

# Mother Teresa, the National Catholic Register and Me

## COMMENTARY

The death of Mother Teresa was my big break, if I might put it that way, into Catholic journalism.

In the summer of 1997, I had written my first few pieces for the National Catholic Register. I was a seminarian who needed money for a pilgrimage to the International Eucharistic Congress that year in Wrocław, Poland, and the editor at the time, Joop Koopman, engaged me — based in those pre-internet days on nothing more than a begging letter I had written him — for some reports filed from the site.

Mother Teresa died on the Friday before the Labor Day weekend, and the Register was

FATHER RAYMOND J. DE SOUZA

caught short, not having the principal obituary piece ready to go. The editors spent the day trying to reach a major Catholic writer to do it, but — again, pre-internet — could get no one on a Friday afternoon before a holiday. Desperate, they called me, as I had done some other writing for them after Poland.

I told them I would be honored to write on Mother Teresa, but didn't know enough about her to do the subject justice.

"Not a problem," came the urgent reply. "We can send you whatever you need."

An hour later, having made arrangements with my local parish — the only place close by that I knew had a fax machine — more than 30 pages about Mother Teresa spilled out. I read it all and wrote the obituary piece, which meant printing it out myself and faxing it back to the editorial office. A secretary there would then retype it into the Register's computers.

I learned that day that in journalism it is important to have something to report, or some comment to offer, and to be able to write well. But of supreme importance was the ability to write *fast*. Even before the internet speeded everything up — sometimes beyond the capacity to think — journalism required speed. The death of Mother Teresa taught me — and the Register's editors — that I could write fast. The calls from the Register came more frequently after that. So began 20 years and counting with the Register and, for me, a new apostolate in Catholic journalism alongside the principal reality of my priestly vocation.

In August 1998, having finished my philosophical studies in Toronto, I moved to Rome to study theology. The Register had just lost its Rome correspondent and wondered if I might take over.

I thought it was a bad idea. Not only did I have my studies to occupy me, making a weekly or fortnightly filing from Rome a challenge, I thought it unwise for a seminarian to be writing about matters papal and Roman. It struck me as out of place.

The rector of the seminary — then-*Msgr.* Timothy Dolan, now cardinal-archbishop of New York — agreed. Archbishop John Foley, then president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and a general source of inspiration and encouragement to Catholic journalists, also agreed. After relaying this back to the Register staff, they, too, agreed.

"But we are stuck. Can you help us just for a few weeks, perhaps a month or two at most?" they asked.

So began a temporary solution that lasted five years, until I returned home after ordination.

All of us agreed that it was a bad idea in principle. It just turned out to be a workable idea in practice. As Pope Francis would say much later, reality turned out to be more important than ideas!

Journalism, as the old saying goes, is the first rough draft of history. True enough, but in the internet age — which my writing career has unfolded in — one of the writer's tasks is to situate the daily torrent of information into the wider stream of history. That has been my approach, and it has found a resonance with readers. Or at least 20 years later my editors keep letting me try.

A Rome correspondent necessarily covers the Vatican, and even subsequent to my return home to Canada, most of my commentaries are on that beat. In 1997, we were 19



**BLESSED MEETING.** Father Raymond J. de Souza meets Benedict XVI at the Western Wall (Kotel) in Jerusalem during his pilgrimage May 12, 2009. The chief rabbi of the Kotel is shown at right (with beard). Courtesy of Father Raymond de Souza

years into one of the greatest papacies in the history of the Church, what I later came to see as an epic 35-year pontificate in two parts, 27 years under Pope John Paul II and eight years under Pope Benedict XVI. History was accelerated during those years, and those of us blessed to cover it sometimes forgot exactly how historic those events were.

There were times, though, when we were more than aware that history was passing before our eyes. Some of the moments that journalism permitted me to witness firsthand:

— The Great Jubilee of 2000, from the opening of all four holy doors — which I covered in person, sometimes just a few feet away — to the papal visit to Fatima for the beatification of Jacinta and Francisco. That trip had two purposes beyond the beatifications. John Paul revealed the Third Secret of Fatima, which he understood as a confirmation that he had survived the assassination attempt of May 13, 1981, precisely as part of God's providential plan to end the scourge of European communism. Additionally, the intervention of Our Lady of Fatima meant that the prophecy of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński of Warsaw, made during the conclave of 1978, had come true, namely that John Paul would lead the Church across the threshold of the third millennium.

