

WORD IN ACTION



Photo: Pixabay

Affairs of the heart

Falling in love is perhaps the most beautiful experience one can have, but when it happens to someone who has made a commitment to someone else, it presents a dilemma. A member of a religious order shares his experience of falling in love.

I'd forgotten what being in love was like. I was fifty and had lived in a religious community for nearly twenty years, when it hit me. Not that I had been, consciously at least, looking for a relationship with a woman. The fact that I had taken a vow of chastity didn't take away the attraction to the opposite sex, or of marriage and a family, but I had never found it a major problem. I had seen several of my confreres leave to get married, and had put it down to a lack of prudence on their part, or perhaps a certain naivety in their relationships with members of the opposite sex. But I somehow felt that I was protected from such dangers.



The first seeds

I first came across Joanna at a prayer meeting. She was the only person in the group I hadn't met before. She seemed a bit unsure of herself, so I went over to chat to her, as I would to any new arrival. Perhaps the first seeds were sown in that moment. She was quite attractive, but it was her obvious vulnerability that really drew my interest. Our paths didn't cross again for a month or so, until she came, with her two children, to a family retreat organised by the local church. I was both surprised and delighted to see her and we chatted briefly and fairly superficially. At the end of the week I offered to give her a lift home. She invited me in for a cup of tea and we started to chat more freely. She told me her life story. It was a story of suffering and of abuse, the like of which I had never heard before, and my heart melted. I just wanted to wipe away the suffering, or at least do something to make up for all that pain. Having listened to her story, the only thing that I could come up with was: 'You're a fantastic girl, Joanna, a fantastic girl.'

Admitting the truth

I was away for the next three weeks on a formation course, but I couldn't get Joanna out of my mind. She really was a fantastic girl – but she thought she was nothing. I wrote her a letter. It wasn't a romantic letter, just a strong reassurance that, in God's eyes she was a very special person

and that she should never forget that. As soon as I got back home I rang her. It was just so amazing to hear her voice and to reassure her that everything was all right. The phone calls became frequent and I never wanted them to end. One day her daughter answered the phone and told me that the cooker had broken down and that mum couldn't afford to buy another. I immediately rang a parishioner who had contacts in the trade and was able to get a slightly damaged new cooker, for next to nothing. Joanna was overwhelmed with the new cooker – she had never had a 'brand new' one before.

At a certain point I realised, or rather admitted to myself for the first time, that I had fallen hook, line and sinker for Joanna and, although we had never declared our feelings for one another, I was in no doubt that she felt the same for me. By now five months had passed since our first meeting. We had actually seen each other eight or nine times in that time, but always for a specific reason and never for a 'date' as such. The battle between head and heart now started to rage within me. My head reminded me that Joanna was seventeen years my junior, that she had many problems, that she had two children, although she had never married. My head also told me that I had made a serious commitment to God in my religious community and that I could not just walk away from that. My heart told me that I had finally met the woman that had been meant for me from all eternity. And besides... the thought of leaving her, of never seeing her again, were just too painful to contemplate.

Head versus heart

My head told me that I should communicate my dilemma to my superior. It wasn't easy to do it for a number of reasons. The first was sheer embarrassment in having to admit what had happened. The second reason was that I would certainly be moved as far away as possible from this situation. The third was that I didn't want to hurt Joanna in any way. After one particularly sleepless night I decided to spill the beans. I took my courage in my hands and



Photo source: Pixabay



WORD IN ACTION

told the full story to my superior. He was obviously quite taken aback, partly because he had no idea of what had been going on within me, and partly because he had never seen me in such an emotional state before. However, even before he spoke, I felt a great sense of relief. In fact, he said very little, except to thank me for telling him my story and asking if there was some way of cooling off the relationship with Joanna. I felt at peace, and went home with a much lighter heart. Things did cool off a bit, but there was no getting away from it, Joanna still occupied my every waking thought. A few weeks later I found myself talking to the Superior General about something entirely different, when I decided to tell him about Joanna. He too was very understanding, and certainly not shocked, but he said that really the only way to resolve things was to cut completely with Joanna, and the sooner the better. He added that to do so would hurt very much and that he would understand if I wasn't able to be so drastic.

The decision

The drive back home was terrible. I knew that what he had said was right, but the thought of cutting with Joanna was unbearably painful. One thing was my pain, but far worse was the thought of causing pain to her. After all, I had the support of the community, but she had nothing. I decided to go back to basics. Why had I entered the community in the first place? I had done so because I felt that Jesus had asked me to give my life to him. This meant giving him all that I held precious, and this included the possibility of a deep, intimate relationship in marriage. Did the experience with Joanna change that decision? It seemed to me that Jesus was now asking me to put into practice in a very real way the decision that I had made all those years ago. It was hard, very hard, but I couldn't come to any other conclusion.

Without thinking too much about it, I picked up the

phone and called Joanna. I told her that I would have to stop ringing her and seeing her, and asked her forgiveness for hurting her in this way. She told me for the first and last time that she loved me, but that, although it would hurt her tremendously, she only wanted what was best for me. When I put the phone down, the tears flowed freely. The feeling of emptiness was indescribable, if this was what God wanted, then so be it, but it hurt, it really hurt. For a month or so after that phone call, the suffering remained. The temptation to ring Joanna, or to call round, just to see how she was, was very strong indeed. One day it was just too much and I dialled her number. I got an unavailable tone, and when I rang directory enquiries they told me the subscriber was now ex-directory.

An act of faith

It was probably three months before the feelings had completely subsided. Now, six years on, I can look back on the experience in a more detached way. I still pray for Joanna and her family. I know that I cannot help them directly, but I am certain that if I hold them up in prayer, God will sustain them with his love. This requires a great act of faith on my part, and one which I constantly need to renew, but I really do believe it. I realise too that if I had left my community to find happiness with Joanna, it would probably have ended in unhappiness for both us, in the long term. Now I know what my former confreres went through, and why they left the community. I know too what my friend went through when he fell in love with a younger woman and left his wife of twenty years. I can never judge anyone who finds themselves in such a dilemma, but I also know that you don't have to follow your heart and that with the right kind of support and advice you can emerge blooded, bowed, but a stronger person. 🍀

The author has asked to remain anonymous.

