



## Happiness: a response to freedom

*Walêska and Luiz Santos*

We are Walêska and Luiz, married twenty-two years ago, both Brazilian citizens, living in Manaus, a city located in the Northern Region of Brazil, in the center of the Amazon Rainforest, the largest tropical forest in the world. Manaus is currently a large urban center with 2.5 million inhabitants.

We are here to give our testimony that the Christian life is another divine blessing, among so many that we have received. According to Don Bosco: "Our life is a gift from God and what we make of it is our best gift to Him".

Knowing how to 'live the moment' today is one of the greatest wisdoms of the human being. We are convinced that nothing in our lives happens by chance. It's all part of God's plans for our spiritual evolution.

Our story reminds us of another, that of a girl who went to an old locksmith and asked, "Please, I want the key to happiness." With his wisdom, he replied, "Of course, girl. Did you bring the model?" This is a question that challenges millions of people. What is the key to happiness?

We are both the youngest children of humble, numerous, united and very Catholic families. We had the privilege of living with parents who valued marriage, had lasting relationships, respected the family, taught us values and encouraged us to fly, despite economic, human and social limitations.

In our families, the older siblings had a mission to help take care of the younger ones. Each child was responsible for some housework. Studying was an unquestionable obligation. Our parents succeeded in making true the dream of having all the children graduate from university. We used to make our daily family prayers when we woke up, at mealtime and at bedtime.

At first, we did not realize the greatness of this upbringing by good examples and everyday practice. Over the years, with our maturation, we realized that these teachings have shaped us as more responsible, disciplined, and solid human beings.

They are deep features that permeate our minds and hearts, our thoughts, feelings and actions. They make us think and rethink how our family enabled us to live so fully.



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For us, happiness is a state of mind in which one feels genuine joy, an inner peace. It is a divine light that shines forth in each one of us, an achievement that is improved every day, with the practice of good, opening the doors for God to intervene, every moment, in our lives. Therefore, even in the most challenging moments, realizing the manifestations of God makes our lives happier.

And these manifestations are many.

When Luiz was born in 1968, Manaus was not the metropolis it is today, but only a provincial city with few resources, including medicine. The doctors detected that he had a very serious problem and that he would live, at most, for six months. His parents, Terezinha and Abel, were very shaken, but they did not lose hope. They were patient in facing the problems, persevering in prayer, faith, and attitudes.

After very difficult medical consultations and with divine providence, a doctor recommended: “take this boy to São Paulo, where he can be operated on and survive”. But how to go to that city so far away with the financial difficulties and the uncertainty of what could happen? Who would take care of the other four children?

For years Luiz's mother slept with her hand on his chest to feel his breath and make sure he was alive. This was a great example of love, faith and dedication.

Only after seven years of many attempts, with the fear of death each day, Abel and Terezinha were able to schedule cardiac surgery through the public health system. Finally, Luiz could be operated on in São Paulo, the largest and most developed city in the country. After the surgery, they spent three days unable to physically approach their son, who was in terrible pain. But, fortunately, it all went well.

Back in Manaus, Abel and Terezinha joined the Movement of the Teams of Our Lady, where they remained for 40 years.

Another example of divine intervention in our lives was my meeting with Luiz, twenty-eight years ago. I was born and raised in Belo Horizonte, a city more than 4 thousand kilometers away from Manaus. Even at such a distance, the hand of God placed us face to face.

In 1990, after graduating from college, my mother and I traveled to Manaus to visit a brother who lived there. We would spend fifteen days in the city. I took the opportunity to look for a job. I soon got, not one, but two, in my area, as a dentist. That same day, I met Luiz. I went to have a snack at a candy shop near the clinic where I was going to work. He greeted me very kindly. Coming from different paths and cultures, we got to know each other. Two years later, we



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started dating, engaged, and the love of God gave us an encounter, in search of happiness, to which we said yes. The fifteen days I would spend in Manaus have already become twenty-eight years.

With one year of marriage, we had the first pregnancy and we were very happy with the novelty. We would give birth, a true miracle of life. But God's plan was not this. At least not at that time.

Due to physiological problems, I had the pregnancy interrupted. A very painful process and difficult to accept, which caused much sadness, insecurity and concern. Over time, we have gathered strength, supported by the love of God, confident that He is our strength. We pray with the psalmist: "Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways" (Ps 128,1).

After many tests and medical appointments in several places, I was diagnosed with an anomaly in the uterus. Any pregnancy would be very difficult, only by the grace of God could we become parents. Two years later, I was able to get pregnant. However, it was a high-risk pregnancy, and every possible care would be needed.

