

Q & A: Professor Dana Dillon

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 26, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we are hearing from young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project. Today's interviewee is Professor Dana Dillon, Assistant Professor of Theology at Providence College. **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 Dillon: I have to begin with a brief disclaimer about how difficult it is to speak well about such complex questions in such a short piece. Any attempt to do so will necessarily paint with too broad a brush, but I think that it is important to attempt this conversation anyway. Although there are other ways to cast the divisions within the Catholic Church in America, I want to offer two basic ways to see it.

The first way to name the divisions in the Church is simply to call the two groups the Democrats and the Republicans. If we're uncomfortable with the use of party labels to describe Church realities, we could call these groups liberal/progressive and conservative, or left and right, or blue and red. I think there are a great many people who, specifically because they are Catholic, do not fit into either political party as easily as they might otherwise. How many of us look for odd combinations like Democrats who oppose abortion and Republicans who support programs for the working class? But I always find it a little astounding when my Republican friends who are happy to swing the club of the magisterium or the tradition when the topic is abortion or same-sex marriage are the first to relativize the tradition and talk about the importance of leaving prudential judgments to the proper civil authorities when the topic turns to war or economic justice. And some of my friends who were deeply opposed to Condoleezza Rice's honorary degree at Boston College in 2006, on grounds that her actions as Secretary of State violated the Catholic moral tradition around war and the dignity of the human person, were among the first to defend Notre Dame's decision to offer President Obama an honorary degree in 2009, and brushed off similar arguments that his pro-choice history likewise constitutes a violation of the Catholic moral tradition around the dignity of the human person. To the extent that we are unable or unwilling to see these inconsistencies as inconsistencies, we are shaped much more by our national party politics than by an authentic reception of the gospel or of our Catholic tradition. And, to that same extent, we are and will remain polarized.

The second way that I want to name the divisions in the Church centers around one's relationship to episcopal authority. Again, the overly simplistic way to name these three groups is for, against, and "it's complicated." Of course, the real answer is that it is complicated for all of us. But anyone who has been around the Catholic world long enough knows some people who have a knee-jerk reaction to anything that comes out of the Vatican or the USCCB or their own chancery. For some of them it is immediate embrace while for others it is instant rejection. Most of us consider ourselves to be much more nuanced thinkers than that, and yet, if we are really honest with ourselves, we can probably admit that we tend to view statements from our bishops with either a charitable eye or a highly critical one. I think this division is one that is more marked in the earlier generation of theologians than in those of us who are newer to the field. I think that there are four key moments in the last half century that have deeply marked those who lived through them as theologians, and they particularly shaped those theologians' sense of the church and their own role and their own risks as theologians within it. The four events are (1) the Second Vatican Council (1961-65), (2) the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* (1968), (3) the dismissal

of Charlie Curran from his post at Catholic University of America (1986), and (4) the promulgation of *Veritatis Splendor* (1993). For theologians who lived through these, they are key markers in one of two stories. One story begins with a hope and a promise of a new church, more responsive to the real needs and issues of the Christian faithful and continues with three incidents in which, in different ways, that promise was betrayed or twisted by a backward-thinking magisterium. The other story begins with a betrayal of the Catholic tradition in a false understanding of the "spirit" of the Second Vatican Council and is followed by three acts of heroic re-direction on the part of the magisterium. The same "dots," so to speak, connected in radically different ways. Theologians of my generation learned about all of these incidents like a history lesson—perhaps a bit more like family history than like history class—but certainly not something that we experienced firsthand. And we are rarely, if ever, in the same room at once with all the players, because most of them do not gather with one another. Most graduate programs lean one way or the other, as do most professional gatherings and conferences. Those of us younger theologians who are lucky enough to have come to know and value voices on both sides of the divide feel the absence of those who have opted out of organizations like CTSA. To its credit, the board of the CTSA has been concerned about this for some time, but it remains a profound problem that the "conservative" voices are systematically missing from this group that was intended to be the gathering space for all American Catholic theologians. I will admit that my first CTSA meeting was a bit of a shock to me. I was not surprised at all to find that most speakers approached topics from a liberal perspective, but I was stunned to find that many of them spoke as though this was the only perspective a reasonable person might have. My sense is that most of these divisions will be with us for the foreseeable future, but I do see some signs of hope. Since 2002, I have attended symposiums of New Wine, New Wineskins, a group of pre-tenure Catholic moral theologians who gather annually for theological conversation, punctuated by meals and prayer together. The group seeks participants from all graduate programs and prioritizes developing the kinds of friendship that can survive serious disagreement, and, certainly I can attest that the friendships formed here have given me a sense of important areas of disagreement to explore and have given me a great deal of hope that we can move closer together than we often seem. To be fair, part of the success of this group has stemmed from the willingness of senior scholars in moral theology to be our conversation partners and to send us their graduate students. In talking with younger scholars at New Wine, New Wineskins and at the recent Fordham Conversation Project gathering, I have noticed that our generation is deeply concerned about our students' faith. In fact, at the FCP, time and time again, participants responded to questions about the divisions in the Church with stories of the classroom and the challenges our students face in discovering and nourishing a vibrant faith in Christ. Many of us expressed a concern that our students don't know much about their faith, and a hope that they will walk away from our classes not just with increased knowledge, but with some sense of faith. We also share a concern that, in a world where all things spiritual, religious, and transcendent are constantly marginalized or attacked, the deck is stacked against our students finding and holding onto a flourishing Christian faith. I suspect that theologians of every generation and of every ideology share this concern. But I think that Catholic theologians that grew up in a post-Vatican II Church are perhaps better equipped than those who came before them to know what a challenge it is to grow up in a world hostile to faith in a Church divided against itself, and in the midst of that to become an adult with a mature and vibrant faith in Christ. And, from what I saw at Fordham last weekend, this generation of theologians is ready to step forward and partner with one another, with the older generations of theologians, with bishops, with priests, with anyone willing to nurture that Church—even if it means working through some of our disagreements and biases—so that we can pass on to our students and our children a faith in Christ that is capable of bearing fruit in charity for them, and for the life of the world. I think that is a great sign of hope.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Professor Michael Peppard of Fordham

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