



Ascension of the Lord C
June 2, 2019

**An Interview with Fr. Ron Rolheiser on
Conservative and Liberal Issues**

A former professor of Philosophy, Fr. Ron Rolheiser now serves as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He is the author of many books including his best seller, *Holy Longing*. His weekly column is carried by 50 newspapers worldwide. He grew up in a conservative German immigrant community in his native Canada, experienced the liberalism of the 1960's, and now says the secret is to "always be looking for balance."

The following interview appeared in our bulletin in May 2007. I would love to know if and how Fr. Ron would revise/update the views expressed in this interview 12 years later. I suggest that those of you who meet in small groups take a break from your regular focus and share your thoughts on this interview, or just spend 30 minutes at the beginning of your meeting to talk about it.

There's a lot of polarity in the church and in U.S. culture today, tension between liberals and conservatives. What is the cause of that?

First of all, you'll always have polarity, and it's always been there, although not always as intense. During the Second Vatican Council, we had a window of some years when polarization wasn't red hot.

Then we had a massive pendulum swing in the Western world, actually worldwide, in the late 1960's. There was a liberalization that set in and that caused its own reaction. So what you're seeing today inside of the church and inside of society (and in the Islamic world) is a fierce and a powerful conservatism. This conservatism actually feeds off an unbalanced liberalism. Excessive liberalism sparks excessive conservatism, then excessive conservatism sparks excessive liberalism, and so on

Jesus sometimes was liberal and sometimes he was conservative, but he always acted out of faith.

But don't a lot of liberals and conservatives think they already are acting out of faith?

Yes, we all do. But sincerity is a tough thing. Ideology is like a virus; we breathe it in, and it's really

hard to be free of and to truly think our own thoughts.

For example, one of the things that conservatives struggle with is writing something off just because it is politically correct. But sometimes when something is politically correct, it's also correct.

So often people are just reacting and saying everything in secular culture is bad. While there are negatives, there are also some incredible positives that we don't want to lose.

What's positive about liberal secular culture?

Liberalism is about freedoms, many of which we take for granted. The opposite of secularity is not the church; the opposite of secularity is the Taliban. I don't think you want to live in Iran, which is a theocracy. Holland, on the other hand, is the most secularized culture in the world, far more secular than the United States. It has very low church attendance, and everything is legal: abortion, euthanasia, prostitution, drugs. You could look at that and say it's a cesspool of moral relativity.

Those aren't good things. But Holland takes care of its poor better than any culture in the world, and the status of women is the highest of any place in the world. Those are major moral achievements. And they didn't come out of conservatism. Those are liberal achievements, which also come out of the gospel. So it's a complicated thing for some to say the church is a culture of life and secularity is a culture of death. That's far too simple.

Not only that, people don't buy it. Young people are not looking at the church and saying, "Ah, that's life!" and at Hollywood and the Super bowl and saying, "That's a culture of death." That's not the way they see it at all. They see something in the Jerry Seinfelds, and the David Lettermans, the Olympics: There's life in there, and there's also something about God in there.

What's good about conservatism?

They get a very important part of the gospel: intimacy with Jesus. People may say that they don't care about justice. Maybe they don't but they get the intimacy part.

Sometimes people in liberal circles don't get that intimacy with Jesus part. We're doing the social justice,

but we're not really sure why we're doing it, like sometimes we don't know the difference between Christian social doctrine and Greenpeace. The better ones get it—Dorothy Day, Jim Wallis, Daniel Berrigan. [If you've never heard of these three person, perhaps you can google them. To search for Berrigan, use Fr. Dan Berrigan, S.J.]

But we all pick and choose; we're all "cafeteria Catholics." I was once asked to write a definition of a practicing Catholic. I began by saying that only Jesus does God real well, and the rest of us drop off, either to the left or to the right. Conservatives have major blind spots and liberals have major blind spots.

What are those blind spots?

Liberals have to ask, "What deep truths are conservatives defending?" For example, they care about the unborn and the family. And conservatives have to ask, "What are liberals' deep instincts?" Some conservatives say that feminism is a liberal cause, but it comes from the gospel. And not all feminism is anti-family. Gloria Steinem allowed her employees to bring their children to work, which made for healthier families. So in some cases, feminism goes against the family, and in some ways it supports families.

Is moving to the center the answer?

Not really. The middle can end up being the lowest common denominator, kind of wishy-washy. In politics, moving to the center is the way to win elections. It may be the solution politically, but not prophetically. Of course prophets don't often get to be president of the United States. They don't make good politicians because they're driving an edge.

How do you balance being prophetic with being popular if you're trying to reach out to people?

Let's take Jesus. When Jesus started preaching, people liked what he said so he drew really big crowds. Then at a certain point, he said some unpopular things and everybody left. Jesus wasn't very happy about that; he didn't want to be unpopular.

Daniel Berrigan says we have to make sure not to make a vow of alienation, just to get in somebody's face. You try to speak the truth and be a loving person, and sometimes it makes you unpopular. The danger is sometimes ideologues intentionally try to take themselves there.

Any advice for people trying to bridge the liberal/conservative gap?

When I was a seminarian, I set up the rule for myself that I must always try to read against my temperament.

At the time I was a natural conservative, so I would read liberal stuff. Then I went through some years where I was a natural liberal, so I read conservative literature. It's good to look for balance.

Is indifference harder to deal with than anger?

Absolutely, and this is one time I'll be categorical. The biggest problem in the church is not anger, it's indifference. A Canadian sociologist of religion, Reginald Bibby, has found that of people not going to church, fewer than 5 percent are angry at the church. The other 95 are indifferent.

