

Thoufic Khouri

The Gospel of Grace in Jesus Christ

A witness is an Evangelical message, a message that one receives and desires to pass on, a message from the Evangel, and that Evangel is Jesus Christ. This gospel message is a love story, the story of the love between a particular person and Jesus Christ, and that love is now made possible because the love of God's Son has been displayed.

Before I continue, I would like to pray to the Father that He might enlighten us and give the words of the Holy Spirit. "Our heavenly Father, we thank Thee that we are allowed to come to Thee. I thank Thee that I can testify to Thy marvelous Gospel. I beg Thee that Thou wilt give me Thy words, words that give living power for those who listen. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen."

I begin my testimony with a Bible verse that is very dear to me: Matthew 11:28. The Lord God gave it to me at a time of great need; I was on the point of doing a foolish thing. He then took my hand to lead me out of my depression. The verse is: "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*"

In a Boarding School at Jerusalem

I was born in Lebanon of Roman Catholic parents and was enrolled in the register of their Church. In January 1923, I was baptized by a threefold immersion ceremony. This is the custom of the Syrian Catholic Church. Through this act I was supposed to have become a "Christian;" I did become a member of that Church. When I was three years old my mother died, and I was put in a boarding school in Jerusalem, where I stayed until I was thirteen. At a young age, I loved the altar, the priests, and everything connected with the priestly service.

The Sisters of Mercy controlled the school. One nun, Sr. Germaine, noticing my piety and my interest in the liturgy, insisted that I become a priest. (Later on, I wrote twice to this nun and explained to her the true way of Salvation. After the second letter she did not reply.)

My Doubts in the Seminary

When I was 13 years old, I had to choose either to study at college or to enroll in a seminary as a priest. I chose a seminary of the Syrian rite. You know what seminarians are like. They are carefully sifted; many are sent away, leaving only a few. These are, of course, not yet perfect. I did not feel worthy of the priesthood and asked my Prior many times if I could leave. The answer was always the same: "You are called by God, and if that is not so, then when it is clear to us, you may go." This continued for a long time. The last time that I went to the Prior with

this problem was just before my ordination as Sub-Deacon. I felt the difficulties that the priesthood would bring, particularly the celibacy. When I had undergone this ordination, I would then automatically face the obligation of lifelong celibacy.

There was still a strong feeling of unworthiness growing within me. I did not feel sufficiently worthy to serve at the altar. This was why I pressed my Prior strongly that I should not be ordained as Sub-Deacon; I could not decide for myself. (When one is so extensively prepared for the priesthood, the Catholics consider it a dishonorable thing to withdraw.)

Again I received the same advice: "You can be ordained without any fear," and so I became a Sub-Deacon and was later ordained a Deacon. Again, I went to my Superiors and asked if I could remain as a Life-Deacon. I did not ask this because I did not wish to continue my studies, but simply because of my feelings of unworthiness about the priesthood. Even as Ephraim the Syrian, I wanted all my life to serve the altar and help the priesthood. My Superiors regarded this as a very foolish idea and forced me to take the final step, that of being ordained a priest.

A Little Piece of Paper by my Heart

After my ordination to the priesthood, the doubts remained. They called these doubts "an angelic virtue." There were also difficulties on an intellectual level. I had these earlier, as well, when I was studying philosophy, and especially theology. I could not accept certain things without great difficulty. I wanted to understand all the dogmas, but wondered how they originated and how important they were. I could not remain in uncertainty about this. My superior once told me: "If you have difficulties of belief don't be desperate; imitate your patron, St. Vincent de Paul." He had written on a piece of paper the Creed, which he rolled up. When he was attacked by doubts, he kissed the paper and pressed it to his heart saying, "Lord, I do not understand, but I still believe." I followed his advice and experienced a short period of peace. It was not, however, strong enough to fully settle me in my beliefs.

