

**WHY I CAME BACK TO THE FAITH**  
**FOUR TESTIMONIES**

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These accounts are simply testimonies of faith that ask to be heard respectfully; they are in no way claiming to represent some kind of proselytism. We know only too well how unfathomable the ways of God are, and will see how His goodness becomes increasingly evident in each of these journeys, which though painful at times, are more full of God than perhaps their own protagonists even realise.

These testimonials can be taken as being separate from any type of polemical texts, and only ask that their words be heard in a moment of tranquillity. We appreciate their diversity and thank the authors for their courage in sharing their experiences.

INTERNET: [www.fespinal.com](http://www.fespinal.com) - Translated by Jerarda Walsh - Cover illustration: Roger Torres  
- CRISTIANISME I JUSTÍCIA Edition - R. de Llíria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona - tel: 93 317 23 38  
- fax: 93 317 10 94 - [info@fespinal.com](mailto:info@fespinal.com) - Printed by: Edicions Rondas, S.L. - ISSN: 0214-6509  
- ISBN: 84-9730-213-3 - Legal deposit: B-16.335-09. April 2009.

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# 1. GOD WAS SEARCHING FOR ME

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*Laura (Barcelona)*

My name is Laura. I was born in Barcelona and I went to a convent school run by the Dominicans. It was a girls' school, which became mixed in the eighth grade at primary school; so in the first class at secondary level (studying for the BUP as it was known), the boys were already studying with us.

I was taught religion in school, and my teachers talked to me about Jesus, but in a more "historical" way than anything else: Jesus was presented as someone who lived two thousand years ago, did some remarkable things (miracles), died on a cross and came back to life. But it was almost as if I was being taught about the history of Napoleon. Alongside this, much of the religious instruction I received concerned religious rites and festivals, without anybody ever teaching me how to pray or leading me towards God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. And as regards the latter, I never really understood what role the Holy Spirit played in any of this. And thus my instruction continued, so that when the time came, at the age of seven or eight years old, I was prepared for my First Holy Communion. I still have a few vivid memories from that event, such as that of my First Confession, (and how difficult it was for me to think of sins!), as well as how nervous I was on the day.

When I was about eleven or twelve years old I joined a local scout group called the *Turons*. In the beginning, we used to hold our meetings in a place in the area known as Les Corts, and later we moved to the Sants area. It was a secular scout group, and one that was also very pro-Catalan, a group from which I gained many things, or as I

suppose you might call them today "values": friendship, both within the group and on an individual level, a love of nature, strength of spirit, a love of my country, its mountains, etc. I also got the opportunity to see and experience things that I would never have had the chance to experience in other areas of my life. I remained a part of this group

until I was about twenty years old, and also spent two years of that time as a group leader.

During this time, my observation of religious practices –which basically meant going to Mass on Sundays– gradually decreased to such a point that it eventually stopped altogether. This was not a conscious decision I took, but rather due my own inertia, and the feeling that religion no longer held any significant meaning for me, until it finally fell by the wayside altogether. I never felt as though I had faith, and nor did I go looking for it. In my own personal environment (among family and friends), I never came across an example of someone truly living out their faith. As I was growing up, and later when I left the convent school and began to seek my own path in life, with my own circle of friends and social commitments, Christianity simply remained off my agenda.

At the age of eighteen, I began a career in Law at the University of Barcelona. This part of my life came as a huge shock to me, and it took me practically the entire first year there to get used to it. The reason for this basically came down to two factors: firstly, the freedom I was suddenly able to enjoy, through the fact that nobody knew who I was, what I was doing, or what I had previously been doing; and secondly, meeting people who were so different from those I had known in my convent school. During those years, and along with a few people I knew at the Faculty, I came into contact with the world of drugs for the first time, not because it held any particular attraction

for me, but rather because it was something that was so readily available in my environment. Suddenly, cannabis joints as well as other substances, which had previously been so alien to me, became part of my daily life. Looking back, my personal relationship with drugs never took over my life, though it was a part of it: I remember the first time I decided to try a joint, I fell flat on the floor after three puffs.

These were the years when I discovered nightclubs and started to go out at night much more. Dancing until the early hours of the morning. I used to love dancing and in fact still do; and besides, I was a good dancer. They were also the years in which I began to notice boys, to the point that wherever I went, I would always end up falling for someone. It made me feel important, but on several occasions in my life, it also made me feel uncomfortable. These were the years when, with a group of friends, I used to love going to big festivals that were taking place in the towns of Catalonia. And these were also the years when Catalanian rock music was born and became hugely popular.

Religion, faith, believing or not believing in God are things that just didn't come into my life; and if anyone ever asked me about it at that time, it would always have been in the theoretical or intellectual sense, never as an actual lived experience, because there was no one in my social circle who had any experience of these things. When friends had parents who were believers, they would always talk about them in a critical or disrespectful way. As for me, although my parents had

always instilled a great respect for God within me (I remember saying: I don't know if God exists or not, but although I don't know, I'm inclined to believe that He does), I also had the image of belief in God as being something "outdated" and, above all, I never took the time to wonder if this was something that might have any bearing on my own life.

To be honest, I remember those years as being very exciting ones: I experienced so many things for the first time. For some things, I was prepared; for others, I wasn't. On another level, they were very intense years, and I often felt that everything I experienced along the way was more difficult and more inhospitable than I could ever have imagined.

My life had nothing in common with the world in which I had been educated and grown up, and I often felt overwhelmed by what I was experiencing, and by what was affecting my life.

However, during those years, there was something in my life that wasn't going well, and that was my love life. On the surface, it appeared that I had everything that was required in order to "succeed": I was a pretty girl, attractive, a good dancer, at ease in my personal relationships. I knew a few boys who, without needing to go into too much detail, offered me relationships which I suppose you could call "serious"; but at the same time, there was something that was making me keep my distance from them. And this seemed to be a contradiction, considering that, although I thought I wanted to be in a relationship, if the opportunity for one arose, I would

reject it. This made me feel very insecure about myself.

At the age of twenty-seven, I began a very important relationship. It was the first time I fell in love with anyone; however, after nine months we broke up. I felt the repercussions of this for a long time afterwards, and it affected me in the years that followed in a very decisive way. This new upset succeeded in adding to the insecurity I already felt. I also had the feeling of being somewhat lost, of not knowing how to really "live", of not knowing what to do with my life, and above all, of not feeling happy and of not knowing where to look in order to find happiness. This wasn't a form of depression I was going through, more a deep-seated sense of unease which, at times, evolved into feelings of guilt and self-recrimination for not knowing how to do things right, or to put it more simply, for lacking a more purposeful nature and for not being of a stronger character.

Coupled with this, I felt an overwhelming desire to seek happiness, to find meaning for my life, and to feel more comfortable with myself. For this reason, and on the advice of a close friend, I began a form of therapy known as sophrology, which for a certain amount of time suited me quite well. At times, it even made me feel euphoric. At the same time, I began to find out about the practice of Reiki through books recommended to me by friends or acquaintances, and so I dabbled with the world of spirit energy. Nevertheless, it never interested me too much, because I would always find myself wondering: «what are the motivations of the person

writing this, or why are they telling me these things?». What I found was that all of these issues distracted me and held my attention for some time; but then I would always revert to feeling just as lost, insecure and guilty as before.

