

The Person and the Challenges
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Testimonies

Introduction to the four testimonies

Part of the work of the Members of the EEC during the Congress of Celje consisted in reading and studying narrations of conversions to the faith today. In the months prior to the Congress, 4 testimonies of conversion were gathered. These 4 testimonies are by Alessandro, Monia, Florence and Octavia.¹

The Members present for the Congress had to read these testimonies personally, then in language groups decide which one to study in greater detail. Once the language group chose a particular testimony, the group had to analyse it in detail in two moments.

During the first moment, the first part of the story was studied, and the group had to identify the dynamics of what was happening when the person concerned gained access to the faith. Moreover, the group had to identify the conditions which favour such an initiation.

During the second moment, the second part of the narration was studied. During this period the group had to study the necessary catechetical conditions which could be used to help the conversion process and to accompany the person concerned towards a permanent conversion.

¹ The 4 persons from whom the testimonies were gathered asked EEC to remain anonymous. This is the reason why here only their first names are reported.

Alessandro

My Testimony

Alexander is 51 years old. He has always lived in northern Italy, although in different cities. He has been married in a civil marriage for 15 years. He has a 12 year old daughter. He is a university professor.

First Part

I will narrate a story not so much of a conversion, but of a re-appropriation of something I discovered, but which has never ceased to be inside me.

My Christian Initiation was in many ways similar to that of many of my peers: catechism from Year 2 (7 years), Communion in Year 3 and Confirmation in Year 5. But unlike so many other children of my age, I attended all the years of catechism, and not just the preparatory weeks for the reception of the sacraments. I cannot say that my family was made up of practicing Catholics, but we believed: I have been taught the basic prayers at home; my grandmother who lived with us prayed every night. I was lucky enough to have, as parish priest, a priest whom I greatly esteemed, who offered us an example of evangelization which was a bit different than usual: he was the one to guide me for Confirmation, and I had him as a teacher of religious education in the next three years. I remember that he used a catechetical project which was very innovative: it seemed like a breath of fresh air, an evangelization based on biblical texts. I still cherish his lessons on St Paul and a Mass celebrated in a small room of the school for those of us who wanted to participate. Unfortunately, perhaps for his too modern ideas he was removed and sent to a parish far away from my diocese. From that moment my problems with faith began: I felt betrayed, not by him, nor by God, but by whom? – the Church. I evaded my spiritual point of reference. However, I continued to attend Mass, to confess, to participate in the Eucharist, but feeling increasingly ensnared and asking myself about what I was doing, if I was being sincere with myself.

Then a new bishop came in my diocese. To define him as conservative is an understatement! I still held firm, with my girlfriend at that time. I was 18 and

had long debated whether to have sex before marriage, something shunned by the Church. After a year, I gave in and in consonance with my decision, I moved away from attending mass and from the faith. I started going to university, then read a PhD, then the university work, in all, about 30 years away from the Church. I have written-off from Christianity; from the Church. But over the years I had mounted a revulsion against the ecclesiastical institution, its dictates regarding morality, especially sexuality, on life issues (abortion, euthanasia). I was very far away. However sometimes I went to Mass, sometimes with much diligence. I stopped confessing. What had I to confess? Not to be in agreement with the Catholic Church? And then there was no repentance, since I did not see that I was sinning. However, I also stopped receiving Holy Communion: how could I lie to myself and in front of the altar? It is the same reasoning that I used with my wife about marriage: how could I lie? How could we get married before God claiming to adhere to the moral dictates of the Church when it was not so? I married civilly, and I still am: we get married before God as a couple not alone.

But in all those years, but I always maintained contact with Scripture, often for professional reasons, but also for pleasure, to retain the practice of reading the Bible, something that I had decided upon when I was a boy. Sometimes I entertained myself in places of worship in the cities where I lived, something that I love very much. One of these was Padua, where my relationship with Christianity in those years is perhaps, at its deepest moment: Every so often I went to the Romanesque church, of St Sophia, stripped as it, in order to be with myself, while I avoided the Basilica of St Anthony, which was – and still shows! – an image diametrically opposed to what for me is the Gospel message: how could I tolerate the trade that took place in and around the basilica? Two years after my marriage my daughter was born. We did not baptize her immediately. However, under pressure from my mother-in-law, in the end after more than a year, we baptised her without conviction, but looked for a parish and a priest who was away from conservative positions. My daughter then had the freedom to follow Christian education since kindergarten, but the great transition came with the catechism, which she asked me to attend in Year 2. I have often wondered if there was the hand of God in that request.

