

Writing about the pope in 1991

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

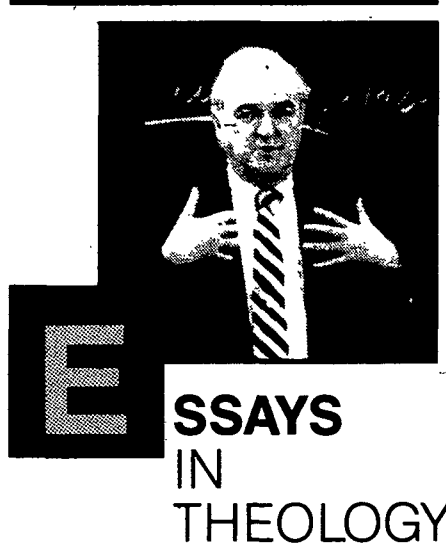
I wonder occasionally if someone else is writing a column like this under my name, because I often get accused of positions I don't recall ever taking.

One of the most common complaints is that this column is disrespectful toward the Holy Father, which is why there is always pressure from some ultra-conservative quarters to have it dropped. If a lie is repeated often enough, some people will be tempted to believe it. So I've decided this week to do an inventory of all 52 columns I published in 1991 to see how often I mentioned Pope John Paul II, in what context, and in what spirit or tone.

On Feb. 22 I welcomed his new encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (The Church's Missionary Mandate). I was concerned, however, with the way the new document was being received in the press, and I cited passages in the text to show that the pope was not saying what some were criticizing him for saying.

I mentioned Pope John Paul II only in passing the following week (March 1), noting that his commitment to social justice and peace is just as intense as that of Pope John XXIII before him.

The pope appeared for the third consecutive week in the column of March 8, in connection with an appreciative essay on the recently deceased Father Pedro Arrupe, head



of the Society of Jesus. I made references to John Paul II's role in Father Arrupe's retirement and in the subsequent election of a successor.

I didn't mention the pope again until May 10, when I praised him for the moral reservations he expressed about the war in the Persian Gulf, quoting liberally and approvingly from his annual address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Vatican and from his letter to President Bush, urging him to avoid the use of military force.

The following week (May 17) the column marked the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and advised readers to look forward to Pope John Paul II's own new social encyclical.

The next week's column (May 24) focussed on the challenges of East-West ecumenism and noted Pope John Paul II's personal commitment to the reopening of that religious dialogue.

On June 21 I began a series of three columns in strong and detailed praise of the pope's new encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, commemorating the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.

"No pope in modern times," I began the June 28 column, "has contributed more to the development of Catholic social teaching than the current Bishop of Rome, John Paul II." I ended the third column (July 5) in almost identical fashion.

The Aug. 30 column was devoted to the church's teachings on human sexuality, and began with a quotation from Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* to show that this teaching is evangelical in the best sense of the word, i.e., it embodies what the pope had called "that deep amazement at (our) worth and dignity."

The Sept. 13 column had to do with the way Catholic news is handled by the media. I made a glancing reference to the pope's two visits to the United States. The first one in 1979 received extensive national coverage; the second trip in 1987 had only limited, mostly local coverage. "Why?" I asked, "Because the novelty had worn off."

But that was a comment on the media and the attention-span of the American public, not on the pope.

John Paul II received incidental mention again in the Oct. 11 column, which summarized an article by Father Andrew Greeley in *America* magazine.

The Nov. 8 column was devoted entirely to the pope's 10-day pastoral visit to Brazil and provided a pointed defense of John Paul II's balanced approach on the relationship between religion and politics.

In my recent Christmas column, I emphasized the teachings of Pope John Paul II on the issues of immigration and the treatment of immigrant workers, citing specific texts from this three major social encyclicals, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and *Centesimus Annus*.

I concluded: "Putting teachings like these into practice would contribute far more to the resacralization of Christmas than having some creche reinstalled in a public square or carols wafting once again down the corridors of a public school."

If these references in 15 separate columns reflect a pattern of disrespect toward the Holy Father, I should like to know what the word "disrespect" means.

