

# The Gift

By Father Charles Chiniquy

Father Chiniquy was a famous Catholic priest of Canada, born at Kamourasko, Quebec, on July 20, 1809. He established the first temperance society there and won the title, "Apostle of Temperance of Canada."

Because of his ability and piety, he was entreated with a colonizing party of French-Canadians, who settled in Illinois.

Late in life he was a friend of Abraham Lincoln. He toured England several times and this particular narrative of his life was first given in London, on January 16, 1899.

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I was born and baptized a Roman Catholic in 1809, and I was ordained a priest in the year 1833, in Canada. I am now in my seventy-fourth year, and it is nearly fifty years since I received the dignity of the priesthood in the Church of Rome.

For twenty-five years, I was a priest of that Church, and I tell you frankly that I loved the Church of Rome, and she loved me. I would have shed every drop of my blood for my Church and would have given a thousand times my life to extend her power and dignity over the continent of America and over the whole world. My great ambition was to convert the Protestants and bring them into my Church, because I was told, and I preached, that outside the Church of Rome there was no salvation, and I was sorry to think that those multitudes of Protestants were to be lost.

A few years after I was born we lived in a place where there were no schools. My mother became my first teacher, and the first book in which she taught me to read was the Bible. When I was eight or nine years old I read the Divine Book with an incredible pleasure, and my heart was much taken up with the beauty of the Word of God. My mother selected the chapters she wished me to read, and the attention I gave to it was such that, many times I refused to go and play with the little boys outside in order to enjoy the pleasure of reading the Holy Book. Some of the chapters I loved more than

others, and these I learned by heart.

But after my mother died, the Bible disappeared from the house, probably through the priest who had tried to obtain possession of it before. Now this Bible is the root of everything in this story. That is the light which was put into my soul when young, and, thanks be to God, that light has never been extinguished. It has remained there. It is to that dear Bible, by the mercy of God, that I owe today the unspeakable joy which I feel at being among the redeemed, among those who have received the light, and are drinking at the pure fountain of truth.

But perhaps you are inclined to say, "Do not the Roman Catholic priests allow their people to read the Bible?" Yes, I thank God that it is so. It is a fact that today, almost all over the world, the Church of Rome grants permission to read the Bible, and you will find the Bible in the homes of some Roman Catholics.

But when we have confessed this we must tell the whole truth. When the priest puts the Bible in the hands of his people, or when a priest receives the Bible from his church, there is a condition. The condition is that though the priest or people may read the Bible, they must never, under any circumstances, interpret a single word according to their conscience, their intelligence, or in their own mind. When I was ordained a priest I swore that I would interpret the Scriptures only according to the unanimous consent of the Holy Fathers.

Friends, go to Roman Catholics today, and ask them if they have permission to read the Bible. They will tell you, "Yes, I can read it." But ask, "Have you permission to interpret it?" They will tell you, "No." The priest says positively to the people, and the Church says positively to the priest, that they cannot interpret a single word of the Bible according to their own intelligence and their own conscience, and that it is a grievous sin to take upon themselves the interpretation of a single word. The priest says in effect to the people, "If you try to interpret the Bible with your own intelligence you are lost. It is a most dangerous book. You may read it, but it is better not to read it, *because you cannot understand it.*"

What is the result of such teaching? The result is,

that though both the priests and the people have the Bible in their hands, they do not read it. Would you read a book if you were persuaded that you cannot understand a single word by yourself? Would you be such fools as to waste your time reading a book which you were persuaded you could not understand a single line of? Then, my friends, this is the truth about the Church of Rome. They have a great number of Bibles. You will find Bibles on the tables of the priests and of Catholic laymen, but among ten thousand priests there are not two who read the Bible from the beginning to the end and pay any attention to it. They read a few pages here and there, that is all.

In the Church of Rome the Bible is a sealed book, but it was not so with me. I found it precious to my heart when I was a little boy, and when I became a priest of Rome I read it to make me a strong man, and to make me able to argue for the Church.

