

Vincent O'Shaughnessy

From Dead Religion To New Life In Christ

I was born and raised on a farm in West Limerick, Ireland, and the memories of my childhood are happy ones. The youngest of seven children (three sisters and three brothers), I had lots of relatives to visit or to receive as visitors on Sundays after Mass. No one ever missed Mass on Sunday in those days in Ireland, unless they were seriously ill. Such a lapse was designated a mortal sin, meaning deadly and deserving of hell should one die with it unconfessed and unforgiven by a priest. The priests were revered, even idolized. I decided I would like to be a priest myself.

As a very small boy, I remember rolling out of bed each morning to my knees to say my morning prayers, beginning with the Morning Offering, which my mother taught me, together with the Our Father and Hail Mary. I still remember the Morning Offering going like this: "Oh Jesus, through the most pure heart of Mary," which meant to me that to get to Jesus, I had to go through Mary. I also have a vivid picture of kneeling in the kitchen each evening to pray the Rosary with the family, but most of all I remember that the trimmings to the Rosary were longer than the Rosary itself. Everyone that had any problem in the neighborhood had to be prayed for with three Hail Mary's each time, and all the deceased relatives likewise.

I Became a Priest



So I applied to St. Patrick's College, a missionary college/seminary in Thurles, County Tipperary. I was accepted and began my six years of studies for the priesthood, which consisted of two years of philosophy and four years dogmatic theology and moral theology, plus Canon Law and other subjects. We did no real study of God's Word, just an academic smattering about the Bible, but nothing of any depth or consequence. I often regret that no one ever told me to study God's Word during those six long years. However, without being born again it probably would not have interested me. I

would have lacked understanding, as the eyes of my understanding had not been opened up to the Word of God.

The long-awaited day of ordination finally came on June 15, 1953. It was a memorable occasion with a big reception for family and friends. The celebration continued through the next day, the day of the first Mass, when most of the parish people showed up for the young priest's first blessing.

Coming to America

Following three months vacation in my homeland, I set sail for New York with several other recently ordained priests, destined for various places in the United States. My first assignment was to the Cathedral in downtown Sacramento, California, one block from the state capitol. I began my priestly duties with much zeal and commitment to the work of the ministry; I was determined to do the very best job that I could do and to be the very best priest I could be. I was assigned a room on the third floor of the Cathedral rectory, which had just been vacated by a man who had a common problem among Catholic priests, namely alcoholism. It took me several trips to the garbage container in the backyard to get rid of all the empty bottles I found in drawers and closets. I was grieved because at this time I was a "teetotaler" and belonged to an Irish organization called "The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association." (We identified ourselves by wearing a little red heart-shaped pin. When Irish people saw one wearing such an emblem, they would not offer him alcoholic drinks.)

Humbled in the Confessional

At the Cathedral, I remember spending long hours in the confessional, not wanting to walk out of the confessional while people were still waiting in line. However, when the allocated time was up, walking out of the "box" did not seem to bother the other priests. The result was that I used to show up late for scheduled meals and was made fun of by the others for my service to the latecomers, especially the Mexican-Americans. God gave me special love for these humble, unassuming people, who in turn loved their Padre as they knelt and kissed my hand. This experience touched me and humbled me.

From the Cathedral, I went to fill a vacancy at another parish in the suburbs that had an Irish staff. My new parish priest (in the States we call them "Pastor") was a semi-invalid with three assistants, but I soon found out that the real acting pastor was the Monsignor's sister, who was the housekeeper. She answered all the door calls and phone calls and routed them to her brother, whether they asked for him or not. The kitchen was out of bounds and so was the dining room, unless one was invited by the housekeeper to come in for the meals. One day, she chased one of the assistant priests out of "her kitchen" with a carving knife, causing him to grab a chair to keep from being stabbed.

I remained in that environment for five years while the old pastor grew progressively worse in health. This caused me to have more and more responsibility in running the parish and, believe it or not, the housekeeper took a liking to me, and we got along well for the rest of my time there.

Heresy of Activism

I soon got caught up in what I call the heresy of activism, which caused my spiritual life to suffer the consequences. I still spent time in prayer before and after Mass and read the

breviary (the official prayers for the clergy) daily. I prepared my sermons on Saturday from the outline supplied by the diocese. Preaching I enjoyed, as I had been trained how to appeal to the emotions of the soul. I had no training and no idea how to minister in the Spirit or to the spirit of the people. I made the people feel good and on that score I was considered successful.

