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FLOWERS IN THE DESERT

Stories of Faith and Hope in the Middle East

RIALP EDITIONS

MADRID

VI.

MY FATHER IS AN IMAM

Born in Brazil, daughter of an imam, raised between the Qur'an and the Catechism, now a Numerary of Opus Dei, a citizen of Lebanon. Can we imagine a greater contrast?

I met Magda at Al Tilal, an Opus Dei retreat house that, true to its Arabic name (“the hills”), is located in the town of Maad, in the heart of the Lebanese mountain range, about five hundred meters above sea level. It is a privileged place for photography lovers—like the one writing these lines—because it offers some of the most beautiful sunsets one could ever see over the Mediterranean. In addition, there is a panoramic view stretching to Beirut, about fifty kilometers away, the port city of Jounieh, and even closer, just twenty minutes away, Byblos. Is it not incredible to experience the oldest city in the world—six thousand five hundred years of history—that has never ceased to be inhabited and to have its own governance?

Magda worked there, in the residence next to Al Tilal, which includes a professional training center for women, the Institute of Management and Services (IMS).

And she told me her story.

My name is Magda Omar Hayek; it's a very common surname here—like “Gutiérrez” or “Fernández” in Spain, let's say. But if you don't mind, I'll start by telling you about my father.

He was born in Bar Elias, a town in the Bekaa Valley. Most people there are Muslim, and all his family is—Sunni. The difference between Sunnis and Shiites is that the latter split off when they believed that Muhammad’s successor had to be someone of his bloodline, while the Sunnis believed it should be his first follower, Abu Bakr. “Sunni” comes from the word *sunna*, which refers to the “sayings of the Prophet,” like a collection of Muhammad’s customs. So they follow the Qur’an—like the Shiites—but also the *sunna*.

My father, as I was saying, was born there, and at the age of seventeen he went to Brazil by ship. He first lived in São Paulo and shortly afterward in Paraná, where he met my mother. Although she is Brazilian, she has European ancestry: from England on my grandfather’s side, and from Poland on my grandmother’s side. They lived for some years in Germany and eventually settled in Brazil.

My mother was Catholic—she always was—though not very practicing. My father, when I was born, wasn’t very observant of Islam either: he said his prayers, and I don’t know if he went very often to the mosque. In fact, sometimes he would accompany my mother to Mass... when she went... But they ended up getting married in the mosque, because there had been previous marriages: my father, before arriving in Brazil, had had a marriage of convenience—“arranged” by the family—in which he had three children. And my mother had married in the Church and had one child from that marriage. We are all “half-siblings.”

Given this situation, it was understandable that my mother did not want to have me baptized, although she did allow her cousin to do it. She worked in a parish and, without hesitation, took some candles used for baptisms from the church and did it at home, in an extraordinary way—without my father knowing, of course. My mother would always tell me: “It was your godmother who baptized you at home...”

Naturally, I was very small and don’t remember it. But I also know that my father suffered a major professional setback and, almost overnight, found himself without a job and with a family to support. He remained like that for a long time, and it led him into depression.

Within Islam there is the figure of the *sheikh*. The “elder”—which is what *sheikh* means—is a learned person, someone who has studied at an Islamic university. He is not exactly a theologian, but he has sufficient academic preparation to become a sheikh and take responsibility for a community. On the other hand, there are people who devote themselves much more to the practice of religion: we call them imams, although sometimes also “sheikhs,” because of their spiritual wisdom; they usually wear a robe, a long beard, and a head covering called a *kufiya*.

So my father, depressed as he was because of his lack of work, met one of these men, who one day said to him bluntly: “You pray too little. You have to do it five times a day, and read the Qur’an, and...”

He was so struck by his vehemence that he decided to change: he began to grow his beard, to cover his head with the *kufiya*, and within a couple of years he was already wearing a robe—like a typical Muslim imam. I must have been five or six years old, and I remember sitting beside him, praying in Arabic with him, from memory, some prayers from the Qur’an... He was proud to see me like that and would show it to friends and relatives: “Look, my daughter knows these Qur’anic prayers...” I would start praying, without understanding anything I was saying. “Dad says it, I do it,” I thought. Now I do speak Arabic: thanks to the fact that he always taught me bits of the language, it later became easier for me to learn it.

