

“This riveting book documents the journey of an internationally renowned cardiologist and scientist in her fight against cancer. An adventurous read, the book makes the reader eager to find out the progress and outcome of treatment. Under the guidance of a monk, author Magda Heras navigated the book of Psalms for prayer and inspiration in each event she faced on her journey. Equipped with her strong faith and personal relationship with the Lord, Heras feared no evil, even as she walked through the darkest valleys of life. Her witness in connecting faith and science reminds us intellectuals to ponder the ever-important life questions, ‘What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?’”

—Dr. Kai-Nan An, PhD
Professor Emeritus
Mayo Clinic College of Medicine

“*Even Though I Walk* sets new criteria for spiritual direction: The Psalms are the revelatory text. This book breaks new ground for cancer treatment and care.”

—Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, author of *Renouncing Violence: Practice from the Monastic Tradition*

“*Even Though I Walk* captures the magnificent humanity and steadfast courage of Dr. Magda Heras. Through her spiritual pilgrimage with the increasing reality of a dwindling number of days in this life, Magda’s writings inspire the most doubting skeptic. Knowing her in health was a joy and privilege but sharing her intimate ponderings as she approached death is a munificent treasure. This book should have special meaning to those who deny the intersection of faith and science or those who search in vain for a ‘cat with five feet.’”

—Michael B. Wood, MD
Emeritus President and CEO, Mayo Clinic

“What a beautiful book this is—one about dying, yes, but at least equally about living well, with a fully human spirit open to deepening friendship, to the development of prayer life (especially through the medium of the Psalms), and to appreciation of the created world. Magda and Ignasi’s correspondence is never saccharine or self-pitying; it acknowledges difficulties both spiritual and material. Yet it ultimately demonstrates—with instruction and reflection, questioning, lyricism, humor, and matter-of-fact description of the progress of cancer—how alive we can be, how much we can give each other even as life wanes. I wish I’d had this book when my husband was dying a decade and a half ago; I’m certainly going to share it with my hospice patients.”

—Susan H. Swetnam, author of *In the Mystery’s Shadow: Reflections on Caring for the Elderly and Dying*

“One of life’s great challenges is to walk genuinely through the valley of the shadow of death with another human being, maintaining the mystery, not taking refuge behind easy, stock answers. This lovely book tells a story of when it happened—through unfailing relationships and through learning to pray the Psalms. Delicate, sensitive, and highly insightful.”

—The Reverend Dr. James O. Chatham
Pastor, Presbyterian Church (USA)

“This book, while written in simple conversation, has a powerful message for all of us. Death comes in different ways but comes unavoidably to everyone. The dialogue between a Benedictine priest and an accomplished medical doctor reveals the tangle of emotions that emerge as the reality of death inexorably draws near. The book is not only enlightening but certainly worth a second reading.”

—Irene Nowell, OSB, author of *Wisdom: The Good Life*

Even Though I Walk

*One Woman's Journey of Prayer
in the Shadow of Death*

ACCOMPANIED BY A BENEDICTINE
AND THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Magda Heras and Ignasi Fossas

Translated by Elaine M. Lilly



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Translator's Note

I am honored that Magda's family entrusted to me the translation from Catalan to English of this "spiritual documentary." Magda was a beloved friend and I heard her voice, in English, as I worked. I also heard the voice of her correspondent, Ignasi Fossas, in a brief but unhurried conversation in the monastery at Montserrat revered by many Catalans for spiritual, environmental, and/or cultural reasons.

I freely admit to a lack of "professional distance" in this translation. The process helped me to digest my grief at my friend's death, to celebrate having known her, and to keep a promise I made as she sought to confront her cancer diagnosis in some positive way: "Magda, maybe you're supposed to write something about this. If you do, I will help you." I'm a manuscript editor. That's what I do. But Magda didn't write a book. She wrote personal notes, as she always had—handwritten, emails, and "WhatsApp" text messages. Her communication with Fr. Ignasi was especially important to her as she faced mortality; their unique friendship became a great comfort to her—and now to me and others as well.

After her death, Magda's husband worked with Fr. Ignasi to compile excerpts of their correspondence, and bits of her periodic health updates for friends and family, for publication by the press at the Abbey of Montserrat. Fr. Ignasi added some context (**shown in this font**) and I've added a few explanations and brief notes [*italicized, in square brackets*]. A glossary, referenced by superscript numbers in the text, contains longer explanations and untranslated Catalan words, expressions,

and cultural references. My favorite of these is a typical signature, *una abraçada* (a hug) or *petons* (kisses), which might puzzle the reader in translation. The welcoming embrace from Fr. Ignasi when we met and the parting benediction of a kiss on each cheek as I stood to leave are examples of how *abraçades* and *petons* show friendship and mutual respect. They are not translated in this book.

The best match for Bible translations tended to be the New International Version, except Psalm 23 (after the epilogue), which is from the English Standard Version. I have noted where I translated some portion of a verse quoted in Catalan or chose a different translation. The psalms are cited according to Masoretic numbering. All photos are from the family archives of Magda's husband, Marc Garcia-Elias. Sources for glossary entries are duly cited.

A personal note: I love the common Catalan expression of sympathy, "I accompany you in your sentiments" or more simply, "I accompany you." I use the short form, "*t'acompanyo*," and explain it to English-speakers like this: "It's almost one word, with just an apostrophe between us." Magda thanks Fr. Ignasi "for accompanying me in these difficult times," and I must thank both of them for accompanying me in this labor of love. I also thank those who graciously read drafts of the translation, including those who specifically helped this Lutheran kid attempt to do justice to the Catholic and Benedictine spirit of the correspondence.

Now, I leave you with the powerful prologue by Gabriel Magalhães, a Portuguese writer well known in Spain, and with the conversations, the pain, the spirit, the determination, and the tenderness of my friend Magda and the Benedictine who accompanied her toward her epilogue.

Elaine Lilly

Mankato, Minnesota, June 29, 2018

Prologue

Shining a Light in the Darkness

It is difficult to write these lines. Difficult because the book you now hold plunges into the mystery of pain and death. Faced with these somber, melancholic landscapes, our usual reaction is to look away. And say nothing. In fact, it is never easy to find words to say over cremation ashes or an open grave.

It is difficult, also, because in this volume we meet specific people, with names and surnames. On the one hand, there is Dr. Magda Heras, a distinguished Catalan cardiologist of international renown, who left a luminous professional and human legacy; on the other hand, Fr. Ignasi Fossas, also with a medical license but now a monk serving as the prior of the monastic community of Montserrat.



During Dr. Magda's serious illness, she decided to engage in an intensive contact with Fr. Ignasi. One of the outcomes was what we could conventionally call a correspondence, although the forms of media used have almost nothing to do with the traditional paper and ink. Their dialogue floated in the sophisticated web of new technologies; we are confronted with an epistolary transfigured by contemporaneity.

And here we have that exchange, full of smiles, tears, and most of all questions. It is a whirlwind of emotions and thoughts, whose protagonists are Magda Heras and Ignasi Fossas, with secondary actors as well: Dr. Marc Garcia-Elias,

Magda's husband; other monks at Montserrat; and relatives and friends. And now the one writing these lines and you, reading these pages.

Do we have the right to listen to this chamber music of the approaching death, so very present in this dialogue between a monk and a woman who is ill? Yes, we do, and for a very simple reason: Dr. Magda Heras, who had generously offered her life to all who had the privilege of knowing her, decided to give us her death as well. In fact, from the beginning she shared her illness, intensely, with the people around her. And her death, the way she had to leave this world, reminds us a bit of the concept of a "last master class" of a great teacher.

There is, then, a lot to learn in these pages. First, this book is an adventure in prayer. We believers often transform our prayers into a long-suffering monotony. We pray as if walking home with a heavy bag of daily spiritual shopping. Sometimes without even realizing it, we impoverish what could be one of the secret treasures of a life story.

Driven by the river of life into the waterfall of death, Magda Heras, who had done so much scientific research, began a search for prayer with the same rigor she had applied in the laboratory. The result was that she discovered the immense ocean of biblical psalms, an ocean through which she sailed, discovering islands of consolation and sometimes verbal currents that allowed her to express her own internal tempests.

Her great discovery of the Psalms would be enough to make this book useful. How many of us pray using this spiritual heritage? Perhaps some of us, at most, hear psalms sung (sometimes off-key) at Sunday Mass, and our participation is reduced to echoing a refrain. Actually, the Psalms can live in us, as if creating a cathedral of the soul. The one who prays them finds in them the best mirror for the hard times in life, as well as for the bursts of existential joy.