Diplomacy Against a Dictatorship

To be brief, there were disciplinary, intellectual, and ethical difficulties. I had an aversion to submitting my will completely to my superiors. The Bishop could really do as he wished with us. The effect was that many got their own way by using other means. This was especially so in the case of appointments. If one had a little cunning, and a feeling for diplomacy, then one could prevent an unwelcome appointment, or even alter it to something a little better. For example, I was appointed Chaplain in a small village away in the wilderness. I manipulated things so that this appointment was cancelled, and I was appointed instead as a Lecturer in a Seminary.

The Advice of a Franciscan of Gethsemane

This appointment brought its own difficulties. I now had to try with the utmost effort to be a good example to my students. I still had to read the Mass in the morning, alternating with another priest. We were the only two lecturer-priests at the seminary that belonged to the Syrian

rite. The others were Benedictines. My longing after perfection of life greatly increased, and I sought to obtain the power for this through the Sacraments. The Sacraments did not give me the power for which I sought. This disappointment caused a crisis. I began to doubt the value and the truth of the Sacraments. From that moment on, I began to consider resignation from the priesthood, not that I wanted to leave the Roman Catholic Church, but I wanted to be relieved of the burden of my priestly functions. I felt totally unworthy of this holy way of life. I spoke with my confessor, an old Franciscan who lived in the cloister of Gethsemane. He always said: "O dear boy, even the greatest saints have had trouble with temptations against their beliefs. There is no valid reason for resigning. Just carry on peacefully. It is Satan who does not want you to do things well."

Pastor in Beirut

After five years, I was nominated as pastor of a Syrian rite parish in Beirut. I came more in contact with people and their misery. I got to know the suffering of the poor and came to love them, but I could never find peace for my soul, nor peace and harmony with my colleague, another pastor.

This priest, a rascally, old fellow, loved money very much. He had the management of a school of which he retained the gifts as much as possible. He was able to do this because the Lebanese schools are not under the control of the government, but privately run. Nevertheless, I did not have anything to do with him. He, however, did not leave me in peace, but continually complained to the Bishop about me. The Bishop loved me and I him, for he had ordained me as a priest. In the end, I had a great aversion for my fellow priest and for others like him. Still, I did not yet have a reason to say goodbye to the Church. I dared not.

The Soul is not Satisfied by Money

In the meantime, my ethical difficulties continued and still I performed the Sacraments. This again caused several tensions. In order to perform the Mass, one's conscience has to have certain purity, and this purity is obtained by means of confession. Many times I had the opportunity to confess before the Mass, but I did not always do so. I then had to satisfy myself with an exercise of penitence, in which a very firm intention to confess my sin at the next confession had to be made.

It was still very difficult to adjust myself to this psychological act of penitence, because I had to do it in love to a perfect God. Many times, I had to satisfy myself with the saying of this act of penitence and then went on to read the Mass. I often had the feeling that although I had to do it, I celebrated a sacrilegious Mass. The necessity to serve in this condition was a growing burden to me. At last, I went to the Papal Nuncio with a request to be relieved of my priestly functions.

Again, I became discouraged. The Nuncio thought it was only depression, a passing psychological state. He gave me some money, about \$35, to cheer me up. You must realize that this was not the way to help me. My purse was fuller, but my soul emptier.

Love for Such a Hard Church

I was tired of all the priestly functions and wanted to leave officially, without any grudges, trouble, discussion, or difficulties with my Church. I did not want to cause great trouble in leaving, but the Church did not allow me to leave quietly. I began to feel that I was a slave to that terrible system. How the Roman Catholic Church sought to tyrannize my whole life! I wanted to be a simple layman in the Church. However, I began to realize that this could never be. I could not escape from the pressures of the hierarchy. How could I ever have loved such a church that was so hard on me? I began to think of saying farewell to my priesthood at all costs, but I dared not. I was afraid because I had my religious beliefs. I believed, for instance, that Rome alone was the custodian of salvation and outside her there was no salvation. Certainly, I was afraid that should I die at that moment I would be lost, but nevertheless, I continued to believe that inside the Catholic Church my salvation was secure.