Later on—I must have been about ten—we moved to Londrina, where my father got a job at the mosque. They held celebrations there... they sacrificed a lamb to commemorate Abraham’s sacrifice... I do remember that.

And I also went to church.

I grew up between two completely different environments. “Unofficially” baptized, but being raised by my father in Islam. Also encouraged by a cousin of mine who lived very close to our house, I began to receive catechism classes at the parish... without my father knowing, of course.

That was all my formation.

That, and the prayer to the Guardian Angel that I used to say with my mother every night, also in secret. My father did not know that I was being formed in Christianity; I only told him what I learned from the Qur’an. And there was an implicit agreement with the parish community: things had to be that way—“Nothing must be said to her father.”

The time came for my First Communion. I had already been baptized, but not “officially.” So, accompanied by my mother, I went to the priest and said: “I want to receive my First Communion, but I would have to be baptized.” My mother was somewhat uneasy because of my father—half-jokingly, in my neighborhood I was known as “Bin Laden’s daughter”—and the priest reassured her: “She is old enough to decide which religion to follow, and by law she has the right to do so.” So, in the end, I was officially baptized and received my First Communion—both in the same Mass.

And always behind my father's back. It's true that sometimes he was a bit suspicious, but he never asked me anything about it. And my mother never said anything either. Naturally, when I was little, he did know that I went to church with her, but beyond that—complete silence.

Restless Heart

So things went on until a moment came—when I was about fourteen or fifteen—when, in my father's mosque, they began organizing youth groups within the community to transmit the religion more actively. My mother and I would go, because it was my father's work and we wanted to accompany him. He liked that.

But with the mixture of knowledge from both religions, and as I was entering adolescence fully, I began to have many doubts about everything. A lot. The Christian formation I had received had no real roots, so it was of little use to me. And what I had from Islam was essentially my father's example: I would pray, laying the rug on the floor, washing my hands as every good Muslim does to purify himself before prayer... Yet I still didn't understand. And what little I did understand, I lived more as an obligation than as something personal. Now, what does a teenager need in order to do exactly the opposite...? Well, that.

So, doubting the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, I stopped going to Mass—only once a year, at Christmas, perhaps because a group of friends went—of course I gave up confession, and catechism...; and I kept going to the mosque, because of my father. But I didn't like it either. Although I did sometimes observe Ramadan. When someone asked me, "So, what religion are you?" I would say I was Muslim, and I would pray and explain what I knew about Islam—the bare minimum so as not to stand out.

Deep down, I had left everything. From the age of fifteen until I was twenty-two or twenty-three.

During that period, I finished school and entered university. I was very curious, like a kind of Saint Augustine: I read everything, looked for signs, tried to understand. The force of the cosmos, the influence of people, reincarnation... whatever came into my hands, I devoured it, searching for a sign.

During my university years, I worked during the day—I started as an executive secretary in my last year of school—and studied at night. Monday to Friday. From seven in the morning until midnight. It was hard, I won't deny it, but those years helped me return to one of the teachings my father had given me: we must not be

attached to material things; our life is not here, but in the other world. That moved me deeply. And I would think: “A person is born, grows, develops, works tirelessly studying and working, gets married, builds a family... and dies. And that’s it? Nothing more?” There had to be something more. “And if there is something,” I would tell myself, “it doesn’t make sense for it not to be better.”

In fact, I never stopped believing in God. I didn’t practice, it’s true, but I couldn’t stop believing. And because of this, I kept turning all these questions over in my mind, reading, talking to people... and asking myself new questions.

I completed a master’s degree in industrial management and began to think about myself. Outwardly, life seemed to be smiling at me, but I felt I lacked a clear path.

