

Three Years as a Nun

The Testimony of Former Roman Catholic Nun Charlotte Myhill



I think it a duty towards God to give a little sketch of my life as a Roman Catholic, trusting through the grace of God to prevent others from being led into such utter darkness. At the age of fifteen, I went to Leamington; there I made the acquaintance of a young lady, a Roman Catholic. I was at that time a member of the Church of England but very insufficiently instructed in its doctrines. No wonder then that my friend succeeded, after a little time, in drawing me to her church in Warwick, the first time in my life I had ever entered a Roman Catholic Church. The beautiful music and singing quite overpowered me.

The Sunday following I went to my own Church; but no, it had not the same charm for me; I wanted something to fascinate my senses. Being very fond of Miss H –, I had the misfortune to open my heart to her. Immediately she told me it was my duty to see a Priest, but at the time I scorned the very idea, as I knew it would be going against my parents' wishes and disobeying them in every respect. But what was I to do? I could not remain as I was. At last I told Miss H – that I would write to my father and explain to him my feelings; but she assured me I was placing my soul in a most dangerous position, and that God would not bless me unless I saw a Priest first, and then I could follow his advice. Consequently I did so, and after his advice took instructions to be received into the Roman Catholic Church without letting my family know.

Six months after, I returned home. I tried to continue receiving instructions from another Priest, but it was impossible, as I seldom went out alone. I then wrote to Miss H –, who was at that time residing at Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire, keeping a school under the Earl of Gainsborough. I told her how unhappy I was, and that it was impossible to continue my "instructions." After a long correspondence she at last told me that I must sacrifice my home and go to her to be received into the Roman Church; but I told her it was impossible, as my friends would never give their consent. Finally she wrote and told me that it was my duty to run away, as the Commandment, "Honour thy father and mother," was only meant when there was no question of religion, and that I was also to remember our Lord said, "He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me." In the letter was enclosed a post office order, more than sufficient to pay my expenses there. She told me to start at once, and she would meet me at the station. The letter, in a sense, so frightened me that I consented; as may well be imagined, I passed a night of most bitter anguish.

At 5 a.m. I left my home, and all those that I held most dear on earth. On arriving at my destination I wrote to my family, but my absence had been soon discovered. My poor father and mother were nearly mad with grief, not knowing what had become of me. On the reception of the letter they sent friends to fetch me home, but acting under the influence of Miss H –, notwithstanding the broken-hearted letter I received from home, I refused to return with them.

In the month of August following I openly renounced the Protestant Church, and was baptized a Roman Catholic. I felt a sort of external joy or fascination but inwardly I had *no peace*. Then Miss H –, not content with seeing me a member of the Roman Church, wished me to become a Nun. That I looked upon as quite impossible, as I was of a naturally gay character, but my love for her was great, and as usual, I could not resist her, and consented to make a tour of different convents. In September we started for York, St. Mary's Convent, from there to Ireland, etc., etc. In all, we saw about twelve different Orders, but I did not like any of them.

On our return to Chipping Campden, Miss H – began to be very anxious about me (as I talked of returning to my home at Christmas), for she intended entering a convent then. She begged of me to accompany her to Stroud, St. Rose's Dominican Convent there; I consented. On our arrival we were introduced to the Mother Prioress, whom I found to be very amiable, and in consequence, before leaving, I asked admission into that Order; I was at once accepted, and the day was fixed for my reception. The next day we returned to Chipping Campden.

And as Christmas drew near, feeling most homesick, I told Miss H – that I neither could nor would enter the convent until I had bid farewell to my parents. She tried to persuade me from it, showing me the danger I had of losing my vocation, but in vain; this time my will was too strong.

Accordingly, the week before Christmas we parted for ever; she to enter the convent at York, and I to spend a few days at home before shutting myself up for ever; but when once at home I had not the heart to leave my family again, though continuing a firm Roman Catholic. My friends showed me the greatest kindness, and although I went daily against their wishes, they did not forbid me to continue my religious duties. My friends had a most bitter hatred against the doctrines of Romanism. All went on well until I was introduced to a French Order that had come over to England. I went to see them with the permission of my Confessor, and was at once enchanted with a most fascinating Sister, "Soeur Marie" – who spoke broken English. She spoke to me about the "religious life"; and quite won my affection. I confided to her all that I had suffered during the time I had been a Roman Catholic, and that I had tried to find peace but could not. I asked her if she could tell me how I could find that peace; she told me that it was not difficult, that she saw plainly God was calling me to devote my life entirely to him, and that I had only to answer to that call and should at once find *that peace* I had so long sought for.

