

An Ex-Priest Confesses

by Jim Seghers

At the bottom of page nine of the December 1996 issue of *This Rock* magazine a sentence riveted my attention: "Among the most venomous of enemies of the faith are former Catholics, especially former priests." That statement prompted me to share my story.

A great change occurred in my life while I was barely listening to a retreat conference during my second year of high school. In that startling moment I understood with extraordinary clarity that God was calling me to become a priest. I instantly perceived that I was free to accept or reject this invitation. I said, "Yes."

I was completely unaware that at that very moment my mother was on her knees waxing our living room floor begging the Blessed Mother to take control over my life. When after that conference I came home to announce that I wanted to become a priest, she wept. A mother's prayers are very powerful!

To have an adequate understanding of this dramatic turn of events it is important to understand something of my early life. Because of certain frightening childhood experiences I felt a deep inner sense of shame and insecurity. Because of my inability to express these feelings, there smoldered below the surface a sense of anger, even rage. This would quickly erupt when I felt threatened or injured. I was a fighter. Sadly, this aggressiveness was encouraged and exploited by coaches and teachers.

My parents were devout. I had a solid religious formation in Catholic schools. However, my distorted filters prevented me from understanding my faith in terms of a personal relationship with Christ. Deep down I felt there was nothing likable, much less lovable, in me, so I couldn't grasp that God's love was both intensely personal and individual. I understood religion as being obedient to my parents, keeping the commandments and the precepts of the Church. Beyond external observances I was far from being religious, much less pious. At the time of my call to the priesthood the passion of my life was sports, especially football, friends and an exceptional young woman with whom I had a close relationship. There was very little about me that would even hint that I might be a candidate for the priesthood.

Nevertheless, the following September I boarded a train with other high school seminarians from the New Orleans area. Our destination was St. Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, MO. My dad had been a student there. My younger brother Art, whom I greatly admired, was returning there for his third and last year.

My experiences at the Cape, as the seminary was popularly called, were very positive. I began to acquire good study habits. I learned to control my temper thanks to a tough talking to by our prefect, Fr. Bill Pittman. I also made a few baby steps in the spiritual life under the patient guidance of our spiritual director, Fr. Ed Wilson. Great friendships were also formed which have lasted to this day.

On completing high school the next step was to St. Mary's Seminary where we would complete a five year college program, the first two years of which were spent in intense spiritual formation called the novitiate, and then four years of graduate study in Theology and Sacred Scripture. Before entering the novitiate we spent three days in silence, conferences and prayer. It was during this retreat that I first encountered Jesus on an intensively personal and sensible level. It was an overwhelming experience, the memory of which lingers to this day. During that first year in the novitiate the presence of God was so tangible, so real, that doubting his existence would have been impossible.

It was at this time that I first made the decision to commit my life to God. In this I was inspired by the example two very fine priests. The first was Fr. Ignatius Foley our novice master. He was a wonderful spiritual director and a great example.

The second priest was Fr. Joe Finney. He had been very ill for many years. When I knew him he was near the end of his holy life. Generally, the novices served his daily Mass which he said at the Shrine of the Miraculous Medal. Twice during the Mass he would pause to offer his private prayer to God. Because of a throat problem this beautiful conversation was in an audible voice that the server could hear. As this broken old priest poured out his tender love for God with a beautiful child-like fervor, the tears would flow down my cheeks. I repeatedly asked Mary to form me into that kind of a priest and to teach me to love her Son with that kind of abandonment. I was expressing the most profound longing of my heart.

The years seemed to fly by. When I graduated from college I was particularly looking forward to the four year of graduate studies in Theology and Sacred Scripture. Unfortunately, the anticipation was far more exciting than the reality. The courses were challenging and informative. However, the subjects we studied were almost exclusively the object of the intellect, rarely the object of the heart. I learned a lot about God, but the studies did little to intensify a personal relationship with him. At least that was my experience.

From the time of my entrance into the novitiate the importance of obedience was stressed. On many occasions the figure of speech of an assembly line was used. The seminary was the production line. The faculty were the craftsman. I was the raw material. My task was to submit to the formation process so that at the end I would be a finished product. I made that commitment. So when we were ordained on a glorious May 24, I felt I was ready. I was a finished product. Surely not a Cadillac, but at least a Ford. I was to discover I was correct. I was an Edsel!