After a few years like this, I began to feel a deep sadness, and did not know where to begin to look in order to find happiness; as well as that, I had a great feeling of emptiness inside, an emptiness that I could almost physically feel. I remember thinking that if someone performed an X-ray on my upper torso, they would find that it was completely empty, like a great painful void.

And so I began to look inside of myself: «What if the reason you feel like this is because you don't have God in your life? And what if the only thing you are missing is simply God?». These were questions I asked myself only as a last resort: up to that point, I had never thought that God might actually exist in such a way that He might play a role in my life. However, going beyond these questions, I didn't know where to begin my search. I decided to look at Christianity for two reasons: I didn't feel as though I had the energy to find out about every other religion at the time; and secondly, I was aware that my formative years and culture had Christian roots, so I thought I would naturally feel closer to these than to any other religion.

So I was clear on that point, and yet everything else was covered in doubts, fears and prejudices. I was afraid to move closer to a Church that I felt was full of older people who were close-knit

and very religious. The idea of not having my group of “like-minded” and “cool” friends around me frightened me. I was afraid that the Church would want me to change the way I dressed, and that wherever I would go, I would have to wear long skirts, blouses closed up to my neck, and baggy clothing (I had a very stereotyped image of the Church at the time...). I was afraid of meeting moralists who would make me feel guiltier than I already did. And more... I was not convinced that simply believing in God could make someone change the way they lived. I thought that it was one thing to believe in God, and another thing to live out that belief in your day-to-day life.

At that point in time, all my circle of friends was secular, and I had no friend to turn to that could help me. However, I did have an aunt, Lluïsa, (a sister of my mother), who was a believer, and she was the type of believer that had always caught my attention: as in, you could tell by the very way that she lived her life that this lady was a woman of faith. So one night I arranged to go for dinner at her house. When everybody had left, I went over to her and, half-embarrassed, half-afraid, I explained my worry, hoping that she would understand me and give me a “magic formula”. She didn't give me the formula, but she did talk to me about Jesus with a happiness in her eyes and face that I had never seen in anyone before. What she told me seemed very strange and foreign at that time, and in reality I understood very little of what she was saying; but I did like listening to her, and in particular, seeing that she really believed in what

she was saying. I could tell that she wasn't talking to me about rumours, or things she had been taught, but that she really believed this to be true. And this was the fact that impressed me.

Anyway, I told her that all of this still seemed a little alien to me, and explained that before I moved in any direction, I would first need to believe it for myself. My worry was how I would be able to reach a point where I believed in God. What did I need to do in order to develop my faith? I remembered a friend of mine living in Boston at the time, and with whom I regularly stayed in touch by email, and I said to her: «Could you imagine me becoming a believer?». I didn't even really know what that word meant, nor what needed to be done in order to reach that point of faith, and nor did I know what impact it might have on my life.

My aunt began by pointing me in the direction of various people and places that might help me on my way. I was first introduced to a priest, a meeting that unnerved me a little, because he immediately offered to hear my Confession. Following a few prayer sessions in the Cathedral, in which I felt he took my faith for granted, I decided that this approach was not what I needed at the time. And then I was introduced to a friend of my aunt's, Mercè.

We arranged to meet in Barcelona one day, in a square in the Sants area of the city. We met up in one of those bars in the area that was quaint and old-fashioned in style. I remember that the TV was on full blast there because a football match was on in which Barça was playing; and the bar was full of

smoke and people talking at the top of their voices. And sitting at a table, in the middle of this atmosphere, Mercè and I were drinking orange juice. I can't remember exactly what I must have told her: though I imagine it would have been a summary of everything said here, above all, the worries and doubts that I was feeling. At one point I said to her: «I think I am looking for God». Mercè looked at me with those beautiful eyes of hers, so full of life and answered: «No, Laura, God is looking for you».

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I had never imagined that I would ever hear anything like that. Throughout my whole life, it had never entered my head that God, the Creator of the universe, of Heaven and Earth, could be looking for me, a pathetic person that was so totally lost in the world, that didn't know how to go about finding herself nor which path to take in life. Could God really be looking for me? How wonderful. Too wonderful to even believe!

And yet... in the eyes of Mercè, in her voice, the way she looked at me, listened to me and spoke to me, I could sense that she had a deep and vivid belief in what she was telling me. And it wasn't just in what she said, it was

more in how tangible her belief and faith in God was; it was this faith which finally captivated me.

So anyway, I carried on searching, but perhaps this time with a little more hope and happiness after my conversation with Mercè. I felt that without faith, I would never be able to really understand or live my life. Without faith, I felt blind in my search.

In around May of that same year –it may have been around Pentecost– Mercè invited me to a meeting that a Christian group held in a spiritual house run by the Carmelites, in Matadepera (a town near Barcelona). She told me I was under no obligation to go. When I arrived that weekend, having nothing better to do, I decided to go to the Carmelites' house. And then I thought: «What are you doing here, Laura? What brings you to this house? What are you thinking by joining this group of believers? You will feel totally out of place». And I was on the point of turning around and returning home, until another part of me said: «No Laura, don't go home empty-handed».

I went in. The people there gave me a very warm welcome, something that reassured me and gave me confidence: no one asked me why I had arrived so late, and neither did they ask me if I was planning on staying. I felt happy to be among them. There were a lot of people queuing on a stairway that led down to a porch. I asked the last lady in the queue what they were waiting for, and she answered: “We're going to Confession”; and immediately added: «Are you?». I replied: «Oh no, not me!» and yet I didn't budge from her side as

the queue moved slowly along. Then her turn came; and when she came out, she said to me: «Go on, go in. You'll feel great after it!» So I went in.

It was a small room, with a window that let in lots of light and a small table. There was a man at the table, slight in build, wearing a brown habit. What I remember most is the gaze of that man: little blue eyes, so alive, and a look about them that communicated great gentleness and understanding. I think that the people who knew Jesus personally must have felt what I felt at that moment, on a much greater scale of course, when I saw the look of mercy in his eyes. And it was this sense of mercy that stayed with me through that meeting.

At that moment, I knew that this man could see right through me, and yet there was no sense of reproach in his eyes, in fact, they were full of respect and forgiveness. It was hard for me to start; but the confidence he inspired in me helped me to speak in a clear voice, and to confess to him that which was hurting me so much in my heart. He listened to me, looking at me with those eyes of understanding and mercy, without saying a word. When I finished, he answered: «Look Laura, Jesus gave up His life for all of us, and that includes you». Tears began to fall slowly down my cheeks, something that took me by surprise, because it had been so long since I last cried. Once more, someone was telling me something that was helping me to believe in myself, in Laura, the girl who lived in Barcelona in the twenty-first century, someone was telling me that God cared about *me*.



Afterwards, he put his hands on my head and told me that my sins had been forgiven. He also gave me a penance of two Our Fathers to say when I had a quiet moment. And when it was finished, I returned to the others, ate with them, said goodbye to Mercè and returned home.

That same night I was studying on the computer at the dining table in my house (I was studying Humanities in the UOC, an online University), when I remembered the words of the priest and felt the need to say those two Our Fathers. As I was saying them, it felt as though every word was completely full of meaning for me, and that every sentence was given life through my life. At the same time I was crying, with a lament that came from deep within me, a liberating cry. When I finished the prayers, I realised that I was totally exhausted: I tried to pick up a pencil on the table and couldn't; and neither could I get up from my chair. I had no energy and yet, I felt light. I wasn't afraid, even though I didn't know what was happening to me. I don't know how long I remained like this, but I know that I felt at peace; and after a while I was able to get up, and then went to bed.

