

Ed's Story from the Philippines

## **BORN AGAIN CATHOLIC**

Before I narrate my experience as a Born Again Christian, Let me begin my story by going back to the summer of 1981 where I attended my first Catholic Prayer Meeting. It was moderated by two ex-seminarians one of whom happened to be my office-mate at Sun Life of Canada at Makati, Metro Manila, Philippines.

For a while, I was full of enthusiasm. I was excited about the new things I have learned and tried applying it to my life. But as time went by, I could see a pattern similar to my Cursillo days in the 70 s. My enthusiasm for going to the meetings began to die down. Perhaps, I was just not consistent enough praying and reading the Bible. As St. Paul said, drinking milk and not solid food. I was getting out of the word and into the world. In other words, I was sliding back. I was now a Catholic by name and a non-Catholic in deeds.

In July of 1991, my family and I migrated to San Francisco, USA. We settled in the heart of San Francisco city. After several years of doing the same boring routine, I began looking for a Bible study group. While in the process of looking for a Catholic group, I still was a cafeteria Catholic, going to mass whenever I can, and praying whenever I could. In May of 1998, one Friday evening, I happened to drop by an old office-mate s house and they asked me to stay for dinner. Little did I know that after dinner, there will be a born again Bible study meeting. Lo and behold, before I could even say no, I was given an NIV Bible and there I was listening to the Moderator. One of the members of the group was Tony Rose Gayda, a movie celebrity in Manila. She happened to be the niece of the leader of the group. She stays in the US for a month every 2 years. Back in the Philippines, she is also an active born again Christian. I guess with my present state of mind, and my hunger for a Bible study session, I was slowly being contaminated by their enthusiasm.

Before Tony left for the Philippines, she gave a strong testimony about her life that it somehow pierced through my heart. I just kept crying like a baby. I couldn t contain myself. I had to go to the bathroom to wash and wipe my tears away. Later on that night, I struck up a conversation with Tony, telling her that I believed the Holy Spirit through her testimony convicted me.

I have now started a new phase in my life. I attended their services on a regular basis and in return, they showered me with their love. They were so kind to me. Visiting me whenever I failed to attend a Friday study session, or a Sunday service. The group was called Care Ministries. It was an all- Filipino Para-church with a Filipino Baptist Pastor as the spiritual leader. During my first 3 months with the group, the study sessions were all centered on life applications. In the beginning, I really had no way of finding out if they had doctrines different from Catholicism because they believed in Catholic doctrines such as the Trinity, and Deity of

Jesus. It was hard to distinguish in the Bible study sessions if there was any big difference between Protestantism and Catholicism.

Ninety nine percent of the members of our church were former Catholics. Evangelicals thrive on recruiting Catholics because it was the easiest religion to penetrate. Smoking, Liquor or wine, and gambling, were prohibited. I never really understood these rules, but since it was for the good of all souls, then I had no problem with it. All of these restrictions made me a better person. I stopped swearing, and drinking.

My whole life revolved around the church and its people. I stopped going around with friends who were smokers and drinkers. The only time I went out with people, who did not share our faith, was to evangelize them. As I became more active, they elevated my status by naming me as one of the board of directors with the position of secretary. After a year, I became a member of the praise and worship team that sings during Sunday services. Later on they divided the Bible study into cell groups. I was assigned to moderate one of the five groups they have set up. In the study groups, the topics were still life applications. I prepared well for the sessions. I was using Protestant commentaries. I went to Barnes and Noble to read and study books by Bible Christians. Pretty soon, their books and commentaries were influencing me. It was now obvious that Protestantism in some ways was different from Catholicism. What was important to me then was that I had peace of mind. I was doing good works. I believed in James 2:24 that faith without good works, was dead faith. I applied this thinking that I was doing it more on my own efforts than by the grace that God gives. We went to the homeless of San Francisco, once a month to give food and minister to them. All these good things occupied my mind, which made me peaceful and happy. The last step in my being a full-blooded Born Again Christian was when I was assigned to preach one Sunday service. I picked the topic, The Cost of Discipleship. It was a full packed service day and I was nervous. I knew God would guide me through it and I guess I passed the test because the next thing I knew, they wanted me to take up theology classes at Golden gate seminary.

