

My dearest brothers and sisters in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have longed for this moment to be with you all: Joe and Melanie, the Gregory family, my own family, my friends here, to return to the High School I graduated from more than 20 years ago. But with great desire I have wanted to celebrate Mass with and for you, Joe, and to open my heart to you, my brother, and hopefully not fail in my attempt to tell you what I consider God wants me to tell you in your time of need. These words are for you today, Joe.

We are here to celebrate your death, Joe. I repeat, we are here to celebrate your death.

Now if only I can cooperate with God's grace to explain myself after having most likely won the contempt of the majority of those gracious enough to listen. I feel it is a mystery that I only begin to comprehend, whose depths go well beyond what I am capable of understanding much less conveying.

Don't get me wrong, Joe, I pray for your healing, for God to work that miracle for you. But maybe the true miracle lies precisely in this sickness.

Joe, you and I began our adventure together many years ago. Despite being just kids, in Fr. Francis' example and words we saw and understood the beauty of following Jesus Christ as the Apostles did: in leaving everything behind to follow him. So we both left what we loved most: friends, family, home, our own lives and plans, our own country...for him. And we believed the words Jesus said to St Peter about those who go down that path: *"In truth I tell you, there is no one who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times as much houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and land -and persecutions too- now in this present time and, in the world to come, eternal life."* (Mk 10:28-31) We believed those words and took up the adventure together but God had different paths for each of us. For you, it was not the priesthood but Melanie and your children. However, your generosity and willingness to follow him was not going to go without

reward and that “100 times as much...in this present time” is right before you. God had promised it and he never goes back on his word. There you have your mother and father, brother and sisters, your wife and children, your friends from Seton and from Church, from work and school, your friends here present and those not here, and your spiritual family in the SJCP, which you have never lost. Fr. Pedro Javier, the priest who kicked you out of Shoreless Lake School, was precisely the one who gave his permission and blessing for this Mass to happen here today and sends you his best and many prayers including his own Mass today which will be offered for your intention from the heart of El Pedregal.

Joe, as you well know at this stage in your life, these are the true treasures of this earth and God has lavished you generously with them. I would say you are a very wealthy man...rich! These are the riches that constitute your life. And then this evil suddenly comes to rob you of everything. In your own words from your blog, “The villain, in this case, is ALS. It swooped in, ruining my personal and career desires, family desires, long term desires. It cannot create, it can only subvert and twist and destroy [...] and the villain does not go away.” (from a blog post titled *There are no accidents* dated February 17, 2018) Your words are accurate: a villain. The most cruel imaginable. It has robbed you of all your dreams and desires, all of those beautiful treasures that God himself gave you. It has left nothing unscathed: your career, your plans for yourself, your family. Most importantly, this villain has robbed you of your ability to express the love you have in your heart to your wife as you want and as she wants. It has done the same with your children and erased your presence from their future. It has broken your heart many times and Mel’s as well, and the shattering of hearts has yet to reach its most terrible moment.

But maybe this villain, precisely by doing these horrible things, is giving you the chance of a lifetime. I would even dare to say this villain is playing into the Divine plan for you, albeit unwittingly. No different than the Devil himself unwittingly played right

into the Divine plans and gave God the victory at the exact moment he was completely convinced he was dealing a deathblow to everything Jesus was and stood for.

The parallels between what you are suffering and what Jesus Christ did are astonishing.

Jesus in his lifetime had worked hard to fulfill his Father's plans and had accomplished so much: his preaching, his miracles, the good he was doing, the followers he had, etc. He had the greatest treasures and they were all given to him by his Father. At the Last Supper he spoke to the Father (Jn 17:6-7,10): "They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now at last they have recognised that all you have given me comes from you... All I have is yours and all you have is mine, and in them I am glorified." Jesus was rich in all he had accomplished on this earth. Then, in a moment, it was all taken away.

In swooped the most heinous villain of all, the Devil, who now had free reign to rob him of it all and crush him completely. The Devil set about destroying Jesus' plans and work here on earth. His reputation and credibility were shattered when he was punished with the cruelest punishment reserved for the worst criminals. His disciples and apostles, in whom he was glorified, abandoned him except Mary, his mother, and St. John and a few women. Yet even then Jesus accepted it and did not merely resign himself to the loss of those things he loved the most but with a courage unseen before on the face of this earth freely took up what was asked of him by his Father and went on the offensive. Those few followers who were left, faithful to death, even them he gave up freely from the cross "woman behold your son, behold your mother" ...notice how he did not even call her "mother". He gave up his own good status in the eyes of his Father and appeared before him as guilty of all our sins, as having betrayed in the most vile fashion the person whom he loved infinitely. Going even further, he felt abandoned by the Father "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". His failure was complete, everything he loved, gone. And then finally, having absolutely nothing left for himself except his very own life, he gave that too: "'Father, it is finished, into your hands I commend my spirit.' And bowing his head, he died" It was the greatest

moment this world will ever see, the moment in which he proved his love for the Father perfectly and proved it to us also. He gave absolutely everything to the Father, he held nothing for himself. He lived perfect Poverty or, as St. Francis would say, "he had taken lady Poverty for a spouse on the cross." It destroyed him, it shattered his heart, it tore him to pieces. But this was what he had come here to do.

