

How God Banished Hopelessness From His Soul

By DEXTER DUGGAN

PHOENIX — With the spring sun beaming outside on desert plants and trees in luxuriant bloom here, Roy Schoeman told an audience about the winter in his soul as he had walked along Cape Cod sand dunes years ago.

It was an interior winter that ended with an overwhelming spiritual encounter.

He'd joined the faculty at Harvard Business School at age 29 after attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "I'd actually achieved everything I hoped to achieve. . . . And yet there was still no purpose to anything. Nothing had any real meaning. And so that's really when the bottom fell out" and he felt "hopeless," Schoeman told listeners.

He spoke to an April 22 conference here at the Mt. Claret Catho-

lic retreat center, nestled by local landmark Camelback Mountain. Also talking before an estimated 225 people was philosopher and writer Alice von Hildebrand.

The conference, on the theme "God Is Love," was sponsored by Mt. Claret and Ville de Marie Academy, an independent K-12 Catholic school in suburban Scottsdale.

Schoeman, the New York City-raised son of German-born parents who fled Nazism, said that as a youth, he had "quite a religious Jewish upbringing. My religious prayer life and my religious identity were the center of my life. . . . I was very blessed by Providence in the rabbis who oversaw my Jewish formation."

He didn't look forward to entering MIT, he said, because "nothing that wasn't for God really in

the long run made any sense." Once there, however, he lost his faith, partly because of the "scientific, evolution-based worldview," but in larger measure because of the radical atmosphere at universities then.

"I rather quickly and enthusiastically fell out of the state of grace," Schoeman said, adding that by the time he left the school, he was either an agnostic or atheist, depending on which day of the week a person asked him.

Yet "I had a tremendous thirst and hunger for God, which is obviously just a gift from God. . . . I knew there had to be some real meaning in life," which he expected would appear sometime.

Seeking solace in his desolation by walking amid the beauties of

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nature, Schoeman was on Cape Cod early one morning, "lost in my thoughts and listening to the birds when I received the single greatest grace in my life."

He said he can't think of any way to describe the experience "other than to say I fell into Heaven. From one moment to the next I found myself very aware, very knowingly in the presence of God, seeing my life as though I were looking back over my life after death in the presence of God. . . .

"I saw in an instant everything that I would be happy about and everything that I would wish I had done differently," Schoeman said.

He felt he would regret at death "all of the time and energy I worried about not being loved when every moment of my existence I was being held in an ocean of love greater than I imagined could exist, coming from the hands of this all-knowing, all-loving God."

Another great regret would be "every hour I wasted doing nothing of value in the eyes of Heaven," he said, explaining that every moment of life offers an opportunity to do something of value, "which would sort of be a jewel in our diadem for all eternity."

Even though there had been bad times in life, Schoeman said he saw he was watched over and cared about at every moment.

"More than I had ever hoped for was actually true. I mean, we live forever. Everything that ever happened to us was the most perfect thing that could be arranged. Every moment of our lives had infinite meaning. . . . There was nothing to worry about and there was nothing to be unhappy about, in some sense ever again," he said.

Marian Shrines

He said he phoned his mother with the good news that there's really a God and people live forever, but her reaction was that he needed to be checked in somewhere. Because of her own experiences, including fleeing for her life from the Nazis, she suffered "philosophical angst," he said.

Schoeman wanted to know what religion to follow and prayed nightly to learn this God's name "as long as you're not Christ and I have to become a Christian," he told the audience.

Exactly one year after the Cape Cod encounter, "I received the second really great, extraordinary grace of my life." He dreamed of being led to a room "with the most beautiful young woman that I could imagine. I knew without being told that it was the Blessed Virgin Mary," who said she'd answer any questions he had.

Upon awakening the next morning, Schoeman wanted to be fully a Christian, although he knew nothing about Catholics or Protestants or differences between them, he said.

He attended a Protestant church, but the pastor was so dismissive of Mary, Schoeman knew that wasn't for him. His visits to Marian shrines brought him toward Catholicism.

Schoeman was baptized in 1992 and hopes other Jews will find fulfillment in the Catholic Church.

Jews "were trained to yearn for the coming of the Messiah," and pour their heart and soul into this, he said.

"Have you ever seen a Woody Allen movie? . . . The despair is all through Jewish humor. I mean it's existential despair that they can only deal with in this kind of black humor because the abyss in their soul of yearning for Christ is so deep."

The Diabolical

He said Catholics don't share their faith with Jews because "they're afraid of offending them, they're afraid of being kind of unjust and oppressing them." But, he said, "There's no way for anyone to be as happy as God meant us to be . . . without the sacraments, which are only available through the Catholic Church."

Praying for the conversion of the Jews hasn't been high-profile "in official Church promulgations" since the Holocaust, he said, adding that people should "recognize that there's no greater favor that anyone can do to anyone . . . than to bring them to Christ."

Schoeman said "it's about time to return the favor" to Jews because "in fact they brought Christ to all of us."

There was "nothing . . . dearer to Jesus' heart than that His own people would follow Him," and nothing caused Him more pain than being rejected by many of them, Schoeman said.

He spoke of "the guiding hand of Providence over the role of the Jews from the very beginning with Abraham, all the way through to the Second Coming . . . not excluding the Holocaust, which I think is particularly important to address explicitly because at least for the Jews, that's where they kind of dropped the ball with believing in God's love."

He said it's not easy to find another example of a people who've been hated and persecuted throughout history, although many peoples have been persecuted at various times.

The Holocaust "flows directly out of three streams," he said — occultism, eugenics, and sexual depravity — adding that "Hitler was an active occultist. . . . The Holocaust was the direct expression of the diabolical will bubbling up from Hell."

Although the Holocaust had the effect of hampering Catholic efforts to convert Jews, "The current wave of Jewish conversions [is] the greatest since Messianic times. . . . Today there is not a town in Israel without a Messianic Jewish congregation," Schoeman said.

Rather than regarding Catholicism as a break from his religious upbringing, Schoeman said, "It seemed painfully obvious to me that if the Catholic Church is what it claims to be, it's a continuation of Judaism."

Schoeman is the author of *Salvation Is from the Jews* (Ignatius 2003).