As from a year, the parish of my neighbourhood offered a revolutionized catechism where parents were also, once a month catechized mostly by other parents, rarely by the priest. We worked a lot in groups. I did not choose it willingly, but I endured the offer: I returned home angry every time. I felt I was wasting time listening to so many platitudes from parents. Once and for all:

“I believe in Jesus, not in God.” Sometimes I got up and I left because I could not bear listening to negative and regressive positions especially on the part of some parents that were evangelizing us! But I have always brought my daughter to Mass, and I explained, word for word, everything that was going on: the readings, prayers, the elevation etc.: a participated mass, and understood, not simply endured. I always listened attentively to homilies, and there I took a breath of fresh air, I grew up. And Mass after Mass, I began to feel a deep pain inside me. Why? I realized almost immediately that I do not partake of the Eucharistic meal. Suffering, even physical...atrocious! Staying there, sitting in the pew, after seeing the body of Christ! I remember I clung to myself, to contain the discomfort that grew inside me. In anticipation of the Eucharist of the children the parish priest gave a special talk to us adults, but I could not accept the testimony offered, very directed towards a predictable result. I got up and I left, but I told him face to face and did not hide my feelings.

This was the beginning of a beautiful spiritual journey, and of friendship. I began to talk to him. Sometimes I went to visit him and told him about my suffering, my fear of abandoning my old self, to convince myself to let go of myself with the hope to rising up once again. He had used that phrase in a sermon, and I was felt myself shaking! In the end I could not make it any more! I prayed so much, on several days and at several times, in a small church in my town, for hours and I discovered something very, very simple: God had always been inside me, we always walked together, he waited for me, provoked me, he made him angry, made me suffer, he has called me to him. During those painful meditations I felt him asking me: “Alexander, what are you going to do? I am here, inside you, why are you afraid? I am here for you!” We were always together, all these years! I listened to you, and you have heard me; I searched for you and you have searched for me! “At that point I felt a strong boost: I could not bear the separation from him, from his body any longer! When I said this to my parish priest he said, “What are you waiting for? Come!” And I went, after having had a beautiful confession – the most beautiful of my life. I did not choose a particular Sunday to approach the Eucharist, nor a solemn mass or a special feast. I did not wear a tie, but I went to meet a friend, as I was, in absolute simplicity, as you do with real friends. The freedom to be oneself in faith, to feel accepted and loved for who you are, in a continuous process, as happens in real friendships!

My wife was puzzled by my ‘change’, but I also told her what I say to myself: I have not converted, I have made mine what has always been inside me. Has

anything helped me in his re-appropriation? Yes, some things have helped me. The first: the proposal of a mature faith, an adult faith, based on freedom. No more dogmas and precepts, but the awareness of being the promoters of our own evangelisation, no more based on doctrine, imposed, but rather perceived and felt within oneself. Maybe if I had not met a catechetical journey for adults that has targeted at this, who knows where I would be? Maybe I would have reached the same re-appropriation, but certainly the catechetical way has paved the way for me.

The reduction in the number of the participants in the meetings immediately after the communion of the children has helped a lot: now there were only parents who wanted to share and question themselves seriously on important questions of faith and morals. I no longer returned home saying that I had lost time, but convinced that I was in a search with others. It was very nice. Then suddenly listening to a story of a witness: Thierry Bizot, *Catholique anonyme*. I found myself once again: the same initial scepticism, the same questions, the same conflict with my wife, with society, with myself, and, finally the surrender to God's embrace. Then the patient waiting of who was watching my path (the parish priest), who knew how to listen, to wait, to support, to reassure. But more than anything else the patience of God who waited for me, who spoke to me in many ways, year after year, never giving up, never turning off the flame. He kept me anchored to the Bible, to reading the Fathers of the Church, occasionally taking me to Mass, sometimes to pray, sometimes to contemplate him in a picture, in a medieval crucifix, in a passage that I read: can you escape from such a great love?

Guidelines to understand text:

- Which are the elements narrated by Alexander and which caused his conversion?
- What facilitated his access to the faith?
- What difficulties or fears can be found in his story?

Second Part

From that moment I began my journey in a re-acquired and renewed faith. Still to this day, I feel a tremor in the prayer before the Eucharist: "Oh Lord,

I am not worthy to receive you...”: I feel that God has given me the word of salvation and I treasure it as a precious gift in me. However, the journey did not end, and there are still many insecurities. I am often appalled by the apparent monolithic faith of many people: who never have a doubt, an uncertainty. I am not like this and I hope I will never attain these absolutes: how could I continue to grow and enter into dialogue with God? How could I continue to have him as a friend if I knew it all, if I am already certain of everything? In this search there are people who continue helping me – even indirectly – the parish priest and the chaplain of my parish. I feel that their home is my home, their faith proposal is what helps me. Some important examples: conveying the idea in the liturgy, in homilies, in iconic representations in places of worship, to be part of a millennial journey of faith.

Never in my faith journey, not even in my experience as a Christian youth, have I felt so strong a need of the voice of the Church Fathers, of the testimony of the early centuries. I see everything – even in my study, which is incidentally on that epoch – in a different light. I have grasped the journey of the early Christian community, continuous research, left to those who came after them. An immense treasure that makes you feel that you are never alone in your path but you progress with others, those who came before you and those who will be coming after you. You recover the origins, not for fashion or pose (in a world where one searches for the ‘natural’, the ‘organic’, the ‘primitive’) but because the community of believers is millennial. So beautiful!