At that time, I was working at a university owned by Protestants, alongside people of different religions. On Friday mornings, I would always pass by a house that caught my attention. I would get off the bus at the same time, walk one block, and arrive at work. And just a few steps from the university, there was that house: modern, large, elegant... and with a plaque next to the door: “Caravelas.” “How strange,” I thought, “if it were an ordinary house, why would it have a plaque?”

One day I saw a priest entering it, dressed in a cassock. It must have been around seven-thirty or eight in the morning. It caught my attention: “A modern house with no sign of being a convent or anything like that... what is this priest doing here?” My curiosity kept growing. So I started greeting him whenever I passed by. “—Good morning. —Good morning. —How are you? —Very well.” And I would continue on my way. “A priest who comes and goes. Some girls who open the door for him, who are normal, like me—not nuns...”

Wow! Between that, the fact that my father no longer told me anything because I was more independent, and that I kept wondering what to do with my life, one day, talking with a colleague—who was a practicing Catholic—I burst out:

“Look, Bárbara, you know what? I’ve come to the conclusion that I have to find a path—any path: in the Catholic Church, in Islam, in Protestantism, in Buddhism... I don’t know!”

I poured everything out. And she said:

“My boyfriend has been going to a center of Opus Dei, and I’ve started going too. They give very good Christian formation—like catechism for adults, but deeper.”

“Great,” I replied, intrigued and excited at the same time, “but Opus Dei? Is it here, in Londrina?”

“Yes, yes: here, next to the university, a house like this and that...”

The house I saw every Friday...

Although the only thing I knew about that “Opus” came from *The Da Vinci Code*, I didn’t hesitate for a second:

“When will you take me?”

We went the following week. Despite my eagerness, I went cautiously, half thinking it was a secret society and that they would come up with strange things... as if I were some kind of Sherlock Holmes...

A numerary welcomed us, and I liked her very much. She took us to a small room, and my friend started the conversation by saying, “Tell her a bit about what Opus Dei is...,” and she began to explain. “Now tell her what numeraries are, and what this and that is like...” The other one blushed a little, perhaps thinking she was saying too much to someone she had just met... But my friend wouldn’t let her “escape.”

She told me everything: from vocations to how they live, in which countries... It sounded like another planet. But I liked it.

We started doctrine classes every week. Since it was close to work, we would use a break to go there. I liked it more and more: the atmosphere, the formation, the way many of my doubts were being clarified... I used to be very fond of partying, and there I realized that one could be happy without constantly living in “wild parties.” In fact, it made everything much more interesting.

I would tell my mother what I was learning. “Did you know that the Vatican has made a Catechism, and that it also has a compendium?” I memorized everything and told it to her. And she, who always has very keen intuition, once said to me: “I don’t know what’s going on there, but your face has changed.” “I like it,” was my brief reply.

After about a year and a half, I started attending the circles.

Bringing Our Joy

I finished my master's degree at twenty-five and wanted to step out of my comfort zone. To see the world. To learn English, French—Arabic? If I learned it well, I could work as an executive secretary, and Brazil has many trade relations with Arab countries: it exports coffee, rice, sugarcane... It was an interesting professional niche. What was the problem?

My father. Not a chance he would let me leave Brazil to live in someone's house if it wasn't family: "You may be as old as you like, but not on your own." I knew Lebanon because, when I was fifteen, I had traveled there with my parents. I knew about the Bekaa Valley. According to my father, it was a great place to live—paradisiacal, very fertile... I thought it was a beautiful country, but tiny. Then the unexpected happened.

One Sunday, while watching a DVD about tourism in Lebanon, I felt an irresistible impulse. Without thinking too much, I blurted out: "Dad, I want to go to Lebanon to learn Arabic." —"What?!" —"Yes... and then come back." My mother thought it was just another passing idea—"she'll forget about it in three weeks," she said—but he, seeing that I was serious, got excited. He called relatives, organized contacts... He arranged everything: "I'll talk to your cousins so they can find you an institute where you can learn the language... don't worry."

And I didn't worry at all.

