

kissed passionately the image of the Virgin radiant with grace. It was She!

I did not know where I was. I experienced an almost total change...I tried to find myself and could not...The greatest joy burst from the depths of my soul; I could not speak...I could not account for the faith and awareness that I had acquired. All that I could say is that in the moment of this phenomenon, the band fell from my eyes; and not one band, but a whole collection of them, and they disappeared rapidly, one after the other, as snow, mud and ice disappear under the influence of the burning sun.

I came out of a tomb, out of the abyss of darkness and I was alive, perfectly alive...But I wept! I saw in the bottom of the abyss the extreme misery from which I was torn out by an infinite mercy. I trembled at the sight of all my iniquities, and I was stupefied, emotionally moved and shocked in admiration and gratitude...Oh, how many descend calmly into this abyss with their eyes closed by pride and recklessness!... They descend alive into the chasm of terrible darkness...And my family, my fiancée, my poor sisters!!! For you I offered my first prayers. Will you not lift up your eyes to the Savior of the world whose blood cancelled the original sin? Oh, how terrible is the imprint of that stain! It renders the creature made in the image of God unrecognizable.

I wondered how I came to know this truth, since it is sure that I had not opened a religious book, I had not read a single page of the Bible, and the doctrine on the original sin, that is totally forgotten and denied by modern Jews, had not occupied my mind even for an instant; I doubt if I have ever heard the term. How did I arrive at this knowledge? I do not know. I know this; that entering the church I knew nothing; leaving it, I saw everything clearly. I can only explain this change with the image of a man who awoke from a deep sleep, or with that of a man

born blind, who sees the light in one blow; he sees but cannot define the light that is the source of his illumination, and in which he contemplates the objects of his admiration.

...I felt ready for everything and [immediately] insistently demanded baptism. They wanted to delay it. 'But how!', I exclaimed, 'the Jews who heard the preaching of the Apostles were baptized immediately, and you want to delay it, even though I heard the Queen of the Apostles!'

Eleven days later Alphonse received baptism, confirmation and first communion. Soon afterwards he entered religious life (having broken off his engagement), and in 1847 was ordained a priest. He spent the rest of his life working and praying for the conversion of his fellow Jews. He moved to the Holy Land and with his brother Theodor founded a congregation of nuns -- the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion -- to pray for the conversion of the Jews. He built a convent for them on the site of Pilate's palace, the very spot where Pilate showed the beaten and bloody Jesus to the crowd suggesting that he be released, to which the crowd of Jews cried back 'Crucify him! His blood be on us and on our children!' (Matthew 27:25). He died in 1884 at Ain Karem, John the Baptist's birthplace near Jerusalem. His heartfelt prayer that New Year's Day in Naples, that God lead him to fulfill his cherished goal to work to improve the lot of the Jews, had been granted, as he said, 'beyond all expectation.'

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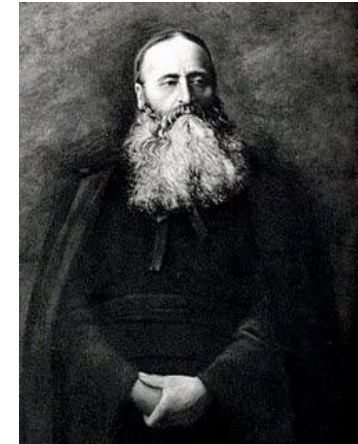
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Pamphlet 560

The Conversion of Alphonse Ratisbonne



Alphonse Ratisbonne

Alphonse Ratisbonne was the son and heir of a wealthy, aristocratic family of Jewish bankers in Strasbourg, France. When Alphonse was still a child his older brother, Theodor, converted to the Catholic faith and became a priest. The family reacted with hostility and horror. Alphonse resolved never to communicate again with his older brother, and developed a violent antipathy to the Catholic faith and to all things Catholic. Although Alphonse was entirely atheist in his beliefs, and non-practicing as a Jew, he felt a great love and loyalty for his fellow Jews, and devoted much of his effort and wealth to better their social condition. At the time of his conversion, Alphonse was 27 years old, and engaged to marry his uncle's beautiful daughter and to take his place as a partner in his uncle's bank. During his engagement Ratisbonne noticed a subtle change in his religious feelings; he wrote:

I must note a certain change that came about in my religious thinking during my engagement. As I said, I did not believe in anything; in this

absolute nihilism, in my denial of any faith, I felt myself to be in harmony with my Catholic and Protestant friends; the sight of my fiancée awakened in me a sentiment of human dignity. I began to believe in the immortality of the soul; instinctively I began to pray to God; I thanked him for my good fortune, but nevertheless I still remained unhappy...I could not account for my sentiments;...I often told her [my fiancée] that, and truly, the thought of her raised my heart to the God, that I did not know, to whom I had not prayed, whom I had not invoked.

