

To Tell of the Works of the Lord is to give Thanks

It was Christmas Eve of December 2019 at Tabor Carmelite Community, Nsukka and we had just concluded a beautiful hour of Christmas Carols followed by the Christmas Vigil Mass. After the mass, the community had some light refreshments with the congregation. I went to bed late knowing that the next day being Christmas Day would be a hectic day. I wasn't feeling too well when I woke up that Christmas morning. I woke up feeling unwell. I struggled to get up and went for Lauds (morning prayer) with the rest of the community. We were four conventual friars and sixteen novices in the community. When the prayer was over, I still felt unwell, so I went back to bed while the others went for breakfast.

Within the last six months of 2019, I had experienced some health problems; waking up in the middle of the night and being unable to breathe correctly. At other times, my heart would beat so fast when I climbed stairs, and I would feel dizzy whenever I laughed deeply. I didn't know what to make of it. Also, sometime in August 2019, I thought that I was dying. It was like my body was just about to shut down on itself. At that moment, I suddenly felt as though my habit was choking me; I felt like taking it all off to get some relief. When I regained some strength, I went to the hospital, was hospitalised for two days and was treated for malaria and typhoid fever.

On this Christmas Day, it was my responsibility to preside over the 8.30 am mass at the prison, so I struggled to get out of bed again when it was time. I put on my habit and walked up the stairs to the front of the main building in the community called Carmel. I saw the novices putting in the packaged food and the other items we were to use to celebrate Holy Mass in prison into the novitiate bus. A number of us got into the bus, and we left for the prison. I was among the first group that arrived at the prison. Several prisoners were to receive first holy communion that day, and one was to be received into the church.

At the prison, I began by having the Sacrament of reconciliation (confession) while we awaited the other friars' arrival. The mass started sometime after 9 am. After the mass ended, I felt a lot worse, so I asked Anthony, a close friend of ours, to please take me back to the community. I was feeling weak and feverish. Anthony took me back to the community while the others stayed back to distribute the food and articles of clothing to the prisoners after the mass. It was about midday when

we arrived at the community. I asked Anthony if he could go to the pharmacy and get me some anti-malaria medication and some paracetamol. I felt sure that perhaps I was about to have a bout of malaria. I then went to the refectory to get something to eat. Everything I tried to eat, I vomited. I was nauseous, and I must have thrown up at least more than four times that day. I was also having bouts of diarrhoea. I was feeling feverish, and so I went to lie down. I was oscillating between lying down, vomiting and going to the loo.

That Christmas evening, the friars in the community gathered for a barbecue in the courtyard just outside our refectory. Although I was feeling quite unwell, I came out of my room to eat, chat, sing, and dance with them as we celebrated the birth of Christ. Tomorrow, I would be driving about 250km to Benin City to catch a flight to Lagos. My siblings had arranged, and I got permission to travel from Lagos to London on 27th December 2019 and return on 9th January 2020. One of my siblings took care of the trip's expenses.

On 26th December, I left Nsukka in the morning at about 7 am in Anthony's company. We drove to Benin City from Nsukka, and we arrived at about noon. Anthony then went back with the car to Nsukka while I stayed behind for the flight to Lagos scheduled at 5.20 pm. The flight arrived on time, and I flew into Lagos. I spent the night at my brothers' home preparing for the trip to London. Throughout that night, I had constant diarrhea and was going to the toilet now and then. I left the country for the UK on the evening of the following day.

I arrived in London in the early hours of 28th December. The next day we had mum's 80th birthday celebration with friends and relatives in the UK present. It went well. After it was all over, I went to my brother Nicholas' place at Kent. I had scheduled all that I had planned to do over the remaining days of my holiday. I would visit my other brother and my sister and see a fellow Carmelite priest working in Wales and other such things.

On 31st December, I was in the same room with my mother, and we were chatting. I was also waiting for my brother Nicholas who had gone out to return home for we had somewhere to go together ourselves as we had planned. I then fell asleep on the bed beside mum. At the same time, mum was playing her favourite game Sudoku in the local newspaper. She was sitting on a chair right next to the bed.

