

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology

The column attains adulthood

This column has finally grown to adult status. It's 21 years old this week.

That may come as a pleasant surprise to friends; it will be a depressing bit of news for those who had hoped for a little less staying power.

The column first appeared in The Catholic Transcript on July 8, 1966, in response to an invitation from Monsignor John S. Kennedy, at the time editor in chief of the paper and rector of the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Hartford, Conn.

Without his encouragement, I should never have thought of doing these weekly essays. And without his extraordinary example as a writer and editor, my own literary standards might have been set too low to sustain a column like this for so many years. I shall always be grateful to him for his inspiration and support.

That first column contained a charter for what was to follow. I offered a definition of theology and commented on the state of popular theology in a Church that was still fresh from the Second Vatican Council (it had adjourned less than seven months earlier).

I expressed concern about a theological gap that had begun to open between the teachings of the council and the findings of scholars, on the one hand, and the understanding of many ordinary Catholics, on the other. I hoped that the column would help close that gap.

"Theology is not the preserve of the clergy — or, worse still, of a minute portion of the clergy," I wrote. "The Second Vatican Council is meant for the whole Church."

Many of the earliest essays were relatively non-controversial commentaries on the council documents. Eventually, however, I branched out to other topics.

The column generated its first bit of controversy five months later, in its examination of Charles Davis's resignation from the priesthood and the Catholic Church. (It is significant that many of my readers today will not even recognize the name of Charles Davis.)

I've gone through my files to see what I wrote about on each of the column's anniversaries. The topics and subjects are part of the still-evolving story of the post-Vatican II Catholic Church.

July 7, 1967: I began a two-part review of Leslie Dewart's *Future of Belief*. This was in the midst of a well-publicized debate about Christianity and secularity, which included the "death-of-God" movement, Harvey Cox's *Secular City* and the new theology of hope.

July 5, 1968: A reflection on the Christian in the world, in light of Senator Edward Kennedy's eulogy of his slain brother, Robert.

July 4, 1969: A review of Gregory Baum's *Faith and Doctrine*, an attempt at a new Catholic apologetic.

July 10, 1970: A report on the 25th anniversary.

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nual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, whose theme was the Church and whose principal topic of controversy was the papacy.

July 9, 1971: A reflection on the impact of our American democratic experience on the life of the Church in the United States.

July 7, 1972: Church reform as a Christian vocation.

July 6, 1973: Authority and the generation gap. Why many younger Catholics have an attitude toward authority that is different from that of the over-45 crowd.

July 5, 1974: A comparison of Charles Davis's (again) and John Cogley's departures from the Catholic Church. Cogley, one of the most prominent Catholic laymen in the United States, editor of Commonweal and religion writer for The New York Times, had left the Church a few months earlier.

July 4, 1975: Criteria for Church reform.

July 9, 1976: An analysis of presidential candidate Jimmy Carter's evangelical Christianity and its potential impact on U.S. politics.

July 8, 1977: On homosexuality as a divisive issue in American public life and in the Church's moral teaching.

July 7, 1978: On the "ex-Catholic syndrome," with special reference to Phil Donahue.

July 6, 1979: On Pope John Paul II's first visit to Poland following his election to the papacy.

July 4, 1980: "What does it take to be a saint?" — a reflection on the life of Ignatius Loyola.

July 10, 1981: A comparison of extremists and non-extremists in the Catholic Church today.

July 9, 1982: On the fundamental distinctions among faith, theology and doctrine.

July 8, 1983: On the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on peace.

July 6, 1984: On the pastoral dimension of theology and the new role of the theologian in the post-conciliar Church.

July 5, 1985: Italian journalist Giancarlo Zizola's analysis of Pope Paul II's restorationist agenda (a three-part series).

July 4, 1986: The U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on the economy and why it will be more challenging for U.S. Catholics than was the bishops' previous letter on peace.

