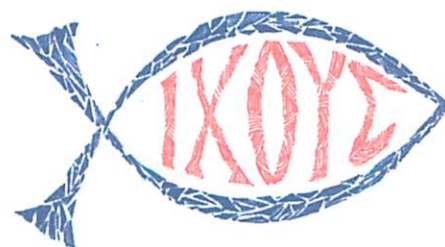


More than a Survivor

Life after the
Catholic Priesthood



Dominic Stockford

Cert. Th.; DipSW; DipHE

Rector of Christ Church, Free Church of England,
Station Road, Teddington, Middlesex.

More than a Survivor Life after the Catholic Priesthood Dominic Stockford

While it is most difficult to go back over my many years in the Catholic Church and its priesthood, I see that it is necessary. I remember and take courage from the words of the Apostle Paul, *"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."*¹

My parents were both converts to Catholicism in their early adulthood. As a result I was born a 'cradle-catholic' and into a family that dutifully followed every requirement set upon good and faithful Catholics by the Pope. No questions were publicly asked of the rights or wrongs of his pronouncements, even when following such rulings resulted in hardship and unhappiness for individuals in the family. We were brought up as Catholics in a way that underlined the importance of the denomination and that did not even allow me to realise that there was anything 'else' out there. One early memory is of going to Church one Sunday with one of my mother's school friends. She attended the local High Church Anglo-Catholic service, which left me asking one question of my parents on my return home. 'Why don't we go there? It's just the same.' Unsurprisingly I received no answer, how could you explain the difference to an eight year old? The best of my youth and much of my early manhood has been spent in the Catholic Church and priesthood, *"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere."*²

As a child my experience of 'faith' was of doing the right thing – that is going to Mass every Sunday and giving some of your pocket money to the collection. On one occasion it meant the priest came to the house when my father was ill – just the once in 6 years in that parish, and just the once in 15 years in the next place we lived. I hope that gives the lie to the great myth of Catholic clergy dutifully and regularly visiting their flock! The other side of the upbringing in 'the faith' was schooling. For nearly my entire time in primary education I attended a Catholic school, and from 13 to 18 years of age I then went to Downside School, a private boarding school run by Benedictine Monks in the Somerset countryside. Faith at both schools meant doing the right things. Those who were 'good Catholics' would attend the Sunday Mass and the Friday Benediction service. Those who were very good would become altar servers or choristers. Those of us who were 'bad' would run off at these times and do things that made sense to us like walking the nearby hills, rain or shine. The pressure to conform and to do the required works was tremendous. Teachers would be sent out to drive around looking for those trying to escape 'doing their duty', and other pupils would treat you like dirt and even report you to the 'authorities' for failing to fulfil your obligations.

It did however provide moments of mirth. Such as the occasion when I and one of the other serial avoiders were the only two prefects from the whole school in a service and therefore, to the amazement and disbelief of the rest of the school, had to lead everyone out of the Abbey Church after the service!

¹ Romans 8:37

² 2 Corinthians 2:14

One positive thing about attending Downside School was the sense imparted that faith was personal. Whether this was intentional or not it stood me in good stead later in life. We also studied for one of the 'O' level exams (16 yr age group exam) the Gospel of Mark. From the little I remember it was not done in the critical hermeneutical style so beloved of the Catholic Church but in a way that encouraged us to know what is said in it. Until I left the Catholic Church I was never encouraged to look at scripture in this straightforward way again! Even though any doctrine given was that of the Catholic Church in all its unbiblical glory, I – if no one else – left with the wonderful knowledge that I could talk to God and that the Scriptures contained truth. I always remained staunchly Catholic however.

I can understand that many people find such an idea difficult, especially those who have never been part of the Catholic denomination. But it is purely and simply because being a Catholic, in much the same way as being a Jew, is not just a faith but rather a way of life. As a young person brought up in the Catholic denomination I was steeped in this and it never even occurred to me that there was any other way of thinking. Although we studied the European religious 'Reformation' and 'Counter-reformation' in history classes at school it never occurred to me that there were people in this country, Great Britain, who thought differently to the Catholic denomination. I was brought up, intentionally or not, with the impression that the only differences between denominations in this country were of style and presentation.