Suddenly, I got up out of bed, being unable to breathe. I went to the window, which was just right beside the bed, to open it. I discovered that the window was already open. I turned to return to the bed, and that was the last thing I remembered. My mother said she saw me get up suddenly and go to the window. I then turned back and then fell on the boxes and other things which were beside the bed. She screamed. And this made my nephew and niece, Christian and Emmanuella who were at home, to run up and immediately began calling the emergency services.

"Theo, Theo." "Can you hear me?" I heard the voice of my brother Nicholas calling me and tapping me on my back. I could feel saliva on my mouth and face as I lay on the ground. "Yes, I can hear you," I said as I rested on my elbows while still on the floor beside the bed where I had collapsed. "Mummy, Theo is alright; you can hear him." "Theo, please tell mummy you are alright," Nicholas said. "Mummy, I am alright," I said. Mum had fallen and had been sitting on the floor in shock.

Emmanuella, my niece, helped take mum out of the room while my brother Nicholas and his son Christian helped me get up. I changed my clothes while my niece continued to talk with the Ambulance and Emergency staff on the telephone who was asking for and taking information. My brother Nicholas and his wife Stella took me to the Princess Royal University Hospital in Kent. We went to the Accident and Emergency section where I had to be on the queue with others as we waited our turn to see the doctor. I was discussing with Stella as we sat together waiting, when suddenly, I blacked out.

Following that was another faint call that I could hear from afar while I struggled to regain consciousness. Now, it was my sister in law calling out to me again "Theo, Theo" and I could feel a cold tap on my cheeks as I struggled to regain consciousness. I saw the male nurse responsible for checking patients' vitals before admitting them to see the doctor standing by my side. He told me that I would be alright and that I would get admitted to seeing the doctor almost immediately. It was the second time I had passed out and regained consciousness. It made the nurses quicken the process for me to meet with the doctor.

The doctor examined me, and initially, he didn't seem to find anything wrong with me for all my vital signs were in order. He struggled to determine what could be wrong, especially as Stella and I told him that I had already passed out twice. I don't know what he heard, but when he placed the stethoscope on my back and listened,

he said: "Oh, no, there is something wrong here." He now told me that they would have to admit me to the hospital.

We waited for quite a long time before I could eventually get a bed in the hospital. The staff were apologetic. Of course, they probably had too many people to admit with limited bed spacing. I had an X-ray of my chest done, and a nurse led me into the ward.

While waiting to be given a bed, my brothers and some relatives stayed with me at the hospital. By the time I was offered the bed in the ward, it was already early hours of New Year day. In the hospital ward, this kind, warm and friendly Portuguese nurse brought me something to eat and ensured I was alright before leaving at the end of her shift. My brother Martin and my sister's husband Philip stayed with me some more before leaving for home. I could hear fireworks and celebrations as people celebrated the New Year.

When I woke up on 1st January, I noticed three other patients in the cubicle with me. They were all connected to monitors. I was the youngest in the room and appeared to be the healthiest. There was also a nurse in the room who appeared to be responsible for all the patients. I got up and went to take a shower all by myself and came back to lie down on the bed. Sometime early that morning, a doctor came to me. He told me that he had looked through my file and that I would be connected to the monitor for the next twelve hours for observation.

I didn't have much to do, so I went on the family WhatsApp group and chatted with my siblings. I also sent WhatsApp messages to friends and colleagues. My mum sent me a video message asking me to pray that God grants that the medical team can rightly diagnose what is wrong and give it the right treatment. I prayed the "Mary Undoer of Knots Prayer" for that intention and lay on my bed to sleep for I was feeling a bit tired.

The next thing I recall was my eyes opening slowly. Although I couldn't hear any sound, I could immediately see the nurses and the doctor racing towards the bed where I lay. Gradually, I began to make out my monitor's distress alarm beeping. I also immediately felt the hands of a nurse who was at my bedside, holding me and calling out my name, "Theo, Theo." My heart rate on the monitor was reading about 200 beats/min. The medical staff sprung into action, and the nurse made me

take off my clothes. I felt uncomfortable taking off my clothes in front of this female nurse, but what could I do? They put me into a medical gown. They took blood samples from me and quickly began moving me out of the ward. Two staff members wheeled me out of the cubicle, through the corridors and perhaps into a lift.

