

Mark Peña

The Lord Became My Righteousness

I was born in a little town north of Burgos called Villamediana de Lomas, Spain. Because I wanted to be a missionary I decided to enter the novitiate to become a Roman Catholic priest.

I began the novitiate 24 July 1949. After a year and a day we had to swear to God before the holy community to observe for one year the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. With this ceremony we began as members of the congregation of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary the Immaculate. After this we moved to Madrid to the larger seminary that the Oblates have in Pozuelo de Alarcón, where we studied two years of philosophy and four of theology to be priests.

After three years it was necessary to profess for our entire lives the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Before arriving at ordination, the seminary student has to climb several steps on his ascent towards the top. They are called orders, minor orders and major orders. It begins with the tonsure during the first year of theology. Then follow the other orders.

On 17 March 1956, in the church of the seminary of Madrid at the hands of the bishop of Madrid-Alcalá, Dr Eyjó Garay, I, together with four

classmates, received ordination to the priesthood.

My First Mass and Fireworks

My first Mass took place in the church of the Religiosas de San Jose de Cluny in Pozuelo de Alarcon the following day, Sunday 18 March 1956. I sensed great internal emotion and sublime sentiment for this first Mass and remember my nervousness that I should not wrongly perform any of the rites and ceremonies.

The first Mass with the family in our home town was something humanly great for a little town such as mine. Everyone lived two days of intense emotion and fiesta during 8 and 9 July 1956. It was all fireworks, music, floral displays, games and joy. I was the first priest from that town and because of that it was a matter of great pride for all the families.



I taught Spanish literature and music, Latin and French, but what I liked best was preparing the Sunday sermon for the 11 o'clock Mass in our church.

Co-Pastor

As the Provincial Patriarch knew of my missionary desires, he assigned me, together with another Oblate Father, as co-pastor of a poor and miserable parish in the city of Badajoz. On 14 November 1958 I arrived at

the parish of Our Lady of the Assumption at Badajoz, composed of a populace of great spiritual and material misery. It was made up of nine thousand souls. For three years I worked in this parish to the joy and satisfaction of the people. Truthfully they felt proud of me, and I loved them and sought to win them by every means.

Increasingly I felt burdened by my sins and realized that there was no assurance of forgiveness through confessions and other Roman Catholic practices. I felt that I was lost forever. The Mass became meaningless. Like John Knox, the former Roman Catholic priest turned Reformer, I could say, 'The Mass is blasphemy'. I determined that I must leave the priesthood, go into the world, obtain secular employment and 'enjoy life'.

Evangelicals — Rare Insects?

My dissatisfaction with the Mass and the spiritual emptiness of the Roman Catholic Church increased. I contacted a Protestant pastor in Madrid, Alberto Arajo Fernandez. I did not know him but had been told that he was a prudent man and an earnest Christian. The first contact with him was very simple and cordial. And to think that the great majority of Roman Catholics, at least in Spain, think that evangelical Protestants are something like rare insects! He let me explain my problem, and with a wisdom and a love before unknown to me he counselled me and encouraged me to spend much time reading the New Testament. We corresponded regularly.

In February 1962 I resolved to take the great step, to leave the Roman Catholic priesthood. I could not continue where there was only ritualistic

coldness; as it is written, 'Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof' (2 Tim. 3:5). I wrote to Arajo asking him to look for a place where I could hide, and also to another pastor in Bilbao, Juan Eizaguirre, asking him the same thing, because at the first opportunity I was determined to leave the priesthood.

'The Lord Our Righteousness'

My superior had arranged for me to preach at the celebration of the appearances of the Virgin in Fatima. I chose this as my time to leave the priesthood and my religious state. I arrived in Madrid on 8 May 1962. Then I flew immediately to Holland, to get out of Spain before my superior could learn of my defection and have the police close the Spanish frontiers to me.

At this time I knew nothing of true biblical salvation, but in Holland I lived with an evangelical Protestant family. They read the Bible together and prayed in family devotions and at meals. They recommended me to Dr Hegger, a converted priest and director of a work in Holland which helps priests who want to leave the Roman system. It is called 'In de Rechte Straat' (In Straight Street), from the reference in Acts 9:11. Dr Hegger counselled with me and answered many of my doctrinal questions from the Word of God.

Shortly afterwards I returned to Spain via Portugal (for safety) to visit my mother, who was sick and worrying about me. The Lord enabled me to live in safety with my family for a month and my mother improved greatly. On my return by train I was reading the Bible and praising the

Lord. In this attitude of praise, passages of Scripture came to me, emphasizing that Jesus Christ is a perfect Saviour, the only Saviour, the all-sufficient Saviour; that he made one perfect, never-to-be-repeated sacrifice on the cross of Calvary for my sins; that he was my substitute, my sin-bearer; and that he would impute his righteousness to me and forgive all my sins if I would but trust him with all my heart. In one moment, I did so. I gave him my life, my soul, and received him, trusting him as my Lord and Saviour forever. The words of God were fulfilled in my heart and life: 'To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins' (Acts 10:43). My sins were forgiven; my soul was saved; heaven became my home; Christ was mine, and I was his forever.

My Prayer for Roman Catholics

I returned to Holland. From there I contacted The Conversion Center in Havertown, Pennsylvania, about coming to America and studying the Word of God. The Lord enabled me, after some difficulty, to reach the USA in September 1963, where I commenced studies at Faith Theological Seminary. I then took some special courses at Temple University leading to a Master's degree in Spanish Literature.

As Paul's heart went out for the salvation of Israel, so I pray for my beloved Roman Catholics: „Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own

righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." (Rom. 10:1-4)

Mark Peña was born in Spain. He experienced his "second birth", the biblical rebirth, in Holland. His last place of work before retirement was in Chicago, Illinois, USA, where he served as a shepherd to a Christian congregation.