

# When center shifts, what of the true fringe?

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Some Catholics react to the application of political categories to the church the way most of us react to the scratching of fingernails on a blackboard.

They reject the very idea that the Catholic Church may be subject to the same social and systemic forces that generate conflict and diversity in comparable institutions.

For such Catholics, there are no left and right in the Church — only right and wrong. To their way of thinking, there aren't conservative Catholics and liberal Catholics; there are only good Catholics and "so-called" Catholics.

But now even Pope John Paul II has acknowledged the existence of diverse currents in the Church.

In a recent interview with an Italian journalist, the pope suggested that his many trips around the world have been

providential in preventing a "confrontation" between liberal and conservative wings of the Church.

He claimed that by going directly to visit local churches and by "avoiding being caught up in the confrontation between the 'right' and the 'left,' between 'conservatism' and 'progressivism,'" he was able to "introduce an element of balance in the implementation of conciliar reforms."

What is most significant about the pope's remarks, however, is not his recognition of the existence of right and left-wing forces in the church but the way in which he redefines the center.

The center of anything is relative to its extremes. The one who defines the extremes, therefore, also defines the center.

On the right the pope places schismatic Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and those who are "afraid of 'change' as represented by the council."

On the left the pope places those who

"already hoped for a 'Third Vatican Council,'" or who are guilty of "reducing everything to the particular church."

Although the pope's reference to the left is much vaguer than his reference to the right — he fails to name Lefebvre's left-wing counterparts — the pope's concept of the center isn't difficult to deduce.

If Archbishop Lefebvre and his sympathizers constitute the right-wing or conservative side of the Catholic Church, then it surely follows that the center belongs to Cardinal Ratzinger; movements like *Opus Dei* and *Communion and Liberation*; New York's Cardinal O'Connor and almost all of the U.S. archbishops appointed since 1980; the Fellowship of the Catholic Scholars; *Crisis* and *Communio* magazines; such critics of the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letters on peace and the economy as Michael Novak and George Weigel; such philosophers and theologians as Germain Grisez and William May; and



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on and on.

And if that is indeed the center, many of the church's most active and influential Catholics must constitute the left — the opposite number presumably to Lefebvre-type resisters of Vatican II: Milwaukee's Archbishop Weakland and the working majority of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops; the Leadership Conference of Women Religious; the Catholic Theological Society of America; *America* and *Commonweal* magazines; such drafters and supporters of the U.S. bishops' pastoral letters as Cardinal Bernardin and Father J. Bryan Hehir; such theologians as David Tracy and Richard McCormick, SJ; and on and on.

Are such individuals, groups, and journals really as extreme in their way as Archbishop Lefebvre is in his? Are they, in the end, comparable to one another?

I do not suggest that the pope had thought out the implications of his remarks to this extent. Clearly he hadn't. I suggest only that conclusions of this sort can be deduced from his interview.

And this is what troubles an increasing number of Catholics today. They note with dismay how the center has, in fact, been redefined.

The thousands, indeed millions, who have heretofore occupied the church's broad center-ground have been displaced and, by implication at least, branded as extremists no less than Archbishop Lefebvre & Co. on the opposite side of the spectrum.

Although patently absurd and outrageously unfair, the tactic is the only way by which hard-line conservatives can redefine themselves as responsible centrists.

They recognize, after all, the validity of the old Scholastic axiom, *In medio stat virtus* ("Virtue stands in the middle"). Truth is to be found somewhere between the extremes, not at the extremes.

The redefinition of the center, however, is not only an injustice to the real center of the church. It raises also a question of inclusiveness.

If Archbishop Lefebvre represents the right, Cardinal Ratzinger represents the center, and Archbishop Weakland is representative of the left, where does one place the Coalition of American Nuns, or Catholics for a Free Choice, or theologians like Daniel Maguire and Rosemary Reuther, or activists like Father Daniel Berrigan, or Catholic socialists like John Cort, or the nameless thousands who scoff at any pronouncement from the magisterium or who defend the practice of celebrating the Eucharist without a priest-president?

The redefiners evidently haven't thought of them.

# A weak king lacks confidence in God's promises

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

"King Saul, as your chief army officer I must abide by your commands. But your decision to wait here for the prophet Samuel is foolish!" the general said. "While we stay here and do nothing, our enemies continue to build their forces to attack us."

"Samuel told me to wait here for seven days," King Saul replied. "When he comes, he will offer a sacrifice to the Lord for our defeat of these Philistines."

When a week's time had passed and Samuel still did not come, many of the king's soldiers were so afraid that they began to desert the army. King Saul became impatient and finally called in one of his advisers. "Bring me the burnt offerings for a sacrifice. I will make a plea to the Lord on behalf of Israel."

Just after he had done so, Samuel arrived at the camp. "Saul, what have you done? Did you think that you could just assume the role of a priest?"

"I was afraid," he admitted. "Many of my men were deserting. I felt that I must do something to win God's favor."

"It was far more important to wait in obedience to the commands I gave you from God," Samuel replied. "You are supposed to do the will of God, not behave like the kings of other nations. By your actions, you relied on yourself instead."

Later on, the Israelites were preparing to go to war against the Amalekites. Samuel came to advise King Saul just before the battle began.

"King Saul, this is what the Lord says to you: 'I will give you the victory over these people because they have done evil. After you have defeated the Amalekites, you must completely destroy everyone and everything. Do not even leave a single one of their cattle, sheep or camels.'" When Samuel finished giving him all God's instructions, he left the king.

Soon after, the Israelites did conquer the Amalekites. But King Saul chose not to kill their wicked King Agag, but to take him as a hostage instead. He also told his men to take the best livestock with them. Only the worthless things were destroyed.

When Samuel arrived at the camp a few days later he asked King Saul: "If this time



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you were obedient to the Lord, why do I hear sheep bleating and cows mooing?"

"It seemed such a waste to destroy everything," King Saul explained. "We decided it better to take the best things and give them to the Lord."

"Which do you think would have pleased God more — your obedience to his commands or your sacrifices?" Samuel asked. "Now the Lord has sent me to tell you that he has rejected you as king of Israel. If you had shown yourself to be a good king, all of your descendants would have continued to rule after you. Now that will never be!"

"Please forgive my sin!" Saul cried. "I did what my men urged me to do."

"I'm sorry; it's too late," Samuel said as he turned to leave. "God is not like a man who changes his mind."

Samuel went back to his home in Ramah. He never saw Saul again, but he grieved over the king's foolishness for the rest of his life.

Scripture reference: 1 Samuel 13 and 15

Meditation: Which is better — doing things God's way or relying on ourselves?

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Copy Deadline: Wednesday, August 2nd

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