

Edoardo Labanchi

I Received Mercy

The only religion of which I had any knowledge was that of the Roman Catholic Church. So I decided to become a priest and joined the Jesuit order. My superiors seemed to be quite satisfied with me, and I was admitted to take the vows that are usually taken only after two years of probation. This gave me a certain satisfaction, I must admit, but it was only a human satisfaction. I felt that I was doing something different from other people; and, like the Pharisee standing in the Temple before the altar looking down at the Publican; I felt I was not like the rest. I was in the Catholic Church and considered as one that was going to be perfect. Indeed, I was so ambitious that I asked to be sent as a missionary, feeling that in this way I might be able to lead an ever-higher spiritual life. So, it happened that I was sent to the island of Ceylon.

Ceylon

When I arrived in Ceylon, not yet an ordained priest, I was sent to work in a college before starting my theological studies. The Jesuits have a long period of training. Very soon I became greatly disillusioned at the lack of any zeal on the part of the Catholic missionaries to convert the heathen. I saw them engaged in teaching in schools. I saw their elaborate churches, but I saw very little real “evangelism” as I understood it at that time. I realized that the atmosphere was quite dead.

India

In due course I was sent to India for my theological studies and, eventually, was ordained as a priest. During my studies I came face to face with the heathen religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, and I began to be challenged deeply about my own religion and to ask myself what, essentially, was the difference between Christianity and these heathen religions. They had their holy books and writings. They had high ideals and commandments and tried to live up to them. A Hindu would readily put a picture or image of Christ among his other gods and yet remain a devout Hindu. Was there any basic difference between these religions and Christianity, or were all religions really the same?

Some Light

It was at this time that I began, little by little, to see the light, and I must admit that I began to do so in spite of being in the Catholic Church. I was nearing the end of my theological studies, but it was certainly not from them that I was getting the light, nor was it from my professors, nor from my devotions, nor from my obedience to the pope. I can assure you of that. The means that God was using was the reading and the study of the Bible, of His Word. Even before this, I had felt a certain attraction to the Bible, to something pure and real that spoke to the heart and could be understood, something that was more than merely human. I now continued to read and study the Bible with close attention, and as I did so I began to realize that the basic difference between Christianity and the heathen religions lay, not principally in commandments or doctrines, but in the Person of Jesus Christ. I began to meditate on what the Bible said about Him and about His redemptive work, and as I did so He began to become more and more real to me. Little by little, Christ became like the sun beginning to rise on the horizon of my life. Although I still held a great many Roman Catholic doctrines, something wonderful was happening to me.

After Ordination

In 1964, after my ordination I was sent to Ceylon again. Now I went as a priest, and it was at this time that I was sent to a town in the center of the island to give a series of lectures on the Bible to some Roman Catholic catechists, because my superiors knew of my interest in the Bible and that I had made a special study of it. It was in the course of one of these visits that I visited the evangelical church of the town. I had, of course, seen this small evangelical church before, but always despised it. Nearby was a large, imposing Roman Catholic Church, and I used to think, "What do these puny Protestants think they can do? If the heathen are to be converted, it will be through the great Roman Catholic Church." On this particular day, however, I had an impulse to go inside. Perhaps the new ecumenical movement made me feel that we now had to be kind and friendly to the "separated brethren." Evidently they were surprised to see me enter, but they received me very kindly and gave me some leaflets and literature. I could not help being impressed by the zeal and devotion of these people. Some of them were Swedish missionaries and others were Ceylonese Christians and workers. They were holding an evangelistic campaign, distributing leaflets and invitations in the streets and even the children among them were enthusiastically helping in this task. I had not seen such zeal in the Roman Catholic Church. I also saw that they were trying to convert me.

Personal Fellowship With Christ?

One of the papers they gave me interested me greatly. It was a devotional journal called "The Herald of His Coming," which is now published in a number of languages, including an edition in Italian, published in Rome. The articles in this paper constantly referred to the new birth, to a personal surrender to Christ, and to a new life lived in fellowship with Him. I already knew these things in theory, but here they seemed alive, real, and personal. "After all," I thought, "this is what the Gospel is all about and what it should be." I continued to meet these evangelicals on a number of occasions, and they gave me other Gospel leaflets and booklets, some published by

the Scripture Gift Mission, as well as subsequent numbers of “The Herald of His Coming.” This literature helped to bring me closer to the Lord. I then returned to India for some months to complete my theological studies, and here, too, I had contact with other evangelicals.

