



J. Ernest Fresques

*God's Merciful Grace:
Before and After My Life as a Priest*

As a child, I considered the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church as my basic standard of morality. My relationship to my Creator depended on them—or so I was told. The message I received was that I was all right with God as long as I was all right with the Church. I was all right with the Church as long as I was faithful in keeping its institutional requirements. In effect, I was taught to focus on the Church. Where was God? By implication, God was there, but in the background. *The Church* was the one that claimed authority.

I do acknowledge something very important for my developing sense of morality: our priest required that we memorize the Ten Commandments, which I did. To this day, I can recite them without flaw. More accurately, I should say that I learned the Roman Catholic revision of them.

False Presence

Where was Jesus to me as a young Catholic boy? Well, He had ascended into heaven, but I had access to Him in what appeared to be the bread of Holy Communion, also called *Eucharist*. And if I wanted to be alone with Him, and pray to Him, I could simply go to any Roman Catholic Church in the world, and there He would be waiting for me. Actually, the wafer did not even look like bread. Anyway, we were told that it was Jesus—body and blood, soul and divinity. I was strictly instructed that I had better believe that or else I would be guilty of serious sin for doubting an official teaching of an infallible Church! Woe is me that I should dare to think outside its teachings!

At some point I learned that I would incur the *ipso facto* penalty of excommunication from the Church if I disagreed with any of its official teachings. To be excommunicated from the Church meant to be out of communion with God, my Creator. I would not want to die in that condition, for then it would become permanent: “world without end. Amen.” Woe is me! I had better accept the Roman Catholic Church's self-concept as the measure of revealed truth.

The Big One

As a boy, and a teenager, I was obliged to attend Mass every Sunday and on every “Holy Day of Obligation.” This, I was told, was “binding under the pain of mortal sin.” So I was taught; so I

believed. Imagine the burden this placed on me, not only during my childhood, but also through much of my life as a young adult. My right standing with God hung in the balance, as it were, every Sunday!

The concept of mortal sin weighed heavily on my mind. If I missed Mass, I would lose my salvation through a “mortal sin” of omission! If I ate meat on a Friday, I would become alienated from God! I would then need *forgiveness from God*. As a Catholic youth, how could I find God and receive His forgiveness? There was a resource available to me any Saturday afternoon: I could make a very private confession to a Roman Catholic priest! ”Bless me, *Father*, for I have sinned,” is how I began my confessions. All I had to do was to be sorry, resolve not to commit those sins again, confess them to the priest through an opaque screen in the dark confessional, and do *penance*, which was usually a set of prayers that had to be said before leaving the church building.

Penance?

I was never taught nor had ever heard of Jesus Christ's teaching of *repentance*. I was taught about *original sin* and its forgiveness through the sacrament of baptism, but that was not a practical consideration for me. After all, I had been baptized as an infant and had become a child of God (so I was taught, so I thought) “*ex opere operato*,” those famous Latin words meaning that it worked automatically. I was not made aware that I was living in a condition of alienation from God, as an enemy of God, as the Scripture states, “*for if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life*” (Romans 5:10). After all, in my mind I remembered that I had been baptized. I had been made a child of God (so I was taught). But when I was not faithful to the Church laws, I experienced guilt. I would then decide, “I’d better go to confession!”

Legalism

Although I had never heard of the term *legalism*, I was being trained to be legalistic. I was so immersed in the *culture of Catholicism* that eventually I became enmeshed in the *politics of Romanism*. I became a Roman Catholic priest. I had good intentions; I wanted to be God's instrument of forgiveness and preach the Word of God to God's people. Yet, I myself had no in-depth understanding of the basic biblical teachings pertaining to a person's relationship with the Lord: *union* with the Father by grace—through *faith in Jesus alone*. For me at the time (as with all Roman Catholic people) union with the Father was thought to happen by means of the sacraments, especially through baptism and the Eucharist.

In October 1967, I was serving in my first assignment as an associate pastor. I had been offering the Mass for the intentions assigned to me by the pastor. He also gave me the attached financial offerings, and I had accepted them. But come the end of October, I was in for a big surprise. We associates met with the pastor. On the agenda for our meeting was the subject of *All Souls Day* that would occur on the 2nd of November. In preparation for that day, special envelopes were made available to the parishioners for two purposes: to list the names of their *deceased* friends and family members on the outside of the envelope, and to place a financial offering inside the envelope. After the envelopes were emptied of the offerings, they would be

placed on the altar so that the deceased persons named on them would be remembered at the special Masses for the dead on the 2nd of November.

