

Epiphany – ALS – 01-06/07-2018

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Over the years when you have asked me, “How are you doing, Fr. Jim,” I would respond, “I am blessed.” I found that the more I responded this way, the more I deeply believed it and sought to live my life that way – a “blessed” child of a loving Father.

I have some news to share with you that will not sound like a blessing, yet I believe it will truly be so.

For over a year and a half I have been having some muscle problems with night cramps in my legs that have made sleep difficult and more recently uncontrollable twitching in my muscles. After trying the standard hydration and stretching protocol, adding magnesium and potassium supplements, I found some, yet rather short lived, relief.

Finally this past September my priest support group strongly urged me to get some more focused medical attention.

After a number of extensive tests, blood work, MRI of the brain and neck, on November 13th I was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease after the famous baseball player.

ALS is a progressive nervous system disease that destroys the nerve cells and eventually causes disability and total paralysis. Doctors do not know why ALS occurs.

ALS often begins with muscle twitching and weakness in a limb or slurred speech. As the disease spreads and nerve cells are destroyed, my muscles will progressively weaken, as I have been experiencing especially in my upper body. Eventually, ALS will affect control of my muscles needed to move, speak, eat and breathe. There is no cure, treatment or effective medication for ALS. The disease is fatal.

As one of the doctors put it, “Think of it as Alzheimer’s of the muscles. Your cognitive abilities are intact but your muscles don’t know what to do.”

In late November I met with Archbishop Sartain to inform him of my situation. He was so caring, concerned and compassionate. He was also extremely supportive in the two requests I asked of him.

First I asked that I remain as pastor of Saint Michael Parish as long as I am able to function effectively. This is what I love – being a priest, serving you and the Archdiocese.

Secondly, I asked that I be allowed to remain in the rectory as my abilities deteriorate – which they will – and to be cared for here with your help, and to die here among you – whenever that might be. I am deeply grateful for his understanding and kindness.

As I have researched and learned about ALS, I have come to understand how devastating this disease is. It is relentless and will eventually rob me of any ability to move, then eat and finally breathe.

Yet, I am hopeful about the assistance that I am already receiving at the Swedish ALS clinic in Seattle with Dr. Mark Elliott and his team. In the weeks following my diagnosis, I slowly formed a core team of folks from the parish who have been supportive and will in the future ask many of you for your assistance in my caregiving.

I do not know when or how quickly the symptoms will worsen. Each individual is different. They called it a “designer disease.” From initial diagnosis the average life expectancy is three to five years, and for some even longer. What God has in store, I do not know, but I trust in God’s love and plan for my life and however God wants to use me in this.

I realize that this is a lot to hear and to digest. I wish I could have told more of you personally. Please honor my request that I tell as many parishioners as I can this weekend.

By that I mean, allow Fr. Gary Zender, my close friend and Vicar of Clergy for the Archdiocese and myself to tell parishioners at each Mass. Fr. Gary will be available after Mass to answer your questions and concerns.

Therefore I ask that you please keep this news to yourselves throughout the weekend. Please do NOT put this out on social media until Sunday evening after Life Teen Mass.

In the coming weeks I will talk more about ALS in the bulletin. I will post links on our website to the ALS Association as well as to a video about the Swedish ALS Clinic that I am aligned with. I will also be establishing a Caring Bridge website where you will be able to access ongoing updates from me. Cards and letters are appreciated but please no cookies, casseroles or food for now!

Lastly, many of you may be asking, “What can we do for Fr. Jim?” At this point, please pray for me. Pray daily for the intercession of St. John Paul II who taught the world how to live and die well and with dignity. Pray to Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati. If he needs a second miracle in order to be named a saint, I’m volunteering!

Most of all, please pray that I may daily be open to the will and plan of God. Pray that I may be able offer whatever suffering this will entail for the salvation of souls and conversion of hearts to Jesus Christ.

Lastly, thank you for the incredible opportunity to have been your pastor these past 20 years. I can’t express in words how very grateful I am to you all. God bless you.