NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A New Generation of Theologians

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 23, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The Second Vatican Council was the central event in the life of the Church in the past 100 years and remains the central point from which all theological discussion flows. But, it was also like watching a dam break as decades, even a couple of centuries, of pent up concerns, insights, and desires came rushing over the wall. Vatican II was a good thing, a very necessary thing, but if the refusal to engage modernity that preceded it was destructive to the Church, some of the floodwaters unleashed at Vatican too were also destructive.

In the decades since the close of the Council, theologians, and those of us who are not theologians but who are concerned with theology, have found ourselves in a debate about the Council?s meaning. There were some in the 1960s who wanted to rollback the Council. They sought first to prevent the election of Giovanni Battista Montini as Pope, hoping to elect someone who would suspend the Council. Others hoped that once the bishops left town, the Vatican curia would be able to strangle the conciliar reforms in the crib. They failed. Some, the Lefebvrists, left. From the left, many placed their own hopes on the Council?s implementation. The Council?s call for social justice was morphed into liberation theology. Recognizing the changing status of women in society, some called for the ordination of women. These efforts, too, came to nothing. Some left.

A debate between left and right emerged, a debate that was overladen with secular concerns ? as indeed, with secular labels, as ?left? and ?right? as understood politically proved a bad fit for understanding the different sides in the ecclesial debates. To be clear, those debates were necessary and, in their way, useful. They showed that much that had not been discussed previously for fear of the Holy Office needed to be discussed. And, those debates also showed that there are some things in the modern world we are now engaging which are not compatible with the Church?s theology. But, those debates have grown stale. Most younger Catholics yawn. They know that we are not all going back to the Tridentine Mass. And they know that liberation theology entailed an anthropology that was insufficiently Catholic.

I got into trouble once at a panel in which I took part at Boston College when my book came out in 2008. In response to one of the questions, I threw out a throwaway line about liberation theology being dead. My comment stemmed from a discussion with an official in Rome who had just been part of the ad limina visits with, if memory serves, the Brazilian bishops and he had assured me that liberation theology had either changed in ways that made it more compatible with Catholic anthropology, or had died. The minute the panel concluded, I was accosted by an angry professor who assured me that liberation theology was not dead. The anger was what surprised: Surely, in Chestnut Hill, oppression was an academic concern, not an existential one. There was no invitation to dialogue, and indeed, for that my throwaway line was partly to blame. But, the truth is that the last thing I wanted to do was engage in a theological discussion of the fecundity of liberation theology. Been there, done that.

Starting today, at this blog Q & A segment, we will be hearing from some young theologians who recently participated in the Fordham Conversation Project. This project grew out of a series of discussions among junior faculty at Fordham who decided to invite some of their colleagues from other Catholic colleges and universities around the country for a weekend of discussions this month on the Fordham campus. All the participants were

under 40 and without tenure. They have not devised a ?mission statement? at this time, believing that they want the project to grow organically, and ?mission statements? can rule out as well as clarify. One of the founders, Assistant Professor of Theology Michael Peppard did tell me that this is how the group has described itself: ?We are young Catholic theologians at colleges, universities, or
seminaries, who desire to shape our careers in ways that reduce polarization in the American Catholic Church. Each of us came of age at some distance from the ideological debates of Vatican II and the immediate postconciliar era, and we believe that our Catholic generation has new opportunities to heal divisions in the body of Christ. We proceed with profound humility toward the previous generation's tilling of common ground, even as we hope to plant new seeds of faith and charity in our Church. As Christians committed to the unity of the Holy Spirit, we approach our task with intellectual solidarity toward one another.? I can scarcely thing of a more noble enterprise than this.

I am delighted that five of the participants at the Fordham Conversation Project have decided to share their views with the readers of this blog this week. I hope to feature them again in the future. I hope that the readers, like myself, will sense the hopefulness and the opportunity that comes with the passing of a generational torch, even though such sensibilities are tinged with melancholy for those of us who are not under 40 any longer! As you will see from their thoughtful comments, the future of Catholic theology in this country is in good hands.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/10/2013 - 23:46*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/new-generation-theologians