



Pat Bitzan's Miracle Cure

As Mother's Day approaches, many people express thoughts of gratitude for the gift of their mothers. For Pat Bitzan, however, Mother's Day is a time when she is deeply thankful for the gift of being mother.

Pat is an active woman. She golfs regularly, follows sports with a passion, discusses the latest novels with her book group, and travels frequently with her husband, Don. They have been married 55 years. She is mother to seven grown children and the grandmother of 23. She lives a full and active life. It's not really out of the ordinary, until you consider that when Pat was 39 years old, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her cancer had already spread to her lungs, and doctors said her prognosis was grave.

In 1966, there was little the medical community could do to help her. "I was devastated", Pat says. "My children ranged in age from 10 months to 16 years. My greatest desire in my life was to raise my children".

The Pilgrimage

Faced with little hope, Pat and Don turned to their faith, their family and their friends for support. That support came through in ways that still surprise them. Shortly after her diagnosis, Fr. Arnold Weber, a Benedictine priest from St. John's, told Pat about Dom Columba Marmion, an Irish monk who served as abbot of a Benedictine monastery in southern Belgium during the time of World War I. Marmion was widely known for his abilities to reach out to people as a spiritual counselor. He was also a gifted teacher, spiritual writer, and retreat master.

When he became abbot, Marmion's motto was, "To serve rather than to rule". Under his leadership, the abbey at Maredsous became known as the "Parlor of Belgium" where people of high and low rank would come to seek Marmion's spiritual advice. His basic thought was that if people searched for God, the search itself was a prayer. He taught that everyone is called to a life of holiness.

After Marmion's death in 1923, the monks received hundreds of letters from people about how he had made an impact on their lives



and their faith. Marmion's reputation as a holy person was so strong that in 1957, the Diocese of Namur in Belgium initiated a formal investigation into his life and works with the hope that he might one day be declared a saint of the Catholic Church. Members of the Benedictine community throughout the world were asked to spread Marmion's story and to encourage people to ask Marmion to pray for them for special favors of healing. Pat says that after she read about Marmion, she couldn't get him out of her mind.

That's when she and Don decided to make a pilgrimage to Belgium to visit the tomb where Marmion was buried, and to ask Marmion to intercede – to pray with them to God for strength and healing. Arrangements were made as quickly as possible. Family members helped defray the costs of the trip and friends came forward to care for the Bitzan children.

Pat and Don arrived at the abbey at Maredsous in August 1966. “The twin towers of the monastery at Maredsous reminded us of St. John's”, Pat says. “We immediately felt comfortable there”.

The monks went out of their way to welcome them. “The Benedictines treat every visitor as if they were welcoming Christ”, Pat says. “We talked and talked. We opened our hearts to them and they were so loved”. The Bitzans spent four days at the abbey, visiting Marmion's tomb each day, praying and celebrating Mass with the monks. Pat remembers that when she touched Marmion's tomb for the first time, she felt a deep sense of connection with the deceased monk, and that connection remains strong for her today.

“When I touched the marble of Abbot Marmion's tomb I had such a sense of bonding and connection with him,” she says. “When I got home, I could still feel it”.

Pat felt well and strong at Maredsous and both she and Don, felt a great sense of peace as they left the abbey. “I didn't expect I would be cured, but I felt it was possible. I was hopeful”, Pat says.

Her hope turned to joy when, a few weeks after the Bitzan's return to St. Cloud, medical tests revealed that Pat's cancer was disappearing. Just months later, it was gone, and Pat has been cancer-free ever since.



The reunion

In the 1990s, after an exhaustive investigation of medical records and review of testimony from doctors involved with Pat's case, officials in the Vatican concluded that Pat's cure was miraculous and that her miracle of healing was performed through the intercession of Abbot Marmion. That miraculous healing led to Abbot Marmion's beatification at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome in September 2000. Beatification is the final step before a person is canonized, or declared a saint of the Catholic Church.

