

'Defenders' ignore Hispanic exodus

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

"In a huge cultural transformation that is changing the face of religion in the United States," began the front-page report in the May 15 Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, "millions of Hispanic Americans have left the Roman Catholic Church for evangelical Protestant denominations.

"From storefront churches in urban slums to gleaming temples along suburban freeways, perhaps more than four million of the roughly 20 million Hispanic Americans now practice some form of Protestant Christianity, according to several demographic studies," the story continued.

"And the movement away from Catholicism, which traditionally claimed virtually the entire Hispanic population, has accelerated in the 1980s."

However, disturbing the statistical evidence, the report could not have surprised anyone who has been following recent

trends in U.S. Catholicism. Only those with their heads in the sand would have been startled.

This ominous development was exactly what one prominent biblical scholar had in mind when, several summers ago at Notre Dame, he shared with me his opinion that Catholics who have been lost to the church because of the writings of Hans Kung could hold their annual convention in a telephone booth, while the number of Catholics lost to the Church because of biblical fundamentalism is in the hundreds of thousands.

But what have our self-appointed "defenders of the faith" been doing all this time to stem the massive hemorrhaging of Hispanic Catholics from the Church of their baptism and upbringing?

They have been busily engaged in a private clipping, photocopying and underlining service, identifying "dissident" theologians, pastorally "deviant" bishops and

assorted other ministerial "malefactors," and then sending the "evidence" air-mail to sympathetic cardinals in the Vatican.

While Hispanic (and non-Hispanic) Catholics were leaving the church by the hundreds of thousands, even by the millions, our "defenders of the faith" were seeing to it that imprimaturs were removed from theological and catechetical books that thousands of other Catholics actually found intelligible and useful.

While hundreds of thousands of Hispanic Catholics were being lured to storefront churches with simplistic interpretations of the Bible and large doses of caring personal contact, our "defenders of the faith" were having their friends in the Vatican impose periods of silence on theologians whose writings ordinary people actually read and could understand.

While thousands upon thousands of Hispanic Catholics were drifting away from the Church that had nurtured them for cen-



turies, our "defenders of the faith" were hunting down and harassing pastorally energetic bishops whom the majority of their clergy, religious and laity loved and respected.

While the Catholic Church was losing millions of its most cherished members to Bible-thumping fundamentalists who offered them a genuinely communal experience of church, our "defenders of the faith" were piling up institutional sandbags against the onslaughts of theological dissent.

But the facts speak for themselves: Catholics who have been lost to the Church because of the writings of Hans Kung or any other theologian, for that matter, could hold their annual convention in a telephone booth. The number of Catholics lost to the Church because of biblical fundamentalism is in the hundreds of thousands, even millions.

Why, then, have our "defenders of the faith" ignored this reality? Is it perhaps because they themselves are infected with the disease of fundamentalism?

Doctrinal fundamentalism, after all, is simply another form of biblical fundamentalism. Both are based on uncritical, historically naive, ideologically simplistic and selective reading of texts.

In the case of biblical fundamentalism, the text is the Bible. In the case of doctrinal fundamentalism, the text is a papal teaching or directive of some sort.

Biblical fundamentalists cannot imagine their interpretation of the Bible to be incorrect. For them, all other interpretations are not only wrong; they are the work of the devil.

Neither can doctrinal fundamentalists concede the possibility of error. Those who disagree with them are not only mistaken; they are heretics and instruments of the devil.

Biblical fundamentalists believe themselves to be the only "real" Christians. Doctrinal fundamentalists believe themselves to be the only "real" Catholics.

Biblical fundamentalists stress the Jesus-and-me relationship, mediated by the biblical text, to the practical exclusion of the social dimension of Christianity.

Doctrinal fundamentalists stress the God-and-me relationship, mediated by papal teachings and directives, to the practical exclusion of the social dimension of Catholicism — even though Pope John Paul II emphasizes this dimension with uncommon frequency and force.

Hundreds of thousands of Hispanic (and other) Catholics have been lost to the church because of biblical fundamentalism. How many have been saved for the Catholic Church because of doctrinal fundamentalism?

Wheel out the telephone booth.

God makes unlikely choice for king of Israel

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"It's no use, Eli. We've been all over these same hills for three days now, and my father's donkeys are not here," Saul said to the servant. "Let's go back before my father thinks that we are lost, too."

"I have one last idea," Eli replied. "Samuel, the prophet, lives nearby. He is a respected, holy man who is able to foretell the future. Perhaps he will be able to tell us where the donkeys have strayed."

Samuel saw the two young men coming in the distance. Saul was tall, nearly a foot taller than the other man. He knew at once that Saul was God's choice to be the first king of Israel.

"Stop worrying about your lost donkeys," Samuel said when they arrived. "They are already back home. Both of you come now and join us for dinner."

Saul was puzzled when Samuel led them into a room where 30 guests were already seated and placed him at the head of the table. He was given the best portions of the meal, and Samuel invited him and Eli to be his house guests that night.



The next morning, Samuel said to Saul, "Send your servant on ahead. I have a message for you from the Lord."

As Samuel poured olive oil over Saul's head, he said, "I anoint you as God's choice to be the first king of Israel."

Saul was dumbfounded. "How can this be true? My family is the least important in the tribe of Benjamin. And Benjamin's is the very smallest of the tribes of Israel."

"Do not be afraid," Samuel told him. "Return home now. As you travel, God will give you three signs to show you that what I have said is true. First, you will meet some people who will tell you that your father's donkeys have been found. Second, some priests will pass you on the road on their way to offer a sacrifice. They

will greet you and give you two loaves of bread. Finally, just before you arrive home, you will see a group of prophets singing and praising God. You will join them in worship and after you do, you will feel like a different person."

Everything occurred just as Samuel had foretold to Saul. He told no one about Samuel's message to him from God. Several days later, Samuel called all of the people of Israel together for a meeting.

"You have asked God for a king to rule over you," Samuel announced as he stood before the huge assembly. "Today you shall have your king. Gather yourselves together by tribe. God's choice for the king of Israel will be chosen by lot."

The first lot fell to the tribe of Benjamin and the next lot to the family of Matri. When the final lot was drawn, Saul, son of Kish, was chosen as the king.

Samuel stood and waited to present Saul to the assembly, but no one could find him. Saul was afraid and was hiding. Some of the people who already knew him found him and brought him forward to stand next to Samuel.

"Long live our king!" The people shouted. "Long live the king of Israel!"

In his heart, Samuel still felt the people had rejected God by wanting a king. So he told them again about the rights and duties of an earthly king. He wrote everything down in a book and placed it in a special place so that the people would never forget.

Scripture reference: 1 Samuel 9 and 10.

Meditation: "The Lord is king. He is clothed with majesty and strength. The earth is set firmly in place and cannot be moved. Your throne, O Lord, has been firm from the beginning, and you existed before time began" (Psalm 93:1-2).

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