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Colleagues celebrate career of Fr. Richard McBrien

by Thomas C. Fox



Fr. Richard McBrien (Photos by David Kamba)

To the dismay of the right and pleasure of the rest, theologian Fr. Richard McBrien has popularized Vatican II theology more than any other person.

After 45 years of his award-winning weekly column (2,364 in all) titled "Essays in Theology"; after 20 books, including *Catholicism*, originally a two-volume synthesis of Catholic theology; after serving as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and after being the recipient of its highest honor, the John Courtney Murray Award; after countless papers and speeches; after all this and more, McBrien will be honored April 27 at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, where he has taught for 30 years.

"No Catholic theologian in the United States has made a larger contribution to the reception of Vatican II than Richard P. McBrien," said Catholic theologian Fr. Charles E. Curran, Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and a longtime McBrien colleague and friend. "McBrien has made this contribution by carrying out to the nth degree his role as a Catholic theologian."

Curran will be a featured speaker at the Notre Dame McBrien symposium, whose honorary chair is former university president Holy Cross Fr. Theodore Hesburgh. It was Hesburgh who in 1980 invited McBrien to come from Boston College to chair Notre Dame's theology department. McBrien was chair for 11 years, until 1991.

Curran is not alone in his effusive praise for McBrien and his contributions to theology.

According to John Thiel, president of Catholic Theological Society of America and professor of religious studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut, "McBrien is the theologian who has done the most in the American church to teach the continuing heritage of the Second Vatican Council. Through his many books and essays ... [he] has prompted a couple of generations of post-Vatican II Catholics to reflect on nothing less than what it means to be the church."

St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, professor of theology at Fordham University in New York, said of McBrien: "His love of the church and his knowledge of its history, both sinful and graced, led a whole generation to a greater critical appreciation of what it means to be Catholic. ... [His] weekly columns have been the voice of church reform in the United States for decades. ... His insights have pierced the fog of pretense and at times outright deception to bring a modicum of transparency to the exercise of power."

McBrien is currently on a medical leave of absence with plans to retire in May 2013.

Last year he had back surgery and discovered in June that a non-Hodgkin lymphoma returned in spite of two years of treatments. In treatment he suspended his column for the second time, in January. He recently told *NCR* editor Dennis Coday: "Don't feel sorry for me."

He told me recently, "I'm getting lots of emails and cards from people who say, 'We need you.' I fully intend to return to the column, but don't want to return until I feel well enough to do it every week."

The name Richard McBrien is synonymous with the Second Vatican Council. It helps explain why, as Pope John Paul II's and Pope Benedict XVI's conservative episcopal appointments have taken firm hold, many diocesan newspapers have dropped his column. Once his weekly reflections appeared in 24 diocesan papers and in the bulletins of two dozen parishes. Today, only six diocesan newspapers and eight parishes publish McBrien, who is a Hartford, Conn., archdiocesan priest. (McBrien has written for *NCR* from at least the early 1970s. His weekly column has appeared in the paper and online since 2008.)

It bothers McBrien to see bishops dropping his writings. He makes this clear in conversations with friends. But the reason he is disturbed is only partly personal. He sees implications for the wider church and for freedom of expression in theology.

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"My column might be viewed as a kind of barometer," he said April 4 in a

telephone interview. "I've not changed; the bishops have." McBrien said he takes pride that what he says in private he repeats in public, and then went on to say, "If there are any reasons for the bad patch the church is now going through, it is the appointments to the hierarchy and the promotions within made by John Paul and Benedict. By and large, they have all been conservative. That's why so many Catholics have left the church, are on extended vacations, or are demoralized or discouraged."

By contrast, he pointed to Popes Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI who appointed, he said, conservatives, moderates and liberals. "A healthy mix," he added.

Eugene Kennedy, longtime McBrien friend and another Vatican II evangelist, in an email called McBrien "an ironic hero of Vatican II and its teachings."