To celebrate the beatification, Pat and Don traveled to Rome with their adult children and their spouses for the ceremony. On a sun-drenched day amidst thousands of people, the Bitzan family watched as Marmion's portrait was unveiled in St. Peter's Square. The Church beatified five people that day – two popes, an Italian bishop, a French priest, and Abbot Marmion. The ceremony lasted for hours with songs, prayers and speeches in Italian, English, Spanish and French. The family's time in Rome included celebrations at both the Belgian and Irish embassies and a private audience for Pat and Don with Pope John Paul II.

After four days in Rome, the family flew together to Belgium. The quiet, cool Belgium countryside contrasted the fast-paced streets and crowds of Rome. Family members found themselves strangely silent as they drove along narrow roads toward Maredsous.

When they arrived, Pat and Don led their children to Marmion's tomb. Just inside the abbey church. The church was empty ; many of the monks at Maredsous were still in Rome and not expected to return to the monastery until the following day. Pat and Don approached the tomb, knelt down, reverently touched the stone and prayed. Then Pat stood and looked up at the picture of Marmion hanging above the tomb. In a voice filled with warmth, she addressed Marmion as one would a treasured friend. Her words filled the abbey church.

“Oh, Abbot Marmion”, she said, “I've brought you my children”. One by one, the children stepped forward in silent prayer -the experience beyond words. The family spent the next two days at Maredsous, walking the hilly roads around the abbey and enjoying



the company of the monks when they returned from Rome. They flew home a few days later.

“I dreamed all my life of bringing my children to Maredsous”, Pat says, “But I never actually thought it would really happen”.

The Legacy

Although the routines of daily life seem to quickly take over, family members have found that the experience of the trip has stayed with them. Many have expressed a deeper belief in the power of prayer and have felt a stronger connection with Abbot Marmion.

Since returning from Rome, Pat has often been asked to speak to groups about experiences. Although she is a private person and doesn't consider herself a speaker, she accepts the invitations to share her story with a deep sense of gratitude. “I feel that my role is to share Marmion's story with others”, she says.

Pat also responds to individuals who contact her about Marmion, people in need of healing themselves or those who are concerned about a loved one who is ill.

“Whenever I hear about people in trouble, I tell them about Abbot Marmion is the one to go to”, she says. Pat believes that prayers are answered. She feels strongly that the prayers of Abbot Marmion helped her put herself entirely in God's hands. “Even if I hadn't been cured, my prayers would have helped me let go and accept whatever I needed to accept”, she says.

The Catholic Church teaches that all healing – whether physical, spiritual or emotional- leads to a deepening of faith. That is certainly the case for Pat and for her family. Pat feels that her prayers to raise her children have been answered far beyond her expectations. “I treasured that God allowed me to have children and to raise them”, she says. “I am so grateful”. She considers the blessing of getting to know her children as adults, their spouses and all her grandchildren as “an extra bonus”.

Each night before they go to sleep, Pat and Don pray together. They give thanks for Pat's healing and they pray that Marmion will be recognized as a saint. They continue to ask Marmion to pray to God with them to help strengthen the faith and love of their family.



“With seven children and 23 grandchildren, there is always plenty of work for him to do”, she says with a smile.

Pat says she still doesn't understand why she was healed. Her Healing is a mystery that has enabled her to live out her life as a mother and grandmother. And “that is a gift”, Pat says “she is humbled by, and grateful for, every day”.

Mimi Bitzan

(This article by Mimi Bitzan, May/June 2003, is reprinted with permission from Envision Publishing LLC, Among Women Magazine, St. Cloud, Minnesota, USA)

**Post-Scriptum :
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On September 2007, my Husband and I returned to Maredsous to give thanks to God for my healing through Blessed Marmion.

As I placed my hand on the cool marble of his tomb, I could again feel the bond to Blessed Marmion that has remained with me since my first visit on August 8, 1966. I am humbled and grateful for the gift of life that God has given me through his intercession.

As I look back on my life, I thank God for allowing me to remain with my husband and children and see my children grow to adulthood. I have been privileged to see how my children have brought Abbot Marmion into their own lives. Our family's love for Blessed Marmion is profound.

As I thanked God at Blessed Marmion's tomb, I asked him to help me use my remaining years to do God's work in tending to the needs of others.

Pat Bitzan