Perhaps what really bothers the critics is the frequent praise of Pope John Paul II's writings and speeches on social justice, human rights, and peace. They may not like to be reminded so often and so explicitly of their own pick-and-choose approach to papal teachings.

Dare we call it "cafeteria Catholicism"?

Are we lights in the world's darkness?

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Luke 3:15-16, 21-22; (R1) Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; (R2) Acts 10, 34-38.

In the new calendar, the Sunday after Epiphany is the feast of the Baptism of Jesus or the First Sunday of the Year.

Why was Jesus baptized. After all, He was sinless. It seemed as senseless as a healthy man going to the hospital.

First of all, John the Baptist's baptism had nothing to do with taking away sin. It was simply an outward expression of an inner will to change heart or one's way of life, and thus get ready for the Messiah.

Jesus was baptized for two reasons. First, His baptism brought the mission of John the Baptist to an end. After Jesus' baptism, John's mission was finished.

Secondly, His baptism inaugurated His own ministry. The ministry of Jesus began after His baptism when "the Holy Spirit descended on Him in visible form like a dove."

Jesus' baptism with water by John

marked the end of the Old Testament. Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit marked the beginning of the New Testament.

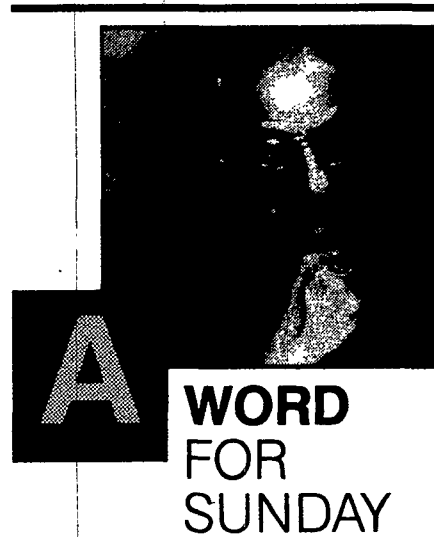
The Old Testament gave us the law. It told people what was right and what was wrong. But knowledge is not virtue. That was why the law in the Old Testament was more honored in the breach than in the observance.

The New Testament gives the Holy Spirit. The law was something outside a person. But the Holy Spirit is someone inside a person, someone who can change hearts and make the burden of the law light and its yoke easy.

Jeremiah foretold this when he said: "The days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel ... I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts" (31:31, 33).

At our baptism all of us received the Holy Spirit. But like Jesus, we were called, not for privilege but for mission. That is why at baptism a lighted candle is given to the child: he or she is to be a light in a dark world.

Once upon a time there was a



cave. He lived underground as caves are in the habit of doing. He spent his life in darkness. One day a voice called out to the cave, "Come on up to the light and see the sunshine."

The cave growled, "What do you mean 'light'? There is nothing but darkness in the world."

But the voice urged, "Come up and see."

So the cave came up and was surprised to see light everywhere. Looking up to the sun, the cave said, "Now you come with me and see the darkness."

The sun asked, "What is darkness?" The cave answered, "Come and see."

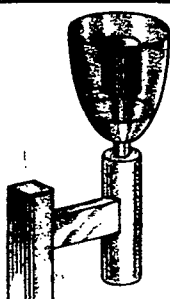
So the sun when down into the earth and entered the cave and said, "Now show me your darkness." There was none!

Our Lord paid us a wonderful compliment when He said, "You are the light of the world." How? By seeking to dispel the darkness of sin and error by the witnessing of our lives.

One of the saddest remarks I have heard was made upon the sudden death of a man at work. His co-workers said, "I never knew he was Catholic."

Baptism calls us to be different. It calls teenagers to be leaders, not followers; husbands and wives to love each other and not take each other for granted; for mothers and fathers to be concerned about their children and not let them do as they please.

The darkness is out there; are we lights?



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**Looking for
'The Bible Corner'?**

It's grown to a full page! Turn to page 11 for *Kids' Chronicle*, a new biweekly feature by Bible Corner columnist Cindy Bassett.

Answers to the *Kids' Chronicle* activity on contracts are: 1) mortgage, 2) license, 3) anarchy, 4) marriage, and 5) Constitution.