Let us remember that Jesus himself, on the cross, prayed a psalm: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

(Ps 22:1). This phrase is not a recognition of defeat, as less-informed readers of the gospels might think, but rather a shout of hope in a moment of despair . . . because the one who asks the question still believes in an answer. And in that possible answer there exists, and persists, a presence: a light that, though surrounded by the shadows, is not extinguished. The Psalms, including the psalm that Jesus prayed, are a fortress of prayer that protects us so we can resist the onslaughts of life.

Magda's navigation through the Psalms would not have been possible without a human compass, which for her was Fr. Ignasi Fossas. The prior of Montserrat was like a map that does not prescribe any particular route. The task of this learned and loving priest consisted of explaining prayer's "wind rose" [*an ancient sailor's tool showing 32 directions and the eight winds*], something he always did with exemplary humility, aware of what he did not know. Praying, of course, is also not knowing everything but yet not ceasing to recognize God in the swamp of doubts that sometimes show up in our prayers.

And that is how this trip toward the darkness was made in a ship of light: with Dr. Magda at the helm and Fr. Ignasi in the crow's nest, describing the horizon . . . because, indeed, the Abbey of Montserrat works a bit like the unfurled sails that allow navigation of the ship of Catalan spirituality. This book illustrates for us the relationship between the ethereal world of Montserrat and the more tangible cultural universe of Catalonia.

In fact, Dr. Magda went up to the "holy mountain," as many had done before her and many will do in the future. To "go up" (*pujar*—it must be said in Catalan to really ascend!) to Montserrat is an important part of Catalan identity. Many Catalans go up to this Benedictine abbey in order to truly be who they are, as if up there is a magic mirror that can allow us to see the transparency of our faces. For his part, Fr. Ignasi would also go down the mountain to visit his friend.

And the final result of these ascents and descents is a beautiful embrace of souls with no altitudes differentiating between them, only the purest Christian fraternity.

As a good scientist, Magda Heras appreciated innovation—which was reflected, for example, in her work as editor-in-chief of the *Revista Española de Cardiología*, the official journal of the Spanish Society of Cardiology. It is curious that the book you now hold in your hands also shows considerable novelty. In the Christian tradition, there are many volumes about pain. We have innumerable stories of martyrdom: severe fasting, hair shirts, and spiked belts appropriate for causing misery of the flesh; bare feet walking on sharp stones; and terminal illnesses narrated with beatific background music. There is even special language linked with these cases: the cross, atonement, reparation. This great dictionary of bitter suffering ends up transmitting the idea that pain is an accounting debt that must be paid to an implacable creditor (i.e., God).

Within this framework, some books are true horror stories because Christian spirituality, if misunderstood, gives rise to a terror film, staged with grim images from the darkest altars of the gloomiest churches. Not so with this book. What is surprising in Magda's correspondence is that, although there is pain, the suffering is expressed in today's words, using the most natural, everyday language. It is voiced without verbal affectation, without rhetorical sanctimony—in simple words, written by good people. It is a pain that speaks to us, seated by our side.

And this normality of language, this naturalness of word, is a great victory, an admirable merit of these pages. The merit is shared by Fr. Ignasi, who did not impose on his friend the verbal archaisms of faith—all those lexical dinosaurs that carry the believer away at times of suffering—and by Dr. Magda, who, in each message she sent, fought for honesty

and transparency in the words she wrote. In this book, phrases flow with the naturalness of a coastline—clean and crystal clear; carrying sediments of pain, yes, but without the toxic spills of a dark religiosity.

Another curious aspect of this book is the articulation between faith and science. As we all know, we have been trying, over the last two centuries, to build a strange “Berlin Wall” between these two realities, as if believing implies ignorance and scientific knowledge automatically entails disbelief. One would therefore have to choose between the view through a microscope or telescope—which science has multiplied into an infinite number of new technological eyeballs—and the old religious vision, with its millennial myopias and astigmatisms. With its blindfolds, many atheists would say. Well, these pages prove it does not have to be like that. The eyes of Dr. Magda, trained by science, are open to the horizons of faith. And these two ways of seeing are complementary, not antithetical.

The dialogue between faith and science is particularly rich in this case because, on the one hand, we find a monk and a scientist together in the foreground of the stage. On the other hand, this dialogue also occurs *within* each of these characters: the friar studied medicine, in that past life that gets left behind in any radical profession of faith, and the scientist learns to become a nun in a convent without walls, shaped by her illness and her prayers.

And here I must confess that, although these pages abound in the merits I have mentioned, they leave an aftertaste of sadness. Gradually, we become covered with the dust of melancholy because all this work of prayer—by Magda Heras, by Fr. Ignasi, by the monks at Montserrat—hits a wall, the wall of death. And reading these pages we see how that wall approaches but we are unable to slow down the car that is our lives. An experience before which, as I said at the beginning, we would prefer to close our eyes.

In other words, in this book we hear that terrible silence of God we have all experienced at some time. I heard it so much that for a while it was very difficult for me to write this prologue. Faced with the life experience of Dr. Magda, who had transformed herself into an endless prayer without being able to avoid her death, everything in me was an Easter vigil that had not yet found the path to Alleluia Sunday. There are times when all we have of our faith is the desire to believe.

And that was how I remained mute and melancholic before the divine silence until, one day at the end of this past month of May, Dr. Marc Garcia-Elias came to visit me in the solitude of Covilhã, my own personal desert wilderness. The same divine silence that intimidated me was also pursuing him. We had a conversation that embraced the memory of his wife. He showed me a slide presentation about Magda, which was a beautiful declaration of love showing that the illustrious cardiologist had been a fragile and charming girl whose tenacity, bravery, and intelligence transformed her into a brilliant climber of all life's peaks. Not only the professional ones but also family ones, affective ones, endearingly human ones. And so her death also became a great climb—ideal for this woman who was passionate about the highest peaks of existence. As Dr. Marc and I talked, somehow God started speaking to us in the words that we exchanged. And when Marc Garcia-Elias left, stepping back onto that hectic carousel of doctors who are international icons, I had learned three important things.

First, there will always be, in our life of faith, a moment in which everything around us says “no” and we will have to say “yes.” And at that moment our statement, in the midst of the darkness of such denial, will have a fundamental value. Magda Heras did it with her immense courage. And what we must hear, in the texts that she left us, is precisely the “yes” she wanted to say, and boldly said, without paying much

attention to the “no” she also heard. We can hope that she will help us to be capable of a similar affirmation in the darkest hours of our own life stories.

Second, when we approach death, the essential thing is to reach that threshold with all of our humanity intact. Dying is only an insoluble problem if we are already dead when we die. Many deaths today are like the dying of the dead. To avoid this terrible death of the already deceased, euthanasia is now suggested: the maximum endpoint of a fearsome multiplication of mortalities. But, if we approach the river that separates us from the other life with everything we are, we will discover within ourselves the mysterious boat that will take us to the other shore.

This book is, in fact, a spectacle of humanity: the consummately human Fr. Ignasi and the radically human Dr. Magda. Death represents, in essence, a shipwreck that allows the best of our condition as men and women to survive. And that is what happens in these pages: an explosion of affection, tenderness, kindness. An existential embrace that can encompass everyone who wishes to be embraced. Because Christianity teaches us that our humanity, both the evil we commit or, as in this case, the good that we are capable of, is our common homeland.

And the third conclusion: we should not die in resignation, chewing on our demise as if it were a bitter medicine. We must extinguish ourselves by loving life, loving it deeply, because we are not abandoning it but moving toward the other side of it, toward the most intensely vivid dimension of the same life. This is one of the great lessons from Magda Heras: she did not die while nodding off in the shade, but while seeking the sunlight. Shortly before she died, she told her husband that she wanted to hike once more up the Tèsol, a beloved peak in the Pyrenees. This reaffirms the idea that to die is to finish our climb to life’s summit, and not to just dive

into death's underwater grave. Our goal will not be to abandon the landscapes and the faces we love, but rather the opposite: to put all of them, having developed them in the darkroom of death, into our album for eternity.

In fact, Magda Heras did return to the Tèsol summit: Marc Garcia-Elias placed a part of his wife's ashes on that mountaintop. It was as if he had buried his wife in the air. And we must add that this book is also, in a sense, part of those ashes. These texts are what remains of the luminous death of an admirable woman who, in order to walk toward death, took the hand of a learned and intelligent monk, who was at the same time sensitive and pragmatic. The friar and the doctor sing, in these contemporary messages, a psalm for two voices: a spiritual duet that touches us, perhaps changing us as people.



A light shines on Son del Pi, a village at the base of El Tèsol

This book can also be defined as a dialogue between a living person who has died and a dead person who lives on. The living person who reminds us of a departed one is Fr. Ignasi, consecrated to a new life as a friar at Montserrat, a way of life in a mysterious no-man's land between this world and the one beyond. The dead woman who lives is Magda Heras. When we reach the end of this book, after we overcome the emotions of having read this very personal correspondence, Magda's absence infiltrates our lives as a friendly presence, a light shining in the darkness.