What happened to the money? I was surprised to learn that it was to be divided among the priests who presided at these special Masses. I was amazed, and I objected to this practice. I did not think any of the money should come to the priests, and I did not want to participate in the practice. The pastor accommodated my wish. He assigned me to offer the Mass at the convent chapel of the Sisters on the 2nd of November. That way I would be excluded from sharing in the windfall. He may have felt sorry for me since he later made an arrangement that resulted in my receiving additional money. The offerings are called “stipends.” It would be wrong to charge money for what the Church said were spiritual blessings. That would be “*simony*.” I had become aware of a hidden agenda. Nevertheless, I continued to accept a stipend each time I presided at a Mass.

This practice of taking money for Masses is still carried on in the Roman Catholic Church. On June 13, 2004, an article appeared in *The Arizona Republic* in Phoenix, Arizona. The headline read, “U. S. Catholics outsourcing prayers to India.” It was by Saritha Rai for *the New York Times*. She wrote that because of the short supply of Roman Catholic clergy in the United States, churches in Kerala often receive Mass “intentions” from overseas, and that “The intention (is) often a prayer for the repose of the soul of a deceased relative.” She pointed out that, “The requests are mostly routed to Kerala’s churches through the Vatican, the bishops, or through religious bodies.” Here is a notable point. She stated that, “A prayer request from the United States typically comes with \$5,” as compared with local donations of “40 rupees (90 cents).” “In Kerala, where priests earn \$45 a month, the money is a welcome supplement, (Bishop) Adayanthrath said.” There is a distinction here: the money is a *stipend*, not an overt *stipulation*. The practice is to take money for Masses, but this is not charging for them; it is, they claim, merely accepting the *customary* donation. This is reminiscent of the Pharisees of old.

A New Career

I decided in early 1969 that I would change careers at an appropriate time so that I could establish my own family. As I interacted with the families in the parish in Glendale, Arizona, I gradually came to the realization that I would prefer family life to that of a bachelor who would never have a wife, children, and grandchildren. After about two years in the priesthood, I asked myself, “What am I doing here?” A year later I decided that it was time to find another career. I submitted my letter of resignation to Bishop McCarthy, the first Bishop of the *Diocese of Phoenix* in Arizona in January 1970.

I enjoyed presiding at Mass and preaching. I would have liked to continue doing these things even though I would have a new, full-time career. Why not help as a weekend priest? Bishop McCarthy made the right administrative decision when he said “*No*” to that idea. In retrospect, I appreciate his decision. Years later, I would come to appreciate the Gospel of Jesus to the extent that I knew that a complete and final break with Romanism is right and inevitable. “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*” (Galatians 5:1).

I became an agent with the *New York Life Insurance Company* in April 1970. I married Molly Valencia in October 1970, and we became parents in 1974. That is the year we adopted two lovely little sisters, Melinda and Grizelda, ages 5 and 2, who are now beautiful young

women in their thirties. We have one son, Jerome, also in his thirties, born that same year. In July 1978, we were delighted to welcome Cecilia into our family. Like her brother, Jerome, she was born at *Good Samaritan Hospital* in Phoenix, Arizona. At this writing, she and Jerome are still single. We have one granddaughter, Jessica, and three grandsons: Stephen, Joseph, and Xavier.

Conviction, Faith, and New Life

In November 1977, I was alone at home, and I went into my backyard where I prayed to Jesus and acknowledged Him as *my Savior* and the *Lord of my life*. The sentiments of my heart on that memorable day were in words such as the following, “God, my Creator, I acknowledge that I have made choices against your love for me; that I have turned away from you in sin. I now turn to you to trust in your Son, Jesus, in His life and death on my behalf. Jesus, you are the Christ. God, your Father, raised you from the dead. The Father has drawn me to you. Let me repent of my sinfulness and of all my sins against you. Let me believe in you. I ask your forgiveness. I ask to receive you, to receive your Spirit here and now. You are my Savior: I put my trust in you. You are my Lord: I yield my life to you.”

