

1994 was the year of the pope

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

As I write these lines, it is still a week and a half before Christmas and the 1994 "Man of the Year" issue of *Time* magazine has not yet hit the newsstands. If *Time* does not select Pope John Paul II, at least this column will.

There is little question that the pope dominated so much of this past year's news. His health — and the speculation it has generated, not only about his physical well-being but also about his likely successor — has kept him and the papacy front and center in the media.

So, too, has the delayed English-language publication of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church, which has already sold millions of copies worldwide, and several books of his own, including the best-selling "Crossing the Threshold of Hope" (Knopf, \$20).

The pope's letter to all the bishops reasserting the church's official opposition to women's ordination and prohibition of further discussion of the matter, and the posture taken by Vatican delegates to the Cairo conference on population and development served as telling reminders of John Paul II's firm adherence to traditional views on women, human sexuality, and reproductive issues.

In November the pope also called a consistory to announce formally the list of new cardinals, bringing the



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number of eligible cardinal-electors — those under the age of 80 — to the full complement of 120. The media took note of the not-surprising fact that most, if not all, of the new cardinal-electors share the pope's conservative stance on various issues facing the church today.

The indirect message is that the next pope — regardless of when John Paul II should die or retire — will be a carbon copy of the current pope.

I have already pointed out in this column on more than one occasion that the church's history tells a different story; namely, that popes are rarely succeeded by carbon copies of themselves, even when the deceased pope had a lengthy tenure in office and appointed many of the cardinal-

electors.

No pope, for example, served longer than Pius IX (1846-78) and few have been farther to the right on the ecclesiastical spectrum. Nevertheless, Pius was not succeeded by another like himself, vehemently opposed to the new stirrings of democracy and freedom of thought and expression. He was succeeded instead by a moderate, Leo XIII, who reigned for almost as long as Pius (25 years).

And thus has the pendulum swung through much of the papacy's history, and certainly over the past two centuries.

The current pope is characteristically defiant in the face of all the speculation about his health. One way in which he does this is by talking frequently about his expected role in the celebrations that will mark the beginning of the third Christian millennium and about his plans to visit the Holy Land in conjunction with that historic event.

He would, after all, be only 80 years of age on Jan. 1, 2001, the official beginning of the 21st century and the new millennium. That isn't unusually old by today's standards, but questions do remain about the true current state of the pope's health. Six years would be a generous period of life-expectancy for a man of 74 with very serious health problems if, in fact, such is the case.

Pious Catholics and well-meaning, but uninformed, non-Catholics tend to think of popes as almost god-like

figures, moving serenely on a moral plane higher than the rest of us and across whom the shadow of controversy never falls.

But that has rarely been the case in the papacy's history, and it is certainly not the case with Pope John Paul II. Whatever one might think of the current pope, he does not go out of his way to avoid controversies.

Nowhere is this pope's controversial character more evident than in the persistent speculation about his health. Those who are fiercely loyal to him personally and who share fully his views on a wide range of theological and pastoral issues become agitated in the face of such speculation. They are like Cardinal Jozef Tomko, a high-ranking Vatican official, who dismisses it as "foolish talk."

On the other hand, there are many other Catholics who, for obvious reasons, do not reveal their thoughts to the media, but who speak privately of the Holy Father's health with some measure of impatience. After more than 16 years, they yearn for a less-rigid style of leadership.

It is worth remembering that some of the same Catholics who would become infuriated by such thoughts were themselves, during the last years of Paul VI, privately critical of the pope and eager to welcome a change to a more strong-minded style of papal leadership.

Thus it is, and thus it has always been in the long and richly diverse history of the Catholic Church.

Gifts bring happiness to giver, receiver

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 2:1-12; (R1) Isaiah 60:1-6; (R2) Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6.

The church celebrates the feast of Epiphany after Christmas. Epiphany comes from two Greek words meaning "to show forth." Epiphany celebrates the showing forth, the manifestation, the revelation, of the world's Savior to the Gentiles, non-Jews.

God in His mercy always accommodates Himself to our limitations. The Jews knew nothing about astrology but everything about angels, so God sent angels to reveal to them His Son's birth.

The Gentiles knew nothing about angels but everything about the stars, so God used a star to reveal His Son's birth to them.

The Gospel does not tell us the number of wise men, nor their names, nor the country from which they came. Because they gave three gifts, it



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has been concluded that there were three wise men.

In the eighth century, St. Bede gave them names, and, to represent all of life's stages, he made one young, another old, and the other middle-aged. He called the old man Melchior

and had him give gold, the symbol of kingship. He represented Asia. He called the young man Caspar and had him present incense, the symbol of God, ever-young. He represented Europe. He called the middle-aged man Balthasar, who was swarthy, strong, and bearded, and had him give myrrh, the symbol of humanity. He represented Africa.

All the Gospel says about their country is that they came from the East, probably Persia. The Gospel also tells us that the wise men were astrologers, scientists who studied the skies. They believed the stars foretold the future, that they affected lives, as the moon does the tides. Hailing from the East, they were familiar with prophetic literature, especially with Second-Isaiah, which foretold a mighty savior's coming.

Saturn and Jupiter came together in 7 B.C., causing a brilliant phenomenon in the skies. The wise men could have taken this conjunction of the two planets as a sign of a world-

ruler's birth. No matter, whatever they saw makes no difference. The point is that these men followed their own lights the best they knew how. And using their reason brought them to Jerusalem.

That was as far as they got. The human mind alone is never enough in life's journey. God's revelation is also needed. So, in Jerusalem they turned to Herod, who, in turn, had recourse to the Scribes and Pharisees. And they went to the Scriptures, God's written revelation. There, they found the answer to the wise men's query.

The pattern is the same today. God expects us to use our heads. Using it means listening to the church and to God's word, as interpreted by His Church. It, too, will bring us to Christ.

The idea of gift-giving at Christmas originated with the wise men's gifts. Gifts make everyone happy. True happiness, however, consists of giving, especially of ourselves, our love. To give brings a double happiness: it blesses those who give and those who receive.



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