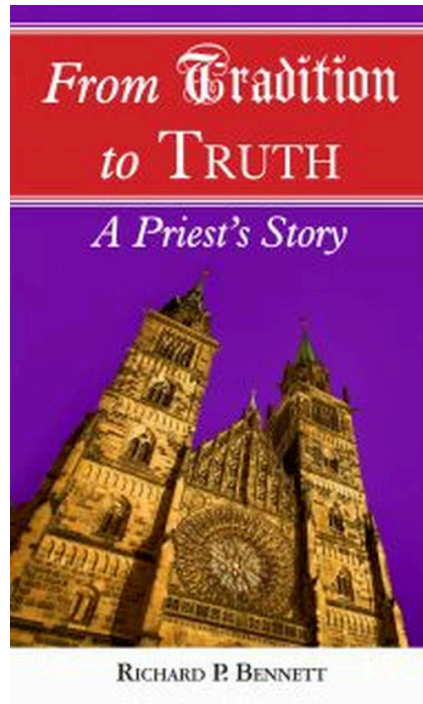


From Tradition to Truth

A Priest's Story

By Former Catholic Priest, Richard Bennett



The Early Years

Born Irish, in a family of eight, my early childhood was fulfilled and happy. My father was a colonel in the Irish Army until he retired when I was about nine. As a family, we loved to play, sing, and act, all within a military camp in Dublin.

We were a typical Irish Roman Catholic family. My father sometimes knelt down to pray at his bedside in a solemn manner. My mother would talk to Jesus while sewing, washing dishes, or even smoking a cigarette. Most evenings we would kneel in the living room to say the Rosary together. No one ever missed Mass on Sundays unless he was seriously ill. By the time I was about five or six years of age, Jesus Christ was a very real person to me, but so also were Mary and the saints. I can identify easily with others in traditional Catholic nations in Europe and with Hispanics and Filipinos who put Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and other saints all in one boiling pot of faith.

The catechism was drilled into me at the Jesuit School of Belvedere, where I had all my elementary and secondary education. Like every boy who studies under the Jesuits, I could recite before the age of ten five reasons why God existed and why the Pope was head of the only true Church. Getting souls out of Purgatory was a serious matter. The often quoted words, "It is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins,"

were memorized even though we did not know what these words meant. We were told that the Pope as head of the Church was the most important man on earth. What he said was law, and the Jesuits were his right-hand men. Even though the Mass was in Latin, I tried to attend daily because I was intrigued by the deep sense of mystery which surrounded it. We were told it was the most important way to please God. Praying to saints was encouraged, and we had patron saints for most aspects of life. I did not make a practise of that, with one exception: St. Anthony, the patron of lost objects, since I seemed to lose so many things.

When I was fourteen years old, I sensed a call to be a missionary. This call, however, did not affect the way in which I conducted my life at that time. Age sixteen to eighteen were the most fulfilled and enjoyable years a youth could have. During this time, I did quite well both academically and athletically.

I often had to drive my mother to the hospital for treatments. While waiting for her, I found quoted in a book these verses from Mark 10:29-30, "And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life." Not having any idea of the true salvation message, I decided that I truly did have a call to be a missionary.

Trying To Earn Salvation

I left my family and friends in 1956 to join the Dominican Order. I spent eight years studying what it is to be a monk, the traditions of the Church, philosophy, the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and some of the Bible from a Catholic standpoint. Whatever personal faith I had was institutionalized and ritualized in the Dominican religious system. Obedience to the law, both Church and Dominican, was put before me as the means of sanctification. I often spoke to Ambrose Duffy, our Master of Students, about the law being the means of becoming holy. In addition to becoming "holy," I wanted also to be sure of eternal salvation. I memorized part of the teaching of Pope Pius XII in which he said, "...the salvation of many depends on the prayers and sacrifices of the mystical body of Christ offered for this intention." This idea of gaining salvation through suffering and prayer is also the basic message of Fatima and Lourdes, and I sought to win my own salvation as well as the salvation of others by such suffering and prayer. In the Dominican monastery in Tallaght, Dublin, I performed many difficult feats to win souls, such as taking cold showers in the middle of winter and beating my back with a small steel chain. The Master of Students knew what I was doing, his own austere life being part of the inspiration that I had received from the Pope's words. With rigor and determination, I studied, prayed, did penance, tried to keep the Ten Commandments and the multitude of Dominican rules and traditions.