A Priest Who Poisoned Himself

About this time, a priest swallowed poison taking his own life. He had been a bad priest who had occupied himself with all kinds of obscene business. He had been addicted to gambling, and had gambled his life away. Sometimes he won, and sometimes he lost. In the end, he committed suicide. I began to consider following his example. Before I took my life, I would surrender myself to the mercy of God and ask Him to awaken in me a perfect act of contrition. I was afraid of that thought. I felt so helpless and depressed.

The Frightening Image of an Apostate Priest

In spite of the terrible state I was in, I dared not break with the Roman Catholic Church, as I would then become an apostate priest. Many times the terrible image of the renegade priest had been portrayed to us, but we had been told only about those priests who had been unfrocked and who had left the church. I did not know that there were many other priests who had left the Church because the love of Jesus Christ had claimed them. To leave the Roman Catholic Church meant for me to go the same way as Renan, or as ex-priests, DeLammenais and Loisy. Such priests were portrayed as monstrous examples of pride, or as slaves to animal instincts. No, I would never want to become one of them.

I Wanted to Commit Suicide

Still, I was in an acute state and needed urgent help. One day I went to the church of my parish and beat on the altar and begged, "Lord, if You are really here now, help me, please." But I did not get any help, just the opposite. I suddenly realized that I had committed a new sin against my faith because I had said, "*If* You are really here now...." I had expressed doubts concerning the dogma of the Real Presence and of the Transubstantiation of Christ in the Host. When one willfully doubts a Roman Catholic dogma, it is a mortal sin. I returned to my room very, very depressed and again contemplated taking my life and plunging into eternity, but I dared not.

...Suddenly I HAD to Pray

Suddenly, I had a strong desire to pray, but not the prayers from my Syrian Breviary. I wanted to turn to God in personal prayer from the depths of my heart. I knelt down and said: "Lord, I do not want to be an apostate, and yet, I am still afraid that I will lose all my faith. Therefore, I pray now let me die while I still have faith in You, in Your Son Jesus Christ, in Your Holy Ghost, in Your Holy Church, and in everything that she teaches me."

From Scripture Jesus Speaks to Me

Very soon after this, I had the impulse to open my New Testament. I had Bibles in Arabic, Aramaic, Latin and French, but I had never really read it thoughtfully, that is to say, grasping it with a hungry heart. I did not have reverence for the Word of God or respect for this book of the Lord. I never had time or inclination for it because I never had any expectations for my soul. On that day, I opened my Bible and my eyes fell on Matthew 11:28: "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.*" It was, viewed from a human standpoint, accidental, but God who has everything in His Hands and Who guides everything had prepared this text for me. I did not read those words for the first time. Many times I had read them from my Breviary and in the Mass, but they did not mean anything to me. On that day those words were a personal message from Jesus to me. Then I prayed a second time and said: "Lord, I take You at Your Word. It is You who are calling me. Here I am. You promised to take my burdens away. Well, here are my burdens. Remove them from me and give me rest from them." I got some rest, but I did not then know Jesus as my personal Savior.

Back to the Routine, the Weariness and Sorrow

Soon after, I had to return to my routine work as a priest, celebration of the Mass, and listening to confessions. Again, I served the sacraments in the orphanage with its 300 orphans. The people of the parish again demanded my attention. My sad and weary life continued.

A Foolish Plan

One day, I reminded myself that the first time I had received any enlightenment had been through the Bible. Why should I not go to the Bible House in Beirut to inquire about a book on comparative religions? When I think about this, I have to smile that I was so naive. I was looking for a book about several religions so that I could then choose a suitable one.

I tell you this as an illustration of how far a Roman Catholic priest can wander from the truth. I had never known a living, "personal" religion. I was looking for something difficult. I wanted to choose between Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Greek Orthodox, and Protestantism. For me, they all had the same value. I wanted to choose from these, but it was clear that I wanted to make only an intellectual choice.

