

# Catholic fundamentalism escaped attention

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

Fundamentalism used to be regarded as an exclusively Protestant phenomenon, something one might run across in the so-called Bible Belt.

Catholics weren't very much interested in Protestant fundamentalists, except when they tried to make life difficult for Catholic newcomers to a Southern community or when they bitterly opposed Al Smith's presidential candidacy in 1928.

In recent years, however, fundamentalists have been more difficult to ignore. Several fundamentalist preachers have built vast television empires, and a few gained prominent access to the White House during the Reagan presidency.

In the meantime, the phenomenon of Catholic fundamentalism had gone largely unnoticed, even though much of the pre-Vatican II theology, catechesis, preaching, teaching and piety was based on fundamentalist preconceptions about church history, the meaning of the Bible, the nature of doctrine, and the origins of religious authority.

The Catholic form of fundamentalism is now being more widely acknowledged because it has achieved a new visibility, militancy and political clout during the pontificate of John Paul II.

Not that the present Bishop of Rome is a fundamentalist. He is far from it. On the other hand, this pontificate, intentionally or not, has been encouraging the activities of movements, organizations and individuals who were generally kept at bay by previous popes — especially Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI.

Not since the pontificate of Pope Pius X at the beginning of the present century have Catholic fundamentalists (then called "Integralists") enjoyed such favor at the highest levels of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy.

These Catholic groups and individuals are generally unhappy with the turn Catholicism took at Vatican II, although they are careful not to attack the council head-on.

They believe in a church that is essentially unchanging — in its doctrines, its liturgy, its governmental structure and its devotional life.

The church is unchanging in all these respects because — in their view — that's the way the Lord set it up.

Although they have probably never read the Bible in its entirety nor had a serious course in biblical interpretation, these Catholics are certain that the Bible "proves" all the truth claims of the

Catholic Church.

And although they couldn't tell you within a few centuries when the Council of Trent met, or, for that matter, where Trent is, they are certain that the doctrinal tradition of the church is clear, unambiguous, and (again) unchanging.

Although they wouldn't have a clue to the structural and ministerial diversity of the New Testament, they are certain Jesus left his Apostles a precise organizational blueprint by which the church must be guided for all time.

And although their concept of liturgical tradition is probably what their grandparents and parents experienced at the parish level — novenas, Benediction, May devotions (including "the living rosary" and the crowning of statues), Forty Hours, and, of course, the Latin Mass — they are sure that Jesus intended it all exactly this way.

Send them back to the third or fourth centuries in a time machine, and they'd be shocked.

Fundamentalism, of both Protestant and Catholic kinds, is as much a state of psyche as it is a state of mind. People don't come to fundamentalism at the end of a long intellectual journey. They "learn" it emotionally in the home, even before their



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

First Communion, and it is reinforced emotionally for them in the church and at school, by relatives and by friends.

Fundamentalism cannot be rebutted or disproved by arguments. The fundamentalist cannot contemplate, much less concede, the possibility that he or she may be wrong. To do so is to have already unlocked the door to the devil.

So there is no dialogue with the fundamentalist, only the fervent exchange of historically unanchored assertions and of proof-texts selectively marshalled.

Until now, Catholics have tended to give only a pamphleteer's response to the fundamentalist phenomenon, fighting fire with fire, so to speak (so much anti-Catholic bigotry was conveyed through pamphlets).

Simple attacks evoked simple defenses. There were a lot of "Thou art Peter's" shot back across the field of battle. And nothing made the truth more obvious than those history charts showing the beginning of the Catholic Church at the time of Christ and the beginnings of the Protestant churches many centuries later.

Perhaps it was because Catholics failed to recognize the existence of fundamentalism within their own community that they failed in combatting it effectively outside.

Indeed, even today, Protestant fundamentalism claims millions of former Catholics. These Catholics were always Protestant fundamentalists offered them was the real thing.

Fortunately, the phenomenon of Catholic fundamentalism is now being taken more seriously within the Catholic Church.

More about that next week.

# Togetherness serves as source of prayer power

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's readings: (R3) John 17:1-11; (R1) Acts 1:12-14; (R2) 1 Peter 4:13-16.

The gospels tell us that Jesus prayed often. Seldom do they let us listen in. Jesus' prayer in Sunday's gospel reveals two things: His intimacy with His Father and His love for His disciples. To His Father's will, he has uncompromising commitment. For His disciples, He shows deep concern for their spiritual safety and reluctance to leave them. Hence "For these I pray ..."

Between the ascent of Jesus and the descent of the Holy Spirit, there is a period of watchful waiting marked by uncertainty, anxiety and longing. The apostles, with some women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, are gathered in the Upper Room and pray furiously. They pray for nine days (the first novena).

During this waiting period, we can visualize Peter breaking the somberness and fear that kept them huddled in the Upper Room by saying, "Rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings ... Happy are you

when you are insulted for the sake of Christ." Last week Peter said it is better to suffer for good deeds than for bad ones. He repeats himself here.

When Jesus faced His Passion, He prayed (R3). When the apostles faced life without Jesus, they also prayed (R1). Both prayed because prayer is the source of power.

Your muscles show when you flex your arm. The word "muscle" comes from a Latin word meaning "little mouse." The muscle in your arm looks like a little mouse under your skin.

Both Jesus and the apostles, facing their mission life, needed power. They did not need muscle power, however. Muscle power is not the only kind of power. There is horse power, electrical power, atomic power, and so on. But far above and beyond these is divine power. And the way to tap this power is by praying.

In the readings we see that prayer has a double thrust. Horizontally, prayer power can come from togetherness — praying with Mary (R1). Togetherness is important in prayer. A tug-of-war depends in great



## A WORD FOR SUNDAY

part on the number of participants. A single stick can be broken easily, but not when it is part of a bundle. Our Lord said where two or three are gathered in His name, He is in their midst. That is why Mary asks for family rosaries and why liturgical prayer is so effective. Togetherness is a source of prayer power.

Vertically, prayer gets its power because it is addressed to God who is almighty. Christ promised, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

The disciples prayed nine days with Mary. And those prayers, like a rainstorm unleashed from heavy clouds, caused the Holy Spirit to rain down upon the apostles and the Church. Their praying caused a frenzy of witnessing and growth such as the world has never seen before or since.

One of the best ways to prepare for the Pentecost is by praying together. Why not restore the practice of making a novena to the Holy Spirit in the parish or in the family?

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