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"God gave me the undeserved gift of conversion"

"I felt that someone really cared about my soul and recognized my dire need to be reconciled with God through His Church." Magdalena, a young mother from the Philippines, talks about her journey to the Catholic Church.

04/20/2023

I grew up in the very Catholic country that is the Philippines and

was baptized in the Roman Rite like most Filipinos. But baptism was the extent of my relationship with the Church — I wasn't raised Catholic, and at a very young age became as far from being one as anyone could be. At 19 years old I disastrously called myself an atheist.

Jump forward a few years and I'm a wife to a good man, and a new mother to a baby boy. My husband and I were your average modern-day non-believers. We lived good, decent lives and held lofty principles, but God and religion were completely irrelevant to our world. We saw everything to do with faith as unfashionable, outdated, and irrational. Life was good without God, we thought. Life seemed just fine.

Then one day, without much preamble at all, God gave me the undeserved gift of conversion. Being

a terrible sinner and no friend to God, this grace was incredibly painful and put me in a great state of interior upheaval. I hardly thought about God at all and then, as if someone had flipped a switch, God was all I could think about, day and night, for weeks: is there a God? Did He ever reveal Himself to us? Who is He? Which religion got it right? If He is real, then what in the world am I suppose to do? Also, what is happening to me?

My heart grew frenzied and obsessive as I sought to answer question after question, praying fervently for the first time in years. I was given exorbitant graces, the foremost being an inexplicable desire to go to confession (which I have never done before), and a real, bodily hunger for the Eucharist (which I wasn't allowed to receive). Somehow I knew that I needed to

return to the Catholic Church, but how?

I pursued every avenue of help I could think of: contacting my only two Catholic friends; reaching out to religious orders and lay organizations; pestering my impossibly busy parish so I could meet and speak with a priest... For some reason, I couldn't get very far with any of these approaches, and after two full months I was still very lost and nowhere near being able to receive the Sacraments.

Despair took hold of me as I grasped for the first time the oceanic distance I had willfully put between God and myself. My only hope was a strange little prayer I started to learn and say every day, unfamiliar but comforting: the Holy Rosary.

The Aroma of Christ

“To impregnate our words and actions with his aroma is to sow understanding and friendship. We should accompany others so that no one is left, or can feel, abandoned. Our charity has to be affectionate, full of human warmth” (St. Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, 36)

Our Lady didn't take too long to respond to this poor sinner. I was providentially directed towards Opus Dei through a YouTube video that casually mentioned how incredible the members are with providing counseling and spiritual formation.

Everything I knew about Opus Dei at the time came from Wikipedia. I hadn't read any of St. Josemaria Escriva's writings either, but it didn't matter. Without prior experience or knowledge, it was easy to understand and be drawn to the Work because of the people I met. They emanated the joy and peace of Christian living. For

the first time in months, I felt that someone really cared about my soul and recognized my dire need to be reconciled with God through His Church.

A kind and faithful supernumerary of Opus Dei in my city accompanied me through my faith crisis with overwhelming charity. Throughout several months I was given resources for basic Catechism, direction and preparation for my first Confession, legal (canon law) advice and assistance for the validity of my marriage within the Church, and they also miraculously arranged my Confirmation against impossible odds. My son was also baptized in our parish chapel. Very soon after I met this supernumerary, we discovered we were both headed to Jerusalem: she was going on pilgrimage and I was moving there with my family. It was Divine Providence.

Jerusalem

“We have to behave as God's children toward all God's sons and daughters. Our love has to be a dedicated love, practised every day and made up of a thousand little details of understanding, hidden sacrifice and unnoticed self-giving. This is the "aroma of Christ" that made those who lived among our first brothers in the faith exclaim: ‘See how they love one another!’” (*Christ is Passing By*, 36)

There was only one thing we couldn't accomplish in the Philippines no matter how hard we tried: get married in the Church. The interfaith union between my husband and myself required a special dispensation from an archbishop before we could be properly wed according to Church laws, and despite diligent attempts we could not secure this before we had to

leave for Jerusalem. One of the kind Opus Dei priests I met was very hopeful. He seemed almost certain we would be married in the Holy Land somehow... And he was right.

Through a personal connection with this same priest, long-time Jerusalem numeraries welcomed us in their home soon after we landed. My husband and I had been to Jerusalem before. He even has family living in the city. But this time we felt less alien and more at home because of the ready and sincere friendships offered by the people of the Work.

Our wedding, which seemed so impossible back in the Philippines, was quickly arranged. In three weeks we were celebrating this holy sacrament in their humble but beautiful oratory. Besides our infant son, everyone else in attendance were completely new faces, but warm and happy for us nonetheless.

I don't think the word "stranger" is in the vocabulary of the Work's members. We certainly never felt like strangers among them the day of our wedding.

A Newborn in the Holy Land

"Whenever sanctity is genuine, it overflows from its vessel to fill other hearts, other souls, with its superabundance. We, the children of God, sanctify ourselves by sanctifying others. Is Christian life growing around you? Consider this every day" (*The Forge*, 856).

When we planned my family's move to Jerusalem, my life was completely devoid of faith. In the midst of God's own city and His chosen people, I would have seen and not seen, heard and not heard. Instead, God saved me before we left the Philippines, and when I journeyed home to Jerusalem so did my soul.

Miraculously this former pagan finds herself making a home as a “newborn” Catholic in the Holy Land, surrounded by people whose hearts are fervently seeking God every day, going to Mass alongside pilgrims from all over the world, and walking many of the same roads Our Lord and Our Lady walked. I’ve beheld Jerusalem’s shining beauty before, but nothing compares to how it looks now to a soul in love with its Maker.

Magdalena Garcia

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