Opinion
NCR Voices

The tympanum above the central entrance to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston (Wikimedia Commons/Farragutful)

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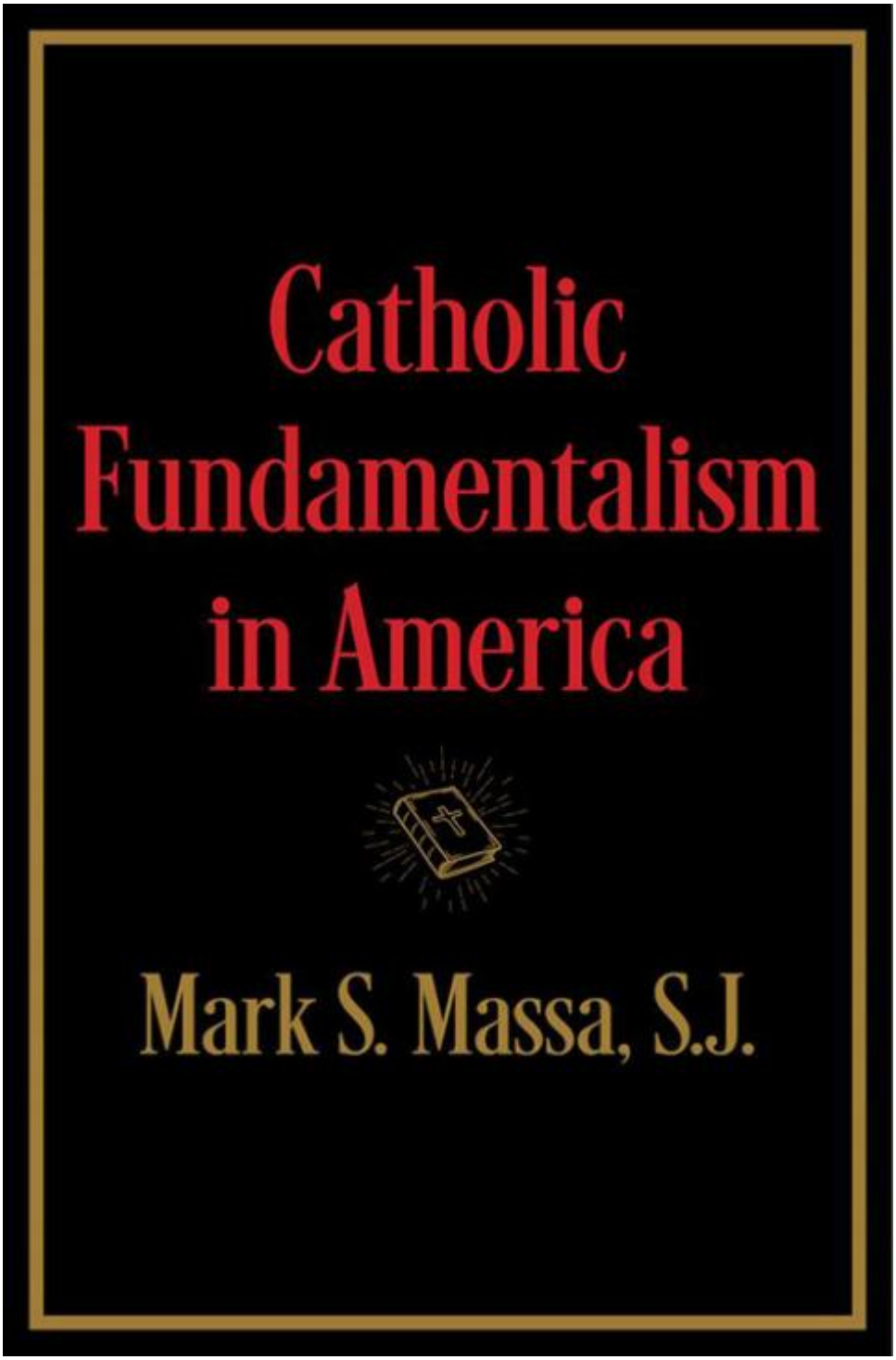
Fundamentalism is a quintessentially American form of religious expression, but one we associate almost exclusively with Protestantism. Its first iteration at the beginning of the 20th century began with the publication of 90 essays attacking liberal theology in 1910-15 and known as "The Fundamentals." The 1925 Scopes trial, immortalized in the movie "Inherit the Wind," brought the conflict between fundamentalism and modernity into the national spotlight.

With the rise of the Moral Majority in the 1980s as a key constituency of the modern Republican Party, fundamentalism's populist, countercultural, religious approach became a dominant force in American culture.