Meanwhile, the Abbey of Montserrat remains in the landscapes of Catalonia, Spain, and Europe. It stands like a portal to many mysteries, like the flight of prayers anchoring the fabric of our lives, like an ancient, profound Benedictine song that, every day, has new echoes. In short, it is a mirror reflecting the highest heights, in which each of us can find the truth in his or her face. Because we, like Dr. Magda, can go up to Montserrat and, doing that, one day reach, perhaps, the highest of all summits.

Gabriel Magalhães
Covilhã, Portugal, June 8, 2015

Introduction

I'd known Marc for years through the medical profession and through his involvement with our monastery. One Monday morning, September 24, 2012, to be exact, he called to see if I was at Montserrat. He wanted to come up with his wife, Magda, to visit me. We met in the community's reception area after Conventual Mass.¹ After the usual greetings, Magda excused herself to go to the washroom and Marc updated me about his activities, but quickly told me that this was not the reason for the visit; there was other news. Magda returned and told me about the diagnosis² she had received just a few days earlier.

All three of us are doctors and know how to keep an emotional distance when we discuss patients, but in this case the patient was there, in front of me, and I was impressed with her serenity. I became increasingly "touched," and I had no idea what to say. But my emotions reached their fullest when Magda finally said, "As you can imagine, everyone suggests things to do and special techniques to cope with the situation. To be honest, at this point only two things interest me: my oncologist's advice and if you can teach me to pray."

I couldn't move. Magda and I didn't know each other well, but I knew she was asking me for the only genuine thing that I could offer her at that point. It seemed that Providence had prepared everything. And so of course I humbly agreed to accept both this gift and the responsibility that was being offered to me.

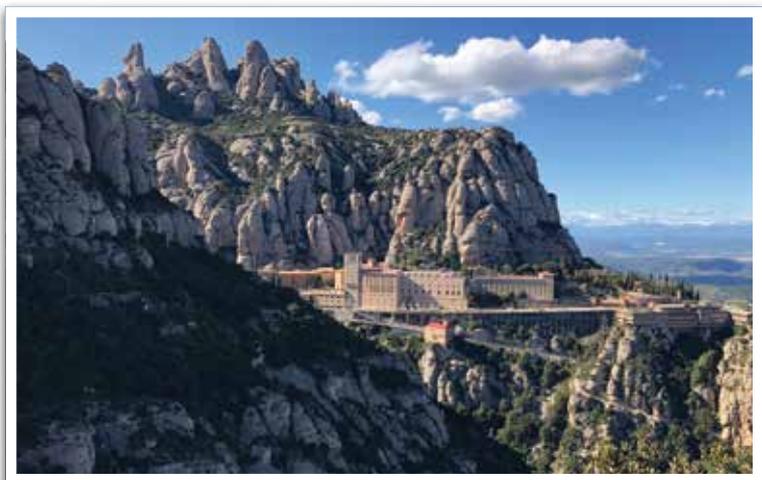
Thus began a last-minute friendship (as in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard: I arrived at the end of the day

and received the same as those who were there from the first hour!), a fabric woven of personal conversations, emails, WhatsApps, and so many other little things that make up everyday life. And with that friendship came access to a reality to which I have been, through grace and the goodness of Marc and Magda, an exceptional witness—and for that I can never be sufficiently grateful.

The following texts are a selection of emails and messages that Magda and I exchanged. I have added some notes to help the reader better understand the text. I have also inserted fragments of letters that Magda regularly sent to friends and relatives, explaining the evolution of her illness. It goes without saying that, together with Marc, I undertook this task with great emotion and with great respect and veneration. I hope this book can help those who read it as much as my friendship with Magda has helped me.

Ignasi M.

Montserrat, September 24, 2014



The Benedictine Monastery at Montserrat

Correspondence

September 12, 2012

Dear family and friends:

Yesterday I found out that the cough and shortness of breath that I've been having in recent months are caused by a lung tumor. . . . Gosh-darn-it-all,³ what news! Frankly, I really wasn't happy about setting aside what I was doing to focus on getting well, but there is no alternative and I plan to do everything necessary so that years from now we can talk about it in the past tense.

I am not the first in the family and probably not the last to have a tumor. I'm sure those who have been through it will help me with the practical aspects of facing it day-to-day, and I plan to be a diligent student. In addition, I hope that all of you will have some time to spend with me (going for a walk or for coffee, suggesting pastimes, good books, music, etc.).

I intend to continue living life as normally as possible and not stay home gazing at my navel, so I will go to concerts and the theatre and hope to be able to see more cinema than usual. Today I will have a more extensive visit with the pneumologist, tomorrow a PET scan (that's Positron Emission Tomography), and Thursday a bronchoscopy (with anesthesia!). When I have more details, I will share them.

We don't want to have any secrets from our friends and family, including our parents and our daughter. Marc and I believe that if everything is out in the open everyone will be better able to help me. Tell the youngest children that I'll explain it to them when we get together to celebrate September birthdays. Next June I'll be 60 and the celebration will be a special one.

Petons,⁴ Magda

September 14, 2012

Dear friends and family:

Today they did the PET scan. It was important to determine whether any other part of the body showed evidence of an additional tumor. Eureka! I only have one, on the right lung, the same one that showed on the computed axial tomography (CAT) scan—so today's scoreboard stands at 1-0! Some of you might think this delight is exaggerated, but for me it was very important to have this information and I'm happy with it.

The next round is a bronchoscopy on Tuesday. They'll take samples for pathology analysis, and next Thursday we'll know the type of tumor, and Friday they'll decide on treatment.

I am very happy with the way I'm treated at Hospital Clínic. Everybody is waiting for me when I arrive and they're familiarized with my case. Both the anesthesiologist and pathologist have called me to talk about things. I really couldn't ask for anything more. And what's more, everybody shows affection for me . . . what a luxury!

Magda

Magda / September 25, 2012

Dear Ignasi:

I know you are very busy and that somebody giving you a little more work is probably not what you really want. Nonetheless, I very much appreciated our conversation because it was an opportunity to talk with a medical colleague who understands disease but also has a spiritual dimension that I lack.

I haven't talked with you very often; in fact, the last time I saw you was when you were the financial administrator [*for the monastic community at Montserrat*]. I guess you and Marc have seen each other more often, for professional reasons. In any case, and to be brief, I would just tell you that both of us are highly dedicated to the medical profession: I teach at the University of Barcelona—residents, students—and direct doctoral dissertations, attend national and international conferences, do basic and clinical research, get grants, participate in working groups of national and international societies, etc. Marc has also done all that, and in our life together, which is and has been very pleasant, we have been 100% dedicated to our work. We have a 31-year-old daughter, Anna, a biologist who works in cell electrophysiology and now has her doctorate and teaches at Pompeu Fabra University.

We really enjoy nature, and our ideal getaway is walking in the mountains, or skiing, snowshoeing, etc. In fact, this summer we spent four sensational weeks in the Pallars Sobirà,⁵ where we have designed a house that we love. I hope that someday you will come to Isil to see it.

As I guess you can easily imagine, a diagnosis like this changes life in an instant. What was essential and urgent becomes totally secondary, and many things that had been put off or were “hibernating” (that's something we cardiologists say, “hibernating myocardium,” meaning the myocytes are alive but not pulsating due to inadequate blood flow) begin to surface with increasing intensity and persistence.



Isil, Pallars Subirà

This whole introduction is my way of telling you that I'd like to spend some time every day in spiritual reflection and prayer. I am not sure how to start and that's why I'm asking for your help. Obviously, I don't want some kind of "How to pray in one hour" short course, just some guidance on getting started, texts that could help me, etc.

I grew up in a Catholic family, but with two interesting approaches: my father believes that one must fulfill the obligations (Masses, communions, baptisms, etc.); my mother, who goes to Mass almost every day, has a faith that is more like mine. She says that we don't have to spend all day crossing ourselves, but we should maintain a dialog with One who loves us, and explain and ask for help with the things that worry us, feeling that God is near even if "it's been a few years" since we've maybe even said hello.

Anyway, while I am waiting for the pathologist to tell me about my tumor, I've taken the opportunity to write you. If you have a little time and want to spend it on me, I will appreciate it very much. I'm on sick leave, so I could come to Montserrat again someday, even though modern technology allows for more "virtual" contact. My brother comes up to the *Escolania*⁶ and I could ride along with him.

Just as I have taken the liberty of asking you this, I hope you will do the same and freely tell me whether you have a little time to spend with me.

Of all the possible “esoteric” or “natural” or “alternative” therapies everyone is recommending, and it seems that many people believe in them, I am only interested in the ones my oncologist and you can offer me.