When I was almost reaching the eighth month of pregnancy, my father passed away in Belo Horizonte. Because of the high risk pregnancy, I was unable to say goodbye in person. It was impossible to make round-trip journeys between cities that were about four thousand kilometers apart. I had to live the mourning away from my mother and my siblings. I counted on the support of my husband, his family and God. It was another difficult period facing this painful loss and at the same time to having to be extremely strong to preserve the life of our daughter. Eleven days after the death of my father, our firstborn daughter, Tainá, was born. After the childbirth, I underwent a very complex, life-threatening surgery to reconstruct the uterus because of bleeding. My mother-in-law Terezinha was very welcoming and took care of me as a daughter. I am eternally grateful for everything she has done for us. At that moment we also felt the love of God embracing us.

Our journey of joys and trials has still a few chapters.

We are grateful for the generosity of God, who has given us the blessing of two more children, Bernardo and Abel. Today, Tainá is 19 years old, Bernardo is 15 and Abel, 12.

One night, Walêska was in bed with our son Bernardo, seven years old at that time, to make him sleep. Suddenly he had a seizure. The first diagnosis was that he had a brain stroke. We were worried, very distressed. After all, a child at this age suffering such a serious problem would be very difficult for all of us.



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We believed that God was with us and, on this journey in search of our happiness, He would not leave us unprotected. After all, there was never a greater proof of love than the surrender that He gave us of His own Son, to all of us. Then we remember the eternal consolation of His Son Jesus: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Mt 5, 4). And we did not give up, of course. Freely, and with great faith, we continued to believe that the divine light was lighting our steps.

Eventually, ongoing tests allowed a more accurate diagnosis of our child: epilepsy. We would have to live with the crises and protect him. In search of new solutions, we went to São Paulo. By means of more complex and modern tests, an angel dressed as a doctor showed us that his case was a mild illness that would manifest itself only in childhood. After a certain age, he would not have the crises anymore. She told us in these words: "He has a benign childhood epilepsy, your son is healthy! You can celebrate!". Imagine our excitement!

In thanks for this blessing, we all went to the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Aparecida, Patroness of Brazil. When I stopped to contemplate the beauty of the sanctuary in Aparecida, I leaned on one of the immense pillars. As I placed my hand on a ledge of the structure, I realized there was something else there ...a rosary. It was surely God's presence teaching us one more lesson: to pray, to believe and to thank.

Our youngest son Abel also underwent a minor surgery before he was two years old. Again, God was showing us the way so that everything went right.

We have been part of the Movement of Teams of Our Lady for nineteen years. It is a commitment based on deep faith in Jesus Christ, his teachings and his examples.

During this period, some members left our base team, a spiritual advisor and several counselors were transferred. But new brothers and sisters arrived to continue on this journey. The team is always renewed and transformed.

In this family, we learn a lot about respect for others, to praise the qualities of each other, to maintain peaceful coexistence. We also notice the differences in personality of each couple. We face our realities and limitations.

Once again the generosity of God places wonderful paths before us. Since August 2016 we have been serving Teams of Our Lady as Sector Couple. In that time, we have learned a lot thanks to each spiritual counselor, to the liaison couples and to all the members of the Northern Region College. We understand that each one has a mission to be there and together we evolve.



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When we were invited to give this testimony, we were very touched. We were on a formation course, in a Jesuit house located in Itaici, inland within the State of São Paulo. As we returned to the room, we noticed a sign that was on the top of our door, with the following phrase attributed to St. Teresa: "Let yourself be modeled. You do not know what God will do for you."

We believe that God has given us this sublime mission, to show so many people that a couple, from the Brazilian Amazon, strives to fulfill the tasks assigned to them, allowing themselves to be modeled, wanting to actively serve the Church and the world. "Lord, complete in us your work. May your goodness endure forever" (cf. Ps 138,8).

We want to thank our families, our friends, all those who have helped us and, above all, God for the opportunity to be here witnessing to His presence in our lives.

Remembering the girl mentioned at the beginning of this testimony, who sought the key to happiness. We do not have a universal model either, because happiness is within each one of us, in how we experience the path.

We believe that God gives us the freedom to make certain choices that make us evolve: to live one day at a time, with the presence of God at all times, trying to be a little bit better than yesterday, for ourselves and for others.

Always look for the good side of situations:

- Be grateful for everything, including the difficulties, because they make us stronger.
- Recognize that we are sinners; we have qualities and defects, we are no better or worse than anyone else.
- Enhance friendships, because everybody, in their own small way, teaches us something.
- Cheer the success of others and become restless with the pain and sadness of others.
- Be generous and help others, regardless of who they are.
- Take love wherever you go.

Because through these choices and attitudes we consolidate and express our happiness. We always and relentlessly want to testify that God is Love, that He is Holy, that He is Father and that He is Good.

**Walêska and Luiz Santos**