

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

Saved ... and healed

By Scott Harrup

"We've often heard the Scripture where Christ tells us we are to take up our cross and follow Him," says Mary

Beth DeLeon of Springfield, Mo. "But it wasn't until I completely wept in Jesus' arms and said I would give my cross back to Him and accept whatever His will is that things changed."

That prayer took place in a hospital intensive care unit following a surgery that nearly cost DeLeon her life.

DeLeon, 41, an internal network systems data assistant for J.P. Morgan, attends James River Assembly of God in nearby Ozark, Mo., with husband Ramiro and children Michael and Dianna. The DeLeon family has

shared Mary Beth's cross the past several years as she has endured an array of life-threatening illnesses.

But Mary Beth's faith journey once presented her with a very different understanding of Jesus' cross. Raised in a Catholic home, she entered a religious order in California after completing nursing school. She served for nearly six years as a nurse and a nun.

"On the one hand," she remembers, "I admired the spirit of service the nuns showed as they cared for the sick. I knew many of them had a genuine relationship with Jesus."

But the weekly liturgical practice focused on penance. DeLeon always sensed an undertone of doubt regarding one's salvation.

"Why was I still making amends for my sins?" DeLeon

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The DeLeon family became united in their faith in 2002 and 2003.

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asks of those years. "I couldn't comprehend that. Why did I have to punish myself? I knew Christ had died for my sins, but it was as if my heart did not know He did it once and for all."

At 25, DeLeon left the convent. She later met and married Ramiro, raised a Catholic in Mexico. They moved to Springfield.

In 2001, DeLeon accepted an invitation from a co-worker to visit a small fundamentalist church. The family soon joined her. Ramiro and Michael accepted Christ as Savior on Easter 2002. The three of them were baptized. In 2003 Dianna made the same decisions.

Truly living for Christ as a family changed the DeLeon home. Then Mary Beth developed stage 3 liver disease, diabetes and an autoimmune disease that nearly destroyed her ability to form blood clots.

"If I had cut myself with a paring knife while cooking," she says, "I could have bled to death. I had less than 10 percent of the platelets my body needed."

During what was supposed to be a relatively simple outpatient surgery in Feb. 2005, DeLeon nearly died from blood loss. She woke up in intensive care with five IVs across her body.

"They were trying to get fluids and blood back into me as quickly as possible," she says.

That crisis forced her to re-evaluate what it meant to carry her cross for Christ. It was the turning point when she completely gave her illness and possible death over to her Savior.

She knew God is able to heal any illness, but also knew healing came through praying in faith. When she asked elders at her church to pray for her, their reluctance and half-hearted compliance disheartened her.

By that time DeLeon was seeing Dr. Marcia Graham, an Assemblies of God physician and volunteer with the Fellowship's HealthCare Ministries.

Graham's nurse Elaine Goodwin accompanied DeLeon to the prayer meeting at her church, then invited her to come to James River Assembly for further prayer.

"I will never forget October 23, 2005," DeLeon says. "I don't remember who prayed for me or the songs that were playing, but I remember God's touch, feeling His Spirit. I felt like I was right next to heaven. A warmth went through me."

The family has attended James River since, and DeLeon is active in the choir.

DeLeon felt God leading her to make personal changes that would complement what He would do miraculously in her life. She went on an extensive diet, eventually losing 100 pounds. Today she no longer needs insulin, after having needed four to five injections a day. Her liver is returning to health. Her platelet count is moving toward a healthy minimum.

"I give it all to God," she says. "I know He can heal instantly, but if this illness has brought me to this level of faith, then that's also healing."

And more importantly, she says, is the continued assurance she has of the eternal power of the Cross.

"I no longer wake up in the morning wondering if I'm saved that day," she says. "I know that Christ bore His cross once and for all for me." **tpe**

SCOTT HARRUP is senior associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel* and blogs at sharrup.agblogger.org. E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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