



Bishop Hicks' Column



March 2023: Journeying 10 years with Pope Francis

It is a common practice to give a gift made of silver for a 25th anniversary and something of gold for a 50th. However, I was wondering, what do you give for a 10th anniversary? After some research, there seems to be some consensus that either tin or aluminum is meant to commemorate a decade. Perhaps these metals make an appropriate gift since they are known for their strength and resilience.

On March 13, our Holy Father will celebrate his 10th anniversary as pope. As we have watched our pontiff lead, guide and shepherd the Church, few would argue that he has done so with great strength and resilience. I am truly amazed by his vigor, perseverance and tenacity. Sometimes I wonder if I reach his age, God willing, will I still have that type of energy?

Pope Francis, like his predecessors, is so much more than a CEO of a worldwide organization. He is the apostolic successor to St. Peter, the "rock" upon which the Church is built. Just like the apostle, he has his own personality. Some people focus on his warm smile or infectious laugh, while others notice his ability to listen and engage in conversation. Even the name he chose as pope, Francis after St. Francis of Assisi, is a nod to his humility.

I am a bishop ordained under Pope Francis in 2018 and then installed in 2020 for the Diocese of Joliet. I have tried to emulate his famous advice that a bishop and priest should strive to be a good shepherd with "the smell of the sheep." In other words, the Church is better off with leaders who spend time among the people of God. Pope Francis continues to give us an example of how to be and do just that.

I have a beautifully framed photo of Pope Francis, Cardinal Cupich and myself taken in Rome in December 2019 during an ad limina meeting. I love the photo because we are all laughing out loud. This snapshot was captured when Cardinal Cupich, one by one, was introducing the 26 bishops from Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin to the Holy Father. While introducing the bishop standing in front of me, Cardinal Cupich said to the pope, "He is one of my retired bishops." The pope looked at him and said, "You look much too young to be retired." Then it was my turn. The pope firmly took my

hand to shake it, and Cardinal Cupich said to him, "And this is Bishop Ron Hicks. He is my vicar general." The pope then broke into a big smile, looked at me and said, "You are a vicar general *and* a bishop? You look like you are still in high school!" It was a beautiful moment to share in that laughter and joy, and I am glad it was immortalized in a photo, which I treasure.

No matter how you describe Pope Francis, his 10th anniversary gives us a wonderful opportunity to thank him for his faith, leadership and prayers. That's in addition to all of the work he has accomplished, which includes three encyclicals, four synods, countless homilies, extensive travel, innumerable audiences and the canonization of more than 900 new saints, chief among which are Pope John Paul II, Pope John XXIII, Mother Teresa of Kolkata, Pope Paul VI and Oscar Romero, along with the 813 martyrs of Otranto.

He has also given us several exhortations over these 10 years, from which there are many things to learn and ponder. His first such document in 2013 was "Evangelii Gaudium" (The Joy of the Gospel), and I appreciate that he began his pontificate proclaiming, "joy" – namely the joy that comes from an encounter with the risen Lord, Jesus. The joy of the Gospel fills our hearts and lives because of the salvation brought through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, which sets us free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.

As I write this, I realize it would take volumes to capture what the pope has done and accomplished over 10 years. And even though his achievements are vast, I cannot help but think of all of the pressure he endures and the burdens he carries daily. Leading the Church amid today's complexities, polarization and challenges is not easy. Therefore, I thank God that our pope wakes up each day and leads with gospel joy, faith and zeal.

Every day at Masses across the globe, we as a Church rightfully unite our voices in the Eucharistic Prayer as we ask God to "be pleased to confirm in faith and charity your pilgrim Church on earth, with your servant, Francis, our Pope." As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of our Holy Father, let us in a special way pray for his continued strength and resilience, as together we wish Pope Francis, "Ad multos Annos!"