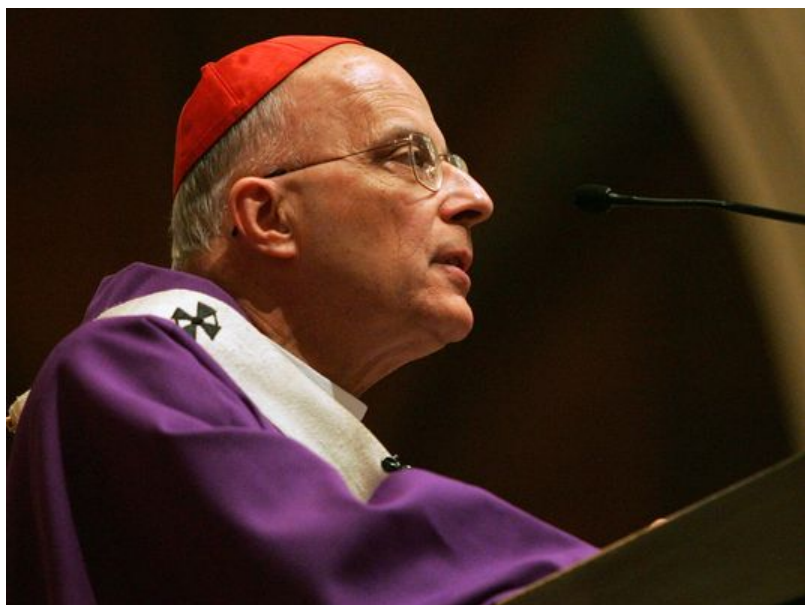


Taking stock of our lives



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Pope Francis, in his Lenten Message for 2014, writes about Gospel poverty. Poverty, he explains is a way of being one with Christ, who “became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich.” Poverty, the pope writes, is Christ’s “way of loving us, his way of being our neighbor, just as the Good Samaritan was neighbor to the man left half dead by the side of the road. What gives us true freedom, true salvation and true happiness is the compassion, tenderness and solidarity of his love.”

The pope’s message distinguishes Gospel poverty from material, moral and spiritual destitution. The antidote to each of these evils is found in living within the embrace of the merciful love of God. Lent is a time to open our lives to that embrace, to become deliberately poor and self-sacrificing in order to create space for God to transform our lives. Lent is a time for us to enter a season of renewal by taking stock of our lives, preparing for the Sacrament of Penance, and professing our faith at the Easter Vigil.

If I may speak personally, this Lent finds me once again in poor health. My cancer, which was dormant for well over a year, is still confined to the area of the right kidney, but it is beginning to show signs of new activity. After many tests, scans, biopsies and other inconveniences, the settled judgment is that the best course of action is to enter into a regimen of chemotherapy, with drugs more aggressive than those that were used in the first round of chemo. This treatment will take place over the next two months, when my reaction to the chemo will be evaluated.

I was able to maintain my administrative schedule well during that first round, although my public schedule was sometimes curtailed because of lowered immunity. As I prepare for this next round of chemo, I ask for your prayers, which have always sustained me, and for your understanding if I cannot always fulfill the schedule already set for the next several months. While I am not experiencing

symptoms of cancer at this time, this is a difficult form of the disease, and it will most probably eventually be the cause of my death. Chemo is designed to shrink the tumor, prevent symptoms and prolong life.

I imagine this news will increase speculation about my retirement. The only certainty is that no one knows when that will be, except perhaps the Holy Father, and he hasn't told me. As required by the Code of Canon Law, I submitted my resignation two years ago and was told to wait until I heard from the pope. The consultation the pope makes through the Apostolic Nuncio takes a good number of months, and it hasn't formally started yet.

In the meantime, Lent gives me a chance to evaluate not only my life of union with the Lord but also my life and actions here as Archbishop of Chicago. Every life is more tactics than strategy, i.e., each day is filled with activities that meet the needs of the hour and that respond to people in front of you. But behind the daily activities, leadership demands a sense of strategy: What are the overall goals of the varied activities that fill our lives?

When I returned to Chicago as archbishop in 1997, the goals of the Decisions document, completed under Cardinal Bernardin, gave me a sense of direction that has continued to be helpful. But I also had a sense, first developed when I returned to this country from Italy in 1987, that the church here was going to go through a period of some institutional decline. In a period of institutional decline, one saves as much as possible the elements of institutional presence that are necessary for mission — parishes, schools, seminaries, etc. — but one pays particular attention to the formation of people. No matter how weak an institution might become, if enough people are well formed as disciples of Jesus Christ, the church's mission is secure.

Consequently, I am especially grateful to those who have helped over the years to reform and renew the various personnel formation programs: the seminary system, the diaconate preparation programs, the lay ministry programs, the instruction in the liturgy, the catechetical formation programs in three languages and the preparation of teachers and principals, giving them a new sense of their work as ministry. All the personnel formation programs have been reworked according to the mind of the church, and some have been newly created with the same purpose. Whoever comes next as archbishop will have people he can trust and depend on.

Key to these efforts have been the various councils that are part of governance in the archdiocese: the Episcopal Council, the Presbyteral Council, the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, the Administrative Council, the Finance Council, the Archdiocesan Women's Committee, the Youth Council and other

ministerial groups. The various agencies and institutions connected with Catholic Charities and with the care of the poor are functioning well. The members of all the councils and many others have kept me informed about challenges to the church's mission and ministries; they have taken responsibility for initiatives and programs; and their members, in listening to their peers, have put their own life with the Lord in perspective. It has been a joy to work with them, and I am grateful to them all.

I am grateful as well to the pastors and parishioners I meet each Sunday. They encourage me in my conviction that the grace of God is not given in vain. There are a lot of holy people, missionary disciples of the Lord, in our archdiocese. I am grateful for this, even as I acknowledge with sorrow my own sins and failings.

One of the great pleasures in being Archbishop of Chicago is the chance to meet and cooperate with pastors of other churches and faiths, with people from all walks of life and varied ideas, with those who keep us in touch with the universal church and the world beyond this city and its environs. To all of them, I am grateful.

Lent 2014 brings the death and resurrection of the Lord more insistently into the horizon of our lives. Before the Lord, we are all weak and needy, poor in who we are, rich in him. Grateful for our various callings and rejoicing in that poverty that opens us to God's grace, let us observe Lent together in prayer, penance and almsgiving. God bless you.

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.