

I was looking for God

I had a very happy childhood, surrounded by a large family with loving, pious parents. My father, in particular, sincerely believed in God. He was born in Russia at the end of the 19th century. When the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in 1917, he fought on the side of the Tsar. A bullet hit the 20-year-old in the left temple, after which he immediately went blind. Since the bullet lodged in his temple, he had no further damage.

In his parents' house, they were reading books about Lourdes and my father decided to travel there and pray for healing. He packed all his savings, bought a train ticket and started the great journey. But after only 30km of travel he was robbed, his money and the ticket were stolen, only he did not lose his passport. Determined not to be dissuaded from his plan, he returned home and told what had happened to him. With the help of his youngest sister, he then went around the surrounding villages asking for some money to buy a new train ticket. And so, after two months, he arrived in Lourdes. On the way he experienced how people took him in, helped him and drove him a bit.

My father was not healed in Lourdes, but he was not discouraged because he had experienced the goodness of God so many times in his life. He always prayed to the Lord and it seemed that he could see Him with his inner eyes. God rewarded his faith and gave him a compassionate, studious man from the upper class of society to assist him in this idolatrous city. He had a noble heart and a noble house, and he took care of my father as if he were his own son. This is the background of why Lourdes will always appear in my testimony.

Our daily family life was characterized by this respect for God. We prayed before and after meals and every evening. Most of the time we knelt down to do so, especially my parents. I loved this God-fearing atmosphere. When I had to stay in bed for a long time at the age of 8, I found a New Testament in a drawer in my parents' room. I read enthusiastically what it said about the life of Jesus. I had already heard people speak about Jesus, but reading the text myself was something completely different. I enjoyed this reading so much that I no longer minded being sick. In my little child's head, I thought about how I could do it to always be with Jesus. At that moment I made the decision to become a nun, like my aunt. This desire and ideal have kept me throughout my youth. Unlike my sisters, I didn't fret over boys' stories; I just thought the opposite sex was stupid. I was often laughed at because of my decision, but I bore it patiently. I waited for the moment when I could enter a convent. Finally I was 18; the time I had set for myself to leave everything. With great joy I entered a Dominican convent.

The monastery

But even the entrance interview confused me. I had come to be close to the Lord, but now I was told that in order to please God, I must first take care of my personal life and work to eradicate my faults and sins. I accepted this rule, of course, because - I told myself - God could not be close to a dirty and rebellious person. So, with all my heart and energy, I faced all the instructions of the superiors. I hoped that the faster I would fit into the prescribed mold, the faster I would achieve the expected holiness.

Unfortunately, holiness did not arrive on command; the naive joy I had at the beginning faded more and more, and the communion with Jesus for which I longed so much failed to materialize. I felt as if he had abandoned me, he who had so filled my youthful years. But because I did not want to miss him, I held on to the monastic life as best I could.

After the novitiate, the Order assigned me to various places to assist the secretariats. My life was rather bleak ... but I did not lose sight of my goal. Fourteen years passed in this sadness, and often I rebelled. Then something extraordinary happened: Pope Paul VI instructed the religious orders to review their monastic rules in the light of the New Testament. We each had to read the letters of the Apostle Paul separately and then discuss them in community with the others. Fresh air moved in through the gate of our monastery!

When I came to the Epistle to the Galatians, I realized that, like the Jews, I was living under law and thus had no access to grace. Since then I distrusted the rules that governed monastic life. I was dead inside. I was sure that if I stayed in those structures I would end up in hell. I was desperate to leave, but that raised the next question: would I find God easier in the world than in the monastery? Where was God anyway? My many sins weighed me down. Although I went to confession again and again, their crushing burden remained and weighed on my conscience. Yes, hell awaited me, I knew it. Fear of death enveloped me without end, all the more so because I was in poor health. My mental agony also led to weight loss. In all this, the 51st Psalm accompanied me. Again and again I sang these verses:

Psalm 51:3-6 and 12-13

How many tears I have shed, alone in the darkest corner of the chapel or at night in bed, when I was afraid to fall asleep because I was carrying death within me. This is the situation I found myself in when the Lord bowed down over my painful life.

God intervenes

Two years after I began to study the Scriptures, there was a great challenge to overcome that finally led to my liberation. One day I was informed that my mother had broken a leg and wanted me to come to Lourdes to take care of her. My superiors, knowing how bad I was, did not want me to leave the convent. They suggested that my mother come here so that I could take care of her on site at the convent. But my mother disagreed. Then I decided to go to the superior in charge of the monastery, that is, the bishop. When he heard what it was about, he said to me, "If it were my mother, I would go and take care of her." That brought clarity! For the first time in my 16 years of monastic life, I made my own decision. I went back to the monastery after the talk and said, "I'm leaving tomorrow." And I really did leave. The superiors gave me just enough money for the train ticket. But from that moment on, I experienced the generosity of the Lord, who took care of me.