For me that day, the words of John 1:12-13 were fulfilled, “*But as many as received Him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*”

Background to My Backyard Moment of November 1977

In retrospect, my experience “prior” to that moment was very interesting, and very important. Months prior to November 1977, Molly and I, and our three children, had become associated with a newly organized group of former Roman Catholic priests, nuns, and their respective families. The group called itself “*New Ministry*.” We met many wonderful people who became our friends. We met once a month in Scottsdale, Arizona. In these meetings began the process toward a personal conversion to “Jesus Alone” (*Solo Christo*). This leads us now to November 1977. It is then that I had acknowledged Jesus as my personal Savior and had asked to receive Him! I prayed to Jesus, the Victor over death (moral, physical, and spiritual) and I had acknowledged him as *my Savior*.

As a direct result of our regular study of the Bible, I began reading privately from the Word of God each morning. How refreshing! Because of my desire to commit the Word of God to memory, I decided to use music to help me. I composed melodies of various New Testament passages. One of these, which I taught to my three children, is based on Galatians 5:22, 23:

*Love, joy, peace. Patience, kindness, goodness,
Trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
These are the fruit, the fruit of the Holy Spirit.
See the Letter to Galatians, Chapter 5,
Verse twenty-two, and twenty-three.*

The next thing that happened is that John Antonio Budreski, a friend of mine since 1967, not only listened to my music, but he enjoyed it so much that he decided that we must record it! So

we did. We recorded at Sound Tech Studios in Phoenix, Arizona in December 1980. I sang and played the Autoharp. For the other melodies, I was the lead singer with three backup vocalists. For instrumentalists, we hired professional musicians from the Phoenix Symphony Orchestra. Ten years later, in 1990, I recorded another album of melodies. This recording was done on cassette album.

Light and Darkness

I was walking in spiritual darkness when I was a Roman Catholic priest; yet, I thought I was walking in the light of truth. To some extent the Word of God had enlightened me, but still I was a walking and talking example of a man who had believed and lived according to the false teaching about priesthood as presented in the Roman Catholic Church. Roman priests are not Christian priests. The only true priests are the “High Priest,” which is Christ Jesus, the Savior who lived, suffered, died, and rose from death for sinners, and the royal priesthood of believers, i.e., the true disciples of Jesus Christ. As a royal priesthood, the disciples (true followers of Jesus Christ) offer up sacrifices of praise to God. They cannot forgive sin or provide salvation to the lost. Jesus, the God-Man, is the only one who could make atonement for us, and who did make atonement for us sinners and for our sins; and he is the “only” Mediator between mankind and God the Father. Roman Catholic priests, so-called, cannot forgive sins, and neither can their sacraments. They cannot make present the unique, historical sacrifice of Christ Jesus. The bread and wine of Holy Communion are not the substances of the body and blood of Jesus, as they allege. They are symbolic *reminders* of Christ Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself to the Father in atonement for us sinners, who are powerless of ourselves to make peace with the Father. *Jesus* accomplished that: Jesus Christ alone is our Savior! What a wonderful and overwhelming message. It is really good news! Everyone needs to know this. *Christ Jesus is the Lord of the Old and New Testaments*. He is true and He is the Truth! “*I am...the truth...*” (John 14:6). The Eucharist is not the Jesus of the Bible. As a so-called priest, I was like someone described in the Bible—I was a blind man leading the blind. I was an intruder teaching a false gospel. I was a cultural symbol for those who falsely believed that they were receiving Jesus from my hands.

Condition of Sin

The Word of God describes the condition of sin as being spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-3), as being at enmity with God. Sin’s symptoms pervade us in our self-centered inclinations and behavior. We criticize, complain, and condemn those who do not agree with us or meet our own created standards. We are not cognizant of the truth of the words of the Apostle, “*For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love*” (Galatians 5:6). Our motto seems to be, “the only thing that counts is Me, Myself and I!” By my very nature, I was on an ego trip from the first day of my life, and I did not know it. My self-centeredness was as natural to me as eating and sleeping. It was inherent to my humanness, to my *condition of alienation from God* (Romans 5:12-21).

Purgatory: A Message of Hope—Or of Revenue?

Do you remember hearing about that witticism from the days of the *Reformation* in Germany? *So bald das Geld im Kasten klingt, die Seele aus dem Fegefeuer springt!* Translation: *As soon as the coin in the coffer clinks, the soul out of (the) purgatory springs!*” The same kind of duplicity is an ongoing occurrence in today’s Church of Rome.

