Modern Catholicism, the Antithesis of Fundamentalism

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Anti-Catholicism in America stems from many sources. Historically, of course, this predominantly Protestant nation had a built-in prejudice against Catholics, on theological grounds. But there were many other factors as well. Our mostly British early Americans also resented it when large waves of immigrants—Irish, German, Polish, Italian, and many others who were largely Catholic—began to dominate the social and political landscape in the major Eastern cities, Chicago, and elsewhere. During the same period, Catholics also became prominent in business, society, and culture, so much so that the American establishment had to come to terms, somewhat reluctantly, with the presence of what it had earlier regarded as a foreign faith, with divided loyalties.

That's pretty much where things stood until the mid-1960s when a new factor entered into the equation. It's hardly a secret that the moral and cultural revolution associated with "the Sixties" moved in direct opposition not only to traditional Catholicism; it abandoned the morals, and often the faith, of mainline Protestantism as well. There had been a liberal Christianity in America and Europe for several decades that had tried to reduce Christianity to a vaguely spiritual inspiration with uncertain moral content, but nothing like this. These developments put in doubt the very basis of what counted as "Christianity," which now seemed reduced to essentially two commandments: "judge not" and "tolerance" of what all Christian groups had earlier thought intolerable, especially with regard to sex.

In order to make this revolution plausible, the old ways had to be redefined. A group of Protestant leaders centered around

the Princeton Theological Seminary had earlier developed what they called Christian "Fundamentals" against the very liberal theology that would eventually lead to quite novel forms of faith and morals. They happily called themselves fundamentalists, thinking they could defend a kind of Mere Christianity, as C. S. Lewis later called his own efforts in this vein. But after the 1960s revolution, the term "fundamentalist" was used much more widely by those who were not part of the movement. It became—and still is today—intended to be a term of abuse, and today anyone who adheres to what were common faith and morals is very likely at some point to hear him or herself described as a fundamentalist.

This has also become an extremely useful stick to beat Catholics, "traditional" Catholics as we're now forced to say, as if the rich Catholic tradition of philosophy, theology, scripture studies, magisterial teaching, art, architecture, poetry, music, and liturgy counts for nothing. Primarily because of its sexual mores, the Catholic Church, too—at last in the perspective of popular culture and no small part of the media, the academy, the political system—is nothing other than a "medieval" holdover, which is to say that for purposes of public discourse Catholics can be dismissed in just the same way as the new national and international elite dismiss rednecks from the American South and traditional believers in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Southern Hemisphere generally.

It was not always so. I wrote my latest book *A Deeper Vision: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Ignatius Press) to document how utterly wrong that view is. At least for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century—and I'd argue in the papacies of St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI after the great disruption of the 1960s—the Church gave birth to and nourished a dazzling group of philosophers, theologians, novelists, poets, thinkers of all

kinds. And they were appreciated and taught at some of the most prestigious universities in the world. Current secular culture knows little of this because it cannot see over the Iron Curtain of sexual license that it has erected, as if real Christianity never got going until 1968. That is only to be expected. But it's quite sad that even few Catholics know much about this extraordinarily rich cultural period in their own tradition. Hence, my effort to offer this readable, accessible survey.

Let's be clear, the great Catholic tradition is not restricted merely to matters of sex or abstract ideas, important as both are. One of the telling characteristics that I recount in my book was how urgent Catholicism seemed to everyday life for many people in the twentieth century, sunk as they were in what seemed the inescapable and meaningless world of scientific materialism and a philosophical nihilism that was slowly undermining all traditions.

Jacques Maritain, for example, who some Catholics will know went on to become the most influential Catholic philosopher of the twentieth century, felt these twin threats in his very bones. In 1901, he and his future wife Raïssa (a Jewish refugee from Russia, later a poet and mystical writer) were walking in the Jardin des plantes in Paris. They were both studying science at the University of Paris, and the vision of the world that science presented was so depressing that they decided they would kill themselves if they couldn't find something more worthy to live for.

They did, almost by direct divine guidance, through a series of personal encounters with figures like Leon Bloy, Charles Péguy, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, and others. It's important to understand what Catholicism brought to people like the Maritains – and there were many such in the twentieth century – because several of the things they found most bleak about the scientific materialism of their day are still with us, if in a somewhat different form.

