

## Time travelers view the church

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Many of us are fascinated with the possibility of traveling forward or backward through time. H.G. Wells' novel, *The Time Machine* (1895), is a classic, of course, but more recent films and television programs have broadened that interest. The *Star Wars* and *Back to the Future* movies, the two *Star Trek* series, and *Doctor Who* are just a few cases in point.

For examining the past, a time machine could make a great teaching tool, not only for history classes, but for theology as well. Our most cherished preconceptions and fixed opinions would bump hard against the wall of freshly lived experience.

Imagine a fundamentalist — with the Bible as a kind of road map — racing through the ancient past in avid quest of a first-hand look at the wonders reported in the pages of the Old Testament.

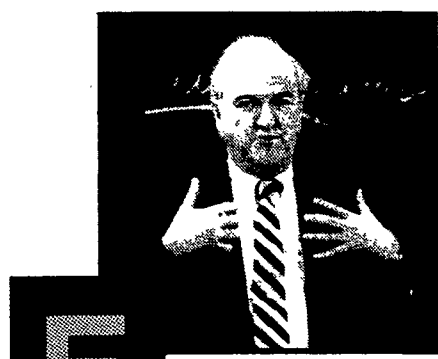
What would he or she find? A lot less than expected.

And what of those Catholics who assume that today's church is basically unchanged from the church of the past?

They could, for example, return to the fifth century and ask the most orthodox bishop about the number of sacraments. "Who can count them?" would come the reply.

Or they could backtrack into New Testament times and ask the pope's whereabouts. "What's a pope?"

And yet many Catholics believe



### ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

that the pope is our only sure guide to orthodoxy on this Earth, and they articulate that belief as if it were a principle.

But principles go backward as well as forward. If a principle is true today, it should also have been true yesterday.

But imagine such Catholics getting into a time machine and setting the dials for Rome on April 3, 1412, some 580 years ago.

They step outside into the crisp spring morning and squint up at the deep blue, sun-splashed Mediterranean sky. It is a city full of movement and noise, and the air is alive with the smell of cooking food.

"Where may I find the pope?" they ask a passerby.

"I should expect he's at the council," comes the reply.

"Ah, another council," they mumble. "We hope it's not as troublesome as our own Vatican II."

"What's that?"

"Never mind," they say, trying to distract the man from their slip of the tongue. "Who's the pope now?"

A look of disbelief crosses the man's face. "You must be joking. There are three by last count."

"No, no, my good man. There can only be one pope at a time. The Lord's will, you know. 'Thou art Peter ...' and all that."

"Well, the one that's there is Papa Baldassare Cossa. Goes by the name John XXIII."

Our mythical time-travelers gasp. "My Lord, did we stall somehow at 1962? We set our course for 1412."

The Roman by now has walked away, certain he had been in conversation with two mad people.

In due course, our travelers learned that John XXIII was indeed in Rome and that a council, was in progress, having just opened two days earlier.

It was intended as a reform council, like the council called by John XXIII of the 20th century, but attendance was poor and there seemed little promise of success.

Our travelers also discovered, much to their chagrin, that there were actually three claimants to the papacy, not one. The oldest, but not necessarily the surest, claim was that of Benedict XIII, a cardinal of irreproachable conduct, elected unanimously by the 21 Avignon cardinals on September 28, 1394.

But he was in Barcelona now, issuing edicts of excommunication against the other claimants to the papal throne, while his own support was limited these days to Spain, Portugal and Scotland.

Gregory XII had been elected by 12 Roman cardinals on November 30, 1406, with the hope that the whole mess could somehow be straightened out in short order. It wasn't.

Elected on May 17, 1410, John XXIII has been described by one historian as an "unscrupulous, grasping and ambitious man as well as an unblushing libertine." And yet John commanded the wisest support of the three, with France, England and several Italian and German states recognizing him.

After John's election, Gregory was banished from Naples, where he had been living under the protection of the local king, and took refuge with the lord of Rimini.

