

Nicole Hanjani
A Convert from Islam

My journey to the Catholic faith has without a doubt been one of the most important and glorious events of my life. If anyone had told me, say ten years ago, that I would one day be a Catholic I would have been utterly incredulous. To fully communicate my story, I must go back to the beginning of my experience with faith and God. I was raised a Shi'ite Muslim. My mother, an American with no religious affiliation, married my father, an Iranian, in the mid 1970s and four years later I made my entry into the world. I spent my childhood years in California and attended an Islamic school in southern California from kindergarten through the fifth grade. In this school we were taught the Quran and the foundations of Islam along with science, social studies and all of the other subjects one is taught in elementary school. Although my father did not force me to cover my hair or perform salat (the prayers performed five times throughout the day and evening) I identified myself as a Muslim with pride. I was taught from an early age to do my best to follow in the footsteps of the Prophet Mohammad, which entailed praying for those who hated me, loving God with my whole being and leading a life of honesty and practicing love and kindness for my fellow human beings. The God of Islam, referred to as Allah (which simply means God in Arabic) can be a God of righteous anger but his infinite love for his children is also acknowledged. The word Islam itself means submission, and Muslims are required to submit themselves fully and joyfully to Allah. As a child, playing with my friends and watching cartoons, I did not give much if any thought to theological details of Islam but I did comprehend the basics and embraced them willingly. Islam was an important part of my heritage and self-identity.

When I was eleven years old, my father sold his business and our house and we moved to Tehran, Iran. I was to remain in Iran for six years. When I reached the age of about fifteen, I underwent a time of more intense religious devotion. I started doing my daily prayers on a regular basis and even began fasting for the holy month of Ramadan. For a while I felt more spiritually complete and I especially enjoyed listening to the azan (call to prayer) the evenings of Ramadan, before we would all gather together after praying to break our fasts. I knew about Jesus and by that I mean I knew that Christians believed him to be the Son of God and I was also well aware of what the Quran had to say about him. Jesus is one of the most revered and beloved figures in Islam but Muslims believe him to be not the Son of God but a Prophet of God and to say otherwise to them is the height of blasphemy. One of the most oft-quoted tenants in Islam is: "There is no God but God and Mohammad is his messenger." Despite this fact, Islam and Christianity really do have much in common. Both faiths believe in Mary's virginal conception of Christ and both religions stress the importance of loving one another, doing acts of kindness, loving God, being faithful to ones spouse, etc. I am grateful that I was raised with religion because it taught me so many valuable lessons that I have carried with me through the course of my twenty-six years. While I was never as devout a Muslim as

many people I knew, I did take my faith seriously and was happy to follow the path of submission to God until I reached the age of seventeen.

When I was sixteen years old, my beloved uncle Mehdi passed away. He was only twenty-seven years old and left behind a widow and baby son. His death devastated my entire family for he was a truly beautiful man and beloved by all. I prayed fervently for his soul but around this time, feelings that had been planting roots in my heart over the last year or so began to sprout. The 'you must observe all of these rules to the 't' or go to hell' mentality of Islam began to deeply frustrate me and I began to become resentful of having to pray because I thought that any God who would condemn his creation to everlasting hell simply because one was too lazy to rise before the sun and perform the first prayer of the day was not someone I could feel much love for. My prayers began to lose all inspiration and I found myself reciting them by rote. I remember once telling someone that I despised praying and when they asked why I did it if it was so loathsome to me, I replied that I did not want to go to hell. I was seventeen years old when I did an about face and began to fully sever my ties to Islam. If God loved me unconditionally and was all merciful, I would reason, why then would he condemn me for something as relatively petty as not covering my hair before men when it was one of the most beautiful things he had gifted me with to begin with? Why was I, along with all women, forbidden from entering a Mosque or touching a Quran during the menstrual cycle? More than anything though, the fact that God to me was a distant being who was to be bowed before and worshiped without any real sense of having an intimate and personal relationship with him were the deciding factors in my decision to break away. My mother practiced Islam for a few years and she recently told me that never, as during her time as a Muslim, had she felt so far away from God. I think my uncle's passing was an important catalyst in this process because it made me view faith, life and death in a different way. After my uncle's death, when I expected to find comfort in loving God, I found nothing but coldness and loneliness. I do not mean to portray Islam as a negative force in any way whatsoever and instead of stating any official position on Islam, merely wish to express my own story and experiences with the religion.

