

The Conversion Of A Catholic Priest

By Bartholomew F. Brewer, PH.D.

More Catholic Than Rome

Millions—perhaps the majority—of Roman Catholics are Catholic by name, by culture, or by inertia. Our family, however, was Roman Catholic by conviction. We understood and practiced the teachings of our religion. We believed it to be the “one true church” founded by Jesus Christ. Because of this, we accepted without question everything our priests taught. In those days before Vatican II, the common belief was that “outside the Roman Catholic Church there is no salvation.” This brought us a feeling of security, of being right. We were somehow safe in the arms of “holy mother church.”

From the time my father died (I was almost ten), my mother attended daily mass, not missing even one day for over twenty-four years. Our family faithfully recited the rosary every evening. We were encouraged to make regular visits to the “blessed sacrament.” In addition to the teaching at home, all of our schooling was Roman Catholic. Monsignor Hubert Cartwright and the other priests at our home parish, the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, used to say that our family was more Catholic than Rome.

It is no wonder that as I approached high school age, I felt called to prepare for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Rather than the secular priesthood, which serves parishes, I chose to apply to the Discalced Carmelites, one of the more strict and ancient monastic orders.

From the first day at Holy Hill, Wisconsin, I loved the religious life, and this love was the motivation I needed to get through all the Latin and other studies, which I found very difficult. The dedication and self-sacrifice of the priests who taught our classes was a continual reminder of the value of making any sacrifice to reach the goal of ordination.

The training I received in four years of the high school seminary, two years in the novitiate, three years of philosophy, and four years of theology (the last after ordination) was thorough. I was sincere in practicing the various mortifications and other disciplines and never once doubted my calling nor anything I was taught. Taking the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience represented my lifetime commitment to God. For me, the voice of the church was the voice of God.

My ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood was at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in Washington, D. C., the seventh largest church in the world today. When “His Excellency, the Most Reverend Bishop” John M. McNamara imposed his hands on my head and repeated the words from Psalm 110:4, “Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” —I was awed with the belief that I was now a mediator between God and the people. The anointing and binding of my hands with special cloths signified that they were now consecrated to change bread and wine into the real

(literal) flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, to perpetuate the sacrifice of Calvary through the mass, and to dispense saving grace through the other Roman Catholic sacraments of baptism, confession,—marriage, and the last rites. The other two sacraments of confirmation and holy orders require a bishop. At ordination a Roman Catholic priest is said to receive an “indelible” mark: to experience an unending interchange of his personality with that of Christ, that he may perform high priestly duties as “another Christ” (alter Christus) or in the place of Christ. People actually knelt and kissed our newly consecrated hands, so sincere was this belief.

After completing the last year of theology, which was principally a final preparation for preaching and hearing confession (which involves giving absolution or forgiveness of sin), I was granted my long-expressed desire to be a missionary priest in the Philippines.

The Beginnings Of Doubt

The change from a regimented, monastic life to the simplicity and freedom of missionary life provided a challenge for which I had not been prepared. I loved traveling to some of the eighty or more primitive barrios assigned to our parish and I also cherished teaching my religion class at the Carmelite high school in our small town. Until then my life had been almost exclusively among men. I enjoyed watching the girls giggle as they flirted with teasing boys. After a while, though, my attention was drawn to one of the more diligent students, who thoroughly captivated my interest. This young lady was mature beyond her years because of the responsibilities that had fallen to her after her mother had died. She was lovely and shyly responded as we stole moments talking alone after class. This was a new adventure, and I soon interpreted our newly discovered affection as love.

It is not surprising that soon the bishop learned of this, though he was many miles away, and he quickly returned me to the States before any serious relationship could develop. The embarrassment of this discipline was difficult for both of us, but life always moves on.

After the adventure and freedom in the Philippines, I had no motivation to return to monastic living, so the Father Provincial granted permission for me to work at a Discalced Carmelite parish in Arizona. I enjoyed my responsibilities in that parish, but my next assignment was not so fulfilling. Soon I applied for and was granted a dispensation from Rome to leave the Carmelite order to serve as a secular (diocesan) priest. While serving a large parish in San Diego, California, I received permission to enter the United States Navy as a Roman Catholic Chaplain. There new goals, rank, and travel served as an escape from what had gradually become a sterile parochial life of ritualism and sacramentalism.

