

Charles Berry

A Priest Asks God for Grace

As practicing Catholics, we dedicated half an hour each Sunday to attending Mass, but religion really played a minor part in our family. As a teenager, I was ashamed of my Catholic beliefs, avoiding going to church whenever I could. Then something happened that changed the direction of my life.

Suffering to Get to Heaven

While baby-sitting for a Protestant neighbor, I chanced to read a booklet on the subject of “Hell and Eternal Punishment” and was convinced, as I am at this moment, of the terrible reality of hell. Determined that my first obligation was to find a way of drawing closer to God, I entered deeply into Catholic practices. I began attending Mass and saying the rosary every day, wearing the brown scapular and various medals. I was told that if I really wanted to find out how to get to heaven, I should read the lives of the Catholic saints and discover how they managed it. Thus, I determined that the surest way to heaven was to cause myself to suffer. Pain became my constant companion, yet I was careful never to betray by my expression how much I was suffering. Then at the age of 19, I entered the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine and for the next 17 years lived under the rule of St. Augustine, progressing from postulant, to novice, to professed, and finally to priest.

During the first 10 of those pre-Vatican II years, I did not even see the inside of a regular monastery nor have the opportunity of association or frank discussion with regular monks or priests. Students for the priesthood never mixed with the superiors and teachers. The hardships were many, but were gradually relaxed a little as we advanced and approached ordination. Few of us complained if the food was poor, the hours of rest insufficient or the discipline degrading or inhuman, because we felt that this was the price that we had to pay to become men of God. Obedience to authority was the one theme, which dominated our lives. Not only did we surrender the right to our own possessions, ambitions, and private lives, we surrendered even our minds, intellects, and private thoughts. We were told that God spoke to us directly through the mouths of our superiors and that any doubt or hesitation in accepting their complete control was a grave sin against God.

“Be Ye Holy for I Am Holy”

My first assignment as an ordained Catholic priest was a little bit different from the average. Instead of being sent to some monastery to assist in parochial work or to teach, I was given orders to continue studying until I achieved a Ph.D. in chemistry, so that I could teach in a Catholic University. The new monastery where I was sent was luxuriously furnished with every convenience, boasting of the finest foods that money could buy. But I had not sacrificed for so many years to be able to finally live in luxury, but rather to become a true man of God --a saint. What was disappointing and disillusioning to find upon entering the inner circles of the clergy was how very unimportant God was to those who were expected to have extraordinary holiness and love of God. The part of each day, which was concerned with doing the Lord's work, was regarded as the unpleasant part. I noticed (not only there but wherever I have been in the world) that the only clergymen who would get up for service in the Church would be those appointed to conduct them, and then they would feel sorry for themselves that it was their turn.

After asking to be sent someplace else, I was delighted to be transferred to the headquarters of the Augustinian order in the United States. But instead of discovering it to be a spiritual powerhouse, I found it to be where many priests were brought when their lives became so scandalous as to hurt the reputation of the Church. I wondered, "Where is this Church which had been described to me to which I had given my life because of her purity and beauty? Could it be that it does not exist in the United States because of contamination by Protestantism? Could it be that it only exists in its full purity in Catholic countries where it has full liberty of expression and freedom from constraints?"

At this time I heard of a Catholic university in a Catholic country that needed a scientist to build up its program in science and engineering. Eagerly I volunteered and soon became Director of the School of Chemical Engineering at the Catholic University of Cuba. Needless to say, I did not find there the church that I had expected to find. Any American Catholic who travels to a Catholic country is embarrassed and shocked by what he sees. In the United States the Roman Catholic Church is on its good-behavior, putting its best foot forward because of its critics and opponents. In a Catholic country, where it has few opponents or critics, it is a very different matter. Ignorance, superstition, and idolatry are everywhere, and little effort, if any, is made to change the situation. Instead of following the Christianity taught in the Bible, the people concentrate on the worship of statues of their local patron saints.

“Thou Shalt Not Make unto Thee Any Graven Image”

For many years, as a Catholic, I had maintained the idea that Catholics do not worship idols, but now I saw with my own eyes that there was no difference between the Catholics with their images and the pagans with theirs. When I met in Cuba a genuine pagan who worshiped idols (a religion transplanted from Africa by his ancestors), I asked how he could believe that a plaster idol could help him. He replied that the idol was not expected to help him; it only represented the power in heaven that could. What horrified me about his reply was that it was almost word-for-word the explanation Catholics give for rendering honor to the statues of the saints.

Works without Faith

Little by little, I devoted myself to my work at the University. Under my leadership, we built and equipped a group of large buildings to house schools of Chemical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Architecture, Pharmacy, and Psychology. As each school developed, I turned it over to a qualified dean, while I became Assistant to the Rector in Charge of Science and a member of the four-man Executive Committee governing the entire university. Probably the most outstanding success I had was the formation of a Bureau of Quality Standards, under which industries voluntarily agreed to accept minimum standards and contracted with our laboratories that we might continually test their products to insure uniform high quality. The most powerful and wealthy people, from the President on down, showered me with honors and gifts so that I might be their friend and support their projects and ambitions. Yet, deep in my heart I knew that whatever honor I had achieved, I had not gained the real goal for which I had set out. Augustine said it so well centuries ago: "Thou hast made our hearts for thee, O God, and they are restless until they rest in thee."

