

Cancer-free Baltimore priest humbled by support of parishioners

By Elizabeth Lowe

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In less than four years, Father John A. Williamson has twice been told he has cancer. In 2010, he was diagnosed with Stage 1 testicular cancer. Last fall, after a tumor was removed from his stomach, Father Williamson was diagnosed with Stage 3 Atypical Burkitt Lymphoma.

The 41-year-old pastor of Church of the Ascension, Halethorpe, and St. Augustine, Elkridge, said his faith has been his stronghold.

"It has been essential," Father Williamson said. "I knew God was going to get me through it. He got me through it last time."

Gena Williamson, his mother, said she gained strength from her son because "he was strong and faithful through it all."

"Your child is your child, no matter what age they are," said the parishioner of St. Joseph, Fullerton.

Father Williamson began chemotherapy Dec. 26, two days after he celebrated six Masses on Christmas Eve. He finished chemotherapy March 26 and is now in remission.

"By the grace of God I am cancer free," Father Williamson said. "The hand of God was in this all along. I feel good."

Monsignor Adam J. Parker, vice chancellor for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, remembered a phone call he received from his friend nearly four years ago.

"He let me know the diagnosis had come, which was shocking," Monsignor Parker said.

Monsignor Parker said he was "amazed" by his friend's "demeanor of peace" surrounding the diagnosis, placing everything in God's hands.

"It got a whole lot more serious this past fall," Monsignor Parker said. "His demeanor remained the same. He has a really deep faith. He leaned on that faith even more heavily."

In addition to the support of family and fellow priests, both parishes have rallied around Father Williamson, who received more than a dozen get-well cards each day during treatments.

"It's humbling, as a pastor," he said. "Usually you're the one serving other people."

Last December, Pat Donohue-Galvin, St. Augustine's parish council president-elect, initiated a 54-day rosary novena for Father Williamson. More than 500 people from

both parishes participated.

"It was a way of uniting the two parishes for one common cause," she said. "I believe it was helpful in Father John beating the cancer."

The parishes have held fundraisers, which included the sale of novena prayer books, rubber prayer bracelets and a gathering at Ascension May 17, to send Father Williamson and his parents, Gena and Don, to Lourdes, France, in late June for 10 days.

Father Williamson has a devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is believed to have appeared to St. Bernadette Soubirous more than a dozen times at Lourdes. The French town is a destination for Catholic pilgrimages and miraculous healings.

"He's had two bouts with cancer and there's not going to be a third," said Mary Hoban, Ascension's parish council president. "We're all really positive that the Blessed Mother is going to take care of him. The Blessed Mother has been an integral part of this whole thing, from beginning to end."

Father Williamson said the generosity of parishioners is "overwhelming."

Their support means a great deal to pastors, said Father Louis A. Bianco, a friend of Father Williamson's, temporary administrator of St. Isaac Jogues, Carney, and associate pastor of St. Joseph, Fullerton.

"As a priest, your extended family is your parish and you go through so many things together," he said. "To have your parishioners show that much love and support for you is really necessary."

Mrs. Williamson appreciates the support her son has received from both parishes.

"They've been phenomenal, sending meals over," she said. "There was a lot more they wanted to do, but John is a very independent person. The biggest thing was everyone's prayers. That meant the world to me and their concern for John, and I know that meant a lot to him. They're terrific congregations."

During treatments, Father Williamson remained active at both parishes.

"John worked, except for the 12 days he spent in the hospital," said Mrs. Williamson, who frequently stayed with her son in the rectory following treatments. "Otherwise, in between his treatments, he was saying Mass and trying to keep a presence for the people."

Parishioners were surprised Father Williamson continued to work in the office after treatments and celebrate Mass.

"People were in awe," Hoban said. "Now he's back to work full-time and he hit the ground running. He's remarkable. He's not going to let cancer define what he can and can't do. He kept a positive attitude. From the very beginning he knew he was in for the fight of his life."

Donohue-Galvin described her pastor as inspiring.

"He was determined to not let it take away from him being a part of the parish," she

said. "Parishioners of Ascension and St. Augustine really appreciated being able to see, talk and listen to Father John throughout his illness. It allowed us to be part of the healing process. We were praying and rooting for him the whole time."

Father Williamson said it was important he stay connected.

"I needed something to concentrate on," he said.

"One thing he said this last round that struck me," Father Bianco said, "was 'there are parishioners I have who are struggling with cancer or other diseases. How would it look if I weren't there with them?' "

Monsignor Parker said he would have never suspected his friend had cancer had he not told him.

"Nothing has changed in terms of his overall outlook," Monsignor Parker said. "He's had the same upbeat spirit."

Almost one month to the day after completing chemotherapy, Father Williamson celebrated four Masses Easter weekend, then five Masses, two weddings and a first Communion the following weekend.

"It's good to be back and bouncing from one event to another," he said. "I relish that. It energizes me."

Father Williamson's mother said her son operates at "200 percent" when he's healthy, and that cutting back was an adjustment to a "normal person's workload."

"John," she said, "doesn't know the term 'take it easy.' "

FATHER JOHN WILLIAMSON

Age: 41

Pastor: Church of the Ascension, Halethorpe, and St. Augustine, Elkridge

Home parish: St. Joseph, Fullerton

Education: St. Joseph School, Fullerton; Loyola Blakefield; Mount St. Mary's University; Theological College of The Catholic University of America



Father John Williamson, pastor of Church of the Ascension, Halethorpe, and St. Augustine, Elkridge, delivers the homily to students at St. Augustine during a Mass of Thanksgiving May 2 now that his cancer has gone into remission. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

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