

Guido Scalzi

My Encounter With God

Our little house at Mesoraca, in the province Crotone in Italy, was situated in a hamlet called “Filippa” which was not very far from the monastery of the Franciscan Friars, located on top of a beautiful hill. It was there that I as a child went with my family to hear Mass.

Majesty and Monastery

I remember one particular morning I was moved as I heard the strains of the church organ, and with spring awakening, made me sense for the first time something new and different. It produced in my mind a unique attraction, an emotion stirred throughout my entire being. I felt it would be wonderful to live the rest of my days in a monastery in close communion with God and nature. When my mother came out of church, I met her on the way home and cried out: “Mama, how great it would be for me to become a priest.” To say my mother was happy with my sudden decision would be an understatement. She was happier still when I let her know as the days passed that I was more and more confirmed in what I had sincerely considered to be a call of God for my life.

One day I convinced my mother to go to the monastery with me to speak to the Father Superior. After our interview, he seemed satisfied with the seriousness of my intentions and told my mother I definitely would be a priest someday. Eventually, the director of Seraphic College, the Franciscan seminary, accepted me. On September 28, 1928, I took leave of my family, and accompanied by Father Carlo, we made our way by train to the seminary in the province of Cosenza.

Substituting Ice for Soap and Religion for Relationship

During the trip, my thoughts drifted back to those I had left behind. Often, without letting my companions see me, I wiped away the tears that dropped silently down my cheeks. The first days of seminary were characterized by a great flurry of activity due to the arrival of new students and some confusion, since many of the boys did not adapt quickly to their new regimented lifestyle, which was quite different from the freedom they had previously enjoyed. As the cold winter approached I suffered from frostbite, flu, and other illnesses. There was no heat at the college. In the morning, when we awoke at the sound of the alarm, we had to walk through an open terrace to wash our faces, since there was no running water. The water would freeze in the basins; so, the ice had to be broken, and we used the ice as though it were soap. Sometimes, two or three days would pass before most of us would dare wash our faces. It was a

hard life. The cold had a debilitating effect upon my morale, which sank lower and lower each day. Though I tried to overcome all these things, I withdrew into myself more and more. I was surprised to find myself weeping. During those times, no one could console me. I remember one time Father Carlo, annoyed because of the disturbance I was creating, approached me and began slapping, punching, and even kicking me. I must say that those relentless blows achieved the desired effect. From that moment on, I decided to live that seminary life, even if it was most disagreeable to me. One thing I learned quickly was that I could confide in no one, and it was impossible to have a friend. Spies seemed to be everywhere. Very few memories remain of these first four years of seminary.

Brother Happy

In September of 1932, I left for the monastery, where I spent my year as a novice. According to the novitiate rules of the Order of the Minor Friars of Saint Francis, the day one is inducted one is given a new name. So from then on I was known as “Brother Felice” (Brother Happy). I remember the awful boredom that plagues novices, boredom coming from a forced idleness emanating from a false solitude. Even though the novices are a group supposedly growing in the ways of God, in reality they are suspicious of one another and jealous over trifles, which lead to envy, quarreling, and vulgarity.

The Priesthood Breaks in my Bosom and Then I Bleed

My year as a novice ended with the ceremony of the “simple profession” on October 4, 1933. On July 7, 1940, I was ordained to the priesthood. I received congratulations from the Bishop, my superiors, and the priests, who were present. I was very happy and ecstatic. At last I was a priest. However, for me, my first Mass was a sad delusion. It seemed to me to be merely acting out the role that I had been ordained to perform. There was no joy, no spiritual satisfaction. Where was the presence of God that I had been promised to savor in a very real way? There was nothing but mere formality; there was only void.

After a few years at St. Francis of Assisi Convent, where I taught Italian, History, Geography, and Religion at the intermediate junior high levels, I went to the Monastery at Bisignane (Cesenza) and then to a monastery at Reggio Calabria. It was here that I had my first face-to-face encounter with evangelical Christians.

A Fountain of Water for the One Who Thirsts

On August 15, 1945, while passing in front of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Reggio Calabria, I suddenly felt a strong desire to see the minister. Finally, one day I found the courage to write a letter to the minister asking to see him. “Come, you are welcome to meet with me at your convenience,” was Pastor Salvatore Tortorelli's response to my note. The pastor advised me to read the Bible. “Read it with simplicity and without preconceived notions” he said.

I returned to the monastery and began to read the Holy Bible in Italian. For my spirit and soul, it was like a fountain of water for someone that thirsts and sight for the blind. Each page

brought new surprises and new light, like opened windows to the walls of a prison. *Is it possible?* I would repeat to myself. *Is it possible that I lived so many years without ever knowing all of these marvelous things?* One day I told Pastor Tortorelli how I felt. “The Lord is calling you out of falsehood. Leave everything, and be converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” was his response.

My Real Fears

There were three obstacles preventing me from leaving the convent. First, there was the shame of being despised as an infamous person, a defrocked priest. Second, the fear of venturing out into the unknown world without having security or employment of any kind hindered me from leaving the monastery. Third, this last point was most crucial because the fifth article of the Concordat—between the Italian government and the Vatican—forbade employment of all ex-priests. With such conditions, I could not muster enough courage to leave the convent.

