



by Jim Civale

Hanging up from a rushed, long-distance phone call from my brother in New Jersey, I stared at the fax machine, waiting and wondering. What was this big decision he had made “that would be best communicated in writing”?

Finally my fax machine cranked and sputtered as three pages inched their way across continent and ocean. While the letter was still attached, I raced to read. I was stunned. Vince had left the Catholic Church.

Worse yet, he dared suggest I do the same. Did he forget who I was? Surely he recalled that I almost joined the Jesuit priesthood seven years earlier. He knew that although I chose to marry a woman I had met while serving as a Catholic missionary teacher in Samoa, I was no less devoted to the Mother Church than if I had been one of her priests. Vince knew I had had all of my children baptized Catholic and that I attended daily mass, not wanting to go even one day without receiving Christ through the Eucharist. He knew I was currently the Director of Catholic Education and no mere nominal Catholic.

As an active member of the Legion of Mary, I knelt weekly before Mary’s marble likeness and religiously recited the Rosary. How, then, could I help but take umbrage at his attacks on such sacred things as Mary’s Immaculate Conception and Perpetual Virginity? There was only one right response to my brother’s offense. I would defend the Mother Church. I would prove how gravely mistaken my less-learned brother was. I would show him from the very Scriptures he claimed would lead me away from my former faith why he must return to it.

Having no Bible of my own (only the Vatican II documents, Daily Missals, and the Catholic Catechism), I decided to use his King James Version. During the next six months, I worked on the apologia. However, I found more questions than answers. Where was the evidence of Peter's papacy and Mary's mediation? Why were we practicing vain, repetitious prayers when our Lord had forbidden them? Why were we forbidding marriage and promoting abstinence from meats when the scriptures associated such with apostasy? What was I to do when the two sources of Divine Truth (Church Tradition and the Sacred Scriptures) contradicted one another? "They never do," the Monsignor told me. But they did.

During that time of intense questioning, the Lord sent me the gospel again and again. It began with an independent Baptist missionary at the airport who gave me a gospel tract with his church information on it. I carried that tract for six months before I got saved, never dreaming I would become the pastor of that same church. While that tract sat folded in my wallet all those months, I came home from mass each Sunday and watched the same preaching program on television. I loved the clear Biblical preaching and practical teaching which was so different from what I was used to. There was only one problem. The preacher found a way every week to "twist" whatever he preached about into a you-need-to-get-saved pitch. Every Sunday I turned off the television and vowed not to get sucked in again the next week. But I did.

Finally, on Christmas morning 1996, before my wife and children awoke, I humbled myself and prayed. God's holiness, my sinfulness, and hell's terror loomed large in front of me. I knew I was a sinner in need of salvation and that the Catholic Church could not save me. In that moment I fled from Catholicism to Calvary and put my faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The veil was rent in twain from top to bottom before me and I joined the priesthood of all believers.

I thank God for continuing to work mightily since that dear day over nine years ago. I utterly failed to convince my wife to leave a five-million dollar Catholic cathedral and attend church in a run-down, rented room with only twelve others. How could I convince the niece of the first Samoan Cardinal to go against her religion when our family, jobs, and social circles were all exclusively Catholic? I couldn't – but God could. On May 26, 1997, Emi agreed to go "one more time" to that little church. That day she went forward in that little room on the fourth verse of "Christ Receiveth Sinful Men" and received Christ.

On July 1, 1998, we answered the call as pastor and pastor's wife, and since then God has grown His church in American Samoa from less than twenty to nearly sixty members, all while we both worked full-time secular jobs. What a God we serve! There were times I was so overwhelmed working as a school administrator and taking seminary courses through correspondence, that I barely made it to the pulpit with a prepared sermon, but God never failed nor forsook us.

In January of 2005, after seven years of hearing our prayers for full-time missionaries to come to the Samoan Islands, God called us to be those missionaries. In June of 2005, we began a fifteen-month period of deputation, during which God blessed wonderfully and

brought in 100% of our needed support. We are now back in the Samoan Islands eager to complete the planting of Vai o le Ola (Living Waters) Baptist Church (i.e. to build facilities on church-owned land and to train a national couple to replace us). We are equally eager to establish a Bible college to train nationals to plant more churches in our Pacific islands.

God not only worked marvelously on the day of my salvation and since then, but also beforehand. Sixteen years ago, He allowed me to go to the Samoan Islands, changing my life's course before I joined the priesthood. Fifteen years ago, He provided me a faithful helpmeet before I even knew how to look for one. And nine years ago, He was long-suffering toward me as I rejected the gift of salvation daily for six months straight.

By God's grace, I will give my entire life to serving Him in the Samoan Islands.