The Holy Father received Archbishop Broglio and Bishops Higgins, Spencer and Buckon on Monday, 9 January 2012.
A little over a year ago, while in the middle of a very active West Coast Confirmation schedule, I fell ill and was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. My prognosis was less than a year. I asked Archbishop Broglio to keep the matter somewhat a close hold until I could address it sensitively in consideration of my mother’s very fragile health situation and he graciously agreed.
I began treatment at M.D. Anderson Cancer Hospital in Houston, TX receiving chemotherapy every two to three weeks. Thankfully, I was able to stay with my brother Tim and his wife, Gisele, who live in Houston. As you may know, pancreatic cancer cannot be cured and is usually a very stealthily and aggressive adversary. In my case, however, except for the unavoidable extreme fatigue, there were very few side effects. This allowed me to continue some pastoral work when I found the openings.

I am very grateful to the other Bishops at AMS who quite generously took upon themselves many of my responsibilities even though they had so many of their own.

The cancer was contained quite well for most of the year. A month ago all chemotherapy became ineffective and within that time my doctors have been wonderful in pain management and with the many other forms of support provided by M.D. Anderson. This is the reason, and many of you have noticed, that I have gradually taken more and more of a low profile.

A FEW INSIGHTS I’VE HAD THAT MIGHT BE WORTH SHARING:

It is quite interesting to me that immediately after the diagnosis at Bethesda Naval Medical Center I found myself stopping at the Newman Book Store near Catholic University and staring into a picture of the face of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin on the cover of his book, The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections, 1997. As I paged through the first few chapters, I was amazed to read how all of his experiences at the onset of his diagnosis of the same disease were exactly parallel with my own. I have since read his book many times and he has been my constant companion from that moment until now.

This leads to my first insight: none of us, especially those of us who are disciples of the Lord, enter into this final part of our journey alone. One may feel isolated at times but, if anything, the intensity of the Christian community becomes almost overwhelming.

It starts with the powerful presence of the Lord himself when in the flash of seconds your future is laid before you. You can actually feel the Lord take your hand and hear him say the words “Do not be afraid.” It’s as if the Lord brought me to Cardinal Bernardin — a companion to walk with and to hear when I needed words of support and inspiration from someone who went through what I was going through.

Then, the Christian community, in ways never imagined, gradually begins to appear all around you. They begin appearing, as it were, out of nowhere. Some who were distant are more present, and those who were close become even more alive and connected. It is somewhat similar to the community that was always present with Paul as he made his journey toward Rome. The community he encountered throughout his travels was his main support. That support is quite amazing.

The second insight: this new kind of powerful presence of the Lord helps you become aware of and understand that you yourself become a presence to others in similar situations. Opportunities to share the essence of who we are and what we believe become prominent.

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The night after my biopsy at Bethesda one of the young doctors lingered behind. He kept staring at me while I, not knowing what else to do, smiled back and tried to eat my pudding and keep it down at the same time. I eventually asked him, "What's up?" And he asked how I could take the news they had just delivered and remain so positive. I paused thoughtfully thinking that possibly I was just in a state of denial — but then dismissing that, I looked at him and replied with what I knew in my heart was the true answer — then and now: "Faith and fear can't live in the same space," I said to him. "It's eventually got to be one or the other. The Lord has put me here and it's up to me to go where he wants in the way he wants." He said, "How do you do that?" And I told him the story of the disciples meeting Jesus in John 1:39 and repeated the answer of Jesus: "Come and see." That's really where all of life's questions are resolved. All questions are answered by starting with Jesus.

In saying that I don't mean that one immediately finds oneself in this space of dynamic trust and faith, but rather one is taken up in the journey that Jesus made every day. Paul distinguishes between the realm of "flesh" and the realm of "Spirit." We, as His disciples, are called to move in a dynamic and embracing way through a journey that transforms us from flesh to Spirit every day. (Galatians 5:2-26)

This journey of Jesus from flesh to Spirit, the transformation from human fear to faith, permeated His whole life. It is found in the scriptures with His forty days spent in the desert where He encountered and grappled with temptations. Temptations are challenging and pull all of us back to worldly things. Jesus, tempted in the desert, recalls how God led His people into the desert for forty years (Deuteronomy 5:8). In this dialectic — "fear," flesh, and worldly temptations transform into life in the Spirit:
total faith, conviction, and hope in the Kingdom of God. Our journey must follow the same path — because “faith and fear” cannot live in the same space. Jesus’ life, engaged in the world, was a continuum where faith and the Spirit always won out.

In Jesus’ temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane we see that great moment of victory where faith was triumphant (Lk 22:42 and cf: 2 Corinthians 4:16 ff). Likewise, on the Cross — “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). We must embrace the sufferings of the moment and the fears as they come to us but at the end of the day we must let joy be the victor — or consolation as Paul refers to it — that Christ alone can give to us. Ultimately, we must do what God wants us to do.

All these months at M.D. Anderson I’ve met people with some unbelievable challenges and the question most of them have is the same as the young doctor’s, “How do you do that?” and the answer is the same, and Cardinal Bernardin attests to it in his book, it’s especially persuasive coming from another cancer patient – “Come and see.” How one lives one’s faith within the inescapable realities in which you are called to live can have a powerful effect on others and help them on their journey as well.

A final thought: A young 19 year old Marine ran up to me suddenly one day and, grabbing me square by the shoulders, looked me in the eye and full of fright said, “Father, I’m not a very good Catholic, and I don’t want to get out of my responsibilities but I’m leaving for Iraq tomorrow. I’m scared and I know I’ve let God down in so many ways — but please Father, will you pray for me, please?” “Every day,” I said to him, “I will.”

At the end of NPR News every night they silently scroll down the names of our military who were killed that day — most always they are in their 20’s. It’s a spine-chilling moment of silence.

With all the great gifts God has given to me in my life, almost too embarrassing in His generosity to mention, among the greatest gifts has been the honor to serve these young men and women of our military. How pathetic would it be for any among us to feel any remorse at all over the conditions and challenges handed to us after witnessing what they have been called to do and how courageously most of them have done it. Rather, these men and women, besides my faith, are my inspiration and ongoing strength. Let them be yours as well. †