

God, Truth, and Thirteen

(A Conversion Story)

By **SISTER Mary GWEN, S.M.S.M.**

The Australian Catholic Truth Society 1956 (No. 1246)

The two parts of this booklet were originally given as talks during the Catholic Hour, Station 3AW, Melbourne.

Part 1

God, Truth, and Thirteen

I have been asked to tell you the story of my conversion. I would rather tell you of the love of Mary, our Mother, which followed and surrounded me for more than half a century, until it led me, four and a half years ago, into the Catholic Church; and into the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary, a Congregation where now I bear her name.

Come with me, for a moment, to nineteenth century London, to one of those tall, narrow, large-roomed houses near the banks of the Thames; a Victorian home of massive furniture and four-poster beds, of countless ornaments and innumerable draperies; a home where generosity, sacrifice and service were daily made vivid realities; for my father gave all his spare moments and moneys to the poor of South London, and my mother to her household duties added the care of two invalids, my youngest brother and my aunt; above all to a home which, steeped in the Protestant and Low Church Anglican tradition, was filled in all honesty of conviction with a deep aversion for anything and every thing to do with the name Catholic.

The story began when I was one! Of course I only learnt it later. My eldest brother, then a school boy of thirteen years, brought consternation into the home by announcing his desire to become a Catholic. Needless to say the answer he got was NO. He must wait. Wait until he was twenty-one. He was not yet of age to know. Time might, and probably would, change his mind. But my brother was not of the kind that changes his mind. He resolved to wait. The school boy friend who had taken him to a Catholic Church was banned the home. In silence, but with steady will, my brother kept to his decision.

Six years passed. The consternation of earlier years seemed likely to turn to tragedy. It was my brother's intention now not only to become a Catholic at twenty-one, but also to marry one! But tragedy was averted. No rift occurred to mar that happy home; for there, complete surrender to God's Will in every tiny detail of life, reigned supreme. With the wisdom of parents whose love for God and their children overrules all prejudices, the young Irish Catholic girl was made a welcome visitor. Sunday after Sunday found her in her place at that family dinner table. Religious differences were set aside.

One morning, after such a visit, my mother thought it time to tell me, her seven-year-old daughter, that my brother was going to marry this girl, that she was a Catholic and that he would become one. I had just finished a piece of dictation, for my mother taught me at home every morning. I had never heard the word Catholic before. I put down my pencil, I remember it was blue ! And said, "Mummy, what is a Catholic?" My mother waited, thinking. She in her turn, put down her sewing. Then very seriously and quietly she said: "My darling, Catholics worship the Virgin Mary in place of God."

Catholics worship the Virgin Mary in place of God. So she really thought. Nine words. That's all. But words never forgotten. It was one of those moments that mould the future of one's life. Brought up to put God first in everything, no matter what the cost, even at the age of seven, horror filled my heart. So that's what Catholics were! They put someone in the place of God. They were idolaters! I knew. My mother taught me Bible stories. I knew what happened to idolaters. I knew about the Israelites and the golden calf. I knew what happened to people who disobeyed God's laws. I put my books away and went into the garden. What would happen to my brother? Would fire fall from heaven? Would plague strike him? Would one of the cracks in that dry lawn open and swallow him? And I prayed. God, never let me be a Catholic!

Some years later as a teen-ager in company with my school fellows we sat for a public examination in a large Convent School. There were hundreds of girls present. At the end of that week the Nuns said that we had been good girls, we could go in and see their Chapel. The girls all went in, hundreds of them. But one stayed outside, because she was not going into a place where the Virgin Mary was worshipped in place of God! Those words of eight years ago still stood out like beacon lights.

In that home, aversion for everything Catholic was only exceeded by mistrust and dislike of Nuns. My father said he never passed a Nun on the same pavement. He always crossed over the road. As his offices were next to a large Convent I used to think he must cross the road many times a day! For those Nuns were constantly out ministering to the sick and the poor. It was a peep gained one day through an open door in the high brick wall of that very Convent that helped my sister, years later, towards the Church. For through that door she saw grass and flowers and a Nun playing with school children. That glimpse of beauty and happiness made her think that Nuns perhaps were not really quite so bad after all! So God uses the little things of life.

The day came when my brother was received into the Church. I was not allowed to know anything of it at the time. It was more than 40 years later before I knew of my father's words that day. All he said to his son was "Well my boy, if you must be a Catholic, all I say is -BE A GOOD ONE."

