



Our Lady of the **BROKEN**

A damaged plaster statue helped a washed-up Chicago radio legend return to the faith — and bring hope to millions

By Denyse Shannon

Thousands of people process behind the “Broken Mary” statue down Chicago Avenue after leaving St. John Cantius Church on May 31, 2019. The event, inspired by former Chicago radio host Kevin Matthews, was titled “There Is Hope for the Broken.”



Photo by Denise Durigal/Chicago Catholic

“If you would’ve told me 30 years ago that I’d be carrying around a broken statue of the Virgin Mary and talking about God, I’d say, ‘Are you high?’”

So begins *Broken Mary: The Kevin Matthews Story*, a recently released documentary film from ODB Films and Family Theater Productions about the Chicago DJ who went from having 10 million listeners a week to hitting rock bottom — and then, unexpectedly, to following Christ’s call to become a messenger of mercy for the broken.

In 1987, Kevin Matthews catapulted to Windy City fame on WLUP-FM “The Loop” by making people laugh. His off-kilter humor, zany impersonations and on-air antics garnered huge audiences — and a cult following of KevHeads, as his fans were called.

“He was an icon in Chicago, and I was a huge, huge fan,” recalled Bill O’Connell, a former KevHead and a member of St. Michael the Archangel Patron of Police Council 12173 in Chicago. “Throughout the ’80s and ’90s, the last thing you would think of him was a pious and faithful person.”

Matthews himself admits as much.

“I was born Catholic. But during this time, I would say, from 1986 until 2011, I’m living the life of a zombie Catholic.”

He attended Sunday Mass, but it was mostly a formality. “Make sure the priest sees you,” he remembers thinking. “It’s a fake; it was a con.”

Then one day in 2011, Matthews walked into the studio to do the work he had known for 35 years — only to be fired moments later. What followed was a series of what he calls “miracles.”

Today, Matthews touches millions of people who are drawn not to an edgy radio personality, but to Christ and his Blessed Mother.

‘WILL YOU DENY MY MOTHER?’

Matthews grew up the son of an auto worker in Pontiac, Michigan. Undiagnosed dyslexia contributed to a childhood marked by abuse and bullying. He learned he could deflect much of it by making people laugh, and carried that coping mechanism into adulthood, parlaying it into a successful radio career.

But as the media landscape evolved, Matthews’ celebrity status waned. He left Chicago in 2005 and returned to Grand Rapids to pick up his career where he first got his start in radio. The new gig, with WLAV-FM, was short-lived. While on air one morning, Matthews found he couldn’t move. He thought he’d had a stroke.

Matthews was diagnosed with a rare form of multiple sclerosis. The disease made it hard for him to work, and within a short time, it cost him his job. “You’re fired — two weeks’ notice,” he recalled being told, and a decades-long career ended abruptly.

“You talk about broken,” Matthews said. “You talk about hitting rock bottom. And it wasn’t until I said, ‘I’m so broken; here — the pieces, the garbage, the beatings — I give it to you, help me;’ that, boom, my life changed.”

The first in what Matthews calls a “succession of miracles” occurred in 2009, when he was driving in Chicago.

“I heard a voice say, ‘Go to the cemetery.’ I knew which one because of the *Tribune* article,” Matthews recalled, referring to a news report on alleged apparitions at Queen of Heaven Cemetery in nearby Hillside.

“Thank goodness I went, because I could have just ignored it,” he said. “But every time I heard the Holy Spirit, I listened and did what I was told.”

At the cemetery, Matthews went to the 15-foot-tall crucifix where a retired railroad worker was allegedly cured of blindness in 1986.

“I put my hand on the feet of Christ, and I said, ‘I’m sorry; help me; I’m so afraid,’ and then my hand started to work as water came running down on my hand and my arm.”

Though mobility returned to his MS-afflicted hand, the spiritual impact did not last.

“I once again forgot about God,” he said.

It wasn’t until the following year that Matthews began to undergo a lasting conversion.

“That happened at the dumpster where I found Broken Mary lying on the ground,” Matthews recalled, referring to the plaster statue that would play a pivotal role in his life.

“I walk over to her. She’s on her back. She’s broken in two at the waist. Her hands are missing. She’s sunk in the mud. She’s covered in weeds and garbage — and that’s when I hear

the voice of Jesus Christ say to me, ‘Will you deny me? Will you deny my mother?’”

Matthews had been about to enter a flower shop near Grand Rapids to buy flowers for his wife. He stepped into the shop to ask about the statue but was told it wasn’t for sale.

“She said, ‘No, it’s a family heirloom.’ And so, I hear the voice again: ‘Will you deny me? Will you deny my mother?’”

“For the second time, I said, ‘God, help me,’” he recalled.

“What came out of my mouth next — I have no idea where it came from. But I just said, ‘I’ll give money to nuns that live out here if you let me have her. I’ll give money in your name if you let me take her.’”

It worked. Matthews took the statue into his home and for some time kept it in his dining room, where it reminded him of his own brokenness.

