

# **Zhanara discovers Catholicism in Amsterdam**

Zhanara is from Kazakhstan, but her life took a big turn when she came to Amsterdam. Here she encountered the Catholic faith and has been baptized. Her path to conversion has taught her to open up her mind and her heart.

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In the city of canals, it's already dark. At the Church of Our Lady of Amsterdam, after the sun has set, the Pascal Vigil begins.

To Zhanara, this celebration has a special meaning: she will become a daughter of God in the Catholic Church. She came closer to the faith by the grace of God; the help of a group of friends made the way easier.

### **Zhanara, where does your story begin?**

I led the normal life of a girl in Kazakhstan. But when I finished my business studies in Almaty, my parents encouraged me to continue studying in Europe. I chose the Netherlands because I found many similarities between this country and my own country. I enrolled in a Master's program in International Business in Rotterdam. I have now graduated and am looking for a job.

## **When did you become a Catholic? What attracted you in Christianity?**

In Kazakhstan, a former republic of the Soviet Union, religion was restricted during my youth. I was raised without religion, but inside me I knew I believed in Jesus Christ, even though I didn't say anything or gave any sign of it.

About a year and a half ago, I met an Italian, Marco. We became friends. Thanks to him, I came in contact with the Italian culture, whose roots are to a great extent Catholic.

Little by little I discovered how true Christians, even with defects like everyone else, radiate generosity with their way of thinking and acting, how they help each other and take a positive attitude towards life. Of course, we all have our failures. They trust - we trust, I can now say -

that God will give them everything they need to be happy.

So, I came to the conclusion that I needed to deepen my knowledge of Catholic doctrine. My faith in Jesus became stronger, to the point of asking to become Catholic following the path of the sacraments.

### **How did you prepare for Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion?**

In September 2006, I found information on the Internet about the church of Our Lady of Amsterdam. That's how I came in contact with its rector, Fr. Ploeg. From him I received all kinds of help and encouragement. He suggested that I follow a Christian doctrine course at the Aenstal Residence, located in the middle of Amsterdam.

I also attended meditations on the gospel preached by this priest at

Aenstal. I met other girls and saw in practice what it's like being a Catholic. I was impressed by the way they helped me to know the doctrine and to practice love for God. These weekly meditations were a great inspiration for me.

My friend Marco was a constant support along my path towards Christianity, always willing to explain different aspects of the faith. Another important part of my preparation was a spiritual retreat at the Sonnenwende Conference Center. I spent four days devoted to deepening my knowledge and love of God.

**Could you tell us what changed in your personal life after becoming a Christian?**

Naturally, no one becomes a Catholic overnight. It's a wonderful process - enriching and emotional - into which

one must jump, opening one's heart and mind without fear.

I greatly enjoyed this time of preparation both spiritually and intellectually. It made made my desire to become Catholic even more firm. Now I belong to the “Catholic family.” I realize this is a task of a lifetime and not just some hobby that you can put down every so often.

**Zhanara, how did you change in your daily life?**

I have learned how to judge my activities and thoughts by God's criteria. I try to look at them through God's eyes. I want to struggle to be more generous and less selfish. I try to make more time for God, both in terms of prayer and in terms of being kinder towards others.

I am conscious that God is constantly close to me and that, for that reason, I can always ask for his help,

especially in the moments of trouble and insecurity. In the moments of joy and happiness I give thanks to God because He gave me everything I have and for everything he will give me in the future.

No matter what happens in my life, I know that I will never be alone, because God is always with me. I just began my Christian life and I hope that I can always live according to the truth God has revealed to us. I see this as a great challenge, but one that is worthwhile taking up.

### **How do you see being a Christian in relation to your native country?**

The life of any believer, regardless of what religion, is a new phenomenon in Kazakhstan. People look at it with curiosity and sometimes with fear. In my country there are many Russian Orthodox, but the majority of Kazaks are Muslim. This explains the fact there are so few Catholics, though

the number is increasing. A few years ago, the first Catholic church opened in Almaty. And not long ago the first Centers of Opus Dei were also started.

I am convinced that the outlook for Christians in Kazakhstan is good, though there is still a long and challenging road to travel. I believe that, living as good Christians, we can be an inspiring example for those who we hope will decide to follow us.

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