My religious life broadened quickly as I mixed with non-Catholic chaplains. For the first time, I was living outside my Roman Catholic culture. Amid the ecumenical atmosphere I gradually became neutralized. Then as Vatican II opened the windows of rigid tradition to let in fresh air, I took in a deep and delightfully refreshing breath. Change was in. Some wanted it to be radical, others wanted only a little modernization.

For many, the Roman Catholic faith was failing to give answers to common modern-day problems. Many felt alienated and misunderstood. This was especially true of priests. With all the change, the priesthood

was losing its glamour. No longer was the priest's education considered far superior to that of the parishioner. No longer was the priest cultured above the majority of his people. To experience an identity crisis was more common among priests than any were willing to acknowledge, even among the chaplains.

At first I was scandalized to realize that some of the Catholic chaplains were actually dating. I listened with interest as some openly discussed the impractical nature of mandatory celibacy. Soon I also gained the courage to question the authorities of our church who persisted in retaining such traditions—especially when the law of celibacy was the source of so many moral problems among priests. For the first time in my life, I doubted the authority of my religion, not because of intellectual pride, but in conscience, in true sincerity.

As students for the priesthood, we were well informed regarding the ancient tradition that binds the Roman Catholic priests to celibacy. We well knew that the few granted permission from the Vatican to marry may never again function as priests. But times were changing. Questions never before voiced were being raised at the Vatican Council in Rome. Many thought that priests with wives could, as the Protestants did, bring greater sensitivity and understanding to marital and family issues. Discussions about such things were commonplace whenever priests got together—even as they visited the apartment that Mother and I shared together off base.

The Authority Of Scripture

Mother was not shy in joining the discussions. She was a well-informed and intelligent person, and I greatly valued her opinions. I recall how appalled she was that evolution was being taught in Catholic schools and that Rome had established dialogue with the communists. She had long been disturbed over some of the conflicts she had observed between principles taught in Scripture and the lack of principles among many of our religious leaders. Many years before, Monsignor Cartwright had comforted Mother with the reminder that though there were many problems in our church, Jesus promised that “the gates of hell would not prevail against it.” Mother always expressed a tremendous respect for the Bible. Though she read it faithfully through the years, she was now becoming an avid student of Scripture. As I observed a general liberal trend among my colleagues, Mother was leaning in another direction. It was a mystery to me. While others discussed desires to see relaxation and loosing of traditional rules and rituals, Mother expressed her desire to see a more Biblical emphasis in the church—more attention to the spiritual aspects of life, and a greater emphasis on Jesus, even a personal relationship with Him.

At first I didn't understand, but gradually I observed a wonderful change in Mother. Her influence helped me realize the importance of the Bible in determining what we believe. We often discussed subjects such as the primacy of Peter, papal infallibility, the priesthood, infant baptism, confession, the mass, purgatory, the immaculate conception of Mary, and the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven. In time I realized that not only are these beliefs not in the Bible, they are actually contrary to the clear teaching of the Scripture. Finally the barrier against having personal convictions was broken. There was no doubt in my mind about the Biblical view on these subjects, but what effect would all this have on my life as a priest?

Making The Break

I truly believed that God had called me to serve Him. An ethical dilemma was staring me in the face. What was I to do? Yes, there were priests who did not believe all the dogmas of Rome. Yes there were priests who secretly had wives and families. Yes, I could remain a Catholic Chaplain and continue serving without voicing my disagreements. I could continue receiving the pay and the privileges of military rank. I could continue receiving the allotment and other benefits for my mother. There were many reasons to stay, both professional and material, but to do so would have been hypocritical and unethical. From my youth I always tried to do right, and that is what I choose to do now.