When I was seventeen, my mother, siblings and I returned to America and what a happy day it was! My father had long ago become an opium addict and with that addiction came physical, emotional, mental and verbal abuse. I heard Mother Angelica once say that hell for her began at the age of six. I can state with certainty that my personal hell began when I was eleven years old. My father had always been prone to going overboard when punishing his children and had a volatile temper but I could never have imagined just how horrible things would become once we moved to Iran. My mother had no independence or resources there and we were fully enslaved to my father's rages and abuse. In November of 1997, my mother, two brothers, sister and I escaped from Iran. We had to wait until my father was out of town and the only way we managed to procure the funds necessary for plane tickets was through divine intervention. All we took with us were literally two suitcases. Two suitcases represented six years of our lives,

years dark with despair and misery. I won't even go into how terrifying it was, waiting in the airport in Tehran and then in Turkey, expecting to see my father at any moment show up to drag us back.

When we came back to America, we had no money and hardly any possessions. We stayed with relatives for a year and then moved to Nebraska to live with my Aunt. Although I was now free from my father's tyranny, I endured many more years of unhappiness and depression for we lived lives of grinding poverty. In 2001 I moved to the opposite side of the state of Nebraska to attend college. As poor as we were, I got through college with the aid of pell grants, student loans, working several jobs and with a couple scholarships. Here at college I was truly happy for the first time since my early childhood. I made wonderful friends and immersed myself whole heartedly in the academic life. I graduated Magna Cum Laude in the spring of 2004 with a B.S. in history and English. I moved back to western Nebraska and now work for a mortgage company. I plan to apply for graduate school and would like to look into earning a Masters in theology or some other field that will allow me to immerse myself in the Catholic faith on a daily basis. I don't know where to even begin but I must start applying soon as I only have a few months until the deadline for applications.

Now comes the really challenging part of my story. It's one thing to relate the story of one's life but quite another to relate the story of one's coming home, so to speak. I shared the previous information with you so that you might better understand just how miraculous it is that I was called to the Catholic faith. At the age of seventeen, as I stated earlier, I turned from Islam but soon after, I don't know just when, I turned from God and became a devoted agnostic. I seriously doubted even God's existence and did not believe in an afterlife. Even though I wanted to think that there was life after death I figured that those who believed so were just indulging in wishful thinking. I came to despise the institution of organized religion in general and went so far as to think that anyone who was a member of a religion could not truly be an enlightened being. While I always believed in freedom of worship, I had nothing but contempt for those who tried to convert me from agnosticism. I did not really know any Catholics (In fact I did not even know any Catholics in person until I went away to college) and the Protestants I knew seemed mostly close-minded bigots who wanted to "save my soul" in order to win a point for the team, as it were, not out of genuine love for me or Christ. Even though, however, I felt something of an abhorrence for those who tried to force their beliefs upon me, internally I was searching for something. I attended various Protestant churches with friends for I have always been interested in learning about the world's religions, none of them really appealed to me and I felt that there was something missing from these denominations, as if they had some of the pieces to the puzzle but were missing the most important ones. So I would attend services a few times and then revert to my belief that Christ had nothing whatsoever to offer me, at least not the Christ that these churches portrayed. Around the time of my late teens I began to feel a deeply abiding and even impassioned love for Jesus. I could not accept that he might be the Son of God, for this notion was still

blasphemous and an egregious wrong to me, but I felt that he was more than simply a Prophet. I would watch films about his life and passion whenever I had the chance and would find myself weeping from the sheer overpowering beauty of his love for humanity, his kindness, mercy and gentleness. I read the Bible from time to time and was especially moved by Luke 12:22-29 and would return to these verses during times of sadness and loneliness. Thus my love for Jesus began to blossom slowly but surely and I found myself beginning to resent my intellect at times for preventing me from accepting Christ as my Savior. I spent the last eight years of my life waffling between a desire for Christ's love and defiant agnosticism. When I wasn't content to accept that there was no God, no afterlife, no savior, etc., which was most of the time, my life consisted of spells of searching, yearning and a profound sense of emptiness and spiritual loneliness. I loved Christ, I now know, long before I fully accepted him as my Lord and Savior, but, my mind would dictate to me, I could only accept him as a mere man, albeit a wonderful, beautiful man, because he could not have possibly been God's own Son.

It's almost humorous to look back at how I was able to reject all the barriers to the acceptance of Christ in a veritable single moment, an epiphany that occurred in a flash, a conversion of the spirit, if you will. Sometime in August I was going through a particularly trying episode of emptiness and inner desolation. Once again I found myself searching for something, yearning for sustenance of the soul. I pulled out my copy of Sr. Wendy Becket's Book of Saints (I have long been fascinated with hagiography and long before I ever dreamed of becoming a Catholic was inspired and moved by the lives of saints) and read through it again hoping to find some comfort. I tried to ignore the yearning that had overcome me, for after all, this sense of longing was hardly new to me. I found myself watching EWTN one day for no apparent reason, a channel I had been horrified by in the past, and caught the show Life on the Rock. Fr. Francis was discussing celibacy and abstinence and he made the comment, and here I paraphrase, that young people who abstain from sexual activities are made to feel abnormal by society when in fact they are the truly normal ones who will be the happiest in the long run. As an individual who has been chaste my entire life, this really struck a chord with me because I have often been made to feel like some sort of freak when people find out I am twenty-six and a virgin by choice. Thus, Fr. Francis' words really meant something to me. I recall thinking that maybe there was more to Catholicism than I had realized. While I knew a lot about the Church's foundation and history, I have to admit that I knew little about how the faith was actually applied. Even though I thought that Catholicism was nonsensical in so many ways, it appealed to me in a way and on a level that no other religion had ever done. I think that the Holy Spirit was guiding me long before I would acknowledge its presence. For example, whenever I would go to an art gallery, I would find myself drawn to Christian art more than anything else, in particular Medieval icons and later depictions of the Crucifixion. When I was in the Swedish National Art Gallery in the winter of 2003, the first room I headed for was the one that contained the icons and just stood in front of them, gazing into Mary's solemn, Byzantine eyes. While I had such feelings for years, Protestantism did not really move me and I could not accept that it was God's true church

