

Christian Meert's Conversion Story

We had been married seven years and had three children. We had bought a beautiful farmhouse in the countryside close to my wife's parents in the heart of Burgundy, close to the famous vineyards.



Our home in Origny, France

We had great friends with children of the same age as ours. We were healthy; the children were great. Business was very good and money was not a problem.

(My wife) Christine had started going back to Church after a deep conversion and I was going too, once in a while. Or I stayed home with the children while she was at Mass. I felt a little jealous of her relationship with God and the Church. Sometimes I resented having to babysit and not be with her doing something fun. I felt as if God was stealing her away from me. It's true also I didn't much like having spiritual conversations, it made me uncomfortable.

I had been raised Catholic, Sunday Mass, Catechesis, family prayer. I went to a Christian Brothers School. I visited all the convents in my native country to see my aunt who was a Franciscan Nun. My uncle was a Franciscan priest and we spent a lot of time together, even made long trips together. Then, at sixteen or seventeen, I was not interested any more and drifted away. That was some sort of a protection too, at that time the Church was in turmoil in the sixties/seventies. I am glad my mom never told me about our Boys Scouts Chaplain who left to get married to a Nun. It would have given me some justified reasons to leave the Church.

When I saw Christine going back to Church, praying and enjoying it, I realized I was not fully happy even though everything went very well. I started to look back at times when I had felt more fulfilled. I had enjoyed very much the beautiful Masses, full churches, the processions of the Blessed Sacrament or the processions for Mary Feast days, the bells and smells. I also loved when, with my mom, we prepared food boxes and visited poor people, mainly elderly, at a time when there was no social security and no retirement plans.

But today I was a grown up man, a businessman, I was traveling all over the world meeting important people.



Business Man!

I started to think: "I understand my Protestant brothers who talk directly to God. They don't have to go through a priest for Confession. They don't have to worry about the ritual of the Mass, when to kneel, sit or stand. They don't have to worry about the Saints or the Virgin Mary. They talk to God, like equals, so they can have grown-ups conversations." (When I was an Altar boy I was always afraid I would forget what I had to do, so I have been always a "flower pot", just for decoration, doing nothing).

I knew very little of the Protestant way.

I thought Catholicism was too complicated and didn't understand why we should learn about the Saints. What was their role? What about the Virgin Mary? That was too complicated.

I just wanted to talk to God directly, one on one, and everything would be just fine. I was thirty-two when Christine and her sister trapped their husbands into a pilgrimage to Yugoslavia, via Club Med. We were the only pilgrims at the Club Med.



The Church in Medjugorje, June 1984

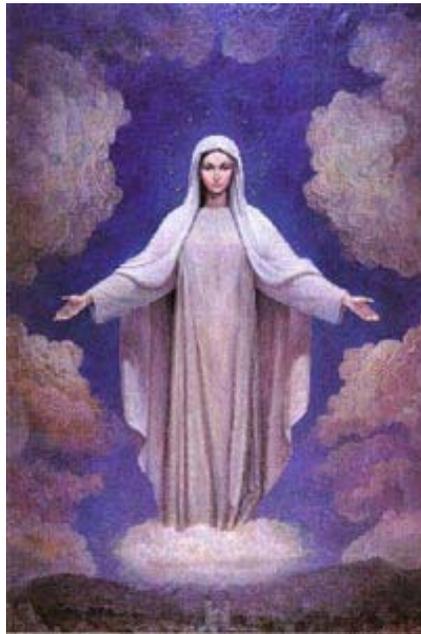
Since it wasn't enough they dragged us the same year to a one week retreat in Ars, France, with 5,000 people. Ars is the village of St Jean Vianney, the good Cure of Ars. I was OK for the one-week retreat; that was a good way to reconnect. I didn't feel like going to a priest and talking. Talking about what? Why should I talk to anybody about my interior questions and my spiritual life when I could talk to God directly? I didn't need to go through any third person.



Ars 1984

That one-week retreat turned out to be a charismatic gathering and all these smiling and joyful exuberant people were really getting on my nerves. But hey, I gave one week to the Lord. I was going to talk to Him and so I didn't care much about the surroundings and all these people. Most of them were camping, but we stayed at a hotel. The second evening was an evening of Reconciliation. I had my eyes closed and I was trying to pray when I started to shake, I felt as if I was holding 460 volts of naked wires in my bare hands. It was going through my all body in several waves. I thought: "Not me, not me, I didn't ask for anything, I just came to look. I don't want to do anything".

