

8-8-08 - Why I Can't Be a Catholic Conservative

Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, On Faith, Washington Post

The Catholic Church is essentially conservative because it preserves tradition. Yet, Protestants complain that Catholicism has changed too much from the time of the apostles. For those who think these opinions are contradictory, it's time to revisit the distinction made long ago by the Council of Trent between "reformable" and "unreformable" traditions.

Unfortunately, serious theological discussion in Catholicism these days faces the wrath of Catholic Conservatives. Asserting that the Church is theologically "perfect," they claim Catholicism must not change anything pragmatically. This closed-mindedness contrasts with Catholicism's thoughtful evolution through the ages. For Catholic Conservatives, it is all about text without context, because they are more Conservatives than they are Catholics.

What repels me from such persons is not that they lack faith, but that they presume their exclusive claim to righteousness making them eager to dismiss the sincerity of the rest of Catholic America. Destruction is preferred to dialog. I am not just talking about those who set bombs in abortion clinics: some of the weapons are verbal. There is the frequent dismissive snobbery of First Things types who complain about multiculturalism in the liturgy, and the Hrumph! factor of the Catholic League that complains about almost everything. Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors lives on as a guide to doctrine for these folks, ignoring Pope Benedict's observation that the II Vatican Council was "anti-Syllabus."

At the root of conservative close-mindedness is anti-intellectualism. Apparently, Catholic Conservatives believe their God-driven task is to conserve, not Catholicize. (You can see this approach in some blogs at this website.) One commentator just recently admitted to never having read the book in question, and then proceeded to attack the author's logic. Such judgments made in ignorance, however, are fairly typical. Such persons seem to view theology's task as that of the three monkeys: Hear no evil; See no evil; Speak no evil. Their thinking is summed up in memorizing catechism answers.

In reality, Catholic theology is an indispensable tool in distinguishing between what is reformable and what is unreformable in the faith. Take, for instance, the issue of condoms. In private conversation with a bishop seeking opinions of what to do about the spread of AIDS, we theologians pointed out that the use of condoms to prevent disease is OK, because it follows the Thomistic principle that morality follows upon intentionality. The pastoral decision in that case was to allow (mostly) women of infected spouses to use condoms, but to guard such use with confidentiality. We stated that conjugal love helps keep a family together and provides loving support to someone seriously sick. You seldom find such nuance among conservatives, who simply rant against condoms.

I have also found some more interested in backing a political party than in serving Catholic teaching. The U.S. invasion and war of occupation of Iraq has been denounced by TWO popes. On March 18, 2003, the Apostolic Delegate indicated that a person

ignoring the papal directive for more diplomatic negotiations through the United Nations "assumes a serious responsibility before God, his conscience and history." Now, in Catholic theology "serious responsibility" translates as "mortal sin." There is no doubt that the invasion was unjustified: *Roma locuta, causa finita est*. Yet because the Vatican today has expressed concern about chaos if troop withdrawal is careless, the Catholic Conservatives try to confuse the absolute and clear denunciation of the invasion with papal caution about troop withdrawal. In effect, they are projecting Catholic teaching as a "flip-flop." It is not! Moreover, since I don't think they are stupid, I believe they are engaged in intentional deception, placing their McCainish politics ahead of their faith.

Catholic Conservatives like to act like gatekeepers for who is a "real Catholic" (themselves) and who is a "cafeteria Catholic" (everyone else). They seem not to know that the classic case of cafeteria Catholicism came from the conservative *National Review*, edited by the late William F. Buckley. Reacting to Blessed John XXIII's encyclical that supported the internationalism of the United Nations, the magazine ran with a cover that proclaimed: "Mater, Si; Magistra, No." A clearer case of doctrinal relativism is hard to find. Unfortunately, the Catholic Conservatives have continued to "game" our faith today, and it's sad.