"For reasons that remain unclear, Fr. McBrien has been judged by many bishops and those who would please bishops as a dissident and dangerous priest whose column was banished from many diocesan newspapers as if it were a modern version of Luther's theses, too threatening to be nailed to their editorial pages," Kennedy said. "In truth, and throughout years of unjustified and unjustifiable criticism, Fr. McBrien calmly returned to the lectern of his column every week to teach the faith in depth and in its application to social and political issues in an orthodox manner that respected his knowing readers and even the bishops who apparently did not read him before condemning him in a highly self-satisfied, let's-play-this-safe fashion."

McBrien, a tall man who stands out in most any gathering, obtained his doctorate in theology from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where he studied during two sessions of the Second Vatican Council.

It was during those years he developed his interest in church history and ecclesiology. He was especially taken by the writings of French Dominican Cardinal Yves Congar, another theologian out of favor with the hierarchy for much of his life. "I read all his works in French and English," McBrien said. "I visited Congar during the council at the Angelicum [Dominican university of Rome]. That was the highlight of my time in Rome. Meeting him and talking with him for about an hour."

Himself a specialist on Congar, Boston College theologian Richard Gaillardetz said of McBrien: "He has often championed Yves Congar as the most important ecclesiohistorian of the 20th century. However, by the mid-1970s McBrien had, in a real sense, taken the baton from Congar, who would live almost two decades longer but with greatly diminished productivity."

Gaillardetz added, "In McBrien's first theological vocation as Catholic ecclesiohistorian, he drew on the massive achievement of Vatican II, an achievement largely inspired by Congar, to work toward accomplishing what the council itself could not, a coherent and comprehensive post-conciliar ecclesiology, a project reflected in his most recent work, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*."

"What has made McBrien stand out from his peers has been his ability to combine scholarly erudition and a sympathetic engagement with the ordinary insights and concerns of everyday Catholics. ... His pugnacious attitude and determination to speak truthfully, and often courageously, in the face of ecclesiastical dysfunction, has often blinded people to his profound love of the church."

Upon his return from Rome in 1965, as Vatican II was closing, McBrien became a professor of theology at Pope John XXIII National Seminary (now Blessed John XXIII National Seminary) in Weston, Mass.

After five years at the seminary, where he also served as dean of studies, he went to Boston College, where he taught and was director of its Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry until

coming to Notre Dame in 1980.

During more than four decades of writing and teaching, McBrien's theological reach has been wide and deep. His scholarship has influenced more than a few younger theologians. "He has educated generations of scholars," remarked Susan A. Ross, chair of the department of theology at Loyola University Chicago and president-elect of the Catholic Theological Society of America. "He has been a mentor for many of us."

Within the academic pantheon, McBrien is viewed as a moderate to progressive theologian. Primarily because of his weekly column he has been a prime target of the Catholic far right, especially on the Internet, where he often gets demonized for not upholding Catholic orthodoxy.

"Why have those extreme right-wing Catholics made him the focus of their opposition?" Curran asked. "He himself points out that some extreme conservatives resist to the end the *aggiornamento* reform brought about by Vatican II. Part of the answer comes from the fact that McBrien, more than any other contemporary Catholic theologian, has tried to theologically inform the average Catholic struggling to reflect on the meaning of faith."

Looking back, McBrien said the most satisfying element in his long career has been being able to popularize Catholic theology. Or, as he likes to say, "keeping alive Vatican II."

"I try to be honest and without being cynical. I try to give a sense of the history of the church and hope in the process."

Asked if he has personal regrets, he answers, no, he doesn't. Pausing, he goes on to say it saddens him that cooperation between theologians and bishops has not been better. "Vatican II was the high point. I blame John Paul and Benedict. They've leaned on Catholic theologians, Curran in particular. There have been others. They've put a chill in Catholic theology. Today many Catholic theologians are gun-shy. They keep their heads down. It's not good."

He says his "most significant" book was *Catholicism*, his 1980 two-volume synthesis of Catholic theology. The first edition sold more than 150,000 copies. Ross, among other theologians, agrees. "It remains," she said, "a landmark in post-Vatican II theology."

The same, many Catholic theologians and other church observers might quickly add, could be said of Richard McBrien.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* publisher and can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org.]

Editor's note: McBrien's columns appear in NCR regularly. His weekly column has appeared on the NCR website at NCRonline.org. All his columns can be found at www.richardmcbrien.com. Emails to McBrien can be sent to rmcbrien@nd.edu

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