My joy was beyond bounds to think that *that peace* was within my grasp. I at once told my Confessor, thinking he would rejoice with me; but he strongly objected to my entering a French Order, though he firmly believed I ought to become a Nun, but had designed an English Order for me. Feeling greatly disappointed, I told all to Soeur Marie, who said she believed God had called me to their Order, and advised me not to listen to my Confessor. The same day I saw the Mother General; she accepted me and desired me to enter at once; but my trouble was not all over; I had to break the news to my dear parents. From advice given me I wrote my father a letter (*dictated by a Priest*), telling him of my intentions, and that if he refused to let me go he would only be able to prevent me until I became of age, as nothing could turn my mind from becoming a Nun. My poor father, broken-hearted, gave no consent, but at the same time did nothing to prevent me, for he knew my strong self-will; then, against everybody's wish, I entered the Convent De Marie Auxiliatrice, Kentish Town; I was removed the same day to Kennington Oval. I was a Postulant until the 5th of August; during that time I felt deeply the loss of my family, and spent many a day of bitter weeping. The Mother of the Novices told me to banish the thought; as it was only a temptation from the devil; I tried to do so. During that time they allowed me to

write and receive letters from my friends, but they were all read beforehand. On the 5th of August I took the habit and white veil. I felt happy, but that *true internal peace* was wanting. I received no letters from my friends, although I wrote many.

At the end of October I was ordered to Bourges (France) with several others. This was a dreadful blow to me, for it seemed that I was then indeed to be torn from dear old England and all those whom I loved. Being the only English Nun then in the convent, of course, I was alone in my grief. The eve before we were to start, my sister having called, the Mother of the Novices told me to go to the parlour, but *forbade me to say I was going to France*. My sister was much upset to see me, for I was looking very ill from fretting and sitting up at night to work. I had scarcely been with her two minutes, when a Sister came and said I was to leave the parlour. It seemed to me most un-christianlike to be allowed to remain only two minutes with one whom I never expected to see on earth again, but I obeyed. At 5 p.m. next day we started for Bourges – I with a most heavy heart. The Mother of the Novices, seeing the feeling I had for my family, resolved to detach me entirely from them.¹

I should say that during the three years I was in the convent I never knowingly let a month pass without writing to members of my family; but during the whole time I never received more than about four letters from my sister, and two from a Roman Catholic friend. Since I have been home I have been told the number of letters that have been written to me and the few received in return. I understand perfectly well the reason my letters have been detained; it was to reconcile me to that cruel detachment from those who claimed my first attention on earth. I have always known the convent authorities to act with very little heart in all such cases.²

In June, I returned to England, accompanied by two Sisters. During the time I was at Bourges I saw very little of penances, and the Novices were very agreeable one with the other. I did not like the idea of leaving to go to another house of strange Sisters, but the Mother of Novices assured me I should find the Sisters the same in all houses. On my arrival in England I found everything very nice, all seemed working for their salvation; but alas! it was only a blind. After a few weeks things soon began to take a very different turn, the Mother Superior, who was a young Novice, very little older than myself in religion, *but the cousin of the Mother General, foundress of the Order*, showed me the greatest unkindness. The house soon became a house of discord and jealousy. She had not the slightest regard for my feelings in any respect – she would not allow me to receive letters or write any. My sister wrote to tell me she was going to be married, and wrote again to tell me she was married; she also sent me her card and a piece of wedding-cake, but of all this I was in utter *ignorance*, and have only learnt since I have been at home. Letters subsequently written have been torn up before my face and cast into the fire without one particle of their contents being communicated to me. My mother came to see me for the first and only time, but the Mother Superior refused me leave to stay more than a few minutes with her, and asked an account of all that had passed between us. During that time I was suffering very much from my heart and chest, and often from weakness turned faint. I told her of it, but she said I was not mortified enough, and took no more notice.

My sufferings increased but I did not complain. I was then mistress of the workroom, and had the whole charge of the work, taking it in and carrying it home. After a time she left the convent. We had another Superior who seemed to be very fond of me, but she had the misfortune to break her shoulder. Again I found myself in the midst of most violent women; one, through jealousy (because she thought the Superior liked me better than her), did all she could to set everyone against me. One day, in a rage, she threw the heavy top of a refectory table upon my back. I was under medical treatment for some time, and suffer in consequence to this day.

I was *most wretched* at this time, and resolved to leave the convent, for I had met with nothing but *deception*. I entered the convent expecting to find peace, but instead of that I found my heart hardening both towards God and man. At this time I had the most earnest desire to return to my family, but, as I had left them against their wish, I felt too much pride to approach them and ask to be received back.

I wrote to the Mother General telling her how unhappy I was, and my intention of leaving the convent. She at once answered telling me that it was only a temptation from the devil. She commanded me to return to Bourges; I did so, and on arriving there I found the Novices very agreeable, in fact, I found everything much the same as when I left it. The Mother General told me I was to make a “retreat” and prepare for making the vows and taking the black veil, for to leave the convent would be *damnation to my soul*. I spoke to the Priest; he told me the *same*. I then consented to follow their advice and accordingly made the three vows – Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

I was next sent to Paris as assistant to the Mother Superior. I had endured many bitter trials during my life as a Novice, but they were nothing in comparison to those I had to endure as a professed Nun after taking the black veil. After a few weeks the fearful penances began; the following are a few:-

- 1.– Discipline with a cord of knots.
2. And 3.– The same, made of steel, with little sharp points that tear the flesh.
- 4.– A hair shirt.
- 5.– A steel torture, in shape of a heart, to be worn on the breast.
- 6.– Same, in shape of a cross, to be worn on the breast.
- 7.– A horse-hair band to go round the body.
- 8.– A steel band, to go round the body.
- 9.– A spiked steel band, to go round the ankles at night.
- 10.– The same, to go round the wrists.
- 11.– To lie on the ground, and be walked over by all the Sisters.
- 12.– To kiss their feet.
- 13.– To lick the ground in the shape of a cross.
- 14.– To dine on your knees.
- 15.– To beg your dinner.
- 16.– To wear an immense white paper on the head with the most predominant fault written on it.
- 17.– To rise a little time after you have been in bed, say a prayer on the cold stones with the arms stretched out in the shape of a cross, etc., etc.

