THE TURBULENT YEARS OF DOCTOR RUMBLE

ALAN GILL

HORTLY BEFORE the 1928 International Eucharistic Congress in Sydney, someone called at St Mary's Cathedral and asked what a 'eucalyptus congress' was. As a result, congress organisers arranged for a priest, then little known, to appear on radio station 2UE and explain what the congress was all about. In this way was launched the astonishing public career of Dr Leslie Rumble, the world's first regular priest-broadcaster, author, and for nearly half a century the English-speaking world's most outspoken apologist for the Roman Catholic faith.

Dr Rumble, who was 83, died last Sunday. Overseas, he was Australia's best known Catholic cleric. He shunned personal publicity yet was, in his heyday, as much of an international figure as Archbishop Daniel Mannix, with whom he once clashed.

At Dr Rumble's Requiem Mass on Tuesday, Father E. J. Cuskelly, superior general of his order, who is visiting Australia, confessed that he told colleagues in Rome: 'I belong to the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart: you know—Dr Rumble's crowd'.

That early radio program, intended to run four weeks, was turned into a Question Box (its actual title) which lasted four years. It was then transferred to the newly established 2SM—owned by the Sydney archdiocese—where it continued for a further 36 years.

Dr Rumble's *Radio Replies* were re-printed and slightlyexpanded in Church newspapers and in four book versions (the latest issued only two years ago) which achieved the staggering circulation of more than seven million copies.

There were no 'separated brethren' in the era in which he rose to fame. Protestantism

(linked with freemasonry and modernism) was a 'damnable heresy'. Catholic mayors were told from the pulpit that they had committed mortal sin by attending non-Catholic civic services, and Jesuit theologians pondered whether the soul of a 'good Hindu' could achieve eternal salvation.

In return, Protestant controversialists depicted the Roman Catholic Church as a neofascist global conspiracy, a 'scarlet woman,' whose cathedrals (including St Mary's) were built on the proceeds of gambling and donations from brewers.

Question Box on 2SM was answered by The Protestant Faith on 2CH (owned by the NSW Council of Churches). The two programs shared, astonishingly, the same transmitter and technical staff.

Archdeacon T.C. Hammond, a low church Anglican, was chosen to be Dr Rumble's radio adversary. He called the Roman Church 'the great whore'.

The Rev Vernon Turner, director of the Christian Broadcasting Association and a veteran broadcaster on 2CH, told me: 'The two programs were put out at different times because 2CH listeners liked to hear Dr Rumble and vice-versa. It was like a boxing match and was great fun.'

Mr Turner, a Presbyterian minister, said most Protestantsconsidered Dr Rumble the more gifted of the two men:

I regard him as the outstanding apologist for the Roman Catholic Church as it was before Vatican II, when everything was seen in black and white. His failure was an inability to break away, in later years, from the rigid system which had spelt out with all the delicacy of a bulldozer that Rome was always right and the repository of all truth.

Dr Rumble was born in Sydney of low church Anglican parents and attended what he later described as an 'anti-Catholic' State school. He was commended by a teacher for writing a poem which went:

There was a priest, a wretched beast, quite subject to the Pope.

He'd cast his spell and threaten hell, but never would use soap.

While a teenager his parents became Catholics but he refused to follow their example. (According to one version of this event, his parents had him re-baptised and re-confirmed against his will, but he refused to accept his own 'forced conversion' as valid.)

Three years later he changed his mind and moreover announced his intention to become a priest. In the meantime, his parents reverted to Anglicanism, at which point he took it upon himself to re-convert them. He successfully accomplished this task shortly before his ordination in 1924.

For most of his years as a writer and broadcaster, he also served as the first official press spokesman for the Sydney archdiocese. He never shirked a question, but adopted a hairsplitting approach which both exasperated and delighted friend and foe alike.

He defended State lotteries and the legalisation of poker machines, and criticised the 'puritan element' as well as the 'Godless secularism' of Australian society.

In later years many of the causes which he had eloquently championed were downgraded or abandoned. These included Catholic censorship (the notorious *Index of Forbidden Books*) and the view that supremacy of conscience was a Protestant 'error'.

In his final book, *Questions People Ask*, he attempted to reconcile declarations of the 2nd Vatican Council (notably that on authority, conscience and religious liberty) with his own apparently contradictory viewpoints. In the book he adopted occasional casuistry that was 'Rumbleism' at its best.

Dr Rumble had a marked sense of humour and appeared to enjoy argument for argument's sake. Radio listeners sometimes doubted



Dr Leslie Rumble MSC, Australia's Radio Priest, Defender of teh Catholic Faith

whether some of his theological judgments were intended seriously.

A horse-racing enthusiast who liked the occasional flutter (a pursuit which his opponents regarded as a typically Romish vice), he gave the following answer to a questioner who wished to know if it was a sin for the jockey to pull a horse in a race.

His explanation: 'You can't pull him ... but you don't have to push, don't have to ride him out. If you don't want to extend him fully, well and good. A jockey is entitled to ride to instructions, an owner to set a goal and a trainer to make his preparation for the race he has in mind'.