■ The 25th anniversary of John Paul fell in October 2003, only the fourth time in papal history that such an anniversary had occurred. John Paul decided to put the beatification of Mother Teresa at the center of his celebratory week — at that time the quickest beatification in modern history. (John Paul himself would be beatified in 2011, beating her time by a few weeks.)

■ The death and funeral of St. John Paul II in 2005 was the greatest event I have covered. It was news on a massive scale — no one expected a spontaneous World Youth Day to break out. And the chant that went up from the crowd — *Santo Subito!* — returned the Church to the age of St. Gregory the Great. Cardinal Ratzinger was the only man who could capably preach for the greatest pope of our time, and it was the anointing of that day that surely convinced the cardinals that he was the only man who could possibly succeed John Paul.

■ In 2009, the sexual-abuse crisis hit home in a particular way for us at the Register. I had been covering that unhappy topic for years, of course, including the white-hot heat of global attention in early 2002. But in 2009 it came home with the revelations that Father Marcial Maciel, founder of the Legionaries of Christ — which owned the Register from 1995 to 2010 — was one of the greatest fraudsters in the history of Christianity and one of the most wicked priests in the recent history of the Church. The weeds and wheat grow together, and a great many people were fooled. We knew then that we had run stories in the Register that were not true, but the Legionaries' leadership was slow to correct them.

Later that year, I decided not to write anymore for the Legionaries. I would not return until after 2011, when EWTN acquired the Register.

■ To exaggerate my role from nonexistent to infinitesimal, I hope that I planted a small seed that might have had something to do with the Register surviving the crisis of the Legionaries of Christ. After the revelations, I had occasion to meet with Archbishop Charles Chaput, who was one of the apostolic visitors appointed by the Holy See for the Legionaries. I asked him to keep in mind the Register, to see if it might be saved, even if the Legionaries no

longer had the capacity or credibility to run a newspaper. Archbishop Chaput would prove to be a crucial figure in saving the Register from demise, facilitating its safe landing at EWTN. That, among many more important things, led to my happy return to its pages.

■ During my time away from the Register, I covered for other papers the papal visit of Benedict XVI to Britain in 2010. That assignment was particularly dear to me, as the greatest Catholic mind of the 20th century had come to beatify the greatest Catholic mind of the 19th century, that of Cardinal John Henry Newman. My entire priestly ministry has been on campus under the patronage of Cardinal Newman, so the beatification itself was a moment of deep emotion and thanksgiving. But the high point of that visit was Benedict's visit to Westminster Hall, where he spoke of the role of faith in political life in the very place where St. Thomas More was condemned to death for his fidelity to the Catholic faith. All the great and good of British society were present, and Benedict masterfully gave voice to the weight of history that pressed down on that moment.

■ World Youth Day in Krakow last year was the epilogue to the great pontificate of St. John Paul II. The Polish pastor who conquered the world watched from heaven as his beloved young people came home to Krakow, the city in which the 20th century happened.

My 20 years with the Register have been marked by three dominant priorities, evoking the three popes I have covered. My first years were the last years of St. John Paul II, who had already become a great figure of history, the vanquisher of communism and the captain who navigated the Barque of Peter out of stormy waters. For example, by 2002 at World Youth Day in Toronto, just his presence was an encyclical in the flesh. I covered WYD Toronto as a priest less than one week ordained, a manifestation that my priestly vocation and journalistic apostolate were entwined from the beginning.

Under Benedict XVI, the great challenge was to explain to the world the message of a thinker and pastor who knew its ailments better than the world itself did. For a Catholic readership at the Register, it meant helping them better understand the depth of Benedict's thought so as to converse more effectively with the secular world around them.

With Pope Francis, the appetite for Catholic news sometimes seems inexhaustible. Certainly I am writing more — at the Register and elsewhere — than I have before. The challenge, though, is different. It is now more a matter of explaining the Holy Father to the Church. The world thinks it knows Pope Francis — as a conventional political and social liberal held back by retrograde forces in Rome — but it is wrong about that. It does all create confusion, in part due to a pontifical style that likes to "make a mess." My friend and former editor, Tom Hoopes, wrote an entire book about that, entitled, *What Pope Francis Really Said*.

The Church continues her voyage through history, in both tranquil waters and stormy waves. The rough drafts of that voyage continue to fascinate. Telling that history, part of the salvation history the Church exists to proclaim, has been a great gift and a choice blessing.

