

Bridging the Catholic Liberal – Conservative Divide: Christian Perspectives

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Introduction

1. The pluralism always present in the Catholic Church has become more polarized.
2. The Common Ground Initiative is designed to promote dialogue and unity based on fundamental Christian beliefs and practice.

I. Framing the Discussion

A. Terminology

1. There are clearly divisions within the U.S. Catholic community but they are hard to name. We could speak of Catholics who favor Pope John Paul II and those who favor Pope Francis as progressives and conservatives; those who stress the documents of Vatican II and those who prefer the spirit of Vatican II as pro-life vs. social justice.
2. In June 2013, *America* magazine, under Matt Malone, disavowed using labels imported from the political world, concentrating on the distinctive communal character of the Church.
3. I am using conservative and liberal as shorthand for real differences which many Catholics sense and theologians analyze.

II. The Conservative Narrative (*cf* Ross Douthat) *To Change the Church* and an article in *First Things*: “*A Crisis of Conservative Catholicism*”

A. Douthat

1. Convert to Catholicism in his teens with his family, now close to 40.
2. Graduate of Harvard; now *New York Times* columnist.
3. Calls himself a conservative Catholic.

B. His conservative story of Vatican II up to Pope Francis

1. The purpose of Vatican II (1962-1965) was to move the Church away from its 19th century fortress mentality, to open a new dialogue with the modern world and usher in a new age of evangelization and renewal. It was not intended to be a revolutionary council or to rewrite doctrine or make the Church Protestant.
2. The Council was quickly hijacked by liberals who wanted to accommodate the Church to the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and transform it along liberal Protestant lines.

3. Two parties quickly developed: one followed the actual documents and stressed the continuity with traditions; the other followed “the spirit of the Council” which coincided with liberal cultural changes. This 2nd party gained control of seminaries, universities, religious orders and diocesan offices but this led to low Mass attendance, few vocations and erosion of Catholic identity.
4. Fortunately, in 1978 Pope John Paul II was elected and he rejected the liberal interpretations and carried forward the true intention of the Council, and inspired a generation of bishops and laity prepared to witness to the full traditions of Catholicism. By the year 2000 the liberals were defeated and the Church was preparing to be conservative but modern, the traditional Church of a long history and of Vatican II. The election of Pope Benedict in 2005 seemed to assure the conservative victory.
5. Various factors cut into this conservative optimism; the sex abuse scandal that cast a shadow over John Paul II’s last years; the ongoing cover-up could not be blamed entirely on liberals; the cultural approval of same-sex marriage; the increase of the Catholic Nones; the increase in numbers of former Catholics; and the inability of Benedict to manage the Vatican corruption. However, it still seemed Catholic liberalism was dead outside of the *NCR* and some Catholic theology departments.
6. That changed with the election of Pope Francis in 2013. He is not a theological liberal but thinks the Church under his predecessors put too much emphasis on opposing abortion and gay marriage and not enough on poverty, immigration, and the environment. He has offered a second chance to liberal Catholicism, which is more resilient than conservatives thought.
7. Liberals controlled the Synods on the family and still have influence in Catholic Universities and charitable institutions; meaning that conservative Catholicism is a “counter-cultural force” within these institutions.
8. Polls often lump frequent Mass-goers with the Christmas and Easter Catholics, but even the regulars are split on issues that conservatives think are clear and unchangeable. For example, only a minority accept *Humanae Vitae* on birth control and only 42% of regulars think divorced and remarried should not be allowed to receive communion.
9. The liberals have many lapsed Catholics and cultural elites on their side.
10. The center right and the center left are now further apart as Francis pushes the liberal agenda, making it harder to find common ground.
11. The 30-year effort by John Paul II and Benedict to move the Church in a more conservative direction did make a difference: seminarians, younger priests and most bishops are now more conservative. However, their appointed cardinals elected Francis and many bishops support Francis, including Cardinal Blasé Cupich of Chicago. Furthermore, the next conclave will probably have over half cardinals appointed by Francis.