Though my bishop had recently granted approval for me to pursue twenty years in the military, I resigned after only four. Mother and I simply and quietly moved near my brother, Paul, and his wife in the San Francisco Bay area. Shortly before we moved, Mother cut her ties with Roman Catholicism by being baptized in a Seventh-day Adventist church. I knew she had been studying the Bible with one of their workers, but she did not tell me about the baptism until I had already decided to leave the priesthood.

The decision to leave was anything but easy. Rome's claim that there are no objective or subjective reasons for leaving "the one true church" was something to be carefully considered. Traditional Catholics would still consider me to be a "Judas priest," "damned, excommunicated, and to be avoided." Yes, there were many difficulties involved in leaving the security of the Roman Catholic fold, but I have found that Jesus never fails.

After shaking the Roman Catholic dust off my shoes, I faced a momentous issue: Where is ultimate authority? Through the process of elimination, I gradually concluded that the Bible is the only authority that cannot be shaken. Many systems, including Roman Catholicism, have attempted without success to undermine its sufficiency, its efficiency, its perfection, even that it was not written merely by the will of men but holy men of God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:21). Oh, happy day when all who name the name of Jesus Christ understand that the Bible is the only source of authority that doesn't change! It is the final authority because of its complete identification with its unchanging Author. God has communicated clearly. It is tragic that Romanism and most of traditional Protestantism, as well as many Pentecostals and other groups, reject Biblical sufficiency. They choose rather to trust questionable traditions, visions, apparitions, or prophecies. Not only are these unsubstantiated as being "of God," but many contradict clear Biblical teaching. No one can accept these extra-Biblical revelations without degrading the authority of Scripture. II Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Perhaps the reason that many regard the Bible as insufficient is that they have not thoroughly studied it. My transcripts from thirteen years of formal study in the Discalced Carmelite Order show that I had only twelve semester hours of Bible—all from text books. This alone is evidence that Scripture is not the basis of Roman Catholic teaching.

After leaving Roman Catholicism I wanted to study the Bible. I was a “church-oriented” person, not being opposed to joining another denomination. After investigating some of the Protestant churches, I sadly concluded that in their ecumenical folly they were Romeward bound at the expense of Biblical truth. Viewing the smorgasbord of churches can be discouraging and even dangerous for the former Catholic in his search for truth.

Meeting Mother’s Adventist friends, however, was a delight. They were enthusiastic about their faith, and their love of the Scriptures echoed my desire to study the Bible. This resulted in a somewhat premature decision to join the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. The pastor who baptized me arranged for the Southern California Conference to send me to seminary at Andrews University for a year.

Salvation At Last!

While making plans for a year of study, I met Ruth. I had been hoping and praying to find a wife for about a year. From the first time Ruth visited our church, I knew she would be my life’s companion. We were married shortly before leaving for the seminary. She was a convert to Adventism, and like everyone else, had assumed that since I wanted to enter the seminary, I was born again.

Realizing that I never mentioned anything about being “born again,” one day my wife asked me, “Bart, when did you become a Christian?” My unbelievable reply was, “I was born a Christian!” In the conversations that transpired, she tried to help me understand that man, being born in sin, at some point must recognize the need of a Saviour and be born again spiritually by trusting only in Jesus Christ to save him from the consequences of sin. When I responded that I had always believed in God, she observed that according to James 2:19, “the devils also believe.”

In time, because of these conversations and because of classes in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, I finally understood that I had been relying on my own righteousness and religious efforts and not upon the completed and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Roman Catholic religion had never taught me that our own righteousness is fleshly and not acceptable to God, nor did it teach that we need only to trust in His righteousness. He already did everything that needs to be done on our behalf. Then one day during chapel, the Holy Spirit convicted me of my need to repent and receive the “gift” of God.

During all those years of monastic life I had relied on the sacraments of Rome to give me grace, to save me, but now by God’s grace I was born spiritually: I was saved. Being ignorant of God’s righteousness, like the Jew of Paul’s day, I had gone about establishing my own righteousness, not submitting to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:2-3).