I was asked to be involved in the catechesis of my parish: I said yes. More or less every month, for two years now, along with another 3–4 parents, we organize an hour of Bible study for the group of our children: we offer a biblical character, both the New and the Old Testament, and we illustrate the character through pictures, film, etc. But above all we read their story in the Bible. We help our children to get around in Scriptures, to seek passages. Hearing their own voice reading the Bible fills my heart with joy: I re-link to my catechism days. The time spent in preparation among us parents is also a nice moment because we reflect on the texts we read, we seek a means of interpretation within us and we share it. However, I feel very insecure; I am always afraid of saying something stupid or superficial. I would like to have more training sessions that give me security. Then I do not know what will happen to me at the end of this catechetical experience when the children receive Confirmation. As they say in psychology I will have to mourn the loss of my “role” as a catechist, albeit a bit improvised, but who knows what God holds for me!

I recently attended a meeting on re-evangelisation: I had never been in meetings organized by the parish, with other adults whom I did not know. Yes, there was discomfort, as I said before: the security of many in the faith disoriented me. I experience the community as a place which is often little open to welcome those who want to confront each other on the faith, but maybe it is my mental laziness, my preconceptions, and perhaps fears which I hope to put to the test. Maybe because I am the only one in that context to have made that kind of way, of re-appropriation? I do not know, I do not know the stories of the others. Having re-appropriated my faith has allowed me to see, however, the relationships with the people around me in a very different way. I live and work in an ideological context which is markedly secular, but I realized how much the reasoning of faith and Christianity is surrounded by ideals. But then talking with people, when you create empathy and mutual trust you realize that many are looking for the faith, asking questions about God, each in a particular path. This has given me a lot of reassurance: away from blatant manifestations of loud conversions, in city squares, on the internet, as if these are phenomena linked to freaks. I found around me a more intimate inner search, however, it is also has space to be shared with who is really listening.

Even my relationship with the Church as an institution is changing (I did not say “changed”, is changing!). I have known over the years, even prior to the re-appropriation of my faith many beautiful realities: the Dossettians, Benedictine monks, I have often heard various voices on a radio program that hosts many experiences of faith, even non-Christian. I also briefly stayed in the Vatican, in Santa Marta, before the current pontificate: I saw those who live in there, certainly not my ‘models’ of the Church, but I finally realized that, beyond everything, the Church is us Christians; we who carry the burden of the Church on our shoulders in a millennial path. Perhaps no one knows where Trnje is: a tiny village in Slovenia. I recently participated in the Mass of Holy Thursday there. I did not understand a word, I, who know many languages, but I still found myself part of the small community who attended Mass, part of that Church who together in the world, celebrated the same millennial rite. I often wonder what would become of me if the way we communicate the faith in my parish was changed. Could I resist a ‘conservative’ proposal, looking at the past? I do not know: I still know too little about my parish community to know how it is, how it thinks, which path it is following, where it is going. I have listened to different opinions, different views, but perhaps this is also an advantage, but I cannot hide that the possibility, although this may be remote, of a step backwards in time worries me a lot.

Although I feel so insecure, inadequate, and estranged, I have however a great certainty: I have God in me and therefore I will never be alone. I found myself praying a lot more; I often read the Bible, even if not daily. I believe that to cultivate faith, we should be helped by meetings, but small groups, where we can feel at ease to talk and enter into dialogue, to trust each other. I do not think that faith is only an interior and solitary searching. Yes this is part of it as well, it is important, but the walk of faith is also supporting one another, waiting for each other just as God has waited for me. I am still always very puzzled with ecclesiastical hierarchies: from time to time we learn of shameful stories, rampant luxuries, power struggles, but there are also beautiful examples and one wonders how they can coexist: I do not know!

I know that in my long journey of fifty years of life, I have had the gift of meeting people who have influenced my life as a Christian, not only priests, but also ordinary people, with whom I spoke about God, the faith, the Church, even during those thirty years in which I did not recognize God in me. In all those years, however, I was always available to confront and to listen: I never hid behind preconceptions and dogmas that are often found, both among the laity and among believers, but I always refused proposals that wanted to dictate absolute truths. I think that the key to interior growth lies in sincerely listening to others. In addition, I had a great gift. Once, during a mass in ordinary time, a passage from Jeremiah was read. When I heard it I said, “Behold, I am that person.” And today I can say: “I am proud to be so.”

“I said: ‘I will not think more about him, nor speak any more in his name!’ But in my heart there was a burning fire, restrained in my bones; I tried to contain it, but I could not” (Jer. 20.9).

Guidelines to understand text:

- How can Alexander’s relationship with Christians, with the community, and with the Church be defined?
- What has encouraged his journey of faith after baptism? What caused him problems?
- Are there elements in the story documenting the transition to a permanent conversion?

Florence

The Story of Florence²

First Part

Florence was baptized when she was 29 years old. She is an architect, married to Didier (immediately after his entry into the catechumenate). She is the mother of Simon.

