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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

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item 197

## evangelization from a wheelchair

It was more than twenty years ago. One day in October I was coming back to my new parish in a little town in Ukraine named Bilohiria. Paul, a young man from our parish in Zhitomir, was driving. Another man was sitting beside him. I felt tired so I slept on the back seat.

When I woke up I was in a hospital and could see the face of my driver over me. "What happened?" I asked. "We had an accident", Paul answered. His head was bandaged. I then tried to lift my right hand but I couldn't. I didn't feel pain but I could not do anything. Slowly I realized that I was paralyzed! I could move neither my leg nor my hand. I could move my head, I could see, I could hear, I could speak and that was all. But I was alive.



The operation on my spine was complicated. Two of my cervical vertebrae were broken and there was a big swelling on my spinal cord. But the doctors did what they could. They bound together the broken vertebrae and did a spinal puncture to relieve pressure.

My Pallottine brother found me in the hospital and we decided to evacuate back to Poland. It was dangerous as I could have died during transport by road. So the Pallottines in Ukraine gathered money to transport me by air. I was moved lying on a wooden door wrapped around by a sheet. My only baggage was my passport. I arrived to the Rehabilitation Centre in Konstancin near Warsaw. I presumed that I would get better and, in a few months, return to my parish. But the facts went another way.

The trauma was serious. It took three months before I could sit in a wheelchair, and I still depended on the assistance of others. I couldn't return to the Ukraine so I stayed in our seminary where the seminarians took care of me. Happily

some of the students were from Ukraine and Belorussia and they came to me for confession and spiritual direction because I knew Russian. So I felt myself needed. At the same time I continued my rehabilitation. I learned to move in a wheelchair, and to write with a computer using one finger, but my hands were still partially paralyzed.

After two years of rehabilitation, and working as a confessor, there was a fresh challenge. My Provincial was looking for a spiritual director for postulants in Ukraine. A new house had been prepared for initial formation. I applied. There were five postulants, the parish priest and myself. However the house was not modified for a wheelchair. They only adapted a room from a garage on the first floor. I was the spiritual director, and taught Latin and English. Postulants helped me and carried me upstairs. Everything was simple and poor. There was no shower, no toilet there. Once a week we travelled by car to the next parish to take a shower. It was a small village in the forest – a dream place for formation.

But postulants started to leave. After Easter only two continued. They didn't have the strength to lift me upstairs. I stayed downstairs in my garage like a recluse. Postulants brought me food. Only once a day they took me to church. I was sick and there was no medicine to heal me. I was afraid that I would die. Then the Pallottine superior decided: Come back to Poland!

But I could not forget the idea of evangelization in the East. That was my dream in the seminary. I read testimonies about the persecution of Christians in the Soviet Union. How would it be possible to get back to the Ukraine or Russia?

Some years later Fr Gregory – my old friend – visited me. We had met each other twenty years before in the Neocatechumenal Way in Ukraine. He had just become the parish priest of a little parish near Donetsk in East Ukraine. He invited me to help because he had begun a mission to families there. I asked my superior. He didn't want to agree without a guarantee that my health would be assured, but at last he agreed.



There is a little Catholic parish in the town Makeevka near Donetsk. It has about 400,000 inhabitants and there are about 100 Catholics. Roman Catholics are less than 1% in East Ukraine, most Ukrainians are orthodox or atheists. In that parish there was a majority of older women. And there were only a few very young children. So the Bishop of the Diocese of Kharkiv and Zaporizhia encouraged an outreach to the families of Makeevka.

The mission team consisted of one priest, seminarians and two families with children. Fr Gregory, a Polish priest, had been sent to Makeevka to be the parish priest and to prepare the mission. There were two seminarians with him, from the *Redemptoris Mater* Seminary in Kiev. Fr Gregory had also two parishes in other towns (50 and 70 km from Makeevka). So it was considered that I would be a help for him. In East Ukraine you must talk in Russian and celebrate in Ukrainian. But there were many barriers for those wheelchair bound. Still, we modified the house and the chapel in Makeevka and paths for wheelchairs were prepared. I received health care from a nurse – a volunteer from the parish.

A mission to families without families? As it happened it was not so simple. There were two families elected to Makeevka: one Spanish and one Italian. But only the Italian family was ready. They arrived in autumn and were shocked. They had three little children. They didn't speak Russian. Their children couldn't continue in those circumstances so they returned to Italy after three months. The following year two Spanish families were elected. One family had nine children! How do you find a flat for such a family? It seemed it would be impossible. Yet, after some searching, we found a big house that was rented from a rich Gypsy family.