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## Through the Years With the Register

Over the course of 90 years, the Register has covered national and world events, shedding light on the news through a Catholic lens. Here is a showcase of a few headlines from the Register archives, with more to come in subsequent issues throughout our anniversary year.

### MEXICO ARRESTS PRIESTS FOR GIVING SACRAMENTS

#### 1927

**RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION CONTINUES.** During the bloody 1926-1929 Cristero War, the Register reported on Mexican President Plutarco Calles' crackdown on the Catholic Church with its Nov. 8, 1927, report (pictured on page 4), 'Most Bitter Censorship Ever Known Put on Mexico to Hide Truth About Calles' Standing.' As the persecution continued, so did the coverage. In Jan. 1, 1933, the Register reported: 'Mexico Arrests Priests for Giving Sacraments.' Calles' presidency ended in 1928, but his influence extended through 1934, and his suppression of the Church led to the deaths of hundreds of Catholic clergy. From 1926 to 1934, the number of priests dropped from 4,500 to 334. In 2012, the film *For Greater Glory* (shown), also reviewed in Register pages, was a cinematic adaptation of the persecution and the resistance of the Cristeros. Flags such as the one shown were used by the Cristeros when resisting the secular government forces in the 'Cristero War.' Wikipedia Creative Commons/Immaculate



#### 1930

**COMMUNICATIONS LEADER.** 'Papal Radio Most Powerful in Europe,' read the headline in the Register Oct. 26, 1930. The new radio station, designed by the 'Father of Radio,' Guglielmo Marconi, and which had been built at Vatican City six months earlier, went on the air Feb. 12, 1931, with two words from Pope Pius XI: *Omni creaturae* ("All creatures"). Shown here, Pius XI examines Marconi's work. In subsequent years, the Register would chronicle how the Church used the latest technology to spread the Gospel, from the launch of Vatican Radio to Pope Benedict XVI using Twitter. AP photo



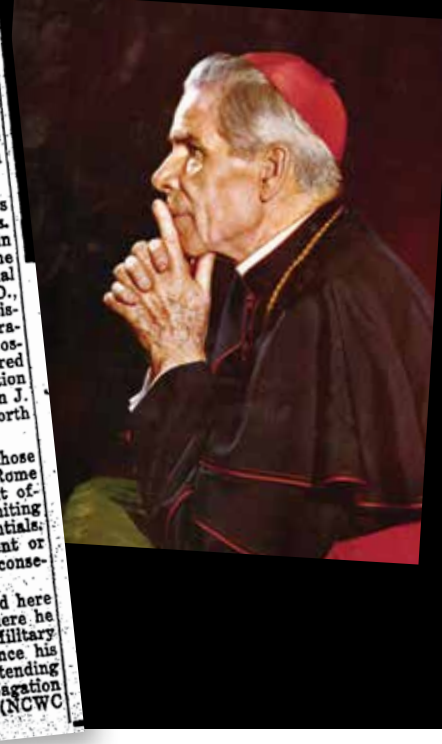
### Bishop-Elect Sheen To Be Consecrated In Rome on June 11

Rome.—The solemn consecration of Bishop-elect Fulton J. Sheen as Titular Bishop of Casertina and Auxiliary of New York will take place in Rome June 11. He will return home as soon as possible afterward.

The consecration ceremonies will be held in the Church of St. John and Paul, titular church in Rome of Cardinal Spellman. The Consecrator will be Cardinal Adeodato Giovanni Piazza, O.C.D., Secretary of the Sacred Consistorial Congregation. Co-consecrators will be Archbishop Celso Costantini, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, and Bishop Martin J. O'Connor, rector of the North American college, Rome.

Bishop-elect Sheen said he chose to have the consecration in Rome because of the opportunity it offers for 'simplicity and limiting things to meaningful essentials. There will be no social event or celebration following the consecration.'

