

Anything can happen at Easter

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

For someone old enough to have vivid memories of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church, it must seem strange that women today have become a focus of theological and pastoral controversy.

Women fulfilled comfortably traditional roles before the 1960s, especially during the years preceding World War II. They were wives, mothers, homemakers, nurses, teachers, secretaries, and salespersons.

In the church they served as women religious (in schools and hospitals), as auxiliary sacristans (mending vestments, ironing altar cloths, arranging flowers), and as parish volunteers (assisting women religious in the preparation of children for first Communion and confirmation or working on the annual parish bazaar).

More than any other factor, World War II altered the role of women in society and eventually in the church as well. With all the able-bodied men in uniform and with the war effort's pressing industrial demands, women entered the work force by the millions ("Rosie, the riveter"). The old adage, "A woman's place is in the home," no longer described the real world.

The economic prosperity generated by the war years' increased production levels carried forward into the late 1940s and into the 1950s. Americans began buying on installment all the commodities that had been so scarce during the war: houses, auto-



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mobiles, and electrical appliances.

The war had another important social and religious effect. The GI Bill of Rights gave thousands of returning veterans a college education at little or no cost, and this, in turn, ensured for many families a higher rung on the economic ladder. The GI Bill also made possible the major expansion of Catholic colleges and universities after the war.

Previously all-male Catholic institutions such as the University of Notre Dame began accepting undergraduate women in the early 1970s. And once women moved into the universities, they moved into the professions as well: law, medicine, academia, even theology.

The whole development was expedited by the women's liberation move-

ment of the early 1960s, beginning with Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*. That same year (1963), Pope John XXIII issued an encyclical, "Pacem in Terris," which called the women's movement one of the age's "three distinctive characteristics."

"Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity," he wrote, "they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life."

In 1971 the World Synod of Bishops widened John XXIII's horizon to include the church as well. Women, the bishops declared, "should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church."

But a fiercely negative reaction also set in.

Women religious — once among the most sacred icons of U.S. Catholic culture — began to be criticized, even ridiculed, for abandoning the traditional habit and traditional forms of ministry in favor of blouse and blazer and ministries of outreach to the poor and the socially marginalized. The adjective "miniskirted" became a contemptuous modifier of the noun, "nun."

It seemed as if the bottom had fallen out of the church, and that the unhappy process had been precipitated, more than anything else, by the "apostasy" of the women religious.

The departure of many sisters from their convents to marry priests was an

especially galling development. Another irritant was the growing protest of Catholic women — laity as well as religious — against their exclusion from ordained priesthood. Altar girls were viewed (and resisted) as an advance thrust toward eventual ordination.

Language has been yet another source of conflict and reaction: the discord last year over the English translation of the new Catechism of the Catholic Church and then over the Vatican's reversal of the U. S. bishops' approval of gender-inclusive language in biblical and catechetical texts.

As the controversy over women in the church continues, we might usefully reflect this Easter on something that happened immediately after the Resurrection. According to the Gospels of Matthew and John, the risen Lord appeared first, not to Peter and the other apostles, nor even to his mother, but to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (Matt 28:1-10; John 20:14-18).

That's very significant because, when Matthias replaced Judas as an apostle (literally, "one who is sent"), the single most important criterion was that he should be a witness to the Resurrection (Acts 1:22).

After the risen Lord appeared to her on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene brought the good news to the disciples (John 20:18). She functioned as an apostle in the truest sense of the word.

But, then, anything can happen at Easter.

Lay life can often have a spirituality to it

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

In a recent column I asked readers to respond to Jesus as a teacher and role model. Wasn't Jesus' message, I wondered, that we've already done enough and yet — at the very same time — we have never done enough? I'd like to share a couple of the responses I received.

John Mazurski of Chicago, writes, "The vast majority of us are not called to be St. Damian among the lepers or Mother Teresa of India or St. Francis Cabrini or any of the other great saints. All around us there are many opportunities to do the small things that would make life easier for somebody."

"I remember one time when I was working. I was washing up ready to go home, I looked over and saw this one man trying to wash one hand, his



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other hand had a bandage on it," he continued. "I walked over, took his dirty hand, soaped it and rinsed it off.

"This is what Jesus was talking about. Nothing tremendous for the average person, just an attempt to show everyone that God loves them and shows his love through our actions," he added. "Actually we are God's eyes, ears and tongue, also his arms and legs. It is up to us to do his work for him."

Lena Shipley of Rochester analyzes the stories of the prodigal son and the Pharisee and the tax collector this way: "The older son, it would appear, did all the right things — outwardly — and never needed his father's forgiveness. The younger son, in his falling to the lowest ebb, learned a valuable lesson of the heart — that of humility, which is so crucial to the soul's growth toward God. At the apex of humility and forgiveness, more was acquired by his soul than by a lifetime of 'doing good,' which always runs the risk of serving the ego and creating

the environment for self-righteousness.

"This is seen so clearly in the example of the Pharisee, who was so meticulous about observing the letter of the law while evading the spirit of the law," she added. "Certainly the tax collector, who had been unjust and finally saw the light, repented and arrived at the apex of humility and forgiveness."

"Jesus attempts to present two laws — the higher and the lower," she continued. "The higher, more exalted, is the law of love — the law where enough is always enough. The lower, the letter of the law, never touches the heart. Although worthy, it will never be quite enough."

If you'd like to join this discussion, please write to me at 4848 N. Clark St., Chicago, Ill. 60640. I, in turn, will try to share your comments with others.

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