I showed a great repugnance to all these penances, not because I felt too cowardly to use them, but because they seemed so unchristian; neither could I understand why I should mortify the flesh *thus*, as it gave me *no* peace. I began to pray very much that God would make known to me what I ought to do.

One day whilst suffering the torture of one of these instruments of penance, I began to think of the last words of our dying Saviour, “It is finished.” I felt there was some mystery which I could not understand, for what could be the meaning of these words if we were obliged to do such fearful penance in this life, to atone for our sins and to look forward to a fearful Purgatory hereafter? I wanted to open my mind to someone, but dare not do so to a Priest or Nun; and as a rule all “Catholics” are forbidden to have a Bible.³ What was to be done? At last, almost in a state of despair, I prayed to God to give me light and strength to act. In a few days Divine Providence sent one of my friends (Mme. C-) to stay at the convent in Paris. I did not hide from her that I was unhappy, but at the same time gave her no reasons. She at once communicated with my brother-in-law, who made it known to my family, who desired him to act in whatever manner was best to reclaim their long-lost child. He at once wrote and ordered me home, but the Superior of Paris telegraphed to the Mother General, and immediately I was ordered to Bourges. On my arrival I was told to take no notice of my brother’s letter, for it would be *damnation to my soul* to renounce the vows I had made by returning to my family. During the week fearful curses were held over my head, which put me in such a state of despair that I was frightened to leave the convent; and at last consented to go to Angers for a few weeks to try and find a little peace.

A few minutes before starting I saw one of the Sisters with three letters in her hand from England; one was addressed to me in my family name from my sister, entreating me to come home and appealing to my feelings of love to my family. The other letters were addressed to the Mother General, the first from my brother-in-law who, acting for my parents, commanded her to send me back to England by the 19th of March, failing which he should make the affair known to the English Ambassador in Paris and claim

his protection for me as a British Subject, and stating that the family solicitor had been instructed to take such proceedings as were requisite to ensure my return. The other letter was also directed to the Mother General from the solicitor who had taken the case in hand, stating that proceedings *would* be taken immediately as I was under age. The letters were so *severe* and *determined* that, after reading them, I positively refused to go to Angers as ordered, and when the Mother General knew my decision, she told me to go to the Chapel and reflect upon the action I was taking. I did so, and became more convinced than ever if I could get away I must do so and return home. The Mother General, finding how *very determined my family* and *I were*, stood out no longer. She then acted very unkindly towards me, and gave me to understand that there was now *no hope of my salvation*, and that hell was paved with Nuns who had renounced their vows.

I arrived in England and was received into the bosom of my family with an affection that for three years I had not known, and I have every day greater cause to thank God that He has brought me back.

My family did not influence my religious thoughts, but God has shown me since not only the errors of convent life, but the *utter darkness* of the whole system. Within her pale I sought peace, *but found it not*, and when I read my Bible quietly at home it spoke in words of *tenderness* to my soul. I saw in *it* the words of eternal life, and by it was led to the fountain opened for sin – the precious blood of Jesus, so freely shed for every poor contrite sinner. I attended a Protestant Church on Sunday, March 15th, and was strongly impressed with the beauty and simplicity of the service, and after the unknown tongue of the Roman Church it was refreshing to my spirit. I have now found that peace I so *vainly* sought before.

In conclusion, I will simply say that my feelings were akin to those of Luther before his conversion,⁴ who, when journeying towards Rome, expected to find it a heaven upon earth – a celestial city – and when he beheld it in the distance, fell upon his knees and thanked God he was permitted to behold it; but when he *arrived* there he found how great was its corruption, and that there was *no peace within its walls*. Deception was written upon the gates thereof. Like him, I have had experience of that system, and rejoice that I have been brought out of darkness into light, from the power of Satan unto God through Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES:

1.The nun has little or no opportunity of communicating with the outside world. Interviews with relatives in the more strictly enclosed orders are only conducted through great grills. Ligouri, in his “True Spouse of Christ,” addressing the Nun says: “Never seek a visit from your relatives.” “Fly altogether from your kindred.”

2.”Nuns shall not write to their relatives nor receive letters from them without having informed the Mother, who shall read the letters before they are forwarded or before they are received.” (Ligouri, “True Spouse of Christ.” Page 290).

3.This was the case in previous times.

4.Disclaimer: we do not hold the same high opinion of Luther as many do. But his experience in the city of Rome was certainly genuine.

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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