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“I, a saint?”

Isabella Tan, a widow and mother of three young children, tells how she changed when Christ entered her life

10/18/2009

“I, a saint?” that question kept popping up in my head shortly after I started going to a centre of Opus Dei regularly for doctrine classes, confession and spiritual direction. It was almost unthinkable because most of the saints I knew were either priests, nuns or martyrs and most lived and died centuries ago.

My life at that time was an endless pursuit of lofty human and worldly goals. Going after those temporal things did not fill my broken cup at all. I was a Sunday Catholic, practicing my faith at my convenience with hardly any sacrifices and paying lip service to God mostly.

A turning point

Stephen, my husband, passed away suddenly of a viral heart infection in 2005, shortly after our 13th wedding anniversary. Left in shock and badly traumatised, I had to face the lonesome and daunting task of raising our three children (then aged 3, 6 and 8). We had many unfulfilled plans and scripture verse Proverbs 19:21 - *“Many are the plans in a man’s heart but it is the decision of the Lord that endures”* made a deep impression. That was the lowest point in my life as I went through

dark days of grief, fear, anger, guilt and confusion.

Thanks to the prayers of friends and strangers, including that of many women in the Work, many of whom I did not know then, God let me see how sorrow and pain tasted different with Him in my life. Gradually I found renewed strength to begin again and to help others in similar situations.

I broke out of my comfort zone and started to live my faith a lot more seriously. Settings fixed periods for mental prayer daily and doing my best to live the norms of piety have helped me to grow closer to Our Lord. The Eucharist and periods of mental prayer, in particular, gave me strength to better face the daily challenges both at work and at home.

Beyond visible successes

My marketing job in a health food company requires me to travel frequently within Asia. Maintaining the right balance between family and work priorities, trying to be a good mum, daughter, employee, colleague and friend would have driven me mad if not for what Opus Dei taught me. Love God and let God love me. Without Love, nothing would have been possible.

I enjoy my professional work and strive to do it well. But when it was motivated by human motives like getting compliments, I was discouraged and bitter whenever my ventures did not result in visible success. Now, I try to do it out of love, to give glory to God and the focus is no longer on me.

Last year, a project I led did not achieve the highly anticipated results, despite all the careful planning and hard work. Instead of

feeling beaten and angry, I prayed, “Lord, You know I’ve done my best. But if You don’t want the glory, then I don’t want it too.” And I moved on, for what ultimately counts is what God thought of my work, my struggles, not my results.

Prayer: the best ‘weapon’

When I met difficult and not so loveable personalities at work, my entire day used to be ruined by such unpleasant encounters. Now I have learned to turn to my Guardian Angel, asking him for help to speak to the Guardian Angel of the other person. Actually, I should thank these people because without them, I may not have prayed that intensely and may not have turned to my Guardian Angel so often.

My children too have learned to relate to their Guardian Angels. Whenever I get a parking space in crowded places, Jeremias would

happily declare that he had asked help from his Guardian Angel. It's a small thing but it will come naturally when he faces weightier matters in future. The other night, Natalie, now 6, said "Mummy, I just said three Hail Mary's – one with my Guardian Angel, one for the favour you are asking and one for the skin condition that Carmen, Jeremias, and you and I have." Prayer is the best 'weapon' for all of us in the family.

Most of the time, my kids fight over little things then make up almost instantly; they will promise to be good and within minutes, they get into trouble. When I return home from a day's work, losing my patience was the easiest thing to do. I used to take out my 'weapon' – the cane – to get instant results. But not anymore.

After one retreat, I went home and told them that I will not cane them

but we agreed on some house rules to ensure order. They were elated but soon realised that the new punishment is actually more “painful” for them because these days, their punishment comes in the form of giving up one of their favourite activities like television or computer games. What is good that they can decide for themselves if they want to be good or naughty and then face the consequences of their actions.

I am convinced attaining sainthood is within the reach of everyone, myself included. Isn't that wonderful?