The Lord makes himself known to me

One day, two months after returning to my mother, I went shopping at the market. Next to one of the stalls, I spotted a poster that read, "Read the Bible." I chose a card from the display and approached. A friendly man greeted me and we began to discuss.

"I am a nun," I said.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"No, not at all."

"Why not?"

"Because I know I'm going to hell."

"Why is that?"

"Because I am very sinful. Even if I went to confession every day, my sins could not be forgiven. At the same time, I do penance exercises, pray, cry, seek the Lord, make pilgrimages, and abuse my body ... I am completely exhausted. I know that I am not pleasing God. What do I have to do?"

"Nothing! It is obvious that you are not pleasing God. You have chosen the wrong way to come close to Him. Remember what Jesus said on the cross, 'It is finished.' Why do you want to add to His finished work? You just have to believe that He did it all for you, and that He will give you all the salvation you have earned."

And I believed. In the middle of the marketplace, in the middle of the crowd, the Lord found me and I found Him. I was completely overwhelmed by so much grace, light, love, forgiveness and happiness: God had come to me. The crushing weight of my guilt fell from my shoulders, my heart was washed, my conscience cleansed, and my strength returned. Oh, how perfect is the sacrifice of Jesus. He took our sins upon Himself and bore the punishment for them. He, the Son of God took care of it. Oh, what joy when all guilt has been forgiven. What a glorious certainty! No, hell was no longer waiting for me, because heaven had just opened to receive me.

The resistance begins

After saying goodbye to the man, I got on my bike and headed home. It seemed to me that I had never ridden so fast before. My mother immediately noticed that I was not the same. I told her everything I had just experienced at the market, about the grace given, about the forgiveness of sins. She knew exactly what state I had been in, she had seen me cry often enough. And yet her reaction was surprising: she told me that if I had any intention of continuing to meet with "those people," I was no longer wanted in her home. I understood exactly what she meant, but none of her words could dampen the happiness that had filled my heart since the Lord had come to dwell in it.

Soon after, my superiors from the convent wanted me to resume my work in the secretariat of their clinic, which I had done for ten years. My mother let me go and I returned to the monastery. But I knew that my days there were numbered. I also knew that the evangelical community in Lourdes was praying for me. I could often literally feel the Lord giving me strength to fight the good fight.

I spent only a few days in the clinic office, then I was transferred 600 km away. From this distance I could not see the "heretics" anymore, they thought. But thanks to the Lord, there were evangelical Christians also in the new place and they helped me a lot. So I understood that I had a new family. I now belong to the family of the true children of God. What a miracle!

In this last place I stayed for one year. I testified my faith before the nuns and before the students of the boarding school for which I worked, as well as before their parents. Then I handed in my resignation.

God gives me grace after grace

I returned to Lourdes, where I went regularly to the evangelical church that had helped me in the beginning. From the very first service, I was struck by the love Christians had for one another. What a difference from what I had experienced in the monastery!

To confirm that my life now belonged to Jesus Christ, I was baptized - along with seven others - in the river near Lourdes. On this occasion I met a Russian preacher who had a lot of similarity with my father. He knew a family whose youngest son was looking for a wife. The Lord had already prepared everything. How could I refuse this additional gift?

In the meantime, my husband and I are retired. We devote a great deal of our time to preaching the gospel. You can guess three times how I personally share the Gospel message: I stand with a Bible stand at the market and testify to God's love for all people and that His salvation is available free of charge.

Closing words

In conclusion, I would like to say that I have not found God in religion or in the monastery; nor in my heart, where I should have sought Him according to the advice of some people.

But God can be found, and in His written Word, in which He reveals Himself through the Holy Spirit, so that we may know His Son, whom He sent to save us.

In short, it was a pope who enabled me to see the errors of his Church and it was a bishop who helped me get out of the monastery. Finally, it was a preacher who, in obedience to Christ, stood in the marketplace that day so that I could take hold of grace and experience the goodness of God.

Agnes (born 23.8.1935 in Lourdes) and her husband Henri have built the recreation house "Rehoboth" in St. Antonin Noble Val in the southwest of France, as a place where the Gospel should be proclaimed. It is especially suitable for Christian vacation camps and youth meetings. www.centre-rehoboth.com

Agnes was called to glory on August 18, 2014, and Henri followed her on November 17, 2020.

Translated from German by DeepL Translator