“Are You Saved?”

In retrospect, I look back at one time about five years into the priesthood when God tried to reach me and lead me through a little child, but I did not pay any attention to what this little child was saying to me. I was standing in front of the church. I think that I may have been waiting for a funeral to arrive. I had the vestments on for the funeral Mass. There was nobody around except a little black boy who looked like he was 3-4 years old. He walked up to me and around me, all the while sizing me up with his big eyes. Finally he spoke, saying, “Who are you? You a preacher?” Then he walked around me again, looked me right in the eye, and said, “Are you saved?” I do not remember what my response or my reaction was to him, perhaps one of pity or prejudice. That little boy had asked me the all-important question of life and I had no idea what he was talking about. Obviously, he understood what it meant to be saved and God was using him to try and get my attention, but to no avail. If I only knew then what I found out 12 years later, I would have had to honestly admit to that little boy that I was not saved. I was 45 years old before I knew what the little boy was saying to me, before I knew what it meant to be saved, to be a born again Christian.

The Role of a Priest

I had applied for a transfer and found myself out in the sticks of a farming community. It was not long after that I welcomed Sister Yvonne and Sister N. to our parish in August of 1968. From the moment we met, there was instant rapport between Sister Yvonne and me, as though we had been long-time friends. Our relationship was kept on a professional level. We both enjoyed conversation and sharing views on various subjects.

One day, in the midst of a discussion about a book, I asked Sister Yvonne, “Sister, how do you see me functioning in the ministry of the priesthood? And I want you to be brutally honest with me.” Her response to my question blew me away. She said, “Father, I see you doing all the right things, I hear you saying all the right words from the pulpit, I see you fulfilling the ‘role’ of a priest.” In other words, she viewed me in the character of a priest. Although she did not realize the full effect of her words, it was the turning point in my life. To me it spoke of role-playing on the stage of life. Shakespeare says “All the world is a stage.” I no longer wanted to be a priest performing on the stage of life; now I wanted off the stage as quickly as possible. Thus, began long months of agonizing.

Sister Yvonne Resigns

The final class for the sisters before Christmas vacation came, and I had been asking Sister Yvonne for the program schedule for the coming new year. It was the last class for 1968 and she still had not given me the schedule that I requested. She fumbled with her handbag, pulled out an envelope, and handed it to me saying, “I shouldn’t really do this, but I believe you deserve to know.” The letter in the envelope was dated May 1968 and was addressed to her Superior of the Order, the Sisters of the Holy Family. In her letter she was submitting her resignation from the sisterhood. However, inasmuch as she had made vows for a year, she offered to finish out the year if her leaving would cause a lot of inconvenience. This is how she got reassigned to Mt. Shasta, California, rather than the large convent in the San Francisco

Bay area where she had been first assigned. As I read this letter, which meant that she would not be coming back to my parish, the tears started coming down my cheeks. She said, "What's the matter with you?" I said something like, "I don't know, I guess I'm just in shock." The children began to arrive for class and I got out of there, leaving Yvonne to face her class. That was the last I saw of Yvonne for several weeks. She departed for the convent at Mt. Shasta the next day. That Christmas was a lonely, dismal one, with lots of snow causing many problems. The truth of the saying, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" became very evident, as I finally had to admit to God and to myself that I was in love with Yvonne. Obviously she did not want anything to do with that kind of a relationship because of my being a priest and her high regard for my calling. She did not want to be responsible before God for my leaving the priesthood.