Only once during the twelve years of my seminary training did I have any doubts about my vocation to the priesthood. It occurred during my last year, about a week before we were to be ordained to the Diaconate. These were the circumstances.

For two years I had been teaching Church History in the College department while I earned a Master's degree in History and completed my theological studies. One of our professors was opposed to the Rector's decision to have me teach. As a result he began a series of

confrontations regarding matters over which I had no control. On the last such occasion I became impatient and irritable. When the faculty subsequently met to discuss our fitness for ordination, he voted against me on the basis of that incident which he presented in a way that distorted the circumstances. I was upset that a priest could be so petty and malicious. For the next two months I had serious doubts about accepting ordination to the priesthood. It wasn't until I practiced Mass for the first time that my peace was restored.

The rite of ordination was a glorious experience. The next morning I said Mass at the Shrine of the Miraculous Medal and dedicated my priesthood to the Mother of God. After a vacation home, I was off to Chicago to complete the research and writing of my master's thesis in History. In mid August I was due to report to St. Vincent's Seminary at Lemont, IL, a suburb of Chicago, where I was appointed Dean of Men. In this capacity I would be in charge of the day to day activity of the one hundred and fifty high school seminarians who boarded there.

Shortly before I reported to St. Vincent's I had a late night visit from the seminary rector. He was a warm, outgoing man whom I had briefly met ten years earlier when I was still at the Cape. I vividly remembered his infectious sense of humor. He said the purpose of his visit was to become acquainted and to express his enthusiasm over my appointment. He said he enthusiastically supported the idea of placing newly ordained priests as Dean of Men as we could readily relate to the needs of the young men we were guiding. He simply could not have been more gracious or more supportive. He stressed that I should feel free to discuss difficulties with him at any time. I was delighted that he would be a trusted mentor upon whom I could lean as I learned my duties.

The next evening Fr. Jack Battle and Fr. Jerry Lehane together with several other priests who had been at the Cape with my dad invited me to visit with them privately. The purpose of their visit was to warn me that I was headed into troubled waters. They reported that the priest who had so graciously visited me the night before had vociferously expressed his disappointment to them and a large number of other priests regarding my appointment. He stated that he was of the opinion that newly ordained priests were poor choices for the important position to which I was assigned. He informed them that he was outspoken in his opposition to my appointment. When I told them of my visit with him the night before they responded, "Don't trust him." I was stunned. When they left I had a troubled night as I wondered, "What have I gotten myself into?"

Some days later I moved to St. Vincent's Seminary where I had many long visits with my predecessor, a priest I greatly admired. He was a gifted administrator who had a wonderful grasp of the job. His input was invaluable in preparing me to meet the needs of the returning seminarians. Alarming, however, was his evaluation of the faculty. He advised that I needed constant vigilance to protect the students from the misbehavior of fellow priests many of whom had severe drinking and other problems. As the faculty began to convene for the new school year it was apparent that the rich community life that was so sustaining in the seminary was non-existent. There was no sense of a common purpose, like a team working together.

Each man seemed to have a life apart from the seminary. We were just a group of bachelors living in a boarding house.

When the students arrived I began a seven day routine of supervision, individual conferences, class and sermon preparation and teaching that started at 5:00 A.M. and often ended at 2:00 A.M. the next morning. The work load was overwhelming. The sense of fatigue was so great that I once fell asleep standing while I was saying Mass. On two other occasions I fell asleep while driving and barely avoided accidents. As fatigue mounted it became impossible to attend morning meditation. Pressing duties often made it impossible to even pray the Divine Office, those beautiful prayers that all priests are bound to say. Would that I had applied to myself Jesus' warning to his first priests: "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Mt 26:41).

By mid-October I was racked with doubts that I belonged in the priesthood. I felt trapped, guilty, anxious and isolated. When I broached these feelings with my confessor he attempted to reassure me that this was simply a phase that I was experiencing. However, the doubts intensified. Instinctively, I identified the problem as spiritual in origin. However, I was repeatedly reassured that this was not the case. As the months came and went I became intensely unhappy. Finally, I concluded that if my unhappiness in the priesthood was not spiritual then it must be psychological. In desperation I determined to do something about it.