Because his fiancée was only sixteen it was thought appropriate to delay the wedding, and to pass the time Alphonse decided to take an extended prenuptial tourist trip. An early stop was Naples; there he found himself alone on New Year's Day, 1847. In Ratisbonne's own description:

It was a sad day for me. I was alone in Naples, I was not greeted by anybody, I had nobody to embrace...I wept and the joy of the Neapolitans increased my sadness. I went for a walk following mechanically the flow of the crowd. I reached the piazza di Palazzo and found myself, I do not know why, at the door of a church. I entered. The Mass, I believe, was being celebrated. How did it come about, I do not know, but I stopped for a moment leaning against a column, and my heart seemed to open and breathe a known atmosphere. I prayed in my own way, without analyzing what was happening to me. I prayed for my fiancée, my uncle, my dead father, my dear mother who left me as an orphan when I was young, all my close friends, and I asked God for inspiration that could guide me in my projects of improving the lot of the Jews -- an idea which I had always cherished. My sadness left me, as a dark cloud that is blown away by the wind; in my whole interior, inundated with an ineffable calm, I experienced a consolation as if a voice had told

me: 'Your prayer has been granted.' Oh yes, my prayer has been heard one hundred per cent and beyond all expectation, because on the last day of that same month, I solemnly received the sacrament of baptism in a church in Rome!

After Naples Ratisbonne went on to Rome. While there he called on the Baron de Bussieres, who was the brother of one of his best friends. The Baron was a devout Catholic and dared Ratisbonne to wear a Miraculous Medal and to recite a short daily prayer to Mary as a way of proving that there was nothing to such 'detestable superstitions.' (The Miraculous Medal is a medal of Mary which was widely propagated following her apparition to a young nun, later St. Catherine Laboure, in her convent chapel in Paris). On January 20, the last day of his planned stay in Rome, Ratisbonne bumped into the Baron riding in his carriage, who invited him to join him for a ride. When the Baron stopped at a nearby church to conduct some business with the priest, Ratisbonne went into the empty church to wait. Let us continue with the Baron's account of what he found when he went into the church to get his friend:

"I caught sight of him on his knees, in the chapel of St. Michael the Archangel. I went up to him and touched him. I had to do this three or four times before he became aware of my presence. Finally he turned towards me, face bathed in tears...with an expression no words can describe...he took hold of his Miraculous Medal and kissed it with passionate emotion. He broke into tears at the thought of all the heretics and unbelievers....Gradually this delirious emotion subsided and he grew calmer, and now his face was radiant, almost transfigured. He begged me to take him to a priest and asked when he could receive holy Baptism, for now he was sure he could not live without it. I took him at once to the Gesu to see Father de Villefort, who invited him to explain what had happened.

Ratisbonne drew out his medal, kissed it, and showed it me, saying, 'I saw her! I saw her!' and again emotion choked his words, but soon he grew calmer and spoke. I shall give his [Ratisbonne's] own words: 'I had only been in the church a moment when I was suddenly seized with an indescribable agitation of mind. I looked up and found that the rest of the building had disappeared. One single chapel seemed to have gathered all the light and concentrated it in itself. In the midst of this radiance I saw someone standing on the altar, a lofty shining figure, all majesty and sweetness, the Virgin Mary just as she looks on this medal. Some irresistible force drew me towards her. She motioned to me to kneel down and when I did so, she seemed to approve. Though she never said a word, I understood her perfectly.'"

'...At first he [Ratisbonne] had been able to see the Queen of Heaven clearly, appearing in all the splendor of her immaculate beauty; but he had not been able to bear the radiance of that divine light for long. Three times he had tried to look up to her, and three times he had found himself unable to raise his eyes higher than her hands, from which blessings and graces seemed to be falling like so many shining rays. 'Oh God,' he cried, 'only half an hour before I was blaspheming, and felt a deadly hatred for the Catholic religion! All my acquaintances know that humanly speaking I had the strongest reasons for remaining a Jew. My family is Jewish, my bride to be is a Jewess, my uncle is a Jew. By becoming Catholic I am sacrificing all my earthly hopes and interests; and yet I am not mad.'

Soon after the experience Ratisbonne wrote:

How can I describe it? Human words cannot attempt to explain the unspeakable; every description, however sublime, will only be a profanation of the ineffable truth. I was there, on my knees, in tears...I took the medal ...and