

God in the water

A father and son survive a 15-hour ordeal lost at sea overnight.

KAREN OSBORNE | FLORIDA CATHOLIC STAFF

Published: 09.17.08



COURTESY | U.S. COAST GUARD

A Coast Guard diver rescues Christopher Marino, 12, from the Atlantic Ocean Sept. 7 off Ponce de Leon Inlet, Fla. Christopher and his father, 45-year-old Walter Marino, survived 15 hours in open water after they were swept out to sea by rip currents off Ponce Inlet the previous evening, much of it apart from one another.

ALTAMONTE SPRINGS | Floating alone on his back 12 miles into the cold midnight ocean, framed on one side by electric lights on the coast and on the other by "the dark abyss," Walter Marino spoke to God.

"I went back and forth from doubting to believing, anywhere from 'God wants to help those who help themselves' to 'He's pulling me away to be with Christopher,'" the parishioner of Most Precious Blood Parish in Oviedo said.

Just a few hours before, the Marino family of Winter Park was enjoying a regular summer Saturday evening Sept. 6 at the Ponce de Leon Inlet beach. But Marino's 12-year-old son

Christopher, a swimming enthusiast who has autism, swam out too far and was swallowed into the ocean by a rip tide. Marino, 45, jumped in to save him, but was swept out as well.

The people on shore could only watch as the two were sucked far from shore on the ebb tide.

They were together at first, fighting 5-foot waves that obscured the lighthouse Marino was using to triangulate their position, being swept farther and farther from shore. They saw the Coast Guard searching for them. Marino tried to use lifesaving tactics he'd learned to chaperone his daughter's Girl Scout troop, but started vomiting when he swallowed ocean water. Christopher went from laughing to terrified by the stinging jellyfish "and he screamed," Marino said.

The currents of the ocean became too strong, and father and son were separated.

To calm his far-off son, Marino started shouting lines from Disney films. "To infinity," Marino shouted. "And beyond," Christopher, who does not communicate well verbally, would reply.

Infinity, though, did not suffice. Soon, Christopher was out of earshot and Marino heard nothing but the unfamiliar night sounds of the ocean.

"I thought I lost him," Marino whispered.

Hours later, the water calmed. Caught between darkness and shore, Marino decided to fight. He swam toward shore — but quickly discovered he wasn't getting anywhere but exhausted.

Coupled with the loss of his son, he said it was hard not to panic.

"I started to really doubt (God) existed," Marino said. "I said, 'Enough of this hope-for-God nonsense,' and I swam and swam. I felt myself getting really exhausted, and then I knew I couldn't do it alone. ... I turned on my back and floated and said, 'I'm going to put myself in God's hands.'"

But God's hands seemed to be taking him the wrong way: farther out to sea. It was a long time before high tide, and floating, not fighting against the current, "was against what every fiber of my body was saying," he said. "Where God was sending me was counterintuitive: into the dark abyss. I thought he was taking me and there were times that that scared me. I thought about my life and what I would have done differently."

He began to float with the tide, recalling a visit his family took to the Ponce Inlet lighthouse a few weeks earlier, and how he'd read that Cuban refugee boats lost at sea eventually washed up on shore. How everything, he read, washed up on shore. He thought about his daughter, Angela, who was starting a ballroom-dancing club in her new high school. He pictured her dancing and made a new resolution.

"I thought, 'She's going to lose her father and brother on the same day. Not this day. Not on my watch,'" he said.

He watched the shooting stars — the very first he'd ever seen.

"It's a very mental exercise not to panic," said Marino, who still has red, purpled jellyfish bites on his legs and arms. "That's what saved me," he said. "God keeping me calm and helping me think things through."

And God, Marino said, wasn't done with him that evening.

Finally, faint purples and blues grabbed at the horizon. He could finally see the buildings around Ponce Inlet, tiny squares 12 miles away. The sun blazed on his shoulders. He could hear birds, and the small fins of jumping fish brushed against his back as they burst into the air around him.

"I was thinking the whole time about how to conserve energy," he said. But a little yelling, he thought, wouldn't hurt. "I said, 'Good morning, fish!' and yelled good morning to the birds. When the sun came out and the birds sang, I knew I just had to wait for God."

Some time later, the fishing boat Open Range came close by, motoring quickly to a favorite fishing spot. Marino, a collector of religious medals who regularly trolls eBay for new finds, heard them before he saw them. The previous morning, he'd put on an antique medallion of Mary on a silver chain, as was his tradition.

