

Theological rumblings

LESLIE RUMBLE MSC

IN 1928, AS SYDNEY CATHOLICS PREPARED to host their international Eucharistic congress, an enquirer approached a priest at the cathedral with a puzzling question: 'What is a eucalyptus congress?' A 'eucalyptus' congress? – the Eucharistic congress organiser knew he must do something about public ignorance. So he bought time on one of the new radio stations then being set up and looked around for someone to run an information program. The man he chose, just back from theological studies in Rome, had been ordained four years earlier as a priest in the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSCs). His name was Dr Leslie Rumble and in time he became the best-known priest in Australia.

For 40 years every Sunday evening, Dr Rumble's 'Question Box' would answer listeners' queries with humour, clarity and doctrinal rigour. Dr Rumble was a confident, convinced spokesman for the one church he believed Christ had commissioned to teach his truth. Interstate Catholic papers carried his material to those outside the range of the radio signal. Books of his questions and answers sold seven million copies, principally in the USA.

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Leslie Rumble was well seasoned to listen sympathetically to questions about Catholicism. His parents were English migrants who had given him a nominal Anglicanism, although his father, a civil engineer, knew enough Latin and Greek to argue visiting ministers out of the home. Once he took the ten-years-old Leslie to a Catholic Benediction service and the candles and incense stayed at the back of the lad's mind. Five years later, with no warning, the parents announced that they were all to become Catholics; but Leslie gave this up after two years. Searching and asking questions, he eventually returned to the Catholic church, where he began to pray that he might become a priest. An Irish parish priest sent him off to the MSC novitiate.

It was a hard apprenticeship, for he had left school at the age of 14. Not only that – while he was in the novitiate his parents gave religion away again and became non-believers. For ten years his father peppered him with letters, arguing the case for rationalism. Seeking help against his father's arguments, Leslie asked so many questions that one of the seminary lecturers suspected that he too was losing the faith. Then, just before his ordination, came a letter saying that the family had returned to the church. For the rest of her life his mother would pray, 'Dear Jesus, don't let any of my little ones be missing in heaven.'

Dr Rumble's family knowledge of unbelief conditioned him to play fair with questioners. He read out their letters and always treated them as honest enquirers. He used plain language and short sentences, avoiding rhetoric or showmanship. Even his voice, which someone said was like worn sandpaper, added to the effect of common sense and calm rationality. His major source was the Bible, which he treated as the book of the church: when anyone asked what

the church taught about something, he quoted the Bible. As well, he liked to bring in Protestant authorities to support his case. Interviewing him, a journalist was surprised to find so many Protestant authors on his shelves. (The shelves had been made by the theologian himself, from fruit boxes; just as he also soled and heeled his own shoes. The simplicity a superior had noted in him as a novice stayed with him to the end.)

Advancing glaucoma forced his retirement in 1968. At 76, he might have expected a life of ease; but his superior asked him to collate a final Q&A book, to cover the new questions troubling the Vatican II era. Despite bad health, he obeyed; and the book, *Questions People Ask*, came out in 1972.

Today it reads like a temperature chart of the church after Vatican II. By contrast with his earlier books, questions from Catholics predominate and the old controversialist's teeth often seem to be on edge – particularly when he is asked about Hans Kung, whom he thought was a show pony; or the emergent Catholic charismatic movement; or Catholic rejection of the papal ban on contraception.

In 1975, the year he died, he wrote to a friend that the 'progressives' now had the numbers in the church. 'The disapproving minority can only abstain from adopting their ways, letting them learn the hard way, the folly of their experiments. To my mind most of their experiments, ecumenical or otherwise, involve a watering down of our faith, a devaluing of our Catholic currency.' It was time to go.