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On January 8 the Church remembers Saint Abo, who lived near Baghdad in the eighth century. He was a maker of perfumes and oils, and a devout Muslim.

The lives of saints include many stories of people who came to their faith after a flash of insight showing them that Christianity is true, or that Jesus Christ is the only God. The "wise thief" on the cross is said, in the Holy Week hymn, to have decided to follow Christ "in a single moment." Saint Abo, though, became a Christian much more gradually. We might say that he argued his way into the faith. For those of us who are committed to the Church but have questions and quandaries, his story is a helpful one.

Abo's profession of perfume-making required him to have some knowledge of chemistry, and he also knew the teachings of Islam very well. He was capable, while still a teenager, of conversing intelligently and confidently on many subjects. Plying his successful trade in Baghdad, he was soon to meet someone with whom he would converse many times, and who would change his life.

The caliph (Moslem ruler) of Baghdad became upset with his provincial governor in Kartli, an area of the country of Georgia, after hearing slanderous reports. He recalled the governor, whose name was Nerses, to Baghdad, and put him in jail.

During his imprisonment, Nerses met and talked with Abo. The prisoner found comfort in having an intelligent person to spend long hours with. Abo liked hearing Nerses' descriptions of Georgia. After a few years, freed by a new caliph, Nerses invited his friend to accompany him to Georgia. The country had been converted to Christianity centuries earlier, but Arab Muslims now had control. When Abo arrived in Kartli with Nerses, he noticed the deep faith of the subjugated Georgian Christians, and was intrigued. He began talking with priests and bishops about their beliefs.

Abo didn't make his discussions easy for the clergy. He argued about points of faith, asked piercing questions, and challenged them to show him the truth of Christianity. Because he was a sincere inquirer, they were able to do so, and he became a Christian..

It was a dangerous choice, and in the following years Abo twice fled with Nerses to areas not under Arab rule, to escape persecution. But in 782, despite warnings about his safety, he went to the Arab-ruled capital city, Tblisi, to preach the Christian faith. He encouraged the Christians who were suffering under Arab rule, and worked to convert Arab Muslims. Denounced to authorities as a betrayer of Islam, he was beheaded in 786.

If he had not questioned, challenged, and argued, would Abo have developed such unshakable faith? He might urge us to ask our own questions, even to argue, but to be open to real answers. That is the way, this former perfume-maker might say, to erase doubts and to discover what he called "the beautiful fragrance of Jesus Christ."