God Works Some More

It was at this point in my life that God began to work more noticeably than before. Increasingly, I felt that I ought to go back to Italy. At the same time, another development took place. The Ceylonese government decided that all foreign missionaries should gradually be sent out of the country; and, as a start, they refused re-entry in Ceylon to those who were already outside. I was also unable to stay in India since, not being a member of the Commonwealth, my residence permit allowed me to stay there only until the completion of my studies. Our superiors therefore decided to send us back to our own countries, and I was told to prepare to return to Italy. Before leaving, I wrote to the director of the Italian edition of “The Herald of His Coming” in Rome, saying that, although a Catholic priest, in the spirit of the ecumenical movement, I had read this paper and liked it very much; and, I should like to co-operate with them when I got back to Italy, as far as might be possible and compatible with my office and function as a priest.

A Bible Professor

On my arrival in Italy and after about two months in my native city of Naples, my superiors sent me to Rome to become a specialist in the Bible. They knew that in India I had been very interested in the Bible and that I was keen to know still more about it; and the Catholic authorities seemed to think that the Bible might form a bridge to the Protestant Churches in the ecumenical movement. I was accordingly sent to what actually was the highest Catholic Biblical Institute in Rome. Realizing that this was a great privilege and honor, I decided when I got to Rome to have nothing further to do with these evangelicals, or Protestants. I had no further wish to collaborate with them or with “The Herald of His Coming.” I now intended to devote myself entirely to the study of the Bible and to prepare myself for my future ministry. I had absolutely no time to have anything further to do with the Protestants.

This was, of course, the reason I was trying to give; but looking back, I can now see that the real reason was that I felt deep in my heart, that if I met them I might have to come to a decision and take a step, the prospect of which made me afraid.

I Try to Give the Gospel

I went on with my studies and was asked at the same time to assist as a priest in a Church in Rome where I preached on Sundays and holy days to perhaps a thousand people. I listened to confessions and did the things a Catholic priest can do. In my sermons I tried to give the Gospel message, and in the confessional I tried to give real spiritual help and advice to tell people about the new birth. I felt the responsibility and importance of these intimate personal contacts, and I thought that besides speaking to them it would be a good thing to give them something to take away and read. It was clear that it would need to be a small booklet, something in simple Italian.

It was also important that it should be something I could give them free of charge, so that people could accept it without any difficulty. My problem was where to obtain such booklets.

I then thought of the booklets that I had received in India and Ceylon that were published by the Scripture Gift Mission and others. I wondered if something like this was available here in Italian. Then I remembered there was a permanent book exhibition in one of the squares in Rome where books of all kinds were displayed and sold; among them there was a stall where a Christian brother had a display of Bibles, Christian books, and leaflets. At the first opportunity, I went to this square and found the stall, looked at his books, and asked whether he had any kind of booklets or pamphlets I wanted. He replied that he had but that he could not supply me with very many. "However, just round the corner," he said, "there is an Evangelical book room. There you could get any amount, and you could choose whatever you want."

At first I was a little hesitant to go, but I did so, thinking that after all it was only a book room and that I could go in, do my business, and quickly come out again. Entering the book room, I was received very kindly by the man in charge. There was a good range of pamphlets, and I chose those that I thought would be suitable. We chatted while the man was wrapping them up, and I mentioned that I had been a missionary in India and Ceylon.

I Open Up to More Truth

I then noticed that something strange seemed to be taking place. The man and his wife were looking first at me and then at one another. They were exchanging glances and a few words, and I thought that there must be something wrong with my black gown. Then he asked me, "By the way, what is your name?" I answered, "Well, my name is Edoardo Labanchi." "Aha," he said, "then you are the man." I thought, "What does he mean that I am the man? I do not know these people."

