Caregiving: A Journey of Love

Michelle Laque Johnson — 2023-04-20

Michelle gave a beautiful and deeply personal account of her own long journey in caregiving for her husband Stu. Michelle is our founder Marian Frentz's older sister and she told us some stories of growing up in a deeply faithful family with a strong devotion to Mary. Unlike Marian who remained strong in her faith, Michelle strayed some during her college years, though not too far. Marian brought her sister back to the faith when she introduced her to a stack of books following her (Marian's) trip to Medjugorje*. The books included testimonials from Medjugorje, and Mary's messages that revived her own childhood devotion to Our Blessed Mother. Michelle described a conversion experience similar to St. Paul, a real life conversion experience like those we learned about from Deacon Jim in his recent talks.

Having witnessed her conversion, Michelle's husband Stu asked her if she wanted to go to Medjugorje too. Stu was a Protestant, and on their trip to Medjugorje, he too had a profound conversion experience which led him into the Catholic Church. Michelle began the journey to become a 3rd Order Carmelite, & took a job working for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and then EWTN, while her husband left his job in corporate America to become a High School Physics teacher. Their lives changed forever when a supposed "bone bruise" on Stu's foot was diagnosed as melanoma, after a year of misdiagnoses, which only led the cancer to spread further. So often during this cancer journey, Michelle turned to God, and felt His presence, enveloping her with His love and preparing her for eight years of increasingly challenging caregiving.

FAITH — Michelle spoke of the importance of the three cardinal virtues in her journey. She prayed "Divine Physician, help me," and graces poured down on her as she took care of some of the more unpleasant tasks of caregiving. She started a prayer journal. Someone had previously told her that a good way to journal is to first write down your own thoughts, and then to write down what you think Jesus would say to you in response. And she felt the Holy Spirit was guiding those answers and they gave her amazing insights and wisdom. She spoke of the importance of looking for blessings, especially in the difficult times, when we might feel put upon and weary. There are always blessings — even in the present moment. She gave some profound examples from her own life: precious time spent with her mother before she died and time spent with siblings as adults as they gathered around their mother. Miraculous things happen when someone is close to dying. Michelle's brother was concerned about the terrible pain and suffering Marian experienced during her cancer journey. Towards the end of her life, Marian said to him "I'm never sad."

HOPE — Not everyone has hope in caregiving. Doctors often are told not to give "false" hope, and many interpret that to mean don't give any hope. We can never allow a doctor to take away our hope, because God is also Hope, and if we allow them to take away our hope, we allow them to take away our God. Doctors are not God! So, how do we find hope when we are starting to lose it? Michelle spoke of the importance of verbalizing fears to those who can truly hear us. We need to find people with a heart who we can share with, who can listen to us. In our sharing, our hope can be restored. Michelle became part of a grief group following the death of Stu. She spoke of the book Man's Search for Meaning, and Victor Frankl's realization that everything can be taken away from us (as he experienced in a Nazi concentration camp) except for how we THINK about our circumstances. It is so important to walk with God, because He will help us keep our mind where it needs to be during a crisis.

* *Michele reminded us that Medjugorje is not an approved apparition and, of course, she will bow to whatever the Church finally decides. She can only describe the impact of Medjugorje on her and her husband and it was tremendous.*

LOVE — We must do things in love, not out of a sense of duty. We need to see the other person in love, even if they are not acting in a loving way. We need to see them as God sees them. Sometimes love means letting go, as when her ninety year old mother told her she was tired, and did not want to try some experimental treatment. Or sometimes love means remembering that a spouse who has descended into dementia is still a spouse and not an annoying child. Saint Mother Teresa, the ultimate caregiver, was treating the wounds of a leper when a journalist said in disgust "I would not do that for a million dollars." Her response: "Neither would I." It's all love. Part of Marian's great gift in evangelizing others was that her motivation was always pure love, and truly wanting what was best for them, to get them to heaven.

THE END OF THE JOURNEY — Michelle spoke of the Apostolic Pardon, the "deluxe package to heaven." It not only forgives sin, but the temporal punishment due to sin. Most priests can give it at end of life, but in Michelle's experience, they do not unless it is requested. Father Swink has spoken of the Apostolic Pardon in his wrap up talk at the end of last season (**LINK** - around the 8 minute mark in the talk). It is also important to say the Chaplet of Divine Mercy, because then Jesus will meet us as the Merciful Savior, and not the Just Judge.

THE END OF STU'S LIFE — At the end of Stu's life, Michele talked to Jesus and said I can see it's not your will that my husband would live, so I'm giving him to you, but in return I'm asking you to turn his heart completely so he can achieve the highest degree of glory. As she finished her prayer and returned to him, a priest offered to celebrate Mass and to say a Rosary and Stu said "Yes." Michelle watched Stu's detach from things — first his treasured possessions, then his beloved dogs, and finally from her. She spoke of many graces at the end, including the date and time of his death — July 16th (the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel) and at 3 pm (Stu's favorite Devotion to Divine Mercy). Michelle saw this as a kiss from heaven. After his death, her favorite Bible verse became "Jesus wept." She asked Jesus to take away the pain associated with memories, but not the memories themselves.

CONCLUSION — Trust God. He is there if we ask, but we must ask! Every time we say yes to God, every time we give Him our "fiat," like Mary did, we allow God to work in us and with us. And all of us can say, with Mary, "For God who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His Name."

POST TALK — Michelle told us the book that most influenced her as a secular Carmelite is St. Teresa of Avila's masterwork, The Interior Castle, which is all about prayer. Until she read this book, she didn't know that it was possible to get this close to God here on earth. It describes the soul as a crystal castle with many rooms. We begin outside the castle where there are many vermin and then enter the first mansions, which are still unclean but better and then progress towards the center, which is where God dwells – inside of us! Here's a great study edition of the **book**.