

Personal testimonies: Discovering God's love in my life

ANASTASIA (Russia)

I will try, although I am very nervous, to tell you the story of how I found God's love in my life. I was born in a country called the Soviet Union which is no more right now. In that country God officially did not exist. I was born into a family of atheists. Although I was baptised after the breakup of the Soviet Union, baptism was the first and almost the last act of faith in my childhood, even though I had some small, though not insignificant, experiences of God's love when I was a child. I would like to speak about that as well. Firstly, a significant thing that helped me to discover God in my childhood and to find God's love was a small old book, a children's Bible that we bought on the advice of our primary school teacher. The love and the light that the book shed within me as a child touched me deeply, and I remember that I read it in secret because I was afraid that my family would not approve. I read it in secret and I prayed. I had some wonderful moments of childish discovery of God's love. I had other experiences like that through some Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox books that, in some mysterious way, made their way into my home. By the way, thank you to all those missionaries who brought that literature to Russia.

I would like to say some words about the most remarkable experience of my teenage years when I really felt God's love. I had very deep fears that would overwhelm me at night. I could not sleep at times because I was so afraid. I had a fear of evil and its essence. One day when I was at my grandparents' home in a very remote village, I had a fearful night, and I decided to pray. I did not know many prayers. What I knew was the Our Father. I prayed that prayer very sincerely, and I think that the hunger and fear of a child's heart touched God's heart deeply. I experienced something that I now know as being filled with the Holy Spirit. I felt immense light come into my heart, and that light gave me a deep hunger for the Bible, a deep understanding of the Bible. It was very much like the experience of a girl falling in love for the first time. As I said, I was in a very remote village, and I would run away into a forest just to pray. I did not want my parents to know that I was praying, and my English helped me with that because I knew parts of some songs that were kind of religious. I prayed singing those songs. That satisfied the hunger to love God and to receive God's love. That was a beautiful time when I knew that when I sinned and asked forgiveness from God, He gave it to me. It was a beautiful period when I really communicated with God heart to heart and experienced God's presence in my life.

Unfortunately, I had no church to support that and to be a place where I could go to receive guidance. The fact that forgiveness could be so easy was also something that played a trick on me. When I returned to my city, a city of a million people, and the hustle and bustle of the city, something went wrong and I stopped saying "I am sorry". I was like Israel that often forgot about God's love. I forgot completely. I forgot and I was immersed in sin. I did not believe in my previous experience and I started searching for the truth. I searched for it in the places where it does not exist. I searched for it in sex

outside marriage. I searched for it in gay clubs. I searched for it in other variants of sin. Now I know that I broke all the commandments. The deep hunger that was in my heart for something that I did not even know was becoming deeper and deeper. It was a very serious experience of emptiness, of being unloved and very lost in the world. My deepest point of going down in sin was when I decided to search in other religions including the occult and some mad magical stuff. I thought that Christianity was very old. It could not still be exercised today, and Christians do not do what they say we should do, so why should I. I thought that I could find something new and exciting to live those Christian values in a new way, so I started to search in the occult.

The worst part was when one day I looked in the mirror and saw something that I did not recognise. It was a foreign thing that looked from inside of me and it was horrible. That was the moment when I met evil, and I thought that now I needed help. I knew that there was one place to find that help, and somewhere out of my childhood there called the voice of the Church. It said: "I have the answer. Come".

I started to search for the Church. In Russia we have the Orthodox Church which is very powerful, so I ran there for help. I had my first confession there. It was a good thing that I did have the confession because I learned that I had committed five sins in my twenty-four years of life. It was an understanding of sin on the level of my head but not in my heart at that time. But I wanted more.

In the United States, which is a beautiful country, I had my first experience of the Catholic Church. I was deep in sin in the United States, but the light that the Catholic Church shed was something that touched me. There I was given a rosary. I found that rosary back in Russia, and the voice of Mary asked me to pray it, so I started to search the internet. I found out about the rosary and about Medjugorje, and about God's love. Mary in Medjugorje said all those things about Adoration and Eucharist. I knew I needed that.

There was no one else but Her to explain to me how much I needed Church and how beautiful it was. I started praying and miracles began to happen. My atheist grandfather converted on his deathbed, and I thought: "How powerful that was. I must be on the right track".

Then, in a very weird way, I found the Catholic Church in Voronezh. We don't have a church building, just a very small community. When I came to the parish, I knew that it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. I loved them and I stayed. The community and the experience of love and truth that they shared was wonderful, but the main thing that made me understand and realise, with my heart and not only with my brain, the love that God has for me, was when a priest in our parish, father Victor, came to me – a girl who had only been in the parish for two weeks –, and asked if I would like to go to the Alpha conference in Ukraine. I said: "Why not". He explained to me that there would be a special prayer there inviting the Holy Spirit into my life. Then I knew that this was what I really wanted. This was what I had been waiting for. I somehow remembered my teenage experience of God's love and how deep and emotional that could be. I said: "Yes, I'm going".

It was a sudden inspiration that he sent me there. It was the most wonderful day of my life. In Kiev there was this prayer to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I suddenly felt that I, sinful, so unworthy, lost and confused, was so much loved by God that Jesus just hugged me and danced the dance of love with me. It was such a deep experience that tears poured down my face. I could not stop crying. They were not tears of sadness, but of joy. I knew that I had found the thing, or rather, the Person, that I had been

looking for.

In all my life, the gift that God gave was not only something I received, but something that I brought back. That was the turning point for my family as well. Two weeks later we were having our first Alpha course session in Voronezh and we invited our families. When I saw my father and mother kneeling before God, and my sister going through a healing experience of God's love, when I saw my parents receive the sacrament of matrimony, it was something that really changed my family and me. I am very grateful to God for that, and for the experience of my first real confession when I not only knew that I had sinned but I felt that it was something that crucified Jesus. It was something that killed him and that killed me. That was the most wonderful day of my life. I felt that a rock that was on my shoulders was lifted and crushed. I really felt that I was born anew. That is something that I still experience although that all happened four years ago. I found the love of the Church, I found the love of God, and I also found the beauty of the Church and its teaching that is so clear and fills your heart and mind. I often wake up in the morning and think: I'm Catholic and that's so great. God is my Father. Thank God for that.

Thank you very much.