

Fifteen years ago, a woman by the name of Joanne Guidoccio received the diagnosis that thousands of people hear each year: she had tested positive for cancer.

One of the things she was asked in the situation, and indeed she had been asked many times over her life as a life-long Catholic, was the question “are you praying.”

She says in many circumstances, this question would be deemed intrusive and inappropriate. But considering the source was her mother, she didn't take offense. If anything, she says she was embarrassed to admit that prayer was the furthest thing from her mind.

Over a month had passed since the oncologist had delivered the diagnosis of inflammatory breast cancer, stage IIIB. While she had shared the stage, she kept those first three words to herself. She didn't want her family and friends looking up IBC online and discovering the seriousness of the diagnosis. In 2004, the five-year survival rate for IBC was 30 percent; as for the 10 and 15-year rates, the percentages were in the single digits and not even worth considering.

Her mother's maternal instincts she says must have been on high alert. She wasted no time in soliciting prayers from her relatives and friends across Canada, Italy and the United States. Whenever any of these people would call Joanne, they would end the conversation with some variation of “stay strong! We're praying for you.”

At the same time, Joanne struggled to respond to the many offers of help that she received. Friends and colleagues were more than willing to drop off prepared meals, drive her to appointments, buy groceries and run errands. She didn't want to appear ungracious, but she really didn't need that kind of help. If she even caught a whiff of tomatoes, garlic, onions or any other strong odors, she'd have to run to the nearest bathroom. As for driving her to treatments, she found it easier to book a driver through the Canadian Cancer Society, especially on the cold blustery days when the roads were treacherous.

To her surprise and those of family and friends, she said “I'd appreciate your prayers and positive thoughts.”

And these prayers, along with her mother's posse, delivered.

Her mother and her friends attended mass regularly and offered many prayers on Joanne's behalf. The staff at Saint James Catholic High School in Guelph gathered in the library to pray for her several times during her cancer journey. Many of them also included Joanne in their morning and evening prayers. A group of relatives visited Lourdes and prayed for a speedy recovery. When a family friend visited Italy, she made a special trip to the shrine of Padre Pio.

Joanne's mother had spoken often of Padre Pio, a favorite saint among Italians. A strong believer in prayer in meditation, he's well known for his saying "Pray, Hope and Don't Worry."

While she did experience the many side effects associated with chemo, including fatigue, hair loss, nausea, and tin mouth, Joanne maintained a positive attitude. This both pleased and surprised her. She says she's not a Pollyanna by nature, nor a pessimist. She considers herself a realist, parked somewhere between these two extremes.

In early November, she received an unexpected gift. As the oncologist felt her right breast and used a ruler to measure the size of the tumor, she stopped and glanced at her notes several times. She smiled and said "your cancer is in spontaneous remission."

Joanne was taken aback and didn't know what to say. Shocked going home, she wanted to tread slowly before calling everyone. After spending several hours researching on the Internet, she found that spontaneous remissions are extremely rare: about 1 in 100,000 cancers. While there was no overt mention of miracles in the articles, Joanne concluded that the scientists were both fascinated and baffled by the phenomenon.

When she shared the news with family and friends, the word "miracle" came up in conversations. Even more interesting were the initial reactions from the rest of the healthcare team. Each of them was shocked. However, all was still not perfect. Her physicians told her that her breast was still compromised when she asked if she did not need a mastectomy or radiation. Their response was they can't take any chances especially with the type of cancer she had.

While she really did not believe that the cancer would return, she also knew she needed to "lock in" her miracle with mastectomy and radiation. As of this November, 2019, Joanne is cancer free now for 15 years.

Padre Pio, the saint she cited, once said "prayer is the best weapon we possess, the key that opens the hearts of God." And indeed, it's something we persist in throughout our lives.

There are many types of prayer, but among the most common is petitionary prayer. And, as the saying goes there are no atheists in fox holes, so many people pray across religions or even those who aren't religious all that much in certain situations. Hopefully we realize too that as Saint John Paul II said we can ask God for all things, even the simplest of things. Sometimes we pray for remission of cancer; sometimes we pray to do good on a test or for a nice day to go for a drive to look at leaves or for the kids ball game not to be rained out. We of course have petitions too at each Mass. So how do we pray correctly? The readings this week give us some insight.