Belief in purgatory became obligatory in 1439 by authority of the *Council of Florence*. If a current-day Roman Catholic does not believe it, he/she is *ipso facto* excommunicated from the Roman Church. Well, this is good news: nothing gained, and nothing lost. This teaching on purgatory is a fiction. It is a Roman Catholic invention and has no foundation in biblical revelation. To the fear-filled Roman Catholic I say, Calm down, calm down friend, and listen to the Word of the Lord, “*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*” (Luke 2:10-11)

We have a Savior today! His name is **JESUS**. He overcame death by the power of the Spirit of God, and the Father has sent that same Spirit to us so that we might be drawn to Jesus (John 6:44), so that He may be our personal Savior. He died, and He rose to life—once for all (time). “*And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life*” (1 John 5:11-12). “*These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God*” (1 John 5:13). To seek the truth may require that we think outside the mold. To believe the truth is not presumption.

Purgatory? No! There are no detours to heaven. When you sense the call of God in your life, know that He is drawing you to His Son, Jesus—“here and now” (John 6:44). Recognize that you are lost—as I was while I was a Roman Catholic priest. *Recognize* that you need a savior, and that you have a Savior. His name is **JESUS**. He stands before the Father as your *Advocate*, ready to save you now! You owe a debt you cannot pay; He paid a debt He did not owe—mine, and yours—Paid In Full! There is no temporal punishment (purgatory) due for one’s sin.

Repentance? Yes! “*Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. 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* (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). After Jesus had risen from the dead, He appeared to His disciples and said to them, “*These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me*” (Luke 24:44). Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “*Thus it is written, and thus it behoved (behooved) Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high*” (Luke 24:46-49).

Is there a Purgatory? No! No detour needed; no muddy road ahead. No \$5 stipends to escape from a fictional prison! Should we have read that *Detour* sign? No! Nonsense. Here is the conclusion as put by Jesus in a nutshell. He said, “*If you believe not that I am He, you shall*

die in your sins” (John 8:24). Likewise, Paul and Silas declared, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house*” (Acts 16:31).

Repentance

In spite of the Holy Spirit's presence in my being, I continue to be inclined to sin. The difference is that now I know that I am forgiven, and the Holy Spirit provides His strength so that I am delivered from the bondage of sin—because of the Lord's continuous mercy toward me. I do not have to sin, yet the power that is needed so that I will not sin is not my own. It is the power of the Spirit of Jesus that dwells within me (1 John 3:23,24). As I write this, I cannot help but shed tears of gratitude and joy. That is what the Spirit does...He often brings us to tears. “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*” (Galatians 5:1). “*And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world*” (John 17:13-14).

Baptism

On October 4, 1984, my son, Jerome, and I drove with friends to the *Salt River*, northeast of Scottsdale, Arizona, and there I was baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son (Jesus), and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is He who had come into my heart so many years before. “*Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him* (John 14:23).

Today, I understand and believe that being “made righteous” (being justified) is by *faith alone* in *Jesus alone* as my Savior—not by baptism. The Roman Church incorrectly teaches that baptism results in the forgiveness of the condition of sin. Subjectively, baptism is in fact a public declaration by the believer of faith in Christ the Savior; a declaration that reconciliation has “already” happened—prior to baptism—because of faith in Jesus. “*For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time*” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Conclusion: the Words of Jesus, Son, and Savior

Jesus said, “*Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life*” (John 5:24).

Jesus also said, “*Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man,*

which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it” (Matthew 7:21, 24-27).

Jesus is the only human being who is also a Divine Person, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14).*

Jesus is the complete revelation of God: *“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:1-3).*

Among human beings, only Jesus is absolutely innocent of sin: *“And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin” (1 John 3:5). “Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). “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” (2 Corinthians 5:21).* Therefore, only He, and He alone, is qualified to make atonement for our rebellion against God and to bring about reconciliation for us with the God of mercy. By turning to Him and repenting and trusting Him for our salvation, we enter into *union* with Him, and with the Father, and they give us their Spirit. We are forgiven; we are saved now and forever. As we grow (mature) “in Christ” (Romans 8:1), our *union* with God becomes more and more *communion* with God. The Bible, the Word of God, says of *obedience* to Him, *“Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Hebrews 5:8-9).*

The Bible says of love toward Him, *“Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).* Also, *“while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).* *“But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31).* Faith in Jesus is *“...faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6).*