

Q & A: Professor Patrick Clark

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 25, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we are hearing from young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project, which brought together a group of young theologians working at Catholic colleges and universities. Today, we hear from Professor Patrick Clark, Assistant Professor of Theology at the University of Scranton.

The question: From your perspective as a young theologian teaching in a Catholic university, how do you view the divisions in the American Catholic Church? Do you see things differently than the previous generation? Are there any signs of hope for healing our divisions?

Professor Clark: The fact that everyone, at least in this country, knows what you mean when you speak about the divisions within the Church indicates the regrettable extent to which Catholics (and all Christians, for that matter) have accepted the concepts and practices of secular politics as the governing models for how we think about and participate in our common ecclesial life. The fact that many Catholic Christians of my generation have come to view these divisions as counterproductive and corrosive bears witness to the real effects brought about by the ways of thinking and acting that have made them so readily coherent to us. The widespread self-segregation of our communities and institutions into homogenous blocs has occasioned a crisis for many of us young believers, whose own experience of church life is simply not enough to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a Catholic?"

At an informal gathering in my undergraduate days, I once asked John Hope Franklin what future role the Church might have in healing the persistent racial divides in our nation. His answer was brief and to the point: "none at all;" and his argument was equally straightforward: "just look at the pews on Sunday morning." I wanted to protest that the churches were crucial to the civil rights movement; I wanted to boast that I myself was currently a member of a traditionally African-American parish. But I knew these isolated examples could not overcome the reality he described; and so I kept silent. The tragedy of the ongoing racial divide in our churches is that it continues to bear witness to the legacy of the profound social sin from which it arose and upon which its coherence depends. Sadly, the Church has all too often failed to be a "safe place" in which the deep distortions of such sinful structures did not make sense.

In a similar way, the increasingly prominent ideological segregation of "conservative" and "progressive" Christian communities seems to me to feed off of concepts and practices that are extraneous, if not outright opposed to the Gospel we all strive to proclaim. Take as an example the appeal of radio commentator Glenn Beck, who this past March "begged" his audience to "look for the words "social justice" or "economic justice" on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice," he explained, "are code words" for liberal political agendas. "Am I advising people to leave their church?" he asked. "Yes!" Or take the example of Rev. Jeremiah Wright's address to the 2009 Society of Christian Ethics, entitled "Where's the Moral Outrage?" in which he claimed that the oppressed and the oppressor do not and cannot worship the same God. When he came to define "oppression" merely in economic, racial and political terms, it became all too clear that the claim was little more than a theological bludgeon to be wielded on behalf of one advocacy group against another. Both of these public statements I consider to be symptomatic of a common pathology that infects our way of thinking and acting in the Church: we have allowed the secular ideologies of our particular socio-historical milieux to shape the expression of our supposedly catholic faith.

The many political causes of our day, worthy as they may be in themselves, have all too often defined who we are as Catholics.

Of course, as Catholics and as Christians, we cannot ignore the wider social and political developments that surround us. Indeed, we are often obliged to fight for causes in the public square alongside other women and men of good will. At the same time, however, the New Testament is filled with promises and exhortations of conflict against the surrounding world. Understanding that this tension between the Church and the world will never completely disappear, Christians need to know when and how to fight the battles within the world that will inevitably come their way. Not all such battles are created equal, however. When political and social divides come to overshadow the common faith and worship that has enlivened the Body of Christ from generation to generation, a critical "safe space" is lost where genuine engagement can take place and authentic diversity preserved. In other words, one of the key battles the Church must always fight is the prudential differentiation between which secular battles it must directly engage in and which it must leave to the world. When our appearance, our bumper stickers or our political contributions reliably indicate our parish membership, we should be able to recognize that something has gone deeply wrong. How can we call ourselves "one, catholic Church" when all too often our common worship at the Lord's Table takes a back seat to our particular aesthetic, political or ideological perspectives? Consider the Great Schism of 1054: now that was a genuine ecclesial battle, one which regrettably has yet to be resolved. That it strikes us today as almost unforgivably parochial is a testament to our deep appropriation of the secular worldview and the battles it thinks are worth fighting.

I believe that my generation—and not only the Catholics among us—are hungry for communities of worship united around a common faith and a common life which can transcend the forces that have stratified and continue to stratify our society into competing ideological camps. In other words, I think my generation hungers for an authentic form of communal friendship that is predicated on something more than mutual interest and taste. We long for the sort of community in which we can face the hard question of what binds us together on the deepest level as sisters and brothers made in the image of God. For so many young people, participation in the Church is simply one more facet of a carefully constructed persona, one more line on a website profile. There is often little sense that one is "claimed" by a community regardless of personal preference. And likewise, there is little sense of obligation for those members of the community who do not look, act or think like one's self.

This observation came home to me on a family trip through Michigan a few years ago, when I attended mass at a small local parish under the charge of a very small African priest who looked, spoke and thought very differently from the white middle-class suburbanites who surrounded me in the pews. It was often difficult to make out what he was saying, but one thing he said I will never forget: "You are here at mass, but that is not enough. We are all responsible for each other's souls. We are our brother's keeper. When you stand before the gates of heaven, the Lord may ask you why your brother or sister is not with you. You must be prepared to answer." Perhaps it will require such "outside voices" to remind American Catholics of our primary obligations to one another, even and especially for those close to us whose lifestyles and ideological allegiances differ from our own. We must find a way to reach others who are different from us; and we must find a way to be reached by them. But that will not happen if we think of them as "them," or as "those who are different from us." We must recognize and address one another as individual, irreplaceable persons: as "you," as "Jennifer," as "John," as "aunt," "sister," "co-worker," "neighbor." It is, after all, my spiritual obligation to this person whose life and space I share that will serve as the impetus for the earnest dialogue and honest debate necessary for the discovery of common ground.

I believe that the Catholic faith possesses the resources to build and sustain this process of discovery in the years to come. I have faith in the power of the central doctrines and practices of the Church to overcome the various forms of self-segregation that continue to afflict us. A God who transcends the world can transcend our all-too-worldly divisions. A God whose love bore the humility of dying as a criminal for our sake can inspire in us the love and humility necessary to engage and reconcile our differences, as real and as deep as they are. A God who, incomprehensible, nevertheless stands at the end of our earthly journey as the common destination of us

all, can serve as the universal reference point that keeps us walking together on this shared pilgrim path.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Professor Dana Dillon from Providence College

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