

'God-incidence' leads to new liver for Father Leiker

By Karen Bonar

The Register

COLBY — Father Mike Leiker will celebrate his first anniversary on as a priest on Sept. 14 doing followup appointments relating to his liver transplant.

This is no coincidence.

In fact, the path to a transplant from a living donor is riddled with "God-incidences" rather than coincidences, said Brenda Kopriva, who donated a portion of her liver to Father Leiker.

"I read about it in The Register and prayed about it for about a week," she said, "and then started the process to see if I could match to be a donor."

As a surgeon at Citizens Medical Center in Colby, Kopriva said she had a professional experience that prompted her to explore the option of possibly donating.

"Shortly before this came up, I lost a patient to liver failure who was waiting on a transplant list," she said. "It was heavy on my heart when it happened. I know the road a liver patient goes down, and I told my husband, 'I know how terrible it can get. I just walked someone through this. I can have an impact on this person's life.'"

She had a passing familiarity with Father Leiker due to working at the hospital in Colby. He was assigned as the associate pastor of Sacred Heart Parish and made occasional hospital calls.

As she continued through the application process, Father Leiker began to cover Masses in Atwood from time to time. Kopriva and her husband, Jim, live in Atwood. They are also parishioners at St. John Nepomucene in rural Beardsley.

Father Leiker's assistance in Atwood allowed the couple's three children to see the potential liver recipient.

"I involved the kids from pretty early on," Kopriva said. "They were able to see his coloring and we talked about how a new liver would help him become healthy."

"One big 'God-incidence' was my family getting acquainted with the story and the man behind the story. Seeing Father Mike at church was convenient and helped give them a better understanding."

THE TRANSPLANT WAS necessary because Father Leiker has a autoimmune condition called primary sclerosing (skluh-ROHS-ing) cholangitis (koh-lan-JIE-tis), which is commonly known as PSC. It is a dis-



Brenda Kopriva is pictured with Father Mike Leiker at Sacred Heart Church in Colby. Kopriva, who is a doctor at Citizens Medical Center in Colby and lives in Atwood, donated a portion of her liver to Father Leiker. Father Leiker's liver was damaged due to an autoimmune disease, and his medical team informed him a living donor would be the fastest way to improved health.

Photo by Karen Bonar / The Register

ease of the bile ducts, which carry the digestive liquid bile from the liver to the small intestine. Inflammation causes scars within the bile ducts, which makes the ducts hard and narrow. Over time, it causes serious liver damage and liver failure.

"I wasn't nervous about being public (with my condition)," he said. "It was nice to put it out there because I know people had the question, 'Why is Mike yellow?'"

"It was a relief for other people to understand what I needed, and that it wasn't life-threatening. A lot of people said, 'That explains a lot of things' such as my skin color and energy level."

BECOMING A DONOR began online with forms and medical history, and later progressed to lab work. Kopriva said the process advanced, and phone interviews were held. The process took about three weeks, she said, and at that point, there was a pool of a half a dozen candidates.

"They wanted more than one option in case imaging or cardiac workup wasn't going to work for me to be a donor," she said. "Screening multiple potential donors at one time meant they wouldn't have to start the whole process over again if I wasn't a match. Time matters for transplant recipients."

Yet the idea of surgery or organ donation didn't make her uncomfortable.

"I'm very comfortable with the terminology and the concept," said Kopriva, who is a surgeon. "Part of why I was comfortable doing this was because I knew the liver would regrow like a starfish."

"The part they took from me would regrow in Father Mike, and mine would regrow. I knew this, but it was a foreign concept in almost everyone I talked to."

THOSE WHO WERE interested in exploring the option of liver donation contacted the Mayo Clinic directly. Father Leiker said they insulated him from the screening process.

"I had no idea how many people had signed up to see if they were a match for me," he said. "I didn't know where anything stood. The Mayo Clinic won't tell you what's going on until it's time to do something because they don't want to bring any false hope, which is good."

