

## **Cheerful and hardworking Bem**

On October 9, 2022, towards 8 pm, Bem Basil breathed his last. For all who knew him, it was not a sad day because of the Christian hope that both Bem and they had. Many spent that day in prayer and as news of his death spread, the sadness began to change to thanksgiving. This is how Bem would have wanted us all to react to his passing into eternity.

24/10/2022

Who is Bem? How did he get to command such reaction among us, who have known him for only four years? He had just completed his training in Electromechanics at the Institute for Industrial Technology (IIT) in Lagos, and was close to satisfying the last requirements to fully qualify as a technician. When he was 22 years old, Bem dedicated himself totally to the service of God in Opus Dei as an Associate member (Associates live apostolic celibacy in Opus Dei). He shared a residence with some other faithful of Opus Dei and a few friends at a flat in Omole Phase 2, close to Ojodo-Berger, in Lagos. As in any home, each person had a different assignment. Bem was in charge of various domestic tasks.

It was during his 2022 annual retreat that Bem began to feel unwell. At the hospital he was diagnosed with an advanced form of liver cancer. Following the diagnosis, Bem was very exemplary in accepting the illness and showed spiritual maturity till the moment of his death.

Bem Basil was born in Benue State on May 31, 1998, the second of three sons and the fourth child among the six children of Augustine and Anthonia Akawe. He belonged to the Tiv tribe, an ethnic group that makes up about 2.4% of Nigeria's population. Like many Tivs who depend on agricultural produce for commerce and life, Bem's parents are farmers in Aliade rural community, in Gwer Local Government Area of Benue. The name 'Bem' is a common Tiv name and it means 'Peace'. Because many Tiv parents love this name, many male children are named Bem. He attended LK Anja

Memorial Nursery & Primary School. There, he lived up to the meaning of his name: *he was cheerful*, outspoken and diligent in his studies. He was the *Head Boy* and was top of his class throughout his primary school.

These attributes were commended by the Headmaster, who noted in Bem's First School Leaving Certificate, that *he was a hardworking and outstanding student*. In 2010, he attended the St. John Bosco's Commercial College, in Aliade. While there, he loved taking care of the school chapel. This dedication earned him the position of *Chapel Prefect*. On finishing his secondary education, he had made more than five credits in his SSCE (Senior School Certificate Examination) including English and Mathematics, pre-requisites for proceeding to the university which was what he wanted to do.

As his family's financial situation would not support his university education, Bem began to explore other sources of income, while spending time to support his parents and uncle at the farm. He learnt to cultivate millet, groundnuts and other cash crops, which the family depended on for sustenance. He spent a good part of his teenage years with both his parents and his uncle. At home he assisted his mother in the domestic work. **He learnt from her how to prepare many local dishes.** Later on in life he would joke that he could cook better than the women who attend in the administration of the Centres of Opus Dei. He would retract his playful boast after attending a long retreat at the *Iwollo Conference Centre*, and tasting the very nice meals on offer there.

Bem was also active in the parish helping out when he saw the need.

He was at the parish when he heard of an employment opportunity in Benin City through his uncle Daniel. This job presented Bem with the opportunity to pursue his dreams of becoming an engineer. Little did he realize that his decision would bring him into a far wider dream than the one he nurtured. He got employed as a cook in Isiuwa, a Centre of Opus Dei in Benin City, in September 2018.

Bem began to understand the sanctifying value of his domestic work. Gradually but steadily through friendship, care and attention received, as well as his association with the young university students who came to Isiuwa to study and receive Christian formation, Bem became **interested in receiving the same formation himself**. He thus began to organize his work duties and schedule so that he could be free to participate in the activities. He became a friend to many of the

university students. One of such students, now a graduate from University of Benin, on learning of Bem's death was left devastated. For him, Bem would always remain in his memory because of his joyful and loud laughter. Bem got his colleague, who was similarly employed at Isiuwa, to begin going for Mass on Sundays and to attend the other activities of Christian formation that took place there.

