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“I have never been happier”

A 21-year-old engineering student from the North of England learnt to love God and find joy in the intense pain of terminal cancer. Fr Joseph Evans, chaplain of Greygarth Hall in Manchester, tells his story.

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In the early hours of Saturday 13th January, as the Hail Holy Queen was being prayed around him, a young engineering student called Pedro

Ballester breathed his last and went to God. Pedro was a numerary member of Opus Dei. In other words, he had committed himself to a lifelong vocation to celibacy in the midst of the world, seeking to bring Christ into the very bloodstream of society following the teachings and spirit of St Josemaría Escrivá. In the end, Pedro's life wasn't very long. The Lord took him to Himself aged 21 after a three year battle with an at times intensely painful cancer of the pelvis during which he hardly complained and bore his suffering with exemplary faith and patience.

Pedro, brought up in Manchester and Yorkshire of Spanish parents, showed many signs of this double background. He had a Latin sociable character mixed with Northern grit. He was always warm and welcoming but didn't like fuss or sentimentality. With faith and resilience he just "got on" with his sickness as one more

reality to sanctify, following the spirit of Opus Dei which teaches us to find God in the ordinary circumstances of life. His often agonising cancer was for him simply another “circumstance.”

His parents – married members of Opus Dei living in Manchester – bravely stood by him throughout his trial while always respecting Pedro’s celibate call and therefore his desire to live in an Opus Dei centre with his brothers in the Prelature. Thus, when the extraordinarily professional and caring staff of Christie Hospital could finally do no more, Pedro made clear that he wanted to die “at home” in Greygarth Hall, the university residence and centre for young people in Manchester where he had joined Opus Dei and where he had lived for the previous two years whenever not hospitalised.

A bright and serious student, he had won a place at Imperial College in London and was just beginning his degree in 2014 when he started to feel pain in his back. Various months were alas wasted thinking it was a muscular problem. By the time the cancer was diagnosed in early 2015, it had spread too far to be stopped. There then began a two-pronged campaign of prayer and trying everything humanly possible, which at one point seemed to have been successful. State-of-the-art proton beam therapy in Germany seemed to have eliminated the tumour. Pedro was thereby given an enjoyable summer and could re-start his engineering studies, this time in Manchester so as to be closer to his parents while still able to live in an Opus Dei house. But the pain began to return and with it the cancer which grew once more at an implacable rate.

This led Pedro to a new life alternating between Christie Hospital and Greygarth, depending on the treatment's different phases. We, his brothers in Opus Dei, did everything we could to support him humanly and spiritually, in close union with his parents and his two siblings, Carlos and Javier. He received Communion daily, usually brought to him by Opus Dei priests who also made themselves available for the Sacrament of Confession or simply to chat. We helped him to pray the Rosary and do some mental prayer each day, though often – when the pain was more intense – Pedro's principal prayer could be no more than offering up his suffering.

We were determined to keep him well accompanied and so there was a constant stream of hall residents and students visiting his room, either in Greygarth or in the hospital, together with many family friends. His

brothers in Opus Dei would make special trips from other British cities, or even from abroad, to see him. Even at Pedro's weakest, his room was always a hub of life and activity. He enjoyed company and spoke to people about God whenever he could. I remember one lad telling me – when Pedro was by now unconscious – that Pedro had been encouraging him to receive instruction in the Catholic faith and that he was now ready to do so, “for myself and for Pedro.” People commented on the unique atmosphere – joyful and prayerful at the same time – of Pedro's room, and many, among them nurses who took care of him, said there was something “special” about him.

While very normal and not at all clerical – he had no time for churchy gossip and was fascinated to the end by current affairs, particularly events in the Middle East – he loved

and prayed for priests and many of them got to know him and would visit him regularly. Various people talked of his deep “priestly soul”, a spiritual capacity to share the sentiments of Jesus Christ, together with a readiness to accept suffering for the salvation of souls.

Pedro was very much an ordinary person with defects and struggles like the rest of us. Sometimes the suffering got him down, particularly that it went on for so long. At times he would cry. He could be occasionally irritated or react against what he considered excessive sentimentality. But his struggle was very real and exceptionally brave. He lived and died a faithful numerary of Opus Dei and was intensely concerned to help others be faithful to their vocation too. Once, less than a month before he died, a group of young Opus Dei members came to visit him in hospital. After a

group get-together, he wanted to speak to each one individually. As we subsequently learned from them, he encouraged each one to be faithful and persevere in his vocation. He asked one young chap, “Are you happy?”, to which the youngster answered: “Yes, I am, and are you?” Pedro answered – after three years of suffering and aware how close he was to death – “I have never been happier.”

Pedro died at Greygarth at about 1.30am on Saturday morning, Our Lady’s day, wearing her scapular and with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in front of him. He was surrounded by his parents, Carlos and Javier, his Opus Dei brothers from Greygarth and a few other students. He stopped breathing at the words “Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us”.

Following his death many people came to pray at his bedside and then later in the day his body was laid out in the house chapel. There was a constant flow of visitors to pray, pay their respects, kiss his brow and whisper in his ear, or just to weep. But there was a deep atmosphere of joy. Subsequently we have received an extraordinary number of messages from people saying that they are praying for him, have offered Masses for him, are seeking his intercession, or how his life touched theirs. As one person put it, and this perhaps sums up the feelings of so many: “I have prayed to him to intercede for me with something. I feel that Pedro is more alive than ever.”