To begin with, what is a human person, that odd being that politicians, celebrities, media types claim we must "respect" and "accept," but with no notion as to why, other than the vestiges of what was once widespread Christian belief? The Judaeo-Christian values stemming from the very first pages of the Book of Genesis give us clear reasons why the person is something unique– namely that God made us in His own image and likeness, male and female. And as the Bible tells us later, knew us in the womb even before we were born. The human person, as Maritain and others argued has intrinsic dignity and worth–if we see how we are connected to the source of all goodness and truth. Without belief in that divine connection, as we now see in the disrespect shown to children in the womb, those near the end of life, and many vulnerable beings in between, the human person is just another animal to be managed for domestic purposes.

The public connection here is not accidental, and was evident quite early to the great modern Catholic philosophers and theologians as well. The human person made in the image and likeness of God has a mind that can understand the good and the true, and a freedom of the will that enables us to embrace and follow them both. The whole modern democratic order, as the Declaration of Independence asserted, depends on our recognizing that "men have been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights."

Atheist regimes, such as Communism, saw things quite differently; instead of dignity and respect towards every individual, they put all value in the collective, which very soon led to high body counts as people began to conflict with the implacable dictates of the Party. Something similar occurred with Fascism and Nazism. Those murderous movements found value in the *Volk* or "the people," and made the state the embodiment of all value. The very term "totalitarian" was invented by Benito Mussolini–and he did not mean it as a term of criticism but a claim for political totality: "everything

within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state." It was no surprise that he and Hitler sought to intimidate and marginalize one of the few institutions capable of standing up to the totalitarian state: the Catholic Church.

Communism and Fascism alike were reacting to what they regarded as the disorder of excessive individualism in the democracies—a problem, but not nearly as dangerous as the misguided remedies these movements proposed.

It was out of these modern disorders, which led to tens of millions of corpses in the Gulags, concentration camps, political prisons—not counting the wars to which they gave rise—that people like the Maritains developed notions such as Christian Democracy. Jacques was one of the major architects of CD parties, which were important in combating all forms of political tyranny, but especially Fascism and post-WWII Euro-Communism. He was also instrumental in writing the U. N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which—whatever the subsequent shortcomings of the U.N.—enshrined some common understandings of what human beings are and how they must be treated.

I mention all these real-world consequences of modern Catholic thought because they are an often-ignored dimension of the twentieth century, which cannot be properly understood without the role Catholicism played in responding to various crises in Western societies. As the great historian Christopher Dawson was perhaps the first to recognize, the West entered into a general cultural crisis in the twentieth century, and it needs the global remedy that only an institution like the Church can provide.

But it's also important for us today to realize that there is a vital and specific *content* to Catholicism without which our world is headed for renewed woes. Many people today misunderstand Pope Francis' emphasis on mercy, for example, as if it simply makes reflection on sin and evil irrelevant in a

fuzzy forgetfulness of the past. But as he's said in his recent book *The Name of God is Mercy:* "The Church *condemns* sin because it has to relay the *truth*, 'This is a sin.' But at the same time it embraces the sinner who *recognizes* himself as such, it welcomes him, it speaks to him of the infinite mercy of God." [emphases added]

His image of the Church as a kind of "field hospital" in an ongoing spiritual battleground has captured the world's attention. This is a useful image—if we understand it properly. And the way to understand it best is to familiarize ourselves with how some holy and brilliant modern Catholic people have tried to address our current difficulties utilizing the riches of the Catholic tradition. Without that developed knowledge and wisdom, the Church would be like a doctor with a good bedside manner who knows no medicine. He can hold your hand and comfort you, but he can't do what a real doctor is supposed to do: cure you.

We have tremendous resources in modern Catholicism that are being neglected, even as they are most needed in our troubled twenty-first century. We need to get to know some of our great brothers and sisters in the faith—not only the Maritains, but figures like Edith Stein, Joseph Pieper, Henri de Lubac, Christopher Dawson, Alasdair MacIntyre, Elizabeth Anscombe, Karol Wojtyla, Joseph Ratzinger, and many, many more. That's why I wrote my book. If we don't take advantage of the wisdom and insight they have to offer, then we risk becoming mere Catholic "Fundamentalists."

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