Thank you for the opportunity to be in contact with you.

Ignasi / September 27, 2012

Your email made a big impression on me. In fact, I was also strongly impressed during your visit, of course. You are asking me for one of the most beautiful things a monk can share with others: prayer and the cultivation of a spiritual life. But at the same time, it is one of the most difficult things, because it is a very delicate subject that surpasses our understanding and in which I feel like an apprentice—like an R1 [*first-year resident, a physician undergoing supervised training in a specialty*], so you know what I mean.

I therefore agree to your proposal with enthusiasm, and also accept with fear and trembling (with fear and with a chill = with much respect) because you invite me to accompany you on a path that travels through the human heart—that is to say, through a sacred terrain. I will try to open my heart as a brother and share with you what I have learned about prayer.

Without further preamble, let's get to the point.

The Christian prayer par excellence is the “Our Father,” the Lord's Prayer. Ah, but first I wanted to tell you that in the Rule of Saint Benedict,⁷ when he speaks of the attitude of monks toward the oratory [*a monastic space for community and personal prayer*], he says that our minds (our spirits, our

hearts) must be “in harmony with our voices” [RB 19.7]. The monastic tradition teaches that the vocal repetition of certain prayers helps us to pray, as if tenderizing the heart, lovingly, and along the way it helps to focus and guide our thought and imagination toward the things of God.

I return to the Lord’s Prayer. I said that it is the Christian prayer *par excellence*. It is what Jesus taught his disciples when they asked that he teach them to pray. Sometimes it happens that these very well-known texts become almost irrelevant to us. It helps me to read them in other languages, because it seems to me that I hear them for the first time and there is always some new word or some new expression. The early Christians had the habit of praying the Lord’s Prayer three times a day: in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. It’s a good way to start.

There is a book that I like very much, although when it was published it received some criticism: the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁸ It is divided into four parts, and the last one is devoted to prayer. You will find a beautiful commentary on the Lord’s Prayer. In addition, the whole fourth part is a very good introduction to prayer, without forgetting an important aspect: the struggle of praying. It is not easy to pray, and this must be kept in mind so that you do not get discouraged when you think you don’t know how, or think that you are not making progress in prayer.

In addition to the Lord’s Prayer, the Bible offers us an entire book of prayers, the book that Jesus used to pray: it is the book of Psalms. But we can talk about that another day.

I send *una abraçada*⁴ and greetings to Marc.

Magda / April 29, 2013

As a complement to the printed copy of the *Revista* I brought you, I'm sending you the index for the May issue of the journal. We send this to all subscribers a few days before the print edition becomes available. In this issue, there is an editorial about hypothermia after cardiac arrest, something I remember discussing one of the first times we talked. As I've told you, the electronic edition is much better because the figures are in color and you have simultaneous access to the English and Spanish editions. If you're interested in browsing the articles, you have free access to those with an open-chain icon, but you need a password for the other texts/PDFs. You can use mine.

Simultaneous publication in both languages was one of the objectives I set for myself when I began as editor in chief, and this effort has been recognized by Medline, which now classifies the *Revista Española de Cardiología* as a bilingual journal. We have two copy editors who do magnificent work with the English and make the English texts fresh, agile, and to the point (instead of Spanglish).*

Anyway, that's a small sample of my work, in case you're interested in knowing how I spend my time (and what has saved my mental health over the past seven months, along with the assignments you have given me!). Of course, your current interests are probably pretty far from cardiology because you're not really in the thick of it.

Greetings from "The Editor," Magda

***As Magda wrote in her first email to me, one of the interesting aspects of our conversations was that we could talk about medicine as readily as about spirituality, because we had both areas in common. One aspect of her work as a cardiologist that had recently given her the greatest satisfaction was the**

Spanish cardiology journal, *Revista Española de Cardiología*, of which she was named editor in chief in late 2009. In that role, Magda managed to give the journal a higher international profile (the famous “impact factor”) than ever before. She focused on two key elements: the journal’s bilingual status (high-quality, simultaneous publication in Spanish and in English) and its electronic publication and web presence.

Magda / May 4, 2013

You told me that our patients are well under control and that’s good news.* Tomorrow I will come to the Conventual Mass with Marc and his mother, and we will stay for lunch. Maybe I could have a look at the patients’ vital signs in case we need to make some adjustment.

Let’s also plan to meet someday during the week of the 13th to the 17th, if that works for you, to keep my own “spiritual health” moving forward.

*One day in February 2013, F. Hilari Ragner¹¹ wasn’t feeling well and I was called to him. I suspected a myocardial infarction, so we did an electrocardiogram and emailed it to Magda. She confirmed the diagnosis and, while we waited for an ambulance, she sent instructions via WhatsApp as if we were in an emergency ward: Put in an IV, give him this med and that one, monitor his vital signs . . . Her professional reflexes kicked in immediately but, poor me, I could only have given him an aspirin and prayed for the ambulance to arrive quickly. When she learned where they were taking him, Magda immediately activated her spirit of service and, using her network of friends and colleagues at that hospital, kept us informed about the patient’s progress. After three days there was a serious complication and I am convinced (we all are, starting with the patient himself) that the monk is still alive thanks to Magda’s personal intervention. I explain this

because, in addition (Divine Providence again intervenes), this monk had published an edition of the book of Psalms with brief introductions for each one, precisely the book that I had recommended to Magda. From that point on, she monitored this monk's health—and a few others as well. They were “her patients” at Montserrat. I think that being able to continue doing some clinical practice, even tangentially, was good for Magda—but above all, it helped us a lot. As she said in a note to me on May 15, 2013: *“In fact, I think I need them more than they need me . . . they are now my only chance to be a doctor and I miss it very much.”*

Magda / May 7, 2013

Today I went walking in the foothills of Sant Llorenç [*very near Matadepera*], just beyond Vacarisses, and I had Montserrat in front of me all the time, with a splendid view of the mountain, and I thought about the visit on Sunday, which we enjoyed a lot. For my mother-in-law, that was a very special day because for a long time she had wanted to come along, but hesitated to ask us. In addition, she was able to chat with Fr. Josep, which brought back many memories for her. His sister Montserrat, who died so young, was her close friend and she has always missed her. When we left on the funicular, I showed her from the car exactly where Cuixà* is (Google Maps, what would we do without it?) and she kept saying how lucky she was to have visited with him at the monastery.

It's curious how everything has been pure coincidence (visiting another monk with heart disease!). My father would say that it is the fruit of Divine Providence and others would say “the world is a handkerchief” [*an idiom meaning “it's a small world”*]. As you saw, my mother-in-law is also a woman with a faith “etched in stone” (I am surrounded!).

What I say is that my relationship with your community is changing my life and has become my Prozac. (Don't look for it in the *Vademecum* [*Vademecum Académico de Medicamentos, an authoritative pharmacology handbook*] because it's not listed!)

We'll plan to meet again for a checkup . . .

PS: Can you send me the link to connect to Vespers? I do not have access via iTunes because the app does not work. Can I access it through your website?

*[Note: *Cuixà, home of Fr. Josep, is the site of a Benedictine monastery founded in the ninth century on the eastern side of the Pyrenees, in what was formerly part of Catalonia and is now French territory. Part of the twelfth-century cloister is now displayed in "The Cloisters Collection" of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470314>.]*

Magda / May 12, 2013

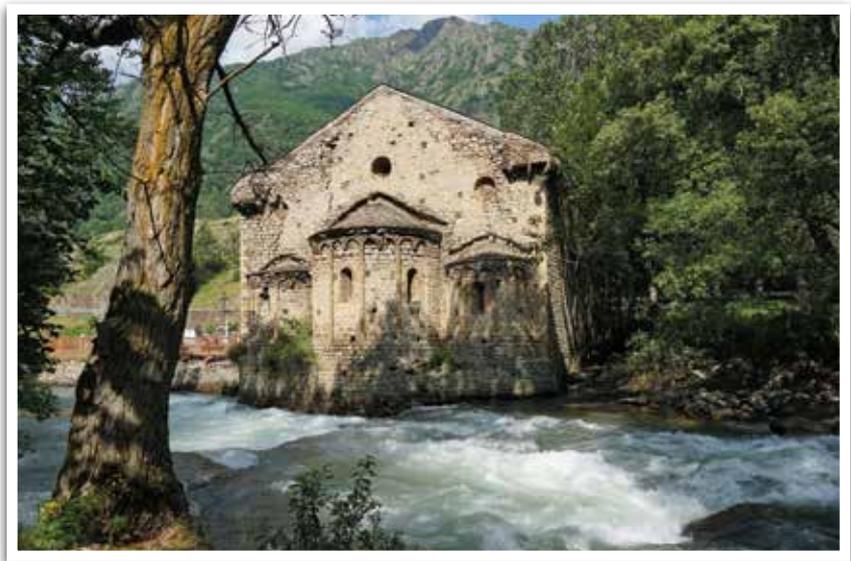
I saw during Vespers tonight that another monk has died. I don't know if it was expected, but we send you our sympathies.

