

Toon Vanhuysse

The Truth Set Me Free

I was born in Zwevegem, Belgium on 13 October 1940, in the beginning of the war years. My parents were very pious Catholic people. Father was an extremely strict man, but at the same time also very affable. Besides family troubles (there were ten children) and the worry with the weaving mill, father found time for all kinds of “parochial works.” Something I have taken from my father was his deep feeling for righteousness. He also had a great heart for sending out development aid.

My blessed mother, who died some years back, was such a good woman. She was very gentle and quiet. Is not this the most beautiful ornament with which a woman can adorn herself? (I Peter 3:3-4) She was also a zealous woman and skillful in family ways, supervising the running of the household. She was slightly handicapped and endured a lot of pain—in silence. She was a woman who never complained, and she accepted everything that was difficult in her life. She considered others more, and we benefited from this. Mother was not someone who was greatly concerned about the external practice of being a believer, but she had hidden an upright relationship with God.

The Power of Tradition

The Bible was always a forbidden book for my parents. However, God is sovereign, and He breaks through much of the resistance that Roman Catholicism has built into the thoughts and hearts of men. Therefore, I believe my mother had knowledge of the fear of the Lord. So, I grew up with a deep awe of God, an awe that was strongly characterized by fear of His anger towards sin.

I remember, so well, going to the confessional, for I failed repeatedly. I sinned against God and suffered remorse. It did not leave me, and [temporary] peace did not come until I had received absolution from a priest in the confessional. The confessional was repeatedly a liberation and relief for me. We never had any knowledge of the Gospel of grace, nor of the joyful message that through believing in Jesus' work of reconciliation we receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Isn't that sad? Such is the power of tradition in the Roman Catholic system. Look, for example, at Confession. The Bible says, “*To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins*” (Acts 10:43). Yet, Rome pronounces excommunication to all those who testify to the Bible. The Council of Trent declares this, and tradition usually pushes Scripture aside. We must beware of this. The Word

of God warns us of this! People are also quicker to accept what the Church teaches than what the Bible says. This is the problem with tradition.

A Call to Missions

I began my secondary studies at a college in Waregem. There I passed a Greek-Latin Humanities course. It was still the time of strong discipline. We obeyed, and we also learned. It was certainly no easy time throughout my boarding school experience. We could go home for around two to three weeks each year.

I had a desire to do something for poor people. In my study time I had read many accounts about great missionaries, and I felt I had to follow in their footsteps. Therefore, I entered the Order of Oblatory Missionary Fathers of Mary, in Korbeekle, near Leuven. That was in 1959 or 1960; I cannot exactly remember.

The novitiate of the Order was in Korbeekle. It was actually a trial year, where we were tested and were suited for the cloistered life. It was a difficult time for me.

Spiritual Exercise Without Value

Every day we had a spiritual prayer meeting. It began early in the morning with the Breviary, meditation, Mass, and devotion to Mary. In the course of the day we had our “spiritual reading,” the rosary, and a period of Bible reading. In the afternoon, we usually did handicraft work in silence. Oh yes, perhaps I may even mention, on some Friday afternoons we had a short time of “flogging.” Every novice had his whip and we had to beat that thing on our back. It was as if one could whip out the uncleanness of the past week.

So, we were trained for a year for cloister life. When I look back at this time, I think how we did not realize that all those so-called spiritual exercises and all our efforts to serve God were without any value, as Paul taught in the letter to the Colossians. They only served to satisfy the flesh! All those so-called “holy” methods chip away at Jesus as Mediator. “*So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Romans 8:8). What grace it is to be able to rest in Jesus' accomplished work of salvation! I want to tell this to every priest and everyone in a cloister: “Repent and believe the Gospel!”

Oh, I find it so sad that the Roman Catholics usually do not know the difference between truth and lies in regard to spiritual things. Lies have acquired a strong foothold in the thoughts and hearts of the people. This is expressed in so many doctrines of Rome. A lie does not yield easily. I experience this now when I evangelize door-to-door, which I am doing with the congregation of born-again Christians in Munsterbilzen. People have a deep-rooted aversion to the truth. The truth of the Word deals with sinful people and shows clearly how wretched and lost they are. Everybody prefers to listen to the suggestions of their hearts, which the Bible calls “deceitful and desperately wicked.” “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*” (Jeremiah 17:9).