My great object was to confound the Protestant ministers of America. I got a copy of the "Holy Fathers," and I studied it day and night with the Holy Scriptures, in order to prepare myself for the great battle I wanted to fight against the Protestants. I made this study in order to strengthen my faith in the Roman Catholic Church.

But, blessed be God, every time I read the Bible there was a mysterious voice saying to me "Do you not see that in the Church of Rome you do not follow the teachings of the Word of God, but only the traditions of men?" In the silent hours of the night, when I heard that voice, I wept and cried, but it was repeated with the strength of thunder. I wanted to live and die in the Holy Roman Catholic Church, and I prayed to God to silence

the voice, but I heard it yet still louder. When I was reading His word He was trying to break my fetters, but I would not have my fetters broken. He came to me with His saving light, but I would not have it.

I have no bad feeling against Roman Catholic priests. Some of you may think I have. You are mistaken. Sometimes I weep for them because I know that the poor men — just as I did — are fighting against the Lord, and that they are miserable as I was miserable then. If I relate to you one of the struggles of which I speak, you will understand what it is to be a Roman Catholic priest, and you will pray for them.

In Montreal there is a splendid cathedral, capable of holding 15,000 people. I used to preach there very often. One day the Bishop asked me to speak on the Virgin Mary, and I was glad to do so. I said to those people what I thought to be true then, and what the priests believe and preach everywhere. Here is the sermon I preached:

"My dear friends, when a man has rebelled against his king, when he has committed a great crime against his emperor, does he come himself to speak to him? If he has a favor to ask from his king, dare he, under the circumstances, appear himself in his presence? No, the king would rebuke him, and would punish him. Then, what does he do? Instead of going himself, he selects one of the friends of the king, some one of his officers, sometimes the sister or the mother of the king, and he puts his petition into their hands. They go and speak in favor of the guilty man. They ask his pardon, they appease his wrath, and very often the king will grant to these people the favor which he would refuse to the guilty man.

"Then", I said, "we are all sinners, we have all offended the great and mighty King, the King of Kings. We have raised rebellious colors against Him. We have trampled His laws under our feet, and surely He is angry against us. What can we do today? Shall we go ourselves with our hands filled with our iniquities? No! But, thanks to God, we have Mary the mother of Jesus, our King, at His right hand, and as a dutiful son never refuses any favor to a beloved mother, so Jesus will never refuse any favor to Mary. He has never refused any petition which she presented to Him when He was on earth. He has never rebuked His mother in any way. Where is the son who would break the heart of a loving mother, when he could rejoice her by granting her what she wants? Then I say, Jesus, the King of Kings, is not only the Son of God, but He is the Son of Mary, and loves His mother. And as He has never refused any favor of Mary when

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He was on earth; He will never refuse her any favor today. Then what must we do? Oh! we cannot present ourselves before the great King, covered as we are with iniquity. Let us present our petitions to His holy mother; she will go to the feet of Jesus, herself, Jesus, her God and her son, and she will surely receive the favors which she will ask; she will ask our pardon and will obtain it. She will ask a place in the Kingdom of Christ, and you will have it. She will ask from Jesus to forget your iniquities, to grant you the true repentance, and He will give you anything His mother may ask of Him.”

My hearers were so happy at the idea of having such an advocate at the feet of Jesus interceding for them day and night, that they all burst into tears, and were beside themselves with joy that Mary was to ask and obtain their pardon.

I thought at the time that this was not only the religion of Christ, but that it was the religion of common sense, and that nothing could be said against it. After the sermon the Bishop came to me and blessed me, and thanked me, saying that the sermon would do great good in Montreal.

That night I went on my knees, and took my Bible, and my heart was full of joy because of the good sermon I had given in the morning. I opened and read from Matthew 12:46 the following words:

“While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. Then said one unto him, ‘Behold Thy mother and Thy brethren stand without desiring to speak with Thee.’ But He answered and said to him that told Him, ‘Who is My mother, and who are My brethren?’ And He stretched forth His hand toward His disciples and said, ‘Behold! My mother and My brethren, for whosoever shall do the will of My Father which is in Heaven, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother.’”

