

# 90 Years

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nalist, bringing to the paper professional journalistic standards. He had been a priest only four years when he launched the national edition of the Register in 1927.

Msgr. Smith set the course of the newspaper from the outset. He told readers in one of the first issues that what they held in their hands was a Catholic newspaper with “snap, vigor and courage” that was “easy to read,” had “no selfish axe to grind” and would “always be loyal to the Church.”

Msgr. Smith broadened the Register’s national reach through the creation of “the Register system” in 1929, which allowed U.S. dioceses to wrap their own broadsheet of local Catholic news around the Register’s national and international news.

Karyl Klein, the archivist at the Archdiocese of Denver, said the Register system at its height connected readers in almost three dozen dioceses with the larger perspective of the Church, covering momentous events, such as the death and election of popes and presidents, to the political concerns of the day. Msgr. Smith also set up the Register School of Journalism in 1931 at Denver’s St. Thomas Seminary in order to form other Catholic writers in the art of journalism.

“It was a different time in journalism,” said Klein, who has been digitizing copies of the Register for posterity. “The headlines and the writing style were a little more ‘flashy,’” she said. Her favorite headline from the era: “Jungle Swallows Nun!”

She said the national edition in the 1930s covered many stories on the challenges of the Depression and warnings against the evils of Nazi ideology; the 1940s chronicled the upheavals of World War II and appealed for the support of refugees; the stories in the 1950s and 1960s focused more on the threat of international communism.

Within 10 years of Msgr. Smith’s death in 1960, the Register’s national edition went into decline. The Denver Archdiocese could no longer financially sustain the Register system, which at its height had a circulation of 850,000, and local dioceses soon became responsible for producing their own papers.

“By 1970, it was all gone,” Klein said. The Register system that Msgr. Smith built over a lifetime was dismantled. However, the national edition survived, thanks to Patrick and Gerardine Frawley, who used their own fortune to buy the National Catholic Register and relocate it to the Los Angeles area.

### Inspired by St. John Paul II

Francis Maier arrived at the Register in 1978 as a copy editor who soon became a *de facto* editorial consultant. (See related column on page 4.) Within months of his hire, the Register was reporting on the “Year of Three Popes” — the death of Blessed Paul VI, the election and death of John Paul I and the election of St. John Paul II.

Maier’s depth of knowledge about the Catholic faith was quickly noticed by publisher Gerardine “Gerry” Frawley, who wanted the Register to rival the most influential national secular newspapers. Within a year, Maier was formally named editor in chief.

“She said: ‘Make it better,’ and I set about trying to do just that,” said Maier, who today is senior adviser to Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput. Maier’s vision for the Register would be similar to Msgr. Smith’s: He wanted the paper to be accurate, formative and informative for Catholic audiences by being faithful to Catholic teaching and loyal to the Holy See, but also a “centripetal force” of Catholic identity that would bring together different points of view. And to that end, Maier said, he would study the papers that were the gold standard of journalism at the time — *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* — to make sure the Register adhered to the highest standards of professionalism.

“The most satisfying part of the job was finding and cultivating young talent,” Maier said. Most of the staff were in their 30s, and Pope St. John Paul II electrified them in their work together. “We didn’t know what we couldn’t do.”

Holy See Press Office Director Greg Burke started his journalistic career under Maier in those days and said the Register was the “Little Engine That Could.” Burke said

Maier’s “demanding and meticulous” professionalism “singlehandedly raised the level of the game in Catholic journalism in those years.”

“Fran’s love for the Church and his intellectual depth showed in the newspaper every week,” he said.

“The paper worked with a limited budget, but with vision and a determination to be a must-read for anyone interested in the Catholic Church.”

### Forming and Challenging

Greg Erlandson, director and editor in chief of Catholic News Service, worked at the Register from 1982 to 1986. He said the Register was not afraid to surprise people. He said Maier made the newspaper “intellectually stimulating” by bringing together on its pages writers whose political affiliations ranged from moderately liberal to conservative but who identified themselves first and foremost as Catholic.

“We were always trying to put out an excellent product,” Erlandson said, adding the Register’s newsroom under Maier developed a camaraderie that had fun, while being scrupulously professional, under the pressure of a weekly deadline.

In order to give the Register a global perspective, Maier developed a network of journalists, both on staff and freelancers, who could report on the developments that affected the entire Church, as well as the new movements emerging out of the Second Vatican Council. Journalists reported on developments in Latin America, Poland (ground zero of the Solidarity movement that challenged the hegemony of the Soviet Union), Eastern Europe and Jerusalem.

Joop Koopman only came to the Register because he responded to an advertisement for a copy editor on UCLA’s job board. But because Koopman was Dutch, Maier set him onto a major story exposing the Dutch bishops’ efforts to create their own parallel magisterium and introduce women priests.

“Overnight, I became this journalist,” said Koopman, who today is the communications director at Aid to the Church in Need. The Register changed his life, as reporting the Church’s stories would lead him to embrace the Catholic faith he had never practiced in the Netherlands as a youth.

