

Jean-Marie Élie Setbon



From the
KIPPAH
to the
CROSS

*A Jew's Conversion
to Catholicism*



IGNATIUS

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A Jew's Conversion
to Catholicism

In collaboration with Astrid de Larminat

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*To the memory of all my Jewish brothers and sisters
who have taken the plunge into Christ,
and especially Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger,
Rabbi David Drach, François Libermann,
and Hermann Cohen*

To the memory of my mother

*To the memory of my first wife, Martine
To my wife, Pétronille*

*To my eight children: Rachel, Déborah, Rébecca,
Myriam, Raphaël, Gabriel, Louis, and Nathanaël*

To My Patron Saint

*You, Saint John the Evangelist,
You who lay upon the heart of our God and Savior,
 Jesus,
You who were His beloved,
I put myself under your patronage, under your protection.*

*“John” means “God compassionate”
But in your name, there is also the word “grace”, the grace
 divine.*

*Thus you, Saint John, who had that grace divine
 to lay upon the heart of God,
You who saw the Word and who proclaimed it to us,
You who were converted to Christ, to what He is and represents,
You who have given us
 the Gospel,
 the Letters,
 the Apocalypse,
Pray for me,
That I may be evermore a child of God,
That I may be evermore converted each day,
That I may become evermore your little brother,
That this book, which testifies to what Jesus has done and
 to what He continues to do in my life,
May touch the heart of each person who reads it.*

Amen.

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PREFACE

Christ turned around Saint Paul, my dear travelling companion, in three days on the road to Damascus. Jesus worked at me for more than thirty years! He has been drawing me to Him since I was a little boy, when I knew nothing about God or religion because my family was nonobservant. Finally, in 2008, He gave me the last push, which enabled me to take the great plunge from the Torah into the Gospel. This is what I am going to describe in this book, the story of my life with God. Rereading it, I feel it is the story of a fool. “God chose what is foolish in the world” (1 Cor 1:27). Saint Paul says that. Does not God Himself often behave like a total fool in the Old and New Testaments—for example, when He asks His prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute? Saint Paul writes that what is folly in the eyes of men is wisdom in the eyes of God (see 1 Cor 1:18–30).

For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn to Jesus, so much so that as a teenager I wanted to convert to Christianity. But I knew that this would scandalize my family because when a Jew converts, his family, even if not religious, experiences it as a betrayal. God’s ways are mysterious: I wanted to be a Christian, and I became an ultra-Orthodox Jew, and then a Hasidic Jew. My heart lead me to Jesus but my head refused to follow and my Jewish identity fought back hard. Finally at the end of a long development, one day God lifted a veil from my eyes. And then everything became clear—he gave me a “new” understanding, and I saw things in a different light.

This book tells the story of a conversion, but above all it is the story of a man who fought for a very long time against the Trinitarian God, who was waiting for him and giving him signs.

I was encouraged to write this account by many people to whom I spoke about my journey. At any rate, as the apostles Peter and John said to the priests who had arrested them and wanted to forbid them from pronouncing the Name of Jesus, it is impossible for me *not* to speak about what I have seen and heard. I am burning to share this discovery of Jesus, who has changed my life, and to share it widely, and not only with the people who attend the conferences I give on the Scriptures. The time has come to bear witness openly and without fear. I feel inwardly pushed to do so.

I address this testimony to all my brothers. First, to those who call themselves nonbelievers but who feel they are seeking God deep within without knowing who He is. I am thinking of some people who are reluctant to approach religion because it would cut them off from their families or their intellectual milieus. Some may be afraid of the Catholic Church, either because they see the Church in a bad light due to what the media reports about her, or because their Catholic parents passed on a narrow and false vision of the Gospel to them. Some may even imagine that the Church wants to confine them, to prevent them from being human, when it is just the *opposite*. I am also thinking of those who hold a grudge against Christians because of wrongs they have committed throughout history; I will return to this later.

