

## Leonora's Testimony



As a child I was brought up in the Anglican Church, attending traditional Sunday school. When I was eleven my family moved north and within a year a new church was built next to our house in Doncaster. This church was called St. Aiden's and its Vicar was a Church Army man called Reverend Cox. He encouraged and supported activities for the youth and so as I grew into my early teens I was blessed with a safe warm and active foundation to

my faith journey.

At the age of thirteen I was sent away to board with a family in North Yorkshire so that I could attend a school in Whitby. The family turned out to be atheists although they made me feel very welcome and looked after me very well. From there I was moved again to a girl's boarding school in Cumbria. I remember feeling lonely and unhappy at first, but I soon realised that I was not 'alone'. I became aware of God's presence in His creation through nature and would often stand in the grounds, beneath an ancient oak tree and felt in communion with a divine power, which comforted me.

In the school holidays I would return to Whitby, and once again I became aware of this divine power through God's creation of the sea, and would experience this as I spent many hours in solitude on the cliffs, but again did not feel 'Alone' as I felt God's comforting spirit always with me. A person who strongly influenced me whilst at boarding school was my scripture teacher Deaconess Lilly. She fired up my mind and inspired me as she brought the Bible stories to life and testified to her life in Christ. This led to my confirmation at the age of fifteen. I began to feel God in my life more constantly.

Then came my time spent at music college in Manchester when I was eighteen. Whilst studying there I began to look into Catholicism, attending talks for non-Catholics at the university. Then I began to look into Eastern philosophies. I became friends with some Muslims and came to respect their relationship with God – "Allah". I also learned to understand their fast of Ramadan and even partook in this fast. This resulted in a fuller awareness of its meaning in a devout Muslim's life, which is that through the fast, from dawn until dusk, their passions may be quietened, thus enabling them to become closer to God and to worship him in a more surrendered state. Then I married an Englishman who had recently converted to the Muslim faith, but married him as a Christian. The marriage ceremony was a sacred and moving experience, mostly spoken in Arabic, all that was required of me verbally was to answer 'yes' in reply to the question, 'do you accept Lamaan,' which was his Muslim name, 'for your soul?'

The birth of our first child was a complete revelation for me as I recognised, in this baby boy, God's creation. I felt God calling to me, for whilst in the maternity ward a hospital chaplain was offering Holy Communion for anyone who wished to receive it. Then tears streamed down my face as I managed to call out weakly 'Yes please.' As it had been some time before my marriage that I had received the sacraments. Through this Eucharist I felt reunited with my Heavenly Father. The birth of a second son and then a daughter confirmed and strengthened my faith even further.

My husband, who had originally been baptised into the Church of England, returned to his Christian roots and was now confirmed. We rejoiced in each child's baptism and my faith grew stronger and became more established.

Unfortunately, as time passed, my husband's mental health deteriorated and as the children grew up I was aware of an adversary interfering in our life together. These were difficult years but our vicar was supportive and understanding. I grew to recognise and feel the Holy Spirit as a comforter and strengthener during these times.

In 1998 I discovered St Ignatius of Loyola and began a course in Ignation exercises with a spiritual director for two years. Gabrielle Billings has been my spiritual director ever since. Through this course I came to understand more about Jesus and was able to form a real relationship with him.

I have, through the grace of God, been led to this belief that Jesus the man and incarnate son of God, is my redeemer and saviour. Jesus in my life has now sealed and strengthened God's love for me and with the knowledge that His love is for all people so that I cannot help but wish to share His love and Word and play my part in building the Kingdom here.

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