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'THE FACE OF CHRIST'

OPPORTUNITY TO TREAT NIGERIAN PRIEST
REVEALS 'FACE OF CHRIST' IN MANY



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Story by Chris Grosser



CHRIST'

FACE OF CHRIST' IN MANY

A PERFECT STORM OF PROVIDENCE SWEEP ACROSS AN OCEAN AND TWO CONTINENTS, AND THE FAITH OF THOSE CAUGHT UP IN IT WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.

"It is Divine Providence," assures Cherie Sammis, director of ethics integration at Ascension Health Michigan. "Father John could have gone anywhere; what a gift for us to be able to receive him."

Father John is the Reverend William John Heladuwa of the Diocese of Maiduguri, Nigeria, and when Sammis says he could have gone anywhere, she's referring to world-renowned medical facilities that could have treated his laryngeal cancer.

But at the invitation of Bishop Steven J. Raica, he came here, to the Diocese of Gaylord. For that, Sammis is grateful; so are hundreds of people touched by the 50-year-old priest.

"He was the face of Christ," says Sammis, who coordinated his medical care, "(and) we were the face of Christ to him."

A Challenging Road

Father John's symptoms — weight loss, irregular breathing, hoarseness, cough, nasal blockage — emerged in 2012 and progressively worsened. It would be three years of consultations, misdiagnosis and challenges before the vicar general pastoral of the Maiduguri Diocese would learn his cancer diagnosis.

Having exhausted resources in his community, he vowed in the spring of 2014 that if he was not better by September, he would seek medical attention outside his diocese.

"As God would make it, I prepared myself enough for that journey for one month," he says. Looking back now, the priest from Muva in northern Nigeria sees where Divine Providence interceded. "The very week I left home on Tuesday, by Thursday Boko Haram moved in." The militant Islamists who have terrorized his diocese allowed no entry or exit for four months. Had he not left when he did, his health would have further deteriorated.

Father John lived with his sister in Abuja for a month before undergoing an endoscopy that revealed a tumor. After a biopsy and then surgery to remove the cancerous mass, doctors said he required further treatment. In the African nation where medical attention is first-come, first-served, and doctors' strikes and Boko Haram can thwart care, that would be a challenge.

He consulted his bishops and they discussed options: among them, treatment in the United States — but where?

▶ A host of people touched by Fr. John gathered for a photo with him on his last weekend at Holy Family. (Photo courtesy)



One of the greatest gifts is that Father saw the face of Christ (in us) and how he shared that.”

A LONG ‘THANK-YOU’ LIST

Lindblom and his wife, Lois, who shared meals, picnics and other activities with the priest, were no doubt on a long list of folks to receive a “thank you” from a grateful Father John.

Lindblom accompanied the priest when he hand-delivered chocolates and a photograph of himself with the medical team at West Branch.

Cherie Sammis, director of ethics integration at Ascension Health Michigan and who coordinated Father John’s care, burst into tears when she read the priest’s very personalized thank-you letter sent to her home. Likewise, she says, when the director of the Seton Cancer Institute shared a personalized thank you with her staff, “people were just in tears.”

Maiduguri Bishop Oliver Dashe Doeme’s thank you to Father Charlie for his response to Father John’s

plight gave the pastor “goose bumps.

“It said, ‘I can’t thank you enough. Because of you and your people, Father John lived.’ From their perspective, (his treatment) was not just a privilege, it was a blessing ... It was a death-to-life experience for their diocese, people and, in a most personal way, for Father John himself.”

As he prepared to return to Nigeria, this was Father John’s prayer: “I pray for the men, women and children (he encountered here), that God will give everybody good health, long life and happiness.” For parents and their children, he says, “I wish for them that their children will copy and live their exemplary way of life,” and that those children will do even better than their parents.

Still more providence

The Dioceses of Gaylord and Maiduguri have long enjoyed a relationship, the former hosting Nigerian priests who come to study and serve. At the time of Father John’s diagnosis, another Maiduguri priest, Father John Paul Bashe, was in residence at Holy Family, East Tawas.

Seeking help for his ailing vicar, Maiduguri Bishop Oliver Doeme appealed to Bishop Raica via email: Might Father John live with Father Bashe while undergoing treatment?

Soon after, Bishop Raica was meeting on an unrelated matter with Ascension’s Sammis, CEO Betsy Aderholdt and Vice President of Missions Andy Kruse.

“When they asked if there was anything that was on my mind that they could help with ... this email came to mind,” recounts Raica. “I shared with them the problem and context of Maiduguri and the suffering they had endured, and they immediately said, ‘We would be honored to help out and facilitate an assessment and treatment of Father John.’ That’s where it all began.”

“It was providential, I think, all of us being present at the same time to hear a little of the plight of Fa-

ther John,” says Sammis. Although the team had never undertaken such an endeavor, Sammis had begun her career navigating health care systems for vulnerable and undocumented immigrants. She was confident they’d figure it out.

Reflecting on it now, she is humbled by the opportunity. “Wow, what a gift, and that’s a gift from Bishop Raica ... Because of him, we were all touched by the grace of Father John.”

That grace has rippled through the Ascension family — Tawas St. Joseph Hospital, Oscoda St. Joseph Health Park and St. Mary’s of Michigan-Seton Cancer Institute, West Branch — and beyond.

Living the mission

Ascension’s mission statement, in part, reads: “Rooted in the loving ministry of Jesus as healer, we commit ourselves to serving all persons, with special attention to those who are poor and vulnerable. Our Catholic health ministry is dedicated to spiritually-centered, holistic care which sustains and improves the health of individuals and communities ...”

