

WITNESS

OF SR. TERESA MARIA ESTER



Peace and good to you, onlookers (cf. *Wis* 19:8) who are reading the marvels which the Lord (cf. *Ps* 105:5) has worked in my life, as in so many others, since I was small. The cross was that extra incentive which pushed me to follow the Lord...embracing the cross in every stage of my life! The first time I heard the passage, “*If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross every day, and follow me*” (*Luke* 9:23), I thought, “wow, the Lord sure is demanding! I like it!” These words of Jesus remained impressed in my mind, and I thought, “It’s true! If we don’t deny ourselves, we risk not taking up the right cross, and so we risk not following the Lord and not doing his will.” Someone has taught me – following the words of Jesus – that we have to take on our shoulders the sweet and light cross of the Lord rather than the tiresome and oppressive cross of the world, given that Jesus himself says, “*My yoke is sweet and my burden light*” (*Matt* 11:30).¹ Yes, the cross of the Lord is sweet and light, and it brings you to salvation!

My meeting with the missionaries and decision to be baptized

I will begin to recount my testimony, opening with a necessary parenthesis: I was born and raised in a non-practicing Muslim family. It was 1993 when I met Catholic missionaries for the first time. I was only seven years old, but a fire was immediately ignited in my heart (like the disciples of Emmaus! – cf. *Luke* 24:32). I am one of three children in my family; I have two older brothers, and it was also thanks to them that I started going to church (though they, unfortunately, drifted away again from faith in Christ). I remember that it was actually one of them, the eldest, who told me to go to church. While I went, I asked myself, “why did he tell me this? What could I possibly find in a church?” but although I felt troubled, I set off for it as fast as I could. As soon as I entered, my heart was filled with a great joy; I didn’t understand where it had come from, and returning home, I wondered why on earth I was so joyful. I would only understand later where this joy had come from, reading Psalm 121: “*What joy, when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’ Our feet are already upon your thresholds, Jerusalem.*”

The decisive step: baptism

I remember that when I was little, whoever celebrated the Muslim feasts and sacrificed an animal would usually then mark both the people and the lintels of the houses with the blood. I myself was once marked with such blood, as it is written in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus: “*The blood of your houses will serve as a sign in your favor: I will see the blood and pass over*” (*Ex* 12:13). In the book of the Prophet Ezekiel, too, it is written, “*mark a tau on their forehead*” (*Ez* 9:4) and “*...do not touch whoever has the tau on their forehead*” (*Ex* 9:6). I don’t know, if they meant the same thing with that gesture, but now, reading the Bible, I explain it to myself this way: ever since I was little, I have always been “marked” [for the Lord]!

As I already mentioned, I was born and raised in a Muslim family and it was by no means easy for me to come to the point of Catholic Baptism. When I learned that my brother had been baptized, I thought, “I will be next!” Both of my brothers were baptized before me, but they did not meet the

¹ Cf. Friar V.V. in *SLC* p. 336, meditation on the 4th sorrowful mystery

same resistance from my parents that I did. One of the first (and most difficult) trials of my life came two years before my baptism, when I was seventeen (I was baptized at nineteen), on the vigil of Pentecost. I had to officially enter the catechumenate, but I didn't go...because one of my family members – evidently unhappy with the step I wanted to take, and also unhappy because I was more interested in going deeper in my faith than in my studies – threatened to kill me because of my faith in Jesus. I remember well how the point of the knife was touching my belly. I was a little afraid, but I said, “Go ahead – what more can you do (than kill me)?” I believed in the Resurrection! This moment fortified all the more in me the strength to set myself to search for the will of God – also because Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body and then can do nothing more” (Luke 12:4). I got through that difficult trial, and after many ups and downs, I was finally baptized on Easter, April 16, 2006. I felt like I had been reborn to a new life, a new creature: as the Word of God says, “If you are not born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In the testimony I gave after my baptism, I said (among other things), “now I am a daughter of God, reborn...Now I must commit myself to carry forward what I have received...”

