



"I can imagine Joseph, with his wife about to have a child, with no shelter, no home, no place to stay. The Son of God came into this world as a homeless person. **THE SON OF GOD KNEW WHAT IT WAS TO START LIFE WITHOUT A ROOF OVER HIS HEAD.**" — Pope Francis in speech to clients of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

'Priest for a day' meets 'beacon of hope' in Philadelphia

12-year-old Brett Haubrich met seminarian Philip Johnson, both of whom had the same type of tumor

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Brett Haubrich of "Priest for a Day" fame met a special person on his trip to Philadelphia on the last weekend of September.

But that certain someone wore neither a white cassock nor a white zucchetto. Nor did he answer to "Jorge."

So it wasn't Pope Francis, though Brett, mom Eileen and dad Conrad went to Philly as guests of honor to experience the pope celebrating Mass to close the World Meeting of Families.

Nope. It was someone else, a Facebook friend the Haubrichs hadn't met in person but with whom they've communicated over the past year, and who shares a commonality with the Haubrichs in addition to a deep Catholic faith.

He's officially Rev. Mr. Philip Johnson, 31, a transitional deacon who will be ordained next spring as a priest for the Diocese of Raleigh, N.C. A third-year theology student, he attends St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in — where else? — Philadelphia.

His bond with the Haubrichs?

Anaplastic astrocytoma, the same rare brain cancer as Brett's and, like Brett's tumor, inoperable in the deep regions of the brain. But he's seven years removed from his diagnosis and eight months from becoming a priest, a living, breathing role model for 12-year-old Brett and a beacon of hope for the Haubrichs in a dark time.

Eileen discovered Deacon Johnson not long after he wrote an article for the Raleigh diocese website in response to Britany Maynard's public quest to "die with dignity" — i.e. get medical assistance to commit suicide — after a terminal-cancer diagnosis: "Dear Brittany: Our Lives Are Worth Living, Even With Brain Cancer"

His story — that of a Navy man who began to study for the priesthood a few months after his diagnosis — resonated with Eileen, whose son was diagnosed in June 2014 and requested to be a "Priest for a Day" as part of his MakeAWish this past spring.

"His article helped me at a difficult time; gave me tons of hope," Eileen wrote in an email from Philadelphia the day after the Mass and meeting. "It really inspired me. ... He is seven years past diagnosis! Amazing!"

She likewise described meeting him in Philadelphia as "amazing," though at one point the meet-up seemed unlikely.



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Brett Haubrich who was "Priest for a Day" as part of his "Make a Wish," was invited to attend the papal Mass closing the World Meeting of Families. He hugged his mother, Eileen, after seeing the pope. His father, Conrad Haubrich, stood by.

Though Philip would be at the papal Mass, he texted Eileen that he'd be leaving right after and have no time to meet.

So Eileen, with a little help from On High, made it happen.

"I was determined to meet him and show Brett," she wrote, calling the meeting her "hidden agenda" for the Philadelphia trip. "He told me where he was seated ..."

But that was of little help: "I walked up to the security line for that section ... so many seminarians and priests!"

All dressed alike, in standard clerical garb. Impossible to pick a stranger out of that crowd.

Except for one thing. Do you think God would bring the Haubrichs 900 miles — ostensibly to see the pope but really to meet the man who has inspired them, a man studying for the priesthood to boot — and not have the meeting happen?

Not a chance. Call it a coincidence, happenstance or whatever you want, the Haubrichs and Catholics know better. It's Divine Providence 101. Guess who walked up? Yep, Rev. Mr. Philip Johnson.

She knew him instantly, from photos on Facebook and the article on the Raleigh diocese website. "Amazing it was the right place at the right time!" she stated. "I am

so glad we met him."

The meeting was brief, lasting just long enough for the Haubrichs to thank him for the inspiration and hope, and for Brett to meet someone with the same rare cancer who also wants to become a priest. Brett posed for a picture with Philip, who left with a photo of Brett, Eileen and Conrad.

Amazing, indeed.

But that wasn't the only remarkable thing to happen to the Haubrichs in Philadelphia. Read on. The other had a biblical storyline.

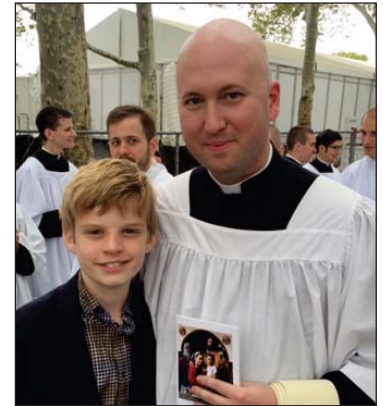
In numerous Gospel parables, people make great efforts to get into the presence of Jesus Christ, to have Him say a few words, to merely touch his cloak, to be cured of illness, blindness or deafness.

So it was with Brett, who was led to the pope's motorcade in similar fashion by an angel in the person of Aimee Tysarczyk.

Working for the company handling communications for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Tysarczyk facilitated a brief interview for EWTN with the Haubrichs in the reserved-seating area. She and the crew departed after the interview, and that was that.

Or so it seemed.

Tysarczyk re-materialized later — totally unexpected — on a mission: to take Brett for



COURTESY EILEEN HAUBRICH

Brett Haubrich posed for a photo with seminarian Philip Johnson, both of whom had the same type of tumor.

an up-close look at the papal motorcade into the Mass. Off they went, soon returning with Brett and Aimee beaming; Pope Francis had blessed them — in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit — as the popemobile drove past. Coincidentally — who do you think arranges these "coincidences?" — NBC Nightly News showed footage of Philip smiling and waving as Pope Francis delivered the same blessing toward him the previous day at the seminary.

How cool is that?

"Really cool," Brett said by phone from Philadelphia, as is his custom.

The four-day, three-night trip to Philadelphia proved to be exhausting — a three-mile hike from their hotel and an all-day excursion for the Mass, with long waits and security lines once they were there, the hike back then sight-seeing the next day. But the trip was well worth it, coming on the heels of a recent MRI for Brett that showed no evidence of the tumor.

"It was amazing," Brett said, echoing his mom, who especially liked receiving communion consecrated by the pope.

Brett listed his favorite things at Mass as "the music, the singing ... everything." And simply, "the pope being there," he said.

Plus, the universality of the Church. The pope celebrated Mass and delivered the homily in Spanish. The lectors read in their native tongues as well.

"The languages were really fascinating," he said. "All the people of other families were there, really of the world."