

Cancer is a Blessing to Me

October 2003: Bzzzzzz – my work pager vibrates while I am in a business meeting with a dozen other people in a crowded conference room. Bzzzzzz – and I’m thinking: “who is paging me? Most of the people who would normally page are in this room.” I sneak a peek at the number, and it is my wife Tina reaching out from home. It is very rare for her to page me at work so I know it must be important. I step out of the conference room to call her. “Your mother called; Tonya is in the hospital. She said you need to come.” My heart sank. Tonya is my younger sister, fighting cancer.

I quickly excuse myself from work. Tina has arranged for someone to stay with our three young children. I pick her up and drive quickly to the hospital. I wasn’t ready for the scene as I walked into my sister’s hospital room. It had been a few months since I last saw her, and she was doing well at that time. Several family members were standing around her bed and I could barely recognize her. She looked so broken, deflated, worn down. She mustered a smile and invited me over for a hug.

I learned that in the past week she had taken a turn for the worse. She was continually having fluid in her lungs which they were draining regularly. It was making it difficult for her to breathe and get the necessary oxygen into her blood. It was draining her strength so they admitted her to the hospital where she could rest and get continual treatment.

Just several weeks ago she was interviewed by the St. Albans Messenger to promote the Linda Wood Mason walk-a-thon. Her health was very good at that time. That article was amazing as she shared her journey with so many memorable quotes and notes of her journey.

- “I want to talk about what cancer has given me,” she says with a smile, “not what it has taken away. That is NOT the story.”
- She was first diagnosed with stage 3B Breast Cancer in December 2000 at the age of 28
- She received a variety of treatments for about 1 year: chemotherapy, mastectomy, and high dose chemotherapy for 3 days. She would tell us about the month-long recovery where she vividly remembers throwing up for 23 straight days
- She would say: “**My life is a gift**, and I don’t want to waste any time. I just offer it up.”
- She was thrilled for her last day of radiation treatment, but not for long. It was on September 11, 2001. She came out of her morning treatment and heard the tragic news of the day.
- Following that she was cancer free for 9 months with no treatments. She used that time to make memories. She planned special time with various members of the family:
 - Daytona 500 trip with dad
 - Lourdes France with mom and best friend
 - Multiple trips to Disney World
 - Spa day with Tina, and the list goes on
- Then in July 2002 she was diagnosed a second time with cancer, this time stage 4.
- She never let it slow her down as she was involved in: Church Choir, EMHC, communion calls, cataloguing books for CCD, participating in “Success by Six” with her young son.
- “**It is daily Mass that pulls me through, it makes me strong**. I feel I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength. Through this whole experience, I have felt that I could handle anything.”

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The next few days in the hospital were surreal. A few memories stick with me. Most profoundly the sheer number of people who streamed in to visit. Not just family, but friends of hers and people whose life she touched through her charity.

I remember one moment when it was just Tonya, myself, and her best friend Kelly in the room and Tonya whispered, "I'm scared". Kelly and I instinctively held her hand and prayed over her for a short time. She responded, "better". That was an incredibly powerful moment for me. Prayer was mostly foreign to me in those days, but Kelly was strong in her prayer practices, so she led.

Tonya wasn't recovering so the doctors, with input from the family, decided it would be best to intubate her to let her rest more fully to see if that would help. It was a long shot, but really the best choice. Ultimately that treatment option was unsuccessful. Her breathing became more laborious and her O² levels continued to drop. On the morning of October 22, 2003, we gathered around my sister Tonya's hospital bed as she breathed her last. It is a blessed experience to be in the presence of a loved one as they pass. I can't begin to describe my emotions in that moment. My sister of only 30 years of age had perished. She died from cancer, but it did not defeat her.

The next few days were intense as we worked through all the funeral arrangements. It was a blessing to spend so much time with my parents and siblings and yet painful to begin the mourning process. We shared stories of Tonya, we laughed, we cried, we celebrated, we loved.

I recall at the wake services again the volume of people who came to share stories of how Tonya had impacted their lives with her charity. Most of the stories happened while she was struggling through her own battles, she kept helping others. Reminiscent of the Blessed Virgin Mary visiting Elizabeth to help with her pregnancy even among her own uncertainty and challenges.

Most striking to me was a plaque placed at the entrance of the funeral home that was given by a family. It had a heartfelt message of gratitude for Tonya, and it detailed her generosity in the past few months toward their son. It wasn't exactly clear what Tonya had done, but it was clear that it had made a tremendous impact and that it happened recently during her own struggles.

It was during this time that I got the call. I was speaking with the funeral director, who I had just met a few days earlier, and he said to me: "Have you ever considered being a Deacon?" I paused for a moment. I didn't really know what a Deacon was or did, but I recalled when I was in high school the father of one of my friends had become a Deacon. I remembered the conversations I had with him about faith and how that still impacted me. Immediately following Tonya's funeral, I began inquiring about the process to become a Deacon.

My favorite quote from the article written about Tonya is:

"Cancer is really a blessing, because I have been given a chance to live out what I say. For me, life is but a legacy of moments pointing toward Christ and nothing more."

Tonya understood that life was a gift. We don't get to choose many of the circumstances in life that we will encounter, but we do get to choose how we respond. Tonya responded by continuing to strive for greatness in righteous living, walking humbly in the steps of Christ toward His cross to make a gift of herself for the service and benefit of others.

Tonya's cancer was a blessing for her, and it became a blessing for me as it put me on the path of my vocation as a Deacon and reminded me that **my life is a gift, and I am called to greatness in righteous living!**