

Priest's recovery guided by prayer

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

His childhood alone yielded enough drama to last Father Bill Darling a lifetime.

Given up by his mother as an infant, Father Darling had bounced through five foster homes by age 7. His spleen was removed when he was 14 — the same year he was adopted by parents who adopted six other children as well. He emerged from these twists and turns to become a diocesan priest in 1973.

Three decades later, Father Darling endured another momentous experience — one that brought him to death's doorstep.

When Father Darling celebrated Mass Sept. 19 at The Atria — a Penfield assisted-living community where he stayed twice during his convalescence — it marked his first public liturgy in more than 16 months. In between the 57-year-old priest endured a ruptured appendix, heart stoppage and a liver transplant. Only the power of prayer, he said, enabled him to survive such dire physical challenges.

"To me, none of this is luck or happenstance," he said. "I have a strong awareness that when I was sick, people were praying for me."

Father Darling's health problems flared up on May 5, 2002, when his appendix burst after several days in which he did not feel well. An operation was scheduled immediately, but Father Darling waited a few hours until a priest — the late Father David Gramkee, then-pastor of St. Patrick's in Seneca Falls — could be located to give him an anointing.

"It's hard for even a priest to get a

priest. People think we have this magical connection," Father Darling remarked.

The appendectomy was performed at Clifton Springs Hospital & Clinic. At the time Father Darling was only in his eighth month at St. Christopher Parish in North Chili, where he was serving his third pastorate. The others were at St. Patrick's, Owego (1987-94), and St. Salome's, Irondequoit (1994-2001).

At the time of his operation, doctors discovered abnormalities in Father Darling's liver. He was diagnosed with nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), an inflammation due to accumulation of fat in the liver. Although NASH isn't connected with any liver disease brought on by alcohol abuse, Father Darling said he nonetheless had to endure suspicions on top of being in extreme physical discomfort.

"If people want to make judgments, if to them two plus two equals five, that's their problem," he commented.

The priest spent 13 weeks at Strong Memorial Hospital, where his infections got so bad that his heart stopped briefly and he wasn't expected to survive. He made a brief comeback, moving first to St. Ann's Home and then to his hometown of Clifton Springs where he stayed with his mother, Lillian. But during the past winter, with his liver worsening, Father Darling went from Rochester General Hospital to Strong Memorial and then to The Atria. During this time he was put on a candidates' list for a transplant, without knowing how long it would take for a liver to become available.



Leila Navidi/Catholic Courier

Father Darling gives Communion to Fred McGrath at The Atria in Penfield Sept. 19, during his first public Mass in 16 months.

"I really expected to have to wait a year, and that I would have died before that," Father Darling said.

In late February he unexpectedly learned that a liver was available, because the man who was supposed to have received it was too ill for the operation. "You never know. They don't say, 'Come in tomorrow,' they say, 'Come in the next hour,'" he said.

Just like that, a 10-hour transplant surgery took place at Strong Memorial and was completed March 1. Father Darling recalls that improvement seemed to come immediately: "After I woke up I actually felt better. I was no longer dragged out, I had better energy."

Hopefully, the procedure closed a chapter of Father Darling's life during which he shuffled regularly between health-care facilities and was hooked up to numerous tubes and machines. His weight — approximately 220 pounds before the illness — shot up to 300 then dropped to 174,

and is now in the 190-195 range.

Father Darling logged a second stay at The Atria this spring, and has been back at his mother's home since June. Although there's still the threat of a liver rejection — "I'm not out of the woods yet," he said — he hopes for a return to active ministry by January 2004. "I'm really energized," he said.

He remains deeply touched by the support that's poured in since mid-2002: fellow clergy who paid him visits; his 80-year-old mother who came regularly to Rochester even though she can't drive; cards and prayers from both friends and strangers — and a big assist from above.

"I'm very loved. For whatever reason, God has chosen to keep me alive," Father Darling said, his eyes welling with tears and his voice cracking.

"There's a deep sense of gratitude in me. I feel grateful to be alive, celebrating the sacraments."

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