Outward Pomp — Inner Emptiness

Then in 1963 at the age of twenty-five I was ordained a Roman Catholic priest and went on to finish my course of studies of Thomas Aquinas at The Angelicum University in Rome. But there I had difficulty with both the outward pomp and the inner emptiness. Over the years I had formed, from pictures and books, pictures in my mind of the Holy See and the Holy City. Could this be the same city? At the Angelicum University I was also shocked that hundreds of others who poured into our morning classes seemed quite disinterested in theology. I noticed Time and Newsweek magazines being read during classes. Those who were interested in what was being taught seemed only to be looking for either degrees or positions within the Catholic Church in their homelands.

One day I went for a walk in the Colosseum so that my feet might tread the ground where the blood of so many Christians had been poured out. I walked to the arena in the Forum. I tried to picture in my mind those men and women who knew Christ so well that they were joyfully willing to be burned at the stake or devoured alive by beasts because of His overpowering love. The joy of this experience was marred, however, for as I went back in the bus I was insulted by jeering youths shouting words meaning “scum or garbage.” I sensed their motivation for such insults was not because I stood for Christ as the early Christians did but because they saw in me the Roman Catholic system. Quickly, I put this contrast out of my mind, yet what I had been taught about the present glories of Rome now seemed very irrelevant and empty.

One night soon after that, I prayed for two hours in front of the main altar in the church of San Clemente. Remembering my earlier youthful call to be a missionary and the hundredfold promise of Mark 10:29-30, I decided not to take the theological degree that had been my ambition since beginning study of the theology of Thomas Aquinas. This was a major decision, but after long prayer I was sure I had decided correctly.

The priest who was to direct my thesis did not want to accept my decision. In order to make the degree easier, he offered me a thesis written several years earlier. He said I could use it as my own if only I would do the oral defense. This turned my stomach. It was similar to what I had seen a few weeks earlier in a city park: elegant prostitutes parading themselves in their black leather boots. What he was offering was equally sinful. I held to my decision, finishing at the University at the ordinary academic level, without the degree.

On returning from Rome, I received official word that I had been assigned to do a three year course at Cork University. I prayed earnestly about my missionary call. To my surprise, I received orders in late August 1964 to go to Trinidad, West Indies, as a missionary.

Pride, Fall, And A New Hunger

On October 1, 1964, I arrived in Trinidad, and for seven years I was a successful priest, in Roman Catholic terms, doing all my duties and getting many people to come to Mass. By 1972 I had become quite involved in the Catholic Charismatic Movement. Then, at a prayer meeting on March 16th of that year, I thanked the Lord that I was such a good priest and requested that if it were His will, He humble me that I might be even better. Later that same evening I had a freak accident, splitting the back of my head and hurting my spine in many places. Without thus coming close to death, I doubt that I would ever have gotten out of my self-satisfied state. Rote, set prayer showed its emptiness as I cried out to God in my pain.

In the suffering that I went through in the weeks after the accident, I began to find some comfort in direct personal prayer. I stopped saying the Breviary (the Roman Catholic Church's official prayer for clergy) and the Rosary and began to pray using parts of the Bible itself. This was a very slow process. I did not know my way through the Bible and the little I had learned over the years had taught me more to distrust it rather than to trust it. My training in philosophy and in the theology of Thomas Aquinas left me helpless, so that coming into the Bible now to find the Lord was like going into a huge dark woods without a map.