Kopriva was one of the potential donors, and was eventually invited to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., for imaging work. It was then when they told her she could contact the recipient.

"I was really nervous because I didn't know him that well," she said. "The first and only thing he wanted to talk about (during that conversation) was me, my family and what it meant to us. I wanted the conversation to be about him, but he wanted it to be about me."

When he began to think about a living donor, Father Leiker said he had reservations about potential donors with family commitments or young children. Kopriva's

children are ages 9, 7 and 5.

"She flat out told me, 'I'm supposed to tell you because you have the right to say 'no' if we're a solid match,'" Father Leiker said. "But she said, 'I don't know why you'd do that.'"

"I told her, 'I wouldn't know how I would deal with it if something happened to you.' Brenda basically said, 'You have to trust God.'"

Kopriva said she and her husband, Jim, discussed the surgery and potential risks before embarking on the process.

"I felt such assurance about it because I felt called to do it," she said of the liver donation. "I felt protected and safe. It was a blessing I had that other people — Father Mike and my husband — didn't have. I think it was harder on those guys than it was on me."

Their initial phone call was on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 26.

"It was at the start of Lent, and he got emotional and said, 'This is going to be quite the Lent for me and you,'" Kopriva said.

INITIALLY, FATHER Leiker said the harvest and transplant surgeries were scheduled for March, but when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, plans had to change. As hospitals adjusted protocols and schedules, Kopriva was also adjusting in the hospital where she worked.

"I was the COVID hospitalist, and dealt with anyone who possibly had COVID," she said.

Father Leiker said a few weeks before surgery was scheduled, Kopriva touched base with him to ask him to wear a mask at the "drive by" bulletin handout scheduled at Sacred Heart Parish in Colby.

"I was feeling really horrible — my liver issues were flaring up — I had a fever," Father Leiker said. "Once I told her I had a fever, she told me to go to the ER. She'd already called the ER and told them I was coming."

Due to his fever and cough, he was quarantined, and was in close communication with Kopriva.

"It gave us the opportunity to know each other better," she said. "Before that, we just knew each other passing in the halls, but after that we got to know about each other's families and he got to know how I became Catholic. It was important to solidify those bonds that affirmed to me that this is the right thing to do."

Because Kopriva knew a transplant was on the horizon, she was in touch with the team at the Mayo Clinic, to check on medication administration.

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Donor: 'I feel like this is God's work'

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"The liver transplant team was trying to figure out how she knew I was having the transplant, because they hadn't even told me a date yet," Father Leiker said. "She said, 'I'm the donor.' They were flabbergasted she was the doctor taking care of me and also the donor."

ONCE CLEARED FROM HIS flare-up, the surgical date proceeded.

On May 22, the right lobe of Kopriva's liver was transplanted into Father Leiker, which was about 60 percent of her liver.

Due to COVID-19, hospital visitors were limited.

"We would have lunch and reassure each other everything would be OK," he said.

The duo granted permission for their medical teams to share updates with the other following the surgery.

"We would see each other as we were doing our walks in the halls," Father Leiker said. "It was nice to check on each other because we weren't allowed to have anybody with us."

Kopriva said the most noticeable aspect of recovery was fatigue.

"The whole liver regenerates in three weeks," she said. "I spent the first week sleeping a lot. After that, it was a slow climb out of taking naps. After four weeks, I was back to work."

But back to work with restrictions. She was not permitted to lift anything heavy for eight weeks following surgery.

"It has made me a better surgeon to be on the other side," Kopriva said. "Now I understand better what patients go through. I also understand what limitations I place on them mean for their lives."

Father Leiker's liver is also back to full size, and because the organ is considered "foreign" by his body, he will have to continue on anti-rejection medications for the rest of his life.

LOOKING BACK, Father Leiker said he understands more fully why his doctor encouraged him to explore the option of a living donor.

"One of the things that he said was, 'You're not sick enough to be on the list, but if you can find a living donor, and we can do this, your quality of life will change immensely,'" Father Leiker said. "Until I experi-

enced it, I had no idea what he meant.

