ninety-five percent Roman Catholic only a few practice their religion, that it was home to the largest Communist Party in the world, I was flabbergasted. Was this not the center and heart of the Catholic Church? Were they not under the supervision of the very highest authority, the Pope?

As the missionary spoke of his own Roman Catholic training in grammar school, I could thoroughly relate to what he said, as it so completely matched my own experience. The

teachings all focused on the Mass and the sacraments. There was nothing about the Bible or God's wonderful plan of salvation. "Why," I wondered, "is the Church so slow in imparting the most important truths of the Bible? Do not the bishops and priests realize that the brief Scripture readings during Mass are not enough?" It was the first time I perceived the Roman Catholic Church as a **mission field**. Nowhere was it evangelizing its people. I was heartsick.

Listening to these reports, I was torn in two. On the one hand, I was elated that many are now hearing more about God's Word in the Bible. Wasn't this my own reason for going to the conference? Could I not relate to previous emptiness? On the other hand there was deep sorrow, sadness that the Catholic Church I was born into, the Church of my parents and their parents before them, the Church I loved and revered, was losing ground. What grieved me most was that now many would not be receiving what I still believed was the actual body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion. As I continued to wonder why the Church was so lax in teaching God's Word, one glaring fact was becoming more and more obvious: I was not alone in my disenchantment. The problem was universal.

Convicted by Truth

In the autumn of the year, while reading a well-documented book entitled, *I Found the Ancient Way*, written by a former priest, Manuel P. Vila, I was shocked to learn that the Roman Catholic Church deletes the Second Commandment from its teaching and divides the Tenth Commandment into two commandments. I immediately recalled the numerous times I had heard the Catholic Church being accused of idolatry because of its statues, and my defensive response that we do not worship statues, but who they represent. What I did not know was that the Second Commandment not only forbids worshiping and praying to statues, but even making them.

Since I was still of the belief that Jesus was actually present in the Eucharist, I decided to study the Corpus Christi Sunday Mass readings. I used the Catholic Jerusalem Bible and carefully researched all the footnotes and cross references. The Gospel reading for that Sunday was from John 6:51-58, where Jesus promises to give us His flesh to eat. Insight gained from this chapter practically forced me to leave the Roman Catholic Church. In the footnote for verses 51-58 was the following, "The Jews ask Jesus for a sign like that of the manna. Jesus tells them the Father's message which I pass on to man makes of Me man's true bread, a nourishment that only those with faith can receive. The Jews don't understand, only Peter and the apostles believe." It was added, "this doctrine is best understood in the light of Deuteronomy 8:3." Through the words "message" and "true bread", Deuteronomy 8:3 was clear to me: "*And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.*" The verse "*and the Word was made Flesh*" came to mind; I realized that the Word is Jesus and Jesus, the living Word in the Bible, is the Father's message to man! Christ reveals to us in human terms who the Father is, and what the Father wants of us. Thus the Word made flesh is True Bread, which through faith in His Word nourishes our souls. It is in hearing, reading, and meditating on the Word of God that we are fed. By faith in true biblical teaching we have eternal life! "*So then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.*" (Romans 10: 17) So astonished was I to see in black and white what previously eluded me, I actually did not know what to believe.

The sad fact is I was so dependent upon Roman Catholic authority for guidance that I initially could not trust myself, or even God's Word, when it contradicted the teachings of the Catholic Church.

As I continued to read the sixth chapter of John, the truth I had learned convicted me further. In verse 45, Jesus says, *"It is written in the prophets, and they shall all be taught of God. Every man, therefore, that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me."* In verse 63, He explains, *"it is the Spirit that giveth life; the flesh profiteth nothing. The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life."* Peter and the apostles understood that our Lord was not referring to the eating of His physical body. Religious Jews, like Roman Catholics today, heard His teaching but did not understand. When teaching a parable about understanding the Word of God, Jesus said to His disciples, *"unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand."* (Luke 8:10)

Upon being convicted of this truth, there was no way I could continue to go to Mass where Catholicism teaches the bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus. I also came to the conclusion that the worship of man-made bread as "God" during Mass is the height of idolatry.