Those of us who move in church circles see anger—at the pope, the sex-abuse crisis—but for most Catholics, anger is not an issue. On Sunday morning, if people aren't going to church, it's not because they're angry. It's because they're sleeping, shopping, or getting ready for football.

Bibby also says that the biggest problem with religion in North America and the Western world isn't religious, it's societal. People treat their churches the way they treat their families. People haven't left their churches, they just aren't going to their churches; the same as they haven't left their families, they just don't come home a lot.

So can you blame secular society for offering all these options, like shopping or football?

It's not so much blame, but secular society does produce opportunity and amusement and distraction. Until something happens to me, I don't have to think seriously about God or faith. You're a good-hearted person, you work hard, you come home in the evening and you're tired, so you have a glass of scotch and watch TV, you go to bed, and the next day you do it again. Until the doctor says you have terminal cancer or your mother dies or something happens that gives you kind of a psychic stick of dynamite, we can just cruise along. We're vulnerable but we think we're invulnerable.

Is there a kind of mutual indifference in that the church says, "Well, fine. If you don't want what we've got, then we don't want you either"?

Today there are two schools of thought in the church. One of them is that the church needs to be trimmer and purer. If you don't want to make the commitment, you're out. The other school of thought says Jesus' mercy is universal. It says the church is a family, and a family keeps embracing even when members don't come home.

A lot of conservatives want a leaner, trimmer, purer,

committed church. Liberals are more likely to say Christ's mercy and compassion is infinite and the church is a big enough family that we don't have to be exclusivistic.

A few years ago, an Episcopalian church in Seattle advertised that anyone who wanted to show up at Easter Vigil with a sincere desire to be baptized could be. I know liturgical people who had cardiac arrest over this! A couple of hundred people showed up, they baptized them, and they probably got 60 or 70 really good Episcopalians out of that. This shows the two schools of thought. For one, it's a sacrilege. For the other, they say Jesus can handle it.

Both liberals and conservatives talk about evangelization. Are either having any success with this?

There are two buzz words: maintenance and mission. The way the church is set up today, we are very good at maintenance. We know what to do when a Catholic comes to church. But "mission" is not about maintaining what you have. It's about bringing in new people. And that's where the church is weak.

We often don't have the time or energy for evangelization. But the second issue is that we don't have the imagination for it. Maybe we need to look beyond the model of the parish.

The Oblates [Fr. Ron's Religious Order] have a project in Birmingham, England, where six young priests are trying to do evangelization in a creative way. They've tried lots of things, going into bars and sitting in Starbucks. Their biggest struggle isn't the liberal/conservative thing, it's trying to break through religious indifference.

I went to World Youth Day in Toronto, where over a million kids came out to see Pope John Paul II. That's wonderful, but 50 million weren't there. So which one do you focus on: the million who are there or the 50 million who aren't there? I'm trying to focus on the 50 million and on how to reach them.

Who's to blame for those 50 million not being there?

There isn't just one reason. There's blame for everybody. Partly it's indifference, partly it's the culture, partly it's the breakdown of family life and community life. Bibby says if your kids aren't coming home every Sunday for dinner, it's probably not the cooking. So it's not so much that the cooking in church is bad, it's simply that people are preoccupied with their

lives.

Is the problem that religion just has too many rules?

In John's gospel, written for his community, there are no rules. Jesus says there's only one commandment: love. That worked while the Beloved Disciple was alive, but after he died, the community broke down. No rules work when you have mature people. But where levels of maturity aren't high enough, you have to have rules.

Malcolm X once said he became a Muslim because he was working with people in the inner city who need the discipline of Allah. Later they need the love of Jesus. And he even calls it the "liberal" love of Jesus. We're supposed to grow to a point where we no longer need rules, where they're internalized. [St. Paul says, "Owe nothing to anyone except love" Romans 14:8-10 - my addition.]

Some of the rules are precisely to weed out the non-committed for those who want the leaner, purer church. I'm not so worried about that. I tend to believe that when I die, I'm not going to be accused of being too merciful. As a priest, I have a certain level of power, and there's always the danger of abusing power. The Catholic Church is the most powerful multinational organization in the whole world. We're 2,000 years old, we have more than a billion people, we're founded on rock, with scriptures and creeds. We can carry some weak family members. We don't have to play it safe. Jesus never played it safe.

What about those who say we should be more aggressive in our outreach, more like evangelicals?

Some people say that one of the things that has always driven Catholicism is public display, like Corpus Christi processions and World Youth Days, where there's a certain pride: "I'm Catholic and I'm proud of it." They would say today we're too reticent, too shy, too apologetic. Some of the younger seminarians want priests to always wear their collars so they can make a statement.

Others, including myself, say that the real witness is your life. I believe that you don't witness to anybody walking through an airport with a collar. You only witness to people you know through the quality of your life. I don't think wearing a collar in public converts anybody. A lot of people in my generation don't feel that public witness should be in anyone's face.

I agree that sometimes we need to preach a triumphant Christ, the Christ who died and rose. But I move in so many circles where it's not what people need or want to hear. That's exactly why they aren't going to church—because they're turned off by that. So we need

to preach the Christ who self-empties, the Christ who doesn't twist anybody's arm, the Christ who isn't triumphant about anything, the Christ who was born as a helpless infant, who is the complete antithesis of any power.

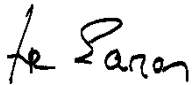
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Reflection question:

- What did you find yourself liking and disliking about the article?

Please feel free to share your thoughts on the above article.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.