

Baby Charbel's life a miracle, say parents

Charbel Fadel is, in most ways, like any other two-year-old boy. He can't sit still for long, preferring to climb on chairs. He likes soccer. He likes giving high-fives to anyone who asks.

But that he's even awake, after a traumatic birth that he wasn't expected survive, is nothing short of a miracle, according to his parents Said and Dolly. And they attribute their son's survival to his namesake, St. Charbel Makhlouf, a 19th-century Lebanese monk famous for miracles. The Fadels, who are also Lebanese, are members of Our Lady of Good Help, the Maronite Catholic parish in Edmonton.

"We were hoping for a miracle from God," Said related in an interview. "Since he's been born, we've had to tell the story of St. Charbel. Through that story now, we have our son."

Charbel Fadel came into this world on Oct. 22, 2015, at the Grey Nuns Hospital in southeast Edmonton. It was a difficult birth. Charbel was without oxygen for the first nine minutes of life. Doctors gave him only a four per cent chance of survival.

"They said, 'There's nothing that we can do,'" Dolly recalled.

Said continued, "They put him on a cold bed so it would stop the brain from acknowledging what's happening to the body. Within hours, they had to take him to the Stollery (Children's Hospital) and had to put him on life support."

Less than an hour after she gave birth, Dolly received the shocking news. "They told her, 'Listen, your son is going to be a vegetable. It is what it is. We can't do anything about it.'"

Doctors at the Stollery performed surgery on Charbel to allow him extracorporeal breathing, a technique used as a last resort to provide cardiac and respiratory support to persons whose heart and lungs are unable to function.



Dr. Anan Hanna of the University of Alberta medical school conducted an independent review of baby Charbel's medical charts.

“From the beginning he came with no reflexes, almost dead,” said Dr. Anan Hanna, a family friend who teaches at the University of Alberta medical school and was asked to review Charbel’s medical records independently.

“He couldn’t breathe for the first nine minutes, not at all. The cause was the blockage of the respiratory tract. He couldn’t breathe at all.”

Dolly said: “All the time we were at the hospital we didn’t hear anything like ‘He’s going to be normal.’”

As an act of faith, they hung a picture of St. Charbel by his incubator and a rosary on the light next to him. That’s when circumstances started to change, according to the Fadels. After 3½ weeks, Charbel started to breathe on his own. And within a month, he was well enough to go home.

“The intercession of St. Charbel happened from the beginning, because when they put him on extra-corporeal breathing, he started to function and they did an ultrasound after that showing no damage,” Hanna said.

However, doctors warned the Fadels that Charbel might have seizures or developmental disabilities because of the lack of oxygen at birth. He didn’t cry for three weeks. And initially he was being fed from a tube.

“There was no acknowledgment from him,” Said recalled. “His body wasn’t functioning properly. His brother would bring drums and play, but he wouldn’t hear anything.”

Dolly said: “He didn’t cry except if he was hungry. I was like, ‘God, you brought him into this world. Please don’t let him have a hard life.’”



Said and Dolly Fadel feel called to make their story public, as it gives them an opportunity to educate people about St. Charbel and "let people know that the miracle can happen anywhere."

Doctors at the Stollery also told her that Charbel would have a hearing problem. When Dolly went for a second opinion, that doctor gave her even worse news.

"He didn't even check him," Dolly said. "As soon as he opened his patient history, he looked at me and said, 'Go live day by day. Enjoy your son because you will never know, tomorrow, what is going to happen.'"

Late one night during the 2015 Christmas holidays, in his basement at home, Said Fadel prayed for a miracle recovery for Charbel.

"I was just sitting there, praying, and telling the Lord 'Give me the pain. My son is a baby. He doesn't deserve to be in that state.' It's like I heard a voice come to me and he told me, 'Grab my picture and put it on the top of your son's head.'"

Confident that he would receive help, Said went into his own father's room in their house, grabbed a piece of cedarwood with the picture of St. Charbel, and placed it above the crib where the baby lay, wrapped in a tiny robe of the style distinctive to his saintly namesake.

"I prayed a little bit on top of his head and then I went to our bedroom and I told my wife, 'You know what? Everything is going to be OK. Someone came to me and told me to place the picture above his head and I did it.'"

The next day Dolly woke up first, and went to check on Charbel. She was amazed at the turnaround when she saw her baby, and his interaction with the cedarwood picture of St. Charbel.

"He was, all the time, looking to the picture. You could see his face smiling and he didn't move his head from the picture. When I went to grab him, his bed was all wet like there was water on his bed. And every time you moved him, his eyes were on the picture."

After that, Charbel's condition improved rapidly. The Fadels took him for medical tests, and all of his vital signs indicated that he was a normal,

healthy baby.

Two weeks later, they retested him with the same result. Ever since then, the Fadels have been taking Charbel for checkups. Each of them indicates that his walking, talking, and medical and neurological development are progressing normally.

Dr. Hanna said the intercession of St. Charbel occurred twice: once when Charbel began to breathe on his own and the second when memory, hearing and reflexes appeared to be normal.

Asked if he believes as a medical professional that a miracle occurred, Hanna is unequivocal.

“Definitely. In two stages. Nine minutes without enough oxygen? No way” he would survive. “Something unbelievable happened.”

The Fadels’ pastor, Father Joseph Salame, said St. Charbel is famous in Lebanon as an intercessor for the sick – with many miracles attributed to him – and he believes that’s what happened in this case.

“Every Lebanese house and Christian goes to visit the shrine because they have a strong belief in St. Charbel,” Father Salame said. “But the strong belief is that God is our healer through his saints.

“St. Charbel lived a model life that made him closer to God. By praying to him, we’re asking God to intercede in our life and change our life.”

Dr. Hanna’s review of Charbel’s medical records and other documentation will be sent to Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith, to the Fadels’ own Maronite bishop, and to St. Charbel Church and Shrine near Beirut, where all miracles attributed to the saint are recorded.

Father Salame and the Fadels shared their story with Archbishop Smith on Jan. 22, coincidentally the 25th anniversary of the healing of a woman in Lebanon who asked St. Charbel for his intercession.

“It’s providential. It leaves you shaking your head at the wonder of it all,” Archbishop Smith said. “Western society today is marked by so much skepticism. When the scientific mind won’t allow itself to go beyond the limits of science to transcendence, then you become closed in on yourself.”

“We need reminders that there is a God who loves us, who intervenes in our lives through the saints. That message becomes a message of extraordinary hope for people.”



St. Maroun Convent and shrine to St. Charbel in Annaya, LebanonPaul Saad/Flickr

Said Fadel has already taken his whole family – including Charbel – to the St. Charbel Church and Shrine as a thank-you. “That was our vow to God and St. Charbel. That was our promise.”

Critics may question exactly what transpired with baby Charbel’s recovery, but the Fadels know in their hearts that they received a miracle that can’t be explained away.

“We believe in St. Charbel. He does lots of miracles,” Dolly said.

At first, Said wanted to keep his son’s story to himself. After reflection, he and Dolly have chosen to make their story public, as it gives them an opportunity to educate people about St. Charbel.

Asked why the family believed they were chosen to receive a miracle, Dolly answered, “maybe to let people know that the miracle can happen anywhere. You just have to believe.”

To the critics, Said says, “They need to believe. Jesus is there and He’s willing to help everyone.”