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“I have waited so long for this moment!”

Vivian Wong was baptised by Pope Francis during the Easter Vigil, 2017. “I am so grateful to become a child of God and finally be able to receive our Lord in Holy Communion; I have waited so long for this moment!”

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At 8:30 pm on Holy Saturday evening, during the Solemn Easter

Vigil presided by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica, he administered the sacraments of Christian initiation to eleven neophytes from Spain, the Czech Republic, Italy, the United States, Albania, Malta, Malaysia and China.

Vivian Wong from Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, was one of the eleven baptised by the Pope. “I am so grateful to become a child of God and finally be able to receive our Lord in Holy Communion; I have waited so long for this moment! I feel so loved by Him and I always pray that He will give me the heart to love Him as much as I can. I am not so good in expressing my feelings, so every time I receive our Lord, all I can tell Him repeatedly is just ‘Thank you!’ and ‘I love you’. I really hope to be able to bring more people closer to Him through my testimony.”

Growing up in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and schooled in the Chinese stream, Vivian never thought she would one day be a Catholic. Her father being Christian and her mother, Buddhist, her contact and exposure to the Catholic faith was nearly non-existent. For a while she followed her father to his church, and later went with her mother to the Buddhist temple, but religion never really played a role in her life.

At eighteen, in January 2015, she signed up for a residential on-the-job training program in hospitality skills at a retreat house in Ulu Tiram, Johor. Part of the program included optional courses for personal development, and one of those was a course about the Catholic Faith. Vivian started attending the classes on the Creed, the Sacraments and the Commandments with some interest but bit by bit, the subject began to really hold her attention, much to

her surprise. She was moved when she learnt that the Eucharist comes all the way from Christ through the Apostles and has remained the same for over 2000 years. She reasoned that if it were a human invention, it would have died a natural death shortly after the last Apostle died.

Being a thorough person by nature, she enjoys dwelling into the details of everything she does. Just as she is meticulous and has high standards in setting a dining table or making a tray of pastries, she started reading and studying the Faith to clarify whatever uncertainties she had and to reach a deeper understanding.

Her friendship with the other trainees eased many things for her. Nearly all the Catholic trainees went for Mass daily, prayed the Rosary and participated in outreach projects like visits to the homes for the aged and disabled, helping out in a club for

young girls of the neighbourhood or were catechists in the nearby parish. Vivian joined in as well, at the beginning as a passive spectator, then gradually as someone who was discovering God and the beauty of a personal relationship with Him.

In Easter 2016, some trainees wanted to participate in Incontro Romano, a yearly meeting for young people who wish to spend Easter close to the Pope in Rome. Vivian decided to join them, aware that it would be a 'total immersion' experience in the Catholic Faith. She had many questions about the Pope: who he was, why he was so important, what he did in the Vatican... During Holy Week in Rome, the group saw the Pope three times: once at the Wednesday general audience in St. Peter's square; another during the Easter Vigil, where the Pope baptized, among others, a Chinese girl; and finally in the Easter Sunday

Urbi et Orbi blessing in St Peter's Square. At this last event, the group was joyfully waving the Malaysian flag in a corner by the railings when Pope Francis passed very close by. There was a frenzy of enthusiasm, cheering and photos, and Vivian recalled, "All of a sudden I understood who the Pope is: Christ's representative on earth. And I felt a strong desire to have him as my guide, to be part of the Catholic family and, if possible, be baptized by him."

Back in Ulu Tiram, Vivian enrolled in the parish program for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The coordinator for the English group, Therese, even volunteered one-to-one classes for Vivian whenever she could not make it to the group classes. The target was to be ready for the following Easter, regardless of whether the Baptism would be in Rome or in Ulu Tiram. Vivian

surmised, “I will be as much a child of God either way!”

In the application to the Vatican for Baptism by the Pope, Vivian approached the parish priest, Fr. Michael, and Bishop Bernard Paul, whom she has met in the weekday Masses in Majodi Centre occasionally. Both were most supportive and they assisted in all the necessary documents that needed to be sent to Rome. She had also decided on the Baptismal name of “Francesca” if the Pope was the one to baptise her.

For quite a while, there was no reply from the Vatican and Fr. Michael suggested contacting someone in Rome who could make inquiries. The Malaysian Embassy to the Holy See had recently started in 2016, and Vivian wrote to the Ambassador, Tan Sri Bernard Giluk Dompok. Through

the good office of his Embassy, the Baptism by the Pope was granted.

A frenzy of preparations then started: air tickets for everyone including her god-mother-to-be, Sylvia, a fellow trainee, from Sarawak; winter clothes; informing Vivian's mother, who could barely comprehend why Vivian wanted to put all her little savings to go to Rome again just to be baptized there...Finally everything was in place for the big day.

The Easter Vigil in Rome was wonderful beyond dreams. Vivian had decided to wear a baju kabaya (traditional blouse and skirt of South East Asia) for the event. The accompanying trainees were given seats of honour the main altar in the grand basilica and they had a clear view of the entire ceremony. Then it started: the lights went off as required by the Easter liturgy on the

sacred night and candles lit from the Easter candle spread like a wave through the Basilica as the Pope processed with it up to the main altar, the eleven candidates for Baptism as part of the procession. After the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of Baptism started... Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion followed one another. Francesca was finally welcomed into the Catholic Church as a child of God on 16th April.

Sylvia, her god-mother, was feeling nervous just before the Vigil Mass started. "During the long waiting time inside St. Peter's before the ceremony, many people were busy taking photos or enjoying the moment. But I felt the need to prepare myself to meet the Pope which would take place after the Baptism and I tried to live the Mass well and pray a lot. It was going to be the most special moment ever in my

life. I had already seen the Pope at a distance several times amidst the crowd, but this one was going to be different: we will be few, and be very close to him and will be receiving his direct attention... Everything happened in a solemn way, like the rehearsal, yet the moment in front of the Pope was for me truly like a daughter being with her father. I could see that the Holy Father was a bit tired, yet praying for the new children of God and all of us around. I did not get a direct blessing from the Pope, but I consider it given through Msgr. Marini at the final rehearsal, who knew little English thus communication was minimal; he blessed each of the catechumens and god-parent making the sign of the cross on our foreheads. The family spirit of the Catholic Church was clearly palpable.”

After the ceremony, the excited Malaysians went on and on with

embraces, kisses and photos in front of Bernini's bronze baldacchino... till the Vatican's usher came to announce that St. Peter's had to be closed for the night! Looking around, Vivian and her group of friends realized that they were the last ones to leave, with the Italian usher encouraging them, "andiamo, signorinas, andiamo" (come along now, ladies, come along).

Francesca now feels the joyful responsibility of sharing the Faith with all who come her way. She asks the Holy Spirit to be able to convey to others the happiness she feels being close to God and living her life according to Our Lord's inspirations.

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Him as much as I can. I am not so good in expressing my feelings, so every time I receive our Lord, all I can tell Him repeatedly is just ‘Thank you!’ and ‘I love you’. I really hope to be able to bring more people closer to Him through my testimony.”

Nelly, 20 years old, a fellow trainee in Bukit Tiram House since February 2016 was moved when she witnessed Vivian’s Baptism. “I prayed for her to become a Catholic without much intensity at the beginning. Then, as the day drew nearer, I really prayed for her, and I see the fruit of the prayers in her joy now. I sensed it very specially the second time she received Holy Communion at the Mass on Easter Monday at the Basilica of St. John Lateran. The joy on her face and the awareness that now she is truly one of us was so clear!” It was clearly an unforgettable experience for them all.

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