

# From Rome to Christ

## The Conversion of a Catholic Priest

By Mark Pena

A little Spanish town north of Burgos, called Villamediana de Lomas, is where I was born and raised. Like everyone else I knew, I was Roman Catholic. I wanted to be a missionary priest.

After a year and a day in the novitiate we had to swear and promise to God before the "Holy Community" to observe for one year the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. With this ceremony we began to be members of the Congregation of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary the Immaculate. After this, we moved to Madrid to the seminary major that the Oblates have in Pozuelo de Alarcon, where we had to study 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 toward the top. These steps are called "orders." There are minor orders and major orders. It began with the tonsure during the first year of theology. Then followed the other orders.

On March 17, 1956, in the Church of the seminary of Madrid, at the hands of the Bishop of Madrid-Alcala, Dr. Eyo Garay, patriarch of the East Indies, together with four classmates, I received my ordination to the priesthood.

My first mass took place in the church of the Religiosas de San Jose de Cluny, in Pozuelo de Alarcon, the following day. With great internal emotion and sublime sentiment for this first mass, I remember my nervousness that I should not break any of the rites and ceremonies. But now I must almost shout out loud that this "greatest act of worship" in the Roman Catholic church is only a species of daily comedy — a serious comedy, yes, but comedy nevertheless. In the words of John Knox, a former Roman Catholic priest, who became, after his conversion to Christ, the great leader of the Presbyterian Church — "THE MASS IS BLASPHEMY!"

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 the 8th and 9th of July, 1956 — fireworks; music; floral displays; games; joy! I was the first priest from that town and because of that it was a great pride for all the families.

I served as professor of Spanish Literature and music for the fifth year, and Latin and French for the fourth, but I liked the preparation of the Sunday sermon for the 11 o'clock mass in our church.

As the Provincial Patriarch knew of my missionary desires, he destined me together with another Oblate Father as co-pastor of a parish, poor and miserable, in the city of Badajoz. The 14th of November, 1958, I arrived at the parish of Our Lady of the Assumption at Badajoz, formed by a populace borough of a big suburb with great spiritual and material misery. It was made up of 9000 souls. For three years, I worked

in this parish in the midst of the joy, contentment 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 Roman Catholic practices. I felt that I was lost forever. The mass and other practices became meaningless. I determined that I must leave the priesthood, go into the world, and obtain secular employment and "enjoy life."

Increasingly, I felt a dissatisfaction with the mass, and the spiritual emptiness of the Roman Catholic church. 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 wisdom and love before unknown to me, he counseled me and encouraged me to spend much time reading the New Testament. We corresponded regularly.

By February of 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." I wrote to Arajo asking him to look for a place where I could hide, and a letter to another pastor in Bilbao, Juan Eizaguirre, asking him similarly, because at the first opportunity I was determined to leave the priesthood.

My superior had arranged for me to preach in the celebration of the appearances of the virgin in Fatima. I chose it as my time to leave the priesthood and my religious state. I arrived in Madrid, May 8, 1962. Then I immediately took the plane 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, who is a converted priest and director of a work in Holland to help priests who want to leave the Roman system. It is called, "In the Straight Street," from the reference in the Acts of the Apostles. Dr. Hegger counseled me and answered many of my doctrinal questions from the Word of God..

Shortly thereafter, 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 in my compartment 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 Savior; 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 accepted Him, trusted 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 are forgiven; my soul is saved; heaven is my home; Christ is mine, and I am His forever!

I returned to Holland, where I contacted the Conversion Center in Pennsylvania about going to America to study the Word of God. The Lord enabled me, after some difficulty, to arrive via Canada in September of 1963. I commenced studies at Faith Theological Seminary and then took some special courses at Temple University, receiving a Master's Degree in Spanish Literature.

To paraphrase Romans 10:14: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Roman Catholics is that they might be saved For I bear them record that they have a zeal for 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."