

Maria Luisa “Maryam” Bernabe, Ex-Catholic , Philippines (part 1 of 2)



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 Alhamdulillah (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 imbibed 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 in spite 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.

(part 2 of 2)

Allah has brought me here to Qatar for this purpose, that I may end my quest and spend the remaining days of my life worshipping Him through the ways of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

The ways of Allah are not our ways for He knows best. Indeed, in the turn of events in my life here in Qatar, I look back and see how magnificently He has woven the path that led me to Him.

In 2009, the company that brought me to Qatar had encountered difficulties and started laying off people and giving them options to look for other jobs. How I landed to the company where I am working now is also one of the pleasant surprises Allah had in store for me. How I transitioned from my previous company to the present one was so swift. The institution where I am working is an Islamic institution governed by Shari’a (Islamic law) and the department I belong to has given me the opportunity to land in my dream job – corporate communications. Since I am immersed in the preparation of newsletters and marketing tools, I had to be in touch with the corporate values anchored in Shari’a’s guidance, that led me to deeper reading on Islam. At that point, I found myself enjoying what I have been doing and just would read anything I could get my hands on.

Early 2010, I met a Filipino Muslim. There was never any discussion regarding our religion. He knew how prayerful I was with my rosary and novena booklets. He said that in his family, they have Muslims and Christians, too. He assured me that I shouldn’t feel uncomfortable about it at all. I found in him the traits that I have been looking for. His idea of a relationship is the same as mine. Hence, religion was never an issue and we both respected our faiths.

One time, I went to Fanar (Qatar Islamic cultural center) with my boss during the exhibit of calligraphic arts to purchase some items for our company. I got a copy of THE IDEAL MUSLIMAH and started reading it three months after I got the book when my fiance was not in Qatar at that time. I felt the verses of the Qur’an talking to me directly. As I read the

qualities of the Ideal Muslimah (Muslim woman), I realized that my way of life is in accordance with the teachings of Islam, after all. Then, I got a copy of the Qur'an in Tagalog and would feel a certain kind of overwhelming peace in my heart that would evoke tears. I told myself, in time I have to pursue it. I sought guidance from the Shari'a department and from my well-meaning colleagues on which reading materials I should choose. I would search the web and read everything I could. Until one day, I stopped. I ceased seeking knowledge because I wouldn't want to pursue anything as long as I see my fiance who has just arrived back from the Philippines. Though he did not raise the issue of my religion, I told myself, I had to deliberate whether I am just being influenced by his presence in my life or whether embracing Islam is coming from my own choice...from the deepest recesses of my heart and my soul.

At that time when I stopped pursuing further studies, I was undergoing crisis, too. Problems kept piling up and I was confused on how to pray. Should I pray the Rosary and devotions or should I do the salaah (prayers done by Muslims) which I did not have any clue on how to perform? For months, I was in limbo, until one night I woke up and I talked to God and said - "My God, I am confused. I no longer know how I should pray. Read my heart. I submit myself to You!" After that, I felt a certain peace.

The care of God began. My fiance went home to the Philippines earlier than planned. God gave me the time I needed for my discernment.

I didn't expect that the day when a great tsunami hit Japan would be the day I would perform my *Shahaadah* (testimony of faith pronounced to become a Muslim). I just felt my heart was very quiet. I went to Fanar with the conviction of attending classes for Basic Islam. This move had been prompted when I was finally able to answer the final questions I had for myself. First, if my fiance and I wouldn't end up together, would I be able to uphold being a Muslim? When I die, how would my family dispose of my mortal remains? And then, I saw in my mind my female Muslim colleagues and I felt a certain community spirit. I then told myself, I may lose one person, but I would gain more. Second, why are Muslim men allowed to marry up to four wives? Don't they know how painful it is for a woman to have another woman preferred over her? This question remained unanswered for several months until that day when I was preparing myself to go to Fanar. In fact, this question would always hold me back from fully accepting the readings I had done about Islam and I was hoping to get it answered once I was given the opportunity to undergo classes in Fanar. Finally, that morning when I was preparing myself for Fanar, I ran another round of questions in my mind - would the feeling of jealousy or envy be the one to pull me back from Allah? Would something so worldly refrain me from knowing Allah? I did not answer myself. Instead, I hurried up preparing myself to leave. That action alone was the answer.

Upon reaching Fanar, I had the opportunity to have one-on-one talks with two of their mentors - Sister Zarah and Sister Maryam. My heart's yearning began to unfold. Sister Maryam said that I seem to be ready. When she asked

me if I would like to do the shahaadah, I only replied by saying - **WOULD THERE BE ANYBODY WHO COULD ADMINISTER IT FOR ME?** Again, that feeling of certainty - it's not about YES or NO, it's about the availability of someone who could administer it for me.

After I said the Shahadah, tears started welling up. When Sister Maryam embraced me and told me I am already a Muslim, I thanked her with tears. My immediate family welcomed me as a Muslimah and I thank Allah for that. Though they remain to be devout Catholics, their acceptance, support and love carry me on. As for my fiancé, he was surprised upon receiving the text message from me minutes after I converted. He did not expect to receive such news from me.

My reversion towards Islam was highlighted by the great tsunami. I symbolically look at it as Allah having totally washed me and cleansed me of my sins. What would have happened to me had I not surrendered to Him? Where would I be?