

Fortnightly

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 2, 2002](#) issue

The new year brings a change to this magazine. This sometimes weekly, sometimes biweekly herewith firmly becomes a biweekly. It's a good move. It will save postage and, since our intention is to have as many pages as before, there's no loss in value. Readers tell us that they cannot keep up with their daily and weekly mail and find that receiving weeklies sometimes adds stress to their biotemporal being. I agree with the change and expect that most readers will, too.

My fellow editors, who are clear, direct, frontal, practical, American and deliberately unfancy, will bill the magazine as an unpoetic "biweekly." And, of course, I will bow to necessity and go along with their choice. But I announce that from now on I am going to think of it as: *The Christian Century. Fortnightly.*

The word that I append to the official name *in petto*, in my heart, as the pope says when he names a cardinal without making his name public, has had predecessors. When I joined the staff 45 years and about 1,800 columns and thousands of short book reviews ago, the subtitle was a rather militant-sounding "Undenominational." In 1963 I was assigned the task of explaining the decision to change it to "Ecumenical." The former subtitle was judged "ungraceful" and "negative," the latter "graceful" and "positive." "We anticipate that readers will bristle at the change," I wrote.

We asked for patience and got it. Four unbristling letters approved the new term, and only one opposed it. The authors who objected to the change feared that while the crabby "undenominational" left editors at a critical distance from the churches and thus free of bias, "ecumenical" meant a commitment to the churches that might make us less critical of them in the future.

For exactly a third of a century I have edited a newsletter, *Context*, which appears every other week, and which I always call "a fortnightly." There is some poetry, some romance in such a word, isn't there? I decided finally to look it up. Tacitus credited the "night" half of the word to the Germans, who anciently measured time by nights, not days. See what I mean by romance?

The origin of the “fort” half of the word is more complicated. William Morris, in the *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, says that “the *fort* in *fortnight* is simply a contraction of ‘fourteen,’” but no one knows who first abbreviated “fourteen nights” that way. According to Morris, *fortnight* and *sennight* (seven nights or one week) “are at least as old as written English.” The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that in Old English “fortnight” was *féowert_ne niht*. *Sennight* “survived dialectically into the 20th century.” The Christian century? So all these years the magazine was an undenominational, then ecumenical, “sennightly,” then an occasional “fortnightly.”

You see how much research has to go into a little column like this one. One expends scholarly sweat. A side benefit of our switch from hovering between sennightly and fortnightly to completely fortnightly for me means fewer deadlines. Graced with health, I’ve not suffered stress over deadlines or missed one yet. But I do welcome the more measured pace, as, no doubt, will the editors, production people, mailers and readers. I picture many saying something like, “Honey, has the fortnightly Christian Century arrived today? I have leisure to read it tonight.” Doesn’t that sound “graceful” and “positive”? See you next fortnight.