Magda / May 18, 2013

Although it's noon, I'm just getting myself started. We are in Isil, in the Pyrenees. It's cold and we have snow close by, but everything has burst into a bright green, the river is flowing spectacularly, and the few forest flowers that dare to come out give a beautiful color to its banks . . . between rain squalls.

As always, thanks for Thursday afternoon. I have many friends but none with your availability to talk about EVERYTHING, and this helps me in a way that is difficult to explain.

One question stayed “in my inkwell,” about the *Introduction to the Psalms* by Saint Athanasius.¹⁰ In the conclusions, there is a reference to how the Psalms should be sung and the Rule of Saint Benedict is cited (I think it’s #81—I don’t have the book in front of me), where it says “*Mens nostra concordet voci nostrae.*” Does this have anything to do with the fact that, when monks read in church, most of you have a tone of voice and a way of speaking that it is “typical of the monks of Montserrat”? On the other hand, I can’t quite link Saint Athanasius (I think you told me he was from the fourth century) to the Rule of Saint Benedict from the seventh or eighth century. Or maybe I’ve just gotten it all mixed up . . .



The Noguera River in spring

Ignasi / May 20, 2013

I have had a very full weekend and now I am a bit calmer (Father Abbot is out all week and therefore I don't have the regular meetings with him).

With regard to note #81 of the Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms, it refers to an important topic in the monastic tradition of prayer (which can apply to all Christians). We start with biblical anthropology, which identifies three areas in the human being: the body, the soul (the psychological, emotional dimension), and the spirit (the spiritual dimension). These three areas are inseparable, always together but never confused. In prayer they can be identified with some ease. When we pray, on the one hand we use the body: we put ourselves in a certain position, we speak or sing—they say that even if we pray alone in silence, we move our tongues imperceptibly, as if we want to pronounce what we are reading. We add our psychology: we may be happy or sad, energetic or tired, etc. And there is also our spiritual dimension: this is where prayer reaches its peak.

According to the monastic tradition, in prayer the order of these areas is from the body to the spirit (and not vice versa, as we ourselves might spontaneously assume). In other words, one begins to recite psalms, we might say, in a “mechanical” way, without understanding everything (the soul, psychology, intelligence still participate very little, and the spirit may still be far away from prayer). Little by little, those words that we say begin to impregnate our interior selves and the prayer becomes unveiled in the spirit.

When Saint Athanasius wrote, “He should take what they (the Psalms) say about each of these situations, present it to the Lord, and say it as if the words were written precisely so that he would say them; in this way, his spirit is in accord

with what has been written” [Note: Fr. Ignasi’s own translation from Greek], that is what he was saying.

Two centuries later, Saint Benedict says the same thing with this phrase that has become a classic: “Let the monks pray in their hearts in such a way that their minds (or we could also say their spirits) are in harmony with their voices” [see RB 19.7].

Obviously, between Saint Athanasius (fourth century) and Saint Benedict (sixth century), there was no direct relationship. They were separated by two centuries, two cultures (Hellenistic, Roman), two languages (Greek, Latin), and two landscapes (Alexandria, South-Central Italy), but they had in common the Christian faith and the monastic tradition (Saint Benedict copied from both the Eastern and Western monastic traditions), and therefore agreed about this order in the learning of monastic wisdom: from the body to the psychology [*the mind*] to finally reach the spirit.

The fact that in Montserrat we all end up reading and singing in a very similar way has, I think, more to do with the fact of living in community. The community tends to create a style, a way to do things to which we all adapt ourselves.

I have been following the emails with Brother Sergi about the contacts in the US and the subject of the “endowment fund.” Thank you very much for your cooperation and your efforts.*

As for the Mass on June 29th [*for Magda’s 60th birthday*], I reserved the Saint Joseph Chapel (next to the Cambril) at five in the afternoon (the Cambril has a group scheduled at that time). The Saint Joseph Chapel is small, but ten people will fit well. If you think we will be more, we will look for another place.

It was funny that you said you can talk about EVERYTHING with me. That hadn’t occurred to me. There is a classical

author (Terence, I think) who said: “I am human, and everything that is human interests me.” And Paul VI, when he went to the [United Nations] General Assembly, said he came in the name of an institution that “is an expert on humanity.” I would like to be like that.

Thanks to you, Magda, once again. How beautiful it must be in Isil these days!

***Another area in which Magda helped us was that of the Escolania. At that time, we were thinking about the possibility of raising funds in the United States, as had been recommended to us in several contexts. Magda’s experience with the world and culture of the US was of great value to us.**

May 20, 2013

Dear friends and family:

As you already know, on June 29th—God willing—I’ll be 60 years old!

Traditionally, birthdays are celebrated with more intensity when they are especially significant (coming of age, entering a new decade, etc.). In my case, the change in decade comes along with my delight at having reached this milestone despite my personal battle with a “pulmonary invader” that has radically changed my daily life over the past eight months. Therefore, I think this is reason for satisfaction and joy and it should be celebrated with all of you who love me and have been at my side during this difficult and different stage in my life.

Having already announced that the party would be on June 29th, however, I realize that date coincides with a macro-concert by Lluís Llach and the call for our own Catalan state in Europe. I cannot compete with this

important event, nor do I want to. To avoid making you choose, I have decided to have the party the night before, the eve of Sant Pere, * the 28th of June. I'll be expecting you.

Magda

*[*Sant Pere = Feast Day of Saint Peter, the main summer festival in Terrassa, celebrated for a week and including many popular traditions on the weekend of the Feast Day.]*

Magda / May 21, 2013

Thank you for agreeing to come to my birthday celebration, Ignasi. I'm very happy you'll be there. You're a "special friend" (*without* even having "a partner"!), and thank you, too, for the whole explanation of the three levels of prayer. I must be on the first floor trying to get to the second floor—the psychological part—somehow, but I hope that if I can just work out enough I'll make it up to the third floor (spirit).

Even though you're more an urban guy and now I know you really like the sea, we'd like you to come to Isil some day(s) this summer and, if you want, you could bring your mother along. I promise not to make you climb any mountain peaks—my current lung capacity is more appropriate for "granny walks" along the river (also beautiful!!).

Magda / May 22, 2013

Verses 10-14 of Psalm 65 describe Isil this weekend. The psalmist must have written it here!

Ignasi / May 22, 2013

“O Lord our God, you provide us with bountiful goodness”
(v. 6)* . . . Isil must be so beautiful.

[*Translated directly from the Catalan Bible verse.]

The verses Magda sent from Psalm 65 became my contribution when her daughter Anna asked for letters to include in Magda’s 60th birthday album. The text I submitted, with my signature, was the following:

- ⁹ You care for the land and water it;
 you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water
 to provide the people with grain,
 for so you have ordained it.
- ¹⁰ You drench its furrows and level its ridges;
 you soften it with showers and bless its crops.
- ¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty,
 and your carts overflow with abundance.
- ¹² The grasslands of the wilderness overflow;
 the hills are clothed with gladness.
- ¹³ The meadows are covered with flocks
 and the valleys are mantled with grain;
 they shout for joy and sing.

Psalm 65:9-13

From the same Psalm, verse 6: O Lord our God, you provide us with bountiful goodness . . .

“ . . . that was Isil this weekend. The psalmist must have written it there!” (Magda)

I don’t know where the psalmist was when he wrote this psalm. But I’m sure that He who inspired the psalmist also created Isil. Everything has come from His hands: the human heart and the wonders of creation. And everything is called to return to Him in Jesus Christ.

Per molts anys,* Magda!

[*Literally, “for many years”—used for Happy Birthday/Anniversary and other congratulations.]

Magda / May 22, 2013

Ignasi, we will not come to Salve at noon because my friends got confused about the schedule. Now it is clear that we will meet with Brother Sergi on Friday afternoon at 5:30, at the *Escolania*, and then they will stay for Vespers and Salve and overnight at Cisneros [*Hotel Abat Cisneros, within the abbey complex*].

I'll go back home because I will spend the weekend with Gemma, one of my sisters, in Palafrugell. Marc goes to the Mayo Clinic this Thursday, and I'd rather not be alone Saturday and Sunday. Before this illness, I loved being alone at home and doing whatever I wanted, but now I need to be with someone because the company helps me to "control the brain." Sometimes I don't recognize myself, a Type-A personality, continuously looking for companionship . . . Ah, and Monday, another onco appointment . . .

