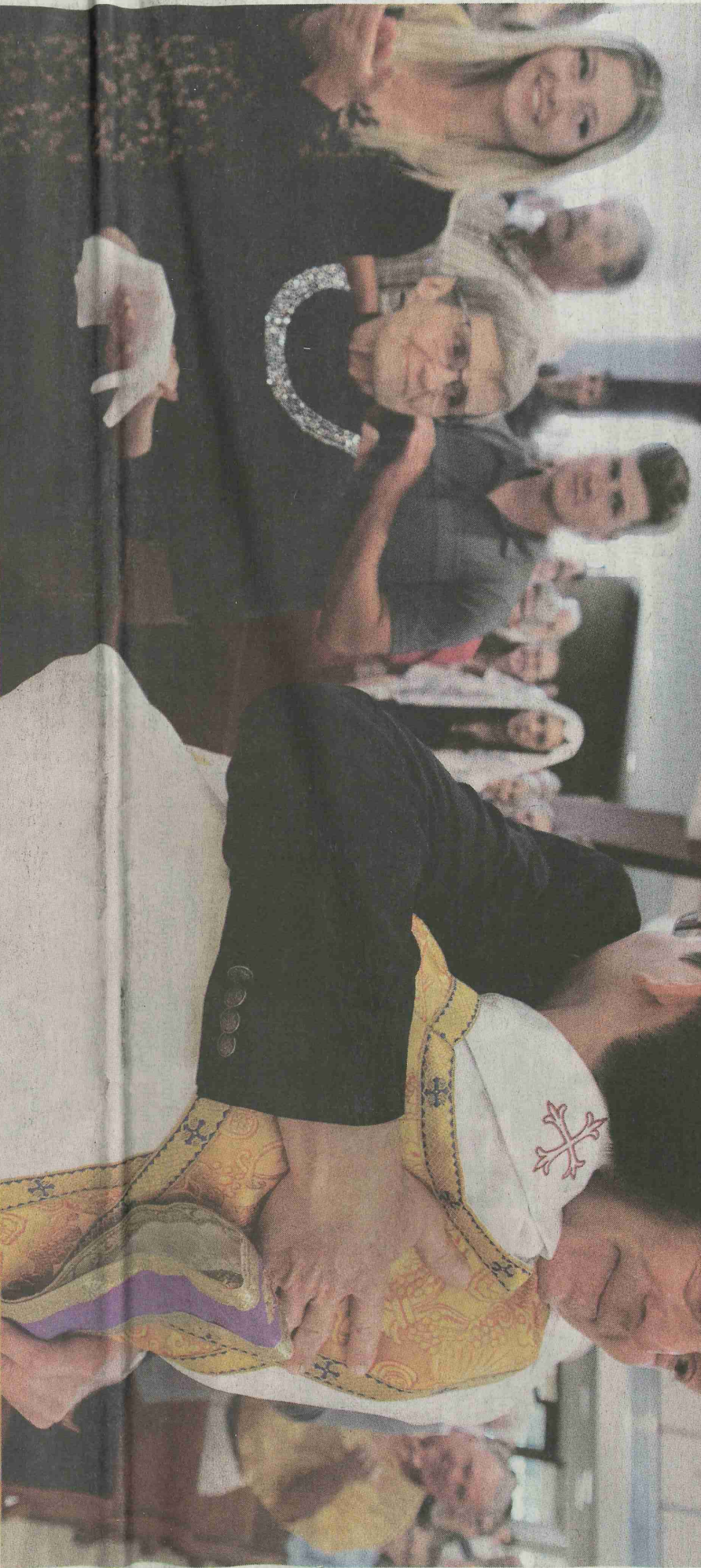


The Catholic Spirit

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Heart of the matter



Tom Ochsenbauer hugs his son, Father Zachary Ochsenbauer, at the end of Mass at St. Peter in Forest Lake June 1, after receiving a special stole that is a tradition among newly ordained priests. Also attending the Mass of Thanksgiving were, from left, Father Ochsenbauer's sister, Christina Ochsenbauer, and his maternal grandmother, JoAnn Gunia.

Ochsenbauer family describes organ transplant journey

Story and photos by Dave Hrbacek
The Catholic Spirit

After deliberating for several weeks, Tom Ochsenbauer of St. Peter in Forest Lake made a bold decision in 2006 to meet Gail Dicus for the first time. He flew to her home in Kansas City with his three young children. It was a matter of the heart — literally.

Moments after opening the door for Ochsenbauer and his children, Dicus grabbed his hand and placed it on her chest so he could feel her heart beating.

This was not the heart she had at birth. It was a heart that once belonged to Ochsenbauer's wife, Marcia Ochsenbauer, who died on Aug. 2, 2005, at the age of 36, after collapsing two days earlier while waterskiing on Ten Mile Lake in northern Minnesota near Hackensack during a family weekend getaway. After consulting with two priests at St. Peter, Father (now Bishop) Donald DeGrood and Father Troy Przybilla, Tom made the difficult decision to donate Marcia's heart after doctors told him she would not recover.

Moving quickly, a medical team shipped the heart to St. Luke's Hospital of Kansas City, where Dicus had been waiting for a transplant after being told she would not survive long-term due to

a heart ailment diagnosed in 2001. Dicus was notified the day after Marcia died that she was a match for Marcia's heart. As the 20th anniversary of that life-changing transplant approaches, Dicus, her husband, Jim Dicus, and the entire Ochsenbauer family have learned just what a good match Gail ended up being for the heart of a mother and neonatal intensive care nurse who died fully alive in her faith.

The eldest of the three Ochsenbauer children, Zachary Ochsenbauer, was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis on May 31 at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, with Gail and Jim Dicus sitting in a pew with the Ochsenbauer family. The day after ordination, Father Ochsenbauer paid tribute to his mother at his Mass of Thanksgiving at St. Peter, again with Gail and Jim Dicus in the pews. Gail, who has lived nearly 20 years with Marcia's heart, could be seen wiping tears

from her eyes during the Forest Lake liturgy.

A woman 'you need to come and meet'

It all started in the mid-1990s, when Tom Ochsenbauer was a flight instructor for Mesaba Airlines. His previous job had been as a flight instructor at Crystal Airport in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. A former student who had gotten a job at the Crystal Airport as a flight instructor reached out to him about a female employee he thought Tom might find attractive.

"He gave me a call, and he said, 'Hey, there's a girl down here that you need to come and meet,'" Tom recalled. "She was working behind the counter — the receptionist at the place where I used to be a flight instructor. So, I went down there, and I thought, 'Wow, she's kind of cute.' So, I started hanging out around there, and eventually I asked

her out for a date."

Marcia Ochsenbauer had grown up in nearby New Hope and was a member of St. Raphael in Crystal, the church of her upbringing. Their dating relationship deepened and they married on Dec. 27, 1996, at St. Raphael. Father Zachary Ochsenbauer was born in 1998 while the family was living in Kentucky. In 2003, they moved to Forest Lake and a home on the lake where Tom still lives. It was in that home, with a beautiful view of the lake, where Tom and Father Ochsenbauer recently sat down with The Catholic Spirit to recount the last 20-plus years.

The marriage that almost wasn't

When Tom and Marcia Ochsenbauer first started dating, she was at that time what he called

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