

Hope from the Bronx for a sane Catholic center

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 16, 2010 NCR Today

Overcoming polarization in the church often feels like the Catholic equivalent of bringing peace to the Middle East. Everybody pays lip service to it, and from time to time some bold new initiative is rolled out, but longtime combatants who have watched such efforts come and go generally feel in their bones that the reality is permanent war.

If peace is going to break out, therefore, it probably won't be those veterans who make it happen.

That's more or less the instinct behind the Fordham Conversation Project, a group of younger Catholic theologians that wants to think beyond the polarization in American Catholic life. I spent part of this past weekend in the Bronx with roughly 17 young Catholic intellectuals brought together under the project's rubric.

The founder is an ethicist at Fordham in his mid-30s named Charlie Camosy, who happened to finish his Ph.D. at Notre Dame the same year that the Obama commencement invitation and honorary doctorate caused a row. Camosy felt motivated to do something about the divisions in American Catholic life, so he put out feelers to what he generously calls a number of "established" figures (read "old") who represent the different tribes that dot the Catholic landscape in this country.

The response, he said, wasn't terribly encouraging. Camosy ticked off three reasons why:

- Many of the senior, established people were just tired of all of this stuff. They had been through it before and perhaps were frustrated at even the thought of dealing with the magnitude of the problem(s).
- Many seemed polarized themselves, and just saw their opposition as so unreasonable that engagement wasn't worth having.
- I also think the post-modern narrative has taken hold. Something like: "Dude, we just basically have wildly different first principles that cannot get resolved. Exchange is fruitless."

I'm a bit skeptical that eminences of the theological guild in their sixties and seventies actually used the term "dude," but otherwise those responses track with my own experience of talking to longtime Catholic thinkers and activists.

After the old guard didn't bite, Camosy turned to his own generation. The gathering this past weekend amounted to a coming-out party for the Fordham Conversation Project, organized by Camosy and another younger member of the Fordham faculty, Michael Peppard, an expert in Biblical theology and New Testament. Charlie did his Ph.D. at Notre Dame and Michael at Yale, so many of the colleagues who assembled in the Bronx were friends from one of those two venues who are now junior faculty at institutions around the country.

For purposes of kick-starting their conversation, they brought in a few established figures. Peter Steinfelds spoke on Friday night, I spoke Saturday morning, and theological heavyweights such as Fr. Robert Imbelli of Boston College and Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and Terrence Tilley of Fordham were around at various points.

Steinfels gave a typically insightful talk about the state of the American church, highlighting a "soft slide into nominal Catholicism" among a growing share of the country's Catholic population. He also warned against "sampling error" in perceptions, meaning a distorted view of what's happening based primarily on one's own experience and amplified by one's favorite media outlets and blogs. For my part, I highlighted two trends drawn from my book *The Future Church*: the emergence of a "World Church," especially the rise of the global South, and the massive wave of "Evangelical Catholicism" currently fueling Catholic identity concerns.

At midday Saturday, however, *extra omnes* was called out and all the "senior" figures exited the room, so the younger folk could deliberate among themselves. On the *Commonweal* blog, Imbelli posted a note he later received from one of the participants about what came out of their exchange:

"Seeing divisions in the church through the ideological lens of left/right, red/blue, liberal/conservative, etc. was seen by practically everyone at the Fordham Conversation Project as totally inadequate: both for the complexity of the issues which face us and for the tradition in which we work. They also seem to be becoming more and more inadequate for our students—and (especially in light of John Allen's talk) for those who hold the future energy of the Church: the people of the global south."

"Despite many of us clearly having differing views on hot button issues like authority, sexuality, women in the Church, liturgy, and more—the natural friendship produced by the weekend (which, because many of us didn't know each other, started with the presumption of good will required by intellectual solidarity) created a safe space to express some of these ideas. The concept of friendship, which obviously has a long theological history, was perhaps the central idea of the weekend. If those who disagree actually make conscious choices to engage in practices to create the space to be friends then the disagreement is far less likely to fracture the relationship. And sometimes understanding grows in such a way that the disagreement fades away—or at least is much better understood."

"I think the focus on junior people allowed both of these ideas to flourish in our discussions because "our generation" (1) hasn't been formed by the culture wars of the 60s and by Vatican II and its aftermath and (2) generally haven't yet fought the battles that define one's self in opposition to another person or idea. This allows friendships to flourish across divides."

For all those who long for a sane Catholic center in America, those are obviously encouraging words.

Before getting carried away, it's important to concede that the Fordham Conversation Project—and the broader post-ideological instinct it represents among many younger Catholics—is swimming against two powerful cultural tides, one in American society and one inside the academy. First, many Americans today are addicted to ideology the way some people get hooked on booze or pills, and they'll have to "bottom out" before they'll be ready to think differently. Second, especially as tenure reviews start to roll around, these younger theologians will be propelled towards thinking more about their obligations to their discipline than to the broader church.

For at least two compelling reasons, therefore, the Fordham Conversation Project may be a long shot to actually change the culture of the American church. Yet at least for one gorgeous weekend in the Bronx, it still felt a lot like hope.

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