

His mother rejected an abortion – now, this priest helped her meet the Pope



Pope Francis meets with Sarah and Msgr. Anthony Figueiredo at the Santa Marta guesthouse in the Vatican, June 3, 2016. Photo courtesy of Msgr. Figueiredo.

By Elise Harris Jul 2, 2016

([CNA/EWTN News](#)).- It was during the thalidomide sleeping pill craze that Sarah Figueiredo became pregnant with her fourth and last child, Anthony. Developed after the Second World War and found not only to help with sleeplessness but also to alleviate morning sickness for expectant mothers, thalidomide was widely prescribed by doctors across the world to their pregnant patients as a safe drug to use. Sarah, who was raising her young family in Nairobi at the time, was one of the expectant mothers prescribed the drug. It wasn't until 1961 that thalidomide was discovered to cause severe birth defects in babies born to mothers using it. Many of the children were born with a condition called "phocomelia," which results in shortened, absent or flipper-like limbs. It was taken off the market in 1962.

When the doctors found out that Sarah's unborn son would be among the children with this disability, they advised her to have an abortion. However, Sarah and her husband, both devout Catholics, refused. Sarah believed her son had "a special mission."

According to her son – now **Msgr. Anthony Figueiredo, 52** – what his parents told the doctors was that "if God has allowed us to conceive a child, that child will not be wasted. On the contrary, God will have a mission for that child, which they believe very strongly is that I would be a priest."

The priest said that his parents didn't like to talk about the doctors' push to abort, and that they only informed him that had happened on the day of his ordination. Despite his crippled arm, Msgr. Figueiredo was ordained in 1994 and has vast experience in missionary work and a hefty academic background in theology. He currently serves as a spiritual director to hundreds of seminarians studying at Rome's Pontifical North American College, advises cardinals on their writing and speeches, and works closely with the Pope.

He has also met Mother Theresa and was able to work as a personal assistant to St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI for several years.

The priest largely credits his parents and their faith for encouraging his vocation, telling CNA that they "never discouraged me from being a priest."

"With great sacrifice they sent all of us to Catholic schools and now with old age my mother is the happiest woman in the world, one would say, because she has a son who is a priest."

Sarah, 84, told CNA that she and her husband had prayed that one of their three sons would become a priest, and that she knew this prayer would be answered in Tony, as she calls him, because "I dreamt that one day. I had a dream that one of my sons, the last one," would be ordained. "I (knew) he had mission."

While there are "a lot of blessings" in having a son who is a priest, one of the biggest came during a trip Sarah made to Rome to visit her son during the June 1-3 Jubilee for Priests.

Msgr. Figueiredo said he had been walking in the Vatican Gardens one day in April when he got a phone call from the Pope himself.

The Pope said that he knew the priest's mother would be coming to Rome for the Jubilee of Priests, and wanted to meet her. Since he was busy throughout the three-day event, which concluded with a Mass June 3, Francis told

Msgr. Figueiredo that "I would really like her to come to my home prior to that Mass. "

It was Pope Francis himself, then, who “completely organized everything,” and welcomed both the priest and his mother into his residence at the Vatican’s St. Martha Guesthouse the morning of June 3.

“It was very, very beautiful. He was just like an ordinary parish priest the way he made my mother welcome,” Msgr. Figueiredo said, recalling how Francis spoke about the number of children in their families and the biblical roots of some of their names.

One particularly touching moment for Msgr. Figueiredo was when the Pope told him that he recognized the priest’s mother from a photo he had given him.

“I gave him the photo three years ago,” Msgr. Figueiredo said, saying it’s “quite extraordinary that this Pope, who is probably the most photographed man in the world, remembers each person. It’s as if he has them in his heart.”

Pope Francis also administered the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to Sarah, who has suffered from two strokes in recent years and in 2010 was diagnosed with aggressive, stage 4 breast cancer, but today is cancer-free.

The Pope “took his time, there was no rush, and he was particularly compassionate,” the priest said, noting how when his mother attempted to stand up for the anointing, Francis told her sit down and himself got up.

“I think that’s amazing from a Pope. There’s really no sense of being in authority, he’s really a servant, a servant of the servants of God. We touched that that day in his residence.”

Sarah, who carried the chalice up to the altar during the Mass after their meeting, said to visit the Pope was “a gift from God...I felt very proud that God had chosen me to come to this special occasion.”

After bringing the chalice to the Pope, “he pressed my hand, and he recognized me and he held me tight,” she said, explaining that the experience is something “I will remember all my life and I thank God for that.”

She also thanked her son for helping give her the opportunity to meet the Pope and to receive his blessing. Giving advice to parents who are hoping for a religious vocation among their children, she counselled that “the more you pray the better it is.”

“We need more priests in this world,” she said, noting how she “always prayed” for her son’s vocation. Even at 84, Sarah continues to pray a daily rosary, keeping one under her pillow so that should she wake up during the night, she can pray a decade before going back to sleep.

Msgr. Figueiredo said that to celebrate the Jubilee of Priests alongside his mother “was an enormous sign to me that God is faithful,” especially when someone gives

something of their life to him, whether it's a parent, a child, a type of suffering, or a vocation.

In regards to the "special mission" his mother believed he had, the priest said for him, this mission has entailed showing a special compassion and solidarity with those who suffer.

"I truly believe what St. Paul said: that God's power is made perfect in weakness," he said, voicing his belief that priests "who particularly have a cross can show a certain kind of compassion and mercy to those who are suffering."

While as a priest "I can preach until the cows come home," people really start paying attention when they see "that you yourself suffer in your flesh...one immediately connects."

For Msgr. Figueiredo, this is what Christ did on the Cross: "he suffered on the cross for us, and so when I am going through suffering myself I see that he's gone there before me and has faith, believing that the Father will bring good even from tragedy."

"That's really helped me to stay close to the smell of the sheep, as Pope Francis exhorts us as priests and as every Christian," he said.