They Spoke Only Concerning Jesus

When I went to the Beirut Bible House in my priestly garb, I was very conscious that I was visiting “heretics.” I rang the bell and asked for a book on religions. I received a friendly welcome. They spoke with me, helped me and, especially, they prayed for me. That was the first time I prayed with Protestants. You want to know of course concerning the things about which they spoke. Well, it was not about other religions or about a church, but about Jesus Christ alone. I thank the Lord that He inspired them to speak about His Son. I was happy to listen to it. They gave me a booklet, “Towards Assurance.” It was printed in Switzerland and contained some Bible texts with illustrations and references.

By Grace, Salvation Only in Christ

I took this simple booklet to my room and read a little from it every day. So, I began to understand the message of the Gospel. I came to a decision that had been prepared a long time before by the guidance of God. So, my life had now ripened by reading and meditation from this booklet, and from the Word of God. I knelt down to trust Jesus only. By God’s grace, everything in me was open to receive Him. I closed my human eyes and the eyes of my mind, and opened only the eyes of my heart in faith and love. I said to the Lord, “Jesus, You alone are the Savior; Your Name means Savior.” The Lord saved me, and from that moment I did not build on anything except Him. Henceforth, I will look for my salvation only in Him.

So the miracle happened, that which I needed so much: a spiritual birth. I became a new creature, a child of God. Outwardly, I was still a Roman Catholic. I still wore my priestly garb. The books in my room were still all Roman Catholic. Inwardly, however, I was a Roman Catholic no longer. Inwardly, I had become a Christian. Also, in my thinking I was still a Roman Catholic, because so many years of pseudo-biblical, scholastic teaching is difficult to discard. Within my spirit, the Spirit of God witnessed to me that I had become a child of God. *“For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God”* (Romans 8:15-16).

Talking with My Bishop

With this new life within, I began to re-orientate my life and had the courage to leave the Church without any fear, without making any scenes, and without hurting anyone. I told my Bishop: “Monseigneur, I want to leave the Church.” I did not read the Mass anymore and, therefore, the Bishop summoned me and asked why this was so. I had by now studied the Bible a lot, and it was food for my soul. I especially read the Psalms and New Testament, and so it was that I could give the Bishop an answer straight from the Bible. *“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). “Monsignor,” I said, “do you want to know how much I love the Mass? Well, if you are prepared to read with me the Mass in the form in which it is recorded in the

Bible, then I will readily say the Mass with you now. At the Last Supper, Jesus read the service in this way, without any Mass vestments and without any incense. (In the Syrian Catholic Rite, a Mass is always celebrated with incense). I shall not sprinkle the incense nine times nor ask you to sprinkle me three times. Neither you nor I will wear any vestments, as is our custom. If you agree, then I am prepared to say the Mass with you now, but only in the way which Christ has instituted the Lord's Supper." "What strange ideas you have," said the Monseigneur. "Monseigneur, these are not my ideas, but the Gospel's." "No, no, these are Protestant fallacies," Monseigneur replied. But I can tell you, the reader, that I had never corresponded with Protestants, and I thank the Lord that He had not brought me in contact with members of any official Protestant denomination. I met only Evangelical Christians who did not begin speaking about churches or the church. They spoke about Jesus, whom every person has to personally receive as Savior. I had done that, and so I was really a "Protestant," but only insofar as I protested strongly against all that is not in accord with the Word of God.

I had Previously Warned Others about Protestants

"Why don't you listen to confessions when people ask for them?" continued the Bishop. "The reason for this is very simple, Monseigneur, because only Jesus has the power to forgive sins. He has shed his blood for us. He alone is entrusted with the power from God to be the Savior of all mankind. I do not wish to infringe on the rights of Jesus Christ," I explained. "I can see that the Protestants in your parish have greatly influenced you," he responded. But I had never been to a Protestant of my parish. I had gone to the Bible House in Beirut, and that was a long way from my parish. There were several Evangelical Protestants in my parish and often I had gone to my Bishop and told him, "Monseigneur, we have to beware of the Protestants in our parish." People had often reproached me for the bad behavior of my fellow priest. For example, he was always playing cards. "We have to be examples to our parish," I continued, "just because the Protestants are ready to stir up a hornet's nest. We, therefore, have to be very wary and give a good example or else we will be stung by those Protestant hornets."