Nevertheless, following this experience, nothing had changed in my life or in my faith. In hindsight, I can now say that my meeting with Mercè and my Confession were two very important moments in my conversion, even though things did not instantly change radically in my life. I carried on trying to find my faith; and again through my aunt Lluïsa I found out that in one parish in the centre of Barcelona,

a series of meetings were being held entitled "Coming back to the faith". It seemed to me that this might be what I had been looking for. One day I decided to go there, and again was surprised at what I found: two priests were talking there in a way that really connected with me, without expressing any reproach or judgement. There was no requirement to immediately commit; they did not take any form of faith on my part for granted, unlike before, and they began by explaining the faith from scratch.

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From the meetings I did attend there, as I didn't go to all of them, I remember one session being dedicated to Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, when the risen Jesus met her in tears and said to her: «Woman why are you crying?». I felt this phrase resonate within me, as if Jesus was saying to me: «Laura, why are you crying?», and I felt a very strong desire within me to explain everything in my life, and at the same time felt an overwhelming sense of peace... as though someone had really heard me and welcomed me, and remained by my side. I realise how impossible this sounds, and yet it is truly how I felt.

During the last few years, I have continued making steady progress, and my life has totally turned around. Not all in one go, but little by little. This has allowed me to develop the faith in my life in such a way that, bit by bit, my life is gradually becoming a life of faith. At first, I felt a little divided: what I felt inside me did not in practice gel with my everyday life. But Jesus has allowed me to move at my own pace, and as I have grown stronger and deepened my faith, I have been able to change my lifestyle and understand more about my life. I am not the same person I was. The search for and the ultimate encounter with Jesus have facilitated an encounter with myself; and this aspect has been a unexpected surprise and gift: at the

same time as I have been discovering Jesus, I have been discovering myself.

Another of the gifts of faith I have received is that of feeling I have a purer heart. I believe that the God of love purifies our hearts, as though to make them shine: and I always imagine God as having a white cloth in His hands, removing all the impurities from our heart, everything that prevents it from shining, and instilling in it all of its original strength. The act of loving God renews a desire within us to love each other: and a desire to love each other in a more sincere way, in keeping with what Jesus preached and allowing me, in my weakness, to experience this for myself: if I love God, He will bring me to love others.

## 2. AN INTERRUPTED GOODBYE

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### *Antón (Bilbao)*

I was born in the middle of the last century in Bilbao. Like nearly everyone else, I was brought up in a Christian family, or should I say, a “Roman Catholic, and apostolic” family. I was educated in a Catholic school and in an environment that I don’t think I need to describe.

In my last year at school, I decided to distance myself for good from everything that represented Catholicism, and leave behind this sense of fear that I had put up with for the last four years, this simmering rage, and this notion of God’s judgement that had been described and exacted by my teachers. Even today, nearly forty years later, I remember those teachers with a great feeling of unease and sadness

I was happy about my decision, because for me it meant restoring a great sense of peace: I would never more accept the threats of those who called themselves servants of God, and who believed themselves superior to anyone who did not embrace celibacy. And certainly, they lived a more than privileged lifestyle. As for celibacy, I will simply say that I suffered an attempted sexual assault at the hands of one of these people. There were good people among

them, but there were also other types, more implacable and violent characters. There were all sorts, but the final outcome was as I have explained. This was how I lived, or rather, this was how I suffered. And it hurts me that it had to be this way, though it hurts me more to remember it.

I felt as though I had made the right decision: my inner peace was restored, but my self-esteem suffered a significant knock: stopping myself from

«going to daily Mass» in school, in those days, was not an easy decision. And I suffered the consequences: I was expelled from school, after thirteen years of being an exemplary pupil; I had always been shy, submissive, and a good student. And this caused an incredible furore in my house, only in part appeased by the fact that as it was during the month of April, a little more than a month away from the entrance exams for University, a Jesuit offered to tutor me at home. I suspect that my parents, (my father anyway) decided it would be better to end my studies peacefully. I managed to pass the exams with high marks, and with University on the horizon, the storm passed, as it were (mainly because my brother was suffering from an illness at the time which was preoccupying –and distracting– the attentions of my family).

I decided to be a lawyer and an economist, in spite of the school counsellor having advised me to study aeronautical engineering, (because of my alleged though inexistent talents for exact and experimental sciences). However, I had a very specific idea in mind, in that I wanted to dedicate my life to defending people who were suffering injustices at the hands of those in positions of power and authority. This was how I ended up going to the Jesuit University of Deusto, an institution of great professional prestige and renowned throughout Spain.

All in all, I never ended up hating God after this: I always held out hope that if God existed, “He was Love”,

although I did feel that this didn’t apply to me.

I don’t feel it necessary to describe the socio-political atmosphere of the time and its religious and moral implications, this being the period at the end of the sixties. At first, the Church, which had allied with the political power of General Franco, simply became my adversary, but as it became more allied with the State, it grew to become my enemy.

Pope John, the Second Vatican Council, working priests, the defence of human rights and of the rights of the poor – all these became part of life and culture, and I experienced them at first hand, even though they arrived late on the scene, at least, for me.

But I loved those priests at the Jesuit University who, as well as sharing hours of conversation, anxiety and hope with me, defended me and took me in at great personal risk to themselves without asking for anything in return. For more than a month, I was forced to hide from the police and, when they arrested and imprisoned me months later, these priests were also forced to suffer the effects. Some became laicised, but the majority continued their pastoral work, standing up for the weakest sectors of society: the poor, workers, and emigrants arriving from other poor areas of Spain that needed so much help.

They counted on my solitude and immense gratitude, my spirit and my friendship, but not on my faith: they never asked it of me, but they loved me in spite of this, and I will never be able to repay that debt of love.

## **A life of example, but not an exemplary life**

I wanted to dedicate my whole life to the profession of being a lawyer and economist and through this, I wanted to focus on those I believed I would be able to defend more successfully, given my training: workers. My work focussed on defending jobs, safeguarding dignity in work, highlighting the problem of work-related accidents and always, always encouraging the practice of “good government” and corporate social responsibility, or in other words, business ethics. So for more than thirty years now I have dedicated myself body and soul to this so-called “social economy” (cooperatives, unions, etc.). Therefore, much of my work has been focussed on business projects that «begin with the people» (as my much admired Koldo Saratxaga describes it, in his works *Symphony or Jazz* and *A New Style of Relationships...*). These are professional projects (or “companies”, which in the traditional sense of the word, some of us would like to see overcome), which the people themselves take part in and direct. These projects do not offer any temptation to move towards a hierarchical or pyramidal style of management, and instead base that management in multidisciplinary teams in which liberty and responsibility are inextricably linked. The essential element necessary for all of this is communication, along with shared values such as solidarity, justice, democracy, participation, and a commitment to the social and natural environment. And furthermore, they are projects that can grow and

succeed, offering economic profitability, or in other words, competitiveness and efficiency. This is because we have found that believing in people and allowing them to develop to their full capacity and subsequently creating a team that shares the aforementioned values, generates incredible concrete results (I refer back to the two works I mentioned earlier and the experiences I come across every day in our work).