Next, I remember rising suddenly from the bed being revived by a defibrillator and surrounded by about four or five nurses or doctors. I had had heart failure again. The nurses and doctors had just revived me using a defibrillator. A defibrillator is a device used to prevent, restore or correct an irregular heartbeat by sending an electric shock to the heart. A nurse would later tell me that I had several (eight) episodes of Arrhythmia that day. That is, the heart beating out of rhythm that leads to cardiac arrest and death. For each of them, the nurses and doctors shocked me back to life, employing a defibrillator. After the doctors and nurses revived me, they told me that I was having too many episodes of these dangerous rhythms of Arrhythmia. They would need to sedate me to reduce the possibility of these dangerous rhythms happening again.

He then said, "Your family is here. We would allow them to come to speak to you before we sedate you." Shortly afterwards, my brother Nicholas appeared, and as he came, he said: "Theo, don't give up, don't give up." I believe I nodded. Suddenly, I could feel that slight discomfort that always seems to precede the dangerous rhythms' coming. I said to Nicholas as I writhed "Please call them, it is happening again". I saw him turn, but then I must have blanked out almost immediately. He would later tell me that as soon as he turned to call the nurses and doctors' attention, the monitors I was attached began ringing alarmingly. The nurses and doctors were there within the blink of an eye; they ushered him away and asked him to leave. Just outside where I was, Nicholas and Stella, his wife, called family members and friends to pray for me. I must have been dreaming about something I cannot remember now when, out of the blue, I felt this hot burning sensation on my chest. I sat up still feeling this burning sensation and seeing this male nurse or doctor holding the defibrillator to my chest as he applied it. "Ahhhh, that was painful!!!" I said as I sat up. Surrounding me were the doctors and nurses who had just revived me again. As I lay down there, I tried to pray. The only prayer I found myself being able to say was: "Lord, may your will be done in my life", and "Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit." Shortly afterwards, the nurses and doctors went ahead with the process of sedating me.

Meanwhile, my brother Martin had called our Carmelite friars in Nigeria to inform them about my condition. Several of our Carmelite friars drove down from Oxford to London that night when they heard that I was sick and hospitalised. Fr's Liam, Alex and Kelvin were troubled when they saw me in a coma being taken away in an ambulance.

I came out of the induced coma on 2nd January 2020. I found myself in the Critical Care Unit of King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill Road, London, connected to all sorts of medical equipment. I had a pipe down through my throat. There was another down through my nose to my stomach for feeding. There was also a catheter bag for passing urine. I noticed that there were about three other patients with me in this cubicle.

"He is awake," said a nurse as soon as I regained consciousness. There were all sorts of very modern and advanced medical pieces of equipment all around me. There was also a nurse sitting just to my right, keeping her eyes on the monitor and me. She was observing and taking notes. It must have been around 7 am. "Don't try to talk. You are not able to do so now" one of the nurses said. The doctors and nurses had moved me from the Princess Royal Hospital in Kent to King's College Hospital on Denmark Hill Road, London. The trip took about 40 minutes. A medical team accompanied me on the journey to ensure that I was stable should the Arrhythmia occur again.

I woke up again at around 11 am and not long afterwards, I overheard someone mentioning my name and asking to see me. I recognised the voice of Fr. Christopher Clarke OCD, one of our Carmelite friars. A few moments later, a nurse came to me saying "A Reverend gentleman is here to see you, would you want him to come?" I nodded. Fr. Christopher then came in and administered the Sacrament of the sick to me. I spent 17 days in the hospital. I had heart surgery and had an internal defibrillator (ICD) put in. During my time in the hospital, I had lots of visits from family members and our Carmelite friars. I am grateful for their love, concern and sacrifice. Throughout this period, I was unable to celebrate the sacrifice of the Holy Mass. I had to surrender to the fact that I could not do so. I am grateful to the Catholic chaplains who took time to ensure that I could receive communion while in the hospital. I am thankful to Fr. Ephraim Nwachukwu from Nigeria, Fr. Roy Joseph from India, Sr. Carmen Lacunza, a Spanish sister, and Deacon Alfred from Uganda. I am also grateful to all the wonderful nurses, doctors, ambulance staff,

and others who work at the hospital. I could not but observe their professionalism and commitment to their work. They were all from different parts of the globe. I commend the people of the United Kingdom for putting in place such a system that works.