Called to Serve

It had never occurred to me that I would serve God in an ‘ordained’ capacity and it certainly never occurred to me that I would come close to God simply through repentance and belief. The only understanding of being faithful that I had was the Catholic Church, and Church meant doing works; attending Sunday Mass and ‘being good’. And so, when I was almost sixteen and received what I discerned as a clarion call to serve God as his minister and because I knew only the Roman Catholic Church it seemed obvious to me that I had to serve God in that Church. The memory of this call was seared into my mind when, the following day, Pope Paul VI died.

As a result of this call I reacted by trying to do the right things. I went on a number of what are called ‘selection conferences’, which were run by the Catholic Diocese of Plymouth where one talked to various priests and was assessed for ‘suitability’ to ministry. I read relevant books; I became friends with the local parish priest; I regularly took part in the ‘sacrament’ that I never understood and always filled me with horror, auricular confession; I attended alternative Catholic services to Mass such as ‘Benediction’³, ‘Stations of the Cross’⁴ and the ‘Rosary’⁵. None of these gave me any spiritual enlightenment and all simply made my heart heavier. Much as, I later discovered, Martin Luther tried harder and harder to do these things in order to come to God and yet found only that he was burdened even more through the actions, so too I found them tiresome and unnecessary. Only the ‘Stations of the Cross’ meant anything as I understood clearly the journey of Jesus to death on the Cross, yet the liturgical insistences of the Catholic service and the non-biblical elements inserted into the story even began to destroy any real interest I had in knowing more and spending more time thinking on the Cross. They were burdens for me to attend, and later burdens for me to lead. In fact I came to hate worshipping God because of these things!

Looking back now I can see that my whole life has been a battle with the unbiblical doctrines and worship of the Catholic Church. If the Word had somehow come to me at that time I would have moved away immediately. However, because being a Catholic was ‘in my blood’ as a lifestyle I never heard that Word. It was as if God was holding his hand out to me throughout my whole childhood and early adulthood and yet I never saw it through the haze and fog created by the Catholic Church’s doctrines and indoctrination.

³ The idolatrous worship of the ‘Blessed Sacrament’ consisting of the wafer consecrated at Catholic Mass.

⁴ A stylised and works oriented liturgical working through of the journey of Jesus to Calvary, including several non-biblical ‘invented’ events.

⁵ Repetition of the unbiblical prayer called the ‘Hail Mary’ along with other prayers. The action intended to make one a better person and bring one closer to God.

Training

I was selected for training for the Catholic priesthood by the Bishop of Plymouth and it was agreed that I should go to Seminary and train for the Catholic ministry in 1980. I arrived at St. John's Seminary⁶ in early September, 1980. I have little doubt that God had no intention that I should begin training for ministry at the age of 18 years and 2 weeks. I was a boy and yet the Catholic Church accepted me! The early experience was horrendous for me. I knew none of the other students but one, another 18 year old from Plymouth who was equally immature. It took me three days to find the chapel as no-one took the trouble to tell me where it was. The library and its importance was, on the other hand, drummed into me!

My constant experience of Seminary was of education, exams and information gathering. We were never really encouraged to be spiritual people and it was even said by a friend on one occasion, when a student with a poor academic record was asked to leave, "Next to his, my spirituality wouldn't even fit on the back of a postage stamp." It seemed that what was important was showing how good you were and showing through one's actions how fitted one was to be a Catholic priest. I gained brownie points because I was a sacristan for several of the years, and good enough to be 'in charge' of the sacristy. The importance of this was that it involved laying out all the vestments and paraphernalia needed for the various rites and ceremonies that the Catholic Church says are essential. It was as if the words of James⁷ had been turned around and they had him saying 'We do not concern ourselves about the faith but his [a student's] works show he is fitted'!

We were never asked about our beliefs or whether we could stack something up using Scripture as our support. When information was presented in lectures it was given to us as the teaching of the Catholic Church – if we did not agree then we could leave! There was no debate. There was no encouragement to sit in chapel with the Scriptures open before us as we were preached to. The scripture lectures were based around the various theories which take apart the Word and divide it up into a variety of authors and time-scales. Bultmann, the de-mythologizing theologian who does away with the divine action within the New Testament miracle events, was frequently referred to. The idea that the Scriptures could actually be correct, let alone be the infallible revelation of God was never broached. These words to Timothy might never have been written - *'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.'*⁸

I came no closer to God in my time in Seminary, and to be quite honest I ceased to try after a couple of years. Instead of being an opportunity to be able to work through God's word it became a hurdle to clamber over in order to begin the 'real work' of parish ministry. I was not trained to be a pastor, or a shepherd, or a minister, or a preacher but rather to be a performer of acts and an Administrator. During the first couple of years there were a few occasions when they could have taken the opportunity to guide us to share the Gospel with others – particularly when we had a Youth Day held at the Seminary for the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton. Instead of

⁶ In Wonersh, near Guildford, Surrey.

