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On the High Seas: From Zoroastrianism to Catholicism

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Damania tells the story of his conversion in which he crossed many seas, including those of the interior life.

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I was born April 27, 1965 in Mumbai (Bombay, India) in a small enclave of 26 buildings where the *Persees* live. These are the followers of Zoroaster

(Zarathustra). It was like an island in the midst of that enormous city of 14 million.

The followers of Zoroaster learn to practice good words, good thoughts, and good deeds. They originated in Persia at the time of the reign of Darius I (actually my son is named Darius) and then were expelled centuries later by the Muslims. There are fewer than 100,000 worldwide. They do not permit conversions of pagans, who are also excluded from the temples of fire where priests burn acacia wood in worship of God, who is symbolized as fire.

In contrast to Hindus, Zoroastrians do not have castes. I grew up in the neighborhood playing cricket. I admired Sunil Gavaster, captain of the Indian team, who played so well. I also liked "pop" music, although I was no fan of John Lennon. It was Bon Jovi who turned me on. And like

any youngster, I used to put padlocks on the doors of our neighbors and broke an occasional window with the cricket ball.

My life has changed a lot since then. I've left behind those 14 million in exchange for the 50 million olive trees of Jaén (Spain). How did I come so far? It's a long story.

A meeting in Jordan

In spite of my Persee roots, I attended the Catholic high school of St. Francis Xavier in Mumbai. Later I studied marine engineering, but after failing technical drawing several times was on the point of dropping out. My mother kept me at it, even though she would have preferred to have *onterra firma* rather than out at sea.

Then came the time for me to be married. I decided not to follow the ancient Indian tradition of arranged

marriages, since I wanted to marry on my own. So before *they* could have me married, I left on a cargo ship. I traveled from port to port, until one fine day I was knocked off my horse--or rather, "off my ship."

It was in 1992. We had docked at the only port in Jordan--on the Red Sea, in the Gulf of Aqaba. After a hard day of work in the heat, I noticed some young ladies from Seville who were dancing. It was like an arrow. As they say here on Jaen (Spain), "me quedé prendao," I was taken captive by a young lady from Jaén.

We saw each other for only three days and then phoned each other for months, using up our salaries on phone bills. Finally she decided to come to India to meet my family. She stayed a month. As soon as she arrived, she asked for olive oil so that she could make a salad and a paella for my family. So, after having

traveled halfway across the world in search of a good wife, I found myself having to travel halfway across India to find a little bottle of oil!

I decided to move to Jaén and cross another sea, this time of olives. A little later, in January 1993, we were married in the church.

During these years I discovered God's Providence even before I met Him. It was everywhere, beginning with my wife and children—three blessings from Heaven. The children grew and grew as I was undergoing changes on the outside (several jobs) and on the inside: reconsidering what it is that we call God.

Meeting Opus Dei

We decided to place our children in Guadalimar, a school where the spiritual formation is entrusted to Opus Dei (of which I knew nothing). We found a cordial, sincere, and

affectionate reception, and they didn't ask us for any religious ID.

A little later I heard that Altocastillo High School was looking for an English teacher. I applied and was hired. I liked the school. The people were friendly and warm. There was one man who was especially affable, the chaplain, Don Luis, and we became friends.

During that time, as I said, I was experiencing the action of Providence, of Someone who was propelling the boat of my life from place to place without, however, depriving me of the helm of my freedom. And I was becoming more and more interested in Catholicism. I made a retreat at Rubín de Baeza, a very nice house near the wall where Antonio Machado lived in the 1920s [a leading figure in the Spanish literary movement, "Generation of '98"].

During the retreat I listened, kept quiet, and thought... Like that poet, I reflected in silence about this new ocean that was opening before me. Above all, I was looking inside. There I discovered the grace of God, whose presence I felt in that chapel. I began to read *The Way*, where I discovered unknown interior seas. Until then I had not read any religious book except for the Bible.

Easter Vigil 1999

A biography of St. Josemaría came into my hands. His life made an impression on me, especially the sorrow he experienced in childhood when his three little sisters died. At first I couldn't understand that suffering, that faith... I couldn't comprehend forgiveness, and even less the love of a God who forgives. But I continued sailing, letting the grace of God move me, and He granted me the gift of faith. In the

Easter Vigil, 1999, the Bishop of Jaén baptized me in the Cathedral. My wife, a very good Christian, left me great freedom during that whole spiritual journey. Natalia, one of my daughters, was baptized with me.

Next came my appointment to be a cooperater of Opus Dei, and four years after that, during a pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary, I understood that I should give myself entirely to God. I told him Yes, trusting that God, who is a Good Father, would never abandon me.

All of this has filled my life with joy, even in the midst of the difficulties. And each day at Communion I tell the Lord: It's true, my God; you never abandon me!

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