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PROVINCE OF MERIBAH PILGRIMAGE TO WORLD YOUTH DAY 2011 IN THE PATHWAY OF BLESSED CHAMINADE
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I'd like to start out with a quote by St. Theresa of Avila as I think it relates to my life and hopefully yours too: "There is no such thing as bad weather. All weather is good because it is God's." As I thought about this speech last night, I thought about how my life has resembled a pilgrimage in some ways.

I was born and raised Catholic – went to a Marianist Catholic grade school called Our Lady of the Pillar and went to an all-girls school for high school. I heard about Father Chaminade growing up and attended Mass with my family every week at Our Lady of the Pillar parish. I had a typical childhood and I was just like you during high school until Dec. 5, 1998, during my sophomore year.

An egg-sized tumor was found wrapped around the top of my spinal cord and it was shutting down my body by the hour. I had emergency surgery that removed as much of the tumor as possible and was diagnosed with a rare, aggressive cancer called Askin's Tumor. Immediately my life was changed for better and for worse.

I finished out the school year and the first semester of junior year doing chemotherapy every 3 weeks. The chemotherapy made some days seem unbearable because of the endless side effects but I tried to remind myself to make the best of it – that God would not give me more than I could handle.

So, after treatment, I was ready to go back to life the way it was. A wonderful year of remission did follow including the trip to Rome, Italy, with my church for Father Chaminade's beautification ceremony at St. Peter's Basilica. I was barely able to make the trip and while in Rome, I took medicine to get me through increased pain. I prayed a lot on that trip and felt a deeper connection to Blessed Chaminade. I felt a peacefulness that this was someone important for me to trust in for prayers of intercession.

A few months after the trip, the cancer showed up again. This time it was during January of my senior year and the cancer had spread throughout my body in my bone marrow. It was discouraging but with the help of family, friends, doctors and God, I was not ready to give up.

Treating the cancer was more complicated this time around and treatments were much

more intense. I ended up missing the whole spring semester and spent it in the hospital. As my friends got ready for graduation and applied to colleges, I was fighting to have a future – any future that meant living. I was barely able to walk at graduation because three days later I was admitted for an extensive bone marrow transplant.

As part of the transplant process, they killed my entire immune system and brought me as close to death as they could. An IV put previously frozen bone marrow cells into me in order to build up a new healthy immune system. I lived in a special isolation room for six weeks, was extremely sick and allowed very few visitors.

Because of some of the medicines, My ENTIRE body peeled terribly – fingernails, lips, tops of feet – even my insides produced buckets of junk through a tube. As if this weren't enough, I soon started hallucinating and we discovered I had two serious infections. I was moved to the ICU as I went into something called septic shock, which is very life-threatening. The doctors used very strong medicines and along with my tiny immune system, endless prayers and God's grace, I once again surpassed the odds and pulled through. One of the doctors later told me I'm one of the sickest they have ever seen without dying!

After transplant, I had to regain strength to start eating and walking again – something I had not done in months. Most of my friends left for college but I focused on each day and getting better.

The next fall, after taking a year off college, I finally was away at college studying architecture. I excelled in my classes and met some lifelong friends. Once again my body hurt and I tried pain medicine. It was too much and I was constantly nauseous and sleepy. Meanwhile, I intuitively felt something was wrong again and I made the decision to move home.

The day after Thanksgiving 2002, we learned I was sick again. A new tumor was between my heart, lung and spine. There was not much else to do. We had exhausted our options as far as chemotherapy and radiation were concerned and surgery was not a good idea at that point. I asked my doctor – how long do you think I have? He didn't know but maybe 3 - 4 months but as a strong Catholic, he believed in miracles and had told me some stories of some. Hearing this made all the difference in my heart and we encouraged people to pray even more. My prayers to Blessed Chaminade increased.

My parents and some of our family friends also said specific prayers of intercession to Blessed Chaminade. When I would pray, I would not pray for a specific outcome, but I would pray for help in getting through whatever was to come – whether that meant life

or death. I always came away with a peaceful feeling that things would turn out alright, but I didn't exactly know what alright meant. I had faith that God and the guidance of prayers of intercession to Blessed Chaminade would help me through my journey – whatever it consisted of. It reminds me of one of my husband's favorite quotes: "Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at His disposition, and listening to His voice in the depths of our heart."

It seemed every other person with my type of cancer who got it again after a transplant had died within weeks because it is so aggressive. But for me, it did not grow like expected. Three months went by and I seemed quite alive. I got a job and really started living because who knew if I had a 'tomorrow,' but I would live for each day, all with God's grace.

By May 2003, I had some difficulties breathing. I received a low dose of radiation to keep me comfortable. In the fall, a whole year with the tumor having passed, I was still alive as can be, but was experiencing more intense pain. To help, I got three very low doses of chemo.

Astoundingly, in December, a scan showed little to no activity in the tumor region. Another scan in January confirmed the results.

