

Odds are you probably have seen ads for the children's hospital called Saint Jude, which provides help at no cost to the families who have a child in need. Through the years, they've helped countless children. But did you ever wonder why it was named after Saint Jude?

The answer to that is the actor and comedian Danny Thomas, who passed on in 1991, felt a calling to do so as he discerned the voice of God calling him to act.

In a story he wrote in 1981, he wrote that many people seem to know that he once vowed to Saint Jude that he would build a shrine in his name if he'd help Danny through a difficult time in his life. But the fascinating part of that story he says is how, when he failed to keep my part of the bargain, that saint resolutely refused to let Danny off the hook.

Saints were a big part of his Catholic family.

His parents had come from Lebanon, a country where shrines dedicated to favorite patron saints are familiar sights. Often these shrines are simply statues, or little places where you can stop to meditate and pray.

We Catholics, he says, of course, do not worship these patron saints—we worship only God—but we do look upon them as special intercessors with God, and we choose them as our guardians and protectors.

As one of nine kids in a very poor immigrant family, Danny says he was grateful for all the protection he could get.

His mother did not hesitate to make her own spiritual vows. He remembers especially a solemn promise she made shortly after the birth of his youngest brother. His name was Danny.

At that time Danny's name was Amos—Amos Jacobs—but early in his show business career he took the names of his youngest and oldest brothers and became Danny Thomas.

When the first Danny was a few months old, he was badly bitten by a rat that jumped into his crib. He screamed and went into convulsions.

At the hospital the doctors told his mother that Danny was dying, but she wouldn't accept that. She went to her knees in prayer, promising God that if her baby's life were saved she'd beg alms for the poor for a year.

Danny got well, and every day for 12 months his mother, herself one of the poorest of the poor, living in shabby, cramped quarters over a pool hall, went out and begged pennies from door to door.

His mother's faith in God he says was so strong that she could not possibly give in to fear or hopelessness. To her, despair was a tool of the devil—it was doubting God, and that was a sin.

As each of the children were born, she turned them over to God and after that she would not let herself, or the kids, forget that we had Him to turn to.

When Danny was ten years old, he landed a job hawking soda pop in the old Columbia burlesque theater in Toledo, which meant that he wouldn't get home until 2:30 in the morning.

One day he heard a neighbor asking Danny's mother if she wasn't worried about the things that might happen to her little boy, but his mother's reply rang with certainty. "Amos is sale," she said. "I've given him into the care of the Blessed Mother." She knew that he was in good hands, and so did he.

Danny always had my heart set on being an entertainer, and during the seven years he spent at the burlesque theater he studied some of the best comedians in the business and grew all the more determined to be one too.

He quit school at 16 and worked as a busboy, a night watchman, a drill-press operator's assistant, all the while picking up odd jobs singing and clowning at local banquets.

Eventually he went to Detroit and sang for a while on a radio program. That's where he met and married Rosemarie in 1936. And that's where he also faced the first real crisis of his life.

In June 1940, a baby was on the way. Danny was making two dollars a night as an M.C. at a Detroit supper club called the Club Morocco. Then it was announced that on Saturday night the club would close for good. Suddenly, he had no job to go to, and no prospects.

Rosemarie was urging him to consider looking for a more reliable line of work, but all he wanted was show business. He wasn't worried about their future.

Danny wasn't in despair—he says his mother had taught him too well for that—but the time had come when he had to choose a realistic career, for him and for his family. Rosemarie talked about him going into the grocery business. He had to consider her wishes. Maybe she was right, maybe he could never make his way—and theirs—as an entertainer. He was in an agony of indecision.

On Tuesday night a man came into the Club Morocco. He was celebrating something. His pockets were filled with little cards that he was handing out to people as he tried to tell them about an incredible thing that had just happened to him.

His wife was in a hospital where she'd been facing an operation for a deadly cancer. All night long this man had knelt on the cold marble floor of the hospital and prayed the same prayer over and over again.

When the sun came up in the morning the doctors called him in to report that, inexplicably, miraculously, his wife's cancer had disappeared.

"This is the prayer that did it," he said, handing Danny one of the cards. It was the prayer to Saint Jude.

