

MARIA LUISA “MARYAM” BERNABE, EX-CATHOLIC , PHILIPPINES (PART 1 OF 2)

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Description: We are all born with a natural inclination to worship God and my quest for Him started at a very early age.

Category: [Articles](#) [Stories of New Muslims](#) [Women](#)

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March 11, 2011 marks my complete submission to God. I have said my shahaadah after months of discernment. The circumstances that led me towards Islam were not easy. But Alhamdullilah (All praise and thanks are due to God), I am now, finally a Muslimah (a Muslim woman).

Let me share with you my journey to Islam.



I was a Roman Catholic by birth. My mother was a nun for several years before she left the convent and she brought us up with a prayerful life. As early as age 7, she has imbued in me the virtue of surrendering to God and looking at everything that is happening as God’s way of preparing me for the best things to come.

Having developed for myself a personal relationship with God, I had been very much involved with apostolic works. I even taught catechism and was awarded the Catechist of the Year Award when I graduated from High School. After which, life has been a constant journey with faith.

At a very significant point in my life, I worked for a humanitarian foundation geared towards projects envisioned to unite Filipinos in prayer regardless of religion. The foundation upheld the conviction that we are all brothers and sisters under one fatherhood of God. Even before I got involved with the foundation, my prayer life was centered towards God the Almighty. However, of course, having undergone Catholic formation in the house and at school, I developed certain devotions to some saints of the church, recognising them not as small deities, but as comrades in prayers for my intentions. There was a point when I would question myself who among the saints are the ones more effective in bringing forth blessings. And so, I would end up praying again directly to God - the One Supreme Being, the Almighty, knowing He is the main source of blessings after all.

When my mother was diagnosed of leukemia and during the latter stage of her sickness, it was a period of pure struggle. At one point, I woke up praying to God to exchange her position with mine so that I could bear her illness. It was a never-ending quest for resources in the hope of having my mother cured by medical advancement. Until our parish priest and close family friend said - SURRENDER...SURRENDER TO GOD. Then, I remembered again to surrender, especially when my mother's body was already rejecting and not responding to chemotherapy.

My mother's death was a pivotal point in my life. Since that time, my life has been a constant battle for total surrender and submission to God. Ego would make me lean more on my plans - struggle for their fulfillment and stubbornly pursue what I want inspite of God's many signs and promptings. During these moments, I would only find peace whenever I surrender. But human as I am, I would always fall back into the trap of wanting things my own way.

After my mother's death, I got an offer for a job in Qatar. That was 2003. Perhaps, I was not yet ready then. I took another job in the Philippines since there was no use of looking for a job abroad because my mother had already passed away. What would be the use of earning what I wanted to earn at the time when she was alive so that I could sustain her medical treatment and also bring her to places? Nothing.

Then in 2006, an unexpected call came for an interview by a German employer with a huge project in Qatar. Qatar once again beckoned and hesitantly I attended the interview upon the advice of my father to give it a try. I was not expecting to get the job but the signs during the interview process made me believe the job was indeed for me. In a month's time, after that fateful day, I came to Qatar. I thought that the opportunity to earn more is just what Qatar has to offer. Surprisingly, it has given me something deeper.

In my Catholic formation, it was inculcated in our heads that the purpose of life is TO KNOW, TO LOVE and TO SERVE GOD. Indeed, it is in man's nature to keep on searching for the meaning of life. The endless search for the proverbial fountain of youth is deeply rooted into man's longing for the meaning and purpose of existence. Unless man finds what he is looking for, he would never stop. Hence, he will never stop at anything and buy for time and health in order to pursue with his crusade. The millions of readers that catapulted the book "The Purpose Driven Life" to its bestseller status, is by itself a testimony of how many people are truly in search for direction and purpose.

At the age of 8 or 9, I asked my mother - "Where was God before Creation?" I told her I would spend time with my eyes closed and drenched in sweat out of total concentration just imagining the following in order – my position and my location, the clouds, the blue sky, the moon, the nine planets, outside of Milky Way only to find a vast expanse of space. With the breadth and width of this space, God is still over and above it..."When there was nothing where was He?" I prodded on. And my mother exclaimed with a smile on her face and embraced me – "You're already thinking that way?" she asked. And then she said, "That my dear, is how great and infinite our God is. He is

beyond comprehension but believe me, He is where he is."

The yearning and longing of Man – young and old alike, is not for material things, nor emotional and physical gratification...it is all these and more. All of us since birth are in search for God. We are made to know, to love, to serve and now, being a Muslimah, let me add one more – to worship God in His Oneness.

In my search for God throughout my life's travails, I glorify Him for leading me towards the path of Islam.

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