

Catholic NEWS HERALD

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Kelly Henson: Closer to Heaven by Christmas

Published: 07 December 2022

<https://catholicnewsherald.com/viewpoints/104-news/viewpoints/8769-closer-to-heaven-by-christmas>

Moments before midnight on Christmas Day in 2015, a 31-year-old woman passed away from cancer and, amid the grief and loss, a celebration began. Whispers and outright testimonies surfaced that proclaimed this gentle and joyful soul may have been particularly close to God.

Since that time, astounding miracles have happened through her intercession. This year, on All Saints Day, Bishop David Kagan opened the cause of Michelle Christine Duppong for sainthood. In doing so, he also offered our country and the world a beautiful model for what sainthood looks like in the modern world.

I first met Michelle when we both served as newly recruited FOCUS missionaries over a decade ago. Michelle had just graduated with her degree in horticulture from North Dakota State University in 2006. The other missionaries couldn't help but acknowledge her gift of being fully present to the person in front of her. Her reverence in daily Mass and daily holy hours was palpable.

She once wrote, "You were made to be a saint. Do you believe that? Do you think you can do it? I want to remind you that there's no doubt in God's mind that you can do it! He made you for it." Her encouragement extended to hundreds of students during her six years of work as a college campus missionary and then as the director of faith formation for the Diocese of Bismark, N.D. She served as a sensitive and compelling model of the lay vocation.

Monsignor James Shea, president of the University of Mary, knew Michelle during her missionary work there. He said Michelle had an "uncommon promptitude or ease with which she lived the Christian life ... She loved Jesus! ... She didn't hold back ... And then that whole substrate of her life was tested by her illness."

What did this look like?

Michelle had an incredible hospitality of spirit. She would invite friends home with her for a "Duppong Haymarsh Experience" on her family farm near the little Haymarsh parish church, St. Clement's. Picnics, singing, four-wheeling, sledding, exploring the farm, or late-night Adoration at the church gave her guests a respite from the pressures of everyday life. She knew the best gift we can give to one another is our presence and loving attention. She lived frugally but would travel to any state or even across the ocean to attend weddings and religious vows for friends.

In an article she wrote a year before her death, Michelle shared an idea appropriate to the Advent season: "This year, how about rather than purchasing presents to give others, we focus on giving ourselves to the people we love – giving the gift of our presence. Show affection and interest in them. Ask questions that go beyond the surface. Let them pick the activity to do together. Let them know how much they mean to you."

Michelle also lived life joyfully, without shame, and developed a deep apostolic zeal. At first glance, she was an ordinary, delightfully quirky Catholic girl. She loved “The Lord of the Rings” and the color blue. She sang worship songs with the hospital cleaning lady and told friends animatedly about her hero, Blessed Pier Giorgio. Yet, an unusual concern for others and their ultimate good was central to her spirit. Michelle saw that too often fear dictates people’s choices in life more than their desire to discern and do God’s will with acceptance and peace. She maintained that everyone was called to sainthood. She encouraged, “Courageously surrender your fears to Christ and boldly move forward in doing the good.” When she learned that her sufferings had brought literally thousands of people into prayer, she wrote, “Nothing means more to me than helping others encounter God through prayer, for having a relationship with Him is the most beautiful gift anyone can have. Thank you for going to Christ!”

As a missionary, she practiced the art of “offering it up.” She would regularly give up small things like condiments for a week for a special intention and invite others to join her in prayer and fasting as well as in joy and play. This chosen schooling in suffering prepared her heart to accept a much heavier cross. She was diagnosed with an aggressive and incredibly painful form of abdominal cancer in December of 2014. Michelle suffered without resentment, and her joy was so attractive that doctors and nurses were drawn to spend hours with her off-duty. When she was told at the cancer treatment center that there was nothing else they could do, she took a moment to reflect, and then she turned to the doctor and asked how his day was going with authentic interest. He was so surprised by her altruism that he needed to step out of the room. Her secret was a trust in God that gave her a perspective beyond the pain.

Advent is often a season of deep, soil-work in our hearts. Sometimes our secret wish list is less about tech gadgets, toys and jewelry and more about peace in our extended family, intimacy in our marriage, understanding with our children, concern over our society or financial worries.

Michelle had insights to help us in moments just like these:

“But through Jesus’ Passion, death and resurrection, suffering has been changed. It has been redeemed, allowing it to carry meaning. No matter what suffering we may be facing, we must know that God is permitting this to happen as an act of love and that He will bring about a greater good from it, for our own good and others. If we choose to unite the pain we are experiencing to Christ, we can share in His work of salvation, meriting graces for others and ourselves.”

Those are hard truths – truths understood best by a new mother far from home, huddled against her kind husband and cuddling her extraordinary child in the corner of a stable. Holiness is for everyone, particularly for those who suffer and long for a Savior. May we each step a little closer to heaven this Christmas.

Michelle Duppong, Servant of God, pray for us!

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