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Saint Josemaria in the Persian Gulf (II): Life in Dubai

In addition to wars and the refugee crisis, a third element characterizing the migration to the Gulf countries in recent years has been job opportunities. Many foreigners - and in the case of Dubai, more than 70% - have settled there in search of new professional horizons.

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It's not just oil: banking, construction, transportation and services are all sectors that have been employing foreigners in Dubai for years. Although all fall into the category of "expats", the lifestyle in the Emirates is very different in each case. In general, Europeans and Americans lead relatively comfortable lives, while Asians work to send money to their families, who often still reside in their countries of origin.

You could say Dubai is the land of extremes: the place where buildings and prices soaring through the clouds coexist with workers whose contract of twelve hours a day, six days a week has them sharing tiny apartments with ten other people.

Land of contrasts

Leah Mae has been living in Dubai for 5 years, but she is able to evaluate the side effects of the

economic bonanza. Although she appreciates the facility of, for example, being able to buy a car, having a variety of foods or having her housing and education covered by the company she works for, she says, "Having all these comforts also leads to a materialistic lifestyle. Many people are not happy and continuously look for the latest news and, in the end, this diminishes the value of a thing."

For Maya, who is Guatemalan, "Staying in Dubai has broadened our perspective of the world, allowing us to know so many different cultures in one place. There have been challenges and new situations that we have had to face as a family, with my husband and children; we have made beautiful friendships, learning to value, respect and live with people of different creeds and ways of thinking."

Professional life also has its contradictions. Fabien, a Frenchman, has spent three years in Dubai and says, "The business-friendly climate and dynamic are important advantages, but the focus on business can quickly become a problem, because it pushes people to be running all-day after money, insatiably, to the point that it becomes their religion."

The possibility of safeguarding their children's future is what pushes many to cross oceans and persevere in foreign countries. This is the case of Gwen and her husband who have just had their first child. Working here allows them to save, invest, build a home in their home country and secure the future of their children.

Helping the family financially in this way, however, often includes the pain of living without them. It's a

difficult decision to make. Rose Nduku Mulwa has been in Dubai for eight years, but her husband and 15-year-old son remain in Kenya. Sometimes, she confesses, she's about to leave everything to go back. José Antonio Pacuan, a father of nine children, moved to the Emirates in 2012 to make more income for his family, who stayed behind in the Philippines. One of his oldest daughters has already made him a grandfather, but last year another one of his children died in an accident. Now his wife, in a precarious health situation, is with him in Abu Dhabi. Taking the family forward is the only thing that keeps him there.

However, when the family moves completely, the situation is different. María Isabel Batres is also from Guatemala and her husband is a pilot. They have lived in Dubai with their two children for eight years.

She sees it as a positive thing because being away from relatives and friends has actually strengthened their family bonds. "When families move abroad, two things can happen: either the bonds become stronger or the marriages break. Faith has allowed me to keep my family together and stronger." She also highlights another aspect: they have become more involved in transmitting the faith to their children, who have not been able to attend a Catholic school. "It is up to the parents to educate their children in the faith. So I need to study it more."

Mike, whose youngest son is already in college, confesses that the educational task was not easy. "The boys were exposed to a culture with values very different from ours and it requires a lot of strength and constant work by the parents to

ensure that they do not fall into the trap of the Dubai lifestyle."

On the other hand, for the younger generation, living in the Emirates is an especially good opportunity for growing in independence while, in many cases, also helping their families. Nicholette, 23, left her job as a teacher and is now a secretary at a multinational: "I wanted to get out of my comfort zone, explore who I am and what I want to do in the future."

Juan Pablo, 30 years old, has been a manager in a company in Dubai for the past three years, and has had a similar experience: "Coming here has allowed me to grow, mature and know myself better, personally and professionally." As a trade-off, "the work hours are long here and you miss your family, although it is also true that when you go back home, you appreciate better the time with your loved ones."

Nurturing their faith

When considering a move to the Emirates, some investigate the possibilities there are to practice their faith. Before emigrating, Gwen wondered if the professional opportunity would also allow her to continue growing spiritually. The vast majority come convinced that they will not be able to practice their faith in a Muslim country.

Nevertheless, for most people the piety, as well as the variety and the multitudinous participation of Catholics in the sacraments is surprising. For Europeans furthermore, the fervor and the young age of those participating is especially note-worthy. The Mass here is not something for women and the elderly. Fabien and Marc were surprised by the number of children running between the pews.

Nicholette says the first time she attended the Eucharistic celebration at St. Mary's, she couldn't even get through the door: there were so many people. "The Church in Dubai is truly Catholic, universal, where people of all kinds are welcome and there is mutual respect among all the faithful," she says. Louelle, her friend, is also impressed by the queues for confession.

Rickson recalls the impression he had when he arrived: "The first thing I noticed when I entered St. Mary was how big it was. I had never seen such a large church. It is always crowded with people. My parish in India is much smaller and not always so alive. It's great to see how the Catholic community in Dubai is growing."