Eugene Kennedy was then a well known priest-psychologist. A colleague gave me his telephone number, so I arranged an appointment. We had very long meeting. He concurred with my confessor that my difficulties were not spiritual. He also reassured me that the cause of my unhappiness wasn't psychological. I felt somewhat comforted. But, as I drove back to the seminary it seemed to me that the fundamental crisis remained unchanged. I was just feeling less anxious about it. If the issue was not spiritual or psychological, then by elimination the problem was the life itself. Could I spend the rest of my life in a vocation in which I loved the work and hated the life? Could I endure the sense of isolation and loneliness? Did I even want to? The one sustaining comfort was my relationships with the exceptional young men who were under my care and the support of their parents.

I was to remain at St. Vincent's Seminary for four years. This was a time of great theological upheaval in the priesthood, especially in the Chicago area where there flourished a strong animosity toward Cardinal Cody and a growing sense of independence from the authority. Although I was aware of many of the new ideas flying under the banner of "the spirit of Vatican II" my daily preoccupation with the lives of 150 seminarians and my instinctive respect for authority initially kept me on the fringe of all of this.

However, that changed when I attended a series of theological seminars that were ostensibly designed to bring priests up to date on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. They were in reality a launching platform for the flawed opinions of the presenters. Their hidden agenda was to indoctrinate us to accept principles of sexual revolution under the guise of high sounding philosophical, theological and exegetical presentations. Was the Church's teaching regarding human sexuality rooted in divine revelation, Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, or was it

merely the expression of an antiquated and imperfect philosophical system that was enforced by a repressed, legalistic Vatican bureaucracy?

The practical implications of how one answered this question were enormous. They impacted the perceived morality or immorality of important issues like divorce and remarriage, fornication, adultery, artificial birth control, and a host of related issues. Artificial birth control was the focal point of the assault on traditional Christian values. It was generally believed and campaigned that the Church's teaching on this matter would soon change. This explains the hail storm of opposition in the United States that greeted Pope Paul's clear-sighted Encyclical [Humanae Vitae](#) in 1968.

The assault on the Church's traditional teaching was subtle. The Church's teaching authority and the infallibility of the Pope were never under direct attack. However, infallibility was defined in terms that narrowed it exclusively to the exercise of extraordinary and rarely defined decrees. Everything else, then, was deemed not to be infallible, thus open to the interpretations of theologians and subject to selective acceptance. Clear papal teaching in opposition to popular views were discounted as emanating from a conservative bureaucracy of old, out of touch Vatican officials rather than from the Church's authentic Magisterium.

The meeting that had the greatest impact on my thinking occurred at the school of theology nearest our seminary. Each of the speakers was well known in his field. One had been the theological advisor to Cardinal Ritter of St. Louis at the Second Vatican Council. The thrust of their presentations was that the Church's opposition of divorce and remarriage, and to artificial birth control were not rooted in divine revelation. Furthermore, the principles they espoused implied that there were no sexual limits between heterosexual adults who loved one another.

I was astonished by what I was hearing. My initial reaction was that these men were heretics. I was sitting on the right side of the large conference room. Thus pivoting to my left allowed me to see the reaction of the audience. Most of these men were major seminary professors with advanced degrees in Theology and Sacred Scripture. Many had been my professors, superiors and spiritual directors when I was in the seminary. I considered them to be level headed and orthodox. I fully expected the room to erupt in opposition. Instead what I observed to my dismay was a room full of heads nodding in agreement. There were some questions, but not a single challenge. What I found particularly disturbing, based on what I was hearing, was the fact that I was binding the consciences of faithful Catholics when the reason was discipline not revelation. I was in turmoil.

To clarify my understanding I offered to drive the principle speaker to the airport. During that 45 minute drive I summarized what I had heard and drew logical conclusions. He greeted my statements with remarks like: "Obviously," and "Of course!" On the drive back to the seminary I felt angry about my seminary instruction. I felt duped. I am ashamed to admit that from that day there was shift in the advice I gave both in and out of the confessional. I was no longer orthodox. Sadly, it would be many years later before I would regain the ground I lost that day.