Bishop-elect Sheen arrived here from Munich, Germany, where he preached at a Pontifical Military Mass Sunday, May 27. Since his arrival here he has been attending in the meeting of the Propagation of the Faith directors.—(NCWC Wire)

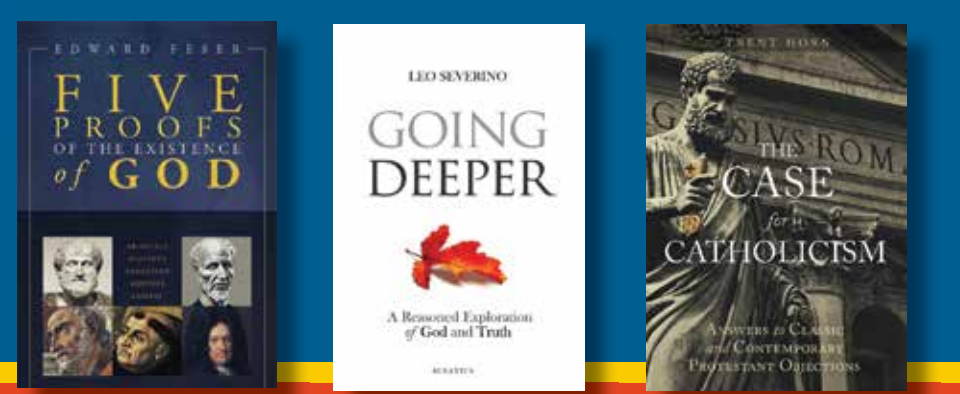


#### 1931

**POWERFUL EVANGELIST.** Bishop Fulton Sheen has been in the Register's pages since 1931. The Aug. 14, 1955, edition of the Register reported: 'English-Language Mass Sept. 5 Believed to Be First in History.' The Byzantine Divine Liturgy in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, was to be sung by celebrant 'Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, New York, national director in the U.S. of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith,' the Register reported. The story went on to say that the Divine Liturgy 'will be beamed behind the Iron Curtain by the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe.' With his weekly radio show and weekly television show, the now-Venerable Fulton Sheen went on to become one of the most successful evangelists of the 20th century. Courtesy of the Fulton J. Sheen Foundation

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## POWERFUL WORKS ON FAITH & MORALS



◆ **FIVE PROOFS OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD**  
Edward Feser  
A detailed, updated exposition and defense of five of the historically most important, but in recent years largely neglected, philosophical proofs of God's existence: the Aristotelian, the Neo-Platonic, the Augustinian, the Thomistic, and the Rationalist. It also offers a thorough treatment of each of the key divine attributes—unity, simplicity, eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, etc. — showing that they must be possessed by the God whose existence is demonstrated by the proofs. Finally, it answers at length all of the objections that have been leveled against these proofs. It provides an ambitious and complete a defense of traditional natural theology available in print.  
FPEG-P...Sewn Softcover, \$19.95  
"A watershed book. Feser has completely severed the intellectual legs upon which modern atheism had hoped to stand."  
— Matthew Levering, Ph.D. Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary

◆ **GOING DEEPER: A Reasoned Exploration of God and Truth**  
by Leo Severino  
A systematic, easy-to-understand journey that grounds the certitude of faith in logic and reason. Severino maps out a train of thought that begins with everyday events, reasons its way through proofs of the existence of God, then goes on to describe the deep purpose inscribed in every human heart. For those not well versed in theology or philosophy, this book is an accessible way to tether matters of faith to demonstrable premises and logical conclusions. For those with deeper theological formation, this book will provide fresh perspectives on the classic arguments that demonstrate how faith and reason go hand in hand.  
GDE-P... Sewn Softcover, \$15.95  
"With atheism and agnosticism on the rise, and in the face of changing cultural attitudes, *Going Deeper* is a breath of fresh air and a shot in the arm. A great read and resource for those concerned about truth and a deeper knowledge of God."  
— Steve Ray, Author, *Crossing the Tiber*

◆ **THE CASE FOR CATHOLICISM**  
by Trent Horn  
The most up-to-date, comprehensive, and thorough defense of the Catholic Church against Protestant objections in print, and especially relevant as the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation draws near. It answers arguments put forward by early Reformers like Luther and Calvin as well as contemporary defenders of Protestantism. It provides a meticulous defense of the biblical and historical nature of Catholic doctrines from Scripture and church history. In answering Protestant objections to Catholicism and in providing evidence for the Faith, it cites modern Protestant scholars who question Reformation assumptions and show how evidence from Scripture and church history support aspects of Catholic theology.  
CCAT-P... Sewn Softcover, \$19.95  
"Trent Horn is a gifted writer and thinker. He offers clear and convincing answers to some of the most common Protestant objections to the Catholic Faith."  
— Francis Beckwith, Ph.D. Baylor University