



A protester carries a placard Nov. 13, 2018, for a rally sponsored by Church Militant in Baltimore. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)



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May 30, 2025

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Catholic Fundamentalism in America, the new book by Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa, provides a much-needed framing of developments within the Catholic Church in the United States. I began my review of this book on [Wednesday](#) by examining the five characteristics of fundamentalism that Massa found in the famous "Boston Heresy case" and that he argues are found in subsequent iterations of Catholic fundamentalism.

Today, we'll conclude the review by looking at some of those subsequent iterations.

[Related: Jesuit author captures Catholic fundamentalism in Boston heresy case](#)

I was completely unfamiliar with the life of theologian Fr. Gommar DePauw, who led the first great protest against the changes to the Mass enacted by the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. If Jesuit Fr. Leonard Feeney had insisted that Pope Boniface VIII's decree *Unam Sanctam* contained the trans-historical claim that there was no salvation outside the church, DePauw vested Pope Pius V's *Quo Primum*, establishing the Roman Missal of 1570, that stood above history. Any attempt to reform those documents constituted error precisely because these texts were seen as irreformable.

At issue in DePauw's resistance to the new rite was not merely Latin and lace. The issue was authority. If the council fathers at Vatican II had undertaken a reform of the liturgy that was irreformable, then their actions were illegitimate.

DePauw questioned the authority of one ecumenical council, [Vatican II](#), to defend the authority of another, [Trent](#). He denounced not just the new Mass but the "damnable Robber Council of Vatican II."

If the struggles over the traditional Latin Mass were only about language, we would not have the troubles that continue to stalk the church. It is this unwillingness to confess the legitimacy of Vatican II that animates many advocates of the old rite and makes them dangerous.



A detail of the Gospel acclamation from a reproduction of the 1962 Roman Missal. Commonly known as the Tridentine Mass, the Mass of this missal is entirely in Latin. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Massa's chapter on the Eternal Word Television Network and its foundress, [Mother Angelica](#), touches on more familiar terrain, but he sees the same kind of fundamentalist characteristics at work in that ministry. Massa writes, in a fine passage that highlights his gifts as a writer:

And like those Protestant "Bible Believers" a century ago, the teaching "passed on" was both a-historical and committed to an older paradigm of Catholicism in which "faith" was both propositional and unnuanced. The Catechism could only be interpreted in one way (just like the Bible for Protestant fundamentalists). 'Doctrine' — in reality, a multi-valent term in Catholic theology — was presented as both objective (like gravity) and perspicacious (i.e., self-evidently clear).

Again, the problem is, for these fundamentalists, ultimately ecclesiological: "Mother Angelica and her soldiers at EWTN seem to have missed the central ecclesiological component of Catholic identity: *communio* ... the belief that the faithful were 'in communion' - with the Bishop of Rome, with their own bishop (the only authorized teacher in a Catholic diocese) and with each other." The essence of the Reformation faiths was that this communion was less important than the individual witness of the Christian to truths he or she perceived, but the irony was lost on Mother Angelica and her acolytes that their ecclesiology was more akin to Luther's than to that of the Council of Trent.

Massa introduces his chapter on the community in St. Marys, Kansas, home to an outpost of the schismatic Society of St. Pius X, with a reference to conservative writer Rod Dreher's 2017 book [The Benedict Option](#). Massa makes the important point that "St. Benedict had never intended his call for monastic retreat from the world to be seen as a model for all Christian believers."

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The community at St. Marys betrays some of the antisemitism that has shaped the motherhouse of Lefebvrisism in Écône, Switzerland, and Massa is right to document this. It is not merely the rituals of Vatican II, but the outreach to non-Catholics and non-Christians, that scandalized this so-called faithful remnant.

Subsequent chapters examine Christendom College, the [Church Militant media empire](#), and Eric Sammons, the current editor of Crisis magazine. In each case, Massa provides sufficient information about, and evidence against, the groups he examines to sustain the charge that they are Catholic fundamentalists. In each case, the fundamentalism is seen to highlight the degree to which these arch-Catholics have lost sight of foundational Catholic ecclesiology and practice.

Perhaps most importantly, Massa has shown why these fundamentalist characteristics so often end up producing people who are very angry at the world, very severe in their judgments, adopting, even relishing, the role of the fool in the parable who tries to remove the speck from his brother's eye while ignoring the plank in his own.