The years sped on. Many waters flowed under the bridge of life. I passed from school to the London University, graduating in science, and then to the science staff of a London secondary school. More vital still I passed from Low Church Anglican to zeal for and complete conviction of the doctrines of High Church Anglicanism. I was proud to call myself an Anglo-Catholic and pleased to point out that this was not the Roman species! It took forty years for me to learn how true this was!

Meanwhile God stepped in again. This time with the desire to be a missionary. Long years before as a little child I had seen African students out walking one day, I had startled my mother whispering to her the great secret that one day I would marry an African! Perhaps that was the birth of a missionary vocation! Soon there came the dawn of a religious vocation. For two years the missionary and Sister ideas strove for precedence. Then came a breakdown and doctors' orders for the rest of life - country quiet and rest! But in the time of illness the problem drew to solution. Perhaps it was possible to be both Sister and missionary. Yes, even in the Anglican Church I found such double vocation existed. That did not call to a life of quiet and rest. Well, if God calls He always gives the grace and strength to fulfil. So, trusting in His strength, I entered an Anglican religious Missionary Order in England. Within a year I was out in India, and in time I was one of a small Anglican Community in the British Solomon Islands.

Meanwhile in England changes had occurred. The sister who had seen the little children through the Convent door was now a Catholic. There were Catholic nephews and nieces too from my brother's family in India. Four years later, at 72 years, my mother was also received into the Church. She no longer thought that Catholics worship the Virgin Mary in place of God. The one-time seven-year-old girl now a missionary sister in the Solomons alone remained outside the Church.

The interests of a large girls' school in the Islands occupied our thoughts and interests for many years. The creation of an education suited to the needs of native girls, agriculture, baby care, handcrafts, filled the days. Then came war and a year in the bush hiding from the Japs. Evacuation to the New Hebrides followed and, when peace came, a visit to England. One event stood out that year. It was 1946. With as far-reaching consequences as my mother's remark years before. I went with my sister to a Catholic Retreat. As I look back now I know this was the turning point. God spoke then and I had a sense that there lay Truth, but I was not conscious of this. His time was

not yet. When the time came He would lead into all Truth as He had promised.

My sister praying earnestly for my conversion told me later that she had thrown me into the arms of St. Therese of Lisieux and received complete assurance that I should come in. However when I left England again for that wee Pacific Island - you can walk all round it in 20 minutes - she wondered how it could ever be. But no matter if one lives on a pin prick in the middle of the Pacific, all times and places are known to God. And the Hound of Heaven was hot upon the trail.

It happened one evening. An unforgettable date, May 17, 1949. A launch dropped the mail ashore just at 6 p.m. when it was supper time. I threw my letters through a window of my leaf house on to the bed and went to supervise the filling of children's plates with piles of hot yams. It was God's planning. There was no time to think of those letters until all those brown children were asleep under their mosquito nets, and only the lap of the waves on the shore broke the silence of the tropical night.

I went to my room. A leaf house of sage palm thatch. A sandy floor. A bed. On it lay three air-mail letters. The first my sister's. The second my superior's, Mother Margaret. She was away in England. The third from a convert friend of my sister's. In it lay a little card. All it said was that my name would be remembered at Mass at the Convent where I had made that Retreat in England. Remembered at Mass. There. Prayers there, for me. By the priest. At Mass. And God spoke. I knew. I cried out, "Oh Lord, I can't stand against that." Can't stand against prayers for me at Mass. Then I realized what I had said. "Stand against." Yes; that is what I was doing. Like St. Paul, standing against Christ. Against Truth. I did know where Truth lay. In those brief seconds the quest of life was ended. I knew. There is only one Home of Truth and that lay in the Church from which I had turned away for half a century. Oh, the mercy of God!

"I fled Him down the nights and down the days,
I fled Him down the arches of the years,
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind,

Yet

Those strong Feet followed, followed after."

What next? This was but a beginning. There was no one there with whom I could share my secret. For six months I locked it up with God. Then Mother Margaret returned from England where she had stayed much with my sister. No word during the year and a half in which she had been away between us about the Catholic Church. Yet, separated all that time by 12,000 miles of land and water, God had been guiding us both towards the same goal. We talked together her first evening. Our minds turned to the Catholic Faith. She said, "You know, I think it is the true Church." And there in that same leaf hut that had seen those letters opened six months before I put out my hand on hers and said, "Yes, I know it is, and I am going to it." We had worked together for 27 years as Anglican Sisters. Together we found the Faith. Unknown to each other God had led us both the same path.