Is this not what God is now asking of you? Joe, Jesus Christ is giving you the chance, through this sickness to be just like him in your life and now in your death. But to imitate him in his death you would need to have the same feelings and thoughts he had. And his feelings toward it are of the most intense feelings that can affect a human heart; and his thoughts, the most profound.

The death of Jesus Christ in all its horror was something he looked forward to throughout his life, even more, it was something he longed for with a passion and loved deeply. Jesus' passionate desire and even "fire" for his death is clear in his own words: "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! There is a baptism I must still receive, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!" (Lk 12: 49-50) The baptism he is referring to is his own passion and death. At the Transfiguration Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah in glory and what were they speaking of? What Jesus had most on his heart, what was most beautiful and exciting: his suffering and death in Jerusalem. So deeply did he long for that moment that he became defensive to the extreme over it even when his own St. Peter tried to get the thought of suffering and dying out of his head: "Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path, because you are thinking not as God but as human beings do." So incredible and wonderful was this death that even in the Resurrection Jesus bears the glorious wounds which are his trophy of love. Finally he has left us this great act of love on our altars to be made present at each Mass for us to share in, and live, and be nourished by, and consoled from. It is what we *celebrate* at Mass: his death. Which is why the idea of sacrifice at the Mass is central to it and should be defended with our lives.

Do you see now why I said at the beginning that we are here to celebrate your death? It is not a message of despair but a message of the most divine hope, it is of great consolation and profound beauty, while still being terrible and awful to face. If we celebrate Jesus' death, if yours is his, why would we not celebrate yours, too?

Do not worry if you feel overwhelmed or if it feels like too much. Jesus, as much as he longed for his own suffering and death, sweat blood moments before it was to happen and affirmed he was "suffering to the point of death" and he even demanded "Father, let this cup pass from me". But he modified that demand with those profound words of love "let your will be done, not mine."

Joe, this sickness is God's gift to you in that it conforms your life and conforms your death to his; it is your chance to give be equal to Jesus Christ: your chance to give absolutely everything to him. We cannot give infinitely only God can; but we can match him and give *everything*. All that you have been forced to give up you can give to him freely and with great joy. Your gradual giving up of all you love which will culminate in giving up your final breath of life can all be done for him, for love. Then every physical ability you lose becomes a tender caress; every earthly dream shattered is made a hushed "I love you"; every blow taken from the villain is turned a tender kiss. And through it all a heart longing to ultimately be with Jesus Christ. When finally you breathe your last and turn over every single thing you know and love to God, that will be your greatest moment. The moment that seems like the end but is merely the beginning of a new existence in which that union with Jesus Christ made perfect here on earth now culminates and is made forever real in heaven. The moment that everyone will remember that Joe, the great warrior, fought to the end to achieve victory. And it will be your glory for all ages. "Pretioso in conspectu domini mors sanctorum eius" "precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his holy ones."

The greatest moment of your life is yet to come, Joe. Don't look to what is behind but to what you have ahead and long for it and love it as Jesus did.

Then will your life be his and his life will be yours. And do you think he will allow anything to happen to those you love after having such perfect unity with him? Of course not! God will take care of those you love, especially Melanie and your children, and he himself will see that they are cared for in this life and brought home to heaven, as well.

This is the quest you and I set out to fulfill when we were just kids, the following of Jesus Christ. This is your time to make that complete. And now more than ever you have ahead of you the great quest that filled our hearts as kids and still fills the hearts of the true followers of Jesus Christ with dreams and a joy and a hope that no villain can ever take away.

The mission of each true knight, his duty; nay, his privilege:

To dream the impossible dream

To fight the unbeatable foe

To bear with unbearable sorrow

To run where the brave dare not go

To right the unrightable wrong

To love pure and chaste from afar

To try when your arms are too weary

To reach the unreachable star

This is my quest, to follow that star

No matter how hopeless, no matter how far

To fight for the right

Without question or pause

To be willing to march

*Into hell for a heavenly cause
And I know if I'll only be true
To this glorious quest
That my heart will lay peaceful and calm
When I'm laid to my rest
And the world will be better for this
That one man scorned and covered with scars
Still strove with his last ounce of courage
To reach the unreachable star.*