I felt like Zacharius, I wanted to see but not to be seen. I wanted to be a spectator but not an actor. I knew something was happening! Then somebody came to me in what I'd call a vision. It wasn't God, no. It was the Virgin Mary.



Mary as depicted in Medjugorje

She was very young, very tiny and beautiful. She was maybe five feet above the ground, as though floating. She was in a very green pasture sloping down, surrounded by short, stone walls. The Virgin didn't say a word. I could see her blue eyes and dark hair, her lips. She was dressed in a long dress; the color of the dress was very dark, almost black but still very bright, full of light at the same time. It made me think of the color of the black stormy clouds when hit by the setting sun in the summer. She had a very sad smile; she just looked at me.

Since I didn't know what to do or say, I felt like I had to present her all my family and friends. That's what I did, like if I was presenting this long line of people to my Queen. This is when she really smiled; she kind of even restrained herself to laugh joyfully. I don't know why she laughed at that moment. Since she didn't say a word, I felt like it could mean: "I know you and I know all your relatives and friends". Or "I came for you and you only" or even "You are nice, it's cute what you are doing" or something like this. I felt comfortable, but shy and awkward. It lasted awhile and I felt it could have lasted longer. She welcomed everyone with this gentle smile; I could see her teeth, her hair moving. There was just one of my friends that she was not happy to meet; I had the feeling that she was repulsed by him.

Without noticing any changes in where we were, I sensed that she was leading me to a spot on my right side, up. There I was, in front of a great light, nothing I have seen before, nothing I can describe.



Pope Benedict XVI once said that "when one has the grace to sense a strong experience of God, it is as though seeing something similar to what the disciples experienced during the Transfiguration: for a moment they experienced ahead of time something that will constitute the happiness of Paradise. In general, it is brief experiences that God grant on occasions, especially in anticipation of harsh trials."

"While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them, then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." Matt. 17: 5.

Yes it was beautiful, only years later could I compare it to what I read about what people having had an after life experience described; the tunnel of light and then this huge, magnificent light, so powerful.

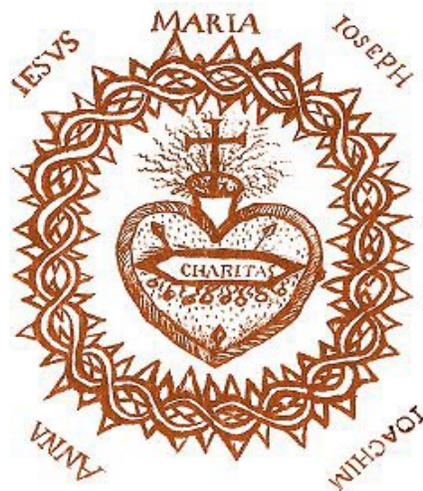
I knew I was in The Presence of the source of light and love. I was in the presence of God. It felt so good. This was where I belonged; this was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life, my eternity. I stayed there in awe and didn't want to move, not knowing what was happening. Everything of this world around me had disappeared, I didn't feel the presence of anyone, didn't hear the music nor the prayer. I was crying, of happiness, and then I had to go back!

I didn't know what had happened, I couldn't talk about it. It took me a full year before I could talk about this experience to my wife and then many more years before I could talk about it to close friends and then I could give my testimony whenever I felt it was good to talk about it no matter who or what. The only thing I had decided on the spot was that I wanted to come back to this gathering the following year.

The Lord poured upon me so many graces after that, that I knew it had really happened, it had been real. I started to devour the Scriptures, especially the Acts of the Apostles. I knew what it meant to chew the Word of God. I couldn't stop reading, couldn't stop praying. Everything was so clear. I knew that what I read in the Scriptures was the Truth. At that time I was traveling extensively in Muslim countries, in one of these countries it was forbidden to have a Bible. So I hid it in my underwear when going through the customs. I read constantly when I was not meeting people. The guys I was competing against called me the Priest. Back home, I couldn't see the Host or pray the Our Father without crying abundantly. I couldn't stand to hear anyone gossiping. I remember one time we were leaving the Church and we met some friends. When they said something negative, just negative about another person, I left. I couldn't stand it.