All that night he thought about this man and his appeal to a saint whom Danny knew only slightly as "Patron of the Hopeless" or "The Forgotten Saint."

Though an apostle of Jesus, Jude was not one of the saints whom many Catholics turned to, probably because of his name, which was really Judas Thaddeus, far too similar to that of the hated Judas Iscariot.

The next day Danny went into a church to pray, and when he reached into his pocket for a coin, he found the card the man had given him. Then and there he felt moved to make his vow.

Danny did not ask for anything specific like money or fame, but he promised Saint Jude that if he would help him find some clear course for his life, he would build him a shrine.

The day after the Club Morocco closed, Danny drove his old Buick down to Toledo and left Rosemarie with his parents while he took one last stab at looking for work in show business.

His plan was to go to Cleveland where he had a number of contacts, but at the last moment, he turned the other way and went to Chicago. It was almost as though he was being drawn there.

Chicago became his town. Very quickly one little radio job led to another, and in a short time he was flourishing as a character actor. Then he tried his hand again as a stand-up entertainer.

He opened before 18 customers in a converted automobile showroom called the 5100 Club; in a few months there were that many people waiting outside trying to get in. Success simply piled upon success.

And what happened to his vow to Saint Jude? Nothing. He was so busy that for two years he had forgotten about it. But Saint Jude had not.

On the way home after a night at the 5100 Club, Danny used to go to the 5:00 a.m. mass at St. Clement's Church. One morning he picked up a little pamphlet that lay

beside him in the pew and, to his surprise, read about a novena—a nine-day period of devotion—about to be offered to none other than his old friend Saint Jude.

Even more surprising was the information that there, on the south side of Chicago, was the first national shrine to Saint Jude. Chicago was Saint Jude's town, too! He wanted Danny to know it.

Danny did not forget Saint Jude again. He knew he had to do something about fulfilling his vow, but he couldn't make up his mind what kind of a shrine he should build. Rosemarie suggested that he think about a statue, or perhaps a side altar, but somehow nothing seemed right to him. Time went by. He moved on to New York. His career progressed to movies and TV. Still he could not make up his mind.

And then came the dream.

He dreamed one night about a little boy being injured in a car accident. He was rushed to the hospital, but for some reason the doctors were reluctant to treat him and the boy bled to death. The dream was so vivid, so horrifying, that it troubled him for days.

But out of that dream came an idea, an idea born of a lifetime of experiences. Danny thought about the man who had prayed for his wife all night on the cold hospital floor. He thought of his infant brother grabbing hold of life just when the doctors said he was dying, and slowly he began to see Saint Jude's shrine as a hospital.

And what better way to honor the Patron Saint of the Hopeless than with a place where "dying" children, children with "incurable" diseases could come to be healed?

That, of course, was the beginning of Saint Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. It is the only institution on this earth dedicated solely to the conquest of catastrophic diseases.

It is open to children of all faiths and races regardless of their parents' ability to pay. No family ever pays for the services rendered there. They are free.

It took him ten years to raise the money to get the hospital started. He did it mainly through benefit performances, going all over the country raising money from Catholics and Protestants and Jews—and Moslems, too—and especially getting help from people of his own Lebanese heritage.

Danny never went before one of those benefit audiences that he didn't think about his mother going door to door begging pennies, for, in his own way, he was doing the same thing, for the same reason.

Today when he looks at the hospital that Saint Jude brought into being, when he sees the hope that the Saint of the Hopeless has brought to thousands of parents and their

youngsters, he is as certain as his mother was certain, that to right despair is to affirm our faith in God and in the love He has for all of us.

Despair can be powerful. It can take over our lives, and leave us devoid of hope. As we all know during this time of the virus, sometimes the light can be awfully hard to see.

The apostles surely must have experienced this too. Jesus has risen, but he goes to heaven. Well, now what? What are they to do? Go and baptize and make disciples they are told. Well that's all well and fine. But I can't help but think Jude and the others at that moment were probably thinking what on earth do we do now?

The answer is that they needed to remember that Jesus would still be with them, and wasn't disappearing from their lives, and that they were being empowered with the Holy Spirit to do exactly what Danny did in his life and we are all called to do, namely to be a witness.

