

Fundamentalism offers believers sense of stability

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In fact, the church's youth minister, Pastor Patrick Medeiros — another former Catholic — estimated that about 70 percent of the church's 500-plus congregation converted from Catholicism.

The existence of such faith communities as Greece Assembly of God Church, the prominence of fundamentalist televangelists and a perceived flow of Catholics to fundamentalist churches have prompted concern in some Catholic circles.

Such concern has developed in spite of the Catholic Church's continuing growth and evidence of a substantial reverse flow of conversions to Catholicism. In 1987, concern about fundamentalism's attractiveness led the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to write a *Pastoral Statement on Biblical Fundamentalism*.

In that document, the bishops described fundamentalists as embracing "an approach to life which is typified by unyielding adherence to rigid doctrinal and ideological positions." In terms of the Christian, non-Catholic forms of fundamentalism, the Bible is presented "as the only necessary source for teaching about Christ and Christian living."

The bishops warned, "The basic characteristic of biblical fundamentalism is that it eliminates from Christianity the church as the Lord Jesus Christ founded it."

Prior to the release of the bishops' letter, the late Archbishop John F. Whealon of Hartford, Conn., in the Sept. 27, 1986, issue of *America*, described the threat of the fundamentalist churches to the Catholic Church as "massive," and the Catholic response as "little and late."

Upon evaluating the situation in his article, which was entitled "Challenging Fundamentalism," the late archbishop wrote, "Statistics are impossible to get, but undoubtedly hundreds of thousands of baptized Catholics have for one reason or another abandoned

Catholics boast most growth

The 1987 and 1992 volumes of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* reported the following membership levels for the Roman Catholic Church, several major mainline Protestant and the largest fundamentalist denominations in the United States:

DENOMINATION	1987	1992
Roman Catholic	52,654,905	58,568,015
Episcopal Church	2,739,442	2,446,050
Lutheran, Missouri Synod	2,638,164	2,602,849
Presbyterian Church (USA)	3,048,235	3,788,009
Southern Baptist Convention	14,477,364	15,038,409
United Methodist	9,266,853	8,904,824
Assemblies of God	2,082,878	2,181,502
Baptist General Conference	132,546	134,717
Church of God (Cleveland)	505,775	620,393
Evangelical Free Church	95,772	192,352
International Church of the Foursquare Gospel	177,787	199,385
United Pentecostal Church	500,000	500,000

their Catholic faith for a Bible church."

The impact of the growing fundamentalism has been especially pronounced among Catholic Hispanics, meanwhile.

Sociologist Father Andrew Greeley, for example, cited the large numbers of Hispanics joining the fundamentalist churches in "Defection among Hispanics," an article in the July 30, 1988, issue of *America*.

According to Father Greeley, Hispanic Catholics are "defecting to Protestant denominations at the rate of approximately 60,000 people a year." Of that figure, he said, three quarters of the Hispanics are going to Baptist or fundamentalist churches.

"It would seem that the Protestant Hispanics have joined fervent Protestant groups in which their religion provides them with intense activity and

community support," Father Greeley wrote.

The inroads fundamentalist churches have made into not only the Hispanic community, but also into immigrant groups, led to a study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a Catholic research group based in Washington, D.C.

Conducted in 1991 and 1992, the study points out that many immigrants are drawn to the fundamentalist churches simply because those churches make them feel welcome and often provide ministers who share their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, noted Sister Mary Eleace King, IHM, a CARA researcher.

And in his 1990 study of fundamentalism, *Fundamentalism: A Catholic Perspective*, Father Thomas O'Meara, OP, pointed out, "In Florida it is estimated that five Catholics enter fundamentalist churches every day ... Many Catholic families throughout the country have members who have entered a fundamentalist church of one kind or another."

What draws Catholics to fundamentalist churches, Pastor Medeiros speculated, is that they want to "see the power of God in operation. They like the freedom of worship, and the understanding of what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ."

He added that many people are looking for answers to prayers and the miraculous — which, he contends, can be found at the fundamentalist churches.

Much of what Pastor Medeiros said rings true to Father O'Meara. But he added that the picture is not simply one of people seeking God.

"Fundamentalism is for many people a psychological problem, not a theological problem," Father O'Meara said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

"Fundamentalism flourishes in a time of uncertainty because it offers instant and easy certainty," the Notre Dame theology professor wrote in his book. "In fundamentalist movements there are no gray areas."

Thus, Father O'Meara told the *Courier*, people are drawn to fundamentalist churches because, "Fundamentalism offers simple answers to complex questions. It offers a certain access to the miraculous. It offers a certain stability in a world that seems very fluid and very relative. It offers a kind of elitism in the world, a sense that one has the

answer."