Well, except about saying goodbye to the Center of the Work. "—What do you mean you're going to Lebanon? —Yes... I want to learn Arabic. I'll only be there ten months." The big question was what I would do about Mass—now daily—about my spiritual life... My father knew nothing about my Catholic practice: he didn't ask, and I didn't say... But what would happen with my Muslim family when I arrived? The women at the Center gave me the contact of a Brazilian numerary living in Beirut, and we started writing to each other:

"How great that you're coming! You can come to our house in Beirut..."

What? I decided not to worry: I would see as I went along.

That same day, the priest who guided me spiritually preached a meditation: "Magda is going to Lebanon! And she goes with joy. We must be ready to bring joy wherever we go." His words moved me deeply, and although for me it was sheer madness, I was very excited.

On October 4, 2012—just three months after that conversation with my father, which shows his efficiency—I was already landing in Beirut.

I came to live, not to spend a vacation with the family while leading a more or less independent life as in Brazil. The civil war had recently broken out in Syria, and the Bekaa was full of refugee camps. Thank God, my family is not among the most “radical,” but here I was the “foreign cousin,” and precisely because I was an outsider who didn’t speak the language and might attract attention, unlike my cousins, I was always accompanied everywhere: two of my cousins took me to the language institute in Zahlé—a very Christian city, by the way—and picked me up afterward; if I had to go buy anything—even something as simple as a toothbrush—I went with a relative; and I even had to lie when I went to Mass... My uncles knew nothing about my convictions. For them, I was the cousin who didn’t practice. But they never insisted. On the contrary, they always treated me very well, and I’m very fond of them. Still, I missed my independence terribly.

On the other hand, since I was the only student in the class, I became very close to my Arabic teacher. At first, seeing me with my cousins and knowing that part of my family had gone to Mecca, she assumed I wasn’t Christian. In fact, during a Muslim feast she came to greet and congratulate me—it’s normal in Lebanon for Christians and Muslims to congratulate each other on their feasts—and when I told her I was Christian, she was completely shocked. For her it was a shock; for me, it made me realize how exceptional it is for someone from a Muslim family to convert to another religion.

That “encounter” was providential because, besides finally having someone I could confide in, she helped me, for example, to go pray in a church. “If you want,” she told me, “we can have only one hour of class instead of an hour and a half, and I’ll take you to the nearest church; then we’ll come back so your cousins can pick you up.”

Another day she told me about a church run by Jesuits on an estate near my house, where Mass was celebrated on weekends... It was almost funny: from Monday to Saturday I woke up later than everyone else, but on Sundays I would get up very early, always with some excuse, so I could go to Mass: “I need some books for class,” “I’m meeting to study,” “I’m going to the supermarket”... and then I would come back with a bag of bread...

Time passed like this. I had already completed five of the ten months I had planned. I missed the formation I had received at the Center of the Work. I stayed in contact with the women in Beirut, but from a distance, and it was very hard for me to see

on Facebook everything they were doing while I was lost in that village of three thousand inhabitants...

From Londrina I had brought *Camino*, and discreetly, when I couldn't go to church and no one could see me, I would take it out to pray for a while before a crucifix. Many times I would say to the Lord: "Let me have a bit more freedom in this country, so I can continue my spiritual formation, keep helping, and take part in the Center of the Work..." It wasn't that I was unhappy, but it was like living in another world, very different from everything I had known.

One day, talking with the Brazilian numerary, I told her that if I found a job, I could live more peacefully. Then she told me about a vocational training institute for women. "Give me your résumé and I'll speak to the director," she said. "Maybe you can do an internship there until you return."

Great!

I spent about a week praying that it would work out.

And it did! Exactly seven days later... Now I just had to convince my uncles...

Here, in Muslim families—as in many Christian ones—the responsibility for the whole family falls on the eldest son. In my case, it was my cousin, whom I secretly called "the godfather"... His siblings, when they went out, had to inform him; and when they came back: "We're home." I, even more so. How was I going to tell him that—if I couldn't even go out alone—I wanted to change city... and region?

What could be my lifeline? My father.

"You have to help me convince my cousin," I told him.

"Don't worry. Talk to him, and if he doesn't let you, I will."