After I was baptized, however, the trials were not over. Since my family still tried to put obstacles in the way of my faith, preventing me from participating in Mass and going to retreats with other young people, I fell into a period of depression: I wanted to make an end of it all, and thought of suicide. I told the Lord, “Isn't it possible that they will prevent me from doing what You put in my heart? Enough, then!” I certainly would not have resolved the problem that way – I only would have made it worse. But the Lord did not permit this to happen, and in the moment I wanted to do it, He illuminated me to send a text to a very dear friend. She called me and told me, “You can't do this! It is the Lord who has given you your life, and it is He who will take it!” (Obviously, she wanted to remind me that the Lord is the master of life and we cannot decide to take it away from ourselves.) These words immediately made me change my mind. I instantly recognized the need to go to confession because of the gravity of the sin that I had considered committing. I still remember the priest's face when I told him: he was shocked! Then, calmly and with an enormous smile, he gave me the absolution. I felt a great liberation and sighed with relief. What a great grace the Lord has left us in Confession!

The Call

Shortly after my baptism, I started to understand with certainty that the Lord was calling me to religious consecration and to embrace the cross in this way: it was June 10, 2006. Ever since I was small, God had in some way spoken to my heart. I remember that when I was nine, I had a dream²² where I was dressed as a nun. I asked myself what this dream meant, but at that time I didn't understand (and couldn't even have known that the Lord speaks in so many ways – cf. *Job* 33:14). To get to the first community that I wanted to have an experience with there in Albania, I had to imitate St. Clare and escape from my house. My parents were far from happy, and once they found me and brought me back home by force, they kept me locked up with a lock on the door for a month. (St. Francis of Assisi was also imprisoned by his father when he learned of his son's vocation!³³) These words of Jesus gave me strength not to give up on looking for God's will: “Whoever loses his life for my sake, will find it” (*Matt* 16:25).

How I met the community of the “Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary”

After the sad episode with my parents that I just recounted, I spent seven years searching continuously for my vocation; finally, in November of 2012, I saw the religious community of the *Little Friars and Little Nuns of Jesus and Mary* for the first time on facebook. The first profile I

² “[T]he vision speaks of dangers and how we might be saved from them...[it] is in no way a film preview of a future in which nothing can be changed” (cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *The message of Fatima, Theological Commentary*, 26 June 2000).

³ Cf. FRANCISCAN SOURCES, *The Legend of the Three Companions*, n. 1417.

visited was Sr. Stella's, and I was immediately struck by the youth, the joy, and the serenity which I saw in the photos. I then watched one of the vocational videos on the website (www.poorfriars.net) which is called, "*Would you live like us?*" and which shows various aspects of the charism, from contemplation and prayer in the cloister to active and itinerant life on the streets of the world, in complete abandonment to divine providence, as Jesus says in the Gospel: "*Take nothing with you for the journey, neither stick, nor sack, nor money, nor another tunic*" (Luke 9:3). Towards the end, the video offers this question: "*Our mission (that is, our work) is this: announcing the death and resurrection of Christ to the world through poor little fliers, but above all, through our example of life. Would you help us do this with your life?*" I felt called to action! And I started to enter into contact with them. After a while of getting to know the community over the internet, I decided to have my first vocational experience with them in Italy. In 2013, I met Friar Volantino (the founder of the community) in Sicily for the first time. The whole time that I was still in Albania, he accompanied me spiritually, explaining to me how to discern the will of God in my life on the basis of the Word of God and the teachings of the Church. His teachings were (and are) extremely valuable in my spiritual journey. I remember thinking that he was a friar who not only tried to be "little" and humble, but who really *was* an instrument in the hands of God, giving life to this community with so much work and effort. The community rocked my world, in a good way! Our mother general, Sr. Veronica, was also a great help to me in maturing, step by step, my desire for consecration; she has always helped and encouraged me in my journey of formation, even in the difficult moments, always giving me the right word which would "shake me up" in the right way. I truly can do no other than continually thank the Lord for everything He has given me and continues to give me in this community of the "*Little Ones of Jesus and Mary*" in which He has called me to serve Him more closely.

I will conclude with the fact that, from the moment I took up my journey towards consecration in this religious family, I have never lacked peace, serenity, or joy, even in the midst of trials – and this can be nothing less than the gift of God. As a dear friend of mine, the bishop of Rimini, once said, "*The important thing is to find yourself in His hands, malleable and useful, in order to be placed where He has always dreamed of you being, the place prepared especially for you...we have a voice, and we can shout our happiness out to God.*"⁴

Peace and good, and above all: *may you become a saint!!* (cf. *1Thess* 4:3a).

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⁴ FRANCESCO LAMBIASI, Bishop of Rimini, *Homily*, Rimini Fiera, 24 August 2014.