“At the time, I didn’t know the first thing about the Catholic Church,” he said. “I barely knew who the Pope was — but then, here I was right in the middle of it!”

St. John Paul II biographer George Weigel said the Polish pope had a profound influence upon Register writers and editors, “beginning with Fran Maier.”

“Under his leadership and that of his successors, the Register took John Paul seriously as a teacher and pastor and became a crucial voice in the Church throughout the United States,” he said. By faithfully transmitting St. John Paul II’s magisterium to the U.S. audience, Weigel added, “the Register cut through the mass-media fog and gave people the truth, which is always liberating.”

### Sharing Tales of Grace

But in the early 1990s, Maier left the Register to become communications director for the Archdiocese of Denver, and the Frawley family concluded they could no longer financially support the paper. The Frawleys sought a new custodian for the Register, and the newspaper was sold in 1995 to Circle Media, a publishing outlet under the auspices of the Legion of Christ, which was publicly committed to advancing St. John Paul II’s vision of the New Evangelization.

The Legionaries tapped Tom Hoopes, who cut his journalistic teeth under Maier starting in 1989, as the Register’s next editor in 1999. Hoopes explained that the Register’s vision in those years was to showcase the concrete ways in which St. John Paul II’s New Evangelization was taking shape and to make readers aware of the truth that God’s grace was at work in the events taking place.

“The Register specializes in sharing how grace unfolds in real time,” Hoopes said.

Sometimes, the stories of grace were seen in joyous occasions like the Great Jubilee of 2000, or amid tragedies, such as reporting on the stories of heroism and sacrifice by Catholics on 9/11.

During this time, the Register dedicated a section of the paper to the “culture of life,” a term coined by St. John Paul II.

And the Register ran the cover “John Paul: Pray for Us” in its special edition marking the passing of the Holy Father in 2005, anticipating that the man who had inspired its mission for nearly three decades would indeed be declared a saint.

In one of his initial personnel moves, Hoopes hired Tim Drake, a fresh convert to the Catholic faith, who wrote to him saying he wanted to put his talents at work for a Catholic publication and had a “quiver full of story ideas.” In late 1999, Drake became the Register’s “features correspondent.”

“My 13 years with the Register were some of the most blessed of my career,” Drake said.

### Register in a Storm

When the Register celebrated its 80th anniversary issue in 2007, the pages included a celebratory publisher’s note, yet it foreshadowed how the paper founded by Msgr. Smith would be shaken under the Legion’s ownership.

“Msgr. Matthew Smith’s foundational formula [snap, vigor and courage] has served the Register well. As long as the paper stuck to it, it thrived. When it didn’t — most notably in the 1960s and early ’70s — it sagged,” Legionary Father Owen Kearns wrote.

Although the Register reported on the sex-abuse scandals in the Church that exploded into the open in 2002, the newspaper, adhering to the narrative of its religious publisher, downplayed the mounting public allegations of sexual abuse against the Legion of Christ’s founder, Marcial Maciel Degollado.

The Register’s leadership defended Maciel in its pages and cast doubt on the findings of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith until his death in 2008. Not long after, in early 2009, Maciel’s well-documented life of duplicity became irrefutable.

In 2010, publisher Father Kearns issued a mea culpa to Maciel’s victims: “I’m sorry for what our founder did to you. I’m sorry for adding to your burden with my own defense of him and my accusations against you. I’m sorry for being unable to believe you earlier. I’m sorry this apology has taken so long.”

After the truth came out — in the middle of the worst of the U.S. economic downturn — subscriptions plunged further, benefactors fled and the remaining staff faced the prospect of who would be the last one to turn out the lights at the Register.

“That was definitely the most painful time,” said Drake. He added the shuttering of the Register and end of its mission would have been a loss to the Church.

“Without a publication like the Register, there are stories and perspectives that simply wouldn’t get told,” Drake said.

### Prayers — and Sacrifices

Saving the Register from capsizing in this perfect storm of a bad economy and its publisher’s scandal required an all-out effort. Dan Burke, today the Register’s executive director, came on board Circle Media and took steps to turn it around. Under Burke’s leadership, the paper went from a weekly to a biweekly publication, and more attention was given to the digital strategy with the launch of NCRRegister.com, which reported and analyzed key breaking Church events online as they unfolded.

Overall, though, it was a perilous period of retrenchment.

“By fall of 2010, we had eliminated all external debt. We were down to the essentials. And we were prepared to begin again,” Burke said.

Burke credited the staff and writers for staying the course with their “unrelenting commitment to the Catholic journalism that the Register has always represented.”

“The Register survived in part due to the tireless and deep dedication to the Church of a core team of people who faced and weathered the storm with dignity and great personal sacrifice,” he said.

But, even with their best efforts, Burke and Legionary Father John Bartunek, then-president of Circle Media, both understood by late 2010 that the Register urgently needed a new publisher in

order to survive. So they began a novena around the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.