In a groundbreaking new book, Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa delves into the historiography of fundamentalism in order to examine American Catholic groups that exhibit the overall characteristics we associate with the Protestant original. For all the obvious differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, when they turn fundamentalist in outlook, the results can be remarkably similar.



The cover of *Catholic Fundamentalism in America* by Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa (Oxford University Press)

Catholic Fundamentalism in America begins by examining the "Boston heresy case" involving the St. Benedict Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The center was founded in 1940 to serve the needs of Catholic students at Harvard University. In

1943, Jesuit Fr. Leonard Feeney arrived and, with him, a series of controversies that created the template for Catholic fundamentalisms to follow.

Feeney clung to the slogan *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* — outside the church, no one is saved — but divorced the phrase from both its historical meaning and its contemporary ecclesial significance: The words didn't mean what Feeney thought they plainly meant.

In an irony of ironies, after clashing with authorities in Boston and in Rome, Feeney was excommunicated for his conduct, finding himself outside the church. He was reconciled before his death in 1978.

Massa distinguishes five characteristics of the Boston heresy case that would be identifiable in later examples of Catholic fundamentalism, all of which correspond in some way to Protestant fundamentalism.

First, in the Feeney case, there was a "strong *sectarian* impulse." (emphasis in original) Massa defines this impulse as "the movement within Christianity that holds that the church is a community of true believers, a precinct of righteousness within and yet in opposition to the unredeemed world of sin, pronouncing judgment upon it and calling it to repentance, but never entering into dialogue with it, much less collaboration on matters of common social, political, or religious concern."

Such sectarianism is profoundly "un-Catholic" insofar as Catholicism has always been the "big tent" religion, present throughout the world among saints and sinners both. Sectarianism truncates the universalist impulses that are hallmarks of Catholic Christianity and, indeed, make the word "catholic" meaningful.

The second characteristic Massa identifies is the tendency to cling to a previously held paradigm of Catholic identity that was fast being supplanted by different, and more current, understandings. In the Feeney case, it was the paradigm of the visible structures of Catholicism as the "perfect society" that was being abandoned.

Protestants were no longer heretics to be shunned, but "separated brethren." Just as importantly, with the demise of the urban Catholic ghetto, Protestants were now neighbors in the suburbs, "with whom they hosted backyard dinners and car-

pooled." In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council's focus on the dignity of the baptized highlighted the sacrament common to both Catholics and Protestants, rather than emphasizing the differing sacramental approaches to Eucharist.

Third, Feeney possessed an ahistorical understanding of the Catholic past. Unlike certain Protestant primitivists who argued that any rite or theology not found in the Scriptures could not be tolerated, Feeney's primitivism extended to the church's teaching itself.

"For Feeney, church teaching (and more importantly, the meaning of church teaching) *could not change*. The past was frozen in aspic," Massa writes (emphasis in original).

Feeney looked to the high Middle Ages as a golden period. Any developments since, precisely because they were developments, bore the suspicion of heresy. The Feeneyites could not grasp that a church that had assumed responsibility for the whole of culture in the 13th century could do, and needed to do, things that would be simply impossible and counterproductive in modern times, when the culture answered to many masters.

Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa (Boston College/Gary Wayne Gilbert)

The fourth attribute common to Catholic and Protestant versions of fundamentalism is that while they focused primarily on theological and doctrinal issues, and only tangentially on cultural or political concerns, they nonetheless invoked the political terminology of "liberals" versus "conservatives" to distinguish their position from

that of the mainstream. This was, for Catholics, quite new.

"Until the immediate postwar era, there were really only two terms Catholics used to describe fellow believers: 'faithful' and 'lapsed,' " Massa notes. "Lapsed Catholics weren't necessarily liberal in any American political sense. ... The idea that one could use the American political label of liberal to describe a group undermining the True Church was a startlingly new and arresting phenomenon."

Massa believes this development in nomenclature "paved the way for the gradual wedding of Catholic fundamentalism with conservative politics in the United States by the twenty-first century."

The fifth and final characteristic that Feeney and his followers displayed that aligned them with their Protestant forebears was "a rhetorical style marked by apocalyptic urgency." For Protestant fundamentalists, premillennialism and various strains of revivalist preaching paved the way for such apocalyptic urgency. In Feeney's case, it was "American Catholic complicity in bringing about the atomic age."

Here is an interesting, modern twist in the Feeney profile. He harkened back to the High Middle Ages in part to escape the nuclear insanity to which the world was rushing in the mid-20th century. You might say he was the first leader of the nuclear freeze movement.

The rest of the book is taken up with Massa's analysis of additional examples of Catholic fundamentalism, highlighting these five characteristics that mark the movements as fundamentalist. We'll finish this review on Friday.

Read this next: Not merely Latin and lace: New book chronicles iterations of Catholic fundamentalism