The parish has Mass in different languages and rites, making it easier for all attendees to participate better

in the liturgy. For example, Maria Katbe, a Lebanese designer with a Greek-Catholic rite, is very grateful for the Mass in Arabic, which is closer to that of her country of origin.

The diversity of schedules is also a challenge when it comes to the activities of the parish. Liza works in a shopping center, in twelve-hour shifts, which change continuously, six days a week. This greatly limits her chances to attend Mass daily, but she still tries.

Even so, part of the apostolate here is to encourage other Christians to take care of their faith, not to abandon their religious practice, even if it means some sacrifices have to be made.

Carol came here in 2009 from the Philippines. "I was struck by the fact that, since children do not learn about their faith at school, parishes

dedicate a large part of their resources to catechism classes. We do not usually see such a collective effort nor so many students in my country, perhaps because the catechism is integrated into the school curriculum or taught at home. In addition, there are different groups and associations that participate very actively in the parish and help the Catholic community."

Those from Catholic countries are used to having many churches nearby. In Dubai, however, despite efforts made to facilitate the participation of the faithful, there are lots of difficulties. The two churches available are at a distance of about 40 kilometers from each other. "In order to go to Mass, we prepare ourselves as if we were going on a field trip," says Maria Isabel. "And the more important days, such as Christmas, Lent or Holy Week, are a

real challenge because the parishes are always overflowing."

The Church does everything on her part to facilitate the fulfillment of the Sunday precept. Maricar, who is a newcomer, is impressed: "With the Sunday Mass celebrated three days a week, it is kind of embarrassing not to go!". Even on weekdays, Jackie and some friends asked the parish for a Mass for mothers who can not attend early in the morning or late afternoon because they are busy with the children. Now there is mass at 9 in the morning at St. Francis and at 12 noon at St. Mary's, with hundreds of people attending daily.

The value of difficulties

The faith sustains Catholics in moments of loneliness, temptation or discouragement. "These are times to grow in strength", explains Louelle. "And in humility, patience, trust," adds Nicholette; "I realize the

importance of living each day with holy abandonment: today I have a relatively well-paid job and a roof over my head, but tomorrow I could lose everything." For Fabien, "in this world of skyscrapers and money, faith becomes a compass that gives meaning to my life and helps me avoid danger."

Melane agrees: "In situations that I cannot control or explain, faced with something difficult to understand, I need to trust in the will of God and believe that everything happens for a reason. It is not easy, it is a daily struggle, but by the grace of God I have survived. Far from family and friends, you cannot rely on anything or anyone to reassure you, protect you, guide you, except God."

When times are tough, "surely the only way to find consolation and stay connected with our origins is our Catholic faith," says Juan Pablo.

"Faith keeps me firm, with encouragement, with hope, with desire to move forward, it gives me comfort when I feel lonely, when I feel sad. It is the essence of life, no matter where you go, no matter where you are, God will always be with you."

For Marc, the Church is always there for him, with its arms open to help him overcome his falls. "Every week at Mass, one has the opportunity to start again and gain strength, and this is the key to moving forward. Precisely because here it takes me more time and effort to go to the parish, I value more the time I spend before the Blessed Sacrament."

Can you talk about God openly?

Despite having freedom to practice different religious confessions, it is forbidden to evangelize Muslims, under penalty of imprisonment or deportation. So how can a Catholic

bear witness to their faith?

According to the people we spoke with, there are many ways.

Liza tries to do so at work by treating her colleagues with respect and kindness, doing her job well and with love. "The best thing I have learned from St. Josemaría is to always accompany my work with prayer and to offer it; no matter how hard or tired I may be, when I do it for God, it ceases to be a burden."

According to Mike, it comes down to responding in a Christian way to each situation that arises, showing love, mercy, and compassion. Along the same lines, Carol thinks: "In a country with such a diversity of religions, cultures and beliefs, a Christian should manifest a steadfast desire to transcend all differences and racial prejudices, to understand what charity is and to treat everyone as Jesus would treat them."

María Isabel says it's not about making speeches, "but about living as Christians, following the laws of the country, setting a good example as a united family, and letting the light of Christ shine in this way." For Maya, it's all about the details: "Just in the way one lives out the day-to-day. In the little things, such as smiling in the morning in the elevator, or trying to have a kind gesture for the neighbor; an attitude of respect towards their customs and religious practices, being understanding with their rules or restrictions. Pray for them and try to live in harmony with them, maintaining a Christian seal in the way one dresses, talks and acts."

Fabien highlights the opportunity to put into practice a few attitudes that are more difficult in the country itself. "Sometimes as Catholics, we learn some nice ideas about tolerance that we don't get to apply very much in daily life: for example,

welcoming foreigners or refugees. In Dubai, we have the extraordinary opportunity to work with everyone, with all religions. Tolerance and Christian values take on real meaning in the daily life here. "

Alejandro, who has shared a flat with three Muslims, ends by saying: "We have learned a lot from each other. They are very surprised when I tell them that we are children of God, that God loves us and that faith engenders knowledge of God."

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