“Live like you were dying.”

It’s the lyric to a song by the country star Tim McGraw, and a call to live all aspects of life – professional, familial and spiritual – to the fullest. For Chris Sargent, it could be a mantra for his own personal story.

At 39, Sargent is dying. He has a rare, inoperable form of bile duct cancer, which has an estimated two-percent survival rate, according to the Canadian Cancer Society. When he was diagnosed in August 2018, doctors told him he had about 11 months to live.

The news dropped just as Sargent and his wife Sofia learned they were expecting a second child, a sister for two-year-old Juliana.

He knew he needed to get a few things right.

At the Easter Vigil on April 20, Sargent fulfilled a promise he made to his family, the priest who officiated at his wedding, and to himself. He became a Catholic. He received the sacraments of Baptism, Holy Eucharist and Confirmation at St. Anthony’s parish in Edmonton.

“I really am leaving this for the 11th hour and 55th minute,” Sargent admits with a laugh. “Sometimes when you’re faced with something that’s so fundamentally
hard to understand ... There’s just more to things in the world. Faith is important to my wife. And I know how I want my family to live its life. If I can help set that foundation for the family, I’ll do that. Also for myself – it’s not just ‘OK I want to do this just to hedge my bets.’ It just spoke to me. I don’t know how to say it in a better way.”

Chris Sargent says that a cancer diagnosis has made it clear what’s important to him, “and that’s time with my family.”

On Easter Monday, Chris and Sofia welcomed their new daughter, Lucia. With his future uncertain, Sargent’s priority now is to spend as much time with his family as he can.

“I don’t know the end of the story,” Sargent says. “It’s one of the hardest things, not knowing, but it’s nice in a way. I can’t live like I’m going to be dead in two weeks and that’s that. I think it’s a blessing to have cancer, sometimes, more than heart disease or something else. I know that I’m dying, likely. I can set affairs in order. But also to spend time with people you care about. It’s a gift in a way.”

Sargent hopes that sharing his journey with terminal cancer – and his commitment to faith along the way – will inspire others to live each day like
it could be their last. Through interviews and unprecedented access, the
Sargent family has allowed Grandin Media into their story of faith, love, hope,
and heartache. This is the first in a series.

PART ONE: A PROMISE BECOMES URGENT

A grapefruit-sized tumour is eating away at Chris Sargent’s body, spreading
from his liver to his lungs and lymph nodes. Sargent is undergoing chemotherapy
and clinical trials at the Tom Baker Cancer Centre in Calgary to try to extend
his life. But the odds are against him.

As a hiker, marathon runner and careful eater, he considered himself a healthy
guy. Then in August 2018, he felt some minor pain for a few days on hiking trip
in the mountains with his wife and friends, ironically to spread the ashes of a
close friend. On Sept. 7, doctors confirmed that he had bile duct cancer.

“When I was diagnosed it was a huge shock, absolutely a huge shock,” Sargent
said. “I never hoped for this, but I was hoping for lymphoma or colon cancer,
something with better outcomes. I was diagnosed with a cancer that’s almost
exclusively fatal and it works pretty fast.”

Then came another shocker. Sofia found out she was pregnant.

“It was such a joy to have that positive news, to have that life-affirming
news. I consider it a bit of a miracle as well, because we certainly wouldn’t
have started to grow our family after I was diagnosed with cancer, after I
started chemo,” Sargent said.

“It’s a really strange time to have so much joy with a young daughter
and a growing family … yet being in a place where I don’t know if I’m
going to pass away next week or two years from now.”

When Sargent was diagnosed, he was enrolled in the Rite of Christian Initiation
for Adults program at his parish, St. Anthony’s. He was fulfilling a promise he
made to the priest who officiated at the Sargents’ 2014 wedding in Tucuman,
Argentina. Suddenly, Sargent’s desire to become a Catholic was urgent.

JD Carmichael, a student at St. Joseph Seminary, helped Sargent through the
RCIA at St. Anthony’s Parish in south Edmonton. He wondered whether they should
now speed up the studies.
“As I got to know him and spent a little more time with him, I really had this feeling that, no, we’re making it to Easter,” Carmichael said. “This isn’t something we have to worry about.”

“His story sounds bad,” Carmichael said. “You think, ‘Oh that’s terrible; his kids may grow up without him.’ But at the same time isn’t this amazing? This man has come to Christ. He has come to the Church. What an amazing story!”

Sargent grew up in an agnostic home in Sherwood Park. The family respected faith, but it didn’t play a big role in their lives. However, as an avid outdoorsman and world traveller, Sargent always felt a connection to something larger than himself.

“I’ve often felt in touch with God, or in touch with something more transcendent, when I’m out in my canoe, at a cabin, or high in the mountains – places far away from civilization, usually when I’m out on my own. I felt that there’s something more. That’s never been a doubt.”

Why even bother becoming a Catholic if he’s dying anyway?

“There’s so much uncertainty, and this is really the only thing in my life that’s been able to give me a level of peace and a level of clarity and shelter
from the storm,” Sargent explained.

“Being diagnosed with cancer really sped things up in terms of my own desire to become Catholic, to be part of the Catholic family, to have our family unified under one faith, to be baptized.”

His marriage to Sofia was the initial spark. But as he explored the Catholic faith, he had a burning desire to learn more. For Sargent – a former health policy specialist with Alberta Health – there’s no conflict between the intellectual and rational and the accounts of the Resurrection and Christ’s miracles.

“I haven’t found much evidence to make me feel that these things didn’t occur. I like the humbleness that I see in Mass and that connection to the past. So many things were appealing to me about the Roman Catholic faith as someone from the outside that give me trust that it’s the right path for me.”