12. Francis' ambiguity on communion for divorced and remarried has brought the Church to the edge of schism.
 13. Conservatives must learn important lessons. Catholic liberals will be with us for generations to come; conservative theologians must develop a better analysis of the development of doctrines; laity must take more responsibility and avoid too much reliance on the pope and papal teaching, as many conservatives did with John Paul II and Benedict.
 14. There are three types of liberals: (1) Those who are faithful Catholics who believe the social teaching of the Church challenges free market economic and political conservatism (this is healthy and benefits the Church). (2) Those who will not or cannot accept traditional Catholic teachings (conservatives need better arguments; their liberal concerns can point to the need for authentic development of doctrine or genuine pastoral change). (3) Liberals who want the Catholic Church to become like liberal Protestant and Anglican Churches (they are not comparable with Catholic orthodoxy and may lead to schism).
 15. The Vatican II mission to evangelize the modern world has mostly failed except for Africa, leaving us with Catholic civil war and permanent crisis which would be the case even without Vatican II. Catholic traditionalists are wrong to condemn the Council as heretical or to blame it for our problems. It did well on relationships with democracy, religious liberty and anti-Semitism but failed to deal with the sexual revolution. The tendency of the Council to balance rather than synthesize leaves both sides with materials for their side. Neither side can win. We may need another Council.
 16. Douthat summarizes his position to fellow conservatives: "Our victories were not as permanent as we supposed, our arguments were less persuasive than we'd hoped, the Catholic center was not quite where we believed it to be, and our adversaries were not as foredoomed as we fondly wanted to believe...which means conservatives have work to do."
- C. Implied criticism of Douthat
1. George Weigel (Catholic neo-conservative) thinks that the new evangelization of John Paul II remains a strong force in the U.S. ever since World Youth Day in Denver in 1993, which was a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church in the USA with lasting effects. In conservative seminaries, Newman Centers (Texas A & M), some parish youth ministry, religious orders, bishops (Cardinal Dolan).
 2. The U.S. Church is more alive than European Churches.
 3. The "Catholic Lite" of liberals is dead, having sold out to contemporary culture.
 4. Benedict and Francis have endorsed the new evangelization.
- D. Influence of conservatives
1. The immense power of Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) founded in 1981 by Mother Angelica, who suffered a major stroke in 2001 and died in 2016. EWTN

- owns the *National Catholic Register*, reaches more than a quarter of a billion viewers worldwide in 140 countries with an annual budget of around \$60 million; it owns and operates the largest Catholic website in the U.S.; its religious programming includes Mass and rosary and is strongly pro-life and anti-gay marriage and critical of Francis; political stand is pro-Trump, pro-republican and pro-free market; its board member Timothy Busch is a major contributor and heads the Napa Institute that recently sponsored talks by George Weigel and Cardinal Burke; 61% of American bishops read the *National Catholic Register* more than any other Catholic publication; for many Catholics in the U.S. the EWTN empire is the public face of Catholicism with more influence than the USCCB, which in 1981 established the Catholic Telecommunications Network of America (CTNA) and spent \$14 million only to have it fail and close it down in 1995. Mother Angelica often critical of American bishops, including Cardinal Mahoney, set up a lay board to keep her network free of episcopal control and refused to use some programming of the American bishops.
2. Conservative Catholic viewpoints are propagated by *First Things* magazine, George Weigel and his syndicated column; the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars.

III. The Liberal or Progressive Story *cf* *What Happened at Vatican II* by John O'Malley; *An Unfinished Council* by Richard Gaillardetz

A. The Council 1962-1965

1. Pope John XXIII announced the Council in 1959, the preparation did not go well because of a reluctant Curia.
2. John's talk on October 11, 1962 at the opening Mass made important points: he criticized the "prophets of doom" who forecast disaster; he distinguished the substance of doctrine from the way it is presented, including the need for reformulations to improve the pastoral ministry of the Church; he insisted the Church should work for Christian unity; he presumed historical consciousness.
3. At the first session October 13, 1962, French Cardinal Lienart, seconded by German Cardinal Frings, effectively took control of the Council away from the Curial officials by opening up appointment of the members of the conciliar commissions to a vote on candidates proposed not just by the Curia, but also names suggested by regional bishops conferences.
4. Another key event was what to do about the Curial document on revelation. The majority of the bishops rejected it because it proposed an ecumenically questionable two-source theory, but they did not get the two-thirds vote to get rid of it so Pope John set up a group to rewrite it.
5. Theologians like Congar and Rahner were constantly giving talks to groups of bishops educating them on the topics for discussion.

6. Through the whole history of the Council there were disagreements between the vast majority of the 2,400 bishops and the conservative minority. Pope Paul VI tried to get full agreement on the documents, often by including statements to keep the minority on board, thus setting the stage for today's disagreements. He also prevented the assembled bishops from discussing birth control and mandatory celibacy. The final 16 documents gained the approval of the vast majority of bishops.
7. The bishops accepted the reality of change and the importance of historical consciousness on behalf of Aggiornamento (Italian for modernizing or updating) which implied a dialogue with modern cultural assumptions such as religious liberty and human equality. The Council affirmed that the Christian tradition "makes progress in the church and grows" (*On Divine Revelation*). The document "On Religious Liberty" clearly changed from rejecting religious liberty and the separation of church and state affirmed by previous popes since the 1860s, to accepting and affirming freedom of conscience and the legitimate autonomy of the state. The change from Latin to vernacular in the liturgy was a change that ordinary Catholics could not ignore. In accepting change, the Council saw it as a way not of rejecting tradition but enhancing it, "a process of redefinition that was both continuous and discontinuous with the past (John O'Malley in *Commonweal* August 9, 2019 "Does Church Teaching Change?")"

B. Early history

1. The majority of Catholics in the U.S. accepted the changes and the renewal effort seemed to get off to a good start.
2. In 1968 Pope Paul VI issued the birth control encyclical *Humanae Vitae* that generated public dissent and general distrust of church authority. It hindered reliance on the sense of the faithful; the implementation of collegial; use of the hierarchy of truths; and the power of episcopal conferences.
3. In the 1970s there were questionable liturgical innovations (clown ministry at Mass) that produced a backlash.

C. The 26-year papacy of John Paul II (1978-2005)

1. He became the main interpreter of the Council enhancing some aspects; dialogue with the Jews, the social teaching, ecumenical dialogue; possibly his greatest failure was his rejected effort to reach out to Orthodox Churches.
2. During his pontificate: 483 saints were canonized, more than ever before; the 1983 Code of Canon Law was completed; in 1992 the Catechism of the Catholic Church was published; he visited 129 countries; wrote 14 encyclicals and gave 129 lectures on the Theology of the Body; he supported the European Union; opposed the Iraq War; supported the Solidarity Union in Poland.

3. Ways he curbed the spirit of Vatican II (*cf* John Allen, 2005): he turned the Synod of Bishops into a forum for presenting his own views; he enhanced the position of Pope at the expense of collegiality; in 1981 he forced new leadership on the Jesuits; he insisted on sharp distinctions between clergy and laity; he made the Catholic Catechism normative over more liberal regional catechisms; he excommunicated Sri Lankan theologian Oblate Fr. Tissa Balasuriya and silenced Hans Kung and Charles Curran by forbidding them to teach as Catholic theologians and in various ways criticized or silenced other theologians including Leonardo Boff, Jaques Dupuis, Roger Haight, Matthew Fox and Anthony de Mello (ten years after his death); his travels and popularity reduced the importance of local bishops; his theory of gender complementarity effectively excluded women from public roles in the church and emphasized their domestic roles in society; in 1979 he enraged many in the U.S. by his stony silence to Mercy Sister Teresa Kane's suggestion women be included in all the church ministries; in 1985 he effectively reduced the power of Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen by appointing Donald Wuerl as his auxiliary with special faculties: In 2001 John Paul II put an end to the practice of penance services with general absolution; His 1990 Apostolic Constitution *Ex corde* on Catholic universities that allowed bishops to require theologians to get a mandate (*mandatum*) from the local bishop to teach in Catholic universities; he criticized liberation theology for not being faithful to the Gospel; he publicly chided Fr. Ernesto Cardinal for his role as Nicaraguan Minister of Culture; the 1998 papal document *Apostolos Suos* effectively took all power away from local conferences of bishops by declaring that their teaching was binding only if unanimous and approved by Rome, making it impossible for the American bishops to ever again produce great documents like their pastorals on Peace (1983) and the Economy (1986).
4. The Vatican refused to accept an inclusive English translation of the Catholic catechism despite the efforts of Cardinal Law and other cardinals. In 1973 the Vatican decided that children had to receive Penance before first communion despite pastoral practices to delay Penance.

D. Pope Benedict: 2005 – 2013 when he resigned

1. Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of CDF, 1981-2005 criticized false interpretations of the Council which caused calamitous destruction in the Church.
2. In 2000 CDF published *Dominus Jesus* which pushed back on Vatican II salvation optimism and openness to Protestant Churches.
3. As pope he said the "Dictatorship of Relativism is the central problem of faith today."

4. In 2007 he issued *Summorum Pontificum* making the Tridentine Mass available in parishes to those who request it and any priest to offer privately. Liberal bishops and theologians saw this as a major blow to liturgical reform. This was part of his support for “the Reform of the Reform” movement.
5. He lifted the excommunication of 4 bishops from the Society of St. Pius X in 2009.
6. He insisted on “the hermeneutic of continuity” and later “the hermeneutic of reform” which played down the changes initiated by the Council (the hermeneutic of discontinuity) and emphasized that the developments were in accord with the long tradition.
7. In 2010 The Vatican imposed a new English translation of the Missal on the U.S. and other English speaking countries. The translation is literal as mandated by the 2001 Vatican instruction *Liturgiam Authenticam*, which has impossible syntax and is widely disliked. The Vatican rejected a final English translation prepared by scholars in 1998 after decades of work (based on dynamic equivalence). This was all in violation of clear directives issued by Vatican II and now revived by Pope Francis.
8. In 2012 the Vatican initiated an investigation of U.S. religious women and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious claimed its work contained “radical themes incompatible with the Catholic Faith.” The investigation lasted three years and ended under Pope Francis.
9. The liberal story is of Vatican II as a Council where the bishops rejected the conservative documents of the Curia and passed by large margins more progressive documents, but with statements imposed or encouraged by Pope Paul VI to placate the Curial bishops. The spirit of the Council was redirected by Pope Paul, John Paul and Benedict toward conservative interpretations and practices. Pope Francis has revived the Spirit of the Council and most Catholics in the U.S. support him. We wait to see the long-term effects of his papacy.
10. Influence of liberals: Over a third of American bishops (the number is growing) tend to support Pope Francis; around 60% of U.S. Catholics favor optional celibacy and women priests; Francis has an approval rating of 72% among U.S. Catholics; Organizations that tend to be more liberal: The Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) ; *National Catholic Reporter*; *America* and *Commonweal* magazines; The LCWR; major Catholic universities; Catholic Health Association, parish social justice committees.

