

Is liberal Catholicism exhausted?

An assertion is not the same as an argument. An assertion is simply an opinion unsupported by reasoning and evidence.

One assertion that has been making the rounds in recent months is that "liberal Catholicism is exhausted." (The assertion is not unrelated to another, rooted in the prejudice of ageism, that the leaders of liberal Catholicism are a dwindling and aging group of "elitists" whose time has passed.)

The first difficulty with the assertion is that liberal Catholicism is never defined. Second, we are not told what specifically has been "exhausted." And third, no clear alternative is offered.

Forty years ago Robert D. Cross, then a professor at Swarthmore College and later its president, published *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America*.

Cross identified liberal Catholicism, both in Europe and the United States, with an openness to truth, wherever its path might lead, and a readiness to engage modern society and modern culture. He pointed out that its leaders included high-ranking members of the hierarchy (Cardinals John Henry Newman and James Gibbons, and Archbishop John Ireland, for example).

He argued that "on no point were the liberal and conservative factions within American Catholicism more at odds than on the proper policy for the Church to



essays in theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

adopt towards Protestants." Liberals favored mutually respectful dialogue; conservatives, the course of separation and defensiveness.

Cross's book appeared less than four years before the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Had he been able to continue his historical survey through the council, he would have found that the central values he identified with liberal Catholicism were carried forward in the documents of the council itself.

If that is indeed the case, a series of questions might usefully be put to those who have been asserting that (an undefined) liberal Catholicism has lapsed somehow into a state of "exhaustion."

1. The liberal majority at the Second Vatican Council held that the church is primarily a mystery ("a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God," in the words of Pope Paul VI) rather than a hierarchical institution, as the conservative

minority insisted. If liberal Catholicism is indeed "exhausted," are we to conclude that the church is no longer to be understood primarily in sacramental rather than institutional categories?

2. The liberal majority at the council held that the church is the whole "People of God," and not just the hierarchy or the clergy. If that is also an "exhausted" idea, is "the Church" once again to be equated with the hierarchy, with the rest of the community viewed as dutiful followers of its directives and passive recipients of its spiritual ministrations?

3. The liberal majority at Vatican II held that the laity directly participate in the mission of the church rather than simply in the apostolate of the hierarchy. Are the laity to be viewed once again as merely instruments of the hierarchy?

4. The liberal majority at the council also made it clear that there are not two separate and distinct realms of the apostolate, the temporal and the sacral, with the former being the special responsibility of the laity and the latter the exclusive responsibility of the hierarchy. According to the liberal Catholicism reflected in the conciliar documents, the laity have as much responsibility for the internal life of the church as they do for temporal affairs outside the church, and members of the hierarchy, in their turn, also have an important role to play in providing moral leadership in the political order alongside

the laity. Has the force of such ideas been "exhausted"?

5. The liberal majority at the Second Vatican Council taught that the social apostolate is an integral part of the mission of the church, alongside its teaching, preaching and sacramental worship. If liberal Catholicism is truly "exhausted," are we to conclude that none of the church's work on behalf of social justice, human rights and peace is essential to its evangelizing mission? Is evangelization once again apolitical, as the 19th-century European and early 20th-century American conservatives insisted?

6. The liberal majority at Vatican II taught that the church is larger than the Catholic Church, that it includes the Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and separated non-Orthodox Eastern churches as well. If liberal Catholicism is "exhausted," are we once again to equate "the Church" with the Catholic Church alone?

7. Finally, the liberal majority at Vatican II mandated that the church's entire liturgical life be renewed and reformed to make it more intelligible and, therefore, more accessible to all. Has the liturgical renewal also been "exhausted"?

If none of the above, what possible meaning can we place on the assertion that "liberal Catholicism is exhausted?"

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