

Amanda Scopilliti

A Nun set Free by God's Unmerited Grace

Early On

Prior to reading Ephesians 2:8 and realizing God's grace is a free gift given through faith, and could not be earned, I thought I would "do" a lot of things for God. At a young age I interpreted this as joining a convent. I struggled with this especially as I went through my teenage years, falling into various sins, some of a more serious nature. However, I had a reawakening at 17 and decided one day I would pursue my dream as a nun after all. I thought I should go to college first and have some form of a career, so I enrolled at Walsh University. It was there I learned Catholic doctrine and began assiduously studying greek philosophy. Prior to this, aside from going to mass, my relationship with Christ was based on personal prayer and reading of the scriptures. It all was about to change, and rather quickly.

As I began my journey at Walsh, I began going to mass everyday, and confession at least every week, sometimes more. I felt more convicted of sin and drawn to give my life fully to God. However, I felt the only way to be forgiven and united with Christ was through sacramental grace. I looked up to the chaplain there who was a Dominican Friar. He was an expert in Catholic Doctrine/philosophy and apologetics. Everything he taught me about the Catholic Church I believed. My prior simple reading of scripture was replaced with studying the Catechism, greek philosophy, church doctrines and pope's writings. My personal prayer to God became all about the sacraments, and Catholic doctrine. I became consumed with it and decided to join a convent after my sophomore year. There was no point in finishing my degree in my eyes, because I wanted to give my whole life to God through the Catholic Church. If they had the literal body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus, what would be the point of striving for anything else?

Joining the Convent

I joined a very traditional Dominican convent that was centered on the eucharist and Mary. Sometimes we would pray the rosary three times a day together as a community, and we always prayed a very long litany to the blessed mother in Latin. We would go to confession every Friday, and we did the Louis De Monfort Consecration to Mary. We even signed papers for this consecration and would recite the prayer every day, that we were consecrating all our thoughts, fears, actions, and everything we are to Mary.



Although in the media the community I was in is portrayed as a fun-loving community, in reality it was nothing but rigid and legalistic. However, I believed what the church and that community taught, that if we lived the rule and constitutions of the community, which were approved by the church, then we would eventually go to heaven. When the sisters die the community puts the paper in which they signed their vows on in their hand, as an expression of the sister presenting to God

her life and vows upon entrance. They told us the only way to know God's will was by what they and the Church told us; we could be sure by living this life faithfully, although we may have to stop at purgatory, we would one day be in heaven. However, we need not worry about being in purgatory too long, since the lives of the sisters achieve plenary indulgences. The sisters would offer masses for us and do other various practices/penances. They would then transfer those to us instead of using the benefit for themselves, so we could get out of purgatory. Sound reassuring?

We couldn't talk to any of the sisters about anything personal, except our novice mistress, the sister in charge of us. In my second year my class was given a Novice mistress that was incredibly hard to relate to. I had thought upon entering the community we would help each other grow in holiness, support one another, and be of service to people. I knew my life would be steeped in the sacraments, and to me this is what it meant to be close to Jesus. I had no understanding of Ephesians 2:8 or what the gospel message really said. When I would meet with my novice mistress she mostly wanted to talk about involvement with the community, and our adaptation to it. Everything was analyzed, like not stapling the papers of our assignments in a precise way, not using proper vocabulary, not standing or sitting the right way, or forgetting to put bottles of ketchup on the table when serving the meals. We had to be very formal while eating, even took classes on etiquette and posture. There were classes spent walking around with books on our head to see if we've mastered it.

Any one of the above mentioned, or many other infractions, would not only be discussed in our weekly meeting with our superior, but at a weekly communal meeting which was called "Chapter of Faults." We were forbidden to speak of this to our family, anyone outside the community, our chaplain or any visiting priests. Essentially they viewed the "Chapter of Faults" as an apology to the rest of the community for failing to keep any of the constitutions, rule of St. Augustine or the formalities which governed our community. You would get up and recite the faults or ways you've failed (what I mentioned above), then the superior would give some form of penance and you would then lay on the ground in a specific way (referred to as the venia) until you heard the superior knock on the chair, then you'd respond "Blessed be God" and it was the next person's turn. There is picture displayed of what it looks like above. This is taken from a Good Friday service. Ordinarily, each sister does it, one at a time.

As you could imagine, if you were not OCD or had problems before you joined, you definitely developed them there.