With the benefit of hindsight, Catholics recognize Gregory as the valid pope and the others as antipopes. But our time travelers couldn't have known that on April 2, 1412, or for a few years thereafter.

The Great Schism, with its many popes and antipopes, would last for nearly 40 years — a lifetime for most people of the day.

And yet the church carried on and the faith didn't die in the meantime.

History does indeed yield many lessons and challenges many "principles."

## Easter provides new life in Christ

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:1-9; (R1) Acts 10:34, 37-43; (R2) Colossians 3:1-4.

Easter comes late this year, and you can blame the moon for that.

Easter, as you know, is set each year by the moon. The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) set the festival on the first Sunday following the new moon after the vernal (spring) equinox.

Thus, Easter's dates may range from as early as March 22 to as late as April 25. It's entirely up to the moon. This year the moon was a bit tardy coming around so we have a "late" Easter.

The moon is the reason we also have Easter bunnies. In olden times the rabbit was made the symbol for the moon, probably because on the nights when a full moon was shining wild rabbits would emerge from their hiding place to feed. Rabbits were associated with the moon, the full moon is associated with Easter, and that is why we have Easter bunnies.

Now why should the moon have so much association with Easter?

The moon is, after all, dead. Astronomers tell us that it died five billion years ago. Yet it's still around, "telling" us when we can have Easter.

The moon relates to Easter in a more profound way than bunnies and determining the holiday's date. The moon is an example of "life" beyond death, which is Easter's theme. The moon controls the Earth's tilt, thereby giving us the four seasons. Although it died many aeons ago, the moon is still in the sky, influencing our lives. It exists beyond death.

Jesus died on this planet about 2,000 years ago. Yet, He lives on beyond the Crucifixion. Death did not put an end to Christ. He lives still, inspiring and uplifting changing lives.

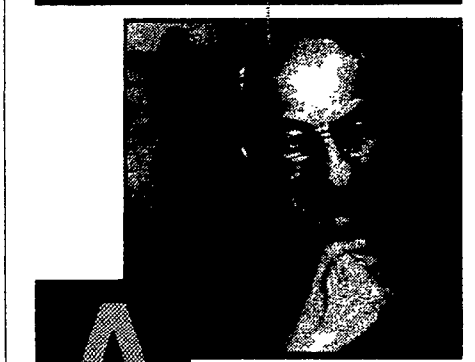
The astronomer Isabel Martin Lewis said in 1924, "A total eclipse of the sun is the most sublime and awe-inspiring sight that nature affords.

"The sun is eaten away, cookie-like, bite by bite, by the occulting moon," she continued. "Submerged completely in the shadow of the moon, you stand hushed before the actual sight — up to four minutes 10 seconds.

"It is unsettling to see darkness approaching during daylight. In the last few seconds before totality, you feel as if you are being swallowed by some gigantic whale," she concluded. "Then it is dark; not quite as dark as night, but dark enough to make it difficult to read. It panics the world of nature. Birds put up an awful racket; the wild turkeys go to their roosts. The cows cease grazing and form a line and march back to their barn. Daytime has become night and the temperature falls" — and a certain uneasiness grips hearts.

We do not know if it was an eclipse — or something else unexplained — when the sky darkened during the Crucifixion. We do feel that the experience must have been unsettling to those who witnessed it. That uneasiness must have taken possession of every breast as the day became dark. Darkness brings solemnity and some fright. All was dark on that crucifixion day so long ago, like the darkness of an eclipse.

But just as when the sun reappears after an eclipse, and those witnessing it experience joy and break into frenzied applause, spontaneously and unanimously salut-



### A WORD FOR SUNDAY

ing the return of the solar rays, so Easter's dawn banished the darkness and sadness not only of Good Friday but of all times.

Thus on Easter we put on new clothes, because with Easter we can begin a new life of love, self-sacrifice and commitment. And children hunt for Easter eggs, because — as Jesus came out of the womb of the tomb — we all can rise from the darkness of sin and error to a new life in Christ.

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