During my third year at St. Vincent's another incident occurred which caused a shift in how I viewed the priesthood. One evening one of my seminarians asked to "close the door," that is, speak off the record. For the next two hours or more he vented his anger, hurt, frustration and hatred toward a priest who had systematically persecuted him simply because he envied the popularity of the boy's father. After I calmed the boy down and sent him to bed, I visited this priest in his room and threatened to beat him if he ever harmed another student. I was initially in a state of rage. He was remorseful. As I walked backed to my room feeling very sad, I kept saying to myself: "This is crazy! I just threatened a fellow priest and almost attacked him just to keep him from being cruel to seminarians. I've got to get out of here!" I didn't feel very proud of myself. My behavior was hardly Christ-like. That night I had turned another corner.

I determined to hang on for another year at St. Vincent's. I was very optimistic about a new man who was coming in as rector and principal. He proved to be an excellent administrator. Regretfully, he had an arrogant confidence that he could read souls from observing facial expressions. He also sometimes exhibited a harshness that could crush the spirit of an adolescent boy. Philosophically, we were on different pages when it came to guiding the young men under our care.

In addition I was disturbed by the large number of our graduating seniors who were leaving the major seminary. When they returned home they seemed angry and ashamed. I couldn't understand what was happening. Finally, I recognized that I no longer felt I was capable of remaining faithfully in the priesthood, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to. I asked my Provincial to relieve me of my duties at St. Vincent so I could pursue doctrinal studies. At his request I consented to teach one more year. I was assigned to Queen of Angels Seminary in Los Angeles, CA. By the time I arrived there in August of 1968 I was holding on to the priesthood by a thread. Two months later I arranged a meeting with the Vice-Provincial, Fr. Joe Falanga.

Fr. Falanga had been my personal spiritual director for several years while I was in the major seminary. He knew me well. I had made the decision to get out, but didn't know what to do or even if it were even possible. We had dinner together at the provincial house then retired to his office. Once there I simply told my story holding nothing back. When I finished he gave me all the permissions I needed and said he would petition Rome for formal laification. He asked and I agreed to remain teaching at Queen of Angels Seminary until the semester break. I had spent twelve years preparing for the priesthood and five years in the priesthood. But at the end of four hours with Fr. Falanga my priesthood had ended. I was quitting the very thing I loved most in the world, the priesthood. I no longer cared!

In February of 1969 I joined New York Life as an agent. This was a providential career choice. At that time I was confused in many of my basic values. I felt painfully out of step and behind other men my age. For one thing, I hadn't had a date in over seventeen years. New York Life is a company that has always promoted excellence and integrity. In these areas there was no room for the fuzzy thinking that was characteristic of so much of the theological double-talk in the American Church. Objectives, values and rules were clear. There was no room for relativism. In addition I came under the influence of Bill Cosentino, a self-professed agnostic, who daily

exhibited more kindness, sensitivity and commitment than most of the priests I knew. He was a great mentor. I worked closely with Bill for almost six years eventually becoming his sales manager. In all that time I never once saw Bill do an evil act.

In 1971 I was formally laicized. A few months later I married a lady I met shortly after I started my leave of absence from the priesthood. Ostensibly, I was still a practicing Catholic, but my observance consisted of attending Sunday Mass and not much else. I was still far too angry and self-reliant to pray much. Our courtship was rooted in well intentioned but misguided secular principles. Thus, it is understandable that three weeks into the marriage she announced that she didn't want to be married, was not in love with me, didn't plan to stay married, and hated Catholicism, my career and just about everything about our life together. It was a position from which she never retreated.

When the marriage ended some years later, I thought: "First the priesthood, now this. My career is thriving, but my personal life is a shamble." I just didn't understand how it happened. Inwardly, I was troubled.

My life began to change for the better in 1980 after I agreed to join my cousin Gwen Richard and her husband Jack and their friends from Independence, Louisiana on a pilgrimage to the Marian shrines in Italy and France. The idea of going on a pilgrimage with a group of pious Catholics was about as appealing to me as open heart surgery. Nevertheless, I agreed to go because I didn't want to disappoint them and I thought it might be interesting to take photographs as I had not visited Italy or France. However, everything changed at Lourdes.

