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Embracing the cross of cancer: Jessica van Leeuwen

The story of Jessica, dairy farmer and mother of 6, and her battle with brain cancer

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Visitors to this website will have noticed a video of highlights from the visit of the Prelate of Opus Dei, Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, to New Zealand last August. The video thumbnail features Jessica van Leeuwen,

mother of six, who was then battling an aggressive form of brain cancer.

Around the world, people who viewed the film were moved by the peace and joy which the 40-year-old radiated in the face of a prognosis that gave her, at most, one more year to live. They joined her in praying for a miracle cure, but God had other plans. On 30 April 2024, Jessica passed away at Hospice Waikato accompanied by her husband, Norbert, and her mother, Linda.

Jessica was the eldest of four children to Linda and Geoff Deane, dairy farmers in the Waikato district of New Zealand. Her younger siblings remember her as a protective and loving big sister, a peacemaker in their squabbles. "Watching Jess' children now," says the youngest, Alex, "I see a lot of ourselves in them. Thomas, Anastasia and Marie are always

looking out for the younger ones, taking after her kind ways.”

While studying biology and chemistry at the University of Waikato in the early 2000s, Jessica became good friends with some members of Opus Dei and joined in service projects organised by Rimbrook Study Centre in Hamilton. Their friendship helped her rediscover the Catholic faith that her parents had taught her, and eventually discern her vocation as a supernumerary.

In 2009 she married Norbert, who had migrated to New Zealand from The Netherlands five years earlier. By then she had begun a PhD, which might have launched a scientific career but for her love of the land. Instead, she chose family life with Norbert on their own dairy farm. There she worked hard: running the farm while Norbert worked in town,

seeing to the daily needs of their children, and somehow completing her doctorate and breeding a prize herd of cows.

She was delighted to find, through the Work, that daily work could be prayer and help in making someone a saint. Many believe that she achieved that goal.

Those gathered for her Requiem Mass at St Joseph's Church in Morrinsville heard that Jess loved to work. She would always respond to prayer requests with, "I will offer up my work". During a course at Brooklands rural retreat, she spent her free time spraying weeds. "Don't you think you should relax?" she was asked. "What do you mean?" she replied. "This is relaxing for me!"

Friends testified to her great warmth and ability to connect with others. During her Masters year she was in California for a conference. Walking

along the beach in the early morning she stopped to talk to an older woman, remarking on the beautiful morning and how she enjoyed seeing the ocean from the other side of the Pacific. At the end of the conversation the woman looked at her intently and thanked her. She had come to the beach that morning so sad that she had intended to walk into the water and end her life.

“Then I met you and realised that life is still beautiful,” she told the young Kiwi.

“A chance encounter, a conversation of 10 minutes – Jess changed people. Her sincere engagement with people was really special,” said her friend, Anne. “I think she touched many, many people in the same way.”

She was a loyal friend who would always find a way to smile and radiate joy. “She was like a sister to me,” said Sarah, who co-ordinated

family and community efforts over the past year to support the van Leeuwen family. “She didn’t think about herself, she cared about people and souls. Being able to spend more time with her has been such a privilege and a real lesson in trusting in God, even when things are falling apart.”

As a mother with a growing family and cows to milk, Jess had to let something slip. More often than not it was the housework. Between leaving the cowshed and putting young children in the car for a trip, she would forget to brush her hair. Her Facebook posts could be a little too frank.

“Jess has shown us that a saint is not someone who is externally perfect,” said Anne. “A saint is a person who loves, whom God uses to reach people.” Jessica’s eldest daughter, Anastasia (11), told her grandmother,

“If mum is going to be a saint, then she will be a saint for farmers and mothers.”

Jess hoped and prayed for a cure, taking whatever treatment was available and enlisting the help of Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz, another scientist and hard worker. Her youngest child, Nico, was only eight months old at the time of her diagnosis. “She wanted to live longer for the sake of her children,” said Norbert. At the same time, she would tell people, “Whatever God wants. All I want is that my family gets to heaven. I just want everyone to get to heaven.”

At a get-together during Don Fernando’s visit last year, Jessica said she was “happy to have this cross” and asked how she could convince others that embracing the will of God makes us happy.

After noting the importance of personal conviction and example, the Father acknowledged that, humanly speaking, this kind of joy was hard to understand. “But it is a great supernatural truth, because all salvation, all union with God and therefore all happiness comes from Christ’s Cross.”

These words found an echo in the homily preached by hospital chaplain Fr Danny Fraser-Jones during the funeral Mass. Addressing the question “Why?” that we inevitably ask when someone like Jessica dies “before their time”, he pointed to Christ’s work of redemption on the Cross and linked it with Jessica’s vocation to sanctify her work in Opus Dei.

“The answer can only be found in Christ, in his love for us personally, in the work he does for us personally. The closer we are to Christ, the closer

we are to the answer. And this is the work for us all: to work to get closer to Christ. In that striving we begin to see as God sees, to begin to love as God loves, and that is called holiness. This is the path to Heaven that Jessica trod, and it is our path.”

In his own tribute to his wife, Norbert noted some of her characteristic sayings: “If I can show others that God loves all people and all souls, I am happy. I offer up my work to God.... My failures... Only God can make me better, I am in His hands.” And, perhaps most significantly, the act of faith that St Josemaria taught his sons and daughters in the Work: “Omnia in bonum” – God brings good out of everything.

“It is hard to let you go,” said Norbert finally, “but I firmly believe that you are in heaven, the place you always wanted to go.”

Jessica, thank you for your generosity, your big heart, your life and your love. Your work on earth is done, but your work in heaven has just started. Intercede for us, for farmers and mothers and for all who strive to find God in their daily work, family and community life: that we also may be true friends, sowers of peace and joy to all we meet, and witnesses to the hope of heaven that lightens every cross.

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