These tendencies can be found in the Catholic Church as well, Father O'Meara observed, in such forms as traditionalist groups advocating the return of the Tridentine Latin Mass and among Catholics who — when confronted by any issue — consistently cite the pope's authority or the magisterium.

In terms of the fundamentalist denominations, however, the key source of answers is the Bible.

In their 1987 pastoral letter, the bishops observed that the fundamentalists present the Bible as without error, thereby ignoring biblical scholarship. Fundamentalists, the bishops wrote, "try to find in the Bible all the direct answers to living — though the Bible nowhere claims such authority."

The appeal of such claims of inerrancy is understandable, the bishops said, in light of social instability and violence prominent in the world today.

This observation was echoed by Nancy T. Ammerman in "North American Protestant Fundamentalism," the chapter she wrote for the *Fundamentalisms Observed*, the first volume of the Fundamentalism Project of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences.

"Increasing numbers were anxious to hear a message about God's truth and God's plan for the future," Ammerman wrote. "They looked around them at the chaos of the times and wondered what they could count on, where the dependable rules were."

Carol Geer felt this sense of chaos in the world.

"The world is in a bad time now," she said. "There's a lot of sin out there. There's always been a lot of sin, but society accepts it now."

Amid social disorder, the Bible provides a solid foundation, Geer observed. "When you know this is God's word, you can stand on God's word," she said. "It's firm."

But Father O'Meara contended that fundamentalists tend to use the Bible as an answer book for all problems. As such, he said, the Bible becomes a way to avoid thinking about challenging and complex theological issues.

This approach, he noted, does not allow for flexibility.

Indeed, it does not even allow for the development of one's conscience, noted Margery Nurnberg, director of the Diocese of Rochester's Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

"They want to be told what to do," Nurnberg remarked of those drawn to fundamentalism. "It takes much more work to develop your own conscience. It takes more work to take responsibility for yourself."

Although their numbers are small in comparison with the Catholic Church, fundamentalist denominations do pose some challenges to the church, Father O'Meara said.

He observed that Catholic parishes are too big, making it difficult to provide the personal contact found in fundamentalist churches. One option, he suggested, is to break up larger parishes into smaller communities, though he acknowledged that many dioceses might find such an approach impractical at this time.

Some parishes already offer Bible study, adult education and greater flexibility in worship, but more parishes need to do so, Father O'Meara asserted.

"Fundamentalism points up to the Catholic dioceses that they are going to have to have programs by which people are educated," Father O'Meara said. "People need to know what's basic to Christianity and how to apply it."

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Father John A. Walchars, SJ, at 80; conducted retreats at Cenacle Center

Father John A. Walchars, SJ, who conducted many retreats at Rochester's Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal over the past 30 years, died suddenly in Innsbruck, Austria, on July 21, 1992. He was 80 years old.

Born in Vienna, Austria, Father Walchars entered the Society of Jesus in 1932, and was ordained a priest in Kingsien, China, in 1943. He transferred to the New England Province of the Society of Jesus in 1947, serving 28 years as an instructor at the Cranwell Preparatory School in Lenox, Mass.

When Cranwell closed in 1975, Father Walchars became a member of the Campion Center Jesuit Community and expanded his retreat activities. He conducted retreats in England, Europe and New Zealand as well as the United States.

According to Sister Ellen Frawley, RC, the late priest brought a fresh approach to every retreat he conducted at the Cenacle Center on East Avenue.

"There was a newness about him. He was constantly traveling, and because of this he had a great wealth of things to draw upon. He kept on growing," said Sister Frawley, who has lived at the Cenacle since 1980 and had

known Father Walchars for nearly 25 years.

Father Walchars normally conducted one retreat in the spring and another in the fall, said Sister Frawley. He was also known for keeping in touch with his Rochester-area friends throughout the year.

"He was a great correspondent," Sister Frawley said.

A concelebrated Mass was offered for Father Walchars on July 24 in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit at the Campion Center in Weston, Mass. Internment was in Austria that day.

Sister Frawley noted that the Cenacle Center will honor Father Walchars the weekend of Oct. 23-25, 1992. He had scheduled a retreat at the Cenacle Center that weekend.

"It will be a weekend of gathering of people who knew him. We'll be sharing his memories with pictures and letters," Sister Frawley said. "It will also be a time of grieving because he's such a great loss for us."

Father Walchars is survived by a brother, Friedrich; a sister-in-law, Elvira; and a niece, Mrs. Hanni Domany, all of Vienna, Austria.