

# **From Rome To Christ - Former Priest's Testimony**

## **By Former Catholic Priest Mark Pena**



My name is Mark Pena. I was born in a little town north of Burgos called Villamediana de Lomas, Spain.

Because I wanted to be a missionary, I decided to enter the novitiate to become a Roman Catholic priest.

I began the novitiate July 24, 1949. After a year and a day we had to swear and promise to God before the Holy Community to observe for one year the vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience. With this ceremony we began to be members of the Congregation of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary the Immaculate. After this, we moved to Madrid to the Seminary Major that the Oblates have in Pozuelo de Alarcon. There we had to study two years of Philosophy and four years of Theology to be priests.

After three years it was necessary to profess for our entire lives the vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. Before arriving at ordination, the seminary student has to climb several steps on his ascent toward the top. They are called Orders, Minor Orders and Major Orders. It begins with the Tonsure, during the first year of Theology; then followed by the other orders.

On March 17, 1956, in the Church of the Seminary of Madrid, at the hands of the Bishop of Madrid-Alcala, Dr. Eyjo Garay, Patriarch of the East Indies, together with four classmates, I received my ordination to the priesthood.

My first Mass took place in the church of the Religiosas de San Jose de Cluny, in Pozuelo de Alarcon, the following day, Sunday, March 18, 1956. With great internal emotion and sublime sentiment for this first Mass I remember my nervousness that I should not break any of the rites and ceremonies. But here I must almost shout out loud that this "Greatest Act of Worship" in the Roman Catholic Church is only a kind of daily comedy—a serious comedy, yes, but comedy nevertheless. In the words of John Knox, a former Roman Catholic Priest, who became, after his conversion to Christ, the great leader of the Presbyterian Church—"THE MASS IS BLASPHEMY!"

The first Mass with the family in our home town was something humanly great for a little town such as mine. Everyone lived two days of intense emotion and fiesta during the 8th and 9th of July, 1956. We had fireworks, music, floral displays, games and joy. I was the first priest from that town and because of that it was a great pride for all the families.

I served as professor of Latin and French for the fourth year and Spanish Literature and Music for the fifth year, but I liked the preparation of the Sunday sermon for the 11 o'clock Mass in our church.

As the Provincial Patriarch knew of my missionary desires, he destined me together with another Oblate Father as Co-Pastor of a parish in the city of Badajoz. The 14th of November, 1958, I arrived at the Parish of Our Lady of the Assumption at Badajoz; formed by a populace borough of a big suburb with great spiritual and material misery. It was made up of 9,000 souls. For three years, I worked in this parish in the midst of the joy, contentment and satisfaction of the people. Truthfully, they felt proud of me. And I loved them and sought to win them by every means.

Increasingly, I felt burdened by my sins, and realized that there was no assurance of forgiveness through confessions and Roman Catholic practices. I felt that I was lost forever. The Mass and other practices became meaningless. I determined that I must leave the priesthood, go into the world and obtain secular employment and "enjoy life."

Increasingly, I felt dissatisfaction with the Mass, and the spiritual emptiness of the Roman Catholic Church. I contacted a Protestant pastor in Madrid, Alberto Arajo Fernandez. I did not know him but had been told that he was a prudent man and an earnest Christian. The first contact with him was very simple and cordial. And yet, the great majority of Roman Catholics, at least in Spain, think that Evangelical Protestants are something like rare insects! He let me explain my problem, and with wisdom and love before unknown to me, he counseled me and encouraged me to spend much time reading the New Testament. We corresponded regularly.

In February of 1962, I resolved to take the great step, to leave the Roman Catholic priesthood. I could not continue where there was only ritualistic coldness; as it is written, "Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5). I wrote to Arajo asking him to look for a place where I could hide, and a letter to another pastor in Bilbao, Juan Eizaguirre, asking him similarly, because at the first opportunity I was determined to leave the priesthood.

My Superior had arranged for me to preach in the celebration of the appearances of the virgin in Fatima. I chose it as my time to leave the priesthood and my religious state. I arrived in Madrid, May 8, 1962. Then I took the 3:30 plane to Holland, immediately, to get out of Spain before my Superior could learn of my defection and have the police close the Spanish border to me.

At this time, I knew nothing of true Biblical salvation. But in Holland, I lived with an Evangelical Protestant family. They read the Bible together and prayed in family devotions and at meals. They recommended me to Dr. Hegger, who was a converted priest and director of a work in Holland to help priests who want to leave the Roman System. It is called, "In the Straight Street," from the reference in the Acts of the Apostles. Dr. Hegger counseled with me and answered many of my doctrinal questions from the Word of God.

Shortly thereafter, I returned to Spain, via Portugal (for safety) to visit my mother, who was sick and worrying about me. The Lord enabled me to live in safety with my family for a month, and my mother improved greatly. On my return, by train, I was in my compartment, reading the Bible and praising the Lord. In this attitude of praise, passages of Scripture came to me, emphasizing that Jesus Christ is a perfect Savior; the only Savior; the all-sufficient Savior; that He made one perfect, never-to-be-repeated sacrifice on the cross of Calvary for my sins; that He was my substitute, my sin-bearer; and that He would impute His righteousness to me and forgive all my sins if I would but trust Him with all my heart. In one moment, I did so. I gave Him my life, my soul, and accepted Him, trusted Him as my Lord and Savior forever. The words of GOD were fulfilled in my heart and life: "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). My sins are forgiven; my soul is saved; heaven is my home; Christ is mine, and I am His forever!

I returned to Holland, where I contacted The Conversion Center, about coming to America and studying the Word of God. The Lord enabled me, after some difficulty, to arrive, via Canada, in September of 1963, when I commenced studies at Faith Theological Seminary. — *Mark Pena*

*"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Romans 10:1-4)."*

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