

Dealing with Alzheimer's

“Some days when I get up, and think of my husband's sickness, I am flooded with a feeling of sadness,” says Pilar Fernandez-Loza, from Asturias in Spain. “But I immediately react and ask God to help me.”

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A golden anniversary

We've just celebrated the golden anniversary of our wedding, and it has been -- something special. We

used to think that when we got older we would have the typical problems, high blood pressure and things like that. Now, some days when I get up, and think of my husband's sickness, I am flooded with a feeling of sadness that reminds me of the song of Edith Piaf: *Bonjour, tristesse*. But I immediately react and ask God to help me be able to identify myself with his will.

Cayetano has been sick for ten years. The first symptom appeared at Christmas of 1996 when we went to Bilbao to visit my son. Coming back he was driving and got lost twice. This seemed strange to me since he knew the route like the back of his hand. From then on he began to have hesitations and distractions. He would go downstairs, buy the paper and leave it on the table, without opening it.

“Pilarina,” he said to me, “something is happening to me.”

One day, in the spring of 1998, he sat down to do his income tax as he does every year. Although he was the auditor of a bank, he couldn’t manage to do it. Finally he said: “Let’s go to the doctor.”

It was Alzheimer’s.

Since then he has been progressively losing his memory, and this is very hard, because he is there -- but *he isn’t there*. One day during a gathering, some people commented about how he was changing expression, gestures, losing eye contact. “Perhaps,” I said to them, “but my husband’s eyes are still blue.”

I try to give him all the affection that I can and I don’t have to force myself, because, thank God, we have been a very fortunate couple, we loved each

other very much and we still love each other, although now he can't express it. At times I bring my cheek close to his lips, and although it takes him a little time to react, he always ends up giving me a kiss.

The grace of a vocation

We have been very happy in our marriage, though sufferings have not been absent. One of our children died at the age of 19. But we have always had the strength and consolation of our faith. In addition we have received the grace of a vocation. We have been supernumeraries of Opus Dei since the late Sixties.

Cayetano made the decision shortly before I did. Now I feel very happy to recall that I never put up any obstacles when he went on a retreat for a few days, for example, and I was left home alone with the children. I was not a member of

Opus Dei, but I thought: “This is good for him; and if it’s good for him, it’s also good for me.”

Later when I joined Opus Dei, he did not put up any obstacles to me either: on the contrary, he always helped me in my vocation, thanks to which we received so many good suggestions for the education of our children, for our human and spiritual relationship.

Of course, our vocations are the most wonderful thing that has happened to us, and if Cayetano were well, he would say so too. He always knew this, but now it is palpable. We are receiving affection in torrents. Our friends in Opus Dei come, they encourage me, they cheer me up. There is a priest who comes to see Cayetano often, and though I don’t know how much he understands, his presence is very good for him and for me. The other day, for my golden

anniversary, they brought me a bouquet of chrysanthemums and I began to cry. “But, Pilar, why are you crying?” one of them asked me. I said one also cries from happiness, on seeing kindness and tokens of affection.

It’s like the tenderness of a mother. I lost mine at the age of three and I was brought up by two aunts who were mothers to me. They both died at over 100 and they were helping and comforting me by telephone until their final moments. I was very sorry that I was not able to go and see them because of my situation, but they told me: “Don’t worry, your first obligation now is to take care of your husband; and the second is to take care of yourself.”

And so, whenever I go to one of my Opus Dei activities, even though they propose very demanding goals of Christian life for me, I give thanks.

When they ask me why I am doing this, since I am Asturian and like to speak clearly, I answer: “Because you are helping me!”

Naturally there are aspects of the vocation to Opus Dei that have been hard for me to put into practice, and there were things that I did not understand in the beginning. I also thank God for that: I was growing in docility to God’s will, and God was preparing me for this.

Opus Dei helped me to see God’s love in this sickness, to smile and to be happy. I have my times of tears, but it’s without bitterness, with tranquility, with peace. This is my way of being faithful to God and of being faithful to Cayetano in these moments.

My support group

I belong to an Association of Families with Alzheimer’s, and I form part of

a group of those caring for people with this disease, who try to help one another, because our situation is very difficult and hard to bear. The Association functions very well. It gives us direction, it comforts us, it gives us affection and sets goals for us. And we have the advice of a psychologist for the group who encourages us to take care of ourselves, so that we transmit to the sick person our own well-being.

Because this infirmity tends to isolate one from others and friends come to see one less often, perhaps out of self-defense—it is so sad to see a person who is slowly shutting down.

Memories

I speak to Cayetano a lot, although he can't answer me and I don't know if he fully understands me. And whenever he returns from the day care center, helped by another person, I go to meet him at the street

door, as I did when we were engaged.

Now when I think of those years, I'm very happy that we had a Christian engagement. I thank God a lot for that. It seems that nowadays many young people don't know the meaning of true love. The other day, when my granddaughter Maria asked me about my wedding, I told her something personal, even intimate, that reflects how Cayetano was. We spent the first night after our wedding in a nineteenth century hotel in Covadonga, in a room with a window from which one could see the statue of Our Lady of Covadonga. And as I went to bed, I found a letter from him under the pillow.

We had been engaged for four years, and practically our whole engagement was by letter, because he was in Almería and I was in Gijón, and in those days travel and

communications were not so easy as today. We rarely saw each other, but for four years we wrote each other every day: *ev-er-y-day*. In that letter, he told me of his love for me, his joy at having received the sacrament of matrimony, and his desire to be faithful to me all his life.

I remember how years ago, when we were living in Bilbao, Cayetano had to travel a lot because of his work, and he told me that, after doing an audit – I don't recall in what city – he had gone with the team of auditors to have a beer in a bar. It was a group of married and single men. In the bar they met some girls and began to chat. They were normal girls, completely normal. On the following day, they went back, and when he saw that the same girls were there, he said good-bye. "Why are you going," they asked him. "Because I have a wife waiting for me in Bilbao," he told them. Nothing in

particular had happened. But he said that in those circumstances of loneliness one has to be especially careful and know how to leave at the right time.

I remember the care with which he prepared his audits. He wanted to do them as well as possible, to offer them to God. Before he handed them in, he would always ask my advice about this or that expression. “But I don’t have the slightest idea about banking!” I’d tell him. “Yes, but women are always more refined than men,” he would say, “and you know how to say things in a more pleasant way. I want to tell the truth, but without hurting anyone. Go on, read this sentence, to see if I could phrase it better.”

Are these just silly things? I don’t think so. It’s living the Christian faith with consistency. And where did all this come from? From his prayer,

from the spirit of Opus Dei that he was living -- and that he is now living, because this sickness is also “opus dei,” a work of God.

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