⁷ James 2:14ff

⁸ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

an occasion to teach Scripture's truths it became a battleground where those students who objected to the 'modern' music being used in the closing Mass knelt in the organ gallery and recited the rosary whilst it went on below them. What is more, they then came down to the chapel after the service finished, and as 'real' bread had been used⁹ proceeded to scuttle around on hands and knees searching for any crumbs that may have been dropped on the floor. Is God in such behaviour? Is there love there? I look back now and ask how the words of John, when he said - *'We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.'*¹⁰ - could have been so meaningless to a company of men who were supposed to be preparing to serve Him?

Still the most frightening aspect for me remains the attitude to the teaching of the Catholic denomination. For instance, when we studied the Catholic teaching of the Eucharist and their unbiblical theory of transubstantiation we used philosophy to learn about it, not the Scriptures (and even then most of my year failed to comprehend what was being 'taught'). There was no realisation that philosophy is the way of man and not God, no contact with the Word of God as He says - *'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.'*¹¹

We would perform 'practice confessions' on willing guinea pigs and yet in 5 years at Seminary I never once gave a practice (or real) sermon! But never once did we seek justification for telling people they did not have the ability to speak to God themselves – and that God alone has the power to forgive sin. We just merrily misused John 20:23 and practiced to be walls between God and man. The words of St Paul to the Romans as he says - *'For the death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin...'*¹² And the words of Hebrews 7:27 – *'He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.'* might as well never have been written. The words of Scripture were just not listened to, the words and laws of the Catholic Church were all that mattered.

This unbiblical attitude carried over to our relationships with other Christians that we encountered. We had a wonderful lady who taught us voice-work.¹³ She was very elderly and died after I had been at Seminary for 3 or 4 years. Some of the students went to her funeral service in a local Church and came back, not full of the joy of the Lord and his promises, but instead bemoaning the fact that the Church was so 'low' that there weren't even any candles in it. The Word preached had not been heard and they had simply seen what they regarded as a failure to perform the right works. A Catholic lady came in to speak about what it was like being married to an Anglican¹⁴ Vicar and the comments made to her and about her were not about the doctrinal difficulties they must have encountered; Instead she was pilloried because one Sunday

⁹ The Catholic Church disapproves strongly of the use of anything other than 'wafers' for communion.

¹⁰ 1 John 3:14

¹² Isaiah 55:8

¹² Romans 6:10 & 11

¹³ Public speaking, etc.

¹⁴ Church of England

in two she went to his Church rather than being a good Catholic and attending a Catholic Church every Sunday.

I nearly saw the Catholic Church for what it is – a secular organisation with secular aims hidden under religious trappings – when one of the students left. He had got as far as being ordained Deacon, and then, praise God, he began to question transubstantiation.¹⁵ He took out the relevant Scriptures¹⁶ and found that the Bible doesn't say what he was told by the Catholic Church, and that it doesn't support what he was told by the Catholic professors. Unsurprisingly he was 'thrown out' of the Seminary within two days, presumably so as to prevent the rest of us from being infected with the twin ills of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Other students were quite incredulous and said many utterly scandalous things, but about him and not about how he was treated! For my part I wished to speak with him but never had the chance as he was gone so fast. I felt sorry for him, I sympathised with him for I had never really accepted transubstantiation (and never did). I hope and pray that he, a truly brave and courageous man for the Lord, has been able to minister God's Word to others as he himself found it. The events and his dignity so nearly broke through the 'way of life' of the Catholic denomination and the hold it had over me. But still, and as I write this I do so with pain in my heart, I did not see the truth. The words of Isaiah, quoted by Jesus, were as true of me as of all those there - "*This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*"¹⁷ They are sadly true of so many who are still led astray by the wiles of Rome. This is, to be quite clear, not condemnation of the individuals led astray but a condemnation of the Roman Catholic denomination which promulgates its errant and unbiblical teachings in full knowledge of the errors contained therein.

¹⁵ This is the erroneous and unbiblical Roman doctrine of the bread and wine used in their Communion service really becoming the body and blood of Christ.

¹⁶ Mtt 26:26ff, Mk 14:22ff, Luke 22:14ff & 24:13ff, 1 Cor.11:17ff, etc.

¹⁷ Mtt. 15:8 & 9

Ministry

I served as a Roman Catholic Deacon for one year and as a priest for just less than seven years. During that time I ministered in a number of parishes throughout Dorset and Devon and met many good people, so many sadly led astray by the unbiblical doctrines thrust upon them. I spent one year as a Deacon in Paignton, Devon. This is a sea-side resort on the 'English Riviera' where the number of Sunday Masses went up in the summer because of the number of holiday makers. It began the struggle I had all through my ministry, which although I was not to realise it fully until after leaving the church of Rome, was due to the difference between my personal beliefs and the demands made on me as a priest.

In Paignton the two key elements of required work were to celebrate the Sunday and weekday Masses and to take communion to the housebound. As a Deacon I was 'allowed' to baptise and so I also ended up being given many of the baptisms to do (hidden away on a Sunday afternoon). At some level I already began to grasp that this round of 'works' was not helping to spread the Gospel. I felt unfulfilled and the work seemed to be pointless. On one occasion I was called in to 'catechise' and then baptise two youngsters (of 6 & 9) who had been accepted into the church primary¹⁸ school. When I eventually said that it would be pointless to baptise them as they had no concept of God and were not responding to my 'catechising' the head-mistress (a nun) became very angry as they had only been accepted into the school on condition that they would be baptised into the Roman Catholic Church (not baptised as Christians mark you!). There was no interest in faith and in helping the children to come to knowledge of God but simply in 'doing the right thing' and making them into Roman Catholics.

It left me confused and continued to push me along my gradual path away from Rome. During my time there I also had several difficulties in my relationship with the curate there. His attitudes and behaviours often left me uneasy, and on occasion he publicly humiliated me during church services. It was without great shock that I later learned that he has since been convicted of paedophilia, with some offences dating to that time. Due to the Roman system of parish governance there had been no opportunity or encouragement to go to anyone about some of my concerns, nor was there training in an understanding of our responsibility, on a physical level, for the children and adults who were in our spiritual care. Had they not just been personal concerns but included knowledge of his immoral and un-Christian actions I would not have known what to do or how to deal with it. Even worse, I would not have had the knowledge of the Scriptures to guide me in any actions I should have taken. Even the words of Paul to Timothy would have helped me, had I been told that the Scriptures are God's revelation and guide. *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."*¹⁹ I was instead naked in the world, with no support from God or His word to help through such difficult times. If I had even known St. Paul's words to the Ephesians I would have had some chance of doing God's work – or seeing what it should be!

¹⁸ 5-11 years

¹⁹ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

“Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”²⁰

In many ways this continued to be my experience in all the parishes where I ministered. Although there were by human standards good people in all of them there was never anyone who guided me to the Scriptures and encouraged me to look to them to find my salvation – and for the way to live life in this world. I spent 3 years in Poole, Dorset before my nagging doubts and problems led me to ask for a move. I would walk around and around the inside of the church there begging God to show me the answers to the struggles I had, but answer seemingly came there none – for he had already given me the answers if I had simply looked into His word. I went to Plymouth Cathedral where I suffered mightily at the hands of the Administrator²¹ who saw everything in terms of works done.

The criticisms (and bullying) that I suffered at his hands drove me away from the Catholic Church but as I knew no other place to look for answers I returned again after a few weeks. I went in the first place to the supportive home of a parishioner and then to a ‘retreat’²² in the Monastery back at Downside Abbey. Although they were helpful and the Abbot gave of his time the final outcome did not help me think through the issues with Scripture in hand – it was instead my ability to once again celebrate the Roman rituals that indicated my alleged return to spiritual health. I returned to the Cathedral and the associated bullying and criticism strengthened in my resolve but not in my knowledge of the truth.