We have never talked about it directly, but I hope that you are one of those who are praying for me, that you have me "on your prayer list," as Sister Margaret says.

Magda / May 28, 2013

I'm on the Sant Jeroni trail [*the highest peak on the mountain of Montserrat*] with a friend from Hospital Clínic. We'll come down for lunch. Can we say hello to you and maybe have coffee?

Ignasi / May 28, 2013

Yes, sure. OK. I'll come to Cisneros at 3:15.

Magda / October 30, 2013

Good evening: I just saw you on *Telenotícies Nit* (*the evening TV news in Catalan*) explaining the Rule of Saint Benedict to a group of business leaders.

If you do another seminar like that, can I sign up or is it only for people from the business world? If not, we will have to do “private classes” so I can better understand its applicability to the 21st century. You already saw from the previous emails that I have many questions.

Congratulations on this initiative—surely it will be a success!

Ignasi / November 1, 2013

The next course on the Rule of Saint Benedict and leadership will be November 21-22. If that works for you, you can sign up, no problem; just say the word and you’re invited.

Wednesday evening (it’s always in the evening, when the qualified nurse has already left Montserrat!), I had to attend a lady who was in a bad state. Thank God it was nothing; but there were funny situations, which I cannot explain in writing.

Magda / November 1, 2013

I am free on November 21 and 22, and if it is not restricted to a closed group, I would like to be there. We will need to discuss the practical aspects (hotel, registration, level of prior knowledge, etc.). I’d like to see a syllabus of previous courses. Thank you very much for the invitation!

I did not go online for the Conventual Mass because it got too late. I spent the morning editing an urgent text, cooking sweet potatoes, and preparing quince . . . (“multitasking”). Not to say so myself, but everything tasted very good and the text has improved a lot. When I noticed it was already 11:45, I applied the saying of Saint Teresa (according to my mother), “God also walks among the pots and pans,” and I stopped with just my morning psalms.

On Wednesday you had the classic evening or nighttime call; it seems that Murphy [*of Murphy’s Law*] feels right at home at Montserrat. I can imagine some situations that are better not put into writing. In fact, doctors could write books that would be bestsellers.

Now I’ll tell you about one that happened to me when I was just a resident and I had to leave the room to laugh until I could get serious again and continue.

When I was doing the hospital rotation for hemodynamics, in the afternoon before a catheterization we would visit the patients who were to have the procedure the next day. We examined them, paying special attention to the femoral pulses, and explained that we would put them under local anesthesia, puncture the artery without hurting them, inject contrast (under pressure, with some accompanying discomfort), apply digital compression for 20 minutes and then bandage them up, and then they would have to rest in bed for 24 hours.

Well, I went to see Mr. X (Spanish-speaking) and I said:

MH: Good afternoon. I am Dr. Heras and I am here to explain the catheterization [*in Spanish*, cateterismo].

Mr. X: Thank you very much, Doctor, but I’m not interested.

MH: Excuse me, but I think you should be well informed and we need to talk about it.

Mr. X: I tell you with great conviction, I studied with the friars and I am very clear about this.

MH: Sorry, but I do not see the relationship between the friars and tomorrow's procedure.

Mr. X: You said that you came to explain the catechism to me and I repeat that it does not interest me.

I could barely tell him that he had confused the two words [*cateterismo versus catecismo*—before running out of the room and laughing myself silly at the misunderstanding! You see that my capacity for proselytizing is nil!

Well, when I see you on the 16th you can tell me that story of yours, unless it's a professional secret.

Many greetings from Isil, with the trees all golden and already dropping their leaves. Glorious as always.

November 5, 2013

Dear friends and family:

You probably know that I had a “difficult” month of July because the drug I was taking as an oral medication stopped working for me. The tumor developed a resistance to it. Finally, and after many tests and premedication [*to ward off side effects*], I began traditional chemotherapy on July 31st.

After four chemotherapy sessions with two drugs, last week's PET showed tumor stabilization; the oncologist told me this was good news because it looks like it will stay like this; in other words, it will become chronic and

the objective for future treatment is to “keep it within bounds.” On the other hand, the lab tests were back to normal.

Today I changed to a management chemotherapy that is administered in just 15 minutes; this is an important improvement because the previous doses kept me there for seven hours. In addition, it doesn’t affect my veins and it appears that the side effects will be negligible. I’ll know about that over the coming days, as individual responses vary.

I feel very good; I feel like doing things and I do them, including walks when we are in Isil. The other day I hiked up 400 meters within a short distance and wasn’t short of breath—but I did it at my own pace. All the same, now I have to get back into physical shape because the four chemotherapy sessions left me with very little strength and quite tired.

Well, thanks for your interest and unconditional support in this “difficult” time, but it’s “interesting” too, in a way, because of all that I have learned.

Una abraçada, Magda

Magda / November 5, 2013

I have sent you a copy of the update letter that I do for my friends and family. I find it a good way to keep them up to date, especially because they are grateful for news. Besides, their replies and the contact make me feel loved in a way that I would never have thought. I think we have talked about it before, but I find it to be a very rich experience.

The news from the oncologist was positive even though (in her words) it seems this tumor just won’t go away; therefore,

if it does not spread like it did last summer, that will be the best that can happen. In addition, I now find myself in good shape, although that's more mental and work-related than physical, but if the new chemo regimen means I won't be so wiped out, I will promptly begin a physiotherapy program before restarting tennis and swimming. Physical exercise is an important part of my life that I want to resume.

What I wanted to say at a more personal level is that yesterday evening's reading was Psalm 115-116 and it seemed tailor-made for the news that I got. I recited it with great pleasure because it expressed very well what I felt. There are also days that it seems to go the other way 'round, but according to Fr. Hilari, then one must adapt to focus on other people who may be suffering or enjoying situations different from ours. I find it harder but I make the effort.

Today I will only do half of my "homework" because between the chemo and the trip to Isil I could not say the Psalms in the morning. Now I will recite the afternoon ones because I have a cook: Marc has taken the week off to take care of me and is making dinner (an "Asian delight"). Oh! And I say the prayer of Simeon because it's short. The problem is that I usually do it in bed and sometimes life as a couple doesn't exactly facilitate one's concentration. This is why Saint Benedict was very clear that if you want to fully devote yourself to the life of "*l'ora et labora*" [*prayer and work*], it is better to be alone. That's not my choice and so I do my best to combine "*l'ora*" with family and daily life.

I have written to Fr. Hilari and told him that you and I would work out the schedules for the visit with the Arzamendis on the 16th. I think we agreed to meet in the reception area after the Conventual Mass. We will visit the parts of the monastery you want to show them and part of the museum. I also understand that we will eat there; if that's not the case, tell me and

I'll make a reservation at Cisneros. If we have time before coming to see you, we will probably take the funicular so that they can see the landscape, since Begoña is seven months pregnant and hiking is not the best thing for her right now. They won't bring their son because our plan isn't designed for a two-year-old and what he wants and needs to do is run, play, and be able to take a good nap.

Forgive all the personal "news." I don't mean to be a bother but I like to share details with you.

Ignasi / November 6, 2013

I am grateful for the possibility of sharing some "more personal" things. As I always tell you, it's very good for me.

I'm glad about the oncologist's positive news. Perhaps Our Lord has removed the parsley from one ear, at least (forgive the irreverence, but you taught me the metaphor).

It's true what you said about the Psalms. There are days that they seem tailor-made for what we are living through. I think it is a privilege to have access to words to say and that express who we are and what we feel. In addition to expressing who we are, the words also help to create thoughts, and in some way to shape our being (but maybe I'm exaggerating). It is not by chance that the Gospel of Saint John begins with that expression: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). And the Word is Jesus, the Messiah.

As for the Arzamendi visit, I imagine it like this: we meet after Conventual Mass in the reception area. I have to welcome a pilgrimage group on behalf of Father Abbot, who will be away. I will leave you with Fr. Hilari, who can show you the library and other rooms of the monastery.

	W2 Sun	W2 Mon	W2 Tue	W2 Wed	W2 Thu	W2 Fri	W2 Sat
Wake-up	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 6	1, 2, 6
Morning	9, 10, 11	16, 17	19-21	25-27	31-33	38-40	
Vespers	12-15	18	22-24	28-30	34, 35, 37	41, 44(II)	
Night	4, 7, 8	4, 7, 8	4, 7, 8	4, 7, 8	4, 7, 8	4, 7, 8	4, 7, 8
	W3 Sun	W3 Mon	W3 Tue	W3 Wed	W3 Thu	W3 Fri	W3 Sat
Wake-up	50, 52, 53						
Morning	58, 59, 60	68, 69	73, 74	78	81, 82, 83	87, 93	94, 96, 97
Vespers	61, 62, 66	70-72	75, 77	79, 80	84-86	89	98-100
Night	54-56	54-56	54-56	54-56	54-56	54-56	54-56
	W4 Sun	W4 Mon	W4 Tue	W4 Wed	W4 Thu	W4 Fri	W4 Sat
Wake-up	101- 103	101-103	101- 103	101- 103	101- 103	101- 103	101- 103
Morning	104	106	119	119	123, 124	127, 128	149
Vespers	105	107	119	120- 122	125, 126	148	150
Night	108, 109						

Magda / December 3, 2013

In Madrid it has been even colder than at Montserrat, and today I was able to go to the gym and pool because my myalgia went away. I am celebrating with a good black tea and chocolate, waiting for Marc—who has already arrived in Madrid [*from an international trip*]. I will find some good psalms for the evening . . . the Abbess* allows it.

