

## A Famine in the Land

Down the street from me, there's a Hispanic fundamentalist church. There are a lot of them in West Michigan, where the upper class is Dutch and the lower class Hispanic. It has big homemade signs on it: "*Gran campaña de fe*"—"Great faith crusade"; "*Salvación y sanidad*"—"Salvation and healing"; "*Grandes milagros*"—"Great miracles."

You don't have to go into this church to know what goes on there; just stand under the windows on a summer evening. The enthusiasm of the preacher and the worshipers carries. You don't have to understand much Spanish, either. The name of Jesus occurs frequently, and shouts of "Gloria!" The message is one of power and authority, about a Name before which demons flee.

I drive by this church on my way to Sunday Mass. A man is going in to service, a poor man, wearing his Sunday best as only a poor man can. He carries a fat Bible under his arm, and his broad brown face glows with faith, hope, confidence, and self-respect.

Surely this man, I think, or his parents or grandparents, used to be Catholic. Why did he leave? There's *salvación y sanidad* in the Catholic Church too, isn't there? Why does he need to go to the fundamentalists?

Then I come to my little parish church. Very few bother to put on their Sunday best here. They look defeated, bored, spectators at a ritual that means little in their weekday lives. The insipid music presents a begging God, a wan ideal of vague goodness, a benevolent abstraction. Even the prayers seem more addressed to ourselves than to a God who might well hear and answer them.

The priest means well, but he offers little comfort. What wisdom he has is better said in books on the supermarket racks by fashionable psychologists. At least there it's unencumbered by the futile attempt to reconcile it with Christianity. His promises are modest, but then he doesn't want to disappoint. Certainly he promises no *grandes milagros*.

But the greatest miracle of all is going on before our eyes. The Maker of the universe here makes himself our food. He is here to be beseeched, to hear and answer prayer, to give the daily bread that now he makes his own body and blood. I look in vain for more than dutiful attendance around me.

I wish I could say I saw some miraculous transformation in my fellow parishioners. But I don't. They hurry out to resume their weekends. If they face some moral choice this week, nothing they've heard today will be able to compete with the TV networks in deciding what they'll do. If they face suffering, loss, doubt, or fear, nothing they've heard today will sustain them. Most of them must struggle to maintain some minimal level of virtue—considering what they have to go on, maybe that is a miracle.

They are heroically faithful, but they are starving. In the midst of God's Church, they are starving for his Word. As Amos prophesied, "Behold, the days are coming . . . when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (Am 8:11). Exhortations to doing good and cuddly sentiments about good will do not slake that thirst or feed that hunger. Even the grace of the sacraments is of no avail if there is not

the faith to accept it and make use of it. And in so many parishes it lies useless. No wonder the poor go where they can hear the Good News preached, perhaps in a *gran campaña de fe*.

On the television that evening, an evangelist, reviewing the evils of the world, attacks the Catholic Church. Waving his Bible and mopping his forehead, he proclaims that the Catholic Church is a manifestation of the Antichrist of the Last Days. He points to 2 Timothy 3:1-5: "In the last days there will come . . . men . . . holding the form of religion but denying the power of it." This is the Roman Church, he says, where they claim to be Christian but refuse to preach salvation, where they are embarrassed by miracles, where they talk constantly about doing good and ignore the promises of God.

He's wrong, I think; but then I'm an educated man. I've read the books about the saints that sit on the back shelves of Catholic libraries and bookstores, neglected in favor of psychological self-help and amateur politics. I know that the Church Fathers and the great Catholic missionaries preached like that Hispanic evangelist, that demons fled at their words, and healing, repentance, and salvation entered in.

But some people are more impatient; they ask, "What have you done for me lately?" It won't do any good to compose "Catholic answers to fundamentalism" if we don't answer them. When a fundamentalist on television or at the *iglesia* down the block accuses the Church of their parents of "holding the form of religion but denying the power of it," they believe him.

What are we doing to prove him wrong?