

# COLUMNISTS

## Divisions within liberal Catholicism

This week all I'm doing in this column is to refer readers to another column: Peter Steinfels' piece in the Nov. 19, 1999, issue of *Commonweal* entitled "Reinventing Liberal Catholicism: Between powerful enemies and dubious allies." The article is one of the best I have read, and I recommend that everyone read it.

The most interesting points, to my mind, highlight divergences between progressive Catholics (liberals in Steinfels' terms) and what he calls the Catholic left. Ordinarily I assume that the majority of American Catholics are most accurately classified as moderately progressive when it comes to Catholicism.

Five characteristics identified in the article as characterizing such progressive Catholics in the United States are: (1) Rather than simply condemning everything modern as anti-Catholic, preferring to make distinctions between good and bad aspects of modern culture; (2) Instead of denying or fearing change, accepting change as a normal condition of life and faith; (3) Having confidence in truth such that free and open discussion is sufficient to conquer error without repression of new ideas; (4) Letting the distinct spheres of human activity develop on their own and freely, whether talking about politics, religion, science, art or literature; (5) Connecting the internal reform of the church to efforts to evangelize and reform culture.

Steinfels characterizes the style of progressive Catholicism as stressing dialogue, mediation, compromise and



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gradualism. Its basic spirituality has been incarnational more than counter-cultural, grounded in the common lay experience of work, family and politics more than radical or extreme movements elsewhere in the church.

In contrast, Steinfels characterizes the style of the Catholic left as evangelical: measuring society, culture and the church starkly against Gospel standards and trying to repair the resulting contrast with little attention to compromise, incrementalism, or extended analysis and debate. While the Catholic left is seen as an offspring of liberal Catholicism, it has adopted more of the dramatic appeals of the 1960s and is linked to Third World liberation movements.

According to Steinfels and his sources, the Catholic left has become increasingly marginalized from the rest of the church. It has become more sectarian, severing its links with liberal Catholicism. The Catholic left is "increasingly defined by internal church questions like gender, sexuality, ecclesiology, worship and spirituality, a near rejection of

hierarchy and a consistently political style of lobbying and mobilization organized around the demands of special constituencies rather than any sense of the whole." Women's ordination, clerical celibacy, homosexuality and abortion, all tied to larger questions of papal teaching authority have become hallmarks of the movement. Questions of race, economics, international affairs and general culture are hardly dealt with at all.

While both liberals and the Catholic left would agree that as a church we need to rethink such issues as the role of women in the church, collaborative decision making in the church, and issues of sexual morality, Steinfels thinks that a significant gap now separates the two groups.

He highlights several factors that have contributed to this cleft between them, and to the general difficulties characterizing even progressive Catholicism at the present time. One is what he calls "the crisis of inclusiveness." He thinks that inclusiveness has become a byword of the Catholic left, "a cant word charged with political leverage." He asks: "Is anyone against inclusiveness? Could anyone be against it? The problem is that inclusivity is a concept that loses meaning apart from some sense of specified and bounded identity. Inclusive in what?" In fact, Steinfels suggests that "some groups flying the banner of inclusiveness are extraordinarily exclusive of those they consider insufficiently inclusive." He thinks the entire em-

phasis on inclusivity separated from questions of identity is questionable at a time when the celebration and preservation of identity is such a strong theme among oppressed groups, and when the basic stance of Catholicism is more ecumenical and tolerant of other religions and groups than it ever has been.

Steinfels' article also develops a biting critique of the anti-intellectualism among all Catholics today. He charges that "the activism of the postconciliar culture, combined with the therapeutic turn in culture, have produced a new form of anti-intellectualism." Rather than systematically analyzing cause and effect, underlying principles, relationships to other evidence or to the heritage of theory, doctrine and wisdom, contemporary debates tend to dismiss all this as irrelevant abstraction and move into using various authorities simply as ammunition for preexisting positions. The hard work of good theological and ecclesial thought and the development of ideas is simply not being done, so that an atmosphere of fear and suspicion keeps all "parties" — conservative, liberal and the Catholic left — isolated and ultimately unproductive.

It's an odd use of a column, perhaps, to so extensively cite another. Still, I found that reading Steinfels helped me to understand a big part of what's happening in church life today, and I encourage all to give it a critical read.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.



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