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**Columnists**

**True Catholics and phony Catholics**

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
 Some Catholics become very uncomfortable and even annoyed when terms like "liberal" and "conservative" or "left-wing" and "right-wing" are used to describe individuals and points of view within the Church.

They object for one — or both — of two reasons. Either they deny that differences of this sort exist in the Catholic Church or they resent the implications that one side is good while the other side is bad.

As you can deduce, those Catholics who object to the use of liberal-conservative/left-right terminology are almost always conservative themselves. Why is that the case?

Conservatives are people who literally want to "conserve" the good that we have achieved and now enjoy. They generally oppose change because they are happy with the way things are.

Given the same set of doubtful or ambiguous circumstances, liberals favor change over stability and freedom over order. Liberals are people who believe that things could be better than they are.

These tendencies — liberal and conservative — exist in every walk of life. Religion is no exception.

Liberals and conservatives exist even in the Soviet Union — seemingly the most monolithic of societies and political regimes. The *New York Times* carried a recent op-ed piece (May 21, 1988) by a sociologist who used to conduct polls for *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, and other Soviet newspapers. It was entitled, "Why Soviet conservatives Fight Reform."

What the author says about tensions within the Soviet Union almost exactly parallel tensions inside the United States, American corporations, or the Catholic Church.

The author, Professor Vladimir Shlapentokh of Michigan State University, challenges the usual view that tensions within the Soviet hierarchy today are reducible to personal rivalries among Politburo members and to the self-serving interests of other groups.

There is something more fundamental at issue. The conservatives who oppose Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms are acting like conservatives always act.

For these conservatives, the Soviet Union, despite its terrible flaws, has been able to achieve military parity with the West and to guarantee a standard of living that is much higher than those in most countries. In the conservative's view, Gorbachev's new spirit of glas-

**Essays in Theology**

nost is undermining discipline. If people can now question and criticize those in economic authority, there will be a corresponding deterioration of economic performance. Workers will stop doing what their managers tell them to do. And if the Communist Party can be criticized and challenged, social order will break down.

Conservatives maintain that by publicizing various social problems like drugs and prostitution, the advocates of reform have only acted to make these evils "normal," and have thereby encouraged young people to embrace them.

Sound familiar? Of course, it does!

There are Catholics who oppose the reforms and renewal inspired by the Second Vatican Council because they maintain that these are leading to a general breakdown of discipline in the Church. If Catholics are encouraged to think for themselves and even to raise questions about papal teaching, the moral order will inevitably fall apart. And by encouraging open discussion of the faults and failings of the Church, the conservative argues, we are sending people, especially younger Catholics, a dangerous message that what can be openly discussed can also be openly practiced.

If the existence of liberal-conservative/left-right tendencies in all walks of life is self-evident, why do some Catholics resist acknowledging their existence in the Church itself?

I offer a guess.  
 First, to admit that sharp differences of opinion can coexist in the Church is to admit that there is more than one orthodox way to understand and express our Catholic faith.

Secondly, the use of liberal-conservative/left-right language supplants the only real distinction such Catholics regard as legitimate; namely, the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy.

In other words, the only differences are between true Catholics and phony Catholics.

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**Paul writes of a reluctant servant**

By Cindy Bassett

A.D. 60  
 Dear Philemon,  
 We have not seen each other for a long time. And yet, I am certain that you are doing much good for the Church in Colosse. You might wonder how I know. Well, I have seen the result of your work right here in Rome.

You see, my friend, it is our job as Christians to share the good news of Jesus with everyone. But it is God who takes the small seeds we plant and helps them grow. Your own servant, Onesimus, has become a follower of Jesus Christ.

I suppose that as you read these words, you are probably thinking that Onesimus is a most unlikely candidate for the truth. Let me tell you of the circumstances of our meeting and you can decide for yourself if God was at work in this situation.

It is true that Onesimus was not a very good servant in your household. He wanted his freedom so badly that he stole from you — something which he soon regretted. Because of his sin, Onesimus became a runaway. He tried to flee as far away from you as possible. By the time he reached Rome, he had been beaten by scoundrels, and all of the money he had stolen from you was gone. Onesimus had lost everything except perhaps that one tiny seed you had planted about the saving love of Jesus.

When Onesimus showed up suddenly on my doorstep in Rome, I knew nothing of his past. I could only see that something was troubling him, so I decided to take him in as a servant. Onesimus has proven himself to be a trustworthy and faithful servant — qualities that were indeed lacking in him before.

And why? My meeting with your servant was no chance encounter. You and I both know that even when all hope seems gone, God is still with us and working in our lives. For it

**The Bible Corner**

is Christ who chooses us first. No one, not even a runaway thief, is beyond Christ's forgiveness. All of us are the same before Christ, and are saved by trusting Him. While Onesimus served in your household, he heard you teach about the love of Jesus.

Now that Onesimus is a Christian, it is his intention to return to you and pay back the money he has stolen. If you feel that he still owes you something, I will gladly pay his debt. The debt of his sin has already been paid for by Jesus Christ.

There is something else that happens to the small seed of Christ's love that is planted in each of our hearts. In order for it to keep growing, it must be shared with others.

If you are willing, Onesimus would like to take to the streets again; not as a runaway this time, but as a Christian witness. Rome is a hiding place for runaways, and Onesimus feels that he can help many of them. I think that he will prove to be a very effective witness.

It's amazing, isn't it Philemon? One small seed just keeps on growing! Christ's blessings on everyone in Colosse.

In Jesus, Paul

Scripture reference: Philemon.

**Meditation:** "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35).