

STEPHANIE, EX-CATHOLIC, SOUTH AFRICA (PART 2 OF 6)

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Description: Her life as a Catholic.

Category: [Articles](#) [Stories of New Muslims](#) [Women](#)

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Life as a Catholic

In 2007, I began to attend the local Catholic Church and began a year-long initiation into Roman Catholicism. The day I became Catholic, March 23rd - 2008, was one of the happiest days of my life, and I still look back on it with fondness.

I was never to know that it wasn't yet the end of the road...

As a new Catholic, I was enamoured with the Church and felt I was home at last. The following year (2009) I got involved in the ministry of sacristan (those who set the altar for Mass and get things ready for each celebration), which I loved dearly with all my heart; I had done it as an Anglican, too. But I soon started to be dissatisfied with the way things were done in the Church, which I had once believed was so strict and traditional. I was particularly upset at the modern and casual attitude to worship, and felt an oddity in my Church as I was the only woman who covered her head. I didn't accept the modern explanation that it was not necessary anymore; it didn't make sense. I believed that the Bible verses of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 were valid for all times and cultures.

Because there was a decline in modesty and head covering for women after radical Feminism came in the 60's, I blamed all of it on Feminism which I hated. I believed that it stripped women of their modesty and dignity, so I defended the Church position as written in Scripture and Church tradition, about women being subordinate to their husbands and that they should remain silent in Church. I was as faithful to these teachings as I could be, I refused to accept roles traditionally designated for men. In doing so, I got into arguments with my feminist lady friends and felt terrible, because I seemed like a woman-hater. I was constantly at odds with the Church letting women take leadership roles, and anything that reeked of Feminism set me off writing unpopular letters to the local Catholic paper! If these teachings about women were in the Bible, why were they not being followed? In the end, I realized it was because some of them were not reasonable. I also defended modesty (which was reasonable), but kept on feeling isolated, surrounded by women in Church, who were dressed in an

indecent fashion. I was confused about why nothing was being taught by the Church about modesty. The Catholic Catechism was so clear, and at the same time, so vague; it spoke of modesty generally, but gave no guidelines at all, leaving it up to us to decide. I was an unhappy and bitter woman, defending a lost cause. It was ironic, but the Catholic name I took was “Dolores” which meant “sorrow”!

Every time I saw a Muslim woman in *hijab*, I envied her and wished I could be one, too. I felt a kinship with them that I never felt with Catholic women, and longed to be in their company. I smiled at every woman in *hijab* when passing them by. Not surprisingly I was also mistaken for a Muslim myself, but it was better than being mistaken for a nun! I would be embarrassed when strangers greeted me “Hello Sister” even in the supermarket, and my priest scolded me for dressing like someone I was not. So I wore my veils Muslim style, adding a crucifix so they wouldn’t mistake me for a Muslim close up. When I did this people did not confuse me for a Muslim, but I was still aware I looked like a Muslim. This didn’t bother me, as I had such a love for them, and defended them when they were criticized, but I sometimes felt like a two-faced fraud. *Who am I? A Catholic? Or a Muslim?* I read novels set in the Middle East and about Muslim characters, watched all the TV programs and films I could find, even Al-Jazeera news, just to see veiled women and prostrating people, and my interest was piqued further.

Around the same time to converting to Catholicism, I had tested my call to be a nun five times at four convents: The first four attempts were September 2006 at an Anglican convent, November-December 2008 at a Carmelite Catholic convent, January 2009 at another Catholic convent, the Poor Clares, and again at the same Carmelite convent from October 2009-January 2010 – all without success.

I still remember an incident in the Carmelite convent. I was staying in the guest quarters; it was about Nov/Dec 2009, and I was forbidden to wear my veil in the convent, which made me very sad. The convent was located in a suburb with a Mosque, and I heard the beautiful and haunting call to prayer on many an occasion, especially when I stood in the bathroom with an open window. When I heard it, I stood in front of the mirror, and took my square scarf I used for a curtain for the window, and put it on my head, fantasizing that I was a Muslim! I wondered what it would be like.

Another venture as a Catholic, was as an aspiring thinker and writer. After I developed a rich prayer life from 2007, I had some spiritual experiences and wrote about subjects like the Eucharist, the Trinity and the Incarnation (as well as womanhood, modesty and the veil aforementioned). I was deeply devoted to these Christian mysteries and although the Trinity was difficult to understand at first, I felt that it made sense in some spiritual way incomprehensible to the mind. (I saw there being two types of logic – the logic of reason and the logic of faith. The former was our human intellect, and the latter was a higher intellect which dwelt in our spirits, and which only made sense when we had blind faith in some doctrine. The problem was, that “blind faith” could easily be distorted into personal opinions...) The doctrine that calls Mary, peace be upon her, the Mother of God also seemed strange, but also made some logical sense – if Jesus,

peace be upon him, was seen as God. Out of these doctrines, I developed this notion of God as being the “state of supreme Being/Happiness.” Catholics taught that Mary is an example for the Church, so we all share in her Motherhood of God. This would mean that we can, in a mystical sense, “give birth” to God in the world! With this understanding I had of God, I felt afraid, because I felt like I was limiting God dangerously to mere concepts. This could lead to thinking that we humans had some sort of power over Him.

I accepted Christian doctrines unquestioningly (until recently when I felt compelled to question them due to my unhappy situation). Because of my writings, I felt I was blessed with much knowledge, so I would be held more accountable on the Last Day for leaving this faith behind. This made me believe I could never turn back on Christianity. I wouldn't have dared! What! Leave this faith behind and lose my soul to Hell? Abandon Jesus as God? No, I was truly convinced I would remain Catholic, my faith was unquestioned and strong! And my mom, I didn't even want to think of what she would say! I trembled at the very thought of leaving Jesus behind. Yet I couldn't deny my increasing interest in Islam, as much as I tried my best to push it away.

In August 2010, I discovered another Catholic convent, Dominican enclosed contemplative nuns, quite far from home, which met and even exceeded my expectations. Their spirituality fitted mine – they focused on Truth and Purity, the two values I most highly esteem. After a two month visit, I remained on and entered officially on the 7th November 2010 (at all the other convents I was just a visitor). I truly thought I found my home at last, but still something dissatisfied me, particularly that I was cut off from the world around me and still didn't feel *free*. After another two months I left and returned home without regret. By this time, my five-year desire to be a nun was over for good. It was January 2011.

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