

Why conservative Catholics are not fundamentalists

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY



By Father Richard P. McBrien
Catholic Courier columnist

The Catholic Church, like any healthy community and institution, needs both conservatives and liberals. The one complements and corrects the other.

For too long, however, we have done conservative Catholicism a serious injustice by lumping it together with ignorance, prejudice, authoritarianism, and reactionary political and social views.

Conservative Catholicism is respectful of tradition, but it is not traditionalist.

Conservative Catholicism favors a measured and cautious pace of change, but it is not opposed to change itself.

Conservative Catholicism may be insistent on the need for authority in the Church, but it knows that real authority works through persuasion and example, not coercion and intimidation.

Conservative Catholicism recognizes the right of private property, but acknowledges it to be a socially conditioned right.

Conservative Catholicism supports the use of force in the legitimate defense of one's country, but only as a last resort and always with restraint.

Conservative Catholicism is committed to the fundamentals of the faith, but it rejects fundamentalism. Why, then, have we allowed Catholic fundamentalists to march under the respectable cover of conservatism? Fortunately, there are signs now of a change in attitude.

In an important article in the Jan. 27 issue of *Commonweal*, Father John Cole-

man, SJ, professor of religion and society at the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, Calif., describes such Catholics as papal fundamentalists with the same right-wing political agenda as their ideological forebears, the integralists.

He calls these Catholics papal fundamentalists because, unlike their Protestant counterparts, they regard the pope, not the Bible, as the sole norm of truth. And he links these papal fundamentalists with the integralists because of the similarity of their mentality and activities.

In the last decades of the 19th century, as the Church was challenged by new intellectual, social, and political developments, a number of Catholic scholars in France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and England sought to formulate a constructive Catholic response to these new forces. Their efforts were quickly labeled by their opponents as "modernist." Modernist came to mean anti-supernatural, anti-spiritual, anti-clerical, and anti-pope.

Although there never was a modernist movement as such, a group of Roman curial officials and their lay supporters saw an international conspiracy at work against the papacy and against the "integrity" of the Catholic faith itself. These curialists persuaded Pope Pius X to issue a formal condemnation, which he did in 1907. Thereafter, a secret international organization of spies, the Sapiniere, and diocesan vigilance committees were set up to detect and report any traces of heresy in seminaries, colleges, dioceses, parishes, and

other Catholic organizations.

"A veritable reign of terror against the world of Catholic scholarship ensued," Father Coleman reminds us. And now there are signs that it is back.

Today's Catholic fundamentalists, he suggests, have the same agenda as yesterday's Catholic integralists. They charge that the principal enemies of the church lie within the church. They claim that papal teaching is the only test of orthodoxy, and that they alone meet the test! And they are committed to a right-wing political agenda.

Earlier in the century, such Catholics were pro-Fascist. They supported Vargas in Brazil, Peron in Argentina, Franco in Spain, Petain in France, Salazar in Portugal. More recently, they have supported people like Pinochet in Chile and the so-called national security ideology of various Latin American countries.

Where are the Catholic fundamentalists to be found today? They belong to Confrontatis in the Netherlands, Schonstadt in West Germany, Comunione e Liberazione in Italy, Opus Dei in Spain and around the world, and Catholics United for the Faith

and *The Wanderer* Forum in the United States.

Some of these groups — Opus Dei in particular — have been closely linked with corporate wealth, and they use it judiciously to enhance their own influence within the Catholic Church, especially in the matter of episcopal appointments and the containing of liberation theology.

Although Catholic fundamentalists issue frequent warnings about the dangers of schism in the church, the only schismatic movement since Vatican II has occurred among their own ranks: Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre's Fraternity of St. Pius X.

In light of the favor such Catholics seem to enjoy today in certain official quarters of the church, Father Coleman's own warning needs to be taken seriously: "The Vatican and John Paul II run the serious risk of being discredited when links to the narrow orthodoxy and political views of the papal fundamentalists are fostered — or, at least, not contained.

"Maybe we need," he concludes, "a new, good Benedict XV to warn us again of its dangers and to call a halt to its insidious growth."

Individuals' misdeeds help build up communion of sin

By Father Albert Shamon
Catholic Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; (R1) Joshua 5:9-12; (R2) 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

St. Paul says, "In Christ's name: be reconciled to God!" (R2). In other words, go to confession. Lent is as good a time as any.

A short while ago, a high school girl asked me: "Why do I have to go to confession to a priest? Why can't I go directly to God?"

I assured her she could go directly to God; but if her sin was mortal, she would still have to go to a priest. The basic reason, I said, is because Jesus set it up that way (John 20:19-23). But that did not convince her.

"Well," I said, "to get peace of soul, we need to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that our sins are forgiven. The person who says he confesses his sins directly to God, how does he know God has forgiven him? The normal channels of communication between persons are by visible signs. We cannot use extrasensory perception. Our normal avenues of knowledge are our five senses. That was why God became incarnate — visible — and founded a visible church with seven visible signs or sacraments, with rites and rituals. God accommodates Himself to our limitations.

"Therefore," I went on, "to know for sure that our sins are forgiven, we've got to have visible signs. Telling our sins out loud, seeing the upraised hand of the priest tracing a sign of the cross, and hearing 'I absolve you from your sins' — what are these but just so many sign-symbols, saying in language that we understand that our sins have been forgiven?" I still did not hit pay dirt.

So I tried again. "God normally deals with us through others," I said. "He used Moses and the prophets in dealing with His chosen people. He uses parents to bring life into the world. He empowers the state to execute justice. Why shouldn't He dispense His mercy through His priests? St. Paul said, 'God has given us the ministry of reconciliation.'" Still no acceptance.

Finally, I said: "You know, our Holy Father has been speaking more and more about social sin. I think most of us see sin as something solely personal, something between only God and yourself: a God-me relationship!"

The pope defined sin as social, because "every individual's sin affects others." He even went on to say that to the Communion

A WORD FOR SUNDAY



of Saints, there corresponds "a communion of sin — whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church, and in some way, the whole world ... Not even the most intimate and secret sin ... exclusively concerns the person committing it" (Reconciliation and Peace, No. 16).

"In other words," I continued, "John Paul is saying that sin has a ripple effect. Sin hurts others besides the sinner. No man is an island; nor is sin just a God-me relationship, but a God-me-others relationship. This is so because of the solidarity of the human race. If a father loses his job, is not the family affected? If a child gets into trouble, are not the other family members concerned? Did not the sin of Adam and Eve affect the entire human race?"

"So," I concluded, "reconciliation requires not just God's forgiveness, but also the church's. The very name 'sacrament of reconciliation' implies that sin is social: a rupturing of relationships with God and with others. The forgiveness of sins is simply restoring the broken relationships. When the prodigal son returned home, he needed to be reconciled not only with his father, but also with his elder brother (R3). Perfect sorrow for sin reconciles the sinner with God; but the absolution of the priest is needed to reconcile him to the church. Do you understand now?" I got a feeble nod.

In his encyclical "On Social Concerns" (January, 1988), Pope John Paul II returned to the idea of social sin. Personal sins, he said, are so social that they cause "structures of sin" to be erected in society — structures that make sin easier (No. 36). The irresponsible decisions of our U.S. Supreme Court Justices, for instance, have erected in this nation secularism in lieu of Christianity.

The fault is not in the structures, but in the personal sins that caused them. Only the avoidance of personal sin and the confession of sin will tear down these "structures of sin."

Change structures only and you have the same old problems. Change people and people will change society. Confession changes people.

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