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A moment of weakness and the paradox of God's grace

Abridged version of an article
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In 1980, a month or so after I had turned 18, I took up residence at Netherhall House, an Opus Dei run student hall in the leafy London suburb of Hampstead.

I turned 50 in early August this year, and it is only recently that I can pull off the feat of looking back across 32 years without a sense of vertigo. The passage of time that has passed since I was 18 often seems simply a continuation of the journey that started when I took my first steps up the stone entrance of Netherhall and across the hushed threshold.

I converted from Islam to Christianity on the basis of an encounter that dates back to my time at Netherhall. The seeds of Christianity had actually been sown somewhat earlier when I was a young child but as I grew older the same tendency towards rebellion that was so prevalent in the 1970's and which led to the creation of the punk movement in Britain manifested itself in my teenage years with a full blown (and entirely frivolous) solipsist intransigence. Religion, in any form, was low on my

list of priorities, a distant form of “noise” that tended, if anything, to irritate rather than stimulate. Having been raised by Muslim parents, if I was anything at that point, I was a Muslim. My application form to Netherhall (which required an identification of religious affiliation) shows in its now grainy and sepia toned photograph, a long haired boy affecting the “Bob Dylan” look of melancholy mixed with disinterest, and with the word “moslem” in the box “Religion”.

In accepting Christ, I first had to overcome the core objections that all Muslims face when confronted with the language of the Holy Trinity, that of Christ’s divinity. Not inconsequentially I also created, and had to contend with, a whole host of obstacles that were self-imposed and which allowed me to continue the habit of patting myself on the back

whenever I sounded clever in the context of a debate.

The path that led me through and then out of these dense thickets of mostly juvenile negativity was built around my first encounter, in Netherhall's library, with Hans Urs Von Balthasar. He spoke to me of matters that I had previously assumed incapable of human articulation. Light and dark, good and bad, right and wrong became less relative. I was introduced to the idea that Beauty, Goodness and Truth were irreducible, although it would be another decade (or more) before I would be able to convert my reading into a coherent understanding based on a pattern of identity through faith combined with intellect.

My soul was also nourished during my 30's alongside my mind, when I discovered the simple beauty of the liturgy at St Joseph's in Hong Kong.

This was supplemented through my increasingly frequent visits to the Brompton Oratory whenever I came to London, and where the Latin sung Mass allowed for the congregation to participate in a rite when “heart spoke to heart.”

The reason for remembering these things is an incident from the past month.

A small group of Muslims from Accrington and East Lancashire decided to object to my conversion from Islam to Christianity in aggressively obnoxious ways. This, shall we say “protest” gathered momentum during this summer’s Ramadan, and seemed to conflate during the days immediately before and after Eid.

My conversion, which is hardly “new news”, has attracted aggression and negativity in the past, but this recent series of concerted attacks was not

always easy to accept. One of the reasons these attacks were harder to handle was that I was more upset by the effect they had on my loved ones.

I can understand the indignation of genuine Muslims, and I can appreciate the anger of people who might feel let down (I speak of those who, in Lancashire, have known me since my childhood). Regardless however, of the nature of the aggression or the personality of the insulter, I don't seek to be negative about Islam. I point out, with careful attention to language and tone, that Christ, my saviour, has drawn me to his side and guides me with Love. The prayers and support of my friends across the world buoyed my resolve and gave me renewed strength during this hard time.

However, a few weeks ago, I was reminded of the frailty of human resolve, and, in my own way, bought

face to face with a shadow of the caution and fear and the power of repentance and reconciliation that is told through the experience in the Gospel, of St Peter and his denial of Christ.

My family and I live in a rather gorgeous part of Surrey, and the entrance to our home is marked by two beautiful Christian images. The first is a large and evocative Crucifix that dates back to the late 16th century and originates from modern day Ecuador. It is carved in “weeping” wood and contains an amber nugget enclosed within the body of Christ.

The crucifix hangs above an earlier (late 14th or early 15th century) stone Pieta of southern Germanic origin. Even allowing for my obvious lack of objectivity, the sculpture, a Christmas gift from my wife Mara, is uncommonly moving and beautiful.

