

Light and Life in Christ

The Testimony of Former Roman Catholic Priest Herman J. Hegger



During my childhood I often heard it said that one of the best ways to escape from eternal Hell was to enter a monastery. I decided to follow that advice.

My Efforts in the Monastery

Monastic life is meant to cultivate strong will-power and make one capable of controlling all passions and lusts. In my monastery, various forms of bodily torture were employed to achieve such will-power. We scourged ourselves several times a week, lashing our naked bodies with knotted cords. Despite the great pain, we were told that if we could endure such whipping calmly, we would receive strength to resist every kind of sensual and sexual urge. We were also told that by scourging ourselves we could atone for sins we had already committed and so shorten future punishment in Purgatory. Around our waists, thighs and arms we wore penitence chains on which were spikes which dug into our flesh. There were also many other kinds of bodily chastisements.

Along with self-inflicted punishments we had other kinds of humbling exercises designed to extinguish our pride and vanity. In one of these routines a priest had to lie on the floor across a doorway so that other priests would tread on him as they went by. Whenever I did this I felt like a worm upon which people trod, but I thought that God must be very pleased with me for such a voluntary self-humiliation.

The worst humiliation included licking an area of the floor clean with our tongues. Doing this made me feel like an animal, like a pig wallowing in the mire, or like a dog sniffing around. Sometimes I even felt like an insect creeping in the dust.

But however I punished and humiliated myself, I could not detect any change or improvement in my character or behaviour. I only discovered that my weak and sinful nature was very much alive. For example, when I licked the floor clean with my tongue, it was just then that the strongest feelings of vanity and pride rose up in me. "What a wonderful chap you are!" I would think. "What will-power you must have! You inflict such painful humiliations upon yourself! How wonderful!" I realised that by these absurd practices I was only inflating myself with pride. The monastery is a sublime effort that is doomed to fail. Why? Because the priest or monk takes his sinful nature along with him into the cell.

My Attempt to Reach God by Mysticism

During the novitiate years, in addition to our attempt to gain the victory over the body with its passions by means of asceticism, we also applied ourselves to the practice of prayer. This was called the cultivation of the spiritual or inner life. Its purpose was to bring about an increasing intensity in our uninterrupted contact with God, Jesus Christ and Mary. Our highest goal was the attainment of true mysticism.

During my novitiate I never experienced this desired mysticism. Consequently I thought the practice of prayer very difficult. We were shown a few methods to pass the time of meditation well. In the

evenings pious reflections on our Lord's passion by various authors were read aloud to us. We were to ask questions such as the following: Who is suffering? What does he suffer? Why? For whom? The answers to these questions were intended to induce acts of repentance for our sins and acts of faith, hope and love, as we were to make up our minds to lead better lives.

Usually I was prompt with the answers to these questions, and then my imagination wandered away out of the chapel. Also I thought the reflections of Roman Catholic authors upon Christ's suffering quite poor. They were thoughts that had been worked out by men who had coloured and moulded them in conformity to their own emotional life. They never could hold my attention for long.

One day in 1940 the idea occurred to me: Why not take the Bible? In it you will not find the thoughts of men, but of God himself. Our monastic rules, however, required us to listen to what was being read to us during meditations. We were not to read the Bible on those occasions unless granted permission. That permission was given me.

My Provisional Use of the Bible

From that time everything became quite different. Meditation no longer caused me mental fatigue as before. I began to enjoy it; the very thought that I now had to do with the infallible Word of God made me happy. I knew I entered holy ground. My imagination would lovingly rejoice in the biblical text. I would turn it about again and again, and tremble before the blazing fire of God's presence in its sentences. And I would be profoundly moved by the love of the Father who revealed himself to me in his words. I preferred above all else to meditate on the story of the passion. Every sentence revealed something of the greatness of the suffering soul of Jesus. He rose before me in his glory, his mercy, his purity and his peace.

Jesus was no longer a coldly intellectual idea, no longer the effeminate and characterless doll at which for so long I had been obliged to look in countless pictures. There was now a bond between him and me, though I did not yet know Jesus through the pure gospel as my personal, perfect and only Saviour.

Obstacles to My Goal of Union with God

There were several hindrances to the personal union I sought. One was the fear that God would finally reject me on account of my sins. Another was the Roman Catholic worship of Mary. I never succeeded in developing great affection for Mary and this troubled me. I had been taught that a child of Mary will never be lost. When in my meditation I surrendered wholly to the contemplation of Jesus Christ, it would suddenly occur to me that I rarely prayed to Mary. Then turning nervously to the mediatrix of all grace, I implored her to save me from eternal damnation. And when I thought that I had paid enough attention to her, I returned at once to Christ, as he had revealed himself in the holy Word of God.

