

ON EAGLE'S WINGS

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Sample

MICHAEL JONCAS

On
Eagle's
Wings

*A Journey through
Illness toward Healing*



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INTRODUCTION

I never expected to write a book like this. My other books have been primarily academic, dealing with worship or musical issues. This book is much more personal, a combination of journal entries, later reflections on the events I record, and the memories of family and friends who walked with me through a year of sickness, suffering, and recovery.

From April 2003 to June 2004 my usual life of preaching and presiding at liturgy, teaching, researching, composing, and offering presentations in various venues was shattered. I was ensnared in a neurological disorder, eventually diagnosed as Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS). Grappling with this disorder led to three months of hospitalization at St. Mary's Hospital, part of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN; another three months of outpatient therapy at Bethesda Rehabilitation Hospital in St. Paul, MN; and six months

of home therapy before returning to my priestly and academic responsibilities.

In the years since, I have had the chance to reflect rather deeply on this time. I believe that what I underwent can be mapped and described in five stages that the following pages will outline. I do not claim that this structure will be true for all sufferers, but I believe nonetheless that exploring these stages might be helpful for others experiencing their own time of suffering and for those who care for them.

Many of my readers probably know that I have spent some forty years writing and promoting church music for the revised Roman Rite Catholic liturgy. As will become clear in my narrative, I couldn't create any new compositions during my time of affliction, and I continued to be creatively blocked for nearly two years after coming down with GBS. However, in October 2005, it was as though the floodgates opened and I wrote a significant number of compositions in a short period of time. Listening to the new compositions, I detected not only a change in my compositional style but (at least in my opinion) a deepening in the compositions themselves. I now believe that some of these compositions arose as I was undergoing the stages of suffering I will describe. So I conclude each chapter with some suggested listening, one composition created in the period after my time with GBS that I believe expresses in some way the experience of the particular stage I had faced.

I offer these reflections in thanksgiving to the medical personnel who helped me confront GBS, to my family and

friends who stood by me through my hospitalization and recovery, and to God, who has walked with me through the valley of the shadow of death and opened new ways of ministering for me. If God uses these reflections to touch the hearts of any of my readers with his healing grace, I will be delighted and enriched.

I would especially like to thank Frs. George Szews, Kevin McDonough, Tom Kommers, and also Vicki Klima and my family members for sharing their memories and thoughts about the events I've described. Without their observations this book could never have been written.

Finally I express particular gratitude to all those who helped to bring this book into being: Therese Ratliff, PhD, publisher at Twenty-Third Publications, for accepting the manuscript; Dan Connors, editorial director at Twenty-Third Publications, who worked tirelessly at turning the manuscript into a book; Jeff McCall, who created the cover; and Patricia "Trish" Vanni, who encouraged me to bring this project to Twenty-Third Publications and who has encouraged me in its creation.

As Johann Sebastian Bach was accustomed to write on his completed musical scores: "Soli Deo gloria" (To God alone be the glory).

Chaos and Confusion

Before beginning the narrative of my transformative encounter with GBS, I'd like to give you some background on my life up to 2003. These biographical notes are by no means complete, but should still give you a sense of the disruption GBS brought into my life and how profoundly it changed me.

BACKGROUND

I was born in Minneapolis, MN, in 1951, the son of Paul Eugene Joncas and Theresa Janine (Narog) Joncas. My dad worked in a variety of settings associated with the per-

forming arts: as a set designer, floor manager, and makeup man for Twin Cities television companies (KSTP, WCCO, KTCA); as a stagehand for professional troupes who came to perform in our area; and eventually as a teacher of theater arts at the University of Minnesota. He spent his free time whittling and painting watercolors and oils. My mom was a long-term medical secretary for the Hennepin County pathology department, but she had also taken voice lessons starting in high school and sang both semi-professionally and around the house. I attribute my permanent love of the arts and long-term avocation as a composer of church music to their influence.

I was also blessed by coming from a large family, the eldest of eight children. I will list them here in order of birth, so that when they appear later in the narrative you'll have some sense of who they are: Jeanine Marie (born 1953), Kathleen Rose (born 1956), Babette Anne (born 1958), Patrice Clare (born 1960), Stacie Lee (born 1961), Joseph Paul (born 1963) and Kim Marie (born 1966). All were alive during my bout with GBS with the exception of Babette, who had died in her twenties, felled by a form of epilepsy that stopped her heart during a major seizure.