For a year and a half, my doctors literally had looked around the world for options. There were many famous institutions and doctors that did not feel as if anything they did would help me. They wanted my doctor to put me in hospice care – for people who are going to die. The tumor, after a year, had stopped growing though—fully filling the space between the major organs but miraculously not damaging them. No one wanted to take it out though because they thought they'd kill me and certainly thought they would not cure me. We kept praying that someone would come and help.

Our prayers were answered when an amazing doctor moved to St Louis. He specialized in the type of surgery I needed. He valued my life and said he could safely remove the tumor. I was suspicious as to why he wanted to take it out. But after meeting with him I trusted him. Surgery went very smoothly and the tumor was removed – which astoundingly had grown to the size of a small nerf football!

After biopsying, it was determined that it was dead—it had somehow died inside of me with very little treatment. It is an unexplainable miracle that I attribute to prayers of intercession to Blessed Chaminade and God's miraculous healing. I cannot express enough how eternally grateful I am for this special gift. In May, it was seven years since that surgery and no cancer has been found since then. I have also learned that I am the

only known survivor ever to have lived this long in my situation with my type of cancer. The medical community is baffled by my case and cannot explain why I am still alive. When the Marianist community realized I had such a miracle and had prayers of intercession to Blessed Chaminade, they started to investigate. Over the past seven years, I have met with many Marianist priests and brothers from the U.S., India and Europe. My doctor has been actively involved in providing my medical records for the investigation. After five years of my cancer being gone, the investigation picked up even more. In May of last year, the St. Louis Archdiocese put together a local tribunal.

My parents, some of our family and friends – some from Our Lady of the Pillar – and myself had to testify before this tribunal about our prayers to Blessed Chaminade. It was an amazing experience and I feel fortunate to have gotten to know our Archbishop a little better through the process. Last summer there was a prayer service at Our Lady of the Pillar to celebrate the closing of the St. Louis portion of the case. From there, the documents – many thousands of pages – were sent to Rome for The Congregation for the Causes of Saints to review. I've been told it could be many months or years before a decision has been made. We all, of course, are praying for the canonization of Father Chaminade.

When I think back over what has happened in my life – only 28 years – I feel overwhelmed and blessed. I see that since I was very young I have been surrounded by Marianists. They have truly shaped me and inspired me. I learned different lessons from each brother and priest I have met as they carry on the legacy of Blessed Chaminade's mission. When I was invited on this trip, I could not have been more excited. While everything on this trip is very special, I am drawn to the parts that link to Blessed Chaminade specifically. It feels like a missing piece to my story and connects me even more to Father Chaminade, who has been so incredibly influential in my life.

When I hear about his life, I can't help but notice all the seemingly endless obstacles and times that he could have given up on his cause. I also feel like there were so many times that I could have too. He truly inspired me to not give up hope and is an inspiration for us all. Upon seeing his gravesite, I was overcome with memories of everything that I had gone through to come to that moment – flashes of traumatic hospital procedures, people praying with me, late nights when I was in so much pain crying out for help ... I prayed there and felt so grateful, blessed and much bigger than just myself.

I feel God has graced me with this miracle of extra time alive to help others. Then, with the tour of Perigueux, Lourdes and Zaragoza, I felt overwhelmed, in a good way. I just tried to take in as much as I could and keep prayer in my heart. I thought of all the sick people at Lourdes and remembered when I was in their place. I prayed that they have

God's graces with them each day. This trip, the experiences and everyone on it have really made me feel refreshed.

It's also made me think that throughout my life, I've learned that when we root our lives in Christ, the pieces will connect. But there has to be an indicator. There has to be something that tells us we are making the right choices. Something that tells us we are on the right path. Something that assures us that we are choosing to do the will of God. If there's not, we're sure to give up or make the wrong decisions altogether. We'll stop pursuing choices because they're tough. We'll give up on our relationships because there's nothing to convince us otherwise. For me, the best indicator has been the peacefulness that is derived by actively discerning the will of God in our lives.

Why peacefulness? Because when combined with an active prayer life, peacefulness becomes part of our direct conversations with God. I find it difficult to trust our other emotions in this way. Happiness, for example, is extremely elusive. If someone dropped a million dollars in my lap today, then I'd probably be extremely happy. This happiness, however, is temporary and will surely fade. Now, if someone robbed me on the street, I'd probably be angry. But again, the resulting anger would be temporary and will also fade. Because these types of emotions are so elusive, I find them to be poor indicators to base God's will on.

Regardless of whether I'm happy or angry, when I use peacefulness as an indicator, I can be confident that my choices and direction in life are that of God, and not of my own fabrication. I am peaceful that I am on the right path that God intends for us. Allowing my relationship with my husband and all other facets of my life to be rooted in Christ does not eliminate hardships, but instead, it puts Jesus Christ in the driver's seat of my life; it gives me the strength to joyfully keep moving forward.

I'll finish with a quote that I hope will challenge each of you in your own prayer lives. The quote states, *"Don't pray to escape trouble. Don't pray to be comfortable in your emotions. Pray to do the will of God in every situation. Nothing else is worth praying for."*