I also address this book to my Jewish brothers, who, when they learned that I had converted, banned me from the Jewish community without trying to understand why I took this step and committed what is an unimaginable transgression for the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jew I was,

who had been taught to hate Jesus. They thought that I was angry with the God of the Jews because of the ordeals I had gone through—not at all! Mine is not an exceptional case. Many Jews have converted, starting with the first apostles. I hope that my Jewish brothers, brothers according to the flesh, will have the curiosity or will do me the favor of reading what I have to say in order to try to understand. For it is so heartbreaking to hear it said or claimed that I have betrayed the faith of my people, when I love Judaism in all its parts and with every fiber of my being.

Finally, I wrote this book for my Christian brothers. I hope it will enliven their faith by bringing home to them how blessed they are to know this God who loves them as they are, this God who lets Himself be approached and loved, in a personal relationship, and not only through the observation of laws, important as they are. For that is truly the heart of Christianity and what Jesus revealed: the relationship of love between God and each one of us that changes our way of living with our brothers. I want to bear witness to this. I cannot keep silent about it.

I Did Not Even Know I Was Jewish

I was born June 10, 1964, at Lariboisière Hospital in Paris. My parents named me Jean-Marc: Jean, after my maternal grandfather, and Marc because my mother thought Jean by itself sounded a little old-fashioned. Without realizing it, my parents had given me the names of two evangelists (that is, John and Mark, respectively). I *definitely* see a veiled message from Providence in this. Moreover, was it an accident that, since I was sick, I was not circumcised on the eighth day as Jewish Law requires? I was circumcised when I was a year old. My grandfather Jean was my godfather. I do not know what Hebrew name I was given on that occasion, or even if I was given one.

It may be hard to believe, but for several years I was *totally* ignorant of being Jewish. And I was going to learn it in a rather unusual way. One day, at school, I began to call one of my classmates a “dirty Jew”. The teacher punished me *very* severely. I found her reaction a little excessive; I did not understand why she was so upset. For me, it was an insult like any other. When I came home, I told my mother what happened. She looked at me and responded simply: “Jean-Marc, you are Jewish.” End of story. What, me, I was Jewish? But what did that mean, “Jewish”?

In fact, I was living in what is called an assimilated Jewish family. My mother never celebrated Jewish feasts and fed us ham and pasta like any other French mother. At home, there was not a single Jewish book or object. Sure, my father carried on a few traditions, but he did not

explain what they meant to us; thus for a long time, I did not realize that they were related to religion. That was how it was, for example, with the mezuzah attached to the lintel of our front door. I never really asked myself what it was all about. It was only much later, while becoming religiously observant, that I would learn that the mezuzah is a little parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah (Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21) and inserted in a small case. Jews put it on the right side of their home's front door as a sign of protection. It recalls the last plague in Egypt, when Moses told the Hebrew people to put some lamb's blood on the lintel and the top of the door so that the exterminating angel who was to kill all the firstborn might spare their home.

Friday evenings, at the beginning of Shabbat (Jewish Sabbath), my father said a kiddush prayer, but a rather simplified one, to tell the truth. He put on the *kippah* (skullcap) and said a prayer lasting five or ten minutes, but I did not know what it meant. For us kids it was a solemn time, nothing more. We sensed only that it was *not* the time for being noisy. Later, much later, I would myself recite a kiddush, which is a prayer of sanctification for the Sabbath said by observant Jews when they come home on Friday evenings. When the father of the family comes back from synagogue, the mother welcomes him by lighting small candles. The whole family sings Shabbat songs, notably “Shalom Aleichem”. Afterward a passage from chapter 31 of the Proverbs of King Solomon is read: “Who can find a good wife? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her” (vv. 10–11). Then the father recites the kiddush, from *kadosh*, meaning “to be holy” or “to be set apart”. This is how the Sabbath, which commemorates the day when God rested after having completed His Creation, is sanctified.

Next are prayers over the wine (and the grape juice for children), followed by the ablutions, when the hands are washed with water poured from a *keli* (a special vessel). Afterward is the blessing over the bread, which is challah, a kind of brioche prepared especially for Shabbat.* But, my family did not respect this whole ritual. Nor could it be said that my father really observed Shabbat since he sometimes went to Paris on Saturday using mass transit. He never went to synagogue. In fact, I assumed religion did not interest him.

