Dear People Whom God Loves,

**Conservative or Progressive Catholic?**

There is often hostility between “conservative” and “progressive” Catholics. In my 64 years as a priest I have been a “conservative” catholic and I have been a “progressive” catholic. I am neither now.

I am not particularly happy with the terms conservative and progressive but I do think that they can shed some light on the situation.

People who tend to see the history of reality as static and unchanging are labeled conservatives. People with a conservative outlook can range from seeing reality as completely unchanging to less and lesser unchanging. People who tend to see the history of reality as dynamic or changing are labeled as progressive. People with a progressive outlook can range from seeing reality as completely changing to less and lesser changing.

This rough view, can give us a little insight why we Catholics often don’t get along very well and will form camps and fight. How ironic.

We who believe with the scriptures that God is love and that God is the trinity, the loving relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that we are made in the image and likeness of God fight and sometimes hate each other.

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I will share with you my journey which moved through being a “conservative” Catholic to a “progressive” Catholic to being neither. This has been my path. It doesn’t have to be your path but it may be helpful to some of you.

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The Catholic Church is based on Tradition in a way that is different than a secular institution. A secular institution may find that it is valuable to listen to tradition that has proved valuable in meeting its goals. However, it may find that it has to take a different path because the previous path was not accomplishing the goal. Moreover, the goal has been set by a human.

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The goal of the church is not set by humans. It is the reign of God (God’s way of love, compassion, mercy, and goodness) that Jesus told us about, invited us to enter. It is from the love of the Father that brings us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit the healing of our sins and the consequences of the sins of all humans since the beginning of humans beings on our earth.

Jesus not only preached the reign of God, he also lived it, suffered for it, died for it and was raised to glory and sent the Holy Spirit to draw into the reign of God beginning in this life and completed in the next.

Some people might ask: Jesus came 2000 years ago, How come the world is such a mess? My answer is: because God is love. Love doesn’t “force”. God invites us into the reign of God and helps us enter. We humans are stubborn and cling to so many superficial things. I also believe that God needs only a crack to get into us. In my life I have been like a mule that needs to be hit over the head to get my attention. At other times I have been drawn by love. Both have had their place. I pray that once I will be able to say the Our Father and totally mean and surrender to “They will be done”.

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Let us now look at tradition in the church. The life and memory and meaning of Jesus were pondered, prayed about by those who knew him in the flesh and passed on to others. Paul had a special revelation and perhaps others (like Peter’s dream) received deep insight.

In the course of about 50 or 60 years or so this was written down in the scripture that we call the New Testament. This is the foundation of tradition. The church (the community of believers in Jesus and in his mission) gradually drew up creeds to point to their mysteries. The creeds are not the mysteries. We believe in the mysteries to which the words point. We call them mysteries because we can never exhaust their meaning. God has revealed himself but will always remain a mystery.

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Now to the danger of being a “conservative” Catholic or a “progressive Catholic. This doesn’t mean that either a conservative or a liberal thinker cannot be a Catholic. Thank God for that. God loves us all. But it is crucial to see the danger because we humans tend to be blind. And the more blind we are the more stubborn we become.

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I think of tradition (not just long tradition) as living tradition. Both solid and flexible. Living plants are stable and growing. Tradition is living and growing with the help of the Holy Spirit. The creeds point to the divine mysteries. The divine mysteries are what they are. They don’t change. We must hold on to the mystery.

When we are a “conservative” thinker because we tend to see a thing as stable and static, it is hard to change the way we express the mystery differently because it seems to us that we are denying the mystery. We don’t realize that through the centuries we gain deeper understanding of the mystery.

When we are a “progressive” thinker, because we tend to see things as more dynamic and changeable, we are not taking into account and learning from the way the mystery was previously expressed, we may miss something essential.

Some of us lean toward clinging to old expressions that don’t draw a lot of people into belief. Some of us do not see the mystery to which the old teaching points when to old words are used. This means that for them they need expression in a new way. Pope St. John XXIII reminded us that faith and how it is expressed are not the same. Our church teaching needs to be solid and flexible. If we don’t listen to each other we will probably miss the mark. That is where my journey has led me.

Smile, God loves you,

Father Clay