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A vocation to seek sanctity in ordinary life

Interview with Stephen Tsang,
an architect working in Chelsea,
London

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Many conversion stories, especially those found in fiction, are preceded by disillusionment, loneliness or even psychological breakdown.

The protagonists who eventually found God after such emotional roller coaster often find themselves

opting for other answers when another life changing experience comes along. My story was simple, in a quiet way paving the way for me to receive a vocation to seek sanctity in the ordinary things of life.

My calm and protected childhood had hardly any notion of God or religion. A few years in a Catholic school in Hong Kong didn't even lead me to set foot in the school chapel. Three years in a Church of England boarding school didn't make much impact either. I realised that very few around me had any faith at all. A last minute decision saw me going to London for University. I visited Netherhall House during my first year in an architectural school. It never crossed my mind that I would stay there as I was looking forward to having my own place, a small flat my parents suggested purchasing. The solicitor had difficulties with the deeds of the new property and the

completion of the purchase was not forthcoming when term began. Needing accommodation urgently, Netherhall House became the obvious choice. I thought it would only be a very brief stay. There were students of different faiths, I soon met a number of Catholics and was intrigued by the naturalness of their faith.

I was also drawn to the large chapel in the residence; architecturally it is the biggest room with the best finishes. Before long I was spending brief moments in it and quite happy that no one ever questioned my being there. One of the residents introduced me to the concept of mental prayer. There was immediately a sense of connection with a Personal God; this distinctive character still holds me now 27 years after the event. Soon I was joining in with the morning prayer session. I often used the little book 'The Way'

by St. Josemaria, no cultural barrier ever seemed an issue at all. Then attending daily Mass was a natural progression, the desire to be more united and identified with this Personal Redeemer grew.

I was happy that all through this period no one ever 'pushed' me to embrace the Faith, perhaps they were expecting me to take a long time. I was in Leeds during the Christmas holidays, prayer and daily attendance at Mass continued despite heavy snow falls. My sister hired a car to take me a few times, she was also in a Catholic Missionary school but had a different experience. It became clear to me that I had received this gift of Faith. Upon returning to Netherhall I expressed my readiness for Baptism and was presently surprised to be asked to wait a little longer. Certain critics have at times hinted that the people of Opus Dei were only interested in

the elite and often would use coercion to achieve their aims; these were not my experience.

One of the great attractions of the Catholic Faith is the devotion to our Lady. My previous studies of Renaissance art suddenly made full sense as the manifestation of a living faith. Other than the various devotions practiced in the residence I loved the idea of visiting 'the Poor of Our Lady'. Even in the affluent area of Hampstead there are many who suffered loneliness and ill health. The family atmosphere was another great help in understanding Catholic culture. It was 2nd of February that I was baptised into the Catholic Church; the residents put on a great show of celebration afterwards. My parents were apprehensive to start with, but seeing no adverse effect developing, they became strong defenders of my choice in front of the questioning of other relatives.

The solicitor eventually got his work done and the contract was completed. Before my departure from Netherhall House I felt a clear calling from our Lord that I can dedicate my whole life to His service without leaving my chosen profession. It was during the Rosary one evening, hardly a month after my baptism. Perhaps I knew little Catholic doctrine at that time but I was sure about the calling, and have never looked back on my decision. I was going out with a girl who was in school with me and we did paintings together, but there was no commitment. Naturally, giving myself to God meant for me a total dedication of all that I was and would be at that time. My non-Christian parents understood this too, although their Chinese culture would have preferred otherwise.

The doctrine of seeking holiness in everyday life is now common

language and part of the everyday teaching in the Church. There are so many practical application in one's daily life that everyday becomes an adventure. Working as an architect provides many opportunities of realising this: finishing everything to the last detail, serving the individual needs of every client, finding the unique solution for each project, creating the right designs to bring order to family life etc. I will never forget that St. Josemaria said: 'When our Lord sees that the altar and fittings are well cared for, He looks upon those responsible with special love and overlooks their other defects.' The human and the divine intermingle in ordinary everyday life, those who neglect the humdrum material details may not be able to find God elsewhere.

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