Not long after that we saw His Lordship, Bishop Aubin of the Society of Mary, Vicar Apostolic of the South Solomons. He had been our friend for many years. We knew the Fathers also, of the same Society. During the next six months God guided each Sister in our little Anglican Community, white and brown, and in the end it was all 13 of us who asked for instruction together in the Catholic Church in the South Solomons.

There we were lovingly welcomed and cared for by the Catholic Sisters of the Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary. At once I saw in them the realization of all my aspirations through the years. Here was a Congregation, Sisters and Missionaries, working throughout many Island groups of the South West Pacific. Schools, Nurseries, Hospitals, Clinics, Parishes, Leprosaria. Each day unfolded to me something more of their Mission Field and of the Home training Bases in Europe, America, New Zealand and Australia. What vast and varied experience must be theirs. Moreover they were themselves a little United Nations. There on that one Mission Station were Sisters from several countries of the British Commonwealth of Nations, as well as Sisters from America, France, Germany, Yugoslavia (as it then was) and Italy. Here they were wearing the same habit, teaching the same Faith, sharing the ups and downs, joys and privations of missionary life. I thought of Our Lord's words: "That they all may be one." Here lay the answer to the world's diversions and divisions . . . "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism."

But more than all their diversity of works and nationalities was their union in Mary. They were Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary. Of Mary. Yes, I had learnt now. Long ago was the day when I had heard, "They worship the Virgin Mary in place of God." Now I understood. "They found the Child with Mary His Mother." So it would always be. In love for the Mother was enshrined the truth of the Incarnation of Her Son. To take from Her was to take from Him. Devotion to Her was to give glory to Him. God gave Jesus to us through His Mother. As Maurice Zundel has written:

"She is not the Source, but the Channel through which Jesus flows to us.
She is not wisdom, but the Seat of Wisdom.
She is not life, but the enclosed garden in which the river of life springs up.
In Mary as in the Church, it is Jesus we meet."

For one who had for so many years turned her back on the Mother of God in mistaken superstition and prejudice, what more fitting reparation and privilege than to dedicate the rest of life's scanty days, if God so willed, in her Society ? But half a century had gone by. Was a noviciate possible? With God all things are possible. So by the mercy and grace of God, six months after my reception into the Church, which took place on the 25th anniversary of my Anglican profession, I was allowed to enter the Australian noviciate, at Queen of the Missions Convent, Wahroonga, Sydney, of these same Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary with whom I had lived in the Solomons.

And again by His mercy and grace and the care of His Mother, He led me through to my Profession last year [1955]. And now with hundreds of other Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary, brown and white, Asiatic and Pacific Islander, European, American, British, I bear the name of Mary and render to her the loving homage of the years when I mistakenly thought that to love Mary was to take love from the Son. I see now that Mary effaces herself in Jesus; and because he who humbles himself shall be exalted, we hail her Mother of God, Queen of the Missions, Immaculate Queen of Heaven.

Part 2

"What Colour is God"

This short talk begins with a word picture - a true one. It is evening on a tiny Island in the Pacific. The full moon has risen above the line of low hills of the adjacent Island. The shore and Mission Station are bathed in the soft serenity of the tropical moonlight. Every detail of the scene is clear. It is a girls' School. It is the evening hour of relaxation after the business of the day. A day spent in learning to do many things, and all things, well for God. Lessons in the class rooms? Yes. But also out in the school gardens where working in teams the girls learn to grow their own food, using the best methods of agricultural science; in the nursery for motherless babies; in the dispensary; in the kitchen; in preparing and weaving the leaves for mats, baskets and beds. It has been a day full of interests and work for all, Sisters and children.

Look now at the moonlit scene along the seashore. Here is a group of children piling high the sand in strenuous efforts to reproduce the miniature sand-tray models of the South Solomon Islands they had made that afternoon in School. Now Guadalcanal is already five feet high and San Cristobal and Malaita are rising rapidly.

Up there on the grass, youngsters, who still have energy left after three hours of hoeing and digging in the garden, are dancing. In two lines, with rhythmic beat of the feet and graceful movement of the arms, they move backwards and forwards while their little friends, squatting at the side, croon the words of the native song.