I found myself becoming incredibly introspective and constantly analyzing everything,



fearing I was damned to hell and hated by God. I would physically tremble during mass, and feared I wasn't part of the sheepfold of God, I must be a goat, one of the ones cast out because of my sin. I could do various penances but most of them you had to get approval to do, so I decided to make up my own things, like taking freezing showers over and over while

reciting Psalm 51. Sounds silly, and it was, but sadly I really thought it might work. Yet, I

never felt forgiven or clean enough to be close to God. Looking back I really think I was having a spiritual and mental breakdown; I was terrified. I felt my prayers were not pleasing to God, I thought I never confessed properly or completely enough, and was hanging out of hell by a very thin thread that could be broken at any moment.

I would tell the priest all these things in confession and how I would be nervous about even coming to mass; I felt in it the very rejection of God. He wanted to meet with me to talk and guide me, but my superior refused to approve it. We had to get permission for everything, and the answer was usually no.

I thought I might find peace by making a life confession where you go through all your sins of your whole life starting with the first thing you remember. After doing it, I felt I messed it up, and started remembering things as soon as the door closed behind me. I begged my novice mistress to let me do it again but she said no, and tried to assure me that if I had the intention of saying everything then it was forgiven. Unless of course, it was a mortal sin, and if it was, just confess those next time. I started becoming very neurotic about it, and felt, since I don't remember all my intentions, actions or thoughts throughout my whole life, and don't know if then those could be sins, and mortal sins, I better just confess them as such. I felt I needed to do this even though I may not have actually committed the sins with the three criteria they base mortal sins on and saw this to be the safest way to be sure I was forgiven. The priest reluctantly let me re-do my life confession against the wishes of my superior, but as you could guess, even after that I thought I didn't say it right or fully enough. Sometimes I would wake up in a panic at two in the morning, sweating, shaking, and full of anxiety.

Leaving the Convent

In my third year I was sent to our convent in Indiana, which was an incredible relief for me since my superior was more human and approachable. I met some Franciscan priests who started a new community and they seemed happy. They would tell us of all the ways they were trying to spread the gospel and reach people. They did a lot with the poor and had soup kitchens etc. I realized I was extremely limited in my ability to reach people with what I conceived as "the good news." With only a few months to go before my vows, I decided I better leave. I couldn't imagine spending my life without the ability to serve others or have the ability to communicate with them. I didn't understand the sacraments and rituals to be unbiblical, but although my motivation was wrong, this at least got me out. I wanted to live more like Jesus, and go out to all the world and proclaim the good news; with my very warped idea of what the "good news" actually was.

I left but was nervous, because I thought when I left the convent I wouldn't know exactly what God's will was for me. So I sought out my superiors advice when I was leaving about what I should do after. She suggested getting a job either with the elderly or children.

When I came home, I figured I better listen to her advice, since I mistakenly thought it was "God's will spoken to me through my superior." I got hired the day after leaving the convent to work for an assisted living close to where I lived. Leaving was a big leap, since when you join a convent you get rid of all your belongings. I didn't have a car or a dime to my name; I had gotten rid of all the money I had, and everything I owned. When I left my superior in Indiana offered to give me money from the community, but I rejected it and just prayed God would take care of me. I did this because the headquarter superiors were really rude about "how much we all cost them," and I wanted to leave in peace. Weighing heavily on my heart also was the knowledge that I was coming back home to a bad situation, with my parents' marriage failing.

Home at Last

God did take care of me, and my family helped me to get on my feet. My grandfather bought me a new car and I had everything I needed. When I started working I was quickly promoted to be the marketing director. I didn't think I'd be there long though, and continued to visit convents to find one like the Franciscans who ministered to people. I was nervous because how could I ever know or have the certainty I was really doing God's will, without a superior or the church dictating it to me? I remember one summer day sitting at my dad's house, with my feet in our pool, just begging God to show me what to do. The scripture immediately came to mind, where the rich young man asked Christ "What do I need to do to inherit the kingdom of God?" I realized following Christ was my only assurance, and I could be at peace. Although I didn't understand what following Christ meant, it brought a sense of relief. As I would visit different convents, something kept pulling me back, and I couldn't bring myself to join. I decided to make the assisted living my ministry and caring for people who were dying. I still wanted to make my vows though and dedicate myself to God, but didn't know how or what that would look like.