These projects are being adapted to our “globalised economy”, expanding through China and India, Mexico, Brazil, Morocco and South Africa, countries which, without wanting to pillage their resources or plunder their profits, desire to develop a bigger and better communal project that will permanently establish values, culture and offer increasing levels of hope for the people.

When we opened the plant in Brazil, it coincided with the serious economic crisis that the country had been experiencing for a few years. The outlook was so bad that it was decided to postpone operations there until the economic forecast improved somewhat. But what about the employees? They were under contract; they had been trained in the Basque region (where the social headquarters are situated), so that they would be able to operate within this new management structure that focussed on the people themselves. The answer given to them from the people at the cooperative, and from all their other projects was this: they would get paid – and in fact, they were paid– those working in the Brazil plant received their entire salary, even when they

could not open the factory due to the economic conditions. This lasted for more than six months, and now the Brazil plant is one of the locations that brings the most wealth to the global project.

In Mexico the salaries were raised, (they had previously been so low), and in each project, everyone was able to reap the economic rewards (or benefits), as a fair return for their efforts and commitment. The examples are endless. This brief summary, as well as being autobiographical, is particularly for those who may despairingly feel that there is no other alternative to the current globalised market economy. There is an alternative. And there needs to be an alternative because, simply put, the current situation is unjust and cruel towards the most disadvantaged sectors, those who are given no opportunity to grow or develop their skills and potential, while they watch their families dying of hunger. However, during our development of these wonderful projects, neither myself nor those who were dedicated to them, paid any particular attention to the Church, or the faith.

We believed we didn't need it, because we already knew about how to value the lives of the underprivileged, and single out the life of "one human being" from another (these others being those that received better social and economic rewards).

But it was for this reason that, little by little, as well as being a Professor at the University, and a studious lecturer, I was nevertheless leading a life that was not making me happy.

## **The crossroads**

Having it all, but not being happy –that was my reality. It might seem like a contradiction in terms, but that's the way it was. As a man living in the developed world, I was rich. As a husband, father, brother and friend, I was living life to the full (and still am), but committed as I was to this exhausting and excluding work, I was zealous to the point that I would let nothing else interfere with it.

That was why I spent over five years attending therapy sessions that allowed me to discover and remember so much of what I had forgotten or deliberately hidden from myself. They were five very difficult years, in which I cried more than I had ever cried throughout my entire life. I would go out into the street with dry and silent eyes, so very silent, without wanting to talk to anybody. As time passed, I decided not to go back to work on the days I had my therapy sessions. So I would go for a walk before going home, where my wife would be trying to ensure that the noise of the children or the telephone did not interrupt the silence I so desperately needed. She also found my therapy a very difficult experience to go through, although it did give us hope. And that was what I needed more than anything!

I discovered emotional wounds that I had suffered, as well as hurt that I had inflicted on those close to me, and finally, I realised why I had put a wall up around my heart: it was so that no one would be able to hurt me again, although this also left me incapable of showing human warmth to many

people in my life, such as those who were suffering the pain of solitude, poverty, illness or those who had been forgotten in society.

And then a slightly disorganised and unmethodical personal quest began. I didn't know what to do or who to talk to, but yet I lived my solitude and emptiness uneasily and unwillingly. I could have enjoyed this period of solitude, and yet I did not. And so I began to replace my feelings of confusion and helplessness with strength, tenacity and commitment. And I searched, and continued to search... I didn't know what I was searching for, but I carried on searching, alone in my solitude. Alone.

I thought about entering politics, but that never materialised, and I never even got as far as knocking on one single door. Instead I worked quietly in a non-governmental organisation. I even approached the notion of Freemasonry, in the intellectual rather than the physical or personal sense.

But this wasn't what I needed either, even though this last experience made me think of Pope John at the Second Vatican Council... At first, I wanted rid of this odd notion. Then one day, as I was chatting with a friend from University, he suggested to me extremely prudently that I took a few days break in Javier, Navarra, and encouraged me to go with someone I knew if I preferred not to go alone.

To be honest, I didn't know how I was going to do it. This was the month of July; the month when we had our biggest workload, because the projects we were working on needed to have any pending matters cleared before the

summer holidays. Not only did we not have a split shift system, but we were working such long hours that by the time we returned home at night from work, it would be pitch black, even during that month of July when the days were at their longest.

And so, in the middle of this hectic workload, I arrived somewhat incredulously in Javier, angry at myself for this apparent whim, worried about what I had left behind, and anxious and nervous about what was ahead of me. Finally I decided to take advantage of these four unexpected days break in the silence of Javier, alone and surrounded by Nature.

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having it all,  
but not being happy  
—that was my reality.

It might seem like  
a contradiction in terms,  
but that's the way it was

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### **At home**

Unfortunately I cannot, or rather I don't know how to describe in detail what happened and how it happened. But with the guidance of a Jesuit that I had come to know, and who will remain my friend forever, I began to open my eyes, my ears, until finally my heart recovered its calm and felt moved.

Silence, long walks, reading and being able to talk about my experience

allowed me to discover, though without even realising it, that I had returned to the “House of the Father”, and that His welcome was both enthusiastic and infectiously joyful. This is how it felt, and this was what I subsequently lived out. And the fortress that had previously surrounded and protected my heart immediately disintegrated. My physical heart began to beat in my chest, felt warmth and was moved, but happy. And my eyes saw Him, I felt His touch and warmth, His infinite embrace, and I also realised that I would never understand the reason for His infinite mercy and capacity to forgive.

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I began to open my eyes,  
my ears,  
until finally my heart  
recovered its calm  
and felt moved

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And this was how I came to recognise Jesus, the figure that does not announce the implacable judgement of God but instead heralds the closeness of the forgiving Father. This is the Kingdom of God in which the poor people are cherished because mercy and compassion are the two qualities that make up the essence of this message of goodness. And because God’s justice is not like human justice, which is ruled by a need for impartiality, but rather God’s justice favours the weakest in society.

It is not an easy path. As Javier Vitoria states (presbyter, theologian,

colleague from University, soul mate and brother), I travel this road with both “love and fear”, as I acknowledge the depth of my own weakness and ignorance.

I only began this path seven years ago, and already I find myself unable to live without Him, no matter how ashamed I am of my limitations, my “sins” and above all, my indifference, which is undoubtedly the worst sin of all. And yet I continue this road and believe in Him. Most of the time I don’t feel the need for carrying out “acts of faith” because I simply know that God is accompanying me and giving me His love all the time.

Every day I feel happier to be a part of this “community” of people who believe in Jesus. Among these followers, I have found admirable and emotional examples of humanity. Their welcome for me was as warm as it was simple. They allowed me to feel like I was an important addition, one of them, when I would normally have felt like the last in line, or insignificant. And in spite of this, I still feel unworthy.

And this was how the void of solitude gradually disappeared. I now have so much hope that the way I live my life has changed, even to the point that my wife has noticed and remarked upon this change (something I would never have believed possible, and still don’t know how or why this has happened).

