

Beyond the 'liberal' and 'conservative' divide



Dear Father Kerper: For a long time my parish had a pastor who was very liberal. Now we have a priest who is very conservative. It seems that the Church now has two internal denominations: liberal Catholics on the left and conservative Catholics on the right. Some friends have even switched parishes when they thought the priest was too liberal or too conservative. How am I supposed to react to the big differences I see among priests today?

Your comments and question unmask a deep wound within today's Catholic Church, namely the gradual formation of what appears to be permanent factions.

This tendency has worsened as Catholics apply labels like "liberal" and "conservative" or "left" and "right" to their priests. These terms, which come from politics, never accurately describe the Church.

Christ, after all, is neither liberal nor conservative. Therefore priests, who act *in persona Christi*, must imitate Christ by rising above profane political terms and categories.

Let's study the four terms you mentioned: liberal, conservative, left and right.

Liberal comes from a set of Latin words that mean "free," especially independence from domination by other people.

When liberalism assumed its political form in the

18th century, it favored competitive markets, free trade among nations, limited state power and unrestricted economic innovation. Liberals also favored limited democracy as opposed to hereditary forms of power; and promoted the separation of state and religion.

Almost all of America's Founding Fathers were "classical liberals," steeped in the liberal thought of the 17th and 18th centuries. This included non-Christian deism and even a hint of atheism.

Conservatives, by contrast, sought to "conserve" long-established forms of government, social hierarchies, some type of monarchy and a state-supported church. They viewed social change with much caution, especially the shift from farming communities to big cities.

This liberal-conservative divide became sharpest in Great Britain. Beginning in the first half of the 19th century, the British produced two parties: one known as the Liberal Party and the other as the Conservative Party. For about 150 years,

these two parties vigorously opposed one another and embodied the pure classical forms of liberalism and conservatism.

Now let's look at the terms "left and right." These emerged after the French Revolution of 1789. At first, they simply described the seating arrangement in France's National Assembly, the rough equivalent of our House of Representatives.

Those sitting on the *left* called for the destruction of the old regime and the suppression of established religion, especially Catholicism.

The "leftists" also called for radical social change as embodied in their slogan: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

By contrast, those on the *right* favored monarchy, the Church and at least the partial restoration of the "old regime."

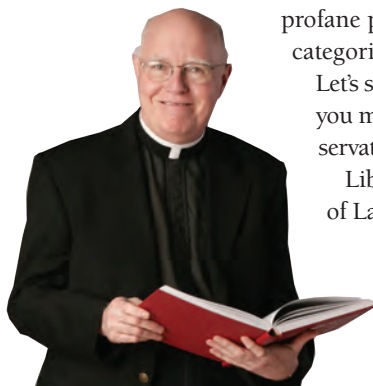
This left/right seating arrangement signaled a trend toward *permanent factions*, entities we now call *political parties*.

This brief historical review of the words liberal/conservative and left/right provides two good reasons for avoiding them when discussing the Church.

First, their meanings constantly change and even become reversed.

For example, some conservatives, especially in Europe, now support legalized abortion, same-sex unions, restricted monarchy and many elements the welfare state. Meanwhile, many liberals now support economic policies promoted by President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, two now-deceased world leaders known for their conservatism. In fact, most European parties that use the word "Liberal" are actually "conservative" in American usage. And the term "neoliberalism," used by the left, actually refers to what Americans would call ultra-conservative economic policy.

Second, when Catholics habitually apply these slippery labels to priests and one another they contaminate the Church with a dangerous "secular mindset" primarily concerned with worldly power. This has nothing to do with faith. As a result, Catholics begin to view one another *primarily* as liber-



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“In essentials, however, every priest is the same as every other priest. Each serves as a living icon of the One True Priest, Jesus Christ, who is neither liberal nor conservative.”

als or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans, hypocrites or fellow believers. This elevation of political concerns over the spiritual eventually causes division and obstructs the Church’s mission,

How, then, can Catholics resolve differences in a non-political, non-factional way?

We find an excellent example in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15. Here St. Luke describes what appears to be a clash between liberals and conservatives.

Here’s what happened.

For quite some time, the earliest Christians debated a hot issue: Must non-Jewish people become Jewish in order to receive baptism?

One group, Pharisees who had accepted Christ, said yes. They insisted that male converts be circumcised and keep all the Torah laws, including the dietary ones.

Another group led by St. Paul said no, arguing that the Torah did not apply to Gentiles.

Following today’s understandings of liberal and conservative, we would certainly regard the Pharisees as *conservatives* and St. Paul and his allies as *liberals*. But this makes no sense. Neither side had any knowledge of those two words. Moreover, neither side wanted to exert brute power over the other; and neither group wanted to win the debate just for the sake of winning. Instead, everyone prayed and opened themselves to the Holy Spirit, who gently guided them to the proper solution based on God’s wisdom and truth. The bitter debate ended in peace *without the formation* of factions.

Catholics who live in democracies naturally import divisive political habits into church life. As such, some Catholics misidentify priests as liberals or conservatives based on personality, style, background and different focal points in preaching.

For example, priests who seem reserved, reverent and focused on standard Catholic points, such as the Eucharist, may get tagged as “conservatives.” Whereas priests who dress more informally, favor contemporary music, speak about justice and overlook minor rules, may be labeled as “liberals.”

Every priest, of course, is absolutely unique in his humanity, having emerged from a specific family, work experiences, schooling and even, perhaps, political involvement.

In *essentials*, however, every priest is the same as every other priest. Each serves as a living icon of the One True Priest, Jesus Christ, who is neither liberal nor conservative.

I share your concern about the appearance of “too liberal” and “too conservative” among priests. As an antidote, I suggest gazing upon the *invisible sacramental character* of every priest you see. Then you will rediscover the Church that is truly “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” We need no other labels. ■



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THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED.

- RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT