

Testimony

by Richard (Peter) Bennett

From Tradition To Truth A Priest's Story

Born Irish, my elementary and secondary education was with the Jesuit fathers, Belvedere College, Dublin, Ireland. Like every boy under the Jesuits, I could recite before the age of ten, five reasons why God exists and why the Pope is head of the Church. We were told that the Pope, as head of the Church of Rome, was the most important man on earth. What he said was law; and the Jesuits were his army.

After leaving college, I decided to become a Roman Catholic priest and for seven years studied philosophy and theology. The teaching authority of the Catholic Church, called the “Magisterium,” was always a central factor so that even when we did study some of the Bible, it was under the teaching authority of the Church. It taught that the R.C. Church is the one and only authority in all matters of faith and morals—the final law on all things.

Having been ordained as a Dominican Roman Catholic priest in 1963, I spent one more year studying theology at the Angelicum University in Rome. Then in September 1964, I was sent to the mission field in Trinidad, West Indies, where my first seven years were much the same as any R.C. priest. It was not until the Catholic Charismatic Movement came to Trinidad, however, that any notable change came into my life. In 1972, because of the Catholic Charismatic Movement, some Canadians came to Trinidad to teach us from the Bible. From their messages, I began to get a love for the Bible, and for the first time in my own life to use it as an authority.

One of the Bible texts used by the Canadians to urge us to pray for healing was Isaiah 53:5, “. . . **and by His wounds we are healed.**” Yet in studying Isaiah 53, I discovered that the Bible first addresses the problem of sin rather than healing: “**All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.**” Although I asked for forgiveness of my sins, I still did not realize that I was a sinner by nature. The Catholic Church had taught me that the depravity of man, which they call “original sin,” had been washed away by infant baptism. In my head, I still held this belief. Yet in my heart, I knew that my depraved nature had not yet been conquered by Christ. Philippians 3:10 became the cry of my heart, “**that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection . . .**” I knew that it could only be through this power that I could live the Christian life. It became the driving force of my life, and the Lord began to answer my prayer.

First, I discovered that God's Word in the Bible is absolute, without error. I had been taught that the Word is relative to the Roman Catholic Church and that its truthfulness in many areas was to be questioned. I began to understand that the Bible could be trusted. I began to study the Bible to see what it says about itself. I discovered that the Bible teaches clearly that it is from God and is absolute in what it says. It is true in its history, in the promises God had made, in its prophecies, in the moral commands it gives, and in how it teaches a believer to live the Christian life. “**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work**” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

I saw from the Bible (1 Tim. 2:5) that the role I was playing as priest was that of being a mediator—exactly what the Roman Church teaches, but exactly opposite to what the Bible teaches. I could see that this was wrong. Even so, I really enjoyed being looked up to by the people and being idolized by them.

I began to see the Roman Catholic's use of Mary, the saints, and the priests as sin. But while I was willing to renounce Mary and the Saints as mediators, I could not renounce the priesthood for in that I had everything invested. The problem crystalized in this: the Catholic Church taught me to look to the Mass and the sacraments as mediating salvation. How, then, could I accept salvation by simply trusting God's Word?

The idea of the Church being absolute or the Bible being absolute was seesawing inside me, shaping my response to everyday life. The tension of this seesawing made me at times physically ill. I ought to have known the simple truth that a man cannot serve two masters. During my final six years, I tried to serve both the Roman Catholic Church as an absolute authority and the Bible as an absolute authority. I was attempting to say that the absolutely authority of the Bible is subject to the “absolute authority of the Roman Church”—an impossibility.

Late 1985 God’s grace won. My decision to leave the security of the Roman Catholic Church was painful, beyond words. I decided to trust the Lord, however, and Him alone, on the authority of His Word in the Bible. I repented of my sins, especially that of being mediator. I accepted fully and unconditionally the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross, **“He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed”** (Isaiah 53:5).

Since leaving the Roman Catholic Church, the Lord has undergirded me in many marvelous ways, including some time as a missionary in Asia, and now as a full-time evangelist (1991).

If you are still trusting in the religious things that you do rather than in the finished work of Christ Jesus on the cross, I ask you to turn to the authority of God’s Word. **“It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ”** (1 Peter 1:18-19). It is the blood that makes atonement for your life. It is a completed work. Ask God to give you the grace to accept that Christ substituted for you, once and for all time. **“He Himself bore our sins on His body on the tree . . .”** (1 Peter 2:24).

If you ask with your whole heart He will put into you the will and the purpose to trust Him. In Him you will be born again. **“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit”** (John 3:6).