

New millennia often overblown

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

We pay great attention to anniversaries and birthdays that end in zero or five. There's probably a reason for it buried deeply somewhere in our corporate human psyche, but I'll leave it to others to ascertain.

This custom, however, does raise some questions. Why, for example, should our being married for 26 years be any less significant and give any less cause for celebration than our being married for 25?

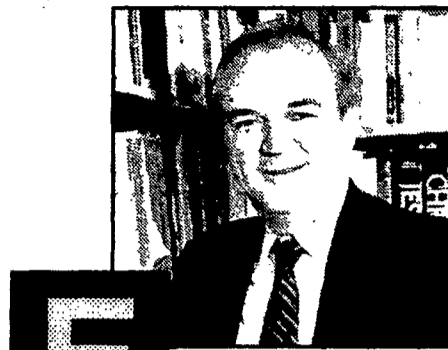
Or why should our 41st birthday be any less traumatic than our 40th?

Such questions are especially pertinent at turns of centuries and even more at turns of millennia. We happen to be approaching one of those turning-points.

Technically, the new century and the new millennium begin on Jan. 1, 2001, not 2000, but because of our penchant for numbers ending in zeroes and fives the year 2000 may eventually win out in the popular mind.

If so, we can pose our next question this way: Why should the year 2000 be any more momentous than the year 2001, or 2002 (just to be safe)?

The obsession of some with the year 2000 and the beginning of a new millennium seems a bit odd. One can see, for example, why an aging grandparent might hope to live a few more years to see a cherished grandchild graduate from high school or get married, but being consumed with the



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

hope of being around just to see the apple drop on Times Square at midnight, Jan. 1, 2000, is another matter entirely.

As I compose these lines, I have at hand a copy of Bernard Grun's *The Timetables of History* (Simon & Schuster, 1991), in which each page is laid out in a grid-like format.

There are seven columns across, under seven different headings: history, politics; literature, theater; religion, philosophy, learning; visual arts; music; science, technology, growth; and daily life.

Along side of each page are the individual years. Just by scanning the seven boxes corresponding to each year, the reader gets a general idea of what was going on at the time.

It's a rare year when the boxes in all seven columns are blank. The year 1001 (the real beginning of our current millennium) is one of those exceptions. *The Timetables of History* records absolutely nothing of significance all across the page. Not a single item.

So much for grandiose millennial thinking.

A review of contemporary developments in the church yields a similar result.

Pope John XV was in office from mid-August 985 until March, 996. If he ever had any hope of being in the Chair of Peter when the Second Christian Millennium began, Providence evidently had another idea in mind.

While awaiting the Holy Roman Emperor to come down from Germany to reinstall him in office with full honors (having been earlier forced out of Rome under pressure from the local ruling family and his own priests), the pope died of a violent attack of fever.

John XV was succeeded in May, 996, by Gregory V. On election day perhaps he, too, thought his ascendancy to the Chair of Peter had been specially providential and that he was destined to usher in the new millennium.

Alas, Gregory V died unexpectedly of malaria in February, 999. "Unexpectedly" isn't an exaggeration. Described as "a hard and determined man of restless energy," he was still under 30 years of age. If any pope had reason to believe he'd be around to welcome the new millennium, Gre-

gory V surely did.

The pope whom Providence appointed for the honor (although there's no indication that anyone made very much of it) was Sylvester II, the first Frenchman to be elected to the papacy.

He turned out to be something of a reformer, attacking ecclesiastical abuses like the buying and selling of church offices (simony) and the bestowal of offices and other material favors on one's relatives (nepotism). He also seems to have had a democratic streak in him. He insisted on the free election of abbots by monks.

But in February, 1001, the Romans revolted against the foreign pope and his political patron, Emperor Otto III. Both were forced to flee the city. The emperor died of malaria a year later and the pope was allowed to return to Rome, but only as a spiritual leader, without political authority.

Sylvester II himself died less than a year after that.

The more significant events happened much later in the century, including the founding of the Carthusians (1084) and the Cistercians (1098) and the establishment of monasticism in Russia (about 1051).

And the really memorable papacy was that of Gregory VII (1073-85), not that of the supremely unmemorable Sylvester II who just happened to be pope when the new millennium began.

Evidently, Providence doesn't care very much if the numbers end in zero or five. Only we humans do.

Sportswriters should cover religion

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

"What can you do to help journalists do a better job covering religion?" Peter Steinfeld, religion editor of *The New York Times*, asked at a recent "Religion and the Media" forum sponsored by *Commonweal* magazine at Loyola University in Chicago.

My suggestion is that religion writers become more like their colleagues in the sports department.

Most newspapers' sports sections (and most sports programs heard on radio and seen on television) are filled with stories and analysis of games, players and teams competing in various sports. You don't see a lot of articles about what's going on with commissioners' offices, referees and umpires, and finances. The reason is that most people are just not that interested in that kind of stuff.



FAITH AND WORK

When I read my daily newspaper's sports section, which I do first thing every morning, I skip over most of the background stories and go right to

the box scores, league standings and stories concerning last night's games.

When my favorite baseball player, Ryne Sandberg, retired suddenly from the Chicago Cubs, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a special six-page supplement on his career. There was nothing in there about the reaction of the Cubs' owners — who are also the *Tribune's* owners — to his retirement or the financial implications concerning "Ryno" leaving the game. It was all about baseball and how Ryne Sandberg played the game with skill, grace and integrity.

My point is: that's the way reporting should be. Good sports reporting focuses on the athletes playing the game, not on the institutional aspects of baseball, football, basketball, hockey, soccer, etc.

The main problem with today's religious reporting is that it doesn't focus on the lay people who are "playing the game" — workers, parents, volun-

teers, students, spouses — the "people in the pews" who are trying to live out their religious beliefs in their daily lives.

Instead, most "religious" stories in the media are about institutions and leaders. When the pope or bishops speak, for example, it is often judged newsworthy by both the secular and the religious media.

Stories of how a businesswoman tries to balance her religious beliefs with the demands of the marketplace or how a father attempts to teach his children about basic spiritual concerns are seldom found. Yet aren't these kind of struggles what religion is ultimately about ... just like baseball is about how well players hit a curveball or turn a double play?

Perhaps some of the sportswriters should be moved over to the religion beat. But, please, don't have the religion writers start to cover sports.

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