I wanted to be able to love, and now I can, maybe because I now feel so loved myself. And as I travel this path, the friend that I mentioned earlier still accompanies me, as happy as ever, and comforts me by telling me repeatedly



that the burden of my doubts, fears and disappointments, which still exists, is now a burden shared with him; he also tells me that my conscience should be the first source of finding out what my duties are, and that I must learn how to live out God's forgiveness, even though I am so ashamed of myself.

### **And to finish**

Are you wondering why I came back to the faith? Undoubtedly it was because I wanted to be able to love, and because I know that I heard His word and felt

His presence. Since that time, I now believe in God's plan of salvation.

And yet when I hear the words of some members of the Church's hierarchy, whether in Spain or in the Vatican, I still find myself repeating something I said seventeen years ago: what am I doing here?

The only difference is that now I have an answer. I am participating in the Kingdom of God, experiencing His forgiveness and mercy, and knowing (without doubting it for a moment) about His infinite love, the love of God.

### 3. THE FASCINATION WITH GOD FELT DEEP WITHIN MY HEART

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*Núria Delgado*

I have been asked to provide a testimonial as to how I came to believe in Jesus. And this isn't the first time that I've been asked. I sometimes wonder whether I should share my story, but always do, simply because the arguments used by those who normally question me about my faith can be so convincing. I will begin with a brief biographical note to give a little background to my situation.

I was born in 1952 in a traditional Catalanian family, with little economic resources, like the majority of families at that time, due to the conditions of the post-war era. My family were traditional Catholics: my mother was a practising Catholic, as in, she would go to Mass on Sundays, attend the Way of the Cross on Good Friday, the Corpus Christi procession, etc., and as for my father, I never knew if he was a believer or not, simply because like many men, he held a certain aversion towards priests and the religious state. I grew up and matured in this environment. I suppose I followed the example of my mother, arguing with my father, although when she would say the «Our Father», I have

to admit that I never understood the meaning of the prayer.

I remember that when I was 16 years old, I reached a point of maturity in my faith: Jesus of the Eucharist became real for me, I read accounts from the New Testament that came into my hands through the priest, and I managed to reconcile the Jesus of the Gospels with the Jesus of “the Church”.

And yet it was precisely through reading the New Testament, at about the age of 20, that I began to realise that the utopia of the Kingdom of God, the notion that I had taken from my reading of the Bible, would never be attained by the Church as I knew it, the Church that

lacked any appeal for young people. Like many others, I had put my hopes, which were perhaps too optimistic due to my lack of knowledge about the structure of the curia, in the belief that following the Second Council, the Church would be capable of renewing itself, of leaving behind its Tridentine roots to take its position in the second half of the twentieth century, and that it would be a witness to the sign of the times. A witness to the Living Christ.

But that didn't happen. They soon gave us the first disappointment when Pope Paul VI, in charge of completing the work commenced by Pope John XXIII, published the *Humanae Vitae* encyclical in 1968, which would mark a setback in relation to the third conciliar constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*. It is perhaps surprising that I mention this detail, given that there were so many other contradictions, but for the typical adolescent, at a time when we knew little about human sexuality, and much less about birth control, this was a big deal. Like many others of that age, we went about building ideals that were discussed among friends on our coffee breaks. Reading that encyclical was like pouring cold water on our hopes. The whole world read it and within our own institute, we talked of revolution.

As I was studying in the University at the time, and mixing in circles that were not directly related to the Church, all of this made me see that (if I may use the metaphor), my country's Church was like a slow-moving elephant: it had a huge influence on people's consciences, but moved at a frustratingly slow pace. The Church of the poor peo-

ple, the weak, the afflicted... the Church of the Beatitudes, did not exist. Instead, at that time, other ideologies seemed to be more appropriate, and made up for the void and the disenchantment that the ecclesiastical institution inspired in me. Here I am specifically referring to socialism, which funnily enough, reached my door through Christian socialists. This alternative, which for me wasn't so much political as it was philosophical, sought to give dignity to all human life, and is the key to understanding what happened to me later on in Moscow.

Little by little, what had previously been the early development of my faith, slowly disappeared to the point that I began to consider myself an agnostic. I never completely denied the existence of God, because that would have required me to put forward an argument that I had always personally found to be very sterile. Instead I took refuge in arguments like «it doesn't interest me... it is not enough in the twentieth century... it is the reason behind many conflicts...», etc.

And so this was how I went about my life, ignoring God, and feeling that I didn't need Him, up until the last week of my holidays in 1998, when chance led me to Russia, or more specifically to St. Petersburg in Moscow. It is difficult for me to explain what happened there, partly because what happened to me after that was far more significant than this particular experience. Yet I can say with certainty that the visit to the mausoleum of Lenin was the beginning of a long journey that would end up with me turning my life around. Within that

tomb, during the five minutes or so that you are allowed to visit it, the story of my youth felt as though it was laid before me, and I left the mausoleum with the question of God's presence within my heart.

At that time, I was a European tourist like any other, enjoying a holiday organised by a tour operator with three other friends. I had no plan in mind, but was simply open to any experience that the country might offer me. And yet the experience I had there was not part of my plans, and was beyond my control.

We had arrived in Moscow in the middle of the afternoon, and were staying in a large hotel with fourteen floors located in the middle of Red Square, just behind St. Basil's Cathedral. From the huge windows of the hotel's top floor, where the dining room was situated, you could view the whole panorama of Red Square, with the imposing Kremlin on the left, and in the middle of the Square, a small monument –small in comparison to the grand buildings around it– which we were told was the mausoleum of Lenin. I can vividly remember the effect that seeing that skyline had on me. I contemplated the scene for a long time, little knowing what would happen to me the following day.

It was a grey and rainy day in late August. A coach collected us to bring us on a guided tour of the sights of Moscow, which would end up at that same mausoleum. The guide explained a few fascinating details to us before we entered, and told us that he would look after our cameras while we went in, because it was forbidden to use them

within the enclosure. Half joking, he told us that anyone wanting to visit the mausoleum must be "all that was left of Western communism".

We had to queue for three quarters of an hour to go into the mausoleum where Lenin's embalmed body lay. I had to leave my camera with the tour guide beforehand, as the area itself cannot be photographed. I arrived at the entrance to the mausoleum and the two soldiers who were guarding the body told me that while I was in the enclosure, I would have to remain totally silent out of respect. And there lay the embalmed, impeccable body of Lenin on display. Once a year they close the mausoleum for a few days, dusting and doing any other necessary work. It seemed to me as though he was a figure made of wax.

We weren't allowed to stay in the area very long, maybe five minutes or so. And yet during that brief period of time, and with vivid moving images in my mind, the whole scene transported me back to that era when the belief that religion was the opium of the people was thought to be a sign of progress. These slogans and imagery got me thinking. The body of the leader of the Soviet Revolution lay there before me. There was a protocol to follow to enter the tomb. All of these elements combined to bring about a dramatic awakening for me. Don't ask me why. All I know is that this was the moment when the ingredients finally came together.

I left there with a huge emotional burden that I hadn't anticipated, because on the one hand I knew that the Soviet

system had created a whole religion with their Bolshevik leader at the centre, but on the other hand, I could see that in a parallel fashion, this was the very same arrangement in our culture in relation to God. It is difficult to explain everything that happened to me in the space of a few minutes, and yet I felt that this God that was making Himself known to me had to be free from any sort of imposed limitations on Him, a God that was somehow stripped of everything we attribute to Him. And a sense of unease began to overwhelm me: I realised that we were also, in some way, using God to suit our own needs. And if religion is not the opium of the people, well then, neither does religion own God.