I spoke with my cousin, with a very well-prepared presentation: website, projects, schedules, location... "Yes, it's a good opportunity for you. Try it," he said.

I was surprised at how easy it had been to convince him.

On March 4, 2013, I came to work and live at the IMS. In truth, I had no idea what I was getting into, but I was happy.

The Great Discovery

My first impression came when I entered the chapel: I had gone from attending church when I could and in secret... to having it inside my own home!

The other impression was the language. The Institute had been started, among others, by several Spaniards, and a lot of Spanish and also French were spoken there... languages I didn't know at all. I did know English, though—and some “Portuñol.” With that, we managed.

I started working and gave myself two weeks to see if I liked it. “If it doesn't go well, I'll go back to Brazil,” I told myself.

And I stayed. Did I ever stay! I was delighted. So after fifteen days, I went to my uncles' house to pick up the rest of my luggage—very little—and came back.

Weeks later, the director of the Institute told me about the international UNIV congress in Rome during Holy Week, and asked if I wanted to go. Of course I did. But how could I convince my father? I had just changed cities, and now I was suggesting going to another one... to Europe! It was madness.

This time, I spoke first with my mother: “Let me talk to your father,” she said. I spoke to him three days later: “I suppose Mom told you...” He didn't even let me finish: “You have to go to Rome! It's your great opportunity to see the Eternal City. Take advantage of it! And don't worry about the ticket...”

They were incredible days. On Wednesday we attended the first audience of Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square, and since there were only a few of us from Lebanon, we got good seats. With a very large flag, we made ourselves visible... with all that that implies—and that, at the time, you don't really think about... Sure enough.

Two or three days after returning from Italy, my father called me: “I saw you on TV,” he said... Oops... “Yes, yes... you were in St. Peter's, in the Vatican... at an audience with the Pope...” Oops! I almost cursed the moment I decided to stand under that huge flag... “Well, I had to accompany them...” “My daughter, I am so proud of you, of your love for your country, there in Rome, in front of the Pope, holding the Lebanese flag...”

My father was full of surprises.

Already in Lebanon, something inside me told me that the path I had been searching for in Brazil—the one I had spoken about with my friend Bárbara—was right in

front of me. What attracted me most about the Work was the atmosphere at the IMS: how they cared for me, and how people from so many different countries treated one another with such affection. “Maybe this is what I’m looking for.”

Two weeks after the trip to Rome, in April 2013, the Prelate of Opus Dei, Monsignor Javier Echevarría, came to Lebanon. In one of the gatherings he spoke about vocation: “If anyone feels the desire, or senses God’s call, they should not be afraid,” he said. “Give yourself, that’s all.” I had the feeling that it was just the two of us there, and that this “give yourself, that’s all” was addressed to me. Later, I learned that someone from the Institute had told him about me—“a Brazilian girl of Lebanese origin and a Muslim family, who is considering a vocation to the Work”—but that they feared my family’s reaction.

One night I couldn’t sleep, turning it all over in my mind, and since I like signs, I said to myself: “I’ll open the book at random and see if I find an answer.” I took *Camino*, closed my eyes, and opened to a random page:

“That—your ideal, your vocation—is... madness. And the others—your friends, your brothers—are mad... Haven’t you ever heard this cry deep within you? Answer firmly that you thank God for the honor of belonging to the ‘madhouse’” (no. 910).

Well, that was the “madhouse” I was entering... “Do you need more signs?” about a Dominique Helou, the priest guiding me, would ask.

No. I didn’t need more signs. I was sure... The one who wasn’t so sure was the director. “Pray a bit more,” she would tell me...

April passed... I kept praying; May passed... I kept praying; June passed... I couldn’t take it anymore. One day I stood in front of a statue of the Virgin here in Al Tilal and, like a daughter, gave her a kind of “ultimatum”: “I’m going to say it one last time; if they say no, I won’t want it anymore. Let them leave me in peace.”

Then I went to the director and told her I wanted to join the Work. “Let me think about it.” Uff! It wasn’t a “yes”... but it wasn’t a “no” either; and this time the ball was in her court. I waited two more days, which felt like an eternity. Until finally I heard:

“Alright, if you want, go ahead.”