I am the product of long Catholic schooling, attending St. Lawrence Catholic School in southeast Minneapolis until third grade and then moving to northeast Minneapolis, where I attended St. Charles Borromeo Catholic school. Discerning a possible call to the priesthood after eighth grade, I attended Nazareth Hall, the preparatory seminary

for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, from 1965–1969, and the University of St. Thomas as part of St. John Vianney College Seminary from 1969–1973, graduating with a B.A. in English. After working at St. Joseph’s Parish in New Hope, MN, as a liturgy and music director for three years, I returned to the diocesan major seminary, the St. Paul Seminary, and was ordained for the Archdiocese as a diocesan priest in 1980.

After ordination I served as assistant pastor at Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary parish on the east side of St. Paul for four years, and then as education coordinator and campus minister at our Newman Center at the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities) for three years. I had already earned a M.A. in theology, specializing in liturgical studies, from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana during the summers I worked at St. Joseph’s, so when I had the opportunity to complete my education in liturgy, I jumped at the chance. Archbishop John Roach sent me to the Pontificio Istituto Liturgico of the Ateneo Sant’Anselmo in Rome, where I earned an S.L.L. (licenciate in Sacred Liturgy) and S.L.D. (doctorate in Sacred Liturgy). When I returned home, I began full-time teaching in the Department of Theology at the University of Thomas. The “powers that be” at St. Thomas have always been remarkably kind to me, allowing me to teach for various lengths of time at other institutions of higher learning such as the Angelicum in Rome, St. John’s University in Collegeville, MN, and at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, where for nearly a

decade I taught in the summer school program of liturgical studies and during the spring semester of odd-numbered years in the Department of Theology. It was in the spring of 2003 that my adventure with GBS began.

THE STORY

17 April 2003

Holy Thursday

I think I first suspected that something out of the ordinary was happening to me as I celebrated the Holy Thursday liturgy with the Sisters of the Holy Cross on 17 April 2003. I had developed a warm relationship with the sisters at St. Mary's College (the "sister" school to Notre Dame) and they frequently invited me to preside and preach for Sunday Eucharist in their magnificent college chapel. So I was honored and delighted when they invited me to preside and preach at the Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. Faithful to their Catholic heritage, Notre Dame and St. Mary's designated the time of the Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday) and Easter Monday as holidays, so I was looking forward both to some time of intense prayer and of relaxation from classroom teaching before the final push of the semester.

The first sign I noticed that something was "off" occurred as I sweat through the Holy Thursday vestments with an

intensity that was visible to members of the community who had gathered to pray. I sweat quite easily (a genetic gift from my father, I believe, who was also a large man), but never before had I concluded a liturgy realizing I had soaked my underwear, my shirt and pants, and the alb, stole, and chasuble (an undergarment, a badge of office, and a flowing overgarment that are part of the prescribed vestments for a priest celebrating Mass in the Roman Rite). Long after I came back to health, members of the St. Mary's community present at this Holy Thursday liturgy told me how puzzled they were seeing me sweat so copiously when the ambient temperature was springlike, if not chilly.

More concerning to me was the awareness that I couldn't raise the chalice and paten (the wine cup and bread plate used at Eucharist) to where I would usually elevate them at the conclusion of the Eucharistic prayer (the central prayer of praise and thanksgiving from which Eucharist takes its name: the Greek word *eucharistia* = thanksgiving). While I noted the experience, I thought I was simply experiencing some muscle weakness. I had been teaching with my usual intensity the whole semester and judged that I was just tired and that any muscular weakness I felt would disappear after a good night's rest.

I know now that I must have surmised that these symptoms were more serious than I suspected, because I called both my mother and my sister Kathy to wish them a Happy Easter (trusting that they would pass my good wishes on to my other relatives) and reported what I had experienced.

Thinking that they were being supportive and having no reason to believe that there was anything serious about my symptoms since I had always been a healthy guy, they agreed with me that a good night's sleep would probably bring me back to shipshape.

