

"Resuming the Column"
 Week of January 31, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

I have been writing this column, which I had originally entitled "Essays in Theology," for over 44 years—since July 8, 1966. I hadn't missed even a week in all that time, until I had lower-back surgery in October and complications thereafter, but not directly from the surgery.

During the week before Christmas, I was at the new St. Joseph Medical Center in nearby Mishawaka, Indiana, for three separate days: for a bone scan on Monday, an MRI on Wednesday, and the draining of a small cyst on the knee on Thursday. On Tuesday I had my annual physical, and on Friday I had my final treatment for non-Hodgkins lymphoma, which, I am happy to say, is now in remission.

The following Monday I saw a pain specialist recommended by my oncologist. He would have given me an epidural injection for back pain, but I was flying to my brother's in Connecticut the next morning (with wheelchair service). I had the injection my first day back from there, and I have felt much better since then.

I wish I had had the injection before I went to Connecticut, because I was still experiencing lower-back pain (but on the opposite side from the surgery) while there. That pain left me for the most part as soon as I had the epidural injection, although I am still not 100%. But at least I have been able to walk once again without the cane.

It is mainly for that reason that I am resuming the writing of my weekly column, with the hope and prayer that I will continue to be largely pain-free from now on. Meanwhile, I remain on medical leave at the University of Notre Dame. I taught a few classes at the beginning of the academic year, but haven't taught any since just before the surgery.

I should publicly thank my friend and neighbor, Beverly Brazauskas. Without her help after the surgery, I would have had to go into a convalescent home or rehabilitation center. I could not have cared for myself, since I live alone. She even pushed my wheelchair in various airports when other assistance was unavailable.

Beverly has also been my driver to my many medical appointments and just around town. She still won't let me drive my own car because of the medications that I'm on.

I am also grateful to my long-time assistant (25 years and more), Donna Shearer, for handling office business in my absence, for always keeping in touch, for answering e-mails, for informing my editors and readers of my progress, and for her constant encouragement and optimistic attitude. Her assistance has been simply invaluable.

I am also thankful to my colleague, Professor Timothy Matovina, who served as Acting Chair of the Theology Department during the fall semester. I deeply appreciate his support during this most difficult time and his own readiness to take my classes until the fall vacation in mid-October and to round up other volunteers, colleagues all, for the remainder of the semester.

Of course, I am also grateful to the new Chair of the department, Professor Matt Ashley, for agreeing with the Acting Chair regarding my medical leave and for his unstinting support generally.

I am exceedingly grateful to my Graduate Assistant, Brandon Peterson, a doctoral student in the department, for carrying on so ably with my course during my absence and to my five teaching assistants for the same reason: Claire Ensley, David Montes, Claudio Perez, Elizabeth Pyne, and Brian Regan.

I also want to thank my editors for their patience and forbearance during these past few months and the many readers who sent cards and e-mails during the fall.

Finally, I must thank our president emeritus, Father Ted Hesburgh, C.S.C., for his concern, encouragement, and extraordinary support from the very beginning of my medical crisis. I treasure my friendship with him.

I am sorry to have to share so many personal matters with you, but all of my editors and readers deserve an explanation for the suspension of my column—the first in over 44 years!

I can also say that my own situation for the past half-year has made me more aware of, and sympathetic with, all those who suffer from chronic pain. It affects not only one's physical well-being, but one's emotional health as well.

I hope to resume my commentary on church- and religion-related matters next week.

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"The Beatification of John Paul II"
 Week of February 7, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Pope John Paul II, who died in April, 2005, will be beatified in St. Peter's Square on Sunday, May 1. Pope Benedict XVI himself is expected to preside at the Mass of beatification.

John Paul II was in office longer than any other pope (about 26 ½ years) except Pius IX, who reigned for almost 31 years and 8 months.

Benedict XVI had waived the normal five-year waiting period to begin the canonization process, partly in response to the demands of conservative supporters who, at John Paul II's funeral, demanded through the use of banners that the late pope be declared a saint immediately ("Santo Subito").

Benedict XVI signed a decree of "heroic virtue" for John Paul II in December, 2009, asserting that the late pope had lived a holy life and allowing him to be called "venerable".

For beatification, one miracle, usually of healing, must be unmistakably attributed to the candidate for eventual canonization. Such a miracle proves beyond all doubt that the candidate is in heaven and has intercessory power with God. One additional miracle is required for sainthood.

In the case of John Paul II's beatification, the miracle in question applied to a 49-year-old French nun, Sister Marie Simon-Pierre, who, according to the senior correspondent of the *National Catholic Reporter*, John Allen (see his dispatches of January 4th and 14th), had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of Parkinson's disease in 2001 and whose congregation prayed for her to John Paul II after his death.

Reportedly, after the nun wrote the late pope's name on a piece of paper one night in June, 2005, asking for help, she awoke the next morning completely cured of her illness. She was able to resume her work as a maternity nurse.

However, there were reports in the French media earlier this year that the nun had fallen ill again, and that at least one physician consulted by the Vatican had questioned the original diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, suggesting that her illness may have been the result of some other nervous disorder.

The Vatican resolved the doubts in favor of the cure. The miracle was approved by both the medical and theological consultants, as well as the cardinals and bishops on the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and finally by Benedict XVI.

Given John Paul II's worldwide prominence and his many years in the papacy, his beatification and eventual canonization, which is a foregone conclusion, are sure to be major news events.

But there are, as John Allen admits, at least two persistent strains of criticism likely to surface in the coming days. Indeed, some of it has already surfaced.

"First," Allen writes, "some Catholic liberals who saw John Paul II as overly conservative have suggested that his cause is being fast-tracked in order to secure political points in internal Catholic debates."

Some of them are also wondering why he is being beatified and eventually canonized so quickly when Pope John XXIII, who launched the Second Vatican Council and is regarded by many as the greatest pope in history, is still awaiting sainthood following his own beatification in September, 2000.

Moreover, "some victims of clerical sexual abuse and their advocates believe that John Paul II's record on the crisis is not worthy of sainthood." Indeed, he had a terrible record, full of denial and foot-dragging, on the greatest crisis to confront the Catholic Church since the Reformation of the 16th century.

He also stubbornly refused to consider the evidence against one of his favorites, Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the influential Legionaries of Christ. It took John Paul II's successor, Benedict XVI, to act against Father Maciel and suspend him from the public exercise of the priesthood because of grave and unchallengeable acts of sexual misconduct.

According to John Allen's report, Vatican officials have not thus far offered any response to the criticisms of John Paul II, insisting in the past that beatifying or canonizing a pope is not tantamount to endorsing every policy choice of his pontificate.

However, in the case of Pope Pius XII, it was his behavior during the Holocaust that has held up his eventual canonization because of negative reactions not only from the Jewish community, but from many Catholics as well.

We assume that John Paul II and Pius XII are in heaven. But holding them up as examples of sanctity is another matter entirely.

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