Several factors have motivated my journey toward baptism, things which happened very slowly, almost without my knowing it, because I was brought up in an atheist family [...] I was an atheist for a long time. I believe that during adolescence, perhaps for pure identity crisis or provocation, I was even anti-religious. But I grew up, matured and above all my personal life has been enriched. So you distance yourself, you become less rigid in your judgments, less sure about everything. To cut long things short, there were also a number of events in my personal life and in my professional life which showed me that that we did not have the proof that “This God” did not exist, so I told myself that there was something.

Following this, several things happened which reinforced this rising doubt and this curiosity in me. They were mostly meetings. Working with an architect, I had the opportunity to go to a community of religious several times. It was a very young community. At the time I was 25, and the sisters were my age, even younger. This impressed me. They were so dynamic, funny, that this has broken down the idea that I had of the Church, the stereotypical images in my head. I discovered their goodness, their generosity. On the other hand I like the Romanesque style a lot. With this same architect I visited the churches of Saône-et-Loire. I realized that there was one aspect of my culture which I possessed very well and that I could not ignore if I wanted to know what was around me. All this can be combined with small events in life that at first we call coincidences, but of which we later find out, when we have the faith, that they are signs...

² You can find the complete story of Florence in: B. Blazy, A. M. Boulongne, C. Peguy and E. Grieu, *Quand Dieu s'en mêle. Paroles de catéchumènes*, Ed. de l'Atelier, 2010, p. 91–101.

In addition, cultivating the project of our marriage, I felt the need to celebrate it religiously. I did not at all want a civil marriage. Therefore I asked myself questions. But it was a great time, three years before I realized that I needed to go further, and possibly ask for baptism.

I confess that at first I was very impressed, very hesitant. For me, the hardest thing was not baptism, but the fact of asking. I was supported by a couple of friends of my parents' generation, who were decisive in my path. During a meal with friends I had the courage to say that I was considering the possibility to ask for baptism; I knew they were believers and practiced their faith. I confessed to them that I was a bit confused, I did not know how to address the issue. They talked to me, and reassured me. That summer I was invited to the baptism of one of their grandchildren, to show me how it was. When I started the journey towards baptism, they proposed to meet regularly, for moments of sharing. I finally reached the security necessary to contact the service of the catechumenate, and even there I had a wonderful reception.

There were things that were changing inside me, but I took three years to formalize my path. What took the longest time was to do this officially. When you start to discover the faith, you do not know whether it is really faith. Having always been a stranger to the faith, to this culture, to this life-story, I was very impressed by the "family", by all the believers. At first I always had the impression that I was making a big mistake, I had enormous fears. But Sr Madeleine's welcome was crucial; she knew how to listen. I went to the parish, I saw the parish notices, I called the parish, they referred me to this sister who called me. The first contact was very pleasant. She thought about it and ended up with sending me to Cécile. She knew that the latter had been trained in the Fine Arts and she knew her taste for art. She argued that that this would be a common point that would facilitate the first approach. I am very grateful.

With Cécile there was a real breakthrough. She feared the age difference between us, while for me, finding myself with an interlocutor so mature in age did not constitute a teacher-student rapport, not a master-disciple rapport [...] I had the impression of speaking to a "second grandmother", and this has created a very natural relationship. I was really lucky to have been connected immediately with the right partner, which put me in connection with the proper companion. And I would like to make it known to the Church.

Guidelines to understand text:

- Which are the elements narrated by Florence and which caused her conversion?
- What facilitated her access to the faith?
- What difficulties or fears can be found in her story?

Second part

At first I always feared that what I believed to be a nascent faith would collapse. I was afraid that my apprenticeship would lead me to an error, and to the fact that I was wrong. In fact, slowly I realized that faith was within me, that what I discussed with Cécile was not something superficial. These were exercises which commenced from meticulously organised and structured points of departure. They were progressive, very interesting for an adult who was being initiated. I experienced this in a very clear way because I saw that during the meetings it was consolidated. Yes, there really was something solid. The first year we postponed the baptism because I was not ready. My companion also felt this so baptism was done in the second year.

[...] What I discovered even before baptism is the Christian community. For me one of the fundamental reasons for baptism was to be part of this family. It was joining a community, although I prefer to use the word “family” because during a mass or between persons who are intimate you experience something rich, a quality, a listening ear and a gift of self that can be never experienced somewhere else. What marks me most is the goodness of those who believe, people of the Church, towards others.

It is true that after baptism not everything becomes so easy. The Church welcomes catechumens really well, accompanying them to baptism. Later it is very reassuring for the neophyte to know of a continuity link, but this must be mitigated because the neophyte is taken by the hand. As for me, after baptism I maintained contact with my companion. I pulled her by the hand to tell her not to let me fall. We really enjoyed being together once in a while. I know that it is up to me to take things in hand. As in life, it is up to each one to take things in hand and take the responsibility; and this is difficult. It is up to the neophyte to do this.

In my parish I discovered that the community was quite old, but maybe this is our challenge, even though the word is a bit ambitious. Neophytes must be

the catalyst of change because the communities are a bit old. It is up to us to rejuvenate them. [...] I had to do with his Fr P. And it is impressive. [...] It is formidable! Although he is overburdened with work he is very helpful towards the catechumens of his parish. But nothing is impossible; if you want to, you really can do it. You can always go to another parish if this does not work.