A Disciple

Ironically, after floundering and languishing for more than thirty years, the Lord guided me back full circle to the very chapter I refuted with the Protestant minister while on my first mission. John 8:31-32 explains the meaning of being a disciple, *"Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed on him, if ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*

I was indeed set free! The Lord continued to confirm this insight through many other passages in Scripture that deal with the eating of God's Word. Some of these Scriptures include Jeremiah 15:16, *"Thy words were found, and I did eat them"* (Job 23:12). *"I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food"* (Psalm 119: 103). *"How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth."*

Further, according to God's Word, the Bible, Old Testament sacrifices on which the Mass is based, were made obsolete by Christ's **once for all** sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:9-10). *"But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God"* (Hebrews 10:12). *"Now where remission of these [sins] is, there is no more offering for sin"* (Hebrews 10:18).

Another belief I had to disown was purgatory. If people can get to heaven through their own sufferings and/or good works, then Jesus died on the cross in vain. Purgatory is the devil's ploy to make people think there will be a second chance to enter heaven.

A Personal Message

It is only through God's Word that we get to know who He is and who we are in His sight. In order to understand the Bible, however, we need to be born again. It is not some Protestant minister, but Jesus Who tells us in John 3:3, *"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

What Jesus is saying is that we must be born spiritually before we can understand His Word. Second Peter 1:21 states, *"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but*

holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost [the Spirit of God].” Then we read, “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Being baptized with water, having religion, or basically being a good person does not save us. We must repent and believe on Jesus Christ and what He has done for us in His death, burial, and resurrection, and place our full trust in Him alone to be born again or saved. This means believing that when Jesus died a substitutionary death for us on the cross, He paid once for all time the full penalty for all our sins: past, present, and future. When we repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we receive new life, His life, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit as eternally belonging to Christ. This is the Good News of God’s salvation! It is in complete contrast to man’s way of earning heaven by good works. Good works are the result of life in Christ, not the means of salvation or earning heaven. *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. 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: 8-10)*

Purpose in Everything

While religious life was not the answer to satisfy the deep longings in my soul, I do not consider the thirty plus years in the convent totally wasted. In God’s economy of time, nothing is wasted. There was a purpose. Perhaps it was the only way I could be convinced that I was not in a church founded by Christ.

One aspect of my so-called vocation to the religious life that continued to puzzle me was the dream that so convinced me that I was in the precise place of God’s choosing. Through a better understanding of Scripture, I have come to know that I was duped not by God, but by the deceiver himself, Satan. God’s will is made known to us by and through His Word. Whatever cannot be confirmed by His Word, or is contrary to His Word, cannot be His will. None of the feasts that honor Mary are in the Bible or supported by biblical truth. There is danger here. The Book of Revelation gives a severe warning about adding to or subtracting from God’s Word. *“If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book; And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life” (Revelation. 22:18-19).* Another warning that deals with all that is added to the true Gospel by the Catholic Church is in the first chapter of Galatians. In verse one, Paul makes it clear that he is an apostle, *“not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father who raised him from the dead.”* Then in verse eight, Paul states quite emphatically, *“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”* That means eternally damned.

My Current Position

I depend upon the Lord’s promises to restore the years the locusts have eaten (Joel 2: 25). His generous care for me can never be outdone. I was released from my vows to serve God according to the Constitution of the *Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity* on May 21, 1985, freeing me to serve Him according to His Word. I no longer strive for perfection by my own efforts, but abide in the only one who can make me perfect and acceptable to the Father by clothing me in His own righteousness.

I do not espouse any particular denomination; I am simply a Bible-believing Christian who will never cease praising God for delivering me from the spiritual darkness of the Roman Catholic faith into the marvelous light of God's truth. From knowing that true authority does not reside in Rome but in God's inerrant Word, I am assured of my salvation because it is Christ who has fully accomplished it and secured it for me.

Freedom for All through Christ

If you, dear reader, are a Roman Catholic, I urge you to let the Word of God be your teacher. Consider the following passages, "*all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*" (Isaiah 64:6). "*There is none righteous, no not one*" (Romans 3:10). "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*" (1 John 1:8). "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord*" (Romans 6: 23). As wages are due to an employee when he has done his work, death is due to a sinner when he has sinned. This is true of every sin. The good news from the Word of God reveals that the gift of God is eternal life! Sinners merit hell, but God has provided deliverance through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no matching proportion between the glory of life with God and our obedience; we must thank God, and not ourselves. The gift of eternal life is through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is Jesus Christ that purchased it, prepares us for it, and preserves us to it. He is the Alpha and Omega, the All in all in of our salvation. "*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*" (John 8:36). His Word is Truth and that Truth will make you free indeed!