Tasked with bringing the young dad up to speed in his RCIA program, Carmichael was skeptical at first. Then he saw Sargent’s spirit come through in his dedication.

“It was ‘I need to know this now. I need to know was Jesus’ resurrection real,’” Carmichael recalled. That set his student apart from the other RCIA candidates. “People don’t have that same urgency, that same hunger and thirst for this knowledge, if they’re not in it 100 per cent.”

“He was true to what he was doing,” Carmichael said. “I think Chris is actually very wise. He has a wisdom that kind of goes beyond this world in a sense, like the wisdom of Christ, the wisdom of God.”

Over several months, as he juggled medical appointments and days of sickness, Sargent challenged Carmichael with rigorous questions of faith.
"As a father, your job is to pass on the faith to your children. How can you pass on what you don’t have? Even just his witness of becoming a convert to the faith, and becoming a faithful Catholic and all this, it’s such a strong witness for his children. You think about the legacy of that. I could see that being a motivator."

Carmichael said Sargent has always put on a brave face. But Sofia offers a different picture, so much so that she asked Carmichael how she could baptize her husband herself it came to that. And, in his family’s privacy, Sargent deals with the enormity and gravity of his situation.

“My world is really simplified. I’m not worried about material things. I’m not worried about getting that next vehicle,” Sargent said. “All those other distractions, all those things, are just gone. It just happened naturally. There’s just a few things that become important. I talked about spending time with family.

“Faith has become really important. And it gives meaning too."

As he faces death, Sargent said he’s not embittered or angry at God. In fact, he considers his diagnosis a blessing. “To me, in many ways, it reaffirms the existence of God. God working to bring us close towards Him.”

Nevertheless, there are times when he’s frustrated. One night Sargent was
flipping through a running magazine before bed. “I was livid. I was thinking, ‘This was me. This was my life.’ And now I’m sick. I can’t do those things. I can’t plan for those races. I’m angry, but I believe this will eventually make sense.”

Would Sargent be as fervent in his faith if he weren’t dying? As one of Sargent’s mentors, Carmichael says no.

“It’s like that country song: ‘I wish you had a chance to live like you were dying.’ I wish we all had that same urgency. This cancer is actually a gift from God. That might sound weird to say that, but what a gift. It did kind of set a fire under him. It’s a fire in his heart. All of a sudden, this really has a lot of meaning, a lot of significance,” Carmichael said.

“It’s totally the grace of God. Faith is a gift and you see God working through Chris and giving him what he needs when he needs it. I think this has been a work in progress for a long time. I think God has actually been preparing him for this long before the cancer came.”

Both men are convinced that it’s not coincidental that they were paired in the RCIA program. They’ve become more than teacher and catechumen; they’ve become friends.

It’s a relationship that has put Carmichael’s own vocation as a future priest into perspective.

“For him to go and be with God, that’s the entire goal of our life,” Carmichael said. “His potential is to go and be with God. His potential isn’t to see his children’s children. That might be a hard thing for people to hear. It might be a hard thing for Chris to hear. I don’t know.”
Sargent’s journey also changed Carmichael’s view of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

“I’ve seen how much effort we have kind of put towards Chris in terms of RCIA. And it’s got me thinking, Why haven’t we put that effort towards everyone who comes for RCIA? Because it’s all the same urgency,” Carmichael said.

“I think maybe what Chris has taught me is ‘What is it that you leave behind?’ It starts to apply to all of our lives,” he said. “Are you helping others come to their faith? Is that something you’re maybe leaving behind? It’s amazing how much that can grow. I hope 20 years from now, I come across a lot more Chrisses.”

Sargent said his illness has illuminated the path forward. Sure, he’d like to travel as extensively as he did before; hiking in the Himalayas was a dream.

“It’s really become clear what’s important to me, and that’s time with my family,” he said. “I’d rather be in the house hanging out with them than scuba diving in French Polynesia or something like that. That sounds awesome, but when the clock is ticking – and it’s potentially ticking very fast – it’s really clear as to where I want to spend my time.”

That’s where Sargent also finds his greatest fear – not for himself but the young family he will leave behind.

“It’s very hard. For me, 95 per cent of the hardship is the impact this has on other people. That’s what keeps me up at night. That’s what makes me frustrated. That’s what makes me angry. And that’s what challenges me to accept this, is thinking that my daughter ... is not growing up with a dad,” Sargent said.

“I find myself apologizing for potentially not being around. I feel quite a bit of guilt about that. It’s not something I’ve invited into my life. It’s the last thing I want. I don’t ever want them to feel like I abandoned them. It’s tremendously difficult it is to think about not being with them. They are the greatest source of joy in my life.”

For his part, Carmichael hopes he and Sargent can one day enjoy their mutual love of fishing, sitting in a canoe on a still lake framed by a blazing sunset. But Carmichael knows that his friend is destined for a higher purpose.

“For me there’s a bit of ‘Well, I don’t want you to die.’ In this journey, I think I’ve been praying and hoping a lot more for a miracle,” Carmichael said. “How that’s changing a bit now is there’s part of me too that says ‘If you are dying, why would I want to hold you back from that?’ … I said to him, ‘Just remember that the greatest moments you’ve had here on Earth are just a dim reflection of what’s in heaven.’

“He said, ‘Yeah, isn’t that great? I can’t wait to go.’”

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Read the entire 3 part Chris Sargent series:

1. Faith in the face of death
2. Sand passes ever more quickly through the hourglass of life
3. Young father dies in the embrace of his newfound faith