The hardest thing is the lack of time, but it is also a matter of will. If I do not react, time flies before I go to mass. In everyday life, what reassures me in my new life as a neophyte is the feeling that this [faith] has not abandoned me, that it is here with me. But I am frustrated because I realize that I do not practice enough. I do not frequent the community enough. [...] Yet, because our faith makes sense, we need the community and the Church to be together in a place of worship. But in my life up to now there is chaos! I just try not to allow myself to be completely overwhelmed. Every now and then I take time to read one or two pages of the Gospel. In the day or in the evening I start to think, and to consider my position. I pray in this way. Frequently I tell [God] that I will not forget him.

I know I have to fight only with myself if I am a bit unsatisfied. The Church has already given me a lot. We can preserve points of reference, contacts with our companions and with other catechumens, as the meal which we recently shared as catechumens and neophytes in the parish. On this occasion we were able to talk about all issues, share experiences and discoveries. If this were what living in a community means, neophytes and catechumens would be helped a lot.

What nourishes my faith are other Christians, their presence, their sharing, and when you are in trouble, their support. There really are people around from whom I know I can find support if one day I had to give up. This couple who are friends of mine, for example, are a point of reference. My companion told me about young couples who have particularly committed themselves to organize meetings once a month which are less centred on baptism, but more about Christian life, and being a parent, etc. This could perhaps be interesting had I not moved. It is important for me to share on family life and professional life, and I discovered in Christians precisely this ability to share and to listen to each other.

Every so often doubt re-emerges [...] It is something that we must not deny, but that to me is positive. In the parish there are thematic conferences once a month, made in a very objective way, anchored in the history of art, with a small academic input. For me this would be a way to deepen my faith. It deals with the representation of evil and the devil, elements which are analysed through history, showing that in such and such a day, the Church had a retarded position

which was inappropriate [...]. These meetings deal a lot with symbols. I need to learn the language of symbols which is so important in churches together with my life as a believer. Because the two-year journey made with my companion anchored my faith solidly.

[...] Throughout my life, if I do not feel written off, at least I will feel a newcomer in the community, someone who arrived late. In my previous life-style there were thirty years which were different from this life – of a non-believer, that means that I will always have the feeling of not having answered these issues as well as Christians do, although they too will pose questions and have doubts. [...] I feel a little imperfect compared to them. However I will never deny my thirty years of life as a non-believer, because that life has brought me to baptism. In retrospect I do not regret the path that I walked, because without it I would not have asked to be baptized.

[...] I would like to transmit this message. For me it would be like an accomplishment. I would like to be an intermediary, a witness. Otherwise I would have done only a part of the journey. And also this idea of the family [...] I would like to pass this on to my children, educate them in the faith in the best way possible and to lead them to baptism leaving them free, because I have not had a lot of it. [...] It would not be logical to have wanted it for myself and not give it to my children.

Guidelines to understand text:

- How can Florence's relationship with Christians, with the community, and with the Church be defined?
- What has encouraged her journey of faith after baptism? What caused her problems?
- Are there are elements in the story documenting the transition to a permanent conversion?

Monia

My story...

First Part

My name is Monia. I am *living experience*, made up of journeys, climbing uphill, losing my way, feeling shameful, feeling thirsty, full of passion, journeys in the light, in shadows, journeys to life and faith. My first contact with God and the Church was as an excluded person. It is a bit risky calling it a *First Proclamation!* Yet, today I can still say that it was. I was baptized, always with a frail health, timid, coming from an unbelieving family where my mother 'believed in God but not in the church' and where my father used profanity as normal form of a speech. I lost the first year of catechism. When my mother, exhausted by my pleas and putting aside 'her principles' turned to the parish priest of the parish where we never attended, asking my admission to the second year – in order to be with my classmates – despite having missed the first year, ... came the disaster ... a peremptory NO. My mother was angry, cursing the church and all her ministers "I was right to say that you are only nice from the exterior! Many beautiful words of understanding and openness and love of neighbour, then you shut the door in people's faces." *For me there were closed doors.*

Today I am almost forty-two. In that period when I did not do catechism I was a black sheep ... how can you hide? I was the only one in class who did not do catechism in the parish and religious education at school, because to protest the mother decided to take me out of that too. How did I feel? Very bad. Can you feel guilty about a sin that you think that you did not commit? Yes. Can you feel ashamed because you are *different* from your friends? A lot...too much. I did not take it well. Whenever I happened to pass near the church I kept my eyes to the ground. Whenever anyone of my friends spoke of the catechism I became red with shyness, devoid of a single word that could 'excuse me'. I really wanted to know what my friends were doing at catechism, what was going on inside those walls next to the church. Did God really exist? Did you see him in catechism? And what was in the church? And by the way...how was a church? For those who live *outside* it is not so easy to imagine. You can only try to build a scruffy image, stealing some phrase heard here and there, struggling against

the prejudices of those who were *inside*. And, especially when you are a child, it is not easy to remain alien to the 'teachings' of your parents. By listening to my parents speak ill of the parish priest as a *gollywogg*, with his black dress and a face that over the years became more and more unknown and hostile to me.