We arrived in Lourdes late at night. By the time we had supper and were given our rooms it was midnight. The weather was cold and drizzly. Everyone in our party was too exhausted to go to the grotto at the late hour, so I went alone. When I arrived at the site no one was there. I saw a sign by a water fountain that read, "Splash water on your face like Bernadette." As I put the ice cold water to my face I thought, "Not like Bernadette. I don't have her goodness." Then I sat down on a bench and looked up at the grotto to the niche where Mary appeared to this simple young girl. As I sat there the thought came into my mind, "When was the last time you told God that you loved Him?" I couldn't remember. It had been a long time. I remembered the young seminarian who had asked Mary to teach him how to love her son. I wept for a very long time.

This was the beginning of my journey back to God. There was a lot in me that needed changing. In retrospect I wish I had been more open to grace. After my return I became engaged in a agonizing custody battle that made me a single parent raising two young boys. This was followed by helping them work through the pain of their parent's mistakes. It was a humbling and stressful experience.

In June of 1983 at my sister's prompting, my grandmother sent me Ralph Martin's book *A Crisis of Truth: The Attack on Faith, Morality, and Mission of the Catholic Church*. When I finally read the book it did much to clarify and correct the erroneous ideas that had taken hold in my thinking more a decade earlier. My sister's example also had a powerful influence. About the

same time I also came under the influence of a fine priest, Msgr. Robert J. Stein, the pastor of St. Frances of Rome in Azusa, CA. He became a friend and a guide. Our third son, Robert, is named after him.

When the courtship with my wife Michelle began years later we determined from the beginning to put God at the center of everything. This has led to a wonderful marriage in the Catholic Church and the blessing of our eighth child which is due this June. Children are the biblical sign of married love. I am always amazed when Catholics reflect the prevailing assessment that children are a burden. I am also indebted to Terry Barber's wonderful apostolate at St. Joseph's Communication and the powerful Catholic Family Conferences that flow from it. The tapes on Sacred Scripture that Terry distributes have motivated me to rededicate myself to the study of the Bible. However, I am convinced that whatever fidelity is in me today is due solely to the mercy of God and the intercession of our Mother Mary together with the prayers of family and friends.

There are many lessons that one can learn from my story. The failure of my priesthood and the adoption of a secular lifestyle were not due to the attending circumstances that I described. They merely greased the slide. The real cause was a self-confident pride and the resulting lack of prayer and dependence on God. Thus my initial analysis was correct. The problem was spiritual. The great danger of the apostate is too little prayer and too much work. During the last supper Jesus admonished all his followers: "apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). I wish I had learned that lesson earlier. I pray that I have learned it now.

Loneliness was the painful crucible that crushed me as a priest. To some extent everyone experiences loneliness. It's a part of creation. Loneliness is the expression of our craving for LOVE — God. The priesthood, like the religious life, only makes sense when Jesus is at the center of one's life. He is the faithful Bridegroom who never disappoints. However, when he is pushed out by activity, or anything else, a terrible loneliness ensues. Ministries alone, no matter how rewarding in themselves, are ultimately unsatisfying.

Secondly, I hope to repair the damage that my bad example may have caused others and to prevent any self glorification in connection with the work I am doing now. What caused my infidelity was sin. There is nothing there to be proud. Often I reflect on the many times I have rejected the tender heart of Jesus and hurt others by my selfishness or the scandal of my life. Because I am in a teaching ministry, I am often reminded of St. James' warning: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (Jas 3:1). When God uses broken instruments any good that results solely reflects upon his glory and mercy.

Some of you who read this may find yourselves distant from God. Men seem especially reluctant to acknowledge their sinfulness and to trust themselves in God's mercy. Men struggle with commitment. Trust. My life reflects grace upon grace squandered and my Lord and loved ones betrayed. Yet, in spite of it all, look at God's love. He loves you no less. Trust and repent. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like

crimson, they shall become like wool" (Is 1:18). While I will always doubt my fidelity, I can feel secure in a trust that is rooted in Christ. Apart from him I can do nothing (Jn 15:5), but He can do anything in me and in you.

Lastly, I hope everyone who reads this will pray for priests. They are under assault in ways that lay people can't imagine. Holy priests develop saints. Our world needs more saints.

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