I was there one year and three months. I was happy that I could participate in the evangelization. I preached sermons, celebrated Masses, heard confessions and went many kilometers to meet ill people and talk with them about faith. I wasn't deterred because I'm paralyzed. Everywhere men from the mission helped me. Young people came to the parish. We prepared plays for Christmas and Easter. There was catechesis of the Neocatechumenal Way and a little community of about 15 persons started up. There was great ferment in our little parish where only 30 persons attended Sunday Mass.

After the year of intensive work I became ill and had to return to Poland to regain my health. Again I expected to go back after a few months. But my Provincial said that I must stay there. It was difficult to say goodbye just as the mission was starting and new families arriving in Makeevka. The Lord could see – I thought.



Until now I continue to live in Konstancin in the Center of Mission Animation. It is the same little town in Poland where I was in hospital after my accident. Now I am a chaplain to a hospital where children are in rehabilitation. I think that it does not bother them that I am in a wheelchair. They accept me. Sometimes we have a boy or a girl in a wheelchair, or one without hands. I can help them to accept their situation.

I think about the barriers to my returning to Ukraine and I still believe that I'll go there and announce the gospel in the East. The Lord can send His apostles across borders.

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**14.01.14**  
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item 198

## **a moving testament of faith, hope, and love**

**a priest writes to the Pope just before dying at age 31. Here's what his letter said...**



*Fr Fabrizio De Michino was born in Naples on 8 September 1982. Nearly 3,000 people gathered in Ponticelli to bid him a final farewell at the Basilica of Our Lady of the Snows, where he served as a parochial vicar. Fr Fabrizio suffered greatly in his last few months, which he lived with great faith and with strength of mind. He always had a smile and words of comfort for his family and friends, who were with him until the very end.*

*Aleteia is pleased to offer the following letter, which Fr Fabrizio sent to the Pope shortly before his passing.*

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To His Holiness, Pope Francis

Holy Father,

In the daily prayers that I offer to God, I do not cease to pray for you and the ministry that the Lord himself has entrusted you with, so that you might always have the strength and joy to proclaim the beautiful news of the Gospel.

My name is Fabrizio De Michino, and I am a young priest of the Archdiocese of Naples. I am 31, and have been a priest for five years. I serve in the Archdiocesan Seminary as an educator in diaconal formation as well as in a parish in Ponticelli, located on the outskirts of Naples. The parish, which recalls the miracle that happened on Esquiline Hill, is named in honour of Our Lady of the Snows, and in 2014 it will celebrate the centenary of the coronation of its wooden statue, which dates back to 1500 – an image that is very dear to all the inhabitants of the parish.

Ponticelli is degraded by poverty and high crime, but every day I truly discover the beauty of the Lord's goodness on those who trust in him and the Blessed Virgin.

I, too, have been able to grow in my love for our Heavenly Mother during my time at this parish, while also experiencing her closeness and protection in the face of my adversities. Unfortunately, over the past three years, I have been fighting a rare disease – a tumour located just inside my heart, which within the past month has metastasized to my liver and spleen. But throughout these difficult years, I have never lost the joy of being a preacher of the Gospel. Even in my fatigue, I perceive a strength that does not come from me, but from God – a strength that allows me to continue on in my ministry. There is a scriptural passage from Ezekiel that accompanies me and instils in me a confidence in the strength of the Lord: "I will give you a new heart; I will place in you a new spirit. I will tear out your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ez. 36:26).

During this time, I have felt the close presence of my bishop, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, who supports me constantly, though sometimes he tells me to rest so that I might not become too fatigued.

I thank God also for my family and friends, and for my fellow priests, who sustain me while I undergo my various therapies, sharing with me these inevitable moments of suffering. My doctors also give me great support, and seem to do the impossible to find the right treatments for me.

Holy Father, I'm beginning to write at length now, but I just want to tell you that I offer all this to the Lord for the good of his Church – and for you, in a special way, so that the Lord will bless you and be with you always in this ministry of service and love.

I beseech you to include me in your prayers. I ask the Lord every day to help me to do his will, always and everywhere. I do not ask God for my healing, but rather the strength and joy to remain a true witness to his love and a priest in the model of his own heart.

Assured of your fatherly prayers, I greet you devotedly,

**Don Fabrizio De Michino**



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