I was now one of them. Sometimes during Bible study sessions I would attack the Catholic religion by looking at the nominal Filipino Catholics who spend so much money and time on statues such as the Boy Jesus and the Virgin Mary. There was this long time Catholic friend who asked me why I joined a Bible Christian church and I answered, This is what made me a better person. Deep inside though, I was still struggling with some of the practices of Protestantism. During Sunday services, everything looked so simple. No altar, No Cross, real bread for communion, which was done at the whim of the Pastor. Collection was emphasized; Bibles were open, long speeches by Pastors, and the singing that looked more like a band of country or rock and roll singers. I also had problems with the clichés they used like, are you saved brother? Have you received Jesus in your heart? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Since my mom was a Catholic, they began asking me, Has your mom received Jesus I didn't really comprehend what they meant by that remark, but I knew for a fact then that Catholics including my mom received Jesus in many ways. I just put all of these questions away and concentrated on being a good person worthy of the Lord. As first-degree separationists, they would not fellowship with fellow Christians who had compromised with error, including liberals and Catholics. I struggled with that too. Another problem I had was that the Evangelical church has relaxed its standards on moral issues. In our church alone, we have had divorce and

remarriage on at least 30% of our members. In other Filipino churches that we fellowship with, the rate of divorced members were higher. In fact, the Pastor of one of those churches is divorced and remarried. I guess, the Catholic Church's refusal to alter the position on this and other issues have caused some to leave the Church and join Protestant churches.

As I struggled with these issues, I continued to be active and serve the Lord through our Para-church. One day, in a Bible study moderated by the leader of the group, the topic was Salvation by faith alone. He kept harping on the subject that faith alone will do it. The only thing that came into mind was James 2:24. Towards the end of the study, I asked, "what about James 2:24?" He answered by saying that once faith is established, works will follow. I answered back by saying that this teaching makes us robots. We become passive and not active Christians. He nodded a yes and added that we have nothing to do with our salvation. I asked another question; what if you commit a sin and die? He insisted that in spite of sin, the blood of Christ has already paid for our sins, even if we die in sin, we will still go to heaven. He followed his answer with another remark and asked me, "Do you understand the meaning of Faith?" Yes, I retorted back, "but not a blind faith like yours." I was alone in my defense of what I believed. No one sided with me. I skipped attending the next two weeks of Study and services. Now I know what James Akin meant when he said, "if you don't agree with the Pastor on some essential doctrines, you will be asked to shut your mouth or find another church."

I was not aware that during my absence, the topic of suicide was taken up in the study session. Again, the leader of the study group insisted with confidence that if a Christian commits suicide, he will go to heaven. This remark made one of the members very angry that he pounded on the table contesting this kind of hermeneutics. He was challenged to produce a passage that would support his claim that suicide is AUTOMATIC HELL. He called me up and said that things went out of hand and it got worse since my last attendance. He asked me to research in the Internet about the topic of suicide and asked me to attend the next session. All I could produce as proof of Scripture was John 17:12. Otherwise the Catholic position on suicide is dependent on the situation. Martyrs for example, were forced to accept death then liberty in the name of Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church also exempted those who were insane. I could not use these issues because they came from Catholic sources and it will be unacceptable to everyone. I just expounded on John 17:12 saying that the Bible clearly forbids suicide by a sane man. On that day, the Pastor was called to moderate but the issue was unresolved. This led the church into factions. After six months the Para-church was abolished. Half of the group led by the leader affiliated with a bigger Baptist Church, called "New alliance." while our group went from one church to the other until such time that I stopped attending services.

Since the summer of 2000, I went on a self-study program on apologetics. I spent more than 6 hours a day studying. I used the Internet and bounded 12 binders. I bought apologetic books penned by popular Protestant leaders who converted to Catholicism. The names Bob Sungenis, James Akin, Stephen Ray, Patrick Madrid just to name a few, were all instrumental in my conversion back to Catholicism. I also bought a big Catholic (New American Bible) study Bible together with a Catholic Bible dictionary. In two years time, I was able to convince with the help of the Holy Spirit, two of the Bible Christians I still fellowship with that Sola Fide, which Luther invented was unbiblical the least, or heretical.

Finally, I am back with the 2000 year old Church of Christ. I am also back in the Philippines. I have accepted all the teachings of the Catholic Church, but what led me back to her was the major doctrine of the Protestants, which was sola fide. With my continued self-study, and joining Defensores Fidei, an apologetic group in the Philippines. I can now say that I can defend the Catholic faith humbly and lovingly.

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