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The column at 45

Richard McBrien | Jul. 5, 2011 Essays in Theology

This Friday ?Essays in Theology? will mark its 45th anniversary. The column began on July 8, 1966, seven months after the adjournment of the Second Vatican Council.

Most of the commentary which this column has provided over the years has been designed to assist Catholics to appreciate the significance of the council and to apply its teachings to the life of the Church in their parishes, dioceses, and nations, and indeed to the universal Church itself.

The column began quite unintentionally. After returning from two years of doctoral studies in Rome, I wrote a three-part series on the task of theology today with the hope of having it published in my archdiocesan paper, *The Catholic Transcript*.

When I submitted the articles to the editor, Msgr. John S. Kennedy, he suggested that I do a weekly column.

And so these essays began to be published in early July, 1966, and have been published ever since. The only time the column had to be suspended, for health reasons, was for three months last fall and into January of this year.

My home archdiocese was, and still is, Hartford, Connecticut. Msgr. Kennedy retired as editor of *The Catholic Transcript* in 1981, after having served as rector of St. Joseph Cathedral in Hartford from 1959 to 1971. He died at age 91 in October, 2000.

I remain indebted to Msgr. Kennedy for his extraordinary example as a priest and a writer, and for his generous and unstinting support and encouragement over so many years.

The very next week Msgr. Frank Lally called with an invitation to publish the essays in *The Boston Pilot*, the archdiocesan paper of Boston. I was teaching at the time at Pope John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, a suburb of Boston.

Cardinal Richard Cushing, at the time the archbishop of Boston, rendered his enthusiastic support and patronage to the column. ?Write about anything you want,? he said, ?but don?t write about money!? As one of the great episcopal fund-raisers, he regarded that topic as his own special preserve.

After Cardinal Cushing died in 1970 and was succeeded by Humberto Medeiros, the column appeared only intermittently in *The Boston Pilot* and then disappeared completely.

The column was ?banned in Boston? long before it was banned in other dioceses around the United States as more liberal-to-moderate bishops like Cardinal Cushing were replaced by more conservative bishops like Cardinal Medeiros.

The first column called attention to the ?wide gap between the theological advances of [the] council and the theological understanding of many Catholic people -- clergy included.?

The same could be said today, but I would make it even clearer now that the word ?clergy? also includes bishops, almost none of whom were present at Vatican II and therefore were not spiritually and pastorally transformed by the council, as Cardinal John Dearden, archbishop of Detroit, and so many other bishops were at the time.

I have tried over these past 45 years to remain faithful to the column?s original intention and purpose, which was to bring the fruits of the council to as wide an audience as possible.

However, as Vatican II bishops left the scene through death or retirement, and the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Jean Jadot, who had been appointed by Pope Paul VI, was sacked by the newly elected Pope John Paul II, the composition of the U.S. hierarchy gradually changed and so, too, did episcopal support for this weekly column.

Twenty years ago I was given a Certificate of Appreciation that was jointly conferred by *The Catholic Transcript* and the Catholic Press Association at its convention that year in Tempe, Arizona.

The citation read: ?Through his insightful column, Essays in Theology, Father McBrien has chronicled the journey of the Church since Vatican II with extraordinary clarity. He has provided provocative insights to the challenges facing the faithful, making theology (faith in search of understanding) accessible to the people of God and bringing it home to the readers of the Catholic press.?

In my formal response to the honor bestowed upon me two decades ago, I noted that the writing of the column was, and still is, for me a form of ministry to Catholics who want and deserve a more serious and critical interpretation of their faith and of its public implications.

That purpose, however, has led the column inevitably into the realm of controversy, which often creates anxiety in the minds of the Church?s gate-keepers.

Many of those gate-keepers do not like controversy, especially when questions are raised about the quality of their own leadership.

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