I, who had been many times to the Bishop to warn against the influence of the Protestants, now heard that I was influenced by them myself, even though I had never spoken to one. "All right Monseigneur, if you, on the grounds of what I have told you about my witness to Jesus Christ as being the only and personal Savior for everyone who believes in Him, call me a Protestant, then in this sense I am a Protestant," I admitted.

A Talk with a Jesuit Priest

The Bishop wanted me to have a talk with a Jesuit priest, in the hope that he would alter my thinking. He was a professor of the Theological Faculty of Beirut. At first I refused, but eventually I went to him. He began very diplomatically and first spoke about several other matters, but not about my conflicts of conscience. A little later, he mentioned the condition of my soul. He asked me if I lived in a good spiritual climate. "Yes," I answered, "I thank the Lord God because I am in an excellent spiritual condition." "And how is your prayer life?" he asked. "Oh excellent! Prayer is the outpouring of my soul," I replied. "Do you pray to St. Vincent of Paul?" he asked. "No, Father, no, not at all," I said. "Do you pray to the Holy Virgin?" he asked.

“No, Father, I do not pray to Vincent, nor to the Holy Virgin. I do not call on any saint. I only pray to Jesus Christ and I pray to God in the Name of Jesus only,” I answered. I continued, “*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*” (I Timothy 2:5). “But don’t you believe in the Holy Virgin any more?” he asked. “For sure, and I respect her highly, but I do not want to give her any of the rights that belong to Jesus,” I replied. Then he took his Breviary and read a short piece from Bernard of Clairvaux about Mary. “When you are desperate, look up to the morning star; when you are fearful, turn, and go to Mary; when you are... etcetera, etcetera.” He then asked me: “Don’t you find that particularly beautiful?” I answered: “I don’t find it at all beautiful.” “Well, what then are your conclusions?” he asked me. “The same conclusion that I gave you from the commencement of our discussion,” I said. He retorted, “But that is not logical.” “Father,” I said, “do you see that crucifix behind you? If you should take Christ off that cross and get rid of Him, then I should perhaps feel a need to pray to another, for example, Mary. But so long as I believe in Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled everything, I find completeness in Him and have no need of substitutes.” “It is very clear to me,” he said, “you are too much of a Protestant. I cannot speak any longer with you, I am sorry.” I then took leave of him.

Above the Splendor of the Vatican

The Jesuit father later telephoned the Bishop to inform him of our talk. I was again called to the Bishop. He told me, “I will give you two weeks to think things over. I am willing to give you a year’s leave of absence, which you must spend in Rome in the home of the Provincial of the Syrian Rite. We will pay for your journey and for your stay in Rome. You can have a good rest there and need not do anything. You can drink in the splendor of the Roman Catholic Church and allow it to influence you.” “But,” I answered him, “I don’t need that. Above the splendor of the Vatican I prefer the splendor of the Word of God, the Bible.”

The Bishop offered me two weeks to think things over. I told him, “I make my decision now. I declare with all certainty that I shall never celebrate a Mass, never hear a confession, and that I will never pray to another of the saints. My belief is totally based on the Gospel. I accept the Bible as the authority for my life and as food for my soul.” “If things are like this,” was his answer, “then do what is necessary so that we are not forced to take the most extreme measure.” I knew what that meant. I packed my luggage and departed because I wanted to avoid the police removing me from the presbytery.

Accursed is Pastor Khouri!

I left my church, but I left it with complete peace of heart. I will repeat it once more. I could not leave the Roman Church so long as I was a Roman Catholic. There was a need to meet Jesus, a meeting, person to person, to complete this step. I was too afraid to break with the Church and become an apostate, an excommunicated person, and a heretic. In my spirit I could already see my name added to the list of excommunicated persons in the back of the churches in Beirut and of the whole Syrian Catholic society, because that is the way things are done in our part of the world. Every person who is under the ban of the Church is mentioned on a list, and the list is nailed for at least a year to this shameful board. I could already hear the people saying, “Pastor

Vincent Khouri is excommunicated. He became a heretic. He is accursed. Anathema stand, he is damned!"

