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In God's Hands when Faced with Illness

The sudden onset of a very serious illness was my first real encounter with the uncertainty of life and how life can change in an instant.

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Uncertainty is a feature of our everyday lives. I think most of us live very happily unaware of its magnitude as we get on with our busy lives. Coronavirus, climate change, unstable political landscapes and natural or unnatural disasters to

name but a few possibilities, can bring this uncertainty into a sharper focus for some of us at times.

The sudden onset of a very serious illness was my first real encounter with the uncertainty of life and how life can change in an instant.

In December 2011, I was preparing for Christmas as a busy working-mom of four. One evening, I suddenly felt strange and had what would transpire to be a seizure caused by a mass on my brain. Days later, I underwent surgery to remove a malignant melanoma tumour. While the surgery was successful, the diagnosis was earth shattering.

The idea that I had an incurable disease was impossible - and the idea that I might not live to see the end of the year, unbearable.

Certainty in God

In the face of such uncertainty, I found myself grappling for solutions and assurances that simply were not there. While those around me tried to focus on the good news of possible treatment options, each medical appointment would leave me feeling hopeless and deflated. I also found illness to be a lonely journey – despite being supported by so many people, no one can feel the loss of your former life (and that of your envisioned future) like you can.

It was in these months that I increasingly turned to prayer to get the certainty and the solace that I needed. Despite being raised a Catholic, I had largely ceased to practice my faith in adult-life but quickly rediscovered the power of the Sacraments and the peace of prayer.

It was around this time that we employed an *au-pair* who happened

to be a Supernumerary in Opus Dei. I remember being so inspired by her faith and the beautiful way that she lived her life. I began to attend evenings of recollection with her in the Opus Dei Centre, and was struck by the message of the Work – that we are called to be holy within the messiness and ordinariness of our daily lives.

Opportunities that illness can bring

Through daily prayer, I learned to let go of the earthly assurances that had been so vital to me and to gradually trust that God knew my situation, knew what my family needed and that He would look after us. As I did that, I began to see the opportunities that illness brought instead of all that it took away.

Being largely sedentary allowed me time to chat with the kids, to listen and be with them in a way that is

much more difficult when you are busy chasing school-runs and making dinners. Ironically, having less energy meant that I did not have the energy to sweat the small stuff and could be more patient with the kids.

I got to see how thoughtful and caring so many people are at a time when I could not reciprocate lifts, gifts, visits or any such kindnesses. I learned to accept humbly that I and my family were in need of those kindnesses and offer only a thank you in return.

I saw that being upbeat, accepting and thinking of others instead of myself had an incredible impact on all who surrounded me. I could see how loved I was and how rich I was in friendship, family and community.

Solace in Scripture

In the more difficult moments of that journey, Scripture was a huge source of strength.

Two pieces in particular accompanied me in very uncertain times. The first was when Jesus bid Peter to walk towards Him on the water (Matthew 14:22-33). Peter sank only when he became aware of the wind and lost faith. The wind in my life was the tumult of my diagnosis, my prognosis, statistics, upcoming surgeries/treatments and how others I had heard or read about had fared. If I looked to that, I too lost faith and sank. If I attended to my prayer and the plan of life that Opus Dei had supported me with, I was at peace even with the full knowledge of the storm. I knew all would be well. I was very aware in myself of the days that I prayed and the days that I neglected to pray.

Psalm 23 was a constant companion especially in 2014-2015. I had three more surgeries. It did feel like I was walking 'through the valley of the shadow of death' at that time but praying the Psalm was empowering. I did not know the how or the why but I trusted that God was by my side and I went through it all in a much more accepting, peaceful way than I could have imagined possible.

God in all my moments

I was put on a new immunotherapy treatment in 2015 and it has been a huge success for me. I have had some scares but no recurrences since then which I am grateful beyond words for.

Although I continue to live with the uncertainty of my diagnosis and all the scans and treatments that it entails, it does not consume me. Life for me has thankfully returned to the busy daily routine of a Mom and

wife. I continue however to realise the importance for me of nurturing my faith in the good times and to turn to God each day in prayer. I am not naturally a consistent person and so I find the daily plan of life, weekly Circles and monthly recollections of Opus Dei are a great reminder for me to start again as the ebb and flow of life tends to distract me from what I know is the most certain thing in my life...my relationship with God.

Last November, Maria was interviewed on the Hearts + Minds podcast, an initiative of some people of the Work. The interview helped a lot of people who are facing illness.

Interview is available on all main platforms on the Hearts + Minds platform:

Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts

For more information, visit:
www.hearts-minds.ie

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