It was that medal, Marino said, that the fishermen saw flickering in the water. They changed course, intrigued.

The fishermen hauled him onto the boat and called the Coast Guard. Marino went below decks, unwilling to look into the ocean and possibly see Christopher "floating face-down," he said.

Less than an hour later, Marino was safe on a Coast Guard ship and the officers were pointing to a helicopter hovering nearby. They told him that Christopher was alive and well, and being airlifted to Halifax Medical Center in Daytona Beach.

"I was yelling, 'My boy can swim!'" he said.

On shore, Marino's sister, Linda Richter, was staying with their parents, and couldn't help thinking the worst.

At midnight, she called the emergency number at Most Precious Blood Parish to report what happened and spoke with parochial vicar Father Jorge Torres. Fearing the worst, Richter, a parishioner of Annunciation Parish in Altamonte Springs, told Father Torres of her doubts. The

priest, she said, told her to hope — and told her he was going to pray until the two were safely recovered.

“I thought they were gone,” she said. “I asked, ‘How do I explain this to my children and have them keep their faith in God?’ Father Jorge said, ‘We’re not going there. We’re praying for God to take care of Christopher and Walt.’ And he said he was going to pray in the chapel. He kept it going for us.”

Father Torres said that after he hung up the phone, “I felt in my heart that I should pray, and what I felt I should pray was five Hail Marys. It’s funny, I asked the Blessed Mother to intercede, and it was through a medal that he was found. ... I’m a deep believer in prayer. I do believe that prayer brings forth miracles. I don’t pray for anything less.”

The next morning, Father Torres was again praying in the chapel when the calls came through, one after the next, that Marino and Christopher were both all right. The 10 a.m. Mass at Most Precious Blood was offered in thanksgiving for their rescue.

“To the priest, the parish community is his family, so it hit home. We didn’t know how it was going to play out, but you just keep praying,” said Father Torres. “God does listen to our prayers and we shouldn’t be afraid to ask him. He yearns to hear our needs.”

People who have autism often don’t have a fear of death. Christopher doesn’t fear danger, Marino said. Coupled with the 12-year-old’s love of swimming, those might have been the things that kept Christopher alive in the dark ocean water, his father said.

Christopher loves swimming, Marino explained. The family is a weekend fixture at the Oveido YMCA and other local indoor pools, where Christopher dives over and over again for swim rings a lifeguard throws into the pool, and where he floats on his back, his ears submerged under the water. The Coast Guard found Christopher floating like that on Sunday morning.

During their last visit to the inlet, Marino remembered Christopher floating with his arms over his head, his eyes closed. Marino grabbed Christopher’s big toe and dragged him around in the water. Christopher lay back in the water and smiled.

That’s how Richter likes to think of God taking care of Christopher, she said.

Marino agrees. “He’s so at peace when he does that and I think he communicates with God. I imagine he floated all night and the sounds of the ocean kept him awake,” Marino said.



Walter Marino poses for photograph with his son Christopher. "It's all part of God's plan. Sometimes you swim against the current and you realize that you're not going anywhere. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

God has kept a hand in the story, both Marino and Richter said.

A few days after both Marinos returned home from a short hospital stay, Richter stopped by her dry cleaners, where the clerk, who belongs to a Protestant church, had already learned of her brother and nephew's ordeal.

"She said, 'My church prayed for you,'" Richter recalled. "She grabbed my arm and said, 'Girl, you never give up until you have something in your hands. And then you pray for Jesus to help you with your unbelief.' Everyone is finding hope in this story. Hope and amazement in God."

A little more than a week after the ordeal, Marino is working to return to a normal life.

He'll return to his accounting job and he will continue to help "take the church out of the box" — turn a cafeteria at an Oviedo middle school into a full church for Most Precious Blood Parish, which does not have a church building of its own.

But other things are going to change.

He'll "try to worry less," he said. "It's all part of God's plan. Sometimes you swim against the current and you realize that you're not going anywhere. Just sit back and enjoy the ride."

As for the inlet, a favorite vacation spot, "it's still the place to be," he said. "I want to go back, but it'll be a while."

There's one more positive coda to the story, Marino said. The fishermen later called to tell him that the day's catch was one of the best of the season.

"God," Marino said, "was everywhere."