Bem was diligent in his work in the kitchen, and eager to take on more tasks in order to be of help. His best dishes were **Egusi soup and Garden egg sauce (Aborin Gish in Tiv Language)**. He used to go to YouTube to learn how to prepare different dishes. He considered Isiuwa as his home, often saying when faced with shortages of some items in the house: "*we need to buy so and so*"; it was never, "*you people need to buy so and so*." He did not consider himself an

outsider. Another quality of Bem was **his willingness to serve without thinking about himself**. It was part of his job to do grocery-shopping, and he would always diligently return the change from his shopping, no matter how little.

After a year of working Bem had saved enough from his salary to pursue his academic dream. He registered for both the 2019 *Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination* (UTME) and the entrance examination at the *Institute for Industrial Technology* (IIT). He was offered admission with a partial scholarship to study Electromechanics at IIT. When he moved to Lagos he also applied to work as a part-time domestic staff at a flat mentioned above in Omole Phase 2 residential Estate, called “Ojumo House”. It was a job that offered him the opportunity to earn while studying, so as to sustain

himself with the limited resources available to him.

While at IIT, Bem continued attending the classes of Christian formation in Ojumo House and in IIT. **On January 31, 2021 at the age of 22, he made a decision to give himself totally to the service of God** in Opus Dei as an Associate member. Bem lived his vocation well. He took care of the other faithful of Opus Dei with his **generous spirit of cheerful service**. Bem would often volunteer to take care of the cooking and cleaning at Alayo House (a residence in Ijebu-Ode, where activities of spiritual formation were organized for university students). Because of his concern to bring other souls closer to God, Bem brought some of his school friends to Ojumo House so that they could benefit from the Christian formation given there. He encouraged a number of them to

begin having frequent spiritual direction with the priest. He developed a good relationship with the neighbors of Ojumo house, one of them a Moslem lady who gave a moving tribute on how Bem helped her children live through COVID lockdown.

At the end of two years of academic and practical work in IIT, Bem proceeded for an 'In-company' training/factory placement with *Pentagon Plastic Processing Company* in Lagos as part of the final stages of his qualification as a technician. During this period, he went for his annual retreat at *Irawo University Centre*, on August 15, 2022. It was during the retreat that he became sick. At the hospital, he was diagnosed with advanced liver cancer. Bem took the news calmly and would often joke about his situation. Following this diagnosis, he moved into a Centre of Opus Dei in

Yaba (Akoka Study Centre) where he could receive closer care and medical attention.

With his strength waning, he would still make the effort to go to the Oratory to pray. On one occasion, when there was no Mass in Akoka, the residents went for Mass to a nearby Centre called Lakeside, some 400 meters distance. They did not inform Bem as they wished to give him more time to sleep. When Bem woke up and realized that he had been left behind, he dressed up quickly and made it on time for Mass. After Mass he walked back weakly to Akoka and well accompanied.

At the beginning of his illness, Bem was reluctant to inform his natural family, not wishing to unsettle them or give them worries. But he was helped to understand the need for his family to become aware of his

illness. On learning about his son's illness, his father immediately traveled by road to Lagos to be with his son. It was his first time of going to Lagos and he got to Berger Park at 2 am. Later, as the prognosis of the illness became known, Bem was moved from the consultancy of University of Lagos Teaching Hospital (LUTH) to Niger Foundation Hospital, Enugu (NFH), for medical attention and to be closer to his natural family. In Enugu, his parents were able to spend some days with him. Friends and acquaintances kept in touch.

In Enugu, he stayed briefly at the *Hillpoint University Centre*. However, as the illness advanced to its critical stage, he received the Anointing of the Sick and the Blessed Sacrament. He died on Sunday, October 9, 2022, accompanied by his father and another faithful of the Work. A week earlier, on October 2, Bem was

incorporated definitively into Opus Dei. On that same day some of his friends decided to become faithful of the Work.

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