

Catholic Fundamentalism: What's that?

by Jim Seghers

In another essay the recent phenomena of Protestant Fundamentalism is discussed. What, then, is Catholic Fundamentalism? Expressions like “Catholic Fundamentalist” or “Catholic Fundamentalism” are terms of contempt used to discredit ideas by discounting the person or persons. It is a popular tactic of false logic used by those Catholics who reject something the Church teaches. By attacking the person a strategy is employed that either shifts the focus from issues to personalities or else avoids addressing substantive issues by ridiculing the opposition.

Fundamentalism is associated with a rigid literalism that wrenches a text from the context of a passage in Sacred Scripture, the whole of Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church. There is no corresponding fundamentalist movement within the Catholic Church. What is called Catholic Fundamentalism refers to those who would cite Conciliar documents, Papal encyclicals and the [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) in a very literal sense to support authentic Catholic teaching and practices. This is quite a different matter.

Sacred Scripture is written in language that is often symbolic and it is presented in a variety of literary forms. While it contains timeless truths and it is the source of theology, the Bible is not a source book of precise theological definitions. It is, however, a source book from which precise theological definitions can be drawn. Thus, when the Church defines the change that takes place by the words of consecration as **transubstantiation**, namely the substance of the bread and wine are changed into the substance of the body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ, the council of Trent intended this term to be understood literally. To teach that Jesus is present merely as a sign is an error because it contradicts the meaning of transubstantiation.

In its teaching office the Church goes to great lengths to define its moral and doctrinal teaching with great precision. The language of its pronouncements is carefully chosen to avoid ambiguity. It does so because the Church wants, even demands that these teachings be understood and accepted literally. In other words they mean exactly what they say. Magisterial statements pronounce truth. Truth is the issue, not opinion. For example, when the Pope defined Mary's Assumption he affirmed a literal truth, namely, that at the end of her mortal life Mary was assumed into heaven body and soul.

A difficulty arises when a Catholic contradicts the Church's teaching. Examples would be stating that the human race did not descend from one set of parents because the Genesis account of Adam and Eve is a myth, or rejecting the Church's prohibition of artificial contraception, divorce and remarriage, and homosexual acts. These positions are clearly opposed to the Church's teaching. Were a Catholic to hold such beliefs that person would be disobedient to the Church's teaching authority, embracing error and perhaps formal heresy. Calling fellow Catholics fundamentalists because they defend the Church's teaching is an empty label that avoids the real issues.

Recently the terms “fundamentalism” and “fundamentalist” have been used with another meaning. Its basis is a false dichotomy between truth and love. In this context a fundamentalist is defined as someone who upholds doctrine at the expense of compassion. If “doctrine” is merely based on one’s subjective understanding that is one thing. However, it is a very different matter when doctrine is based on divine revelation as authentically interpreted by the authority Christ established and the Holy Spirit safeguards. In this case the issue is truth not opinion. Thus, when the Church condemns homosexual acts it is not failing in its obligation to love the neighbor. Truth is never in conflict with charity. It is its foundation. The same can be said for the Church’s teaching regarding a number of other controversial doctrinal positions that some regard as rigid - divorce and remarriage, artificial contraception, masturbation, abortion, and the ordination of women.

A related issue is the common practice of applying political terms like “liberal” or “conservative” to the Church. Recently, this came up in an adult theology class in New Orleans when the teacher criticized and ridiculed the “ultra conservative Catholics on the Northshore.” In his 1998 *ad Limina* Addresses¹ to the U.S. bishops Pope John Paul II strongly rejected the application of such terms to the Church. He did so for several reasons.

First, the Church’s teaching is concerned with truth which is neither “liberal” nor “conservative.” It is simply the truth. We have God’s word for it. A comparison with mathematics is helpful. The correct answer to the addition of 4 plus 4 is 8. That’s the truth. An answer of 5, 6 or 7 is not “liberal,” nor would an answer of 9, 10 or 11 be “conservative” – or vice versa. Those answers are simply wrong. They are not true. Now let’s contrast a political issue. Let’s suppose “liberals” support increasing taxes, whereas “conservatives” are promoting a tax reduction. Truth is not applicable in this example even though the proponents may ardently adhere to the strength of their viewpoint. The reality is that both sides are dealing with opinions that are rooted neither in God’s word nor the nature of things.

The problem with applying political labels to the Church is that it blurs the concept of truth and ultimately leads to the rejection of the idea that one can know objective truth. Everything becomes one’s subjective opinion, because if I have “my truth” and you have “your truth” we end up with no truth. The application of political terms to the Church also leads to the false claim of a moral right to “dissent” from the official teachings of the Church.

Catholics are obligated to assent to all doctrinal and moral pronouncements of the Pope, whether he is speaking with his extraordinary charism of infallibility or with his ordinary teaching authority. Even in the latter instance he is still teaching with divine assistance under that special power that belongs exclusively to him as the Vicar of Christ on earth.² Dissenters cite quoting magisterial documents that reject the right of dissent as an example of

¹ The Pope receives groups of bishops every five years *ad limina Apostolorum* ("to the doorstep of the apostles"). This is an ancient practice that is already well documented in the fourth century.

² Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, # 20; Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium*, # 25; [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #892](#); Pope John Paul II, *Ad Tuendam Fidem*, # 4.

fundamentalism. That's like calling an elephant a canary. The elephant still won't chirp or grow feathers, nor will he fly, and neither will such arguments.

It would be a mistake to exclusively equate all "dissent" with those who reject the Church's moral and doctrinal teaching on issues like the ordination of women, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and the grave immorality of artificial contraception. There is a flip side - those who in their misguided and simplistic attempt to champion orthodoxy, have made themselves more infallible and Catholic than the Pope. As a result some have taken positions that reject the validity of the present Mass, the election of Pope John Paul II, and the Second Vatican Council. While apparently in opposition to those who have been called the "dissenters," they are in reality bedfellows with them. They embrace the same error, namely, placing one's interpretation of doctrine, morality and practice above the judgment of the Church's Magisterium.

Pope John Paul II points out that the second problem with political labeling in the Church is its divisiveness. In the cited example of the teacher who scorned the so called Northshore ultra-conservatives, the effect was to polarize the class, which prompted many of the students to question his judgment and his competency to teach in a Catholic theology program. This was unfortunate because his emotional outburst and sweeping denunciations deprived the class of an opportunity to evaluate and discuss the underlining issues that he considers legitimate.

In this context the Holy Father urges U.S. bishops to "find greater certainty about what the Church actually teaches, and greater serenity in confronting the many issues which - often needlessly - cause division and polarization among those who should be of one mind and heart (cf. Acts 2:44)."

Jesus teaches us to look beyond sinners: false priests, unfaithful religious, secular bishops, sinful parents, betrayed relationships, illness, hardships of every description, and even our own death. He tells us to trust the consuming love of the Holy Spirit. Jesus instructs us must never write off those who hurt us. He commands that we must love them, pray for them, care for them, and forgive them. At all cost we must avoid becoming modern Christian Pharisees who are thankful that we are orthodox while feeling superior and judging the heterodox.

The true root of all the evil in the world is sin. Our real enemy is sin and the father of sin, Satan, who in every age is conquered by the loving and humble submissiveness of Jesus Christ. Whatever our burdens we are merely part of the mop-up operation. As to our faithfulness, Jesus reminds us: and "So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Lk 17:10). The truth is that we are incapable of even doing that except for the grace of God. In the words of Jesus, "apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Yet in his great goodness God will reward us with an eternity of happiness!