No book is without its problems and I have three complaints, each of which is somewhat unfair. First, Massa does not distinguish between the moral culpability of

the leaders of the groups and movements he surveys, and that of the followers. I can sympathize with those for whom the loss of the Latin Mass was a shock; DePauw, however, had been a peritus at Vatican II. He was a learned man. He should have helped his flock, not inflamed them.



Mother Angelica, the founder of the Eternal Word Television Network, speaks at the Call to Holiness conference in Detroit in 1997. (CNS/Michigan Catholic/Robert Delaney)

Similarly, Massa writes of EWTN: "Much of this might be dismissed as broadly played antics acted out in 'boffo' style for an uneducated section of a theologically unlettered viewing public, if it did not play such an important role in shaping the

views of so many Catholics who watch EWTN." That is all true, and demonstrates Massa's mastery of language, but the reference to the "unlettered" sounds snobbish.

This criticism is somewhat unfair because this is a book about history, not a guidebook for pastoral solicitude.

Second, minor details should always be fact-checked by an editor. No person can read their own copy after a certain point. For example, in treating the Lefebvrist's antisemitism, we read that the post-Vatican II rite removed the problematic Good Friday prayer "for the perfidious Jews" and that "the phrase 'let his blood be upon us and on our children' has been stricken entirely from gospel account of St. Matthew always read on that day."

The [phrase](#) remains in the Gospel account of the Passion according to St. Matthew but that account is never read on Good Friday. The Passion according to St. John is read on Good Friday and Matthew's account, including the difficult passage, is read every third year on Palm Sunday, in rotation with the other synoptic Gospels. This criticism is unfair because the fault lay with the editors at the publishing house for not catching this sort of thing.

My biggest complaint also contains a compliment. Massa divides the groups he surveys by using the taxonomy devised by H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic work *Christ and Culture*. DePauw, Mother Angelica's EWTN, and the community in St. Marys, Kansas, epitomize the "Christ against culture" model while Christendom College, Church Militant and Sammons are placed in the category "Christ the Transformer of Culture."

But Massa spends little time explaining why he divides them so, nor how this Niebuhrian taxonomy might highlight the ways the groups are different. His focus on five common characteristics emphasizes only their similarity. Why, for example, is a media empire like EWTN seen as "against culture" rather than "transformer of culture," while Church Militant is not?



The botafumeiro swings as it is unveiled during vespers at Christendom College's Christ the King Chapel in Front Royal, Va., Nov. 24, 2024. The botafumeiro is a silver-plated brass censer with an eight-sided Gothic cathedral cupola perched atop its bowl, and is inspired by its namesake used at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, since the Middle Ages. (OSV News/Courtesy of Christendom College/Agnes Blum)

I say this criticism is unfair because it is always wrong to fault an author for failing to write the book one wanted to read. Still, I think the study would have been richer had he spent more time with the Niebuhrian categories. And this points to the book's greatest strength. It is a case study in the downside of Catholic assimilation and, just so, a truly important contribution to the development of American Catholic historiography, a seminal book.

Many of us grew up learning that the "heroes" of the Catholic story in the U.S. were the Americanizers like Cardinal James Gibbons, Archbishop John Ireland, Bishop Denis O'Connell and, later, Cardinal George Mundelein, all of whom argued for

Catholics to embrace the ambient culture. The "villains" were those who resisted such assimilation, men like Cardinal William Henry O'Connell, Archbishop Michael Corrigan and Archbishop Frederick Katzer. Indeed, this narrative argued that Gibbons and his cohort were vindicated at Vatican II with its embrace of religious liberty and interreligious dialogue.

The truth is more complicated. Assimilation, like all major cultural changes, involves loss as well as gain.

Massa's examination of Catholic fundamentalism explains how distinct groups of conservative Catholics adopted essentially Protestant ways of thinking and of assigning values in ways that are deeply problematic. There are different, but similar, problems with Catholics assimilating to more liberal American ways, too. And there are many monographs needed to explore why resistance to the ambient culture sometimes seems correct, even heroic, in the rearview mirror, while other times it seems foolish or vicious.

In short, Massa has written the best kind of history, one that invites a dozen or more books to follow. At a time when our once-missionary church has now provided the universal church with the first U.S.-born pontiff, developing a greater aptitude for self-criticism can go a long way. Massa has started church historians on a vitally important path. His book is a major contribution to Catholic historiography.