It’s one thing to see that statement hanging on the wall, says Sammis, “and it’s another to experience it in

the associate registering him, or the pharmacy ... the CEO who called and said we are doing this right. You have to work together for the same common goal and vision.” Such an undertaking — Father John’s treatment involved 35 radiation treatments, family physicians, medical and radiation oncologists, otolaryngologists, dentists and support staff — requires collaboration of many at all levels of health care, explains Sammis.

“We take people under our wing who are low or vulnerable, but (in this case) it was really the other way around: Father John really took all of us under his wing.” She tears

▶ ABOVE: Father John and Father Charlie developed “a true brotherhood that will last a lifetime,” says the pastor of Holy Family, East Tawas.

up as she relates imagining the gravely ill priest boarding a plane, coming to a foreign land, having no experience with the culture or health care system. “That implicit trust he put into all these strangers along all of these stepping stones, entering into our care, that really is a walk of faith. He did that.

“He helped people to see the face of Christ ... It’s who he touched along the way (that allowed) all these people to reach out and actualize that mission.

“One of the greatest gifts is that Father saw the face of Christ (in us) and how he shared that.”

Mercy for a silent stranger

At Bishop Raica’s request, Father Charles (Charlie) Donajkowski worked with diocesan Director of Human Resources Tom Tenerovicz to secure a medical visa for Father John. The pastor of Holy Family/Sacred Heart, Oscoda recruited local Dr. Donald Ellis to review sometimes-cryptic medical records and devise a treatment plan — patient unseen. To satisfy the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, East Tawas medical oncologist Dr. David Urbanski’s services also were enlisted.

Within a week of his arrival in May 2015, Father John had seven appointments with four doctors. He’d been prepared to accept death, he says, but soon, “I started to get a bit of hope. That hope progressed as I went on with treatment.”

For much of that treatment, Father John was mute.

“It’s funny to realize he got into our hearts being silent ... just praying with us,” says Father Charlie. “That’s mercy.”

“I found mercy defined and practiced by the people,” says the 6-foot-4-inch priest known among parishioners as “Father John Tall.” In caring for him, he says, parishioners, clergy, medical providers and community members lived the works of mercy — feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the

homeless, visiting the sick, comforting the afflicted, praying for the living. “I was on the receiving end,” Father explains.

“I am proud of my Catholic people, the Christianity they lived,” says Father Charlie. “In truth, it was far more than the Catholic people. It was a community of good people taking care of (him).

“I felt very privileged to be a part of John’s spiritual journey through all of this,” he adds, “to watch him begin to see healing, then hope, and then a positive prognosis — (to see) from where he came here having one foot in the grave, to going home filled with vitality and changed deeply and spiritually in the process.”

‘Glory be to God’

From this humbling experience, says Father John, he has learned “patience, perseverance and leaving everything in the hands of God.

“God is behind everything we do,” says the soft-spoken priest. “In relation to my vocation ... in the end of the day it has taught me to take serious what it is that God is calling me to do ... For me now, it is to return back home, having gained spiritual and medical healing.” There, he will use his own healing journey to bring hope and healing to Nigeria’s traumatized people.

His experience here, however, will remain in his heart. “If I should be grateful to somebody, I’m indebted to the diocese and its people. All glory should be to God, but next would be the diocese and the people, the Bishop and parish priests, ... Sacred Heart Oscoda and Holy Family East Tawas” and all who supported his treatment and recovery.

“When I go back, my intention is to ask my parish, my relatives, everybody I know to pray for the Diocese of Gaylord and all I have come across. The best way I can do that is the celebration of holy Masses.”

He has that joyful opportunity again, thanks to the mercy of others. †

A NETWORK OF MERCY

“I feel I became a better Christian because of this,” says Sacred Heart, Oscoda parishioner Leif Lindblom as part of the network that supported Father John’s treatment and recovery. “It gave me an understanding there’s more to Christianity than just going to church ... it’s practicing it when you have an opportunity to practice it. It was a gift to me.”

Lindblom was among the volunteers who shuttled the Nigerian priest for his radiation treatments — from Holy Family, East Tawas to St. Mary of Michigan-Seton Cancer Institute, West Branch, and back — five days a week for seven weeks. The 76-mile roundtrip gave the 80-year-old plenty of opportunity to befriend the priest.

“At one point, he was very discouraged,” recalls Lindblom. “I told him, ‘I talked to God and he said you’re going to be fine.’”

In fact, God did speak to Lindblom: That’s how he came to be part of Father John’s motor pool. Initially, Father John Paul Bashe, another Maiduguri priest in residence at Holy Family, approached him to help. “I think the guy upstairs said something to me; I think God basically said, ‘Here’s something for you to do.’ It worked out.”

As Father John’s health improved and his appetite grew, the pair enjoyed lunches at Ponderosa, though the priest could only eat certain things. “We got to chat and joke a tremendous amount,” says Lindblom. “He became very positive to the fact he was going to recover.

“I think a large part of his recovery was due to the fact he was accepted with warmth, particularly at Holy Family,” offers Lindblom. He suggests the respect and passion of the staff at Tawas St. Joseph Hospital and the Seton Cancer Institute also “pushed his recovery.”

Lindblom praised Holy Family/Sacred Heart Pastor Father Charles (Charlie) Donajkowski for his example to the parish communities in welcoming Father John.

“If it wasn’t for Father Charlie’s consistent love and support, none of this would have been successful.”