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“Opus Dei helped me see my illness as real work”

It was the first time the journalist had interviewed a person stretched out on top of a bed. But he agreed the interviewee should be comfortable. "Diari de Tarragona" interviews Joaquín Romero, 35, a technical architect from Barcelona with irreversible multiple sclerosis.

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Joaquín Romero suffers from multiple sclerosis, a progressive, incurable degenerative illness. Periodically he needs to get out of the wheelchair in which he stays all day long and change his position a little. The interviewee, amused, comments cheerfully: "I feel like I'm lying down for a psycho-analysis session." So the journalist plays off his joke with the classical first question: Who is Joaquín Romero? Who is Joaquín Romero?

I ask that myself sometimes. I say: "Who is that person going around in a wheelchair?" I used to study, play soccer, lead a normal life. And this life in a wheelchair seems like another person's. Then, I come back to earth and tell myself: "You are the same person, Joaquín, just in a new situation."

How does it feel when illness knocks on the door?

It's like an unexpected guest arriving at your house and saying you had invited him. You're not sure if you should tell him, "Make yourself at home," or "We've run out of food." But then you are forced to accept it because you can't throw him out of the house; you have to know how to treat him, speak to him, listen to him, know what he wants and what agrees with him.

Does one end up loving the unexpected guest?

Yes, but not for his own sake. Suffering is not a good in itself, like a house, a car or a friend. You cannot love pain without having something more for support. And then, the pain is the same, but the way of bearing it is different.

Where have you found that support?

In God. In my case, through Opus Dei, which views the sick as a treasure. I used to think I would not be able to work or have a social life, but Opus Dei helped me see my illness as real work, an occasion for trying to become better and for drawing other people to God, with a smile, for example. I was in Rome, at the canonization of the founder of Opus Dei. The evening before, I was in bed in Barcelona, exhausted because of the effect of the cortisone I had been given for a recent exacerbation of my illness. But the next day, I was in St. Peter's Square, in a walkway with many others in wheelchairs, in the middle of a huge crowd. I was happy, even though I got pretty tired. My guest came with me, as he always does.

When did the guest first arrive?

When I was 22. My life up till then had had two especially magical

moments. The first was when I was 14, after I finished 8th grade with good marks. I went to Menorca for the holidays with my family, then to Italy with some friends. I played soccer, which I enjoyed a lot. The second came at the beginning of my coursework in architecture. I had great dreams for my life: to become a good professional, get married and have a lot of children.

And suddenly the illness broke out....

Not so suddenly. I spent the first year of it going through various tests ordered by the doctors. I finished my coursework, but I was unable to do my final exams in writing, because my hands had become paralyzed.

When did the wheelchair come?

When there was no alternative. First I used a crutch, then two, and one day the wheelchair. I wanted to go to

the funeral of a friend's father, and I didn't think I had the strength to walk the 50 meters from the parking lot to the church. A friend took me in his car, along with a wheelchair in case I needed it. I tried to walk the distance with the crutches, but I couldn't do it. Then my friend took the wheelchair out of the car and I got in it. When we got in the church I thought I would die. Everybody was looking at me; I felt like I was getting stabbed by all those eyes.

Does one get used to it?

Yes, but what you don't get used to is when people talk to you like you aren't normal, because you're in a wheelchair. On the other hand, you also see the desire to help that many people have. And I think we also help them be better, help them have a good attitude towards others.

What do you do in this situation?

I started working. With my brother Borja, a telecommunications engineer ten years younger than me, I adapted my dwelling so that I could take care of myself, go from my bed to the bathroom, open the door and windows, turn on the television, talk on the telephone, write on my computer, etc.

Did you manage it?

Yes, and later we started a business with our initials –“B & J Adaptations.” We started looking for clients, people left paraplegic or quadriplegic on account of an illness or accident. We spoke with the renowned Guttmann Institute, with other rehabilitation centers, and social workers. We offer to adapt the dwelling or room of the disabled person, customizing it to the concrete needs of his situation, with the aid of our technical knowledge and my own experiences.

Do you have clients?

Yes, though it is not easy. One has to conquer the temptation, on their part, to discouragement. My advantage is that I can speak to people wheelchair to wheelchair, rather than trying to relate to them from a distance.

What do you say to a client who wonders why God allows his suffering?

I start by telling him it is very positive that he is asking this question, because one must face every question by looking for an answer. And I tell him I can lend him a hand in his effort to find it.

One reason could be so that we would pay more attention to God, whom we may have forgotten. If this is it, then it is an opportunity to get closer to him. We start by dealing with him, asking his pardon, giving him a kiss through confession. I would also tell him: go to see him in

the Blessed Sacrament, complain, speak to him. And when nothing occurs to you, leave and return another day. Don't try to know him in two days. A friendship requires time.

What is pain for you? How do you define it?

It is a key, an answer to many of the believer's questions. All of its meaning has to do with what is transcendent. It teaches you to know yourself better, to put each thing in its place. And to know others better, to be understanding about their limits.

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