

# Sarah Balabagan, from Muslim to Christian

By Rodel Rodis

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CALIFORNIA, United States?A week before Good Friday, I visited the Jesus is Lord church in Daly City to hear Sarah Balabagan, a Muslim turned Christian, describe her ordeal in the Middle East, a story that was so compelling it was made into an award-winning film in 1997.

After an introduction from Pastor Bobby Singh, Sarah ascended the church pulpit and placed her notes on the podium, humbly apologizing to the congregation that she had to write down her speech as she did not want to be at a loss for words in English. But Sarah need not have worried as she expressed herself exceptionally well.

Sarah grew up in a poor Muslim family in the town of Sultan Kudarat in Maguindanao province. How poor? She had 13 brothers and sisters but when one of them got really sick, they would just watch helplessly by as the medical condition of the brother or sister deteriorated until he/she eventually died. Her parents had no money at all for medical care so only six of her siblings survived early childhood diseases.

Sarah realized early on that education was her ticket out of the incredible poverty she was born into, so she worked as a maid for relatives just to be able to go to school in return for a wage. But that only got her through fifth grade. At the age of 14, she decided to seek employment abroad.

A recruiter secured a job for her by listing her age as 28 (double her actual age) which Sarah learned only when she had already boarded the plane for Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Assigned by contract to work for a 67-year-old widower with four sons, Sarah was apprehensive but she was too young to know any better, naively comforting herself with the thought that, being Muslims, they would respect her.

But they did not, and Sarah was continuously subjected to sexual harassment. The young sons would regularly order her to bring towels to them after they stepped out of the shower naked. Sarah would just close her eyes and resist their sexual advances.

On July 19, 1994, barely a month after she started working, her employer, Mohamed Abdullah Baloushi, entered her room at night and pressed a knife to her throat. He threatened to stab her if she refused sex. Sarah refused and Mohammed stabbed her, which was enough to weaken her and allow him to rape her. In the course of the rape, however, Mohamed let go off his knife which Sarah then picked up and used to stab him to death.

Though weakened by the stab wounds inflicted on her, Sarah was arrested and jailed without bail. In June of 1995, she was sentenced by a local court to seven years in prison for manslaughter and ordered to pay the Baloushi family \$41,000 for diyah, or "blood money." The court also found that Sarah had been the victim of rape and awarded her compensation in damages.

But the state prosecution appealed and a retrial was ordered. The second court found no evidence of rape and judged her guilty of premeditated murder, sentencing her to die by firing squad in the desert.

An international outcry led by Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos resulted in the reduction of her sentence to one year and 100 lashes, plus payment of "blood money" to the Baloushi family, which was paid for by a Filipino-Chinese businessman.

The 100 lashes were administered to her on five consecutive days of 20 lashes a day, employing a kind of stick that was designed to inflict the maximum pain. She was whipped before an audience of family members and friends of Mohamed Baloushi, all cheering on each lash. Sarah did not want to give them the satisfaction of seeing her cry so she bore the pain quietly. But it took her three months before she could sleep on her back.

After serving almost two years in Al-Ain prison in Dubai, Sarah was deported back to the Philippines in 1996, arriving in Manila to a hero's welcome. A Philippine movie studio made a 1997 film about her, "The Sarah Balabagan Story," which starred Vina Morales and was a box-office hit.

What money she received for the film she sent to her family and used for home schooling to secure her high school diploma. She wanted to go to college and study to be a lawyer but three unexpected pregnancies affected her career goals. So she took computer classes and voice lessons where she learned that she could sing and sing very well. She started a career as a singer and her songs have resonated with overseas Filipino workers whose plight she speaks of in her songs.

The pressures of having to raise her three children, taking various classes, and regularly sending money to her mother in Mindanao caused Sarah to suffer depression. Perhaps it would have been better if she had been shot in the desert, she thought.

In the middle of her despair, she met a Christian singer named Dulce Amor who introduced Sarah to her pastor, Reverend Gasti Maribojoc. The minister told Sarah that the 100 lashes inflicted on her were also inflicted on Jesus Christ, only 100 times more so. After Sarah read the New Testament of the Bible and learned more about Jesus, she decided in 2003 to accept Jesus Christ as her savior and to renounce her Muslim faith.

This apostasy—a total desertion of one's religion—was especially difficult for Sarah's mother to accept as she believed the penalty for abandoning Islam is death. She feared that Sarah's lifeless body would end up floating in the Pasig River.

Sarah told her mother that she does not fear death because now she has found meaning in her life. She has dedicated herself to spreading the good words of Christ and if it is his will that she die, then so be it. Sarah has also devoted her life to the cause of the OFWs and especially the domestic servants who have gone through what she went through.

When Sarah arrived in the Philippines in 1996, another domestic helper also returned on the same day, Elisa Salem. The only difference is that Elisa returned in a coffin, the victim of her Jordanian employer's brutal rape, one of 130 OFWs who were killed in 1996. In that year, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration received 14,000 complaints of abuse.

When Sarah sings of the pain and anguish of the OFWs in the Middle East, there is a sad soulfulness to her music. When she sings of her love for Jesus, there is exuberant joy in her heart and a fervent wish for everyone who has gone through hell to go to heaven.

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