These haven't been necessarily the most significant or the most representative columns in each given year. They just happened to have been the topics I addressed in early July.

One of these days I should put together a collection of some of the columns (there are about 1,092 in all), in order to provide a more accessible record of one ongoing interpretation of post-conciliar Catholicism. With a little encouragement, I might do it.

Monsignor Kennedy, what do you think?

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Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side

Where there's a will . . .

Five years ago, Ann Tressy of Ithaca, sister of the late Father John Tressy, asked me a question that has puzzled some who are interested in students for the priesthood. I have known her and her family — her father, mother and brother Jack — since the days when I was stationed in Ithaca from 1938 to 1942 with Fathers Byrne, Kress and Don Cleary, who was the first full-time chaplain at Cornell University. This reply will interest many.

"Dear Ann,

"Your question about what to do in a will, in which you had intended to make a gift to St. Bernard's Seminary in memory of Father Jack, has been on my mind. I have made inquiries, and this seems to be the answer.

"Now that St. Bernard's has ceased to be a seminary, St. Bernard's Institute is a kind of successor, but not a seminary. What some have decided to do is to direct their bequest in a will to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, specifying that the bequest is for the education of priests for our diocese.

"Others have opted for the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, specifying that the bequest is for the education of native clergy in mission lands.

"My first pastor in Clyde, Father Curtin, a great-uncle of Father John Dillon of Sodus, was a zealous mission man. He was also zealous for a bargain. For years he sent money to the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, specifying it for the training of native priests, sisters and brothers working in Africa and India. At Father Dillon's funeral in March, 1961, Father George Wood, then director of the Society, told me, 'There are more native priests and sisters working in India and Africa, thanks to the generosity of Father Curtin, than to (that of) any other person in the diocese! Isn't that a nice present to God and our Lady?'

"In 1981 and 1983, I visited the missions in Kenya, and was impressed by the burgeoning of seminaries and sisterhoods, with so many applicants that they cannot accept them all. You might consider the native seminary training. They abound in vocations. The money goes farther. The work of the Church is extended in a section of the world that is the hope of the future.

"Bishop Raphael Ndigni has a fruitful diocese in Kenya. He was graduated from St. John Fisher College in Rochester. If you would like to be a patron for him, the address is: Bishop Raphael S. Ndigni Mwana 'a Nziki, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Nakuru, Bishop's House, P.O. Box 983, Nakuru, Kenya, E. Africa."

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Some time after, I sent her this letter, Ann Tressy was stricken with a lingering illness. When she died two years ago, she left her estate to Immaculate Conception Church, Ithaca. I think she had three reasons: 1) the parish had been the spiritual home of the family since her parents had come to Ithaca from Ireland; 2) Father Tressy had spent two years at Holy Cross College, Worcester, before entering St. Bernard's Seminary, but his first schooling was in the parish school; 3) nearly every week during Ann Tressy's long illness, the kindest of pastors, Father Bernard Carges, brought her Holy Communion, which her devout soul deeply appreciated.

There is a hue and cry about vocations. If our diocese cannot rouse seminarians or keep them, the Third World is bursting with them, but needs the cash to educate them at a fraction of the cost of educating seminarians in the States.

On June 23, Bishop Raphael wrote that one donor had sent a generous check for \$825, "and we are using it to meet the expenses of a young sister who has just been admitted for a two-year diploma course in education. She is from a very poor family, and will appreciate this help very much. Our Sisters of St. Francis ask me to thank you for informing the gracious lady of our work and our need.

"I have not heard from Father Joe Hart. I pray daily for him and for his work. Kindly give my sincere regards to Father Paul Wohrab and the Masai priest (Father Heisel).

"Next Sunday at Bungoma Stadium in Western Kenya, there will be a consecration of Bishop Longinus Atundo for a new diocese of Bungoma, a cut from the diocese of Kakamega. The bishop-elect is a St. John Fisher College alumnus. This brings the number of bishops to four ex-Fisher College students."

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