After leaving the Critical Care Unit, my eyes were very red. So much so that one day one of the nurses teased me saying: "You look like a Priest Dracula." I smiled.

To Tell of the Works of the Lord is to give Thanks

I tell the above story to give thanks to God. God has indeed been merciful to me. At the beginning of my journey as a Discalced Carmelite friar, I chose the name Theophilus of the Mercy of God. I was captivated by St. Teresa of Avila's life who herself incidentally survived a severe illness at her younger age and never ceased to speak about Gods mercy. Theophilus means "loved by God" or "the one whom God loves." In all these, I see the Lord acting powerfully in my favour in various ways.

In the last six months leading to my journey to the UK, I had clear indications of oncoming cardiac arrest, but I didn't realise it. I would vomit unexplainably after meals; I would experience palpitations in my heart; I would feel dizzy when I laughed deeply, and I would run out of breath when I climbed stairs. At other times, I would wake up at night, unable to breathe. This often meant that I would get up in the middle of the night, to open the windows and the door to my room taking deep breaths. There was a time I went to help in our parish in Benin City and almost died there. In all these, suffice to say that I could have had a cardiac arrest at any time, and there would have been no access to the kind of treatment I received here in the UK. I was probably already having these episodes of Arrhythmia but didn't realise it. I might have died for lack of a ventilator or a defibrillator. For this, I am grateful to God for his mercy.

Furthermore, my siblings' decision to celebrate my mother's birthday in the UK was why I travelled to London. If I hadn't travelled to the UK at that time, I could have had these episodes of cardiac arrests in Nsukka far from the adequate medical treatment I would require. For this, I am grateful to God.

Given my heart condition at that time, though unknown to me, it is beyond understanding that I survived the flight from Lagos to London. It is another reason to thank God for his mercies.

When I arrived in London, I stayed at my brother's place. We had other relatives with their wives and children, who had taken up the other spare rooms and so I had to share a room with my mother while I was there. The first episode of Arrythmia occurred in mum's presence. I couldn't help thinking that if I had been in a room on my own, perhaps there would have been no one there to raise the alarm. For this, I am grateful to God for his mercy.

I underwent several complicated medical procedures leading to my having heart surgery. The cost of these would have run into thousands of pounds. For all this, I was treated free of charge by the hospital. The medical staff said this was an emergency and that it doesn't appear that I set out to beat the system. So the hospital gave no bill, and so I didn't have to pay. For this, again, I thank the Lord for his mercy. When I went to our Carmelite community in Kensington, London after leaving the hospital, Fr Christopher Clarke said my new name was Lazarus. For he said, I had come back from the dead. Lazarus means "God has helped" or "God is my helper." I survived approximately ten episodes of heart failure within the space of two days. The Lord was indeed my helper.

I thank Him for his mercy. I say thank you to the Kensington community members who received me warmly at my return from the hospital. I say thank you to our Provincial and Vicariate superiors and all the Carmelite friars of our Province and the Nigerian Vicariate, friends and well-wishers who were concerned about me and prayed for me.

In all this, I see the Lord as giving me a second chance in life. I see myself as having a new beginning. Before this incident, there were many things that I used to say that I wished I had learned or done in life or if I had time, I would have liked to do. I would have loved to learn new skills like learning sign language, learning more languages, taking a course in music, etc. I see myself now as having a unique opportunity and a new beginning. I see myself as having a fresh start to life. To learn and do things I had previously only dreamed about in this second half of my life. I have lost 20kg of my weight since this incident through exercise and being more active generally. I have learned how to cook, and I am enjoying it. I am learning sign language, studying French and striving to improve in my spoken Egyptian Arabic dialect. I am genuinely grateful to God for the new beginning He has given to me. May His name be praised forever. Amen.