Under the banyan tree two elder girls are finishing a basket, left unfinished when duty called them to help their younger schoolfellows in the dispensary. Near by a group of four sit facing one another, each intently bent on perfecting the art of juggling with the ball-like seeds of the calophyllum tree. With rhythm and clapping they keep several balls in the air at one time, and also pass them deftly to one another.

A white Sister walks up and down a path in company with a native Sister and an older girl. They are discussing the plans for tomorrow's work in the garden. Down on the shore apart from the others another white Sister* is seated on a log by the side of a little girl. {*This Sister later entered the Carmelite Order. At the time all the Community

were still Anglicans.} The waves lap a few yards from their feet. Those two sit silently for the most part, silent in the silence of friendship and understanding, though the small figure is but nine years old.

Behind them a dim light burns in a leaf hut. There, under the supervision of a native Sister, several girls are tidying away the bottles, spoons and tins of milk after feeding the line of motherless babies who now hang contentedly in their small hammocks, south Indian fashion. Nine years ago that little girl on the shore had hung, a motherless babe of three days old, in such a hammock, on this very island, her frail little life tenderly nursed by the Sister now sitting at her side.

War had separated them, but they are together again. The child remains silent, and the Sister wonders what is passing under that closely curling hair. Then, suddenly a brown arm is laid beside her own white one, and a little voice says: "You are white . . . I . . . I am only brown." "Only brown." A tone of despising is detected by the sensitive ear of the Sister. A prayer went darting to heaven for guidance, then Sister said: "Oh, but that is lovely. Jesus was not a white Man, Jesus was more like you, brown, like so-and-so" - and she mentioned the name of a fair Polynesian girl in the school. There was silence again. Then: "Was He?" "Oh, yes," said Sister, and she went on to refer to the pale brown Figure on the Crucifix which the Sisters had had specially carved for their Solomon Island children.

Silence fell again. The waves crept nearer. Then suddenly, like an arrow from a bow, came the question: "**THEN, WHAT COLOUR IS GOD?**" What Colour is God? The question of a nine-year-old Melanesian child. Quickly the Sister realized that here was a crisis. Here was the problem that had somehow occupied that small brown curly head for weeks. Here was the reason for the long silences. She waited, praying earnestly. Some of us would perhaps have been disconcerted. After a moment or two the Sister spoke. With heavenly inspiration the words came: "God is Light. Light is made up of all colours. God is the Father of all men and of all colours." It was a poetic answer: streaked with science and theology. It brought contentment to the child at her side. A small brown hand slipped inside a white one.

* * * *

"What colour is God?" Is not this the cry of the human soul down through the, ages; the cry to know what God is like, the half conscious cry of many; the half ashamed cry of some. It was for this Christ came. To show men the Fatherhood of God. The Brotherhood of man. To show us the path to the goal. To give us the answer to the question.

And where did Christ leave that answer? Is it written across the skies for all to read at their ease, as a plane lays the letters in a smoke trail? Is it proclaimed by angels' trumpets from across ocean to ocean, from hill to hill? Will God give a separate revelation to each single soul? No. That precious answer will be entrusted to men. Man might take the message to his fellow man.

Two thousand years ago the Feet of Christ tramped the lanes and paths of Galilee taking to men the message of love and mercy. Today God waits, waits for our feet to walk the icy waters, to tramp the muddy jungles, to plod the thronged pavements of our crowded cities.

Two thousand years ago the Voice of Christ spoke words of teaching and of comfort to the children, men and women of Galilee. Today God waits, waits for our voices to proclaim that teaching and bring comfort to our fellow man.

Two thousand years ago the Hands of Christ touched the sick and diseased, bringing to them relief and cure. Today God waits, waits for our hands to tend the sick, care for the young, succour the aged. Yes, Christ left man to carry His message to our fellow men. And if our feet go not; if our voices are dumb; if our hands do not His work of mercy, then the message is not taken. God waits and waits in vain. The hungry sheep are not fed, the ignorant are not taught. The sick lie unwashed and unkept.

Maybe Christ waits for you. Here is the greatest adventure of all time. Here is the greatest Call under the greatest Leader. A Call to be the Feet, the Voice, the Hands of Christ to fellowmen.

Will the way be easy? Do we look for ease ?