In secondary school, I and some other immigrant did not do religion. At least I was not the only one. I kept growing up feeling different. But this was not all. I felt different even from my parents. They felt all right although distant. I did not feel well in this situation. I was missing something. Really is there is nothing beyond this life? Why do I feel so uncomfortable, so incomplete? Who is God? Does he exist? Who am I to God? So many questions. And so few answers ...

For a long time I believed that God was the place of refuge for the weak, for those who failed to find the strength to stand in reality and invented a refuge, an escape to which they gave the name of God. It was my justification. But I knew I was just jealous, angry, disappointed.

I did not know the face of God but imagined his expression towards me. He looked stern, a judge, and I did not feel well when I turned my gaze to Him! I feared him as much as I wanted him! But I kept looking down much longer. I was too afraid to find him angry with me.

When I was 16 I got engaged with who is now my husband. He lived in an ideal family. The mother and the father deeply in love (*and my parents separated when I turned 25, they were always quarreling*), three children (*I an only child*), practicing Catholics. For them it was normal. I thought instead that they were incredibly fortunate. *They were 'good'. They had done everything 'in a good way'.* They had not suffered my humiliation. *My shame. My fear.* But if I was afraid, this means that at least I believed in the existence of *something* ... It was like this until I was 22 years old.

Then came my first child. I do not know exactly what happened but the miracle of life that was growing inside me was too intense for me were to deny even the existence of something bigger. I still held my gaze away from God. I thought that I did not deserve it ... yet I felt his nice fragrance. Whom did he want to breath this smell? Just for me? The day when my daughter was born I was sky high, and there I dared look up and looked for God. And He was there, he was there waiting for me, he was always there waiting. And I did not see him, blind as I was! I did not know ... I had to do something.

I was not married, I had not received Communion and Confirmation, I had a little girl in my arms and I was very afraid of the Church. What could I do? God was offering me an opportunity. I had to take it. We introduced

ourselves to the parish priest of the locality where we met. We are little more than children, I panicked; if the parish priest had rejected me when I was 8 years old because I lost a year of catechism, now at least he had to kick us away. We rang the bell, a parish priest in his sixties opened the door, he had red cheeks and although he did not know us, he immediately invited us inside. He gave us a seat and asked us to narrate our story. He listened to us, he laughed and embraced us, and told us there was nothing to fear. He still often invites us. He is concerned about us, and comes to visit us at home. He dines with us. My idea of a gollywogg broke down. *My life broke down. He spoke to me about God. He spoke to me as if he has always been with me. In a few months, the years of distance are annihilated. He taught me the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the value of the family, of Love, of Forgiveness. He does it in such a simple and natural way that I do not feel uncomfortable. I am no longer afraid. I do not feel that I am doing something wrong any more. I did not know that God has always loved me. Could it be that it was so simple to approach Him?*

After two months he assisted at our marriage; the day of my wedding I made my First Communion. I cannot describe the feeling.

Guidelines to understand text:

- Which are the elements narrated by Monia and which caused her conversion?
- What facilitated her access to the faith?
- What difficulties or fears can be found in his story?

Part Two

God has forgiven me immediately, but it took me several more years before I could accept His forgiveness. We had two more children. Three in all. I felt a stronger natural need to thank the Lord for this outcome. I could not and did not want to go back. I had my new family. I had the love of God. I had a new and real opportunity to live the faith.

Once you experience the love of God you cannot do without it. I only want to pour the same uncontrollable love on others. The transformation is slow, sometimes even very tiring, sometimes marked by natural passages. God has had the patience to reveal himself slowly, to look beyond my blindness. He

waited for me. I had almost not noticed this. Day after day, month after month, year after year, my story and God's story crossed roads. I am always talking to others about him. I wish that others feel His love through me.

More years went by. My children have chosen to do the whole path of Christian Initiation. With the third child I have also chosen to do so. *Today I accompany children and their parents in the Christian path.* I received His love for free, and with the same simplicity with which I have received it, I would like to try to give it to others, unpretentious and with much humility.

The parish priest of my parish says that my lack of catechetical formation is the fortune that I have. It took me a while to believe that he was right! But in part it is true. I live by instinct. My faith is not restrained by any prejudice. My story tells me that I have chosen to believe and to love. Nobody has forced me ... only God has invited me.

There were dark years, that I have now overcome and I (almost) look at them with kindness, because they make me feel lucky, special. I became the witness that God can really do everything! I am comfortable with myself, with my family. The church doors are open now. I feel at home in my community, which is not perfect, but it is there; I live it, I am part of it. I am fine with God. I bring a message of hope because if I did it, then all can do it.