Those five minutes in Moscow profoundly affected my life. The process was just beginning, because while this happened on the first day of the holiday, the days that followed were also full of remarkable experiences, subjective ones of course, yet ones that continued to feed this idea that had emerged in the mausoleum. Nevertheless, and in spite of the persistence of the idea, I was convinced that this line of thought would end on my return to Barcelona, when I would be back in my usual surroundings. What was happening to me made no sense whatsoever.

I was wrong however. I returned to Barcelona, and not only did the issue refuse to disappear, but the question on God remained firmly in my heart. I bought myself a picture of Rublyov's Trinity, which I carefully framed. I put it in a very strategic place at work so that

it would remind me of the icons I had seen in the churches in the Kremlin. I also bought myself a Bible, as I didn't have one at home, and began to read, without any particular order to my reading, with the aim of finding out why God was suddenly giving me so much to think about.

I visited churches, hoping to find something that would point me towards this God I was looking for. I also went to Mass, but would place myself near the door so I could leave easily if I wanted to. And I did just that on more than one occasion, because suddenly I would feel uncomfortable about what was happening. At the same time my rational side would make me feel guilty about leaving, and attempt to censure my conduct.

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I was able to accept  
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Those days were not exactly easy. The struggle between reason, which God has given us, and this emerging sense of unease that refused to disappear, was a very difficult time for me; at the same time it was a very constructive experience for me, and I later reached a point when I welcomed this gift of clear-sightedness from God.

And that is how it was. The process lasted another two years, until I was capable of accepting that I was part of God's plan and not just a product of chance. During this time, I realised that if my journey towards God had to be followed to its conclusion, I would need to make it with Christ by my side, although at that stage Christ still did not occupy any significant place in my mind. I remember that during those months, I went through a very difficult internal struggle between my head and my heart, without knowing exactly what my heart wanted. This continued until I was able to accept that believing in God was totally reasonable, in other words: it made sense that God would have created us with hearts able to understand His Mystery. Otherwise what would have been the point of His Creation?

Once I had accepted the existence of the Creator of all things, my life did a complete about turn overnight, as I previously said. Everything had a new meaning that I now needed to discover. Jesus of Nazareth accompanied me on this new journey, but I needed to get to know him too. For me it was a something like a process of daily conversion: I had discovered God, but I still needed to be converted to Jesus. Using the same line of rational argument that I had never abandoned, I needed to get an explanation from myself. It was one thing to know that this Being, the author of Creation, had another Person, but it was another thing for me to find out how I should develop a relationship with this other Person. Yet I understood that Jesus was someone who would lead me to establishing my

relationship with this unique Absolute Power that I was just beginning to discover.

With an inner peace in my heart brought about by my acceptance of God, and with much more tranquillity, a new thought came to me. It was clear that the truth I had just discovered co-existed alongside many other "truths" put forward in the world. And yet I felt that the truth I had found needed to be perceived and understood by all of humanity, since we are all God's creatures. Therefore, it seemed to me that all of the lesser truths that are spread throughout the world, needed to be gathered around this one great truth and mystery that is God the Creator, a Being that is recognised by every religious culture. When I had reached this conclusion, and had accepted my own personal way of truth that would allow me to address this Absolute Being as Father, which meant that I was able to establish a relationship with Him, I wanted to find out more. My desire then focussed on a need for intellectual training, which led me to the study of theology, following a course at the Higher Institute of Religious Sciences in Barcelona.

In this way, I was able to deepen my knowledge about the person of Jesus, who was not just a historic religious leader, but who for Christians represents the Incarnate God, as affirmed by the evangelists. No one who met Jesus, whether they were a follower or an enemy of his, was left unmoved by their encounter. The Bible says that Jesus was then raised from the dead. And this very fact is the crux of our faith. With the

resurrection, we are dealing with a metahistorical issue, as in, it is something that cannot be proved and something that goes beyond reason; but it is in this very fact that we find the borderline between reason and faith offered to us in the message of Jesus: Jesus trusted the Father and gave Himself up to Him, and as God brought Jesus back to life, so we must believe that He will bring us to new life after death.

This should act as the motor behind our daily conversion, because life is in a constant state of activity and is different every day. If we try to model ourselves on Jesus, He must be made present in all of our daily activities, He must be the backdrop to our lives, like a mirror in which we can see the trust of Jesus in His Father, and in which we can also find reflections of ourselves.

If faith is a gift from the good God, as I feel it is, it must be activated, because the very fact of us being human means that when we are dealing with something that it is difficult to find tangible evidence for, our human tendencies can easily cause us to cast such notions aside, if it were not for God's grace.

And this is where the communion of the Christian assembly plays its important role: in other words, the gathering of those people that believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the face of God, and meet together in his name. This is the role of the Church. Through the

apostolic faith, around the altar table, each and every one of us has the opportunity every day to renew the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

In spite of the fact that the Church at times seems to be clinging to its grandiose past, it is diverse enough to allow each one of us to share the experience we have had and that we continue to have of God every day. This far outweighs the structural flaw of our Church: that is, its difficulty in identifying with the modern world, leaving so much work for the Holy Spirit to do, whose voice is not always heard by our blocked ears.

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This assembly, which is the Church, is made up of both human beings and the breath of the Holy Spirit that is so clearly present –it is simply that we do not always know how to listen. The proof of this is perhaps found in my own example, for I went almost thirty years without listening to the voice of God at all.

## 4. THE STORY OF A SEDUCTION

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### *A contemplative nun*

«I cannot stop crying. I don't know who I am. I cannot recognise myself in the mirror. This face, this body... they don't belong to me. What has become of me? I look around my small cell and spot something curled up on the floor that is looking at me pleadingly. It's me! Me! I must return to him, I have to return to him...».

### **From my cell, one afternoon in May 1984**

I wish I could say that «at that moment the alarm clock went off». But there was no clock, and I wasn't asleep. Time is just a rhythmic and tiresome succession of minutes for me. I am imprisoned in a foreign country, I occupy a small space with little light, and my solitude is all I have. My physical appearance, although somewhat recovered, clearly tells the story that heroin has been a frequent guest in my body.

This is why I need to find my original identity. The detoxification process is helping me to find myself again and become aware that the emotions and actions that ruled my life these last few years are not mine; not wholly mine, at least.

Now I am able to ask myself how I reached this point, what has led me to descend into Hell, like Dante. Perhaps it was love, as it was for the celebrated Italian. Writing my story is part of my therapy, although it will not be easy. My hands are trembling, I don't know if I



can be honest with myself. I have spent so much time lying, and am frightened by what I may write.

I will first go back to my adolescence, which was normal and quite average. I was what you would call a “good” girl; I preferred silence and solitude, maybe because I was an intern in a Convent school, and because such values were encouraged there. God was an important part of my life at the time. I did not reject Him, and even contemplated entering a religious order for a while. But then, so did a lot of other people of the same age, it was normal to wonder about things like that. But like many others, I rejected that strange “invitation”, even though I remained somewhat connected to God.

