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"God gave me the undeserved gift of conversion."

A young mother traces her journey from “atheism” to being a “newborn” Catholic in The Holy Land.

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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 church were completely irrelevant to our world. We saw everything to do with religion and faith as unfashionable, outdated, and irrational.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. From giving Him

hardly any thought at all, it's like someone flipped a switch and God was all I could think about day and night for weeks and 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, foremost was 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 can meet and speak with a priest. For some reason, I couldn't get too far with the angles I worked on, 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 me and God. My only hope was a strange little prayer I started to learn and say every day, so unfamiliar but so 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*, No. 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. This was the first whiff I caught of the Work's "aroma of Christ" as St. Paul would say.

Everything I knew about Opus Dei at the time came from Wikipedia. I also hadn't read any of St. Josemaria Escriva's writings, but it didn't matter. Without prior experience or knowledge, it was easy to understand and be drawn to the Work because it's members shared and proclaimed its spirituality through their actions. They simply emanated the joy and peace of Christian living. For the first time in months I felt 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 No. 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, we were welcomed by long-time Jerusalem numeraries 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 Work's members.

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, no. 856)

I did not realize how far I had gone astray from the Lord until He helped me see it. After He gave me the conviction to repent and seek His mercy, He used The Work to aid me in fully orienting every aspect of my life back towards Him.

God’s grace needed not only my cooperation but the cooperation of others. Much like in Calvary, Jesus needs our help in working our

redemption. I see now that my conversion was not only a dialogue between His grace and my response, but the ready response of others. Jesus loved me with the charity of real people. He consoled me through true friendships with others. He brought me back to His church using the apostolate of a handful of His faithful servants.

When we think of miracles we often conjure in our minds something spectacular and otherworldly. Yet my experience has been that God works His daily miracles first through the hearts of men then through their hands. The faithful priests and laypeople of Opus Dei understand this so very deeply. They receive God's spiritual graces and put flesh to them. They make the Divine love of Jesus very real — so real, it's ordinary — that it may fill up the lives and hearts of ordinary men.

My family's move to Jerusalem was imminent, and when we had planned it 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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