Jesus Wants to Save You

Not long after, I was transferred to a monastery at Staletti. One day, as I was walking down a village street in Staletti, I heard someone calling me. I turned to see a peasant farmer signaling me to stop, for he wanted to talk with me. “I bring you greetings from the pastor of the Baptist Church of Reggio Calabria. I was there only the other week and he told me that a priest by the name of Guido Scalzi, who sympathized with the Evangelicals, was in my hometown.” He went on to explain that the Christian community to which he belonged was in Gasperina, about six kilometers away, and that his pastor, Domenico Fulginiti, would like to meet with me. I told him I would be happy to meet with his pastor.

The meeting came some days later. Leaving at night, I went to a convenient meeting place. The house was small and very simply furnished, as are most of the homes of the Calabrian peasant farmers. There was a table with some chairs, a fireplace, and near it a dough tray and two sifters, for sifting flour for bread. Pots and pans hung on the wall near the fireplace. Through an open door, one could see another room used for sleeping. The Pastor did not make a very good first impression on me. He wore a very modest suit, without a tie. One could see he was just a simple peasant. As Pastor Domenico Fulginiti was introduced to me, I thought, “*What kind of Pastor is this?*” I thought that at any moment he would pull out his Bible to witness to me, but instead, looking at me with great tenderness, he said: “By now you know everything there is to know about the Word of God. What you need now is salvation. Jesus wants to save you. He died on the cross to save your soul.” He continued speaking to me about the “new birth” which is accepted by faith in the blood of Jesus. He told me the story of Nicodemus, who went to look for Jesus by night, and then repeated the words of the Master: “Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?” *Born again, if I could only be born again*, I thought to myself. To blot out all of my painful past, all of my errors, all of my delusions, all of my sins, all of the filth and mire my soul had accumulated, and begin a new life, a pure life before God and man. If I could only be born again!

A Real Prayer of Faith

“You must be born again,” the peasant kindly repeated to me. I did not know what to say, but I was content to agree with him, as he continued saying these things with great conviction. He spoke with simplicity. There was no trace of superiority in his words. He used no flowery professorial tones. After a little while, he got up and said to me, “If you don't mind, may we pray before we go our separate ways?” “Of course we can pray,” I answered him. He knelt and raised his hands toward heaven as he closed his eyes in prayer. My eyes were wide open. He began by thanking God for the opportunity that He gave me to hear the words of salvation. He went on asking God to purify my heart from all sin and wash my soul in the precious blood of Jesus, His only-begotten Son, who died on the cross to pay the price to redeem my soul. He continued that way for a while. I was kneeling also, of course, with some reluctance, and I followed his prayer with skepticism, smiling within myself when he alluded to my sins. What could he know? I kept looking at him; he kept his eyes closed, while his hands reached toward heaven imploringly. The intensity of his prayer exuded from his entire being. It was truly a prayer of faith. I had never heard anyone pray like that in all my life. Nevertheless, that prayer seemed to be the true prayer, fully corresponding to the teachings of Jesus, who warned against mechanical repetitions but rather encouraged prayers according to the need of the moment. What could have been more urgent than the salvation of my soul?

Eternal Life is in His Son

Suddenly, I closed my eyes and my past life flashed before me: all my sins, vices, pride, lustfulness, hypocrisy, lies, and many other things. I saw myself covered with every type of sin, as a leper covered with his repulsive sickness. My condition frightened me. With anguish, I wondered how I could free myself from this oppressive situation. In that instant, I remembered certain words mentioned earlier in the prayer: “The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.” It was then I understood what it meant to be truly free. It was then I abandoned myself in the hands to Jesus, my Savior, desperately seeking His help. “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Save my soul,” I cried. I was going through a great crisis. On one hand, I saw my present life, the pleasures, and comfort it offered; I saw my relatives, friends, and all those who respected me for what I was. On the other hand, I saw the unknown, a life of work and sacrifice; but I also saw Jesus with open arms, ready to receive me unto Himself, ready to give me a new heart, a new soul, a new life, full of His grace, His love, and peace. In the words of Scripture, I knew that “...*this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son*” (I John 5:11).

Trusting Jesus Totally

I sensed peace come into my heart. For the first time in my life, I truly felt the presence of Jesus. He was there with us in that simple room; He accepted my repentance; He received me unto Himself and He spoke to me. His voice was sweet to my ear. He calmed the anxiety of the heart. Darkness fled from my mind. His presence was so alive I had the impression that if I extended my hand, I could touch His garment. It was He, my Lord, my Master...Jesus.

Brother Fulginiti became aware that something very important had taken place within me and that the Lord had answered his prayer. He embraced me and said: "The Lord touched your heart; believe on Him only; do not postpone it. Who knows if you will be given another opportunity to hear Jesus' invitation? The enemy will always try to hinder you from entering into the way of salvation." With my eyes full of tears, I replied, "Brother, I have decided to serve the Lord for life or death." "*Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree*" (Galatians 3:13). Since my conversion and departure from Roman Catholicism, I have had the privilege of working as a missionary pastor, evangelist, and as founder and director of "La Voce Della Speranza" (The Voice of Hope) which is broadcast from several radio stations both in the United States and Europe. "*To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified*" (Isaiah 61:3).