

Attempting Salvation by Works

I was born in 1966 on the tiny island of Malta, in the middle of the Mediterranean. My parents were God-fearing people and they made sure to teach the Catholic faith to their six children. Apart from the daily religious instruction at school, they also sent me to catechism after school hours in preparation for the communion. When I was older I went to classes for the sacrament of confirmation. Attendance to Mass on Sunday was absolutely obligatory; my mother encouraged us by word and example to attend church daily. Every evening my father used to gather all the family for the recitation of the rosary.

As a young teenager, I was a proud member of the Catholic Church – believing it to be the one true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. I didn't know much about other religions, but the priests at the bishop's Seminary where I studied told us that the Greek Orthodox and Protestant churches were breakaway bodies guilty of serious sin by separating from the Catholic Church.

We were taught about the Lord Jesus and His death on the cross. However it was emphasized that we had to make our contribution to our salvation. Doing good works and living a moral and religious life were necessary to increase personal righteousness, keep us on the way to heaven and finally gain eternal life. Of special importance was attending Mass and participating in the Eucharist for spiritual nourishment and to free us from our daily faults. Failure to attend Mass on a Sunday would be a grave sin that if left unconfessed would send me to Hell forever.

Confession was an intricate part of my life. I confessed my sins to a priest after which he would prescribe some works of penance to make satisfaction for my sins. Usually the penance would consist of saying the Lord's Prayer and Ave Maria for a definite number of times. I was left in no doubt that my heart remained stained with sin until I performed penance. I did not recite those prayers because of my personal faith in God but as a form of punishment.

The feast of our Lady of Sorrows is a very special occasion in my country. Solemn processions are organized in many towns and villages, which are attended by a good portion of the population. Our family was no exception. It was a day of fasting, and in the evening we would join the penitential procession, saying the rosary and other prayers while we walked behind the statue of Our Lady. We were happy to be doing something – fasting and praying – to make satisfaction for our sins.

As a Catholic I did not rest my salvation in the hands of Jesus, but I was striving to obey the commandments, participating in the sacraments, praying and fasting, in order to merit, or earn, eternal life. Just one mortal sin at the end and I would lose all my merits and my soul. So, although we saw salvation as somehow related to Jesus and His cross, it was equally clear that the crucial factor that determined where I would spend eternity was my personal contribution of good deeds. I had a definite part to play to achieve forgiveness and to be accepted by God.

At our home, at church and street corners there were images and statues depicting 'souls' in the flames of purgatory. They were a constant reminder that we needed to do more and more good works to prepare ourselves before we died. The mind of a young boy could not remain unimpressed by the scene of men, women and children in the agony of fire. The horror of that picture can only be surpassed by the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory itself. The faithful must pay a debt of punishment by penance and good works on earth, and failing to do so, they must finish paying the debt of their sin by personal suffering and torment in purgatory, or worse, the eternal fire of Hell.

Looking back I can see what a heavy burden my parents felt as they strove to rescue their children from the torments of purgatory. They too feared the possibility and consequences of failure. I felt very troubled and concerned. I took seriously my duty to say my prayers, confess my sins, do my penance and perform good works to decrease the torment awaiting me after death, and to keep my soul on the path to Heaven.

Later on it pleased God to teach me that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. Salvation cannot be merited by my works; it is a gift of God purchased by the blood of the Lamb. My heart's desire is to share that knowledge with sincere Catholics who are striving to merit what God gives for free.