

Dear All,

On Monday, February 11, 2008, the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes, I got into a major car accident on the highway in Belize. The car in front of me was slowing down and as I pressed the brakes, my car spun around on the road and collided with another car coming in the opposite direction. The air bags came out, my seat belt locked in place and I got burnt on my left arm and all the toes on my right foot got broken in several places and I have a bruised left knee and my lip burst and my blouse had several patches of blood. The car is completely wrecked and people told me that it is amazing that anyone walked out of the car alive! A friend who was going to work came to my rescue...she was only a couple minutes behind me on the road. Then many cars stopped and people came running out of their cars to help. They told me to get out of the car because it was smoking. A guy offered to pick up all the personal items that had flown out of the car. My friend offered to take me to the hospital as the ambulance had not yet arrived after several minutes, but I couldn't walk, so someone had to carry me into a car and take me to the nearest hospital eight miles away.

The x-ray machines were not working at the hospital and I had to be transferred to another clinic ten minutes away where the x-ray technicians had not yet arrived for work. It seemed like the time was ticking away very slowly. My father came to the hospital and then he drove me to the major hospital in Belize City (1 hour away) where the bone specialist tried to pull the toes back into place. The doctor gave me ten injections in my toes. Just before the doctor pulled the toes, a priest friend showed up and gave me the anointing of the sick. The priest walked out and the doctor walked in....this was the hand of God. God knew that I needed the courage and strength to endure this ordeal. Another x-ray was taken and the toes were still not completely aligned in the right place. The doctor told me that I had an option to undergo surgery to insert pins in the small toes and a rod/plate in the big toe. I needed to inform the doctor of my decision within 24 hours. During this time, I prayed and I kept thinking, "I don't know anything about bones and pins and rods and plates. How can I make such a decision without information?" As these thoughts were going through my mind, a friend walked into the hospital room and asked if there was anything he could do. I

told him that I needed to make a decision, but didn't have much information. He offered to browse the internet for me and got me information on broken toes. Within a few hours, one of my friends in Columbus OH called a couple doctors to get a second opinion on the surgery and she called me to suggest that surgery seemed like the best option. A lady who brought my meal in the hospital said something very profound that confirmed my decision to undergo surgery. She said, "let the doctor do what he needs to do and leave the rest to God." I informed the doctor of my desire to have surgery the next day.

About 25 minutes before the car accident, I was listening to a CD in the car which I recently picked up at a church in St. Charles IL. It was Jeff Cavins talking about 15 things to do in the midst of suffering. Jeff said that in the midst of pain and suffering, we are to say, "Jesus, I trust in you." I was listening to this CD for three days before the accident. And at the time of the accident, I was praying the rosary (as I normally do when I travel long distances) and was on the fourth decade of the sorrowful mystery, the carrying of the cross. When the doctor was putting the injections in my bruised foot at the hospital, all I could say was "Jesus, I trust in you." In the hospital, I got injections every four hours for pain and swelling and this is apart from the injections in the drip and a tetanus shot and blood tests etc.....I think I got a taste of what Jesus suffered on the cross....a very small taste. What a privilege to be able to share in His passion this Lenten season. Just before my surgery, a friend brought her 4-year old granddaughter who lifted up a crucifix and said, "Jesus, please heal Manuela." The little girl told her grandmother that Jesus already healed Manuela and that Jesus went back up to heaven. She then put the crucifix back on the table.

I spent four days in the hospital and I need to keep my feet elevated for a few weeks. And I am to use crutches and take time off from my feet....Thanks be to God for my aunt who basically has to do everything for me right now and thankfully, I have a laptop with internet access, which I am using to write to you from my bedside.

When you're flat on your back, that's a great way to meditate on life and our purpose on earth. We are to use our pain and suffering for the redemption of the world. When we suffer, we are to offer it up for the conversion of souls. We are called to participate in Christ's suffering and to unite our suffering

with His.

He never said it would be easy, but He said that He would be with us through it all. Two days before the accident, a lady asked me for a ride home and when she was about to leave the car, I said something I don't normally say to strangers....I said, "Can I ask you to pray for me? I need a lot of prayers right now." She said, "sure honey." When I was rolled into the hospital in a wheelchair, I saw the same lady. She went to get a medical check-up. She came running up to me and kissed me and said, "oh my, do you remember what you asked me to do for you?" I said, "yes, to pray for me...." She told me that she said several prayers for me that night.

While I was in the hospital, I was going through my cell phone calls and messages; I got a text message from another friend (who doesn't normally call me in the mornings) asking me to please call her so that she can pray for me. When I looked at the time of the text message....it was the exact time of the accident. My friend told me that she had a vision of my car being black during the night and she prayed protection prayers for me. The night before the car accident, the same friend and I were praying together and she said, "tomorrow you will see what God will do for you!" I know that this is God and I know that He is with me...through all these people and through all these events. I remember what Jeff said on the CD I was listening to in the car before the accident....he said that when we go through times like this, we are to minister to others....it takes our mind off our sufferings and it gives us an opportunity to help others. At least five people have come to see me everyday...they are friends I havn't seen in several months or indeed years, friends from the parish I attend, friends from other parishes, friends of friends and of course, my family. Already, I am seeing that those I have been praying for (some of whom I have been praying for years) are thinking more deeply about life and I am more freely able to speak to them about the Lord and about conversion now than before I had the accident. This reminds me of the words of a beautiful song which says that "He makes everything beautiful in His time." "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

When I get questions about what I am going to do now without a vehicle and how I will live now without being able to work, I know that the God I serve is with me and He takes care of me. He already provided a friend right there on the accident scene to take me to the hospital, my wrecked car was towed to a safe place without my even asking, I got a second opinion and information to make a decision about surgery very quickly, I got to see a bone specialist the same day of the accident and I have a laptop with internet access from my bedside. Now, I remember the prayer of John Henry Cardinal Newman....that “God created me to do Him some definite service; ... If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him.” The only thing I can do is to trust in God, to thank and praise Him for keeping me alive, and to trust that He will provide. I cannot ask why this has happened because I know why. He is asking me to partake in His suffering and I need to ask for the grace to endure and use it for His honor and glory.

