

Lives that Speak From Rome to Christ

By Rev. Mariano Rughi

I believe that it is the will of God that we, who have been healed by the touch of Christ, should speak out and testify before the others. That was Christ's way, when He was on earth. He touched and changed men. These changed men He used, to touch and change others.

My conversion from Romanism to Christ was not just an act, but the result of a very long and painful process, which lasted several years; and this goes back to my college life in Assisi (Italy). At that time, I felt led to ask my professor how he could reconcile the practice of Pope Honorius with the official teaching of the church. My professor, in answering, said that this pope did teach the error, true, but he did not speak or teach as a pope, i.e., "Ex Cathedra," but as a private theologian. The answer was far from convincing, and I had to express my dissatisfaction. I wanted my doubts to be banished; but my professor tried to twist my words and read into them a desire, on my part, to uphold heretical teaching. Of course, I was shocked that heresy should have been mentioned in reply to a reasonable enquiry, as I had no thought of heresy in mind when putting the question to him. But there it is: Rome dislikes the questionings of an independent mind, and always discourages or suppresses them by the demand for blind belief and acceptance of the Roman dogma.

But God was awakening me to rise and prepare for my journey, though I did not realize it at that time. For it was during that period of anxiety that I began to be greatly concerned as to the certainty and foreknowledge of eternal salvation.

Once more I could see how the church was contradicting itself, but I dared not say a word to anybody; and so for a time I went on fighting my doubts single-handed, till a day came when I, feeling so deeply concerned, had to speak to my Father Confessor. The reply came very quickly, a simple "Oh! my boy, these are temptations of the devil!" Thus you see how the Church of Rome is trying to pervert

the truth, for convictions of the Holy Spirit are attributed to the work of the devil. I was far from being convinced: I knew John 3:16, which I quoted to prove my doubts were founded on something, but soon I realized that mine had been a bold temerity, for my Father Confessor gave me a terrific lesson on humility and on blind obedience to the church—you notice to the church, not to the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this stage I must make a digression, though much to the point. By this time I had ceased to go regularly to the confessional, though I had never been an enthusiast for auricular confession, a practice which I observed more by an external compulsion than by an inner desire. At times I found it a real burden and, nearly always, a cruel torturing of conscience.

I want to stress this point, because one of the pet arguments of the Romanists in favour of auricular confession is the sense of comfort the penitent is promised to find by pouring out his sins into the ear of the priest, whose absolution will remove the burden of sin and its guilt. I am quite prepared to admit that a kind of comfort may be found there; but how futile it is in effect and how brief in its duration! Surely it is nothing but the result of a passing emotion.

During my five years of priesthood in the Church of Rome (five years may seem rather a comparatively short period; yet it was long enough for me to learn a good deal about confession and the confessional) I heard the confessions of a great many people: many I knew personally. In some of them there was sincerity and earnestness, which one could see through their anxiety and longing for freedom from that besetting sin or from that particular vice; and yet, week after

week, these same people had to come back, much to their distress and grief, to confess the very same, often shameful and hated sin. "But why ought this to be so?" was the question of those anxious souls, and I, the Father Confessor, whose duty was to bring peace to them, could never give a convincing answer; nor could any other have done so in the same position.

Yet the priest will tell the penitent that he is lacking sincerity or that he is not fulfilling the required conditions for a valid confession, and because of that he has often to utter a threat to deny the sacramental absolution of those habitual sins. Here I leave it to you to imagine the awful effect this tyrannical method always causes in the minds of those thirsty and yet blind souls.

I cannot help thinking of that lovely incident in the life of Christ when He met with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Indeed, here we have the answer to the thirsty souls who are continually deceived by being compelled to go to the priest for the quenching of their spiritual thirst. How true are the words of the Lord to this woman: "Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again." The Romish confessional is just like Jacob's well, whose water does satisfy, but only for a time. "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:13, 14).

Here is the true source of a lasting satisfaction, even our Lord Jesus Christ, Who knows the secret need of every sinner and for each has the living water. "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." This invitation comes from the very heart of God; and no priest, no bishop, no pope in the Church of Rome, will ever give anybody peace of heart which they themselves lack. Man remains thirsty, heavy laden and helpless until God satisfies him. Just as a stream or spring fills a well, so the gift of God brings blessing until we have all we need, even Eternal life: "but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."