When I had read these words there was a voice speaking to me more terrible than the voice of loud thunder, saying, “Chiniquy, you preached a lie this morning when you said that Mary had always received the favors which she had asked from Jesus. Do you not see that Mary comes to ask a favor, that is, to see her son, during whose absence she has been lonesome, and who has left her during many months to preach the Gospel?” When Mary got to the place where Jesus was preaching, the place was so crammed that she could not enter. What will she do? She will do what every mother would do in her place. She raises her voice and requests Him to come and see her; but while Jesus hears the voice of His mother, and with His divine eyes sees her, does He grant her petition? No! He shuts His ears to her voice

and hardens His heart against her prayer. It is a public rebuke, and she feels it keenly. The people are astonished. They are puzzled, almost scandalized. They turn to Christ, and they say to Him, “Why don’t you come and speak to your mother?” What does Jesus say? He gives no answer except this extraordinary one: “Who is My mother, and who are My brethren?” and, looking upon His disciples, He says: “Behold, My mother, My brethren, and My sisters.” As for Mary, she is left alone, and publicly rebuked.

And then the voice spoke to me again with the power of thunder, telling me to read again in St. Mark 3:31-35. You will find the same incident both in Mark and in Luke 8:19-21. Instead of granting her petition Jesus replied in such a way as to publicly rebuke His mother. And then the voice spoke to me with terrific power, telling me that Jesus, so long as He was a little boy, obeyed Joseph and His mother; but as soon as Jesus presented Himself before the world as the Son of God, as the Savior of the world, as the great Light of humanity, then Mary had to disappear. It is to Jesus alone that the eyes of the world must be turned to receive Light and Life.

Then, my friends, the voice spoke to me all the night: “Chiniquy, Chiniquy, you have told a lie this morning, and you were preaching a lot of fables and nonsense; and you preach against the Scriptures when you say that Mary has the power to grant any favor from Jesus.” I prayed and I wept, and it was a sleepless night with me.

The next morning I went to table with the Bishop Prince, the coadjutor, who had invited me to breakfast.

He said to me, “M. Chiniquy, you look like a man who has spent the night in tears. What is the matter with you?”

I said, “My lord, you are correct. I am desolate above measure.”

“What is the matter?” he asked.

“Oh! I cannot tell you here,” I said. “Will you please give me one hour in your room alone? I will tell you a mystery which will puzzle you.”

After breakfast I went out with him and said:

“Yesterday you paid me a great compliment because of the sermon in which I proved that Jesus had always granted the petitions of His mother. But, my lord, last night I heard another voice, stronger than yours, and my trouble is that I believe that voice is the voice of God. That voice has told me that we Roman Catholic priests and bishops preach a falsehood every time we say to the people that Mary has always the power to receive from the hands of Jesus Christ the favors which she asks. This is a lie, my lord — this, I fear, is a diabolical and damning error.”

The bishop then said, "M. Chiniquy, what do you mean? Are you a Protestant?"

"No," I said, "I'm not a Protestant." (Many times I had been called a Protestant because I was so fond of the Bible.) "But I tell you, face to face, that I sincerely fear that yesterday I preached a lie, and you, my lord, will preach one also the next time you say that we must invoke Mary, under the pretext that Jesus has never refused any favor to His mother. This is false."

The Bishop said, "M. Chiniquy, you go too far!"

"No, my lord," I said, "it is of no use to talk. Here is the Gospel read it."

I put the Gospel into the hands of the Bishop, and he read with his own eyes what I have already quoted. My impression was that he read those words for the first time. The poor man was so much surprised that he remained mute and trembling. Finally he asked, "What does that mean?"

"Well," I said, "this is the Gospel; and here you see that Mary has come to ask from Jesus Christ a favor, and He has not only rebuked her, but has refused to consider her as His mother. He did this publicly, that we might know that Mary is the mother of Jesus as man, and not as God."

The Bishop was beside himself. He could not answer me.

I then asked to be allowed to put him a few questions. I said, "My lord, who has saved you and saved me upon the Cross?"