In the dark hours of 1940 when England stood alone with the Commonwealth of Nations against the forces of evil, God gave our nations a human leader who did not

promise an easy road or victory but called his countrymen to "Blood and Sweat and Tears." In response to that call men and women left their homes and their offices, their work and their play, their leisure and their pleasure, and counting not the cost were ready to lay down their lives for the cause.

Today Christ calls. Will we give Him less? To carry His message of love and mercy He may ask us to walk the path of Calvary with Him. Will we share His loneliness on a Pacific Island? Will we be one with Him in His thirst in the torrid heat? Will we be weary in travel with Him as He lay in a boat, asleep? Will we be misunderstood by our relatives and friends, as He was? Are we ready to be thought even a fool by them? Was He not called Beelzebub? The world cries out for Christ today. Though it be to blood and sweat and tears, will we go?

Christ said go! Go to all nations! Go to the ends of the earth. For what? To teach. To baptize. To bring Christ into the lives and customs of those who know Him not. To add the star of another tribe or place to the diadem of Christ. To put another jewel into Our Lady's Crown. To bring Christ into the heathen culture and material indifferentism of the world today.

Schools, hospitals, clinics, social welfare, are all items of missionary work. They are necessary. They have their place. They demand from the missionary of today, talents, trades, knowledge, efficiency. We have often to be Jack-of-all-trades and masters of several. And through all this the fundamental call of Christ to bring the message of the loving Fatherhood of God to all men, for "He is the Father of all men of all colours," shines out unflinchingly, strong, clear.

The need is urgent. Maybe the time is short. Around the Isles of the Pacific curl the waves of atheistic materialism, inter-racial antagonisms, national complexes, new ideologies, the problems of a primitive people in contact with the twentieth (and twenty-first) century, and the broken witness of a divided so-called Christianity.

When giant waves threaten to engulf our coasts we rush to the place of conflict men, money, machines. Out there in the Pacific, against these other ugly waves of today the Church needs to rush to the conflict men and women, priests, sisters, brothers, and active lay-folk, more and more of them; money for the work, money for the workers; and machines, especially the one machine of God - prayer.

There lies a stupendous task. Who is sufficient? Our sufficiency is of God. He ever uses the weak things of the world to confound the strong. Two thousand years ago He left His work in the hands of twelve fishermen. About one hundred years ago, [around 1840] the Holy Father put those Isles of the Pacific into the care of the Fathers of the Society of Mary. A little thing to a small band of men. The Fathers and Missionary Sisters of that Society of Mary have carried that message from Island group to Island group. Other Congregations now join the work. The mustard seed has grown. The peoples of many Islands now nest in the tree of Mother Church. With the tree grows also the needs. The need for the machine of prayer. The need for the feet and voices, and hands of men and women to minister to fellow men. Twelve men with burning faith turned the world upside down. Will the Church today do less? What do we need? A sense of right values. A burning faith. A dauntless zeal. All that is born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, our Faith.

Christ calls. Will your feet go for His? Will your voice speak for His? Will your hands serve for His?

Our Lady, Mother of Christians, Queen of the Missions, looks down on the world as long ago she looked at these empty wine pots in Cana. She looks down on Islands and villages, on schools, and hospitals, on parishes and churches. And often she must say: See there, they have no Sister, see here, they have no priest. They have no Brother. And perhaps some of you as you think on these things will hear her saying as she said to those servants in Cana:

"Whatever He says to you, do it."

* * * * *

**AUSTRALIAN HOUSES OF THE
MISSIONARY SISTERS OF
THE SOCIETY OF MARY**

New South Wales:

*Provincial House,
122 Pitt St, Granville,
P. O. Box 1032, North Sydney, 2060

*Pacific Training Centre,
34 Billyard Ave., Wahroonga.

*Regional House,
11 Lois Place,
P.O. Box 662 Merrylands 2160

*Lourdes Convent,
95 Stanhope Ave., Killara.

Victoria:

Noviciate - Casa Marie,
is now located in Auckland, New Zealand. It was formerly at Yallambie Rd., Watsonia.

Also the Sisters are in New Zealand, and in the Chathams and in eight Island Groups of the South West Pacific including the Solomons, Papua New Guinea and the Gilberts (Kiribati), as well as Tonga, Samoa and Fiji. In Hawaii, Jamaica, the West Indies, Bangla Desh, the Philippines, U.S.A., Italy, France, and Algeria. The Mother House is in Rome.