Many doubts assailed me. I knew that so many of the things which we preached, so many of the glib answers we gave the people, were hotly disputed among theologians and laughed at or disregarded by many of the clergy. I was ashamed of the priests who had for centuries robbed the people, ignored the poor, supported rich oppressors, and had lived scandalous lives.

Determined to rescue the few remaining years of my life, I decided that as soon as I received my doctorate in Physics and Chemistry, I would leave the priesthood and the Church. I am sure that every priest faces such a decision some time in his life. The Church had promised to make us men of God, but sooner or later after ordination, each one must face his conscience to "balance up the books." That is when he realizes that he is worse off than the day he began, in spite of using all the means that the Church had offered.

The Cost of Leaving the Church

To decide to leave means to be cut off from most, if not all, of those who have loved, honored, and respected us, and more importantly, those whom we have loved and served. Every priest must know several companions who attempted the break and were forced, for one reason or another, to return. I did. They told me how they returned, not out of love for the Church but, among other reasons, so that they could get "three square meals a day and a decent burial."

I planned my break carefully, requesting from my superiors permission to take a vacation in Europe. Then, after receiving my doctorate degree, I bought a used car in Miami with the idea of disappearing in some small town where I was unknown. I felt none of that joy of liberation and freedom, which might have been expected. All those I had ever known were now cut off from me by their bondage to the Church. I was a stranger and foreigner to the whole world, and more of a stranger to God than ever before.

In casting about for somebody who might help me find employment, I turned to a certain chemist who had worked for me in the Bureau of Standards, but who was now living in Mexico. After receiving assurance that there were friends there who would come to my assistance, I packed my things and headed south of the Rio Grande.

Martha, a friend, was living with an aunt from Spain. Both women were very kind to me and, as a close circle of friendship developed, little did I guess how much each one would influence my life. Eventually Martha and I were married. Her aunt then sought to be reunited

with her errant husband, but not long after he returned, she was found dead in bed. There was a great deal of circumstantial evidence against him, and we became involved in one of the most sensational murder cases in the history of Mexico. Because of the resulting publicity, my name was recognized and several Catholic reporters of leading newspapers began attacking me as a renegade priest. Then, fearing the stability of his business, my employer fired me.

Facing difficulties all the way, we slowly worked our way to San Diego. After several months working at Convair Astronautics, I was informed that they had a staff position for me with the parent corporation, General Dynamics. Several weeks were taken up in conferences and briefings. Naturally, I had to give a detailed account of my life, education, and professional work, as well as references. All this I spelled out in great detail, omitting only the fact that I had been a Roman priest. Suddenly, just a day or two before I was to begin my new work, I received a telegram canceling all arrangements.

I never did have any direct evidence of what led to my dismissal, but after only a few days I received a letter from Church authorities warning me again to never try to obtain recommendations from Church-controlled sources because they would always deny they ever knew me. Never again did I find a position worthy of my training and experience.

The Gift of Salvation

I had been taught all my life to fear and distrust Protestant pastors. We were told that they greedily seized upon ex-priests to use them to promote their own evil ends. In desperation, and in spite of these forebodings, I decided to take the risk and thus discovered that all over the world, since the days of Jesus, there have been people who can best be called Bible-believing Christians. Not people who merely believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, but people who consider it a personal message from their loving God and therefore make it the guiding force in their lives.

I borrowed a handbook on Christian teaching from a pastor and found that all the references were texts from Scripture, not logic, or tradition. I noticed for the first time the simple statements of the Bible on how one can attain heaven and avoid hell. I realized that Scripture is not to be approached from a scholarly point of view but from the position of children listening to their father, accepting and believing every word, recognizing that God means what He has said and knows how to say what He means. On page after page of the Bible, I saw truths that I had thirsted for all my life. The teaching regarding salvation was clear: *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Martha and I talked it over and agreed that I had done more than almost anyone in the world to obtain salvation, but that there was one thing I had never done -- ask for it as a gift from God. We decided that we would ask God for His gift of grace. We got down on our knees and prayed together for the first time.

In a spirit of humility and contrition we asked God to save us, not because of the good we had done or the good we vowed to do, but because of the good that Jesus did when He made atonement for our sin by His death on the cross.

Little did we realize it, but we were born-again, so young [in true faith] that we did not even know who we were in Christ. From that moment on we began noticing changes in our thinking. We began to love the things of God. One way or another since then, the Lord has kept

us busy witnessing and preaching, winning many hundreds of souls for the Lord Jesus Christ and biblical Christianity. *“But ye are come unto mount Sion and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel”* (Hebrews 12:22-24).