Years passed, and I found myself in University, studying Philosophy. This was where I began to feel that God was now totally inhibiting my freedom and autonomy. God placed duties on me, and imposed a moral code, yet remained noticeably absent in the face of pain and suffering... Influenced by the discovery of atheist and humanist philosophies there, and developing a personal sense of rationalisation, God now appeared to me to be something like an uncertainty, or a subjective imagining, an illusion.

So this God that no longer felt like my friend in life was forbidding me to do all these things that I now felt were what life should be all about. A God that remains silent in the face of human suffering, and that doesn't explain the existence of evil in the world. A God who is at the head of the Church, an institution that does not seem to be evangelical, and instead comes across as

intolerant, strict, lacking both understanding and mercy, chauvinist, with links to the rich and powerful in the world. God and His Church went completely against my sense of social justice.

So I began to abandon all of my former religious practices, and to free myself from moral prejudice, distancing myself from anything that might be linked with God and the Church. I began to feel free and to discover a new life, one that was very different from that which I had led up to that point. I had my own wings and I wanted to fly, I wanted to be free and to be myself, live for myself, without any need for cultural, social or religious pressure. I wanted to reach out and touch the sun. And that was why I felt I didn't need God, He did not help me in this quest, in fact, I felt He only got in the way.

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During that time I got to know someone who would be very important in my life. It is to him that I owe the great learning experiences of my life, and also to him that I owe the fact of being here now in this cell, behind bars. I fell in love with a man who was caught up in the world of heroin. And not only could I not get him out of his

drug habit, but I sunk into that world along with him.

These were very difficult years, the most difficult of my entire life. As well as breaking my physical health, it destroyed my very identity. It felt as though I were trapped in an abyss from which I could not escape. A true hell. I would only momentarily feel happiness, and forget about my problems. But afterwards, I would fall into a desperate sadness that frightened me, because I felt nothing but contempt for my life. My attempt to touch the sun was like the story of Icarus: the heat melted the wax on my wings, wax that was made up of deceit and lies, and so I plunged into the abyss.

A few months ago, on our return from a travelling through a country in Asia, we were arrested by police and sentenced to a few years in prison. And so here I am – alone, far from home, thousands of kilometres from my family.

I feel like the Prodigal Son: in a foreign country, far from my home, dying with hunger, and having lost all my dignity.

And now I am starting to yearn for my Father's house where I was happy for so many years, living in harmony, peace and love. I am tired of not being myself, tired of trying to escape myself. There is no sun, no light, I am not free to go out into the street, I cannot feel or even smell any signs of life, nothing but sadness and desperation surrounds me and my hands are beginning to show the wounds of my life's journey. This cursed solitude is destroying my soul. I will be marked forever.

## **From my cell, one afternoon in May 2008**

I now return to the therapy I began several years ago, that of writing my story. I feel that now, just as it did then, my writing will help me to continue this inner quest. I am not the same person I was twenty-four years ago, although I am writing this from a cell now too. The difference is that the sun can enter this cell and from the barred window, I can see the roof of my convent. I hear the birds, I can smell the life and feel it pulsing at every daybreak when I get up to recite the Psalms and texts that millions of men and women have used in prayer through time and space. I live with other women here, but we are free. And the most important thing is this: I am learning how to reach that sense of true inner freedom, the only freedom that counts.

And so I take up this little biography again. The detoxification process helped me to see myself for who I was, and I was horrified at what I saw. And then I realised that it was not that particular man's fault for leading me into that situation. And neither was it the atmosphere in University, or the friendships I made during that time. It was much simpler than that, and for that very reason, it was much more difficult to accept: I myself was responsible for the situation, fleeing from God as Jonas did, and I allowed myself to be swallowed by the whale of desperation and failure. God spent years searching for me and instead I had run in the opposite direction. But He behaved like a jealous lover who would not abandon me.

This extreme situation –hitting rock bottom with drugs, prison, becoming wholly aware of how I had degraded myself being so far from God– was the decisive experience that made me get up and go back on the road towards the Father. I felt the reality of sin in my flesh: I had rejected Love, and was harmful to both others and myself. It felt as though I had reached a dead end in life, caught in the most nonsensical existence.

This was how an imperative need to reconcile myself with God was awakened in my heart, and this brought me to a kind of armistice with myself and with those around me.

I needed to be purified, restored, cleaned, and forgiven. God was offering me total freedom, a return from the exile that my pride had driven me to. It was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life: I felt overwhelmed by the mercy of this compassionate God who was taking me back with love, and filling my heart with an immense sense of peace. I needed to be in the desert to hear the powerful cry of a God that loved me.

My stay in prison was a key stage in the development of my human and spiritual maturity. It was a time in which I experienced much pain at the difficulty I was going through, but at the same time found great acceptance of that pain along with inner peace. At no time did I feel like rebelling against my situation, all I felt was powerlessness and fear. I took advantage of that time in order to reflect upon my situation and make a new start in my life, with my face turned towards the future.

Prison for me was like a life school. It was where I came into contact with a marginalized and delinquent world, which had up to that point remained unknown to me. I learned to be more human, finding out much more about how difficult life was, sharing my suffering with my reclusive comrades, putting myself in their shoes and trying to understand their situation, trying not to be scandalised by their sins, trying not to be too quick to judge their behaviour, because experience has taught me that given a set of specific circumstances, each one of us is capable of anything. I learned to be more tolerant, more compassionate, to look mercifully upon so many victims of an unjust system that excluded the weak and marginalized the poor. I learned to cry with others and to celebrate happiness with others, to listen, to heal wounds, and to welcome the broken spirited. I ultimately learned how to identify a little better with the figure of Jesus that I had rejected up to that point.

A prison experience is traumatic and frustrating for nearly everyone that goes through it. I found myself to be the exception that proved the rule. I came out of prison totally rehabilitated in both body and mind, without any emotional wounds or trauma; because while I was there I received physical and psychological treatment that helped me to cure my drug addiction. I believe that the attitude I adopted from the first moment helped keep me sane.

The workings of the penitentiary system were on the whole good, and were nothing like what I had heard or read about, and at first this brought me

back down to earth. During my sentence, I never encountered drugs or situations of intimidation or violence, whether among the inmates or the officials. That prison was like an internship, managed by State workers and nuns that gave the whole confinement experience a touch of humanity. The hardest thing to bear was losing my freedom as well as the humiliation at feeling so degraded.

The welcome I received from my family on my return home was like that of the Good Father in the parable. It was a real celebration, but one that did not exclude any other family members. We all joyfully celebrated my return home. My parents lived out a real parable. Not once did they reproach me or complain, and neither did they express any words of recrimination. In fact, they always avoided the issue so as not to make me feel bad. Inside, I was thinking: «if they as humans and sinners are reacting like this towards me, how much more welcoming will God who is an infinitely good Father be towards me?».

For many years, I experienced this forgiveness, I enjoyed it, and at the same time, it made me cry with emotion. Since that time, the characteristic that seems to offer the most evidence of God's presence to me is this infinite mercy. I experienced this for myself and have absolute faith in it. And so for me, God will always represent compassionate love.

My life then began to regain some form of normality, I went back to work, and also began practising my faith again. At the start, everything was a captivating novelty, but as time passed,

I began to feel dissatisfied and empty again: nobody and nothing could satisfy this thirst I felt for something more... One day, for no particular reason, things started to go wrong for me again, life was beginning to lose the little meaning it had at that time for me. Everything seemed black to me. Now I can see that, at the same time as things began to slip out of my hands, they were being replaced by intense feelings that invaded my senses unwillingly, feelings that began to win me over with little effort. God was calling me again, but this time the call was overwhelming.