Another popular story concerns the time that a religious column by Dr Rumble, intended for the now defunct *Tasmanian Catholic Standard*, appeared in the sports section of the *Hobart Mercury*. Both journals were printed in the same building, and galleys of type had been wrongly sorted. Dr Rumble greatly enjoyed the unexpected extra publicity, but his opponents viewed the affair as a sly plot to promote the faith.

Following his retirement from public life, Dr Rumble became a 'recluse' (his own word) in the tiny room in the Kensington monastery where he had lived throughout his entire priestly life. The floor was bare and the shelves—made by Dr Rumble from timber boxes—were cluttered with books. A naked light provided meagre illumination.

He sewed buttons on the soutanes of other priests in the monastery and devised numerous gadgets to assist elderly members of the community to get about.

He hated the telephone and (partly because of increasing deafness and blindness) carried

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out all contacts with the outside world—including me—through other priests and sometimes bishops, who became willing messengers for an aging patriarch.

Dr Rumble was a kindly and good-natured man who, it was said, never once lost his temper and was invariably charitable towards his opponents.

In today's changed ecclesiastical climate, he came to be regarded, even within his own denomination, as an anachronism.

If he was unhappy with the present trends within the Church, he rarely showed it, but an indication of his views may be gained from an interview in the *Catholic Weekly* on the occasion of the golden jubilee of his ordination in 1974. In the interview, he stated:

Our primary duty is to make clear the authoritative teachings of the Catholic religion... Claiming that the recent Vatican Council was essentially a pastoral and not a dogmatic one, many Catholic writers have felt free to publish all kinds of speculations with no claim to be official Catholic teaching, yet which have too easily impressed not a few teachers desirous of being up to date.

His final attack—the very last Rumbleism—was a bitter onslaught on the modern neopentecostal (charismatic) movement, which he

condemned as a 'corybantic' religion and 'eccentric cult'. (Corybant, he explained, was a mythical attendant of Cybele, who attended the goddess with wild dances and music as she wandered by torchlight over the mountains.)

By an unhappy coincidence his attack, published in Catholic newspapers throughout the world, appeared a few days before an audience—thus implying Papal approval—given by Pope Paul VI to members of a charismatic delegation from Europe, the United States and Australia. Dr Rumble countered that the "audience" was not a private Papal audience in the normally accepted sense of the word, but a low-key 'bacciamento' (ring-kissing) ceremony deliberately intended to show the Pope's hesitance if not actual displeasure.

Both this and previous controversies were forgotten at Dr Rumble's Requiem Mass in St Mary's Cathedral. Radio 2CH, once the rallying point for anti-Rumble forces, paid the departed priest glowing tribute in several hourly bulletins and announced details of the funeral for listeners wishing to attend.

By contrast, his death was virtually ignored by 2SM, now a pop station which (despite ecclesiastical ownership) displays little interest in either religion or the priest-with-microphone who was undoubtedly its most famous son.

-Published in the Sydney Morning Herald 'Weekend Magazine', Saturday, Nov 15, 1975.

...to be witnesses and heralds of the Gospel, after the example of Jesus Christ. This manner of acting is also recommended to us by St. Peter the Apostle, when he invites us to give an account and provide reasons, 'for the hope that is in you' (1 Pt 3:15). The Spirit is indicating ways that our Christian communities can embark on a new season of witnessing to our faith and devise new forms of response (apo-logia) to those who ask the logos, that is, the reasons for our faith. [...] As Christians, we are to learn a new manner of responding in 'gentleness and reverence and a clear conscience' (1 Pt 3:15, 16) with the gentle strength which comes from union with Christ in the Spirit and with the conviction that our goal is a personal encounter with God the Father in his Kingdom.

—Lineamenta for the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelisation (2012).

This morning we are doing a rather unusual thing. We are celebrating in this great cathedral with very public ceremony the memorial service of a man who abhorred attention given to him personally, who lived most of his life in a monastery room apart from the crowds. This is a rather unusual thing, but then, Dr Rumble was a rather unusual man, a special man...

In tributes made to him last year at his golden jubilee of priest-hood, often this quote was made: 'I have fought the good fight to the end, I have run the race to the finish, I have kept the faith'. It is a text which so obviously fitted his life and work. He was a man who had great qualities of heart and mind. To the public eye the qualities of his mind were perhaps more in evidence—radio, writings, numerous works characterised by clarity, conciseness, and a deep, extensive knowledge. But we who loved with him were probably more conscious of the qualities of heart. He was a kind and gentle man—a simple man as great men are always simple...

His was a fighting for truth, to explain, instruct in truth a kind of apologetics that still has a place in the Church of today, because it is that unwearying search for truth, and its clear expression—a truth that issues into life. In 1918He had a mind that loved an argument in order to arrive at truth, and a heart that accepted people, never permitting any personal animosity, even towards those whose ideas he could not accept...

Last year, at his jubilee, Dr Rumble summed up his own life: 'I have worked to bring the inestimable grace of the Catholic faith, in all its integrity, into the lives of as many others as possible, and to intensify it in those already blessed by it.'

—From the panegyric preached by Fr James Cuskelly MSC. (With thanks to James Littleton MSC, Editor: *Defender of the Catholic Faith. Australia's Radio Priest: Dr Leslie Rumble MSC*. Published by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, 2011.)