When assigned to a new parish later that year, I found that I was to work side-by-side with a Dominican priest who had been a brother to me over the years. For more than two years we were to work together, fully seeking God as best we knew in the parish of Pointe-a-Pierre. We read, studied, prayed, and put into practise what we had been taught in Church teaching. We built up communities in Gasparillo, Claxton Bay, and Marabella, just to mention the main villages. In a Catholic religious sense we were very successful. Many people attended Mass. The Catechism was taught in many schools, including government schools. I continued my personal search into the Bible, but it did not much affect the work we were doing; rather it showed me how little I really knew about the Lord and His Word. It was at this time that Philippians 3:10 became the cry of my heart, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection...."

About this time the Catholic Charismatic movement was growing, and we introduced it into most of our villages. Because of this movement, some Canadian Christians came to Trinidad to share with us. I learned much from their messages, especially about praying for healing. The whole impact of what they said was very experience-oriented but was truly a blessing, insofar, as it got me deeply into the Bible as an authority source. I began to compare scripture with scripture and even to quote chapter and verse! One of the texts the Canadians used was Isaiah 53:5, "...and with his stripes we are healed." Yet in studying Isaiah 53, I discovered that the Bible deals with the problem of sin by means of substitution. Christ died in my place. It was wrong for me to try to expedite or try to cooperate in paying the price of my sin. "If by grace, it

is no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace.." Romans 11:6. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

One particular sin of mine was getting annoyed with people, sometimes even angry. Although I asked forgiveness for my sins, I still did not realize that I was a sinner by the nature which we all inherit from Adam. The scriptural truth is, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10), and "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The Catholic Church, however, had taught me that the depravity of man, which is called "original sin," had been washed away by my infant baptism. I still held this belief in my head, but in my heart I knew that my depraved nature had not yet been conquered by Christ. "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection..." (Philippians 3:10) continued to be the cry of my heart. I knew that it could be only through His power that I could live the Christian life. I posted this text on the dashboard of my car and in other places. It became the plea that motivated me, and the Lord who is Faithful began to answer.

The Ultimate Question

First, I discovered that God's Word in the Bible is absolute and without error. I had been taught that the Word is relative and that its truthfulness in many areas was to be questioned. Now I began to understand that the Bible could, in fact, be trusted. With the aid of Strong's Concordance, 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 has made, in its prophecies, in the moral commands it gives, and in how 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 perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Timothy 3:16-17).

This discovery was made while visiting in Vancouver, B.C., and in Seattle. When I was asked to talk to the prayer group in St. Stephen's Catholic Church, I took as my subject the absolute authority of God's Word. It was the first time that I had understood such a truth or talked about it. I returned to Vancouver, B.C. and in a large parish Church, before about 400 people, I preached the same message. Bible in hand, I proclaimed that "the absolute and final authority in all matters of faith and morals is the Bible, God's own Word."

Three days later, the archbishop of Vancouver, B.C., James Carney, called me to his office. I was then officially silenced and forbidden to preach in his archdiocese. I was told that my punishment would have been more severe, were it not for the letter of recommendation I had received from my own archbishop, Anthony Pantin. Soon afterwards I returned to Trinidad.

Church-Bible Dilemma

While I was still parish priest of Point-a-Pierre, Ambrose Duffy, the man who had so strictly taught me while he was Student Master, was asked to assist me. The tide had turned. After some initial difficulties, we became close friends. I shared with him what I was discovering. He listened and commented with great interest and wanted to find out what was motivating me. I saw in him a channel to my Dominican brothers and even to those in the Archbishop's house. When he died suddenly of a heart attack, I was stricken with grief. In my mind, I had seen Ambrose as the one who could make sense out of the Church-Bible dilemma with which I so struggled. I had hoped that he would have been able to explain to me and then to my Dominican brothers the truths with which I wrestled. I preached at his funeral and my despair was very deep.