“I was garbage,” he said. “I could really relate.”

A MISSION OF HOPE

Father Mark Przybysz first met Matthews in the 1990s while serving as pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Church in Grand Rapids, where he was also a member of Bishop Plagens Council 3104.

“I would go on his radio show a couple of times a week, and we got to be friends,” Father Przybysz said. Through their shared love of cooking, the two paired up for parish events to raise money for Catholic education. The friendship deepened when Matthews lost his job at WLAV.

“He started talking about this thing called the Broken Mary Project and that he found the statue,” Father Przybysz recalled.



Kevin Matthews has spent the past 15 years traveling the world as “Mary’s roadie,” sharing his testimony of God’s love.

The priest offered to have the 27-inch-tall image of Our Lady of Lourdes repaired, but Matthews declined.

“I started crying and said, ‘No, I don’t want her fixed,’” Matthews explained. “I kept her broken because we’re all broken, and we’re loved by God.”

Father Przybysz soon realized that Matthews was undergoing a real spiritual awakening and encouraged him to share his story with parishioners at St. Anthony.

Matthews recalled in the documentary: “I’m thinking, ‘Sure.’ I’ve done comedy. I’ve opened for Seinfeld and Bill Hicks — how hard is church?”

The experience, however, was not what he expected.

“You talk about dying — I’m getting no laughs,” he said. Afterward, he told Father Przybysz he didn’t want to do it again after the next Mass. The priest suggested he turn around.

“There were people kneeling in front of this statue,” Matthews recalled. “It was as though Jesus was saying, ‘I’m going to leave you with my mother, and she’s going to clean you up.’”

From that moment, the Broken Mary Project began to grow. Matthews visited churches, prisons, hospices, hospital rooms and homes, sharing his story, promoting the rosary and bringing the statue to those in need of encouragement and hope.

In 2018, he accepted an invitation to join the Knights of Columbus, serving as chancellor of Council 3104 for six years.

During a visit to Chicago in 2019, Matthews met Father Joshua Caswell, superior general of the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius.

“Someone brought him into the church and said, ‘This is Kevin Matthews,’” Father Caswell recalled. “I gave no reaction because I’d never heard of him.”

However, the young priest was soon captivated by the Broken Mary Project.

“I had this inspiration: It’s time for Kevin to come home to Chicago,” Father Caswell said. “Let’s show Chicago this broken statue.”

On May 31, 2019, Broken Mary was elevated on a bed of roses and carried in a 1.5-mile procession through downtown Chicago. Titled “There Is Hope for the Broken,” the event was aided by the Chicago police and fire departments and attracted an estimated 8,000 people.

“The officers were lined up to lead the procession,” said Father Daniel Brandt, chaplain of the Chicago Police Department and St Michael the Archangel Patron of Police Council 12173 in Chicago. “They were just so proud. A lot of our officers have a very committed love for the Blessed Mother.”

Matthews could barely believe his eyes.

“She went from a dumpster to a bed of roses,” he said. “It was unbelievable.”

‘I WEEP FOR YOU’

Upon returning to Michigan, Matthews experienced another moment of grace.

“When I got home and was checking my mail, I heard Jesus Christ say to me, ‘I love you so much. I weep for you,’” he recalled.



Pope Leo XIV greets Kevin Matthews (right), accompanied by Father Joshua Caswell, superior general of the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius, following the pope’s general audience Feb. 11. The Holy Father named the statue seen in the background Our Lady of the Broken.

After traveling widely with Broken Mary — a journey he chronicled in his 2024 book *Mary’s Roadie* — Matthews finally made his way to Rome earlier this year.

“I simply sent a letter to the Vatican and informed them of who Kevin was,” Father Caswell said. “He was given a special ticket, and he asked that I accompany him.”

Father Caswell described their encounter with Pope Leo XIV, a fellow Chicagoan, after the pope’s Feb. 11 general audience — the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes and World Day of the Sick: “It was such a serene moment. The Holy Father spoke about how important this is because the world is so broken and people are so in need of hope.”

Pope Leo gave the title *Our Lady of the Broken* to the statue, Father Caswell added.

As Matthews’ multiple sclerosis progresses, those close to him have urged him to slow down. He has no such plans.

“He just wants to do Mary’s work for as long as he can,” Father Caswell explained.

Through it all, Matthews believes he has followed the voice of Christ and the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

“When I die, I will hear Christ again, and he will either say ‘I know you’ or ‘I don’t,’” he said. “But to go from ‘Will you deny me?’ to ‘I love you so much. I weep for you’ — that’s where I am now.”

He added: “I made a covenant with God two years ago. I said, ‘Jesus, you are my shepherd. I just want to be your shepherd dog.’”

Broken Mary resides at St. Anthony of Padua Church, but Matthews said she belongs to everyone, and he will take her anywhere she is wanted.

For more information, visit brokenmary.com. ✚

DENYSE SHANNON is a freelance journalist based in Bay City, Mich.