There was, however, an explanation...something very wonderful. "Have you ever written a letter to the director of 'The Herald of His Coming' here in Rome?" he asked. "Yes, I did," I replied. But I was thinking, "This surely is not the director of 'The Herald of His Coming.' You do not look like the editor of a paper. These are not the offices of a publishing house, and this is not the address to which I wrote." As if reading my thoughts the man went on, "You see, your letter was sent here. The director is the legal representative of the paper, and he is also like a general manager for many other things; but we actually publish the paper here. I am the editor, and I have here your letter." Then he actually showed me the letter and said, "Look, you say here that you would like to collaborate with us."

God Corners Me

There are, I think, moments in our lives when we feel as if God is cornering us. In one way, it was just a sequence of human events; but, at that moment, I felt that something unusual had happened in my life. I felt that God wanted me to have contact with these people, and from that day onward I continued to meet these friends in the book room from which various evangelistic activities are carried on, which is also the premises of the Christian Service Center. They also invited me, very kindly, to their meetings held in homes. I attended regularly and got to know other believers. This greatly enriched my own spiritual experience but, what is still more

important, they began to pray for me and not only in Italy but also in Britain. They had friends everywhere, and the news went around that a Catholic priest was meeting with them in their Center in Rome and that prayer was asked for him.

Already Founded on the Bible and Christ

By 1966, in my heart and mind, I was already an evangelical, or rather, Christ was becoming more and more the foundation of my life. I began to discard all those Catholic doctrines and practices that have little or nothing to do with the Gospel. At the same time I was helping to translate articles for the Italian "Herald of His Coming," but I had not yet gone all the way in my conversion. At that time the Vatican Council was very much to the fore, and there was more and more talk about the ecumenical movement. I thought, "Why should I leave the Catholic Church, because we are practically all the same now. We shall all get together and now I can work in the Catholic Church and help to spread the Gospel while still following the Catholic Church." That was my idea, but after a time I became very disappointed with the Vatican Council and the ecumenical movement and wondered what to do. My position, as you will see, was very difficult.

I was not what a Catholic would call an ordinary layman. I was an ordained priest. I belonged to the greatest order in the Roman Catholic Church. I had been sent to Rome for special studies, and, of course, my superiors had a special eye on me. At the same time I felt in bondage on account of all the regulations and official doctrines, and I began to realize that it was impossible for me to remain in it for very long without revealing what I really thought in the depths of my heart and without compromise with my conscience. For a time I tried to adapt myself to circumstances thinking that I could do good by remaining where I was. I used to speak about Christ and salvation, referring to Mary only as an example to follow, but my position as a priest compelled me to compromise with what I knew to be right. I knew the decision I ought to make but still tried to put it off. Then the Lord Himself made me see that I must act and do so at once. I remembered what Elijah said to the people in the Bible, "...*How long halt ye between two opinions?*" (I Kings 18:21) It was in fact at this point that God Himself took control and gave me the strength. Almost in spite of myself I went to my friends in the book room and found myself telling them, "I have decided to leave the Roman Catholic Church, and, if you think I should do so, I would like to help you with your work here in the Center at Rome. Sig. Torie was taken unawares by my decision and yet had really been expecting it for some time. Some days later I left my Order.

New Life in Christ

The point I want to emphasize very strongly as my final word is that the important thing in my story and in the story of others who have come along a similar path to mine is not that we have left the Catholic Church, left an organization, or a religion. The important thing is that we have found a new life in Jesus Christ. I have yet a long way to go and I say with Paul, "*Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect...*" (Philippians 3:12), but I know that the moment I accepted Christ as my Savior and Lord (the Christ who died for my sins) something happened within me. I became a new creature. Paul said, "*And being found in him, not having*

mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:9). I had studied the Bible in the past from a technical point of view, as my professors and companions did in the Biblical Institute; but now it acquired a new meaning - a meaning that does not come from mere human study but which I am absolutely sure comes from above.

My life has not been easy since I left the Catholic Church, and I am sure it is not going to be easy, “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Philippians 3:7-11).

I have willingly laid aside all the material benefits and honors I might have had in the Jesuit order. Any such crowns I gladly lay at Jesus' feet, together with life, my time, and such talents as I have, that He may use me just as He wills. I thank Jesus Christ my Lord that though formerly I blasphemed, persecuted, and insulted Him, that I received mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.