I continued to pray Philippians 3:10, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection...." But to learn more about Him, I had first to learn about myself as a sinner. I saw from the Bible (I Timothy 2:5) that the role I was playing as a priestly mediator ? exactly what the Catholic Church teaches but exactly opposite to what the Bible teaches ? was wrong. I really enjoyed being looked up to by the people and, in a certain sense, being idolized by them. I rationalized my sin by saying that after all, if this is what the biggest Church in the world teaches, who am I to question it? Still, I struggled with the conflict within. I began to see the worship of Mary, the saints, and the priests for the sin that it is. But while I was willing to renounce Mary and the saints as mediators, I could not renounce the priesthood, for in that I had invested my whole life.

Tug-Of-War Years

Mary, the saints, and the priesthood were just a small part of the huge struggle with which I was working. Who was Lord of my life, Jesus Christ in His Word or the Roman Church? This ultimate question raged inside me especially during my last six years as parish priest of Sangre Grande (1979-1985). That the Catholic Church was supreme in all matters of faith and morals had been dyed into my brain since I was a child. It looked impossible ever to change. Rome was not only supreme but always called "Holy Mother." How could I ever go against "Holy Mother," all the more so since I had an official part in dispensing her sacraments and keeping people faithful to her?

In 1981, I actually rededicated myself to serving the Roman Catholic Church while attending a parish renewal seminar in New Orleans. Yet when I returned to Trinidad and again became involved in real life problems, I began to return to the authority of God's Word. Finally the tension became like a tug-of-war inside me. Sometimes I looked to the Roman Church as being absolute, sometimes to the authority of the Bible as being final. My stomach suffered much during those years; my emotions were being torn. I ought to have

known the simple truth that one cannot serve two masters. My working position was to place the absolute authority of the Word of God under the supreme authority of the Roman Church.

This contradiction was symbolized in what I did with the four statues in the Sangre Grande Church. I removed and broke the statues of St. Francis and St. Martin because the second commandment of God's Law declares in Exodus 20:4, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...." But when some of the people objected to my removal of the statues of the Sacred Heart and of Mary, I left them standing because the higher authority, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church, said in its law Canon 1188: "The practise of displaying sacred images in the churches for the veneration of the faithful is to remain in force." I did not see that what I was trying to do was to make God's Word subject to man's word.

My Own Fault

While I had learned earlier that God's Word is absolute, I still went through this agony of trying to maintain the Roman Catholic Church as holding more authority than God's Word, even in issues where the Church of Rome was saying the exact opposite to what was in the Bible. How could this be? First of all, it was my own fault. If I had accepted the authority of the Bible as supreme, I would have been convicted by God's Word to give up my priestly role as mediator, but that was too precious to me. Second, no one ever questioned what I did as a priest. Christians from overseas came to Mass, saw our sacred oils, holy water, medals, statues, vestments, rituals, and never said a word! The marvelous style, symbolism, music, and artistic taste of the Roman Church was all very captivating. Incense not only smells pungent, but to the mind it spells mystery.

The Turning Point

One day, a woman challenged me (the only Christian ever to challenge me in all my 22 years as a priest), "You Roman Catholics have a form of godliness, but you deny its power." Those words bothered me for some time because the lights, banners, folk music, guitars, and drums were dear to me. Probably no priest on the whole island of Trinidad had as colorful robes, banners, and vestments as I had. Clearly I did not apply what was before my eyes.

In October 1985, God's grace was greater than the lie that I was trying to live. I went to Barbados to pray over the compromise that I was forcing myself to live. I felt truly trapped. The Word of God is absolute indeed. I ought to obey it alone; yet to the very same God I had vowed obedience to the supreme authority of the Catholic Church. In Barbados I read a book in which was explained the Biblical meaning of Church as "the fellowship of believers." In the New Testament there is no hint of a hierarchy; "Clergy" lording it over the "laity" is unknown. Rather, it is as the Lord Himself declared "...one is your

Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren" (Matthew 23:8). Now to see and to understand the meaning of church as "fellowship" left me free to let go of the Roman Catholic Church as supreme authority and depend on Jesus Christ as Lord. It began to dawn on me that in Biblical terms, the Bishops I knew in the Catholic Church were not Biblical believers. They were for the most part pious men taken up with devotion to Mary and the Rosary and loyal to Rome, but not one had any idea of the finished work of salvation, that Christ's work is done, that salvation is personal and complete. They all preached penance for sin, human suffering, religious deeds, "the way of man" rather than the Gospel of grace. But by God's grace I saw that it was not through the Roman Church nor by any kind of works that one is saved, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

New Birth at Age 48

I left the Roman Catholic Church when I saw that life in Jesus Christ was not possible while remaining true to Roman Catholic doctrine. In leaving Trinidad in November 1985, I only reached neighboring Barbados. Staying with an elderly couple, I prayed to the Lord for a suit and necessary money to reach Canada, for I had only tropical clothing and a few hundred dollars to my name. Both prayers were answered without making my needs known to anyone except the Lord.

From a tropical temperature of 90 degrees, I landed in snow and ice in Canada. After one month in Vancouver, I came to the United States of America. I now trusted that He would take care of my many needs, since I was beginning life anew at 48 years of age, practically penniless, without an alien resident card, without a driver's license, without a recommendation of any kind, having only the Lord and His Word.

I spent six months with a Christian couple on a farm in Washington State. I explained to my hosts that I had left the Roman Catholic Church and that I had accepted Jesus Christ and His Word in the Bible as all-sufficient. I had done this, I said, "absolutely, finally, definitively, and resolutely." Yet far from being impressed by these four adverbs, they wanted to know if there was any bitterness or hurt inside me. In prayer and in great compassion, they ministered to me, for they themselves had made the transition and knew how easily one can become embittered. Four days after I arrived in their home, by God's grace I began to see in repentance the fruit of salvation. This meant being able not only to ask the Lord's pardon for my many years of compromising but also to accept His healing where I had been so deeply hurt. Finally, at age 48, on the authority of God's Word alone, by grace alone, I accepted Christ's substitutionary death on the Cross alone. To Him alone be the glory.

Having been refurbished both physically and spiritually by this Christian couple together with their family, I was provided a wife by the Lord, Lynn,

born-again in faith, lovely in manner, intelligent in mind. Together we set out for Atlanta, Georgia, where we both got jobs.

A Real Missionary With A Real Message

In September 1988, we left Atlanta to go as missionaries to Asia. It was a year of deep fruitfulness in the Lord that once I would never have thought was possible. Men and women came to know the authority of the Bible and the power of Christ's death and resurrection. I was amazed at how easy it is for the Lord's grace to be effective when only the Bible is used to present Jesus Christ. This contrasted with the cobwebs of church tradition that had so clouded my 21 years in missionary garments in Trinidad, 21 years without the real message.

To explain the abundant life of which Jesus spoke and which I now enjoy, no better words could be used than those of Romans 8:1-2: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." It is not just that I have been freed from the Roman Catholic system, but that I have become a new creature in Christ. It is by the grace of God, and nothing but His grace, that I have gone from dead works into new life.

Testimony to the Gospel of Grace

Back in 1972, when some Christians had taught me about the Lord healing our bodies, how much more helpful it would have been had they explained to me on what authority our sinful nature is made right with God. The Bible clearly shows that Jesus substituted for us on the cross. I cannot express it better than Isaiah 53:5: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (This means that Christ took on himself what I ought to suffer for my sins. Before the Father, I trust in Jesus as my substitute.)

That was written 750 years before the crucifixion of our Lord. A short time after the sacrifice of the cross, the Bible states in I Peter 2:24: "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed."