I suddenly felt an inward perplexity. The idea of giving up the vocation for the priesthood came into my mind, but I soon repelled it as a heinous temptation. I was doing my last year of theological studies, and was almost ready to receive ordination. I thought immediately of the family honour to consider, for in a Roman Catholic country having a priest in the family is a wonderful privilege and a great honour. I was thinking of my parents and friends, who were looking forward to seeing me as a priest celebrating mass. I know they were not very worthwhile thoughts, but, not knowing the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord, I felt weak and powerless in my convictions.

I had to go through my ordination, and thus it was that I became a priest. Sent to a parish as curate in charge, I started my ministry with zeal and enthusiasm, and soon scored even some successes by which my old doubts and perplexity were removed. But was this a sign of sound conviction, or rather the result of a passing emotion? In my parish work I felt a new atmosphere and different surroundings, namely, a certain freedom, once denied during my college life. I took the liberty of reading the Bible and other books and literature forbidden by the church. A parish priest, later on, I came into contact with many people and entered into religious discussion with them.

One day I received a shocking revelation during an intimate conversation with a Franciscan monk. I discovered he was going through the same painful experience about the assurance of salvation. I began to question myself: if this Church of Rome is the true church of Christ, how is it that one of her best followers, one of her sons, a man of integrity and of strict life, is most doubtful about his salvation, dissatisfied with himself and suffering great spiritual perplexities? My doubts revived once more, and again I was in yet another spiritual crisis, but this time leading up to a climax. The reaction was that the mass, the confessional and other priestly duties became a terrible burden.

For a time I sought diversion in amusements. I found that I began to lose my sense of duty; much to my personal shame, I saw myself falling

gradually lower in a worldly standard of life. What did I really need? I needed not diversion but cleansing, not excitement but spiritual repair, not amusement but Christ.

Was the church then ready to point me to this One who could take me out of this degenerate situation? No, Rome was there to apply canonical punishment, namely, a week's retreat in a monastery. But the cure was not adequate to the disease.

I was still alone, fighting what then appeared to be a lost battle, when one day a flash of Divine Light revealed the darkness of my soul. What was I to do? Finally I decided to leave the parish and my parents, and I went to Rome.

There was no fixed plan in my mind, nor had I any acquaintance in the city to whom I could turn for aid. Yet during my first day in Rome my search was rewarded by a casual discovery of a Methodist Episcopal church. I was able to contact the minister, to whom I opened my heart and presented my desperate situation; but soon I had to learn that leaving the Church of Rome was not as easy as I thought. The Lateran Treaty of 1929, with its fifth Article, paragraph 2, was the great obstacle, for it reads:

"In any case apostate priests, or those subject to censure, cannot be appointed or continued as teachers, or hold office or be employed as clerks where they are in immediate contact with the public."

That meant choosing between retiring from any kind of public life or leaving behind everything dear to me—parents, friends and country. The sacrifice required by the latter was

terrific, but I was given strength to bear it and God opened the door in a most remarkable way.

The Methodist minister introduced me to Prof. E. Buonaiuti, an ex-Roman Catholic priest, who also as a result of the Lateran Treaty had to give up the "Cathedra" of Comparative Religions in the State University of Rome for being himself subject to canonical censure. He at once made contacts with Protestant societies in Switzerland, France and Strasbourg, to find me an exit from Rome.

Weeks and months passed by, but there was no good prospect in sight, when at last God sent into the picture the Rev. M. Casella—another ex-priest, who was already working in a parish in Northern Ireland.

The "Priests' Protection Society" sent the lifeboat to rescue me. This enabled me to have a thorough training in the evangelical reformed doctrine by the Irish Church Missions and a course of study in Trinity College, Dublin. I take this opportunity of paying a tribute of deep gratitude toward the Priests' Protection Society for enabling me to come out of the darkness of Romanism into the light of the Gospel.

Of course it has cost me very much to leave my parents, my friends, my country and everything dear to me in Italy; but, when I thought to obey the voice of God rather than the voice of the flesh and the world, all my hardships had been changed into sweetness, especially when I completed my spiritual journey from a sinful life to a personal knowledge of a living Christ.

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