“When we began the novena, in my mind, I did not know if we could keep doing this,” Father Bartunek said. But a sign came quickly on the first day of that novena: He received a copy of a letter sent by Archbishop Charles Chaput, who said he heard about the Register’s troubles and indicated that EWTN may possibly be interested in the Register.

After back-and-forth discussions between the Legion and EWTN, the Register formally became part of the Catholic media mission of Mother Angelica Feb. 1, 2011. Shortly after the Register joined the EWTN family, one of the nuns from Mother Angelica’s monastery told CEO Michael Warsaw, “Mother Angelica had always wanted a newspaper.”

### Invgorated for the Future

Invgorated by EWTN’s support and renewed in its venerable mission, the Register has moved forward. Today, newspaper subscriptions have increased 100% since 2011.

The digital platforms have vastly expanded the Register’s reach far beyond the print edition. NCRRegister.com received 2 million page views, and its Facebook page reached 1.8 million persons, in September alone, and it has topped 54,000 subscribers to its daily and weekly emails. Meanwhile, the Catholic Press Association in June 2017 awarded the Register with “Newspaper of the Year,” declaring, “This is a newspaper with gravitas. It looks extremely credible. The writing is excellent.”

Editor in Chief Jeanette De Melo said the Register has God, above all, to thank for the “miracle” of its success. And thanks to the dedication of the Register team and the vital support of EWTN, it continues to present readers with a global vision of the Church through on-the-ground reporting with a lens loyal to the Church.

“Looking back on the last 90 years, the legacy I’ve inherited humbles me,” De Melo said.

She said the archives are full of lessons from editors who came before her and passed on this great tradition of the Register: Msgr. Smith, the “icon of Catholic journalism” who relentlessly expanded the Register’s household reach; Fran Maier, who cultivated new talent and gave the paper intellectual heft and vigor; and Tom Hoopes, who made beautiful features and catechesis an enduring part of the newspaper’s pages.

“Combining all of that into our print and digital pages today is a tall task, but one we work at every day,” De Melo said.

Carrying on

the legacy remains yet another task. But through the Register’s historic mission and new growth, De Melo said one thing above all is clear: “God’s grace is at work.”

**1946**  
**UNDERGROUND MARTYRS.** The Aug. 18, 1946, edition of the Register reported on the 'astounding evidence of the Christian underground and resistance movement in Germany' with the headline: '1,943 Priests in Dachau Camp Show Heroic Stand of Church.' Five years earlier, Franciscan Father Maximilian Kolbe died in the Auschwitz concentration camp, taking the place of a condemned fellow inmate, Franciszek Gajowniczek. On Sept. 9, 1951, a small news brief announced: 'Probable Saint's Death 10th Anniversary Kept,' as the Register noted Kolbe's beatification process had begun. The Register would cover his 1982 canonization. Public domain

## Eloquence Rings Down Centuries Great Saints of Long Ago Wrote About Assumption of Virgin Mary

**POPE'S NEW PRAYER TO MARY IN HONOR OF HER ASSUMPTION**  
**Painting Hangs in Washington**

### 1950

**PAPAL PROCLAMATION.** Pope Pius XII proclaimed the dogma of the Assumption of Mary Dec. 8, 1950. A front-page headline in the Nov. 5, 1950, edition of the Register noted: "Eloquence Rings Down Centuries: Great Saints of Long Ago Wrote About Assumption of Virgin Mary." Later that month, Pope Pius XII officially closed the Holy Year of 1950. AP photo/Walter Attenni; Paulo Veronese, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1548

**1959**  
**BISHOPS' STATEMENT ON BIRTH CONTROL 'Explosion or Backfire?'**  
**SCOURGE ON THE FAMILY.** In 1959, the U.S. bishops reaffirmed the Church's unbroken opposition to contraception. The Register carried the warning that the promotion of "artificial birth prevention" would prove to be "morally, humanly, psychologically and politically disastrous." This warning proved to be prophetic. In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration approved the first oral contraceptive pill, and public opinion quickly shifted in favor of contraception, fueling the sexual revolution. In 1968, Pope Paul VI responded with *Humanae Vitae* (The Regulation of Birth), the landmark encyclical that reaffirmed the timelessness of the Church's moral teaching.

**1962**  
**News**  
**Official Unavailable.** ...  
**Government Support Costs Conformity in Universities.** ...  
**Says Cultural Heritage Of Catholics in Danger.** ...  
**To the Christian World.** ...

### 1962

**CALLING FOR A 'NEW PENTECOST.'** A 1962 Register headline stated, "Council Great Service to Protestant World." Pope John XXIII had high hopes for the Second Vatican Council, but didn't live to see the conclusion of the historic gathering he convened — but what he set in motion has been a hot topic of debate in the Church ever since. In attendance was Bishop Karol Wojtyla of Poland, and among those who served as *periti* (advisers) to the Council fathers was Father Joseph Ratzinger of Germany. Both men, two of the greatest minds in Western civilization, would follow John XXIII in the chair of Peter as pope.