Because we inherited our sin nature from Adam, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. How can we stand before a Holy God — except in Christ — and acknowledge that He died where we ought to have died? God gives us the faith to be born again, making it possible for us to acknowledge Christ as our substitute. It was Christ who paid the price for our sins: sinless,

yet He was crucified. This is the true Gospel message. Is faith enough? Yes, born-again faith is enough. That faith, born of God, will result in good works including repentance: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

In repenting, we put aside, through God's strength, our former way of life and our former sins. It does not mean that we cannot sin again, but it does mean that our position before God has changed. We are called children of God, for so indeed we are. If we do sin, it is a relationship problem with the Father which can be resolved, not a problem of losing our position as a child of God in Christ, for this position is irrevocable. In Hebrews 10:10, the Bible says it so wonderfully: "...we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The finished work of Christ Jesus on the Cross is sufficient and complete. As you trust solely in this finished work, a new life which is born of the Spirit will be yours ? you will be born again.

The Present Day

My present task: the good work that the Lord has prepared for me to do is as an evangelist situated in the Pacific Northwest of the U.S.A. What Paul said about his fellow Jews I say about my dearly loved Catholic brothers: my heart's desire and prayer to God for Catholics is that they may be saved. I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based in God's Word but in their church tradition. If you understand the devotion and agony that some of our brothers and sisters in the Philippines and South America have put into their religion, you may understand my heart's cry: "Lord, give us a compassion to understand the pain and torment of the search our brothers and sisters have made to please You. In understanding pain inside the Catholic hearts, we will have the desire to show them the Good News of Christ's finished work on the Cross."

My testimony shows how difficult it was for me as a Catholic to give up Church tradition, but when the Lord demands it in His Word, we must do it. The "form of godliness" that the Roman Catholic Church has makes it most difficult for a Catholic to see where the real problem lies. Everyone must determine by what authority we know truth. Rome claims that it is only by her own authority that truth is known. In her own words, Canon 212, Section 1, "The Christian faithful, conscious of their own responsibility, are bound by Christian obedience to follow what the sacred pastors, as representatives of Christ, declare as teachers of the faith or determine as leaders of the Church." (Vatican Council II based, Code of Canon Law promulgated by Pope John-Paul II, 1983). Yet according to the Bible, it is God's Word itself which is the authority by which truth is known. It was man-made traditions which caused the Reformers to demand "the Bible only, faith only, grace only, in Christ only, and to God only be the glory."

The Reason Why I Share

I share these truths with you now so that you can know God's way of salvation. Our basic fault as Catholics is that we believe that somehow we can of ourselves respond to the help God gives us to be right in His sight. This presupposition that many of us have carried for years is aptly defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) #2021, "Grace is the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted sons...."

With that mindset, we were unknowingly holding to a teaching that the Bible continually condemns. Such a definition of grace is man's careful fabrication, for the Bible consistently declares that the believer's right standing with God is "without works" (Romans 4:6), "without the deeds of the Law" (Romans 3:28), "not of works" (Ephesians 2:9), "It is the gift of God," (Ephesians 2:8). To attempt to make the believer's response part of his salvation and to look upon grace as "a help" is to flatly deny Biblical truth,

"...if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace..." (Romans 11:6).

The simple Biblical message is that "the gift of righteousness" in Christ Jesus is a gift, resting on His all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross, "For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17).

So it is as Christ Jesus Himself said, He died in place of the believer, the One for many (Mark 10:45), His life a ransom for many. As He declared, "...this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28).

This is also what Peter proclaimed, "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God..." (I Peter 3:18).

Paul's preaching is summarized at the end of II Corinthians 5:21, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.." (II Cor. 5:21).

This fact, dear reader, is presented clearly to you in the Bible. Acceptance of it is now commanded by God, "...Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

The most difficult repentance for us dyed-in-the-wool Catholics is changing our mind from thoughts of "meriting," "earning," "being good enough," simply to accepting with empty hands the gift of righteousness in Christ Jesus. To refuse to accept what God commands is the same sin as that of the religious Jews of Paul's time, "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." (Romans 10:3)

Repent and believe the Good News!

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