E. Furthering the liberal project (*cf. Gaillardetz, The Unfinished Council*)

1. We need a more coherent, integrated, synthetic reading of the documents that show how they are connected and can be combined to form an effective program of church reform and pastoral practice.

2. Genuine church renewal today must maintain the sense of humility found in Vatican II documents as well as the magnanimity which recognizes the great gifts given to the Church. A humble church is self-critical and recognizes the church's failings. It avoids triumphalism and concentrates on serving God and the world. It listens as a basis for preaching. There is a proper doctrinal humility that recognizes that doctrines point to the mystery but do not exhaust it and there is a proper hierarchy of truth. There is a humility of power that rejects coercive power and celebrates the power of service.
3. Build on the Council's emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit shared by all in baptism which fosters cooperative efforts between the pope and the college of bishops, bishops and priests, clergy and lay instead of competitive relationships.

IV. The Common Ground Initiative on Bridging the Divide *cf* "Called to be Catholic: The Church in a Time of Peril" made public 1996 after 4 years of meetings of a 20 person committee brought together by Cardinal Bernardine, who died in 1996.

A. Concern

1. The Church in the U.S. is in a perilous situation as we approach the new millennium.
2. Polarization, which inhibits discussion, cripples leadership, confuses young people and magnifies fears, is a major problem.
3. Paralysis is the result.

B. Positive response

1. Open and honest discussion of urgent questions: the changing roles of women; religious education; Eucharistic liturgy; human sexuality, image and morale of priests; lay leadership, church and politics; capacity of Church to embrace multiculturalism; survival of Catholic institutions; dwindling financial support; manner of decision-making; responsibility of theology to authoritative church teachings; relation between Rome and American episcopacy.
2. Rediscover common ground "centered in faith in Jesus, marked by accountability to the living Catholic tradition and ruled by a renewed spirit of civility, dialogue, generosity and broad and serious consultation."
3. We need dialogue which respects "legitimate debate, discussion and diversity" and "fresh eyes, open minds and changed hearts" while recognizing there are boundaries which circumscribe Catholic Identity.

C. Working principles

1. No single group or viewpoint in the church has a complete monopoly on the truth.
2. We should not envision ourselves as an enlightened "saving remnant" which spurns the mass of Catholics, their leaders or institutions.
3. Test all proposals for pastoral realism and theological truth.

4. Presume that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith. We should try to understand their positions and not substitute labels or blanket terms like “radical feminism” or “the Vatican.”
 5. Put the best possible construction on differing positions and detect valid insights and legitimate worries.
 6. Be cautious in ascribing motives and do not impugn others’ loyalty to the church.
 7. Follow the lead of Gaudium et Spes by recognizing the valid achievements and real dangers of our culture.
- D. In general terms healthy dialogue demands conversion – “fresh eyes and changed hearts.” The liturgy which is crucial for such conversion, must be common ground and not a battleground. This will prepare us for the new millennium.
- E. The Initiative is still functioning and its principles remain a good approach to bridging the liberal conservative divide.
- V. Pope Francis on Bridging the Divide
- A. Synodality is his preferred approach to renewal.
1. We need grassroots efforts to achieve long term progress; reform cannot be imposed from the top.
 2. Vatican II notion of synodality was undercut by John Paul II and Benedict and Francis is trying to revive it.
 3. He did this in the two synods on the family and on youth beginning with input from lay people who know the challenges.
 4. Synodality is his primary method of dealing with the sex-abuse scandal.
 5. He has insisted that the Liturgy decree of Vatican II must be followed. National bishops’ conferences are the primary decision makers on liturgical translations.
- B. Subsidiary
1. The Vatican does not have all the answers to local problems
 2. Pope Francis frequently quotes National Conferences of bishops and encourages them to take greater responsibility for issues in their country.

Next month:

Finding Our Unique Path to Holiness: Developing the Gift of Discernment

Thursday, October 10, 2019, 5:30 – 7 p.m.