18 April 2003

Good Friday

However, I had further confirmation that something odd was transpiring when, in spite of the fact that I was exhausted from celebrating the liturgy at St. Mary's, I only slept in fits and starts that night. New symptoms appeared: it became physically harder and harder to get up from my bed; walking into the bathroom in bare feet became grueling due to the strange sensations I was feeling on the bottoms of my feet (as though I had Brillo pads attached to them); and a weird weakness took over my right arm (though I thought at this stage that the weakness was the result of too much grading of undergraduate essays yoked to sleeping on the arm in a way that hurt the muscles). I tried to tell myself that these were just passing difficulties and that if I could only get a good night's sleep things would be fine. Although I had planned to attend the Good Friday liturgy at St. Mary's, I gave myself permission to take an afternoon nap instead, thinking that I would attend an evening liturgy in a local parish in lieu of the afternoon liturgy.

I didn't really worry until I tried to prepare supper for myself that evening. (Adult Roman Catholics of the Roman

Rite between the ages of fourteen and sixty observe “fasting and abstinence” on Good Friday, i.e., limit their eating to one full meatless meal [with the possibility of two other small meals that do not together constitute a full meal] on the day that commemorates Jesus’ death; the obligation to abstain from meat holds from age fourteen on). I could not work the can opener nor could I lift the cooking pots from the cupboard to the stovetop burners. Clearly this was more than a passing difficulty.

So I called the clinic at Notre Dame, hoping that there’d be someone on call even though the University was shut down for the Triduum weekend. Surprisingly a nurse associated with the university clinic called me back but said that the regular on-call doctor was gone for the holiday weekend and that I should go to a local hospital if I felt I needed more care. I assured her that, while I was concerned about my symptoms, I didn’t feel they were serious enough to “bother” the doctors at one of South Bend’s hospitals.

I described some of my symptoms to Fr. Michael Driscoll, a good friend and a colleague in liturgical studies at Notre Dame, and asked him for a recommendation for medical care. He kindly offered to try to get his own personal physician to care for me, but I told Michael I didn’t want to bother his medical caretaker, especially on a holiday weekend. I asked Michael to direct me to whatever institutions would be available in the South Bend area that also had a reputation for good medical practice. Michael directed me to an Urgent Care clinic not far from the University campus.

I also called my best priest friend, Fr. George Szews, at that time pastor of the Newman community in Eau Claire, WI, to get his advice on what I should do. He agreed with Michael Driscoll that I should try to get a professional medical opinion about what was going on with me, but left the decision about when to do so up to me.

Even though it was now the time when I had intended to participate in the local parish's evening Liturgy of the Lord's Passion, I felt that I should get to Urgent Care as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, when I finally found the address and reached the clinic, they had closed for the day. The notice on the door said that they'd reopen at 7 AM on Saturday, so I decided that I'd be there bright and early the next morning.

19 April 2003

Holy Saturday

The night between Good Friday and Holy Saturday repeated the pattern from Holy Thursday to Good Friday, i.e., I barely slept more than fifteen minutes at a time and my muscular deterioration continued. My legs and feet grew increasingly weak overnight, so that getting out of bed was becoming more and more difficult. I started to wonder whether, if my legs and feet continued in the direction they were going, I would be able to drive myself to Urgent Care.

I drove from the residence Notre Dame had provided for me during the semester so as to arrive at the recommended Urgent Care right when it opened at 7 AM on

Holy Saturday morning. I was met at the desk by a nurse-receptionist who asked me why I was there. She also asked me to fill out the inevitable forms providing both a partial picture of my health to that point and an indication that I would be able to pay whatever charges I might accrue. Since there was no one else in the office she rather quickly ushered me in to get a diagnosis from the doctor in charge.

I honestly don't remember my physical exam, but I remember the doctor taking what seemed like a long time with me. He had a very soothing demeanor and was successful in calming my mounting anxiety. After at least an hour's exam the doctor said that I was suffering from a "bad case of nerves," probably brought on by too much intense teaching that semester. Since the first real break occurred over the Easter holiday my psyche had given my body permission to signal that I needed some extensive rest and relaxation. He told me to go home, get some sleep, and if the symptoms persisted over the next week or so to get back in touch.

I felt greatly relieved at what he had told me. I immediately drove home and went to bed, trying to make up for the sleep I had lost the last two evenings as well as preparing to attend the evening Easter Vigil later that evening. (The Roman Rite Easter Vigil consists of a lengthy church service begun after sunset and concluded before dawn. It consists of: 1) a light service in which the Easter fire is kindled, the Paschal Candle lit and processed through a darkened church as the participants light their own candles from the Paschal Candle, and a lengthy chant in praise of