He answer, "Jesus Christ."

"And who paid your debts and mine by shedding His blood, was it Mary or Jesus?"

He said, "Jesus Christ."

"Now, my lord, when Jesus and Mary were on earth, who loved the sinner more; was it Mary or Jesus?"

And again he answered that it was Jesus.

"Did any sinner come to Mary on earth to be saved?"

"No."

"Do you remember that any sinner has gone to Jesus to be saved?"

"Yes, many."

"Have they been rebuked?"

"Never."

"Do you remember that Jesus ever said to sinners, 'Come to Mary and she will save you'?"

"No," he said.

"Do you remember that Jesus has said to poor sinners, 'Come unto me'?"

"Yes. He has said it."

"Has He ever retracted those words?"

"No!"

"And who was, then, the more powerful to save sinners?" I asked.

"Oh! it was Jesus!"

"Now, my lord, since Jesus and Mary are now in heaven, can you show me in the Scriptures that Jesus has lost anything of His desire and power to save sinners, or that He has delegated this power to Mary?"

And the Bishop answered, "NO."

"Then, my lord," I asked, "why do we not go to Him, and Him alone? Why do we invite poor sinners to come to Mary, when, by your own confession she is nothing compared with Jesus in power, in mercy, in love, and in compassion for the sinner?"

Then the poor Bishop was as a man who is condemned to death. He trembled before me, and as he could not answer me, he pleaded business and left me. His "business" was that he could not answer me.

But I was still not converted. There were many links by which I was still tied to the feet of the Pope. There were other battles to be fought before I could break the chains which bound me.

But in those days, though I was troubled I had not lost my zeal for my Church. The Bishops had given me great power and authority, and the Pope had raised me above many others, and I had the hope, with many others, that little by little, we might reform the Church in many things.

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In 1851 I went to Illinois to found a French colony. I took with me about 75,000 French Canadians, and settled on the magnificent prairies of Illinois, to take possession in the name of the Church of Rome. After I had begun my great work of colonization I became a rich man. I bought many Bibles and gave one to almost every family. The Bishop was very angry at me for this, but I did not care. I had no idea of giving up the Church of Rome, but I wanted to guide my people as well as I could in the way in which Christ wanted me to lead them.

Now the Bishop of Chicago did a thing at that time which we Frenchmen could not tolerate. It was a great crime, and I wrote to the Pope and got him dismissed. Another Bishop was sent in his place, who deputed his Grand Vicar to visit me.

The Grand Vicar said to me, "M. Chiniquy, we are very glad that you have got the former Bishop dismissed, for he was a bad man; but it is suspected in many places that you are no more in the Church of Rome. It is suspected that you are a heretic and a Protestant. Will you not give us a document by which we can prove to

all the world that you and your people are still good Roman Catholics?"

I said, "I have no objection."

He rejoined, "It is the desire of the new Bishop, whom the Pope has sent, to have such a document from you."

I then took a piece of paper — and it seemed to me that this was a golden opportunity to silence the voice which was speaking to me day and night and troubling my faith. I wanted to persuade myself by this means that in the Roman Catholic Church we were really following the Word of God, and not merely "traditions of men." I wrote down these very words:

"My lord, we French Canadians of the colony of Illinois want to live in the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church, out of which there is no salvation, and to prove this to your lordship we promise to obey your authority according to the Word of God, as we find it in the Gospel of Christ."

I signed that and offered it to my people to sign, and they did. I then gave it to the Grand Vicar, and asked him what he thought of it. He said, "It is just what we want." He assured me that the Bishop would accept it, and all would be right.

When the Bishop had read the submission, he too found it right, and with tears of joy said: "I am so glad that you have made your submission, because we were in fear that you and your people would turn Protestants."

My friends, to show you my blindness, I must confess to my shame, that I was glad to have made my peace with the Bishop, a man, when I was not yet at peace with God. The Bishop gave me a "letter of peace," by which he declared that I was one of his best priests, and I went back to my countrymen with the determination to remain there. But God looked down upon me in His mercy, and He was to break that peace which was peace with man and not with God.