When I was seven, my older brother began to prepare for his bar mitzvah. He took Talmud Torah classes, but at home he did not talk about it and my parents *never* asked him what he was learning. The day of the ceremony, we got up very early, at six in the morning, and put on our best outfits. I could tell that it was an important event. We went to synagogue, and my brother read the scrolls of the Torah in Hebrew. Afterward, we returned home, where my parents had organized a party. I did not really understand what it all meant. It was only two years later that I would really become aware of what I was, when I caught sight of my mother's anguished face before the television. She was watching the news. I could read fear in her gaze. Tanks were advancing in the desert; Arabs were entering Israel: it was the Yom Kippur War of 1973. I was nine, and for the *first* time I felt a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. This feeling was colored with anxiety, fear of seeing the State of Israel disappear.

*This bread commemorates the loaves "of the presence", the twelve loaves once offered in the name of the twelve tribes of Israel each Sabbath day by the priest and which he alone was authorized to eat the following Saturday. King David, when he was hungry one day, broke the prohibition, which Jesus recalls to the rabbis who were reproaching His disciples for gathering grains of wheat on the Sabbath (see Mk 2:23-28).

One day, when I was eleven, I asked my mother: "One of my classmates is hosting his German pen pal at home right now; can I invite them both over?" Immediately she answered very curtly: "No, he's a Jerry." What is a Jerry? I would have to wait until the following year to find out. It might seem strange, but until I entered seventh grade, I had never heard of extermination camps. My mother never told us what she lived through when she was little. However, without ever verbalizing it, she passed on a fear to us, the fear shared by the Jewish people, because of always having to fight for survival. What a mystery that this little people, after all the pogroms and persecutions it has suffered in Christian and Muslim countries, and even long before, should still exist, while the great empires that dominated the ancient world—Greece, Egypt, Rome—have come and gone.

Little by little while growing up, I discovered my family background. I was Ashkenazic through my mother, Sephardic through my father. My maternal grandfather emigrated from Romania and found refuge in France at the very beginning of the twentieth century. He fought so well in the French Army during the First World War that at his death in 1966 he was buried in the military cemetery at Bagneux. As for my maternal grandmother, she was of Polish origin. My mother was seven years old in 1939, when the Second World War began. Her family lived in Paris throughout the war. My grandfather was arrested on several occasions but miraculously released each time. When a roundup was being organized, the district police captain would warn him so that he could hide with his wife and six children (four girls and two boys). No one in their building ever denounced them either. I imagine it was because of what my mother lived through during those years that she, without being at all observant, so strongly asserted her Jewish identity, in contrast to my father.

I did not really know my maternal grandfather. He died when I was two. We regularly went to visit my grandmother at her home on Rue Alfonse Carr in Paris. She and my mother would have long discussions in Yiddish. For me, these were grown-up conversations. But I felt that if they were speaking in Yiddish, it was so that they would not be understood, and I was really curious what it was they wanted to hide from us. After the war, my maternal grandparents gave up the few traditions they had kept up when they arrived in France. So I did not receive a religious heritage from that side of the family. The only tradition that my mother kept from her parents was culinary: she would prepare stuffed cabbage for us.

My father was born in Tunisia in 1929. At the end of the forties, around the age of eighteen, he came to spend a vacation in France and stayed there. His parents joined him afterward. We frequently went to my paternal grandparents' place for lunch; they lived by the Ledru-Rollin metro stop. My grandfather was very welcoming. He always had a big smile on his face when he opened the door. He often played the French card game Belote with us. My grandmother, on the other hand, was more reserved, but she cooked us good Mediterranean dishes: chickpea bouillon in the winter, turnip and carrot salads, and of course, the couscous that my mother learned to cook from her. I loved my grandparents very much, but I did not know much about them. They never talked about Tunisia. And then, the idea of asking my father questions about his youth never occurred to me: we did not talk much about ourselves in my family. My grandparents ate kosher, but that was something I would know only much later. Passing on the Jewish traditions that they maintained did not seem to be a priority for them either.