"The day after surgery, I knew there was something different. I could feel a difference. I knew I was tired from the anesthesia, but it wasn't the chronic fatigue, the beat up feeling I had all the time."

Yet the changes he noticed aren't only internal.

"One day, a couple weeks after surgery, I was outside and noticed my skin tone," he said. "I realized I was white. It was a normal skin tone. A few weeks later, I noticed the whites of my eyes were white, not yellow."

"I experience something new every day — things that I didn't realize I was missing."

FAITH WAS A CENTRAL thread of the entire experience — for both the donor and recipient.

"It was good to have that bond. Being able to celebrate Mass together was so huge and powerful, so reassuring," Father Leiker said. "Our shared Catholic faith was huge. Not just her and I sharing that, but my doctor sharing that as well. There was trust we had going into it that, 'God's got this.'"

"Brenda and I had Mass

together in that private chapel the day before surgery. It was phenomenal — a wonderful celebration of life. We prayed for the care team and surgeons, doctors, everybody involved. It was a special moment."

The opportunity to grow a friendship and share their faith prior to the procedure was something Kopriva said she valued.

"We had talked about some of the limitations Father's disease placed on his ministry," she said. "He felt he had so much more to give but was not physically able. It resonated with me."

"I also feel called by God to serve through my career, and having a restriction on that would be very difficult. With the transplant, I saw a chance to help Father. Mike heal and serve the God he loves at the level he feels called."

GRATITUDE IS another aspect of the experience — but one they don't quite know what to do with.

"I knew I was thankful for Brenda and the others who signed up to see if they were a donor, but I didn't know how to be thankful. I didn't know what 'being thankful' looked like until

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Father Mike Leiker

after surgery," Father Leiker said.

Kopriva said her willingness to explore the option to donate was a simple act of following what she felt was God's will.

"I don't feel like this is my work," she said. "I feel like this is God's work and a whole lot of people's gift."

Kopriva pointed out her family in Atwood assisted with caring for her kids in her absence, and the hospital permitted her to take four weeks off for the surgery and recovery.

"This happened through a willing person that has a ton of blessings surrounding them," she said. "I don't feel like I did anything but be willing."

FAITH AND REASONS

Rules in the Church

Q Why does the Catholic Church have so many rules?

A We often see this question in regards to our Catholic faith.

Why all the rules? I think there to be two basic answers. First, these rules protect us, and secondly, they allow us to be free. I know this sounds counter intuitive that rules actually bring us freedom, so I will provide you a couple analogies to explain.

Let us start with these darn face masks we all seem to love so much. While seemingly, nobody likes wearing a mask, most all of us prefer wearing a mask to the shutdown of society we experienced in March and April of this year. These masks help to protect us from a dangerous virus, and the rules mandating us to wear masks provide us the freedom to travel, to visit others, and to live.

My second analogy involves the rules of the road. We know them well, and most of us follow them. We drive on the right side of the road, and we stop at red stoplights. Because we follow these rules, we are free to drive while having conversations with family and friends, and we are free



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even to sing a song or two while listening to Spotify or the radio. Imagine driving without laws. It would be chaos. We would be continually on edge, driving nervously and defensively hoping to avoid certain disaster. Again, particular rules exist to lead us into freedom and protect us from harm.

Now let us shift to the "rules" of the Church. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church has come to the wisdom of knowing that there are things in this world we need to avoid as we strive to live an authentic and abundant life. From the most basic golden rule to the deepest intricacies of the moral law, we understand that all of these rules exist to protect us from evil, and to give us the freedom to be coheirs to the Kingdom, and sons and daughters of the living God.

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"We [Christians] are, all of us, called to be women and men whose lives are as bread broken for God's people. We are broken to be bread for their hunger, food for their journey, taste for their delight. And as we journey with

these people whom God has redeemed and called to the Reign of God, we must not hesitate to eat at their tables, partake of their bread, for without them, we are women and men of no purpose. Our lives only find meaning when we mingle with the lives of our people."

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