But my greatest stumbling block was the doctrine declaring that the pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church are the highest and the ultimate source of the knowledge of God's revelation. Whichever way one views it, this doctrine reduces the Bible to a second-rate book in Roman Catholic eyes. No papal admonitions to believers to read their Bibles often can alter that fact. A Roman Catholic, therefore, never can devote himself fully to meditating upon the Bible. The deeper meanings of the divine Word, which he is convinced he must infer from it, are always surrounded by a multitude of questions. If the Church has made some pronouncements on the matter, the Roman Catholic must relinquish his own conviction as to what the Scriptures say and conform to the view of the Church. The Bible never can have the central and prominent position which it has with biblical Christians. Who will continue to read a second-rate book which cannot give absolute certainty, and do so day after day and year after year? Besides, it is a book that brings along with it the risk of doubting the doctrines of one's own Church, which doubt amounts to a capital sin and might spell eternal damnation.

My Promotion and Doubts

After seven years as a priest I was promoted to be professor of philosophy in a Roman Catholic seminary in Brazil. However, serious doubts had already begun to assail me. We were forbidden to have any real doubts about the doctrine of the Church. This absolute prohibition against doubting or questioning the doctrine of the Roman Church is the source of her great strength. Protestants wonder how it is possible for Roman Catholic scholars to study the Scriptures without discovering the pure gospel. The answer lies in the simple fact that the mind of the Roman Catholic is not free; it is ever under the threat of fire unquenchable should it deviate from Rome. The very instant he even considers as a genuine possibility the idea that the Reformation view of the Bible might be correct, the abyss of rejection opens at his feet. We were allowed to have a methodological doubt. Such a doubt was often indulged for didactic purposes. Thomas Aquinas makes a systematic use of it in his *Summa Theologica*. It consists of positing the correctness of the opposite view for the time being, to understand it better and afterwards to refute it more effectively. The same method also is applied to discussions with non-Roman Catholics. A Roman Catholic may pretend to believe that his opponent could be right, but that such an admission might be genuine is really impossible.

As a priest, the first power given to me was the daily celebration of the Mass, and this occasioned my first doubt. The doctrine of the magical presence of Christ after transubstantiation frightened me. I felt as if I were standing before a fire which seared me, not a glow that warmed me. There was no question of love. Afterwards there often remained a sense of frightening emptiness.

My second important function as a priest was to administer confession, and this occasioned my second doubt. Confession holds a very important place in the structure of Rome's power. To Rome it is a strategic basis of the highest importance. It emphasises the subjection of the layman to the clergy. In the confessional, the priest is sitting in his judgment seat. The penitent is confessing his weaknesses. He divulges secrets that he would not reveal to anyone else. And it depends upon the priest whether or not the penitent will be absolved from his sins. The priest decides for him between heaven and hell. I would only ask: Is this the "glorious liberty of the children of God"? Is this the blissful salvation of which the Bible speaks in rapturous praise? Is there anything here of the picture of the Good Shepherd who goes to seek the lost sheep in the wilderness and carries it on his shoulders back to the fold? Are not the sheep rather kicked along the path of auricular confession to the so-called sheepfold with the threat of eternal death?

I Am Pressed by Truth

At various times I read the Bible and asked myself, "Is my Church really in accord with this book?" In the Bible it is clearly stated that the only mediator between God and man is Jesus Christ, who took away the punishment of sin on Calvary's Cross. My Church, however, taught that there were several mediators, especially Mary, the "mediatrix of all grace". I also began to doubt that God had given to the Pope infallible authority and power to interpret the Bible, and that it was the duty of every Christian to accept the Pope's view. Could it be right that the Pope had absolute authority to overrule and restate the plain words of the Bible?

Since it is especially through fear that one's mind is paralysed and one's thoughts are blurred, how can the intellect work properly if, behind it, there is the threat of deadly sin and hell and if the flames of eternal reprobation force one to a particular conclusion? Critically speaking, the conclusions of an understanding that is forced to operate in such a way are manifestly unreliable. Do what I would, I could not attain to any degree of certainty about Roman Catholic doctrine. At best, I could grant the probability of its truth, but nothing more. I should be lying to myself were I to assert anything beyond that. My subconscious could now no longer succeed in projecting an irrational conviction upon my intellectual uncertainty. I had observed too long the workings of the subconscious. I knew that my conscience would always reproach me with being guilty of self-deceit. And, holding such a view, I could no longer be called a Roman Catholic. The doctrine of my own Church drove me out.

It was a terrible moment when, in all sincerity, I felt obliged to refuse to submit my mind to the

doctrinal pronouncements of Rome. Until then the Roman Catholic Church had been my support, the rock on which I had built my convictions. Now I saw that I had built my house on sand. The waves of honest self-analysis had washed away the sand from under its foundations, the house collapsed, and I was carried along by the flood of despair. Nowhere could I find a support on which to lean. Alone I had to push my way through the undergrowth of many views of life.