*In one of our conversations, and I don't quite remember how, the metaphor of the Mother Abbess came about. This was normal, given the importance of the figure of the Abbot in the Rule of Saint Benedict and in monastic life. The "game" was very innocent: just as I have an Abbot whom I must obey, Magda had her Abbess (which after all was her own good heart) to whom, in turn, she had to give obedience. The game lasted until the day before Magda's death. Already confined to her bed, in a moment of clarity she said: "Now I cannot pray psalms; I am very weak." I answered, with great emotion, "The Mother Abbess will understand perfectly."

Magda / December 16, 2013

From December 9th to 16th, I went to the Benedictine Abbey in Montecassino, Italy, to lead spiritual exercises in the community. Then I spent a couple of days in Rome. Before leaving, I had given Magda and Marc two tickets for a Christmas concert at the Sagrada Família. [Note: This is the famously "unfinished" modernist cathedral by architect Antoni Gaudí, now nearly finished.]

I don't know if you have access to email in Rome, but if not you will find this one (with a few hundred more!) when you arrive at Montserrat.

Yesterday we went to the concert in Sagrada Família; I attach the program for you. The choir and musicians were very good, but the height of the church eats up the sound, although the reverberation is really not as much as one might expect from seeing the structure.

I really liked that they sang the Christmas carols arranged by Guinovart because we had just been looking for this recording to give to the journal's collaborators but it turned out that it's already out of print. In the end, I bought carols sung

by the *Escolania*, so now I'm advertising them "in Spain" [*i.e., outside of Catalonia*].

By the way, this week on Channel 33 I saw an interview with Fr. Lluís Duch, the "intermediation" guy, and I was impressed by his speaking and reasoning. Today I went to hear Fr. Hilari at the Bar Association talking about Manuel Carrasco i Formiguera [*Catalan lawyer and Christian Democrat, 1890-1938; executed in Burgos by Franco's army in the Spanish Civil War*]. He was brilliant, but he made me worry because, obviously, he did not follow my advice to speak slowly. He raced to say everything in 40 minutes and didn't stop even to take a sip of water! And the best thing was that he had no dyspnea. When he finished, I went to tell him that I saw he was in fine form, and he laughed.

The more I know, the more intrigued I am to know how the Rule of Saint Benedict can accommodate all these "brains" under the same roof for life, without harming day-to-day relationships.

By the way, Father Abbot told me that you are coming back tomorrow and he leaves for Rome and Montecassino the next day . . . He said that you had gone to prepare the soil. He was very kind and told me that he knew my father.

Today I had the umpteenth lab tests and saw the oncologist. Everything is stable and the best thing is that I remain in full physical and psychological form, although I have to admit that I increasingly get nervous when I turn on the computer to look at test results or images.

Tomorrow they will give me the maintenance chemo. The doctor has explained that the myalgia I have, and likely will continue to have, is one of the side effects of Premetexed . . . this has taken a weight off me, and ended the temptation to turn it over and over in my head more than necessary. As we

have discussed several times, the challenge of the disease is more mental than physical and that does not change over time, although fortunately I have found many tools to channel my brain when it overflows. You have been an active collaborator, and thanks again for that.

I hope that your work in Montecassino was pleasant and effective, and above all that you enjoyed your time in Rome and speaking Italian.

Ciao and until Saturday (a sample of my “lamentable” Italian skills).

Ignasi / December 17, 2013

Ciao dottoressa [Hello, Madame Doctor]: Thanks to modern technology, I’ve been able to read your email. I’m really glad about the news you shared.

I’ll tell you later about Montecassino.

In Rome, I arrived Saturday afternoon and leave at midday today [*Tuesday*]. This city has stolen my heart. I have walked a lot (very healthy from a cardiovascular point of view, right?), and I have been immersed in this simultaneously local and cosmopolitan atmosphere. *Na meraviglia [a marvel]*, as the Romans say.

Magda / December 17, 2013

Physical exercise is very beneficial for cardiovascular health but also for mental well-being, although that is scientifically more difficult to evaluate! Therefore, these days you are accumulating a double dose of good health. I hope to see you rejuvenated this Saturday!

I have been in Rome four times, very little, but I was impressed by the Roman Forum and the Villa Borghese (especially the sculptures). The Trastevere street life is also interesting, to take in this more local and less cosmopolitan aspect. We'll talk soon.

They've just given me the medication and tomorrow and Thursday I'll be back in Madrid again; it's a good time to go there because they invariably want to talk about the referendum!¹⁹

Magda / December 27, 2013

Good morning. Today I got up early because I have a PET scan (aiiyi! . . .) and I followed along during Lauds using the Book of Hours, but unsuccessfully because I thought it was the Feast of Saint John* (??). Finally I ended with the psalms approved by my Abbess Have a good day! . . . and "pray" for me.²⁰

***It was John the Baptist, not the Apostle.**

Ignasi / December 27, 2013

Do what the Mother Abbess says, no problem! I pray for you.

Magda / December 29, 2013

To celebrate their 37th wedding anniversary, Magda and Marc spent a couple of days at Montserrat.

We really enjoyed our several visits with you yesterday, especially in the evening, although Marc made us all go to sleep “early” (maybe you also appreciated that). Please thank your prior for being such an understanding and generous guy!
[Note: Ignasi IS, of course, the prior.]

Today I left Mass feeling frustrated. The reading of the letter from Saint Paul regarding the submission of the wife to her husband is so out of date that—even though I understand it was written maaaaaaany years ago—it hurts the ears and the heart to keep hearing it . . . Can’t you do something to adapt these texts to current sensibilities? Precisely today, the day we were married 37 years ago, I think that our partnership’s success has been our ongoing pact to support each other, simultaneously, where family and professional activities were concerned, without either of us having to renounce an opportunity to do something interesting. In many couples that don’t last, the origin of the problem is precisely the domination of one over the other. Doesn’t it seem deeply unfair that 50% of the population has to be subjected to the other sex that for “unknown” reasons is the stronger sex? I would like to know how the women priests* of the Anglican church have resolved this issue.

You see that I am belligerent on this point, but it reminds me of that verse of a Psalm that says the children of Babylon must be smashed against the rocks. One day you told me that some pope had said that due to respect for current sensibilities this verse should be removed. I propose that this phrase of Saint Paul’s also be revised . . . but I do not know anybody I should talk to other than your always attentive and patient ears.

*[*Note: Magda used the term women “ministers.”]*

Glossary of Terms

1 Conventual Mass (*missa conventualis*): This is the daily Mass of the monastic community, open to visitors, which together with the Liturgy of the Hours (the times specified for prayer in the Rule of Saint Benedict) completes the official public services in the Church.

2 Magda's diagnosis was primary pulmonary adenocarcinoma, a non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) that is more common in women than in men and more likely than other types of lung cancer to occur in younger people and nonsmokers. The text refers to cancer-related tests and other medical terminology, including tests such as gamma-glutamyl transferase (gGT), alkaline phosphatase, transaminases, hepatic enzymes), symptoms (hepatomegaly, edema, erythema), and imaging technologies, mainly positron emission tomography (PET) and computer-aided tomography (CAT) scans. In Magda's case, CAT scans assessed the location, shape, and dimensions of her tumor and PET scans showed growth and activity.

3 Gosh-darn / Omigosh / Darnitall: Magda and Ignasi use mild forms of “un-cuss words” allowed by good Catalan mothers, and I have translated them to phrases permitted by my own mother. The Catalan originals are more colorful than any cussing I was not allowed to do, but the parental interventions had the same effect: avoiding a violation of the Second Commandment.

4 *un petó/petons* (a kiss/kisses) and *una abraçada* (an embrace): As explained in the translator's note, this standard "sign-off" is not translated in order to preserve the sense of a friendly embrace and/or cheek kisses given in greeting throughout much of Europe. In Catalonia, this is typically a hug or touch on the arm and a perfunctory kiss on each cheek regardless of gender.