For one, the battle of life if you will is constant. The first reading has the Israelites battling Amalek, a long-since gone tribe. Really though Amalek is just one of many hardships the Israelites face on the way to the Promised Land, and in our lives too, the hardships never end. Some are big like Joanne's cancer diagnosis; others are the daily grind of getting through math class, money issues, job situations, or sick kids at home. Then there are the worldly problems too that are always there of bullying, gossiping, hatred, violence, divisiveness. We can't look back and foolishly think there was some perfect era as the Israelites so often do in Exodus wanting to give up and go back to Egypt. Rather, we have to move ahead and realize the battles are always going to be there.

And a big part of getting there is prayer. Persistent prayer too. When Moses keeps his arms up holding the staff, the battle goes well; well we raise our arms in prayer. The point is that when the Israelites see the staff, they are reminded of God being there with them. Prayer bring them closer to God.

And that's the second point. Just as Joanne emerged from her battle without cancer, she also emerged closer to God through all of that prayer. The Israelites grow closer to God too throughout Exodus. As a retreat director once put it, ask God for five more breaths and give thanks after taking them to remind yourself that we depend on God for everything. This is why prayer is so necessary. It's not as if God is like Santa where we can ask for things to change his mind. He doesn't say Joanna is going to be cancer free because she prayed, but those other 99,999 people who did pray are just out of luck. Rather when we pray, as Saint John Damascus put it, it raises the mind and heart to God. It brings us closer to Him. I'm reminded of this so often when I go to hospitals; I spend time with people who are suffering, but so many who also have resilient faith knowing that while their illness may not go away, they have profound faith trusting that God will see them through. Indeed it's often the case that at an anointing, the person I minister too really ministers to me too and increases my faith through their witness and being so close to God through their prayer.

A third point is we need one another. Aaron and Hur are the assistants of Moses who hold up his arms. Joanne's mother, family and friends and coworkers were her prayer posse helped her through. This is why we pray for one another; as a Church we are a community. It's important to pray for loved ones and those who ask us for prayer, but we also should pray for others too; maybe select someone who strikes your attention—even a complete stranger or someone in the news, and silently pray for that person. It can do so much.

Lastly, what about when prayers go seemingly unanswered? We can't be superstitious and think well if only more people had prayed then this situation would have ended up differently. We also can't expect God to follow our finite rules. Faith is not the same as algebra. But faith is also not blind. God is with us, but sometimes just as when we are children and ask for something for our parents and don't get it it does not mean our parents do not love us, the same is true with God. Sometimes we may pray for the wrong things and not seeing the big picture; I for instance just longed for a relationship

to work out but God wasn't calling me to marriage. Sometimes our prayers going unanswered to things in life are because better things await us and God has bigger plans. But what of seemingly obvious situations like Joannes. How is it fair for someone to die young of cancer? Well, we do not worship a God that says "I need another cancer victim today, this person will do." We cannot fully understand why such things happen, but we can understand fully God's love and that God wants us to be in heaven. Remember when Jesus says "abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this chalice from me; yet not what I will, but what you will." Jesus makes a direct request of the Father, but He's mindful that it has to be in accord with the Father's will. God had a different plan, one that even the Son could not understand at the moment, namely that the Son who knew no sin was dying an unspeakably painful death so that we sinners may live forever as God's adopted sons and daughters. God's will is always directed towards our eternal salvation; maybe for whatever reason God is willing this person in heaven, at this moment. I think of my first really tough funeral, Leslie, who died of cancer at just 17. I prayed for her recovery, and she still died. I still don't understand why, but I think back on her funeral, one of the largest I've ever had, and the full Church of people many of whom hadn't ever been in a church let alone a Catholic one. There was such faith there in part because of her. She made a difference for them and continues to do so. Jesus puts His trust in the Father and says in this prayer that He's trusting the Father sees full picture of salvation. We also need to trust that no matter what, God stands with us. We look to the crucifix, and see God who suffers right at our side; who knows everything we go through, and who's love for us will never wane.

As I mentioned last week, sometimes when we are asked the question "how are you doing?" The answer we'd give is not so good, and that's because in life there are so many battles we face. Inevitably we will suffer, and inevitably we will all die too. And sometimes on our own, it might seem like all is lost in a given situation. Indeed, on our own the pains, the sufferings, the Amalek's if you will will overwhelm us. But with God, we will truly make it to the promised land, because He's got a plan for us, and stands with us every step of the way. So trust in Him. Turn to Him. Fear not asking for anything you need every day. Talk to him often. For while the answer might not always be "here it is," no matter what it is through it all will be the words "I love you," so come to know that love more and more by praying without ceasing.