Not too long after this the Administrator drove himself into serious health problems with his ‘uptight’ attitude and was moved to Cornwall. I was left, as the only active priest working in the Cathedral, as acting Administrator.²³ One of the first decisions I made underscored the underlying but unconscious thoughts going through my mind about the Church of Rome and its doctrines. There was a 6am Mass on a Wednesday morning which had but two attendees, one of whom came to a later Mass as well. I therefore informed my two colleagues that it was henceforth ‘cut’ (unlike Roman doctrine and understanding I never accepted that the more one ‘did’ such things the better it was). They both complained until I asked which of them was to be saying it, as I had no intention of so doing! It hardly needs to be said that neither of them offered! That then cut down the number of daily Masses in the Cathedral parish to a mere 5! How I now wish I had seen and read, or been directed to the Letter to the Hebrews; Chapter 10, verses 11 -14, they would have made sense of my confusion and shown me the untruths at the heart of the Roman church - *“And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never*

²⁰ Ephesians 6:13-18

²¹ The title given to the priest running the cathedral on behalf of the bishop.

²² A time of spiritual rethink – normally at a monastery or somewhere with similar solitude.

²³ Although I had two colleagues one was a retired man in his 80s and the other was an older man who was struggling with alcoholism and was also the Hospital chaplain.

take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."²⁴

It should come as no surprise to hear that we were always given the impression, even taught in some way, that we should regard the Letter to the Hebrews as untrustworthy and not of great importance. No wonder! If you don't want people to see the truth the best plan is to frighten them away from it. Ironically, hidden away in the Roman set readings for the 33rd Sunday of the year (<B) this exact passage is set to be read that day.²⁵ There don't tend to be too many 33rd Sundays in the Roman calendar and if someone did read it I am sure the truth of this passage would have been ignored or unnoticed.²⁶ God has slipped it in though, there is some hope that other clergy may see it, study it, and preach on it.

²⁴ Hebrews 10:11-14

²⁵ In the Roman Lectionary of weekly Mass readings where they have set readings for years >A, >B & >C.

²⁶ The Roman tradition does not tend to preach on scripture itself, but on some theme that the given scripture can be said to have in it, or a special 'theme of the day' such as marriage, or on Roman doctrine.

Departure approaches

My move from the Cathedral was to a small parish on the edge of Plymouth, small in attendance though a large area with a high population. It was here, in the parish of St. Thomas More where, as Parish Priest and on my own as a minister for the first time I was able to begin a process of thinking for myself and acting according to my own conscience – even if the director of that conscience, the Holy Spirit, was still unknown to me.

Within 3 short years there I had, in many ways, overhauled the church, the events and the services within the parish. I did not have auricular confessions, except ‘on demand’, and let us be honest, no-one is going to come to the church house door and ask for confession! The church was re-ordered from its very dominant Roman style to a style more recognisable within other denominations. The altar (still such, not yet a table!) was lowered from its position ‘on high’ and simplified. The wooden lectern, hard against one wall, was replaced with a far more dominant stone lectern, further out into the middle of the church. The idolatrous²⁷ statue of Mary, mother of Jesus, was removed from the front of the church and placed in the entrance lobby. The tabernacle²⁸ was moved from the main church building and into the side chapel. Much of the time I ignored the issues of required ‘colour changes’ for vestments and hangings that Rome demands for the different seasons and feast days.

One of the key changes I brought in is something that although it is in the Roman liturgy is ignored by the vast majority of parishes throughout the world. In the liturgy for Good Friday the Roman church has the ‘Adoration of the Cross’. Note carefully the word cross, for although it is still idolatrous in its concept the liturgy does not call for a crucifix²⁹ to be used – although the vast majority of Roman churches use a crucifix. I refused to use a crucifix and made a cross to be used for this instead – the idea of people coming up and kissing the feet of the figure on a crucifix worried me even then. Many people did not like their ritual changed and I got a number of comments and complaints about this – as about the changes to the church buildings. Despite all this the numbers attending the church grew steadily which can only have been down to the Lord himself - *“For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me...”*³⁰

It is the last thing I will tell you of the events in the church in Plymouth that gives me the greatest surprise and the greatest faith that God uses us to do His work even as we do not know Him. I have, since then, discovered some of the sermon notes that I made in those three years. To my utter amazement, even though the notes were thin to the point of emaciation and my grasp of the texts was clearly not good, the Holy Spirit had led me to preach the Scriptures! *“...the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”*³¹

Looking back now I can see why it was that I continued to struggle mightily in my ministry there. For despite these many little signs that in myself I was being led

²⁷ Deuteronomy 5:8-10

²⁸ Where the ‘consecrated host’ from Roman Mass is kept for ‘adoration’.