The Bishop, after my departure, went to the telegraph office and telegraphed my submission to the other bishops, and asked them what they thought of it. They unanimously answered him the very same day: "Do you not see that Chiniquy is a disguised Protestant, and he has made a Protestant of you? It is not to you that he makes submission; he makes his submission to the Word of God. If you do not destroy that submission you are a Protestant yourself."

Ten days later I received a letter from the Bishop, and when I went to him he asked me if I had the "letter of peace" he had given me the other day. I produced it,

and when he saw it was that letter, he ran to his stove and threw it into the fire. I was astonished. I rushed to the fire to save my letter, but it was too late. It was destroyed.

Then I turned to the Bishop, and I said, "How dare you, my lord, take from my hand a document which is my property, and destroy it without my consent?"

He replied, "M. Chiniquy, I am your superior, and I have no account to give you."

"You are indeed, my lord, my superior, and I am nothing but a poor priest, but there is a great God who is as much above you as above me, and that God has granted me rights which I will never give up to please any man; in the presence of that God I protest against your iniquity."

"Well," he said, "do you come here to give me a lecture?"

I replied, "No, my lord; but I want to know if you brought me here to insult me?"

"M. Chiniquy," he said, "I brought you here because you gave me a document which you know very well was not an act of submission."

Then I answered, "Tell me, what act of submission do you require of me?"

He said, "You must begin by taking away these few words '*according to the Word of God, as we find it in the Gospel of Christ,*' and say simply that you promise to obey my authority without any condition; that you will promise to do whatever I tell you."

Then I got to my feet, and I said, "My lord, what you require of me is not an act of submission, but an act of adoration, and I refuse it to you."

"Then," said he, "if you cannot give me that act of submission, you cannot any longer be a Roman Catholic priest."

I raised my hands to God, and said, "May Almighty God be forever blessed," and I took my hat and left the Bishop.

I went to the hotel where I had engaged a room, and locked the door behind me. I fell on my knees to examine what I had done in the presence of God. Then I saw, for the first time clearly, that the Church of Rome could not be the Church of Christ. I had learned the terrible truth, not from the lips of Protestants, not from her enemies, but from the lips of the Church of Rome herself. I saw that I could not remain in it except by giving up the Word of God in a formal document. Then I saw that I had done well to give up the Church of Rome. But oh! my friends, what a dark cloud came upon me! In my darkness I cried out, "My God, my God, why is it that my soul is surrounded with such a dark cloud?"

With tears I cried to God to show me the way, but for a time, no answer was vouchsafed. I had given up the Church of Rome, I had given up position, honor, my brothers and sisters, everything that was dear to me! I saw that the Pope, the Bishops, and the priests would attack me in the press, and in the pulpit. I saw that they would take away my honor and my name — and perhaps my life. I saw that war to the death was begun between the Church of Rome and me, and I looked to see if any friends had been left to me to help me fight the battle, but not a single friend remained. I saw that even my dearest friends were bound to curse me, and look upon me as an infamous traitor. I saw that my people would reject me, that my beloved country, where I had so many friends, would curse me, and that I had become an object of horror to the world.

Then I tried to remember if I had some friends amongst the Protestants, but as I had spoken and written against them all my life, I had not a single friend there. I saw that I was left all alone to fight the battle. It was too much, and in that terrible hour, if God had not wrought a miracle, I should not have been able to bear it. It seemed impossible for me to go out from that room into the cold world, where I should not find a single hand to shake my hand, or a single smiling face to look upon me, but where I should see only those looking upon me as a traitor.

It seems that God was far away, but He was very near. Suddenly the thought entered my mind: “You have your Gospel; read it, and you will find the light.” On my knees, and with trembling hand, I opened the book. Not I, but God opened it, for my eyes fell on 1 Corinthians 7:23: “Ye are bought with a price, be not ye the servants of men.”