I was about to embark on a nationwide rosary evangelization project for all the schools in Belize. As a matter of fact, I spent a couple days in Columbus Ohio the last week of January 2008 talking to the Missions Office at the Columbus OH Diocese about how they could assist our country-wide rosary evangelization project in Belize. As many of you know, my aunt and I started a small Catholic gift store out of our home a few years ago in order to fund our rosary ministry, as we give out rosaries and rosary leaflets to the people of Belize free of cost. So far, we have given out over 30,000 rosaries and rosary leaflets nationwide. Now, with the grace of God, I continue to organize these projects from my telephone and bedside.

Also, a couple weeks ago, I was continuing my planning of the missions trip to Belize with students from the Franciscan University of Steubenville OH. I met one of the co-leaders of the mission trip when I did a youth ministry course at the Franciscan University of Steubenville three years ago. There were 16 students and their spiritual director, Fr. Ken Cienik S.A. on the missions trip. It was so exciting as I could not find a van to hold 17 people, so I had to hire a bus (that could hold 60 people). So, this huge bus parked in front of my home and all the neighbors got to see the mission team exiting the bus and wondered what was going on. So, we got to witness to our neighbors as well; a couple of them even offered to host some of the mission

team for the nights they were in the city. God is so good. He brought the mission team to minister to me, as He knew I wouldn't be able to go out on foot to do ministry with them. Fr. Ken celebrated a mass of thanksgiving for God saving my life at my house and the entire mission team sang praise and worship songs for over an hour. A couple of them brought guitars and all the doors to my house were opened and several people on the street walked by and stopped to sing along to the music. About seventy people attended the mass in my house and Fr. Ken anointed those who were ill and gave a blessing to each family. Then one of the students, Mary, got up and gave a talk on the meaning of the mass.

The mission team folded 1,000 rosary leaflets, in preparation for their rosary ministry day at St. Martin's Catholic school (one of the inner city schools in Belize) the following day. My aunt went along with the mission team to St. Martin's school, where Fr. Dan White welcomed the team and introduced them to the little children (grades 1 and 2) who were eagerly awaiting the missions team in the church. Then the team was split up and they covered "how to pray the rosary" to the entire school in one day. They put a rosary poster in each classroom and gave each child a rosary and rosary leaflet. At the end of the day, St. Martin's school puts on music for their students and the mission team and the students were in the schoolyard dancing. The mission team described the students as being very open and excited to learn how to pray the rosary. They felt very welcomed at the school and experienced tremendous joy at seeing the smiling faces of the students as they prayed the rosary together. This was the beginning of our country-wide rosary evangelization project.

That evening, the mission team put on a powerful mini conference at Divine Mercy Catholic parish for the Catholic youth of Belize. My father took me in a wheelchair to the church to introduce the mission team and to give my testimony of how God saved my life. People came from all over the country and the team gave their testimonies and talked on real-life issues....dating, chastity, does true love exist, does God answer prayers, how do I know my vocation, etc. The team led the youths in praise and worship songs during adoration and the team leaders invited the audience to surrender all their hurts and pains and sorrows to the Lord. The youth said

that they had never experienced such a powerful experience of the holy spirit in their lives. Many of the youth cried for the first time in several months and they said that this was the first time that they really enjoyed going to a church youth event.

During my weekly doctor visit a couple days ago, the doctor who did the surgery for me told me that he operated on someone who helps out on a project I'm working on. A big tree accidentally fell on the person and he broke his hip and leg and had to have pins and rods inserted in him too! According to my doctor, it was another "close death call." I found out that it was a guy whose wife sits in the same office I do and for whose conversion I pray for daily. Here I was, completely surprised that soon after my own injury, I would get to minister to someone who I know, who I've been praying for and who was even more injured than I was. The same doctor who operated on me operated on him and a nurse took me in a wheelchair to visit my friend (the sick visiting the sick).

God surely has a way to speak to us. He lets us know that even though we're suffering, there are others out there who are suffering more. So, I was given an opportunity to use my sickness to help others and to take my mind off from my own suffering...what a privilege. The thing that made me chuckle is that I offered to help them....I was thinking about it later because really, right now, I can't walk, I can't drive...and I cannot do a lot of things. The only thing I can help them with is listening, talking and praying. But then again, maybe that's all they need right now.

I thought of how God has blessed me with such a loving, caring aunt and how Elena, the wife of the injured man, was now called to exhibit patience, love, kindness, generosity and compassion as her husband's caretaker. I remembered the many rosaries I had prayed for this couple and the masses I had offered for them over the past year and I know that God uses all things to draw mankind unto Himself.

It is said that the name of a person often reveals that person's mission in life. My name Manuela, means "God is with us." On February 11, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was with me and that the Blessed Mother protected me. In Hebrews 13:5, He promises, "I will never leave you or forsake you." I am reminded of one of the promises of those who pray the rosary: "Whoever recites my Rosary devoutly reflecting on the mysteries, shall never be overwhelmed by misfortune. He will not experience the anger of God **nor will he perish by an unprovided death.**"

Please pray for me. My right foot is in a cast. My prayer is that I will be able to hear the Lord clearly during this time and that I will learn all the lessons He wants me to learn. I am praying for all of you too.

Blessings,
Manuela