As St. Augustine said, while God was calling me from within, searching for me, I was lost on the outside, enjoying the wonderful things that He had created. He was with me, but I was not with Him. He was calling me, was looking for me to surrender to Him and yet I resisted by ignoring Him, until His infinite love, healed my deafness, cured my blindness and broke my resistance. God reached out to me, and from that point, my soul yearned for Him, searched for Him, and needed Him... And as I allowed God to become a part of my life, this quest for Truth, which I had always felt, was gradually satisfied, although at times in a hidden way.

I entered into a monastery to find out what God wanted from me. I needed absolute silence in order to hear His voice. Finally, and at a specific moment of which I remember the very day and the hour, I was able to hear His voice with dazzling clarity. It was on Good Friday, during the Adoration of the Cross: I saw Jesus there offered up for our sins, thirsting for my love, and

without offering any more resistance, I fell at His feet and said: «Lord, here I am, take me for Yourself». I cannot remember how long I waited in that church, collecting my thoughts, silent, though unable to stop crying. And yet my cry was serene, joyful, and full of peace. From that particular moment, I knew that I would be totally committed to God forever. There were no more doubts: God had finally reached me. God was stronger and had won me over. One abyss had been calling to another: but the abyss of my misery had been won over by the great depths of the abyss of God's mercy.

After a time during which I dedicated myself to putting my life in order, I joined a contemplative order: the sisters there opened their doors and welcomed me, allowing me to fulfil my desire to consecrate my life to God forever.

I finally responded to His love. What a journey I had taken, how many ups and downs I had gone through to reach the real starting point of my life! But perhaps this whole process had been necessary in order to get to the point of surrendering and discovering the depth of freedom I could enjoy through my relationship with God.

Today I still give thanks to God for His immense mercy and continue to praise His patient goodness that was so put to the test during my adolescence and youth. I spent a long time far away from Him and in spite of everything, He still called me to live at His side. Is that not incredible?

I can now say with great gusto that God's presence in my life is the most

certain reality that can exist, and I feel loved unconditionally by Him, even in the most unworthy parts of my character.

I chose the contemplative life because I have great faith in the transforming power of prayer and in the fruitfulness of a life hidden with Christ in God. Some people, who thought that I was just going from one prison to another, did not understand my choice. This opinion could only have been held by those who did not know the truly liberating power of love. I know that the contemplative life can be difficult to understand when there are so many needs to attend to in the outside world, but the seduction of this life is so strong that, even though it is difficult to rationalise, I see it as being the best thing I have ever done. It is something gratuitous, that cannot be explained, and that gives a meaning to my life that I now recognise.

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I see myself as being a sentinel who remains with their heart and arms lifted towards God, interceding on behalf of my brothers and sisters who have on their shoulders the difficult task of bringing the Good News to all peoples. My mission is to plead with God, if I can call it that, to turn His merciful face

towards His children, to look on our poor sick humanity with the same look of gentleness and mercy that he gave to the adulterous woman, or with which he welcomed Mary Magdalene, the Prodigal Son, and myself. And furthermore, I act as a reminder, a silent presence, a humble sign raised in the heart of the Church and the world, that from the silence and solitude of the convent, points towards God, remembering His existence and His mystery, and inviting others to listen to Him.

When I pray, I try to open my heart to the Father and welcome His compassionate love, in order to make it present in my life. I have discovered the merciful heart of Jesus who was so moved by the pain and suffering of mankind, and I ask that He converts my heart of stone into a heart of flesh, a merciful heart like his own, full of gentleness and compassion, which beats with the suffering of every human being.

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God does not know  
how to do anything  
but love  
because «God is love»

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When you have experienced the merciful love of God like this, when you have had a great experience of salvation in your own life, when you have found through personal experience that turning your back on God causes so much hurt, when you have accepted

God as a liberating grace, when you have felt loved, forgiven, welcomed unconditionally, you cannot remain silent. You feel an imperative need to tell everyone that God is good, that He loves us and welcomes us in spite of our sin, that God does not oppress or threaten people, but liberates them, that believing in God brings about good, and encountering God is a wonderful experience. God does not want us to die, He is a friend of life, and He wants happiness and joy for all His creatures. God does not know how to do anything but love because «God is love» (1 Jn 4:8).

The story of my life has only one main protagonist in it: God. His love gave me back my life. His love is so strong and powerful that I am incapable of distancing myself from it, even though I know that my response to it is poor, and my sin is abundant.

Sometimes, these words from Scripture come into my mind: «I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask to be found by those who did not seek me» (Is. 65: 1-2). God is so great that He allows Himself to be found by those who are not even searching for Him, and He is suddenly capable of saying to someone: «Here I am, here I am»...

My life is like a secret love story, a story of seduction between a God that, since I was young, constantly hounded me claiming me as his own, and my soul, which, at first frightened, elusively fled that Person who was inviting me to give myself wholly to them. A mock struggle ensued between God and me...between Everything and no-

thing... and like a persistent lover, God pursued me until I was within reach, and He went on to –as the Bible says– «take me out of my little garden in order to lead me into the desert so that He could speak to my heart there». A God that was stronger than I was won me over by seducing me. «You were stronger than me, and I was powerless against you» (Jer 20:8).

We may do our best to ignore that Presence that invades our existence day and night, but the truth is that we have

already been touched by a Love that will not stop until it reaches us.

«I had to suffer wounds in my feet, walking along the most remote paths and through the roads of degradation before finding the road to my Father's house, only to discover that it was not a prison, but rather a place of freedom and forgiveness, a place of restored dignity, and I found that there was no set of rules at its centre, but rather a heart, and there was no tribunal, but rather a celebration with music and dance».

Although these are only a few testimonials that are very diverse in nature, we can focus on the following common points that they raise:

1. Karl Rahner was right to state that the Christian in the 21st century would either have a transcendental faith experience or simply would not be a Christian. The testimonials show the importance of spiritual experience today, in a world where society is plural and not sociologically Christian: without this, faith is lost when you move into a new environment. With it, faith remains firm, even though the spiritual experience itself may only last for a short while.

2. This also confirms what Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated when he said that we were living in a non-religious world, when he spoke about the distinction between faith and religion, and when he said that Christ continued to be «Lord of the non-religious».

3. The ecclesiastical institution has been a decisive factor in many people losing their faith, and has sometimes proved an obstacle at the time when that faith is restored, (despite acknowledging the importance of the faith community): the Church often appears as being unable to communicate the message of faith, and instead sometimes seems to impose that message. It can be perceived as not being interested in passing on the experience of God, and instead seem focussed on safeguarding its power and imposing its views on society.

4. The link of faith with the cruelty of the world: if God is love in a world like this, His love seems to be a “one-sided” type of love, considering the lack of response he receives. And one can only be faithful to this love when one has a clear commitment to the victims of history and when one engages in a struggle for justice with them.

5. The importance of our encounters with others: some people we come across in life may be like that figure on the road to Emmaus, at first unrecognisable, but who ultimately succeeded in setting the hearts of those despairing disciples on fire again.