At the same time it happened that I saw only what was good, truly good in the people and couldn't see what was not good. I felt the presence of God all the time; I could talk and listen to Him, but not only to Him, also to Mary, to the Saints, especially to Saint Joseph.

I never had this vision of Mary and of this Light again, at least I don't think so, but I know I encountered God in a very tangible, sensible way. The veil between the visible and the invisible had been lifted for a brief moment, and my life couldn't be the same anymore.



We started to pray with our friends, faithfully every week, for many years. We also started to revive the parish. We organized a choir and sang at the Sunday Masses, we re-started Adoration that had been long forgotten. We taught Catechesis, prepared youths to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, did marriage preparation. One time I was at an empty hospital Chapel, kneeling and praying in the first row facing the Altar that was just a few feet away. On the Altar there was a painting of Jesus on the Cross, we could see Jesus with his open wounds and I got sucked into the wound on his side, but didn't have the guts to go, so I stopped right there. For surfers or body surfers, you know this feeling when you are at the top of the wave and you look down and you say to yourself "I can't do this one".

Another time during Adoration I was facing a statue of St Joseph and I felt that he was really there with me. I didn't have any doubt about St Joseph's presence.

During all this time, I thought everybody had the same connections. I was sure the Pope had conversations with Christ and the Saints, that he was receiving their help, advice in a very palpable way, like Joan of Arc. Talking about Joan of Arc, I have to tell you this story. I had a Catholic friend who was in prison in a Muslim country. His competitors found a way to trap him, under a National Security case so he was sent to prison and couldn't get a lawyer. He was kept in secrecy with no public hearing, no trial for many years. It was totally unjust! Then I had a dream where I saw his judge telling my friend: "Now you can go, you are free and don't complain it was an injustice. Many people had to suffer injustice in many countries. Look at Joan of Arc!" Why did I have such a strange dream? What did Joan of Arc have to do in a Muslim country? Well, a few months later I had a call from my friend's secretary who was so happy to tell me that he had been freed that very same day. It was the feast of Joan of Arc.

Another time I was visiting some friends in Nebraska and was supposed to attend a business Christmas party three hours drive from my friends' house. There was an ice storm warning the whole morning on TV and on the radio. It rained the whole morning and the rain froze instantly when reaching the asphalt.

So I decided to leave earlier. I had to almost crawl to reach the car, a huge station wagon from the sixties that weighed tons. The road was covered with 1/2 inch of crystal clear ice. On the highway there was a lot of traffic, everybody hurrying, slowly, to go back home, things were getting hectic. I was driving slowly and without warning the car started to veer and make circles, I could see the lights from the cars coming from every direction through the windshield, in the rear mirror, I just had time to say: "Oh Lord no, not now, please"! I knew I was going to crash and it was going to be pretty bad. Well that didn't happen, I landed peacefully on the left side of the highway, there was no middle separation, and got stopped by a few inches high snow drift, just before the ditch, the front plate was bent.

A few years later we left relatives, friends, house, job, and finally our country to live a life of prayer in a Catholic Community where families could live with priests, brothers, nuns and other families. We sold our house and belongings, shared the produce with our daughters and the poor and woke up one day knowing that we depended on God only, on everything.



*Community of the Beatitudes
Monastery of the Visitation where we entered in 1990
Pont Saint Esprit, France*

We went to the Holy Land and I was so longing to receive more graces, visions. But I was very disappointed; I felt I had received nothing special, that wasn't true, of course. I had felt such a strong presence of the Lord when we were in the upper room, where Jesus instituted Eucharist. That was not good enough for me who had already received so much. Still I wanted more goodies, more sweet stuff. I wanted to feel the presence of the Lord all the time. It didn't happen, the Lord had decided it was time for me to stop sucking milk and start chew on meat.

I don't have the chill anymore; I don't cry when I receive the Eucharist or say the Our Father. I can hear gossips and even gossip myself.

But I know that the veil was lifted at one time and that everything I saw and lived was true. Living in the presence of the living God is our daily experience, He is always with each one of us, always present, always interested, always attentive: "I am with you always, until the end of the age." Mt 28:20.