A Priest in the Church of Rome

We then we moved to the Students Center in Gijzegem, a village between Aalst and Dendermonde. After two years of study in philosophy and four years of theology I was ordained as a priest on February 20, 1966. It was, of course, an enormous event for me, as you can imagine! It was the crowning event of my study and education.

There was not a higher calling. To be a priest in the Church of Rome! We were chosen to carry out again the sacrifices of Jesus Christ in the present. We had become distributors of God's grace; that was my conviction. We had the coveted pretension of being a kind of "maker of blessings." How I had diverted from the Scriptures! It is dishonoring to God when you consider that Jesus' perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice is weakened through the "Mass offering" and its depth is not recognized for its eternal salvation power. The letter to the Hebrews is very clear regarding this.

Therefore, I gave a year's preparation to the Junior Seminary (a middle school with options for cloister life) of the Fathers at Waregem. I did not find it the best place and I was asked to go to Antwerp to engage in parochial work with a team of priests. My assignment was specifically working with youth.

After a year I had to leave Antwerp-Kiel, because my Order called me up for a similar assignment, this time to start a new parish in Houthalen-East. With three fathers we formed a team and worked there. I wondered about their position and their idealism. It was yet more human power, a human building not erected on the Rock but on sand. God's Word was not the basis for our life, with the result that this self-made structure was very shaky and its fall was great, as the Bible says. How we need to call on Jesus Christ and to accept the Word of God as the steady foundation for our lives!

Life Without the Spirit

Well, I would say that after my 10 years of priestly service, I was spiritually extinguished. I could no longer escape the fiasco of my official service in the Roman Catholic Church, above all in the moments when I was confronted with fundamental human needs. To people who were truly sick, I could not give the comfort of God's Word. To people with guilty feelings about wrong steps in their lives, I could not present the forgiveness or reconciliation found in Jesus Christ. I myself needed to know God and to receive forgiveness for my sins. Because of this fundamental lack, my life had become a spiritual rubbish heap.

My work as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church was characterized by generosity and of course desire to do as much as possible for as many people as possible, and this from my own funds. However, this did not persist. The deepest cause of this failure was not knowing the Lord Jesus Christ or the Scriptures. People ask with astonishment how it is possible that someone who is a priest does not know the Gospel and lacks the right knowledge of Christ. It is deeply humiliating to have to admit that this indeed was the case. Jesus, for us Catholics, was above all else the great example, the example of a moral upright life, and the example of a social and economic justice. That was also the reason I was involved in brotherly life and welfare care, trying to be like Him, and somehow achieve salvation.

New Spiritual Birth

It is by God's grace that He led me to true spiritual new birth in Christ Jesus and opened up to me the written Scriptures of God. This had natural consequences, actually painful consequences. In the light of the truth of the Gospel, I have discovered who I actually am, namely, a thoroughly sinful being, incapable of any good and inclined to evil. There is nothing good in me! This is the testimony of the Bible! The Bible itself taught me also that I was excluded from all hope of salvation and was destined for dreadful destruction, as Paul clearly writes in the letter to the Ephesians. God could find nothing good in me! Who could have thought that after ten diligent years as a priest in the Church of Rome. Yet Paul used a word that describes the value of all the diligence, namely dirt; it is of no value in the eyes of God. I thought that my works could be grounds to stand before God in a good light, but on the contrary, it was harmful. *“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing (Romans 7:18),* Paul exclaims. Outside Jesus Christ, salvation is impossible. We all need to be pointed to the grace of God. There is no other way.

The Bible teaches that all have sinned and are not worthy of the Grace given through Jesus Christ. It became a Biblical certainty for me. Through faith people become righteous without the works of the law. *“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:21-24, 28).*

I want to emphasize very strongly that the Bible makes no compromise on this point. There is no middle path between truth and falsehood. It is either truth or lie! There is a great temptation to consider people who are pious, and faithfully attending services, as righteous. God has broken in me the deep-rooted, but pernicious, inclination to self-redemption. Oh, that runs so deep in a man. We are born with it. I do not believe that there is a man who wants to live by “grace alone.” We hope in secret that there still would be something good in us. We are too proud to admit the contrary. The Bible breathes out a climate of sovereign grace. The sinner is justified by grace, through faith. The cooperation of people is totally excluded. I am glad that God has revealed this truth to me. *“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).*