Ich besichtigte verschiedene Klöster, aber irgendetwas hielt mich davon ab, um Aufnahme zu bitten. So beschloss ich, die Arbeit im Seniorenzentrum zu meinem Dienst zu machen, speziell auch die Begleitung sterbenskranker Menschen. Es war jedoch nach wie vor mein Wunsch, meine Gelübde abzulegen und mich ganz Gott zu weihen, aber ich wusste nicht, wie das geschehen könnte.

I was promoted to be the assisted livings executive director, and was traveling back and forth to Columbus to take classes. The owners asked me if I'd like to move in, since I had been spending a lot of nights with residents dying, praying with them and ministering to their families in my very limited capacity. I moved in and began centering my life on that.

It was there that I met and got close to authentic Bible believing Christians. I would go to the activity meetings and they would always pray, and often talk about Christ. Fran, the activity director, would often challenge what the Catholic church believed, in very kind, subtle but clear ways. I would always dismiss her, and try and defend my beliefs, using the techniques I learned while studying apologetics. She asked me if I knew I'd go to heaven, and if I did, how could I get in, and what would I say to Christ? I arrogantly misquoted Psalm 19, about being guarded against presumption; I thought it presumptuous to think we could ever know we'd be in heaven. Although I pondered it for a few days, I quickly dismissed it, and carried on with my busy life.

Then a local pastor, Bob Majetich came to our facility, wanting to tour it for his father. At the end he began kindly challenging the Catholic doctrines, and invited me to his church. I laughed to myself, but later decided to meet with him. I did this out of duty, since I viewed him as a lost soul, a former Catholic, destined to hell for knowing the Catholic doctrines yet rejecting them. When I met with him he explained to me the gospel in a kind, beautiful way. He offered me tea, and we began kindly debating everything. My heart was too hardened at the time to be open to anything the scriptures proposed, and I left but continued to pray for him, as he did for me.

There then was a resident I was caring for, Gloria, who was a very strong Bible believing Christian. She would say things like "isn't it great we know Jesus saved us?" "I just love reading the scriptures; I wonder what heaven will be like?" I would listen to her, and I always felt I should never push my Catholic beliefs on any of the residents, and I didn't. She had some of the psalms on her wall, and when I was in her apartment I felt a presence of God and peace when she would talk. Her family had the same strong faith, and there were instances we

prayed together. Her daughter Cindy gave me a book by Sinclair Ferguson called “Ichthus” that I kindly accepted but never read. When Gloria was starting to decline, I would read her different scriptures, and the gospel of John, per her request. I remember the words seeming more powerful than they ever previously had to me. Yet again, I had myself so busy and filled my day with so many responsibilities that I didn’t think about it too much after that.

Quitting My Job

I started to become anxious, and began to realize that despite all I was doing, peace was lacking. I decided to quit my job and focus on prayer and school. The owners of the assisted living were incredibly gracious in giving me a lot of opportunities, and I appreciated everything they did for me. However, I decided to leave that job, because “What profit a man he gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” I felt like I had rejected God and needed to re-orient myself. I moved back home; and decided I needed to finish my degree. Since I had gone straight from the convent to working there for five years, I had not done that. The semester was awful, I was questioning everything about my life and who God was. I managed to get decent grades somehow, but then decided to take the next semester off. I had no idea what I was going to do; I felt so empty.

Emptiness & Interior Struggles

Recognizing this emptiness, I decided to re-visit the idea of taking my vows without living in the convent. I thought this might solve the despair I was in, to offer to God the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. I had previously tried for about three years to get this approved in two different dioceses and under two different bishops. Although I tried to explain my desire to go out to the whole world and spread the good news, they always said no. Now that I had more time, I decided to go beyond them to a Dominican Provincial and see if he would give me approval, because I still wanted to live the Dominican Charism. He said yes, and gave me permission to make my vows. So I did just that, but afterwards felt it was all very empty and meant nothing. I couldn’t believe after all the trouble of setting it up, meeting with high officials in the church, spending so many years trying to orchestrate it, then finally making my vows to God, I would feel so incredibly dissatisfied and un-fulfilled.

I began to sink into a deeply depressive state, and had severe panic attacks about my life, my future and God. I couldn’t sleep, and would wake up all hours of the night, so sad. I almost completely stopped working, decided to just take a small position at a donut shop one night a week. All the other days/nights I would just lay in my bed, unable to even get up at times to do basic things like eat, or shower, because I no longer had any energy or saw any point in even being alive. My phone would ring and I didn’t have any desire to pick it up and see who it was. When I did it was my friends from church, some who told me I need to get out of my room to go to mass at least, since I was now in mortal sin for missing it a number of Sundays consecutively. I appreciated that some of them really cared for me, and they did a lot to help me. However, I began to wonder if God even existed, and came to the conclusion he probably didn’t, since I had tried to dedicate my whole life to him and found nothing but emptiness and chaos.