Godliness Without Power

I went through a lot of agonizing, crying out to God for direction in my life. Should I leave the priesthood? Should I not? Could I change the process that Yvonne had spoken of? I decided to give it a go and called the best mission giver that I knew to come and hold a mission in an effort to bring a spiritual revival to my life and to the parish. The mission was held the first week of Lent, but here I saw the "characterization" of what a missionary is supposed to be. The message rang hollow; it was empty, devoid of a heart for God. It had a form of godliness (religion), but denied its power as Paul says in II Timothy 3:5, "*Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof, from such turn away.*"

I Leave the Priesthood

My mind was made up. I was through. I wrote to Yvonne to tell her about my final, irrevocable decision and asked if I could come to talk with her and to go out to dinner together. She agreed and we had dinner together, I will always remember the occasion at the Concord Inn next to her hometown of Pleasant Hill. I convinced her that I was leaving regardless of our relationship ever developing. Then I felt led to say to her, "Yvonne, you left the convent of your own free will, why can't I leave the priesthood?" Suddenly, she realized what she was doing to me and said, "I'm sorry, I was wrong in trying to talk you out of your decision. But if you leave, you need to do so apart from me. You have to know it is God's will." I wrote to my Bishop, told him of my decision, and requested that he apply for a dispensation to Rome so that we could be married in the Catholic Church. Eventually that process was transferred to the Archdiocese of San Francisco. I told him I had secured a supply priest to cover the parish for two months after I left. I set out for the San Francisco Bay area with my few belongings in a little trailer behind the parish car. I stopped to see the Bishop of Sacramento Diocese and to assure him that I would arrange to get the parish car back to the diocese. He asked me for the pink slip, wrote on it and handed it back to me saying, "Vince, enjoy it. Now it's your car; you'll need wheels." I will always remember that gracious gesture.

Yvonne and I Marry

I arrived in Oakland, where Yvonne had an apartment on Lake Merritt. I moved in and she moved back to her mother's house in Pleasant Hill. This was a peaceful place for me, a kind of penthouse where I began a healing process from the awful trauma that followed my final decision. I spent my days praying for a job and filling out applications. One day a friend at the Alameda Probation Department, a former Dominican priest, gave me an application that came

across his desk from Colusa County. I filled it out, mailed it, went for an interview, and got the job.

Yvonne and I were married and moved to the town of Colusa. The dispensation finally came and the Catholic Church blessed our marriage. Yvonne got a job as Director of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine for the parish. Please remember that we were committed Catholics and that is how we were determined to remain. However, each time we came home from being at Mass, we felt so dry, so thirsty, and hungry for the reality of God, for some spiritual food to chew on and digest, but it seemed nowhere to be found. God had given us jobs, a beautiful home, and now a precious daughter, Kelly Ann. We were so happy and filled with gratitude to God for all His goodness to us. We were seeking for a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Him.

We Are Born Again

One day we obtained a book about a priest who was born again by the Holy Spirit. This was all very new to me. The book was a testimony of his life and his meeting with God. Not long after reading this little book, Yvonne and I were invited to a meeting where a nun shared her testimony of God's power to save, and how she got born again. Well, I felt the Lord had touched my heart and was speaking to me. When the altar call or invitation was given to come and receive the Lord as Savior, guess who were the first ones up there? Right! Vince and Yvonne. We prayed that He would be Lord of every area of our lives, and immediately we began to feel the difference. It was at this point I believe I was born again; I had assurance of salvation and peace that my sins were forgiven. Our prayer life had much more meaning and reality. The Bible, the Word of God, began to come alive and be more meaningful as we began to read and study it.

Saved By Grace, Not By Works

We started attending a Bible study and dipping into the Word of God deeper and deeper. As we did, we found that many of the things we had been taught as Catholics did not line up with God's Word. In the final analysis, the Roman Catholic Church teaches a Gospel of works (i.e. salvation through man's own efforts—efforts to lead a good life and to do penance for sins, as if Jesus Christ did not pay for it all with His shed blood on Calvary's Cross). Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it very clear that salvation is a free gift of God, received by faith; *“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.”*



Jesus Alone is Savior

We have seen the need for Catholics to separate themselves from the errors of Catholicism, even as we have. The Lord Jesus has really blessed our lives as we seek to serve Him. We have never been so happy. The Lord has blessed us with two beautiful daughters and has opened many doors to minister God's Word and to pray for people.

Our prayer for all who read this testimony is that they may know Him and the power of His resurrection. Why not seek the Lord Jesus with all your heart? Accept that He and He alone is Savior. He died that you might live — in His own Word (I Peter 3:18) “...*the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God...*” Now an old Irish blessing for you: “May the road rise with you, may the wind be always at your back, and may you be in heaven a long time before the devil knows you're dead.” Should you desire to contact us we would be delighted to hear from you. Bless you!