Life remains a big challenge; God does not take away the weariness. But I can say that life is very different now that I can entrust to Him my weight, my weaknesses, my days and all my daily burdens. Every so often God and I confront each other, but in a positive manner, and we do it to grow, to heal our hearts, and not to get used to each other. And it is a thousand times better to be able to share with Him the joys, rather than hoarding grudges or just a few crumbs.

I conclude my story in this way ...

I love butterflies. I do not pretend to be like one, but I like to think that I have something in common with them. *I have been for a long time in a cocoon where there was darkness, I experienced a transformation, and was reborn freer and more genuine; I love living and I am not afraid to use the wings that the Lord has given me.*

One more thing...as long as there are blank pages to fill, the story continues.

Guidelines to understand text:

- How can Monia's relationship with Christians, with the community, and with the Church be defined?

- What has encouraged her journey of faith after baptism? What caused her problems?
- Are there are elements in the story documenting the transition to a permanent conversion?

Octavia

The Story of Octavia, an orthodox, non-practicing, liberal and anticlerical who has changed a little bit

First Part

With a calm but metallic voice, and lively but virtuous eyes, the priest asked: “What is your first memory of faith?”...

“Ehhh? And now what shall I narrate!?”

That in Romania under Ceausescu religion was not accepted, that the churches were demolished during the night, in secret, because during the day the people made a human chain to encircle the churches and protect them!?

Do I have to tell him of all the Orthodox priests imprisoned and tortured or sent to work at the Danube-Black Sea Canal, the grave of thousands of political prisoners?

Or that at the entrance of each church were the men of the *Securitate*, the Romanian secret service, who watched the people going to church and then report them because they could not make gathering of more than 4 people, because if they were more than 4 they were “plotting against the regime”?

Do I have to tell him that at home, my mother and father never spoke to us about God in order to protect us, just as they had never made any political comment for the same reason?

That at Easter it was forbidden to say that “Christ is risen”, but that, yes, people were celebrating Easter in silence, whispering greetings like a litany, while holding red eggs in their hands?

What is my first memory of faith!?”

Perhaps my paternal grandmother, who turned every night in total ecstasy towards the blackened icon, put high up in a corner of the kitchen – one of the few things that were left after that nightmare ...

It was just after the war.

They commanded the Romanians to cross the river Prut in 24 hours, otherwise the next day they would become Soviet citizens, a republic of the USSR that would later be called “Republic of Moldova” ...

My grandparents lost everything on that day: household goods, their history and their past, they lost brothers and sisters who did not flee in time or did not believe the threat and remained there hoping in the future.

On that day, my grandparents focused on the future: they took all the children and crossed the Prut, together with whatever they were able to grasp in a hurry. And that icon as well...

Or should I tell him of my maternal grandparents, and their meetings with the Evangelicals?

Aaaah, those meetings were beautiful: they were fun – inside the little house there were so many simple and good people, they sang, they were joyful. My grandparents were reborn in this place, they had serene and changed faces, while reciting their prayers ...

Time in that distant village was still marked by the rhythm of the sun and of nature ...

My grandparents were born Orthodox ... they took refuge in faith and become Evangelicals choosing simplicity after they had taken away their land.

Land is everything to a farmer

One day those of the Party came to them, they did not beat my grandfather as they beat the others, they did not even put him in prison but they just told him: “Give us your land otherwise we will throw your 3 children out of university where you sent them to study in the city”...

Or maybe my first memory of faith are those nights that in the next room I could hear the screams of my father – drunk – and the tears of my mother and me on my knees crying, repeating a mantra: „God, please do not let him beat her; God, please do not let him beat her; God, please do not let him beat her...”

I do not know my first memory of the faith...

God yes, but God has always been close to me.

My God to whom I ask questions and he answered.

The good God, energetic, bright, God of the *Kallokagathia* Greek, God the really Beautiful and Good...

The God who never punishes because sometimes we punish ourselves with the vacuum that we create when we do bad things...

The God about whom the Romanian Orthodox priest who was a little crazy (the people who adored him called him “Original”) who officiated our marriage 15 years ago: “It does not matter if your husband is Catholic and you are Orthodox, God is not interested in this, God only cares that you love each other and that you want to marry.”

That priest with whom we went to the restaurant after the ceremony, to have a drink and a grill...

And I am sure that God would have liked a nice drink then, in that far too hot day in June...

And now I am here, to follow the catechism meetings for parents...

CATECHISM!!!!... I!!! Orthodox, non-practicing, liberal, and anticlerical!!!

When our first child was born, from a sort of unspoken agreement, we decided that my husband would take care of provisions, while I, being a non-declared professor would follow the child academically.

“The Catechism classes instead, belong to YOU, you are the Catholic. I do not care if you are an atheist, you must be at peace with them; you know very well that I am cannot bear Catholic priests and that for me they are just hypocrites”.

But after the first meeting with the other parents, my husband came home already decided: “YOU should go to these courses instead, you need to get to know the priest, he is not like the rest.”

And since for the children you do this and more ... it was my turn to go and hear “that priest.”

But as early as the first meeting he surprised me ...