And since we were very close to June 26, the feast of Saint Josemaría Escrivá, I wrote my letter asking for admission on that very day.

An Imam Comes to See Me

I had a ticket to return to Brazil on August 12. However, I knew that if I left, I wouldn't be able to come back—among other reasons because I was still in the process of obtaining dual nationality. Thank God, my father received my proposal very well: “I'd like to stay one more year because I'm really enjoying Arabic...” And he was more than happy: “We miss you, but we think it's great that you stay and keep learning...” So, although my mother sensed there was something more behind it, I stayed to continue studying the language.

In September 2013, we opened a new Center of the Work in Jounieh, where I moved. It was hard to start again. But even harder was dealing with the surprise my parents gave me: “Daughter, we're coming to visit you in February.” I was delighted that they would come, of course—but how were we going to receive, here in a Center of Opus Dei—a Catholic institution—an imam from a Brazilian mosque, fully practicing as a Muslim, with his robe, his beard, his *kufiya*...?

Once, my mother told me they were at a bus stop and some hippies approached my father, thinking he was one of them: “Hey! That's awesome, man!...”

Well, that was my father—the imam—who wanted to come see me. “And what if he realizes?” we all wondered at home...

Luckily, that first Center had two separate floors: the chapel downstairs, and upstairs my room, the kitchen, the dining room... We removed photos of the Pope or the Father and left images of the Virgin. There we received my parents.

Thank God, my father was someone you could get along with very easily. I knew perfectly well when he felt comfortable. We sat in the living room and had a very pleasant conversation: he told stories about Lebanon, spoke about his trip to Brazil, about his work... he seemed happy. And I was even happier, seeing him like that.

As he said goodbye to everyone, without realizing he was speaking to the director herself, he said: “I'm going back to Brazil very peaceful, because I see that my daughter is in good hands and there are very good people taking care of her here.”

They spent several days traveling around the country. On one of those days, they were invited to lunch at the IMS, where a very Lebanese meal had been prepared. The director received him as if he were an ambassador: she showed him all their projects, the house, the kitchen and administration areas... He couldn't have been more at ease.

So much so that...

Here, when you greet a Muslim man—no contact! Just a nod. Well then, when he said goodbye, we were all at the door, and my father went up to each one and... gave them a hug and a kiss on the forehead! He told them he would pray a lot for each of them and for all the Institute's projects. "I see God's hand here; count on me for whatever I can help with," he said. He left happy.

He never came to know that I belonged to the Work, nor that I was Christian—at least not explicitly. A year later, my father was diagnosed with cancer and passed away. He was buried in the Islamic cemetery.

During his visit here, we showed him everything. "Look, Dad, this is the office where I work." There were some images of Don Álvaro, of the Pope... I remember he looked at them for about a minute, in silence, without saying anything. Sometimes I wonder whether, at that moment, any doubt crossed his mind. Perhaps he wouldn't have had any problem, but maybe, for the honor of the family, if he had accepted that his daughter was Christian, he would have felt he had to do something...

Be that as it may, he turned a blind eye. In fact, at the beginning of his own conversion, when he became more serious in religious practice, he tried to get my mother to convert, and that caused more than one argument at home. "I'll go with you to the mosque, to accompany you," she would say, "but my heart is Christian and I will never convert. Be very clear about that."

I never told him. He never asked me. And so we remained—with our unspoken "pact."

My cousins don't know either. I visit them when there is a Muslim feast—like the beginning of Ramadan—but they never ask. And sometimes, when I go with someone from the Center, they love it: "Your foreign friends," they say...

When my father died, my mother decided to change her surroundings and, thank God, began to frequent the sacraments more regularly again. The community my father led took care of everything related to the funeral. We didn't have to do anything. I was able to arrive two days later. He passed away on September 18, 2015. That day was Friday there, and here it was Saturday. For them, Friday is important; for us, Saturday, the day of the Virgin... "He was united from both sides," I thought.