5 **Isil** (altitude: 1163m/3815ft) is one of four small villages in the municipality of Àneu Valley (**Valls d'Àneu**), located in the county of **Pallars Sobirà**. **València d'Àneu** is the administrative seat. **Isil** has fewer than sixty houses, distributed along both banks of the **Noguera Pallaresa** river, which divides to form a tiny island at the center of the village. The village hall, parish church, and rectory are on this "island." *Source:* <http://www.vallsdaneu.org/list/14/pobles/18/isil/>.

6 *Escolania* is a choir school first documented in 1307 (the founding year is uncertain; the monastery was established in 1025). The *Escolania* today consists of fifty boys from nine to fourteen years of age from all of Catalonia. The majority of the choristers start in primary school and finish as they begin secondary school, based on the development of the voice. Magda's brother, a cellist, teaches music classes there.

The *Escolania* is an integrated education and artistic learning center, recognized by the Department of Education of the Catalan government, the *Generalitat de Catalunya*. During the morning hours, the choristers receive general education in all subjects. The afternoon is dedicated to music theory classes, choir rehearsals, instrument lessons, orchestra, etc. For centuries, the choristers have sung daily at the Sanctuary of Montserrat. *Source:* <http://www.escolania.cat/en/escolania/history/>

Fr. Ignasi mentions the singing of the *Virolai*, composed in 1880 to honor the Madonna of Montserrat, called *la Moreneta*

and *la rosa d'abril* (the Rose of April, the month of her feast day): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-Fkh3mUqWY>.

7 *Rule of Saint Benedict* (excerpts): Timothy Fry, ed., *The Rule of Benedict 1980* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981). See also <http://www.osb.org/our-roots/the-rule/>.

8 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

9 *Marató TV3*: This annual telethon, sponsored by Catalan public television (channel 3: TV3) and its operating foundation, raises funds for scientific research into diseases which are currently incurable. It also informs the Catalan public about these diseases and explains the need for research aimed at preventing and curing them. Every year *La Marató* attracts an audience of more than 3 million viewers, collects an average of 7 million euros (more than \$8 million USD), and encompasses more than 2,000 entertainment and informational events throughout Catalonia. Participants include well-known individuals from the world of music, theatre, film, and sports, who donate their talents just as many others volunteer their time. **Source**: <http://www.ccma.cat/tv3/marato/en/que-es-la-marato/>

Magda referenced the *Marató TV3* performance of “You Raise Me Up,” by Sergio Dalma and the *Escolania*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkeu28NbXn0>.

10 *The Letter from Saint Athanasius to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms* is the reference document when Ignasi talks about “making the words of the Psalms our own.” **Source**: <http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm>.

11 *Hilari Ragner*: lawyer, historian, and Benedictine monk living at Montserrat since 1954. He established a journal of

ecclesiastical history and has published studies of twentieth-century Catalan history. In 2014, he received the Catalan government's highest recognition for service to Catalunya, emphasizing his research on the short-lived Second Spanish Republic (1931–39, with a symbolic government-in-exile persisting in Mexico until a post-Franco Spanish Constitution was passed in 1972).

12 *Palau de la Música Catalana*: Built between 1905 and 1908 by the modernist architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner as a home for the *Orfeó Català*, the “Palace of Catalan Music” was financed by popular subscription. The building is an architectural jewel of Catalan Art Nouveau, the only concert venue in this style to be listed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** (December 4, 1997). The modernist building is designed around a central metal structure covered in glass, which exploits natural light to make Domènech i Montaner's masterpiece into “a magical music box of all the decorative arts: sculpture, mosaic, stained glass and ironwork.” *Source and photos:* http://www.palaumusica.cat/en/the-art-nouveau-building_23602.

13 *Saint's days*, the feast day of the saint for which a child was named, are still celebrated extensively in Catalonia—and formerly, were more important than birthdays in many families. “Magda” is short for Maria Magdalena, the saint whose feast day is July 22nd. During some historical periods (such as the Franco era), newborns could *only* be given a name from a list of saints and holy places. For example, Montserrat was allowed in Catalonia, and a “Montse” can be congratulated on April 27th. On page 84, the correspondence notes some confusion about a Saint John in the readings; Ignasi explains it was John the Apostle (December 27th). [See glossary #26 for the festival held in Isil on the eve of June 24th, the feast day of John the Baptist.]

14 *Oxygen saturation* is the fraction of oxygen-saturated hemoglobin relative to total hemoglobin (unsaturated + saturated) in the blood. Normal arterial oxygen is approximately 75 to 100 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg), so 92 was an excellent saturation level. *Source:* <https://www.mayoclinic.org>.

15 *Crackòvia* (a take-off on Krakow, Poland, in Catalan) is a TV3 parody of sports news and figures, with a focus on Futbol Club Barcelona (*Barça*): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsGx3XF2FoY>. In some parts of Spain, Catalans are the butt of “Polack jokes,” but the jeering was turned into two highly popular and politically charged programs in news (*PØLØVIA/Poland*) and sports (*Crackòvia/Krakow*) commentary. (A “crack” is a spectacular expert or “pro” . . . like Barça’s Lionel Messi, an Argentinian who has played his entire stellar career with the team.)

16 *La Mercè*, the feast day of Our Lady of Mercy, one of the patron saints of Barcelona, is also a major city festival: <http://lameva.barcelona.cat/merce/en>.

17 *La Despensa del Palacio* (The Palace Pantry) is a famous pastry company that traces its origins to 1743 in Seville: <http://ladespensadepalacio.com/en/la-despensa/our-story-the-origin-of-a-name/>. Note also that a muffin is called a “*magdalena*,” and Magda’s full name would be Maria Magdalena.

18 *Asterix and Obelix*: Comic books, originally in French, described by Ignasi and cited by Magda: <https://www.asterix.com/>.

19 *Referendum*: A referendum on seeking independence from Spain was a platform issue in the September 2012 parliamentary elections in Catalonia. On December 12, 2013 (a week

before Magda's trip to Madrid), the new Catalan Parliament had voted to hold the proposed referendum and had set a November 2014 date. The central government in Madrid quickly declared such a referendum illegal. The political confrontation was in the news at the time (and persisted at the time of this translation, five years later).

20 The word "*pray*" is in quotation marks, in the translator's understanding, not because of any suggestion that the request is for "so-called prayer" (of course not), but rather because of emphasis or perhaps a double meaning of "*prega per mi*": to send prayers and also to "ask" or plead (in this case, perhaps due to Magda's anxiety about the PET scan: Plead on my behalf).

Magda's request might suggest a play on words but the monk's response is unambiguous and heartfelt: Not "I will pray for you," but "I pray for you."

21 *Los Chiripitifláuticos* was a children's TV program in Spanish, characterized by slapstick humor: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB_7g7_gsqk.

22 *La Moreneta*: The Virgin of Montserrat, one of 160 Black Madonnas documented worldwide (<http://interfaithmary.net/locations/>), is popularly called by this diminutive for "dark woman."

23 *Saint George (Sant Jordi)* is the patron saint of Catalonia, and this feast day (April 23rd) is also the International Day of the Book. As a minority culture that has fought hard to preserve its language and identity, Catalans celebrate the feast day of Sant Jordi with great passion: <https://www.barcelona.yellow.com/bcn-photos/113-pictures-la-diada-de-sant-jordi-barcelona>.

24 *carpals*: Within Marc's expertise as a traumatologist and hand surgeon, his specialty is the carpal bones, best known as the "tunnel" that protects the nerve and tendon flexors that bend the thumb and fingers.

25 *losing it*: Ignasi uses the expression "making *catúfols*," the parts of a waterwheel that dip into the stream or river, rising full of water and returning empty. Making this piece did not require great precision or strength, so the task was usually given to older carpenters. The expression implies impending senility. *Sources:* <https://unxicdellum.cat/2011/11/fer-catufols/> and <http://www.diccionari.cat/lexicx.jsp?GECART=0028040>.

26 *una falla*: A large, burning log carried on a runner's shoulder at a traditional festival for John the Baptist's Saint's Day held in Isil (and a few other towns). On June 23rd, the log carriers dash down the mountainside; the run takes about an hour and from the village plaza looks like a river of flame. At the bottom, the runners cross the river bridge and continue through the cemetery and village with the burning logs, then toss them into a huge bonfire in the plaza to celebrate the beginning of the feast day (Sant Joan, June 24th). A throwback to pagan celebration of the summer solstice, this tradition was dying out but was reactivated in 1978 and declared a festival of national interest by the Catalan government (*Generalitat de Catalunya*) in 1991. Photos are available at: <http://patrimonifestiu.cultura.gencat.cat/Festes-i-elements-festius-catalogats-o-declarats/Sant-Joan/La-Festa-de-les-Falles-d-Isil>.