

I guess I should basically start at the beginning:

My parents were both raised religiously, but took the term very loosely, especially as they got older. They were married in a baptist church, but as the years passed they became less and less involved. They were married for about 7 years, had 3 children by that time, when my father had a "near death experience" when his motorcycle went off of a bridge and into the water below. He had been wearing an actual Crucifix for a few years, (not sure why he was wearing it, since he admittedly associated it with Catholicism) and when he hit the water, it broke off from around his neck, and he couldn't find it in the water. He soon came to take this as a sign (again, strange that he would believe in signs at that time) that he should look into renewing his faith in the Baptist church.

He was a heavy drinker and smoker before the accident and soon after attending his 1st service he threw everything out, even shaving off his facial hair and getting a close cut hairstyle. My mother despised this new behavior and for the next 3 years, their marriage was crumbling. She thought of divorce daily, especially when my father decided he had been "called" to be a Baptist Minister. One day she broke, when to church with him, and came home "saved". She threw out all of her cigarettes, alcohol and even pants (the church they went to said it was sinful for a woman to wear pants).

He became a minister in 1982, the year I was born, and soon took over for the residing minister for retirement. Along with the actual church itself, came the parishioners. The vast majority stayed for only a little while - until they realized he was a tyrant. He demanded insane rules, (particularly where women's clothing and behavior was concerned) and extreme loyalty, such as: No spiritual discussions outside of his sermons for fear they would come up with ideas of their own. Very soon everyone except about 2 families remained. Through the years, up until I 18, he chased countless families away, each time anyone questioned his "God-given" authority.

Skip to me: I had been questioning his teachings since I was a small child, (to the point of receiving punishments and unfair treatment for not taking what he said as Word)...specifically his teachings about women, (forgive me for not believing a woman is practically non-human, and incapable of learning anything) hatred of other races, and Scripture in general. A lot just did not add up to me. I was never interested and became less and less involved.

I met who is now my husband at the age of 19. Directly following our first date, I told my mother I would end up marrying him...my mother almost passed out - why? He is Catholic and Middle Eastern. She immediately told my father, and I was lectured for the next hour (or more) on how "evil" Catholics are, how they are not even Christians, and also how "horrible

every Middle Eastern person" is. For whatever reason, I ignored it all, and continued seeing this "evil" Catholic man. To make matters worse, my boyfriend (at the time) had studied for a couple of years in a Monastery in Lebanon to become a monk, then at a Seminary in the States, and had only left the seminary a year earlier when he realized he really wanted to marry and start a family...So you can understand my parents' "fear".

Even though I had always questioned my father's teachings, I was still skeptical of course. So when talk of religion came up between us after only 2 weeks of dating, I was adamantly stubborn and argued every single point I had been taught all my life. I even asked my father for pointers, hoping to gain his admiration. Soon though, all the points my boyfriend was bringing up fell into place and increasingly made perfect sense. I was still very stubborn and fought it for a few months. During these months of fighting the Faith, I did my own independent research. There was no way, after growing up in an oppressive faith and household, was I going to jump onto whatever my boyfriend was trying to "push".

Now comes the strange, scary part. My father lost his supplementary job after 35 years, (with having only 2 families supporting his church, he needed supplemental work) and became even angrier. Strange super-natural things started happening at our house. I would be awakened in the middle of the night to some of the most horrible, not Holy noises. I know some will not believe me here. Lights would flicker, uncontrollably anytime he would enter a room, then they would be completely fine as soon as he left. Many more things happened, but I have already gone on too much. So my boyfriend (husband now) secretly brought me a Rosary that I discreetly carried, a Crucifix that I taped behind my dresser on the wall, and a small Benedictine Crucifix which I placed under my pillow. All of these things I firmly believed in, even before I outwardly admitted that I would convert.

We got engaged 6 months after our 1st date - my parents were livid. My husband's father suggested we let my father marry us, to try to make some peace; I thought this a bad idea, but so desperately wanted peace. We told my parents that we wanted to be married by my father, and then the following year after my full conversion that we would be having a second marriage in the Catholic Church. They strangely accepted this.

As the second wedding approached, the subject came up and a huge, horrible argument occurred where my father threatened my husband and my husband's father; and told me he, along with the rest of my family, would have nothing further to do with me. We had our beautiful Catholic wedding...without my family present. We made an attempt at peace a year later, things were OK for about another year, then practically the same thing as before happened...only this time it was while I was in the hospital, with a life-threatening, two-month early, emergency delivering of our 1st child.

That was 2 years ago, and I have not seen, or spoken to my entire family since that time.

I was a sheep that heard and recognized the voice of my Lord. How beautiful it was to see the love, devotion and respect paid to Our Lady, when I came from a faith that saw her as simply a "vessel" to carry Jesus, and that is supposedly where her part ended. How easy it was, with being taught that women were nothing, for me to buy the teaching that Our Blessed Mother was practically nothing. Now, she is my only Mother...and God is my only Father. And I am perfectly OK with that, I live for what may be after this life...I do not live for this earthly life.

Sorry this is so long...I am so proud of where I am now for the past 5 years, and wanted to share my story with other people. Maybe it will give strength to another person that may be struggling.

God bless, Jessica H.