²⁹ A cross with a figure representing Christ on it (see note 28).

³⁰ Romans 15:18

³¹ Luke 12:12

elsewhere I failed utterly to understand the problems at the heart of the Roman church. For three years I ministered there, with growing unease at why, although the parish was growing in numbers and I was to all intents and purposes doing a 'good job' I still felt unfulfilled. I still felt that there was a deep emptiness at the heart of all that I was doing. I still could not find within the Church of Rome any sense of the power of God that I told the parishioners of. I was like a 'whited sepulchre', with the appearance of godliness on the outside but with nothing but sin and guilt gnawing away at me inside. I had no assurance in what I did, and the more I did that which I was told to do the more I grew in doubts - *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."*³²

³² Matthew 23:27

Moving on

And so it was these gnawing doubts about the question of the truth that were what made me take the decision to leave the Roman church. I had been talking with a number of parishioners and giving them a gentle form of counselling, and time and time again found myself saying to them 'If things are like that then you must get out of that situation'. And eventually, after a particularly hard day, I found myself applying that to myself. I had been told to do all these things by the Church of Rome and so I had done them, yet I still remained searching for God. How could this be if what I was doing was so right? And so I determined to leave. Even though I had not yet found God He had found me and I could no longer resist His call to do so! *"For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."*³³

Others will no doubt also tell you of the difficulties that can be involved in leaving and for me it was no different. When I went to the Bishop and told him of my decision I ensured that I had a sympathetic clergy friend with me. This proved vital, as I was basically told that I was mad and needed to be sent away to one of the clergy houses where they 'straighten out' those who have gone off the rails. Had I been alone I may well have been cajoled and bullied into following that path but, thank God for His guidance, that did not happen. I left the church buildings within 5 days – and although I left a farewell letter to be read to the parishioners I do wonder whether it was actually read to them as there may have been fear that it would have stirred up the same response in them!

The one thing I was 'given' by the diocese was the deposit on a small bed-sit. No help, no advice, not even thanks for the seven years service that I had given them. Then, for about 12 months I was adrift with no church, no understanding of where to go to find the truth or how to find it and without 'hitting the bottom' I would still be rudderless even now.

³³ Luke 19:10

Seeing God

The one contact I had left was with a rugby club and through a foolish friendship with another member I became embroiled in 'the law'. Despite the unpleasantness of much of the experience there was one thing that occurred again and again that made me start to search for the truth of God. The first solicitor I was appointed was a Christian and not afraid to say so. The Barrister appointed was a Christian. The psychologist who affirmed my confusion and depression for the court was a Christian. The recorder³⁴ who gave sentence was a Christian. They all unfailingly understood and supported me in the troubles I was in and I wanted to know more, not just about the reason for their attitude but about why God had placed them in my path and so I started to go to various churches in the area to try to understand more. *"And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."*³⁵

The first few churches I tried did not 'work', and somehow were missing something; even though they were nominally evangelical I did not hear what was being said as any help or answer. But then, after discussion with someone³⁶ I had met through a placement on the second year of my university course (begun 5 months after leaving the service of Rome) I attended St. Andrew's Church in the centre of Plymouth. Although part of the Church of England they are members of the 'Reform' group and are staunch evangelicals. The simple service and the clear message from scripture caught my attention and I began to attend regularly. I also attended another Reform church in Exeter, St. Leonard's, where the same preaching of scripture struck a chord.

However, although I knew that I had found 'the answer' in the Scriptures I had not yet found my way to Christ. That happened on two separate days not too far apart during 1995, but in totally differing circumstances.