I was so restless, and since I couldn’t sleep and was doubting the existence of God, I began to watch some documentaries by atheists. Upon hearing them compare the Catholic Church to Greek paganism, I decided to research the Catholic Church with fresh eyes. The Catholic Church traditions sounded just like superstitious greek practices, claiming to consume the “deities,” and the whole idea of the madonna and papal infallibility. I was horrified and came to the conclusion there really was no point in continuing to live; everything I believed was a lie. I went back and forth between wanting to die, to realizing I couldn’t because what would

happen then? Not even taking my life would bring peace, since there is nothing after. Nothing to live for, nothing to die for. I know now for certain, that without Christ and His free gift of grace, you only will find despair, and a hellish darkness in your soul. Words wouldn't suffice to explain the deep darkness that had a grip on me. The Lord, in His infinite mercy and free gift of grace, was about to pull me out of this pit; there was truly nothing that could be done by me to get out. Although I didn't realize it at the time, he was prompting me with His grace to keep searching.

I reached out to Fran (the activity director who I became friends with), but didn't really say much about what I was going through, just that I might not live my vows anymore and that I didn't really know what God's will was. She invited me over her house and was so kind, and also met me for dinner a couple times, but I wasn't really open with her. At least I could talk to her about the common experiences we had working together at the assisted living. I was too nervous to talk about my faith or lack there of. Knowing she truly cared and loved me meant so much though, and she would always quote the scriptures. I continued to do my own research because I was too scared to talk to anyone openly about anything. In the doctrines and Catechism they quote different scriptures, but out of context. God's grace guided me to look them up and I realized the church had distorted them and took them out of context. I couldn't believe I had given my life to an institution such as this. Thankfully, I did feel peace when reading the scriptures again, and felt compelled to continue to do so.

Spirit Led Searching

As I spent time reading the scriptures, it seemed the dark cloud I had been under for so long was starting to lighten up. The weight on my shoulders didn't seem so heavy and soon disappeared. I became convinced that God did exist, and he really did love me. I started to go to an Orthodox church for a couple months, but was put off. Although they didn't believe in papal infallibility, Mary's immaculate conception or purgatory, it still was off. Now what? I was by this time convinced the scriptures were the only infallible authority. In my research I had found that there were pope's that were in direct contradiction with each other regarding the doctrine of papal infallibility. Yes, they were both speaking ex-cathedra, which is supposed to make what they say infallible and from God Himself. Not only was this doctrine contrary to scripture, which Paul writes to never go beyond, but this is just one of the many examples of how Catholic Tradition has contradicted itself, and even logically is considered fallacious. In speaking about papal infallibility, Pope John the 22nd had stated in his encyclical *Quia Quorundam* that anyone who accepts this doctrine is anathema, eternally cursed. Then a few hundred years later, another pope came and said it must be accepted and believed, and anyone who will not accept it is anathema. They cannot both be right? The only infallible truth is the Scripture and the Scriptures themselves speak to this. Jesus said "Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35)." Also, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:6 "And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written." The more I looked into all the Catholic doctrines, being convicted in my heart by grace, the scriptures came alive to me and pierced through to my core.

I then came across the Berean Beacon Channel with Richard Bennett as I was searching for more information on youtube. This was incredibly helpful as he took all the Catholic Doctrines and compared them to the Scriptures. I was especially convicted when he explained Ephesians 2:8 and the book of Hebrews. I went back and read both of those books myself. I was so filled with peace and joy as I realized Christ offered His Sacrifice once and for all, and there's no need for a priest to offer and re-offer His all atoning sacrifice, whether they call it a "bloody" or "unbloody" one. Not only was it not necessary, but it is not possible and is blasphemous. It became clear to me that I could take a life long freezing shower, or do any

number of extreme penances I created, attend the mass and partake in every ritual, and this would never save me or get anyone out of purgatory (it doesn't exist). Also, these works would not take care of what they call "temporal punishment" of my sin. It was only by grace through faith, and nothing could be added or taken away from Christ's all sufficient sacrifice. All of my extreme sacrifices and penances were as dirty rags, and a slap in the face to the death of Christ. He has torn the veil, and we have peace with God through Christ. He is the one, sufficient and only mediator. It is written in John 14:6 "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the I decided I needed to talk to Richard, and so looked him up.

