

Resuming the column

Richard McBrien | Jan. 24, 2011 | Essays in Theology

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 percent. 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, Fr. 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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