With these words the light came to me, and for the first time I saw the great mystery of salvation, as much as man can see it. I said to myself, “Jesus has bought me; then, if Jesus has bought me, He has saved me; I am saved! Jesus is my God! All the works of God are perfect! I am, then, perfectly saved — Jesus could not save me by half. I am saved in the blood of the Lamb; I am saved by the death of Jesus.” And these words were so sweet to me that I felt unspeakable joy, as if the fountains of life were open and floods of new light were flowing in upon my soul. I said to myself, “I am not saved, as I thought, by going to Mary; I am not saved by purgatory, or by indulgences confessions or penances. I am saved by Jesus alone!” And all the false doctrines of Rome went away from my mind as falls a tower which is struck at the base.

I then felt such a joy, such a peace, that the angels

of God could not be more happy than I was. The blood of the Lamb was flowing on my poor guilty soul. With a loud cry of joy I said, “Oh! dear Jesus. I feel it, I know it; Thou has saved me! Oh! Gift of God, I accept Thee! Take my heart and keep it forever Thine. Gift of God, abide in me to make me pure and strong; abide in me to be my way, my light, and my life; grant that I may abide in Thee now and forever! But, dear Jesus, do not save me alone; save my people; grant me to show them the Gift also! Oh! that they may accept Thee and feel rich and happy as I am now.”

It was thus I found the Light and the great mystery of our salvation, which is so simple and so beautiful, so sublime and so grand. I had opened the hands of my soul and accepted the gift. I was rich in the gift. Salvation, my friends, is a gift; you have nothing to do but to accept it, love it, and love the Giver. I pressed the Gospel to my lips, and swore I would never preach anything but Jesus.

I arrived in the midst of my colony on a Sabbath morning. The whole people were exceeding excited and ran towards me, and asked what news. When they were gathered in the church, I presented to them The Gift. I showed to them that God had presented to me, His Son Jesus as a gift — and, through Jesus, the pardon of my sins, and life eternal as a gift. Then, not knowing whether they would receive the gift or not, I said to them: “It is time for me to go away from you, my friends. I have left the Roman Catholic Church forever. I have taken the gift of Christ, but I respect you too much to impose myself on you; if you think it is better for you to follow the Pope than to follow Christ, and to invoke the name of Mary than the name of Jesus, in order to be saved, tell it to me by rising up.”

To my exceeding great surprise the whole multitude remained in their seats, filling the church with their sobs and tears. I thought some of them would tell me to go, but not one did so. And as I watched I saw a change come over them — a marvelous change, which cannot be explained in natural ways — and I said to them, with a cry of joy:

*“The mighty God who saved me yesterday can save you today. With me you will cross the Red Sea and go into the Promised Land. With me you will accept the great gift — you will be happy and rich in the gift. I will put the question to you in another way. If you think it is better for you to follow Christ than the Pope, to invoke the name of Jesus alone than the name of Mary, that it is better to put your trust only in the blood of the Lamb shed on the Cross for your sins, than in the fabulous purgatory of Rome, after*

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*your death to be saved; and if you think it is better for you to have me preach to you the pure Gospel of Christ, than to have a priest preach to you the doctrines of Rome, tell it to me by rising up — I am your man!”*

And all, without a single exception, rose to their feet, and, with tears, asked me to remain with them.

The Gift, the great, the unspeakable Gift had, for the first time, come before their eyes in its beauty; they had found it precious; they had accepted it; and no words can tell you the joy of that multitude. Like myself they felt rich and happy in the Gift. The names of one thousand souls, I believe, were written in the Book of Life that day. Six months later we were two thousand converts, a year later we were about four thousand! And now we are nearly twenty-five thousand who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The news spread quickly all over America, and even in France and England — that Chiniquy, the best-known priest of Canada, had left the Church of Rome, at the head of a noble band of men. And wherever it was said, the name of Jesus was blessed, and I hope you will bless the merciful and adorable Savior today with me, when it is my privilege to have told you what He has done for my soul.

Pray for the Roman Catholics of America and everywhere, that I may be the instrument of the mercies of God toward them; that they may all receive, with you, the unspeakable Gift; may love and glorify the Gift during the few days of our pilgrimage here, and throughout all eternity. Amen.