
In early January 2009, I was told that I had less than a year to live. As I come to write these reflections in our final issue of the year 2009, I share various reactions that have been part of the landscape over the past months.

My first response to the doctor's prognosis for pancreatic cancer was that it is a gift to be told that one has so many months to live and that an end is in sight. The doctor, of course, went on to give options. I could have an operation, and it would likely add some months. I could also have the operation, followed by chemotherapy/radiation, and it would add some months and likely some years. The doctor wanted to give me some time to think about the options, but I immediately agreed with his own stated preference that I would undergo the operation and follow up chemotherapy. It seemed that medically I was in a place where I should follow the biblical injunction, "choose life."

The operation seemed to be successful in removing the visible cancer, and the six-month-long chemotherapy treatment has been an experimental study program including a vaccine that eliminates radiation. I have finished the program as of the publication of this issue. Now I live within a wait-and-see time of measurement and testing.



November remains a church time to remember the dead and remind ourselves of our own mortality. I have been feeling even more attuned to the reality of my own personal dying throughout these past months so that it is easy to celebrate November liturgy. It is nice to be put "on notice"—which is how I consider the identification of my cancer. The likelihood of dying is just made more real and, as it were, within reach. It allows me time to reflect and pray how I face this kind of time, what attitude I want to take, and how I want to use the time I have. It does not seem fearsome or dark. In fact, it seems full of surprises of how God wants to meet me in unexpected ways, sometimes not initially pleasing to me. I seem to be taught a lot about powerlessness, patience, and the goodness of strangers. I also believe strongly in the efficaciousness of the prayer support of others.

Advent is a church time of looking forward to new life and especially of our life forever with God. It concludes with Christmas, a celebration of how God, in Christ, enters into our human life, never to let it go. Throughout 2009 with all its medical focus, I have continued to be blessed with finding new life and I again look forward to entering into Advent with greater appreciation. Christmas will be God's own gift to me of celebrating the gift of human life for however many more months and years God intends. With celebrating Christmas, it is good to remember that we were all born to be living a life forever with God, and that remains my hope too.

David L. Fleming SJ

The Review for Religious Advisory Board and Editorial Staff wish all of our readers a most blessed Advent and Christmas season.