

COLUMNISTS

Bernardin's shoes almost impossible to fill

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin died early this morning. By the time this column appears three weeks hence, a grand funeral will have been celebrated in Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago, awash in a bobbing sea of episcopal miters, and his body will have been laid reverently to rest beneath the earth. The media and the gossip mills inside the church will have long since been grinding out speculation about his successor.

The simple truth is that there is not likely to be a successor to Joseph Bernardin for many years to come, because succession is more than a canonical transition from one occupant of a bishop's chair to another, certified by official looking papers from the Vatican.

The deeper meaning of succession is closer to that of tradition. True succession is a "handing on," not of the instruments of office and of its powers, but of the faith itself, and of a whole way of life based upon it.

The faith is not handed on in books alone (not even the Bible) or in doctrinal pronouncements. It is handed on by living people, in living ways, in the ordinary circumstances of life.

It is handed on by parents who not only teach their children the sign of the cross and the basic elements of the faith, but who model that faith for them, both inside and outside the home — giving of



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

themselves to others, forgiving those who have done them injury, standing firm on the side of the poor and the powerless, even at personal risk and personal cost.

The faith is handed on not only by individuals but also by a community, that is, by a local church, or parish, that actually lives by what it preaches: a church that proclaims the need for forgiveness and is itself a forgiving community; a church that warns against judging others harshly and is itself slow to judge; a church that calls the world to a higher standard of justice and is itself a just community, especially toward those in its employ; a church that urges upon society and government a more compassionate and generous posture and is itself compassionate and generous toward its own, including not only its sick and its poor, but also its divorced-and-re-

marrieds, its gays and lesbians, its married clergy, and its most alienated internal critics.

To be sure, the name of the next archbishop of Chicago will chronologically follow that of Joseph Bernardin on the official list of Chicago bishops, but he will not be Joseph Bernardin's successor — unless, marvel of marvels, he is also the kind of man, the kind of Christian, and the kind of pastor Joseph Bernardin was.

Having a letter from the pope will be the easy part, and, in the end, the least significant part.

Truly to succeed Joseph Bernardin as archbishop of Chicago, the man who comes after him will have to possess the qualities of character that the cardinal displayed when, for example, he had to confront outrageously false, but profoundly devastating, accusations of sexual misconduct. His response at the time was marked by humility, forgiveness and utter honesty.

The cardinal's handling of the news about his suddenly deteriorated health was, again, utterly characteristic of the man. No self-pity. No false optimism. No empty pieties. Just a person of faith, facing a suddenly abbreviated earthly future.

In disclosing his condition, so openly and yet with such modesty and restraint, Cardinal Bernardin gave us all a lesson

in humanity. He, the tireless peacemaker, assured us that he was himself at peace. And ready to carry on as best he could in spite of these new and severe limitations on his physical capacities and on his very life.

And carry on he did. Joseph Bernardin gave us all a lesson in how to live, how to face death and how to die. He became Chicago's and the nation's spiritual director and retreat master wrapped into one.

In the early centuries of the church, Joseph Bernardin would have been declared a saint by popular acclaim even before his body had been laid to rest.

And that is why Chicago will probably have to wait a very long time before it has a real successor to Joseph Bernardin. He will have to be a whole and holy human being, utterly committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, completely honest with himself and with others, and with a thoroughly pastoral heart. This has not exactly been the profile employed in the appointment of bishops over the past 18 years.

Joseph Bernardin's death will truly be the source of new life for the church that he loved and served so well if he and his kind should now become the norm rather than the exception to the rule.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Advent gives us time to prepare for the Lord

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 1:1-8. (R1) Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11. (R2) 2 Peter 3:8-14.

James Thurber once told of a thin and lanky prophet who went around his boyhood hometown crying, "Get ready! Get ready! The world is coming to an end!" The community called him the Get-Ready Man.

John the Baptist was a get-ready man if there ever was one. "A voice crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord...'"

Advent is the season of getting ready. It is a time to get ready for the celebration of the Lord's birth and his second coming.

Two young women were visiting over coffee just a few days before Christmas. One woman was harried, frazzled, in fact. Christmas was almost here and she wasn't ready. She hadn't gotten the cards out; hadn't gotten any presents yet; didn't have a tree yet. In fact, she complained that Christmas was a terrible time because she was never ready!

Her friend in all sincerity commented, "But, honey, didn't you know that Christmas was coming?" Advent gives us an opportunity to get ready for the celebration of the Lord's first and last coming. The last will come like a thief, said



a word for sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

St. Peter; so get ready.

Life is fragile. We live in a fragile universe. Here today and gone tomorrow. You may have seen the bumper sticker: "Life is short; eat dessert first."

Remember when Jim Henson died. He was the master-mind behind the Muppets. He got a minor infection — so he thought. It was a weekend. He didn't want to bother his doctor. By the time the seriousness of his condition was apparent, it was too late. Still a young man. The world at his feet. Suddenly he was gone.

Life is fragile. In fact, everything we own is fleeting! An Illinois man from Spring Valley had his wife's diamonds and rubies mounted in a ring for her birthday. He decided on one final touch. He tied a birthday card and a balloon to

the ring and put the whole thing in his car. Arriving at his house, he opened a car door to take out the present. The helium balloon and birthday ring headed for the clouds.

Most of us won't lose our possessions to a helium balloon, but they still are no less fleeting than that ring! That's the way life is. We never know. None of us. Life is fragile.

All of us have things in our lives that need to be set right. At dinner, a lad told his parents there was to be a small PTA meeting at school the next day.

"Well, if it's a small one, do you think we ought to go?" his mother asked.

"I think so," the boy said in a low voice. "It's just you, me, and the principal." All of us have things in our life that need to be set right.

No one wants to be a sinner. But it sneaks up on us. Like the proverbial frog in the pan of lukewarm water, we are lulled into a false sense of security as the temperature rises. Soon we are in hot water indeed!

You know the old limerick:
There was a young lady from Niger
Who rode, with a smile, on a tiger.
They came back from the ride
With the lady inside
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

That is the way sin comes into our lives. Our intentions are good, but often our performance is not. John the Baptist calls us to repentance. We don't know what the future may bring. Life is fragile. All of us have preparations to make. Advent is the time for preparations. Please, God, let us make them by a good confession this season.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, December 9

Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38

Tuesday, December 10

Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 18:12-14

Wednesday, December 11

Isaiah 40:25-31; Matthew 11:28-30

Thursday, December 12

Zechariah 2:14-17 or Revelation 11:19; 12:1-6, 10; Luke 1:39-47

Friday, December 13

Isaiah 48:17-19; Matthew 11:16-19

Saturday, December 14

Sirach 48:14, 9-11;
Matthew 17:10-13

Sacred Heart Cathedral invites you to join us on Sunday, December 8, 1996 at 3:30 PM for "Ave Maria," an organ recital by organist-choirmaster J. William Greene of music in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary followed by **Choral Vespers** sung in chant by **The Gentlemen of the Choir** with assembly participation
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