And all the other meetings were made up of surprises and wonder: surprised to listen to a very broad-minded person, and wondering about the feeling of joy and pleasant sharing that these meetings gave me.

Sometimes I even got to the meetings fighting myself, engulfed in my thoughts and submerged in my doubts, and with astonishment discovered that the topics discussed that day seemed to be made to respond to my heartfelt needs.

Like when we spoke of attraction towards women, which was one of the things that irritated me most in Catholic priests: the fact that they cannot marry but then make questionable choices.

Or when we spoke of desires: that are so good because they help us to move forward, but you always need to distinguish between good desires and bad desires with negative intentions...

Or when we talked about SIN which is a way to harm yourself or others, just as I would have defined it...

And that time when to my surprise I discovered how many other parents, like me, want to drop out and run away? Who like me, often came home in the evening and they immediately want to “smoke a cigarette”, even if they did not smoke, just like me? We laughed so much that day!

In short, that path along with many other parents, along with the priest and the two catechists who succeeded to stimulate us all, encourage us and involve us (he – an enthusiastic man, cheerful, full of energy; she – sweet, sensitive, reflective) they helped me to change.

As a minimum, I change my opinion about Catholic priests and started to be more tolerant and more open towards the Catholic Church...

At the time, I did not know what my son would have chosen as a grown up, or if we would believe it or not ... but the fact that I made this JOURNEY, along with THOSE precious people to me was very important ...

Guidelines to understand text:

- Which are the elements narrated by Octavia and which caused her conversion?
- What facilitated her access to the faith?
- What difficulties or fears can be found in his story?

Part two

And now here I am: to start all over again, together with my youngest daughter, other children, other parents, other catechists, I once again a mother and that Catholic priest even closer, almost a friend ...

The priest smiled in his white-streaked beard...

I realized that while I was day-dreaming, all the other mothers had spoken and they moved on to another topic...

I was able not to answer his question that had seemed so hard ...!

“Well, this time all went well for me”, I thought ...

What was left of the Orthodox, non-practicing, liberal, and anticlerical me of 4 years ago, when my husband told me to go and follow the catechism lessons for parents?

Orthodox because I was born as such and baptized as well, but not religious because at home we never spoke of God or the church, and we never went to church because our parents wanted to stay away from anything that was not right to the Party and which could be a threat for us ...

Liberal and anti-clerical because I had never endured dogmas and never accepted the rules created by human beings in the name of God, mere specula-

tions; because I have always believed that the golden rule that applies is ... try to do what is good.

Because I think that if a couple decide to divorce, it is their right, and the Church and God have nothing to do with it. Just the same as they have no right to ban marriage for Catholic priests or the prohibition of confession for divorced people, or the use of contraceptives or the morning after pill ...

Let us say that Orthodox, non-practicing, liberal, anticlerical woman of 4 years ago has remained so, but she has also changed a little bit...

A woman who understood once more that PERSONS are those who make the difference in parishes, in the street and in the family; that it does not matter if one is Orthodox or Catholic or Protestant, what is important is what one does; that the beauty of the Christian religion, unlike other religions for which I have a respect, is this wonderful and joyous altruistic love of "having sacrificed myself out of love for you, for your rebirth, until you can understand and choose to change and improve".

I did not find faith, because I have always had faith.

But as an Orthodox coming to a Catholic Mass (exclusively to satisfy ... "my duty as a mother"!) and during the mass listening to the words "The Gospel speaks of love and free choice" has had the effect of a strong electric shock... !

I think that HERE lies the key to modern Christianity!

Just as Andre Malraux's provocation: "The twenty-first century will be either religious or not religious."

This freedom is the key to a new dimension, for a renewal and a transformation.

Freedom to choose, after too many years of dogma, of abused-of rules, and of condemnations!

Well ... in a nutshell it is like saying to someone, "You can do anything you want, but when you make good choices, you and everyone around you will feel good."

You can either choose to come to church or not to come, but the few times you come, do you remember how good you felt sharing with us those moments? You have the freedom to make your own way and your own choices, but every time you want to come in, we will be here waiting for you."

I do not know MY way from now onwards. I am discovering it step by step, trying to do what is good and a bit as St Augustine said: "Love and do whatever you want."

And I do not know what can help me on MY way.

This experience with This Priest happened to me, an orthodox in This Parish. But I understood what kind of help I need ... the Catholic Church and all the other Christian churches.

They need priests LIKE THIS ONE: open-minded, tolerant, wise, intelligent, generous and maybe even with lively eyes, but good, like that of my parish priest.

If priests want help us to get closer to God or to faith ... then they can be just LIKE THIS ONE.

That orthodox, non-practicing, liberal, anti-clerical woman frequently has flash images of a man dressed in white, humble but wise, bend his head in front of a proud orthodox patriarch who is shocked.

I have always said that PEOPLE are those who make a difference, I ...!

Guidelines to understand text:

- How can Octavia's relationship with Christians, with the community, and with the Church be defined?
- What has encouraged her journey of faith after baptism? What caused her problems?
- Are there are elements in the story documenting the transition to a permanent conversion?

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