

My suspicion was raised when I felt lumps in my armpit. I desire to live a full and meaningful life, then die young just like many of my favorite saints. So my first thought was, "Is this God's answer to my prayer?"

As I waited for my annual check-up in a few days time, I scouted around for a surgeon who could perform the biopsy I anticipated. I kept everything to myself until the tests confirmed my suspicions. Surprisingly I never had sleepless nights even after I received the test results that read: "High probability of malignancy."

Where did the peace come from? In prayer God reminded me of the First Principle and Foundation of Ignatian spirituality which reads:

"Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created. Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.

Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created."

My bout with cancer was giving me the blessed opportunity to not prefer health to sickness, desiring only that I live for the end for which I was created. I knew that God could heal me in an instant, if He so desired. I had witnessed miraculous healings. But I also knew that He could also be glorified if someone was able to graciously bear an illness, such as cancer. So I was open to whatever God wanted for me.

The Challenges

The first real challenge was sharing this with my family. But since they are devout Catholics, they recovered quickly from the initial shock. The next challenge was to decide on the treatment from the various options. Having cancer invites numerous opinions and suggestions on possible treatments from well-meaning friends and acquaintances that it seems like you are in a maze. Add to this the burden of knowing that your decision will have life and death implications. Again, prayer is the source of wisdom and peace for such decisions. I decided not to go through an innovative treatment in China, which was very attractive to me because I had done mission work in China. I decided to undergo the standard treatment in Manila which meant six sessions of chemotherapy over three months to shrink the tumor, followed by surgery, then three months of radiation.

After my second session of chemotherapy, my hair began to fall, so I decided to shave my head. I had heard that this could be a traumatic experience for cancer patients, but I saw this as

an opportunity to further express my life choice to live as a lay consecrated person. Another possible traumatic experience was the radical mastectomy, but I recalled a discussion about if you cut off a person's hand, the person is still a human; but if you cut off his head, you have taken what is essential, and the person ceases to be. I was grateful it was just a breast that was removed.

At every opportunity I gave thanks for the blessings received – that the nausea was not as bad as people say, that sisters from our community would accompany me during chemotherapy, that available resources made it possible for me to be treated, for the excellent health care professionals in the Philippines, for the help I received from so many people, even those I did not know personally, and for countless prayers that were offered on my behalf by so many friends and relatives. Giving thanks for the blessings instead of complaining about difficulties, made it easy for me to recognize how God was watching over every detail of my life even as I battled the “Big C”. By God's grace, I chose to fix my eyes on the “Bigger C,” Christ.

The Blessings

In prayer, God also led me to accept the possibility that even after the treatment my cancer could recur, and to accept the possibility that I might die from something else, like pneumonia, because my immune system was compromised due to the chemotherapy and removal of malignant lymph nodes. In all of this, I would continue to live my life as best as possible. I continued with my service in community. I completed the projects I began at work, opening up two new school campuses; after which I was granted my request for disability retirement. Life in retirement has proven to be another blessing with so many opportunities to serve and freely give what I have freely received from the Lord. Life has become simpler having to choose which activities to devote my limited energies to. Living with cancer sharpens one's criteria in making life choices. Life is deliberately reduced to what I believe is most important in God's eyes.

It's now been three and a half years since I was diagnosed with cancer. Having to visit my doctor every three months, I am constantly aware of how every day is a gift and how we should embrace the “present.” If God had taken me home in 2010, I would have been at peace because I felt that the life God had given me to live was so blessed and coming home to him would have been like icing on the cake. Things were pretty much in place as I had already identified people who would take over the responsibilities that were entrusted to me. But if God extended my time and gave me more years, I would use it for His purposes. I am grateful to be alive in this Year of Faith where I continue to witness what God is doing in today's world and be part of it. As a brother in the Lord who died of cancer said, “This is a win-win situation.” If I die, I get to be with the Lord. If I live, I get to continue building God's kingdom.

The Gift

For many, cancer is something they would as much as possible be spared of. But because of Christ, the bigger “C”, it can be a wonderful blessing. We will all die one day. None of us lives forever. This just happens to be my path home to the loving arms of God. The words of St.

Francis de Sales ring true for me:

“The everlasting God has in His wisdom foreseen from eternity the cross He now presents to you as a gift from His inmost Heart. This cross He now sends you He has considered with His all knowing eyes, understood with His divine mind, tested with His wise justice, warmed with loving arms and weighed with His own hands to see that it be not one inch too large and not one ounce too heavy for you. He has blessed it with His holy name, anointed it with His grace, perfumed it with His consolation, taken one last look at you and your courage, and then sent it to you from Heaven, a special greeting from God to you, an alms from the all-merciful love of God.”

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