I do not know who you are or what your relationship with God may be, but I ask you the most important question of life: Are you a Biblical Christian? Are you trusting only in the completed sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of all your sin? If not, why not settle it right now? As in a simple wedding ceremony, promise Him your love, your devotion, your trust. Receiving Jesus as Saviour is not something you do as a religious ritual, it is a one-time commitment of your life to Him for the forgiveness of all your sin. The very moment you do that, Jesus Christ takes up a vital position in your being, and you receive eternal

life. After that, you will change. The Bible says, “He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Near the end of my fourth year as an Adventist, I was influenced by several church members to attend some charismatic meetings. They said that the Holy Spirit was breaking down the denominational barriers in the last days before the return of Christ. Wanting all that God has for me, I went into a prayer room to receive the “gift of tongues.” I was somewhat leery of it all, especially since I didn’t experience the feelings that so many described. I did privately practice tongues, but I could not get myself to recruit others into the movement. It was far more important to me to move people to study the Bible, to bring people to trust Christ, and to live by Scriptural principles. My major interest in the charismatic movement was the concern for others it seemed to inspire. This, along with the spontaneity and zeal, impressed me as exemplifying a Biblical lifestyle which seemed to be missing in many churches.

Leaving Again

Not long after I was ordained as a Seventh-day Adventist minister, the Southern California Conference had a special promotion for the writings of Ellen G. White, one of the founders of Adventism and one whom the Adventists believe to be a prophetess. Ruth and I found the series of pastors’ seminars very helpful and informative until the last one. The lecturer was from the General Conference in Washington, D. C., and some of his statements were highly disturbing. The one that became a turning point in my life was that the writings of Ellen G. White are “equally inspired as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.” Disturbed, I counseled with a highly respected leader but could in no way reconcile this in my conscience. I had already begun to feel spiritually shackled in Adventism because of its legalism and exclusivism, but this, in my opinion, was adding to Scripture. When I chose not to begin the series called the “Testimony Countdown” in our church, several members protested. Within a few days I realized, in conscience, that I could no longer continue as an Adventist minister. Had it not been for the encouragement and help of several non-Adventist ministerial friends the transition would have been much more difficult.

During the next four years, I pastored two churches and grew rapidly in the knowledge of the Bible and realized the difficulty of dealing with people not under an authoritarian system. I also had many opportunities to give my testimony. I was convinced that God had “counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry,” but not as a pastor.

A Mission To Catholics

I prayerfully and deliberately decided to return to San Diego, where I once served as a parish priest. Aware that Vatican II had brought many Roman Catholics confusion and disillusionment, I felt led to begin a ministry to help them in the transition from the Catholic denomination. Before long, the Lord opened doors to speak. People wanted to know the name of the ministry. Our answer was that it was like a mission to Catholics.

As Ruth and I grew spiritually, we were convinced of the ecumenical nature of the charismatic movement and we left it. About that same time, we met some Biblical Fundamentalists who believed

and faithfully practiced the principles of the Bible. Though we have many friends in independent Bible churches, we joined a Fundamental Baptist church, in which I was also ordained.

Mission To Catholics International was incorporated and granted non-profit status. Since that time millions of tracts, books and tapes have been distributed exposing the contradictions between Roman Catholicism and the Bible and presenting Biblical salvation. A monthly newsletter is sent to contributors. The Lord has allowed us a bit of radio and television exposure and we are pleased that my autobiography, *Pilgrimage From Rome*, has been published and is receiving an excellent acceptance in English, Spanish, and Polish. We have held meetings and taken literature into many foreign countries, and mail-orders are sent out from our home office in San Diego. Meetings keep us busy traveling throughout both the U.S.A. and other countries. A School of Roman Catholic Evangelism provides intense training of pastors, missionaries and key workers who desire to establish specialized ministries for effectively reaching the Roman Catholic community through their churches. Ex-Catholics are also encouraged to attend (especially ex-priests and ex-nuns, so that they may be prepared to minister within Biblical Fundamentalism).

At Mission To Catholics we are convinced that it is not love to withhold the truth from those in darkness. Roman Catholics need to be challenged to think about what they believe and to study the Bible, comparing their religion with the truth of Scripture. Only then can they experience the freedom and light of God's truth. "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free: (John 8:32).