I always had this frightful image before me, and this was the reason I had never dared leave the Church. But those fears totally disappeared when I came to know Christ as my personal Savior. In earlier times, I had prayed to Jesus but never to MY Jesus, MY Savior. Many times the people prayed to God in the Name of Jesus but without knowing Jesus as their own Savior. *"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God"* (Colossians 3:1-3).

God Looks on Us (Redeemed) Sinners

Dear fellow ex-priests, I know the fears you went through. I know how you have, with deadly sadness, broken from a church that you loved so much, but I can speak encouragingly. This is only one stage. It is only a negative way of looking at what is the essence of the real thing. The final decision does not lie in the breaking with the Roman Catholic Church because of her errors. The final decision has to be taken by everyone personally. In this we are equals. God does not look on us, in the first place, as believers in a special religion or as belonging to a special church. God does not see us first as Buddhists, Mohammedans, or as inhabitants of Central Africa with its primitive pagan religions; nor as Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, or as Protestants. God sees us only as sinners for whom He has given His only Son. Only those who are clothed with the coat of Christ's righteousness are accepted as children by the Father. Those who are far from Jesus, who perhaps pray to Jesus but from afar, who have no fellowship of life with Jesus, cannot call themselves Christians.

We can honestly call ourselves Christian on the day that the Spirit of Jesus Christ witnesses in us that we are really "born again;" the day when we have that wonderful experience, not from a sacrament that we have received or from a doctrine which is understood, but the experience of a new life which we receive for nothing. It is the day when we lean on Jesus Christ, the day we cease trusting in our own efforts, our own hearts, our own intelligence, and ourselves. The day, on which we totally trust Jesus, is the day Jesus becomes the center of our lives, our goal, and companion. When we are born again, then Jesus gives us His Holy Spirit to lead, console, strengthen and encourage us in our dark hours. *"And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: Of sin, because they believe not on me"* (John 16:8-9).

The Consolation in the Dark Hours

You will certainly have occasional dark hours when you return in your imagination to your own country: Italy, Spain, France, and etcetera. You are now living in a totally different world. That change is great and can be heavy. Parting with one's loved ones can give so much pain. I thank God if He has spared others from such bitter experiences as those through which I had to pass. I had been two years in total spiritual and social loneliness. I did not have any contact with others of like mind. I did not know any Evangelical Christians in France where I went after my break

with the Church in Lebanon. However, even if bitterness is unknown, there is still much that can depress. One's thoughts may wander to the lost. You must continually redirect all your thoughts to Jesus Christ.

Freed to Free Others

I cannot end without emphasizing this: I am very sure that God has given each one a calling. Not a churchly calling, because the real calling does not come from human authorities, or your equals, or from your subordinates. We are all equal in Jesus Christ. But I am sure that if God has freed you from such a system, He has done so to replace it with something better. We are primarily called to become witnesses for Jesus Christ. The preparation may have been lengthy. God has freed you to help free others. Be always aware of this calling. *“Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God”* (II Corinthians 1:3-4).

“Ye Are a Royal Priesthood”

But again, a calling to tell others of the joy available can only be done if we ourselves possess this joy. Joy is only found in Jesus Christ. Every human being can experience this joy any moment of his life, if he is guided by the Spirit of God and believes in the written Word and in the Word become flesh, i.e., Jesus Christ incarnate.

I pray that this joy in Jesus Christ will become your full possession. In the whole world, my brothers and sisters and redeemed children of God are praying for you priests. I tell you this to encourage you during the time when the dark hours with their depressing thoughts come. What a wonderful thing to know that we are allowed to be real priests, kingly-priests to God! Not Levitical priests, sighing under a special church system; we are now priests by the Holy Spirit's anointing of our souls: *“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”* (I Peter 2:9). Amen.