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## An Easter retrospective

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Having all of my columns readily available on my Web site ([www.richardmcbrien.com](http://www.richardmcbrien.com)) -- back to the first column published for the week of July 8, 1966 -- has been a boon to my own personal research, especially today when I am preparing to write yet another column to mark the church's central feast of Easter.

According to these electronic records, there have been 201 columns in which Easter is mentioned, and at least 20 columns devoted entirely to the annual feast.

I say "at least" because there were three columns published in April 1968 alone. Each was devoted to Easter and/or the fundamental basis for the feast, namely, the Resurrection.

It is a lesson in itself to read through the more than 20 columns devoted to the meaning of Easter. There is a continuity in them that I find reassuring.

I am struck, as will readers who check my Web site, by the number of times that my Easter columns cited St. Paul's classic text in First Corinthians 15:17: "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins."

From its earliest years this column has emphasized the central importance of the Resurrection. It has pointed out that, under the delayed impact of New Testament scholarship, the church better understands today that the Resurrection is more than a proof of Jesus' divinity but is at the heart of our faith in Christ and our hope in our salvation.

Several of these columns on Easter have begun with reference to the difficulty of saying or writing anything about the feast that lacks the odor of sameness -- what journalists refer to as boilerplate.

This sameness is the real enemy of Easter faith and hope because, through overuse, the words can become disconnected from reality. We hear the preacher's familiar refrain -- "We are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song" -- and it evokes a virtual yawn.

It is not that we have lost our faith and hope in Christ's Resurrection, but only that repetition tends to dull the senses.

Although I was tempted to repeat some of the doctrinal nuggets that I found in many of these past Easter columns, one column in particular caught my attention because of its relevance to one of the issues facing us in today's church.

My Easter reflection for the week of April 10, 1995, almost exactly fifteen years ago, focused on the topic, "Women in the church."

The column pointed to the Second World War as a watershed in the evolution of women's place in society and eventually in the church itself.

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Before the war, women "comfortably" fulfilled many traditional roles -- as wives, mothers, homemakers, nurses, teachers, secretaries and salespersons.

In the church women were nuns (working mainly in schools and hospitals), auxiliary sacristans (mending vestments, ironing altar cloths, arranging flowers), or as parish volunteers (assisting the nuns in the preparation of children for First Communion and Confirmation or working on the annual parish bazaar).

But with many able-bodied men in the service, women entered the workforce by the millions, typified by "Rosie, the riveter." The old adage, still favored by traditionalist types, that "A woman's place is in the home" no longer described the real world.

The economic prosperity generated by the increased production of the war years carried forward after the war. Families began to purchase goods (houses, cars, and electrical appliances) that were not available during the war, but it required two incomes to sustain the new, higher standard of living.

The GI Bill of Rights, on the other hand, gave thousands of returning veterans a college education at little or no cost, and the same GI Bill made possible the major expansions of Catholic colleges and universities. Previously all-male institutions like the University of Notre Dame began to accept female students as early as 1972.

Once women moved into higher education as students, they moved into the professions as well: law, medicine, academia, and even theology.

The whole development was expedited by the women's liberation movement in the early 1960s and by Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris*, which referred to the women's movement as one of the "three most distinctive characteristics" of the age.

In 1971, the Third World Synod of Bishops broadened John XXIII's perspective to include the church in which women "should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the church."

According to the Gospels of Matthew and John, the risen Christ appeared first to Mary Magdalene, not to Peter. She too had apostolic credentials.

The "visitation" (read: "investigation") of U.S. nuns flies in the face of that history.

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