

I was born in Tehran, Iran, into a Muslim family during the ayatollah's regime, which controlled every aspect of our daily lives. From early childhood, I was taught that Allah was the one true God, and I had no exposure to any other religion. My parents and my aunt were influential in my faith upbringing and were adamant about my learning the traditions of the Islamic culture. I grew up in a happy and loving home with my parents, my aunt, and my brothers. We moved from country to country when the war between Iran and Iraq was on. During one of those moves, my parents enrolled my brothers and me in St. Peter's Catholic school in Panchgani, India, because the academics and discipline - and my parents cared much for both - in Catholic schools were more reliable than in public schools. That was my first encounter with Christianity, and I am convinced that already then God began to plant the seeds of my conversion. Finally, in 1989, my family settled in the United States of America.

As I grew older, God wasn't really on my mind, even though I participated in all the traditional and mandatory Islamic obligations. I went through college, and again, God was not part of my life. I only came to think of Him when some urgent need arose. Time passed, I settled down and married my wife. She was a baptized Catholic but didn't receive any other sacraments, nor did she practice her faith. We welcomed our first son and had him baptized. Six years later, we had our second son, baptized. At that point, my wife began her journey to the Catholic faith. She went through RCIA, was confirmed, received the Eucharist, and fully immersed herself into Catholicism. I, on the other hand, decided to take Islam seriously and began to practice regular sessions of prayer. At the same time, I attended Sunday Masses with my family to stay in the loop of what they were doing, so to speak, and I found myself genuinely enjoying the welcoming atmosphere of that parish, its priests, and parishioners. They were always sincere, friendly, and loving towards me. My wife began attending different Catholic events, and I tried to join her any time I could. During one of those events, I "encountered" Mother Mary for the first time, and I can't underestimate her intercession on my behalf. It happened in November of 2014, during a healing Mass we attended in Wildwood, NJ where Fr. Ariel Hernandez was the main celebrant. He brought with him the miraculous image of Our Lady of Schoenstatt for the veneration of the faithful. On that icon, Mother Mary was depicted with stains of blood around her eyes. At the beginning of Mass, Fr. Ariel said that if Our Lady hasn't visited anyone in the congregation thus far, she was doing so that day and that our lives would never be the same. How prophetic his words were! I looked at her image and asked God to send me a specific sign that He existed. I requested of Him a scent of a rose as proof, and I immediately inhaled an overwhelmingly strong fragrance of that flower. Neither my wife nor my children who were standing right next to me were able to smell it. I also followed my inclination to receive Holy Communion, and I did so out of total ignorance.

To this day, I never stopped thinking about that experience. My curiosity in the Catholic faith grew even more as I began to witness the transformation my wife was going through after her conversion. By then, she was under spiritual direction, attended daily Mass, went to adoration, and read spiritual books. She seemed visibly happier, more patient, loving, and joyful. I was so intrigued that I met with Father David Rider, the priest whom she received direction from, who advised that for the next forty days, I double up my efforts in loving the people around me and repeatedly ask God to reveal Himself to me. At the start of that "trial," I had an unusual experience of waking up in the middle of the night and seeing the face of Jesus crucified looking at me and calling me to conversion. His tender gaze pierced my soul. It took less than three weeks - not without the help of a green scapular and Mother Mary's intercession - before I expressed my desire to be baptized. I ended up receiving instructions from Father David as well as attending the gatherings of our parish RCIA group. By the grace of God, on Easter Vigil of 2016, I officially became a member of a big and amazing Catholic Family, which radically changed the trajectory of the rest of my life. A year later, our third son was born. Now, the five of us, as a family, strive to live all the essential aspects of our beautiful Catholic faith and help each other grow spiritually.

Out of many spiritual practices I involve myself in, I place one of the highest importance on Eucharistic adoration. Just two months into my conversion, I had an extraordinary experience before the Blessed Sacrament. While reading a spiritual book, I undoubtedly heard a voice instructing me to stop reading, get down on my knees, and pray the Rosary. I was suddenly surrounded by the scent of roses, even though there were no flowers around me, I began to feel intense heat, and I found myself praying for the people whom I never met and whose names were simply "placed on my heart." I remained on my knees like that for an hour, feeling frozen and unable to move my body as if someone took control over it. Then, unexpectedly, that "power" let go of me interiorly, and I returned to my normal state. Panicking, I called Fr. David, who listened to me and told me that it was the Holy Spirit. Ever since that happened, I spent many hours in Eucharistic adoration, and although I never had the same experience again, the time before the Blessed Sacrament played and continues to play a transformative role in my life.