With such doubts in my heart I could obviously not remain a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. For me, the living death of the monastery came to an end. I left the life of semblances and shadows for a world of fascinating reality in which I was free to breathe at last. I surrendered my office as professor and left the Roman Catholic Church. I laid aside my priestly cassock, which in tropical Brazil just soaked up the heat, and walked lightly and free in my shirt sleeves. But deep within I still carried the burden of my guilt.

Saved by Grace Alone, through Faith

Outwardly I was free, but inwardly I was not at rest, for I had lost sight of God completely. I received much help from an evangelical church in Rio de Janeiro – a local church where the congregation based their faith only on the teachings of the Bible. The sympathy of the people there helped me very much, for they provided me with civilian clothing which I had no money to buy, and food and shelter. I shall always be grateful to them. But most of all the preaching of their minister gripped me. It was completely new to me to hear such explanations of the Bible. But could I be helped by a non-Roman Catholic preacher?

Certainly in my seminary training and as a priest I had heard regularly about the alleged false teaching of such churches, but I had never understood what they taught. In Rio de Janeiro I heard the minister explain that a man cannot save himself, or deserve entrance into heaven by any of his own efforts because he is utterly lost and hopeless. With all this I could heartily agree, for I had all too clearly experienced my inability to change myself. In spite of the greatest efforts and every kind of penitence, I had not succeeded in becoming a different kind of person. The preacher went even further and showed that there is only one way to be set free from sin, and that is to be given by God a completely free pardon and a new life. He showed how this experience must be obtained directly from Jesus Christ, who gives it freely and unmistakably to all who hand themselves over to him in complete trust in his perfect sacrifice.

Light and Life

At first I found this difficult to believe. It was like a fairy story – too good to be true. I could see the beauty of yielding to Christ. It sounded wonderful, and yet at the same time it seemed too easy, too cheap. As a Roman Catholic I believed that salvation was the hardest battle in life, a matter of struggling for and deserving God's favour. But now I began to understand the true teaching of the Bible. Yes, salvation is indeed the hardest thing in the world and must be deserved by perfect obedience to all the demands of God's law, in other words, perfect sinlessness. But the amazing fact is that the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, has fulfilled all these demands for us and on our behalf, if we trust Him. "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom. 3:24-26).

At last the wonderful breakthrough came. My soul opened itself wholly to Christ in complete trust. I could see that it was not the Jews who had crucified Christ – I had done it. My sins were taken by Him. A blinding flash of light illuminated the rubbish heap of my former life.

My soul lay like a bombed-out city before me, and I was filled with anguish at seeing the sin which had permeated my whole being. But, over the rubbish heap I realised and knew that Christ had forgiven me and made me a true Christian. I had become a new creature.

Jesus spoke of the relationship between himself and true Christians in these words, "I am the good

shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine” (John 10:14). I had begun a new life, with all the feeling of close fellowship with God which I had never known in all my days as a Roman Catholic priest. The dead legalism of the Church of Rome was behind me and the future was a living personal relationship with our wonderful God.



Herman Hegger (1916-2012) was an ex-priest of Rome from Holland. Although there are a few phrases in the testimony above which are not quite correct doctrinally, including his statements on the “subconscious” (a term from psychology with no basis in Scripture), we must make allowances for the differing levels of spiritual growth in all believers.

The Gospel means the glad tidings, or good news; and truly, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is “good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10), the greatest news ever heard on earth: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”! (1 Timothy 1:15). And “He is able to save them to the *uttermost* that come unto God by Him”! (Hebrews 7:25).

All men and women are sinners, and sin is a terrible thing: it is the transgression of the perfect and holy law of God, and it has separated all mankind from God. Those who die in their sins suffer the torments of eternal fire. Jesus said, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13,14). The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is that strait gate, and narrow way, that leads to life! “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus said; “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

If you, then, are asking, “What must I do to be saved from my sins?” here is the answer: “*Repent*”! (Acts 2:38); and, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*” (Acts 16:31). Forsake your sin, repent of it, turn from it, and believe, with all your heart, in Jesus Christ! To believe in Him is *to cast yourself upon Him, by faith, for salvation*. He is the Son of the living God, holy, harmless, undefiled, sinless, the *only* Lord and Saviour. He died on a cross, He was crucified, not for His own sins - for He had none of His own - but for the sins of His chosen people, those given to Him by His heavenly Father to save, paying the penalty for sin in *their* place, shedding His blood to redeem them. And after dying in their place, the wrath of God being poured out upon Him, having satisfied the justice of God and having put away the sins of those He died for by the sacrifice of Himself, He rose from the dead, victorious over death, sin, and Satan; and He gives eternal life to as many as the Father has given Him. *Eternal life cannot be earned, and it cannot be bought; it is the gift of God through*

Jesus Christ the Lord. He alone is the One who can save the soul and set the spiritual captive free! Forsake your sin, forsake the false religion of Rome and all other false religion, turn to the Lord by faith, and be saved!

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If you have repented of your sins and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, or if you would like to know more about Him, His Gospel, and the true Christian life, please contact us.

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