Mara gave me the present in order to commemorate, amongst other things, my determination to change a rather passive Christianity into the formal and deliberate act of conversion.

This determination dates back to an encounter almost 10 years ago with Michelangelo's Pieta in St Peter's.

Like countless others before me, I can recall with vivid acuity the very second that I first saw the figure of Christ reclining in the arms of Mary, and in my case I remember the sound of the blood flowing through my body and my heart beating to a new rhythm. Words would serve only to understate how the confluence of time and place bought Faith to a new reality, but for those who read this piece and relate to their own journey towards the service of Christ I can say that the Holy Sacrament of Baptism that marked my conversion a few years later, was set in stone from that day onwards in the Basilica of St Peter.

We constantly have visitors to our home, and Tuesday saw the arrival of a friend who I have not seen for many years. He and I both grew up in Lancashire together, and we have managed to maintain, in spite of an infrequent level of contact, a friendship that has slowly become more important as we have grown older.

It has become my practice to pray in front of our Ecuadorian crucifix and the Pieta, and that morning was no exception. The Crucifix is placed very prominently in the hallway, and when I pray, with my face towards the Cross, I can be seen quite clearly by anyone who enters through the front door.

I had barely started praying when I heard the crunch of gravel as a car made its way across the pathway to our front door, and involuntarily I

found myself drawing back from the act of prayer.

The truth is that I withdrew no matter how slightly, from my prayers because my friend, Yousaf, a practicing Muslim was about to come into my home. I have not yet been able to rationalise my reaction, but I think I was concerned that I might somehow be seen to be pushing my religion into his face. I knew that he was aware of the recent problems I had faced in Lancashire and I also knew that he had read some of the material posted online exhorting Muslims to attack me in order to “teach me a lesson”. I suppose at one level I probably wanted to be discreet and save Yousaf a degree of embarrassment.

If the rationalisation or explanation of why I momentarily withdrew when hearing Yousaf arrive is difficult, my explanation of what and

why I did what I did next is blessedly simple. I bowed my head, restored my hand to the Cross, and resumed my prayers. I then knelt in front of the Pieta and recited “Hail Mary” three times. Not mechanically as sometimes can happen, but with a feeling for each word of praise and supplication to Our Holy Mother.

Yousaf had indeed arrived, and had walked in to see me kneeling in front of the crucifix. He walked past me into the drawing room and waited for me, and the conversation that ensued was affected by what he saw. Our friendship has withstood the test of time, and I am grateful that I did not withdraw from prayer merely to save his blushes or ameliorate his possible hurt. Any weakness was in fact in my mind, not his.

My fleeting withdrawal reminded me of St Peter and the position in the bible that this episode fills. Jesus’

prophecy, and Jesus' subsequent acceptance of St Peter, and, above all else, St Peter's role in the creation of our Church are critical elements of the foundation to the faith that unites all Christians. St Peter, the same disciple who defends Christ and cuts off the ear of a Roman soldier, is also the follower who maintains a distance prior to the act of redemption both ahead of and after Christ's ultimate sacrifice.

Later that day I took out from my library a dusty paperback copy of Von Balthasar's "The Office of Peter and the structure of the Church". Apart from a superlative account of the Church's authority, Von Balthasar reminds us that St Peter was chosen for his task despite his human fallibility. For someone who cherishes the role of the Church I gasped, anew, at the beauty of the paradox which then led to St Peter's

infallibility in his new station as Christ's vicar on earth.

At the end of the day, we all of us have a role to play. Grace comes in many different ways, and through a variety of experiences.

I close with a verse from St Edmund Campion's celebrated "Anima" written in 1581 during the height of the English reformation.

"Rightly do I owe thanks without measure to you, my Guardian Angel,

Who have brought comforts joyous with light,

That light which has borne witness to the manifold Majesty of the Lord,

And vouchsafes the distinction, stature and honour of God"

St Edmund Campion S.J. martyred 1st December 1581 (translated by Anastasis Callinicos)

The complete original article can be found here in the **Catholic World Report**

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