

Conversion of a Catholic Priest

By Vincent O'Shaughnessy

From Dead Religion to New Life In Christ!

As a very small boy I remember rolling out of bed to my knees each morning to say my prayers. We began 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. . .etc." To me this meant that to get to Jesus I had to go through Mary. I had no other way to Jesus. I also have a vivid picture of kneeling in the kitchen each evening to pray the rosary with the family. 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, and all the deceased relatives, likewise.

No one ever missed Mass on Sunday when I was growing up in Ireland, unless they were seriously ill. That would be a mortal sin (meaning deadly and deserving of hell should one die with it unconfessed and forgiven by a priest). The priests were revered, even idolized. I decided I would like to be one myself.

I applied to St. Patrick's College, a missionary college seminary, in Thurles, County Tipperary. I was accepted and began six years of studies for the priesthood, which consisted of two years of philosophy and four years of 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 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 came on June 15, 1953. The celebration continued through the next day, the day of my first mass, when most of the parish people showed up to receive the "first blessing" of a newly ordained priest.

Following a three month vacation in my home land, I set sail for New York with several other recently ordained priests, destined for various places in the United States. I was determined to do the very best job that I could, and to be the very best priest I could be.

I was assigned a room at the cathedral rectory in Sacramento California. It had just been vacated by a man who had a common problem among Catholic priests: alcoholism. It took several trips to the trash to get rid of all the empty bottles that had been left in drawers and closets. At that parish, I developed a special love for the Mexican Americans. Next, I filled a vacancy in the suburbs. My new parish priest, (the pastor), was a semi-invalid with three assistants, but I quickly learned that the real acting pastor was the Monsignor's sister, the housekeeper. I remained there for five years. The old pastor grew worse in health. This caused me to have more and more responsibility in running the parish. Soon I was caught

up in what I call the heresy of activism. However, 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 made the people feel good, and on that score I was considered successful.

About five years into the priesthood, God tried to reach me through a little child, but I did not pay any attention. I was waiting in front of the church, wearing the vestments for a funeral Mass. A little boy walked up to me and around me, all the while sizing me up with his big eyes. "Who are you? You a preacher?" He walked around me again and looked me right in the eye asking, "Are you saved?" That little boy had asked me the all-important question of life, and I had no idea what he was talking about. I was 45 years old before I knew what it meant to be saved.

I applied for a transfer and found myself in a farming community. Soon I welcomed two sisters to help in our parish. One day, in the midst of a discussion, 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 shocked me. "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." Although she did not realize the full effect of her words, that was a turning point in my life! One thing that I did not want was to be a role playing priest performing on the stage of life. Thus began long months of agonizing.

The final class before Christmas vacation came. I had been asking Sister Yvonne for the program schedule for the new year. She fumbled with her handbag and pulled out an envelope. Handing it to me, she said, "I shouldn't really do this, but I believe you deserve to know." She was resigning from the sisterhood! This meant that she would not be coming back to my parish. Tears started coming down my cheeks. She said, "What's the matter with you?" I fumbled a reply: "I don't know, I guess I'm just in shock." Just then the children began arriving and I got out of there. I didn't see her again before she left the next day. Soon I understood the meaning of the saying, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." I had to admit to God and to myself that I was in love with Yvonne!

I cried out to Him for direction. Should I leave the priesthood? Should I not? Could I change the characterization process that Yvonne spoke of? I decided to give it a go. I called the best mission giver that I knew to hold a mission in an effort to bring spiritual revival to my own life and to the parish -- but the message rang hollow. It was like an empty form of religion. (See 2 Timothy 3:5.)

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 take her to dinner and talk with her. She was firm, "If you leave, you need to do so apart from me. You have to know it is God's will." I convinced her that I was leaving regardless of any possible relationship with her.

After securing a supply priest to cover the parish for two months, 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 the Sacramento Diocese and to assure him that I would make arrangements 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.

When I arrived in Oakland, Yvonne moved to her mother's and I moved into her apartment on Lake Merritt. This was a peaceful place where I began a healing process from the awful trauma that followed my decision to leave.

One day a friend at the Alameda Probation Department, another former priest, gave me an application that came across his desk from Celusa County. I got the job. After receiving a dispensation from Rome, Yvonne and I were married with the blessings of our church, and we moved to Celusa. Yvonne got a job as director of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine for the parish. We were committed Catholics, and that is how we were determined to remain. However, each time we came home from mass we felt so dry, so thirsty, and hungry for the reality of God. We had good jobs, a beautiful home, and the first of two precious daughters. We were so happy and filled with gratitude for all God's goodness to us.

As we sought a more meaningful relationship with Him, we were invited to hear a lady share her testimony of God's power to save, and how she had been born again. The Lord touched my heart. When the invitation was given to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour, guess who were the first ones forward? Right! Vince and Yvonne. We were both born again! How wonderful to have the assurance of salvation and peace that our sins were forgiven. There was an immediate difference in our lives. As we read and studied the Bible our spiritual understanding was opened. The dryness was gone. Our hunger and thirst for the reality of God was being satisfied. Our prayer life had much more meaning and reality. Our souls were being satisfied and we experienced true, Biblical happiness. The Lord Jesus really blessed our lives as we sought to serve Him.

We started attending a Bible study and began to find 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 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."

The Lord has opened many doors to minister His Word. We have seen the need for Catholics to separate themselves from the errors of Catholicism, even as we did. Our prayer is that you may also know Him and the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10). The Lord said, "Ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13). Believe His Word. Trust Him alone as your Saviour. 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." "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." (II Corinthians 5:17).

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."**