

Miracle man? Paralyzed priest, former Annapolis pastor, begins walking

EPHRATA, Pa. - When Redemptorist Father John Murray bashed his head against a railing after tripping along a New Jersey boardwalk 15 months ago, the consequences were devastating.

The former pastor of St. Mary in Annapolis and St. Wenceslaus in Baltimore suffered a broken neck that left him instantly paralyzed from the chest down. Rushed to a hospital, he underwent emergency spinal cord surgery and later began rehabilitation at a prominent New Jersey institute.

Doctors had little encouragement for the once-active priest who was known across the East Coast for his preaching abilities. The chances he would ever walk again were virtually zero.

“When they said I’d never be able to move again, they took away all hope,” said Father Murray, a former columnist for The Catholic Review.

On Nov. 28, 2010 - the Sunday after Thanksgiving - Father Murray did something everyone said would be impossible. While living and undergoing rehabilitation at Stella Maris in Timonium, he moved his left leg ever so slightly, gently lifting his foot off the ground.

“I was ecstatic,” Father Murray recalled with a smile. “Here I was about six weeks after they told me in New Jersey I’d never move again and, lo and behold, I could move. Just the foot, but it kept going and going and going.”

Today, Father Murray is completely mobile. Using a walker, he is able to walk on his own at his new residence at St. Clement Mission House in Ephrata, Pa.

Father Murray sees only one explanation for his renewed gift of independence: An encounter with the miraculous.

Help from an intercessor

When most people think of miracles, Father Murray said, they usually bring to mind instantaneous cures of a debilitating disease or terminal illness.

“We think of it as any exceptions to the laws of nature,” the priest explained. “In biblical times, what was called a miracle was anything that showed the power of God. What happened to me wasn’t instantaneous, but it certainly was miraculous.”

Reaching into his pocket, Father Murray pulled out a small object he carries with him at all times. Encased in a small locket, it houses a relic – a piece of bone – of Blessed Francis X. Seelos.

Blessed Seelos, a 19th-century Redemptorist priest being considered for sainthood, had been a rector of the same Annapolis parish Father Murray once pastored. The two also share a good sense of humor and a love for preaching.

“I think with those three common qualities, I had a little in with the guy,” said Father Murray, crediting Blessed Seelos for interceding on his behalf. “Ultimately, all prayers go to God. Seelos can’t give the grace, but he was the conduit for my prayers.”

Dr. Ernestine Wright, medical director of Stella Maris, was shocked by Father Murray’s recovery. She has seen other paraplegics regain limited use of their limbs – but nothing like Father Murray. A born-again Christian, Wright said she believes her

patient experienced a touch of the miraculous.

“With spinal cord injuries, it’s always very difficult at the time of injury to determine whether it’s a permanent or temporary injury,” said Wright, who treated Father Murray throughout his year at Stella Maris. No longer in need of nursing care, the priest relocated to Pennsylvania in October.

“We could not have predicted how much he has recovered,” she said. “It’s very unusual.”

Wright called Father Murray, who last December spent 16 days in isolation at Greater Baltimore Medical Center after contracting a highly dangerous staph infection, an inspiration to other patients and staff at Stella Maris.

“He was determined to get better,” she said. “He was determined that Stella Maris would not be his final place of abode. He was going to get back to ministry.”

Jessica Tewey, Father Murray’s former occupational therapist at Stella Maris, witnessed the priest’s perseverance. She coached him on how to dress, bathe, maintain his balance, cook and get coffee.

“The first day I showed him something, he wouldn’t be sure about it,” Tewey said, “but a week later, he’d be completely independent in whatever I gave him to do.”

Tewey said Father Murray helped the people of Stella Maris as much as they helped him – offering encouraging words, praying for them and being a model of positive thinking.

“The patients loved him,” she said. “He gave hope to other patients. Some other people are saying, ‘If he can do it, I can do it.’”

Choking back emotion, Wright remembered that the first time she met Father

Murray, she went to his room and saw an immobile priest. On his last day at the nursing home, he walked on his own to her office. At the end of their meeting, she said, he stood and shook her hand.

“It was amazing,” she said.

‘The cross always leads to new life’

After his accident, Father Murray resigned himself to his fate and embraced his suffering. The native New Yorker began preaching on a Redemptorist website and did his best to lift the spirits of elderly and infirm Redemptorists with whom he lived at Stella Maris. At 63, he was the youngest among them.

After regaining limited mobility in his left leg, he said, he gradually recovered more control. Sensations returned and he eventually began moving both legs. Before long, he was standing and taking a couple steps while grasping parallel bars. Then, he was moving with a walker. He expects to “graduate” to a cane in the coming months and doctors tell him he will eventually be able to drive.

“It’s like parents seeing their baby take their first step,” Father Murray said of those first few historic steps recorded in his diary March 16, 2010. “Here I am, old enough to appreciate what it was for me to take the first step.”

Sitting in a kitchen at his residence, Father Murray eagerly demonstrated some of his daily rehabilitation exercises. He marched his feet in place, stretched his legs, bent to the ground and pointed his toes. He walks an 84-foot-long corridor outside a chapel - back and forth, three times a day.

Stepping outside for a brief stroll on a recent chilly morning, the priest carefully placed his walker ahead of him before leaning on it as he advanced his feet one-by-one. It can be challenging, he said, but it gets easier every time he does it.

“I will have ongoing therapy by myself or with the therapist for the rest of my life,” he explained. “It’s like playing a piano. If you don’t practice, you get rusty.”

His medical ordeals, he said, have made him more sensitive to the needs of others, while drawing him closer to God.

“The cross always leads to new life,” he said. “That’s the paschal mystery and it led me to a deepening of my faith that I never thought possible.”

Grace is God’s gift to humanity, he explained, and it’s what prevented him from giving up.

“Many times,” he said, “I could feel God’s grace – the Holy Spirit, however you want to word it – pushing me, saying, ‘You can do it! Try harder!’”

As Thanksgiving approaches, Father Murray is excited that he will soon receive his first priestly assignment since his accident. He hopes to return to preaching in a parish or retreat house.

The bespectacled priest is grateful to Wright, Tewey and Marialena Firlie, his former physical therapist at Stella Maris – along with many others. Being able to walk, dress and clean himself, and stand to deliver a homily are all gifts from God, he said.

“You take all those things for granted,” he said. “Not anymore – not anymore.”

For more on this story, visit www.tinyurl.com/cr-murray2011.