When we think of the Ascension, perhaps you think of Jesus going up in the clouds like a "beam me up Scotty" kind of moment. We shouldn't overly-literalize that. Yes, Jesus goes into the realm of heaven and ascends. But this doesn't mean that He is gone like to some far off distant planet. We have to remember God is everywhere; it's why we can say God is with us, but is also in the heavenly realm. It's here at the Father's right hand, words we say in the Creed, which is where a leader would sit next to a king, that He remains with us to intercede for us and govern. Ascending in the clouds, the ascension reveals Jesus' divinity, but we see the humanity too in His physical body ascending. This gives us the hope for heaven too as Jesus, like us, is a human being with the Father now in heaven. But He is still here too with us in the bread and wine, His body and blood. Jesus brings that sacrifice into heaven; His Body and Blood are brought to the Father having taken upon Himself the sins of us all. In Mass, we partake in that sacrifice, joining our sacrifice to the eternal one offered by Christ in heaven. It's why we say "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory," joining in the words of the angels. In Matthew's Gospel, he says "I am with you always, until the end of the age." It's what caused Danny and his mother to be people of prayer. It's why Danny went to Mass at 5 in the morning after working so late. It's what caused him to pray. They knew, and we hopefully do too, that God is truly with us always, and we need to be with Him, and talk to Him. For God is there. To give us strength, to give us guidance, to give us comfort. And, as we'll celebrate next week, Jesus sends us the Spirit to give us further strength to carry out our mission. On top of this, there are the saints too like Jude, who hear our prayers and intercede for us with God. So on one level, this feast gives us both the hope for heaven seeing Jesus go to the Father, but also the reassurance that as Jesus was with us, He is still with us too albeit not in the physical form, but through the sacraments and by now being both with the Father but still with us too on our journey.

What I love with Danny's story though is through his faith, he then discerned what he had to do. Jesus gives the apostles a mission now to be His witnesses. That's also you and me. Danny wanted to succeed in entertainment in his life, and he did. But he also

got that there was something far more important by learning that from his mother. It's what enabled him to live out his vocation as a husband, but also to realize what Saint Jude wanted him to do which he discerned through prayer and that dream. We are now Jesus' voice, hands and feet. We are His presence in the world. If Jesus were still here physically, we might expect Him to do everything for us. But He wants you and I to work in His vineyard. So we have to ponder, what is the work Jesus is giving you and me to do? The "what next" part is what the apostles wonder as the angels tell them to not look at the sky anymore but to essentially get to work means you and I are being called now to action. It's not easy; it took Danny a long time to get Saint Jude's off the ground, but he never gave up. And neither can we when God gives us marching orders. Being a parent, a spouse, a priest, or being involved in our faith, and living out our vocation whatever it might be, this takes work and is a marathon. But we must remember what we do matters so much, even if we do not see results right away, which is why it's so important to think big and realize that with God helping us, amazing things are possible.

One of the early heresies in the Church was to focus entirely on heaven to the point where earth was seen as an awful place to escape. God could have remained other, but instead He becomes one of us, creating us, redeeming us, and continuing to sanctify us and make us holy. Let us learn from that, remembering that as Jesus chose to be in this world and to die for us all out of love, we are each given the commission to be people of hope; people who want to go to heaven one day but want to leave our footprints on earth by leaving the earth a better place than it was when we came into it. Saint Jude's to this day helps so many kids to this day because while Danny Thomas has hopefully joined Saint Jude and the others in God's Kingdom, Danny's work will be felt for much longer here on earth because he was focused on heaven but wanted to bring the love of Jesus into this world by completing the mission He was given, truly doing this in remembrance of me as he heard at Mass - receiving Jesus, but living out the Eucharist through a way of life. Let us do the same, listening to God but also opening our hearts to carrying out His plans for us. Heaven is truly what eye has not seen and ear has not heard. We should all want to follow Jesus there, but before that moment, we have a job to do, a job we are still joined in doing through the love and power God gives us. So like the apostles, let us be with Jesus at Mass and in prayer, but not be afraid to get to work into the world the Ascended Christ sends us into.