for many reasons of which I won't go into here. Thus, one day out of the blue I found myself watching EWTN and I began to feel a calling, as if an unseen but deeply felt presence was there quietly but securely guiding me and putting things in my path. The same evening that I was watching Life on the Rock, a quote from a St. Denis of something or other was shown, something about God loving those who have turned away from him and with just those few words, a tumult was released from within me. I began to weep because I felt the love of God so strongly and his desire to take me once again in his embrace. It was as if an entire dam of pent up feelings was suddenly unleashed in my spirit and after I had calmed down I felt a lightness of being. I knew then that I was being called.

I phoned a Catholic church near me the very next day and asked to speak to someone about Catholicism. I was so nervous and didn't know quite what to say. "Hi, I just had a soul-shattering experience and I'd like to see someone about converting" would have been a bit too much so I settled for making an appointment with Sr. Vera Meis. I was so excited and could not wait to meet her. I still tried to tell myself that I was being foolish and would no doubt end up being disappointed and disillusioned. It turned out that Sr. Vera is one of the most loving, beautiful and spiritual people I have ever met. I can also say with surety that the pastor of my church as well as two other priests I met recently are all remarkably kind and wonderful people. I went on to meet with Sr. Vera several times and she seemed to understand exactly what I was going through. I started attending Mass for the first time in my life and the rest, as they say, is history. I have been inside many churches but can honestly say that the only ones I have ever truly felt divine presence in has been Catholic churches and cathedrals.

I am now taking RCIA classes and enjoying every moment. I am looking forward to my baptism and confirmation so very much and I know, I just know for certain that the first time I receive Holy Communion I will be consumed with ecstasy. No one in my family approves of organized religion so it was hard revealing my conversion to them but in this too I have been guided by the Lord. I love our Lord with all of my being and am devoted to attending Mass, praying the Holy Rosary and contemplating Christ's Passion. I kneel before the crucifix I have hanging on the wall beside my bed every night and am filled with so much love I can hardly bear it, so intense and strong is it. I thank Jesus constantly for the gift of his eternal love and salvation. I humbly ask that he will continue to make me an instrument of his will and that I always keep my mind open to his calling. It is such a beautiful and transforming thing, to be fully able to express my love for Him. During Mass I feel more affected than in any other religious ceremony I have attended and when I sing in church, it is with mind, heart and soul. I cannot say exactly why it took me so long to acknowledge fully my love for Jesus. Perhaps it was simply a matter of overcoming a teaching I was imparted with since my early years. Even though I denied Christ as my Divine Savior for so long, I know without a moment's doubt that he has loved me all along and has graciously allowed me to come to him in my own time and way.

As a novice to Christianity there is still so much for me to learn and I am looking forward to the continuation of my journey. The one thing I do not question is Christ's love for me as an individual. I am so grateful that God has brought me to his Church. I express my love for Christ every chance I get and as I wear my medal of St. Therese, I am reminded to follow my own little way in worshiping my Savior. I could never sufficiently express my love for God in mere words but I hope that I have managed to provide you with a reasonably coherent accounting of my journey home. I would love to share my story with others and want others to know, especially those from non-Christian backgrounds, that they too can accept Christ's love and gift of salvation. Catholicism is the universal faith and is open to all. I now find much comfort and joy in identifying myself as Roman Catholic and hope to participate in it in every way possible. Although I have not yet been baptized and confirmed, as Sr. Vera said, I have undergone the baptism of desire.

I cannot end this testimony without mentioning a person who has played an important role in my conversion. One of my dearest friends, Gloria, is a Catholic and she has been there to support me during this entire journey. I was talking to her not too long ago and she reminded me that while we were roommates in college I had once made the comment that if I was to ever accept and follow a religion it would be Catholicism. I remembered saying this only vaguely and she then told me that in that moment she had prayed for my conversion. I was deeply moved when I heard this and now know even more than before that God truly does hear and answer prayers.