

DIOCESAN NEWS

Livonia parish prays procedure will cure pastor

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Last May, Father Robert L. Collins, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Livonia, and its mission church, St. William's in Coneyus, began noticing that his energy was sapped every day.

"I started feeling very tired, and I had shortness of breath and chest pains," he said in an interview Sept. 26.

In June, the 52-year-old priest attended a party at St. Thomas More Church in Brighton, where he had served as pastor for 11 years. A number of his former parishioners — including a physician — said he didn't look healthy and prevailed upon him to seek medical care, he noted.

He was eventually diagnosed with myelodysplasia, a pre-leukemia condition in which the body's bone marrow doesn't produce enough red and white blood cells, as well as platelets, he said. Various treatments brought his white blood cell count back up, but failed to do the same for his other blood cells.

On Sept. 29, the priest checked into Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester to prepare for an Oct. 6 procedure in which blood cells called progenitor cells, taken from his brother, Joseph, will be transfused into his own bloodstream. The process will help rebuild Father Collins' bone marrow, according to his brother.



Greg Francis/Staff Photographer

Annette Meade, left, and Eleanor Morris, parishioners at St. Joseph Church, Livonia, crochet a prayer rug Sept. 29, for their pastor, Father Robert Collins, who was scheduled to undergo a medical procedure to cure a pre-leukemia condition.

From 9 a.m. Sept. 29 to 9 a.m. Sept. 30, parishioners from both his parishes held a 24-hour prayer vigil at St. Joseph's for Father Collins. The vigil began and ended with Mass; a special Mass also was celebrated for the priest the evening of Sept. 29. Parishioners signed up to pray at various times during the 24-hour vigil.

The parish's office manager, Margie Enright noted that Father Collins has only been pastor since last January, yet has won the sympathy of his new parish.

"He hasn't been here that long, but everyone's real worried about him, and care for him and support him," she said. Father Collins said that he had also re-

ceived calls and cards from people throughout the diocese, including his former parishioners at St. Thomas More.

"There is some nervousness and a little anxiety," he said of the procedure. "But the people (at St. Joseph's) have been so supportive and loving and caring."

In a phone interview, his brother, Joseph, who lives in Barrington, R.I., said he was honored to aid his brother.

"It's not often that you have a chance to profoundly affect someone's life here," Joseph Collins said.

Father Collins expected to receive chemotherapy designed to break down the malignancy in his blood cells. The procedures will affect his body's ability to produce blood cells, he noted.

His blood cells are similar to his brother's. Therefore, Father Collins can receive progenitor cells from his brother, Joseph Collins explained. Joseph Collins was to receive drugs for four days prior to the Oct. 6 procedure to increase the production of his progenitor cells. The procedure to extract progenitor cells from Joseph Collins will take three to four hours, according to a hospital statement.

Father Collins said he will recover in the hospital for six to eight weeks after the procedure. He noted that it has a 45 to 50 percent chance of succeeding.

"I just pray to the Lord to be with me, and to help me," he said.

St. Francis portrayer to perform in Henrietta this weekend

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

After six years as a Shakespearean stage actor on the West Coast, Leonardo Defilippis felt in 1980 that he should rearrange his career path.

"I kind of had a void and an emptiness," Defilippis recalled.

Defilippis chose not to follow his many colleagues into mainstream film and stage productions, however.

"The grace of God told me that wasn't the way to go," he said.

Instead, Defilippis decided to try his hand at recreating Gospel readings and the lives of famous saints.

"I did it only as an experiment. And here I am, still doing it," Defilippis, 45, remarked during a telephone interview from his Beaverton, Ore., office.

Defilippis now serves as president of St. Luke Productions, a Beaverton-based company that creates religious films, videos and television productions. He has starred in most of those projects, and has also done stage portrayals of St. Francis of Assisi and other biblical figures before audiences across the country.

Defilippis is bringing his one-man show, "St. Francis: Troubadour of God's Peace," to the Diocese of Rochester. He will perform at Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 5. The one-hour performance will take place one day after the feast of St. Francis, who was declared the Catholic Church's patron saint of ecologists by Pope John Paul II in 1980.

Clad in a friar's tunic, Defilippis passionately acts and sings as he chronicles St. Francis' life — from the saint's younger years as a son of a wealthy Italian merchant; to his conversion in which he renounced his father and gave up all his worldly possessions; his establishment of the Franciscan order; and his death in Assisi in 1226.

Defilippis noted that he covers a wide spectrum of emotions in his portrayal.

"St. Francis is an extrovert — I find him so lyrical, light and uplifting. And on another level he's very serious, very strict," Defilippis said.

The actor said his presentations serve as an educational tool for those who have only scant knowledge about St. Francis.

"It was something I didn't know that much about, either. But I've read about the

life of St. Francis, and now I can immerse myself into these things and share them with others," he said.

Defilippis said he began his St. Francis performances in 1982, in conjunction with the 800th anniversary of St. Francis' birth.

In addition, Defilippis has also portrayed such saints as St. Augustine, St. Maximilian Kolbe and St. John of the Cross. His audiences, he said, have ranged anywhere from 3,000 people to "eight to 10 cloistered Carmelite nuns."

Overall, he estimated that he has performed live in front of 350,000 people. He still tours several weeks out of the year, although he noted that he has cut back his schedule to spend more time with his wife, Patti, and their six children.

One of Defilippis' primary goals, he said, is to make audience members feel that "for a moment they're in the presence of that saint."

Defilippis added that his performances appeal to a wide range of religious beliefs — "right, left, liberal, conservative, different Christian denominations," he said.

Defilippis hopes that his acting will serve as a good evangelical tool as well.

"Maybe some young person will see it, be inspired, and live that kind of life," Defilippis said. "I think the saints are great role models in our culture. They're an option for inspiration; they're uplifting."

He remarked that although his themes are uncommon in the entertainment industry, he has received many warm compliments while chatting with his audiences after shows.

"We're kind of unique in doing saints. But people are thirsting for something really spiritual," he said. "We want to do art that proclaims the truth."

This objective, Defilippis said, takes priority over his own career advancement or personal glory.

"It's all through the grace of God. We're not doing anything at all, really," he said.

Defilippis said his company is expanding its focus beyond one-man plays "to allow other artists to participate." For instance, his St. John of the Cross video, to be released Nov. 7 through Ignatius Press, features performers in such roles as St. Teresa of Avila and Carmelite monks.

Defilippis said he will maintain his religious productions in order to counter the lack of morality in the entertainment in-

dustry. In fact, he said, many colleagues have told him that they'd like to take on similar projects — if only they were offered.

"I get letters from people in Hollywood or on Broadway who give me encourage-

ment. But they don't always have the control," Defilippis remarked.

Tickets for Defilippis' 7:30 p.m. performance Oct. 5 at Guardian Angels may be purchased at the door.

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