

COLUMNISTS

Column entering 31st year

This column soon marks its 30th anniversary, its existence co-terminus thus far with the Catholic Church's entire postconciliar period.

The first column appeared on July 8, 1966, in *The Catholic Transcript*, the weekly paper of my home archdiocese of Hartford, Conn., and the column's syndicator during all these years. *The Catholic Transcript* was edited at the time by one of the U.S. Catholic Church's finest journalists and leading intellectual figures, Msgr. John Sexton Kennedy, who, thank God, is still with us in well-deserved retirement.

The reference to the column's longevity may come as a pleasant surprise to many of its faithful and generally pleased readers and editors. I hear from some of them directly from time to time and am always exceedingly heartened and encouraged by their warm words of appreciation and support.

On the other hand, the news may startle and dismay those for whom the column is an occasional source of acute theological dyspepsia. I also hear directly from some of them from time to time. Mostly, however, they vent their frustrations in letters to the editor. That's what a free press and a free church are all about.

It is probably difficult for those Catholics who hark back to the 1950s as Catholicism's golden age to concede the column's demonstrated staying power. In



By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in
theology

30 years' time, it has successfully endured various letter-writing campaigns whose sole intent has been the intimidation of bishops and editors. Although that tactic has worked occasionally, the surer means has been the death or retirement of the local bishop, who is almost always succeeded these days by someone more favorably disposed to the course of censorship.

I've been asked many times why the column generates such controversy. Even some of my editors around the country can't figure it out. They firmly believe that anyone who reads the column regularly and objectively has to acknowledge its generally balanced, centrist approach. What apparently disturbs some of its critics is the column's operative assumption that it has an intelligent readership, made possible by the educational opportunities, Catholic and secular alike, that are more generally available to Catholics to-

day than ever before.

Indeed, the postconciliar church is abundantly blessed with an extraordinarily well-educated laity — far better educated than in the golden 1950s and, therefore, far less inclined to accept or be impressed with arguments based primarily, if not exclusively, on authority.

The truly educated person asks questions and critically evaluates answers. Others are only interested in the bottom line. Tell me what to believe, and I'll believe it. Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. There is still a large minority of Catholics whose theological and spiritual formation was largely shaped in the 1950s or at least in the mentality of the 1950s.

Included in this latter group are some younger Catholics who have had no direct experience of 1950s Catholicism but who have readily embraced some second-hand, and not always reliable, version of it. If these younger Catholics could somehow be transported back into the church of the 1950s, there are certain aspects of it that they probably wouldn't like one bit. For example, rash judgment, detraction, and calumny were considered to be real sins in those days, and the criticism of priests and nuns, no matter what their presumed failings, was regarded as particularly odious — a sin punishable not only spiritually by God and the church, but also physically by one's parents.

Notwithstanding the many tensions

and conflicts of this postconciliar period, including those generated by Pope Paul VI's encyclical on birth control, it has been blessed by Vatican II's renewal of the liturgy (by far the council's most important achievement), energized by the development of liberation theology and the church's renewed commitment to social justice, peace, and the defense of human rights, enriched by the proliferation of lay ministries, revitalized by the emergence of genuinely Catholic spiritualities (for everyone, not just for priests and religious), challenged by the new consciousness of women and the maturation of feminist theology, broadened by new ecumenical links with Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox, and non-Christians, and intellectually transformed by the great achievements of the Catholic educational system, especially at the college and university levels.

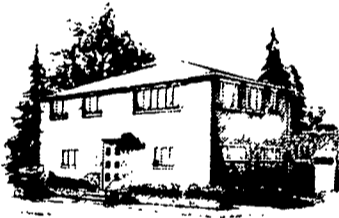
I myself am taken aback by the realization that I've been writing this column every week, without fail, for more than half of my life.

To those who aren't inclined to celebrate this 30th anniversary with me, I salute you nonetheless as brothers and sisters in Christ.

To those who would share the moment with me, I extend a word of thanks. This column wouldn't exist without you.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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