The first was when out walking with Gérardine, who I had met on my Social Work university course and who is now my wife. Whilst walking across part of Dartmoor³⁷ we were discussing faith and issues involved with it. It is instructive to tell you that my first conversation with Gérardine had been as a result of an 'Ichthus' fish symbol³⁸ on the back of her car which had led us into deeper and deeper conversation on many subjects. This walk was one of a number we took before and after marrying in 1996. During this particular walk I began the 'truth' game which, if memory serves me aright, comes from the film 'Truly, Madly, Deeply'. I began to talk about those issues which had constantly been problems for me during my time in the Roman Catholic Priesthood; including their doctrines of the 'Eucharist', of auricular 'Confession', compulsory celibacy and many other issues. Whilst having this discussion I was also able, for the first time ever, not just to discuss these issues but to cast these errant and unbiblical doctrines away – to throw away the psychological security blanket that they can provide. I remember feeling a sense of freedom as, leaning on the Scriptures; I dismissed each one after outlining the human arguments used to justify them. I can remember fully understanding for the first time, as if I had previously been looking through a net curtain, the idolatry of 'Benediction', of the Rosary and of Roman

³⁴ Local judge.

³⁵ Luke 11:9

³⁶ Gérardine, now my wife.

³⁷ A stunning and wild landscape in Devon where the 'infamous' Dartmoor Prison is located.

³⁸ Used in the UK almost exclusively by Evangelical Christians.

Marian theology in a way so clear as not to be denied. I can remember really understanding for the first time on that afternoon that human arguments and ideas could be of no use in finding God and salvation. "*No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel, can avail against the Lord.*"³⁹ Blessed be the name of the Lord for giving me His wisdom as I need it for my salvation.

I also know that I still did not yet understand where the whole truth was to be found, though that knowledge and inspiration was not too much further away. I was now, though, free from Rome in a way that I had not been before, and free from dependence upon the unbiblical and ungodly demands the Church of Rome makes upon her adherents.

³⁹ Proverbs 21:30

The day of recognition

Shortly after this we went and stayed with Gérardines brother-in-law, an Anglican Evangelical minister. On the Sunday the church service was one which completed their parish children's 'Holiday Club' and was unashamedly evangelistic in style, aiming at any parents who may have brought their children along but were not believers themselves. The speaker gave his message, the detail of which does not now stick in my mind, but which spoke of the need each one of us has for Jesus Christ in our lives and of his saving act on the cross. And at the end of the service he then invited any present who wished to give their lives to the Lord to join with him (silently) in saying a prayer of rejection of our sinful lives and commitment to Jesus Christ, through whom alone we could find salvation. I joined with that prayer, drawn to it as if unable to resist it. Although there was no magic moment or great emotions then I knew at that moment that my life had changed.

It is the Spirit of God that made known to me the Person and the unsurpassed merit of Christ Jesus. The convincing work in bringing me to Christ was the Holy Spirit's work. He it is who truly opens the heart. Amongst all the turmoil that I felt He silenced the objections that had been built into me. He applied the truths of Scripture to my mind showing me that I was sinner, and causing me to feel the conviction that lead to my faith in God.

The following week we went to church in Exeter and as a hymn started to be sung I was overcome by what had happened and by the reality of my salvation – the words of the hymn spoke to me directly.

'Such love, pure as the whitest snow;
such love weeps for the shame I know;
such love, paying the debt I owe;
O Jesus, such love.

... such love, fountain of life to me;
O Jesus, such love.'

I understood that my sins are forgiven, through His death on the cross. I understood that for all those years that I had been told by the Church of Rome that I had to earn such forgiveness through works and acts of my own and through the so-called sacraments of the Roman Church I had been living in delusion. *"We... know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified."*⁴⁰ For weeks after this I found myself in this same position, weeping my way through much of the service – not tears of pain, loss or anger, but tears of relief and joy that finally I saw and I understood the words of Jesus when he says to us

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."*⁴¹

⁴⁰ Galatians 2:16

⁴¹ John 14:6

A heartfelt plea

I am now a minister of the Gospel in the 'Free Church of England', a small, reformed, liturgical and most importantly, evangelical denomination. I preach and teach the Gospel as the sole source of faith and practice for Christians. I endeavour to help others understand that only by God's grace can we receive salvation⁴² and that thanks to His grace we are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. The Lord has blessed me, I know Jesus Christ is my Saviour; I repent of my sins and rest in his mercy. For those who read this who have not been brought to this point by God's grace and who are still enmeshed in the Church of Rome think and pray on this following passage. For Rome is separating you from the love of Christ.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

*For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*⁴³

⁴² Ephesians 2:8

⁴³ Romans 8:35-39