Eventually we got in contact and he has been an incredible support. All the questions I had he has already done extensive research on, most was on youtube or published. When I'd ask him questions about topics he hadn't published, he'd say he has all the research in the scriptures and then quickly send it to me. It was such a relief for me to find someone who understood what I was going through, coming out of darkness, into God's marvelous light. I had a security and assurance I never thought possible, in any area of life, let alone my relationship with Christ for all eternity.

Peace at Last

While no church saves us, I realized it's important to worship God in the assembly of the faithful, and to hear His Word proclaimed. Plus, I had a lot of questions and still so much to learn. Not wanting to drive Richard nuts by calling him all the time with all my questions, I



I remembered the three people at the assisted living who had first proclaimed the true gospel to me. These were the activity director Fran King, the resident Gloria Chrzan and the Rothenbuhler family, and Pastor Majetich. You might wonder why I am going into detail here, but, as it is written, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God(Romans 10:17)." I want to share how they brought me God's word, and were so bold in their proclamation of it though the Spirit of God; His word never comes back void. I first reached out to Pastor Majetich, and he and his wife were very encouraging and helpful. I am so thankful for all the time they have spent answering my questions, helping me and including me in their authentic, scripture based church services. I started going to their bible studies, and they purchased

a beautiful study bible for me. To this day they remain a great encouragement, inspiration and source of knowledge.

I contacted Fran King again, but this time was honest with her about the journey I was on. Aside from one of my uncles that sometimes would talk about scripture, she had really been the first person to plant the seeds of the true Gospel in my heart. God was using her in a special way over the course of a six year period, to plant seeds and give me little nuggets of the scriptures. Although I was not open and rejected it for five of those years, she didn't give up and continued to pray for me and meet with me on many different occasions. Her husband Peter is also a pastor, and I was so happy to get to meet with both of them and discuss the scriptures. I consider their friendship a great gift. Their life is a true testimony of what it means to live for Christ with scripture based trust and faith.

I then decided to contact Gloria's daughter Cindy Rothenbuehler, because I knew her family was immersed in the scriptures, and had a strong faith. As I heard the ringing after I clicked her number, I decided to hang up; I felt this whole situation bizarre. I thought they'd think I was crazy, their mother had passed to be with Jesus, and I didn't even work there anymore. However, she called me back confused that I had called her. I was going to say it was

accidental but I didn't want to lie, so I started talking to her. I could sense the peace and joy in her voice as she explained different truths to me and recited scripture. She invited me to her church, Parkside where Alistair Begg is the senior pastor. That evening a guest pastor was preaching on Philippians 1:6. I initially turned down the offer, but then she told me if I change my mind, just to let her know. I changed my mind and felt compelled to go, and I remain forever changed. The whole thing was orchestrated by God, everything that pastor said was exactly what I had been praying about for months. Words could never express the comfort and peace I experienced hearing him preach on those verses, and since then I have continued to also go there. Cindy and her husband have spent so many Sunday mornings/evenings answering all my questions, and purchased for me the Moody Bible commentary. I am so grateful for their continued friendship and guidance. Parkside also has so many different opportunities to study and learn the scriptures, worship, and have fellowship; everything is authentically scripture based and I'm soaking it all up like a sponge. When I called the church I was impressed with how personable they were with asking me my background, and how methodical they were in putting me in contact with Pastor Mickey Aquillino, a former Catholic. His patience and kindness in answering my questions have been inspiring and relatable. He recommended a great book by William Webster entitled "Salvation, the Bible and Roman Catholicism." I joined a Scripture class of his every Sunday before the service, and always look forward to it.

Looking back I can see how God has given me His free gift of grace, every step of the way. I see His sovereignty and wisdom with all he allowed me to experience, both the desolation and joy. I can say as the apostle Paul said, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new, (2 Corin. 5:17)." This unmerited grace is constantly transforming me, and although I still fall often, He is right there convicting me in my heart to repent. I am in awe of the power and infallibility of His Word, and the joy of worshipping with other believers. Words could not express my gratitude for the people he has put on my path. May we all learn from their example, and never tire of sharing the good news of Jesus, regardless if it seems people are accepting it or not. For, as it is written in Romans 10:14, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!"

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