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Young theologians hope to reduce polarization

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 16, 2010

Family members and friends gather for a May 17, 2008 graduation ceremony at Fordham University in this stock photo.

A group of young theologians teaching at Catholic colleges and universities gathered at Fordham University in New York City in August to discuss their work on behalf of the church. About 17 attended; all were under age 40 and none of them have tenure, the two requirements for membership in what was billed as the ?Fordham Conversation Project.?

Recently, for the ?Distinctly Catholic? blog on NCRonline.org [1], some of the participants discussed the ways in which young theologians bring different perspectives to their work, especially their reluctance to carry some of the baggage leftover from the theological debates that characterized the years immediately after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The Fordham Conversation Project grew out of a coffee klatch among the junior faculty at Fordham. They have not devised a mission statement as yet. Nor have they desired to establish rigid structures, believing that the conversation needs to develop more organically. Michael Peppard, an expert in Biblical theology and New Testament at Fordham, told *NCR* that the group did devise this paragraph to describe themselves:

> 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.

One of the organizers of the group, Charles Camosy, assistant professor of theology at Fordham, wrote that the controversy surrounding President Obama?s speaking at last year?s graduation ceremony at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana helped spur the group?s commitment to moving past the polarization that often afflicts internal Catholic discussions.

?The divisions of the church were widened and deepened as result,? Camosy wrote. ?And yet the event itself (which happened to be my doctoral commencement weekend) brought hope. The impressively mature and respectful behavior of the graduating seniors in particular, whether they were cheering Obama or engaging in a separate ceremony in protest, brought with it the overwhelming feeling that this could signal a new moment for our public discourse.?

He believes that the Fordham Conversation Project provided the young theologians with a ?safe place? to discuss their opinions without feeling the need to posture.

Camosy also believes that the generational passing of the torch holds out the possibility that polarization within the church can be lessened.

?The generation that went before us (the generous support from several members of which, it should be noted, made it possible for the Fordham Conversation Project to exist at all) grew up in a premodern church that people on most sides agree benefited from the reforms of Vatican II. They were theologically formed during the culture wars of the 1960s and ?70s through which much of the council and its aftermath were read. But a new generation of theologians has been formed under significantly different circumstances, and that might give one some hope that polarization coalescing around late-20th-century secular political categories may not dominate future discourse in the American Catholic church.?

Other participants in the Fordham Conversation Project also noted how different generations approach the issue of Catholic identity.

?I don?t know if this looks differently to me as member of Gen X than it does to baby boomer or silent generation Catholics,? wrote Julia Brumbaugh, assistant professor of religious studies at Regis University in Denver. ?I know I grew up in a parish where my elders raised me to be Catholic, not liberal or conservative. I only found out later--perhaps as late as graduate school -- that I was a ?particular kind of Catholic.?

?I don?t think the labels would be so bad if they weren?t so uncreative and unenlightening. Of course I?m a particular kind of Catholic. But, wouldn?t it be more interesting to talk about how my Thomist/Ignatian/feminist/U.S. West Coast Catholic vision of things informs my encounters with the world, theology and liturgy? Or how that vision might help me encounter someone inspired by any of the other dynamic traditions within the larger Catholic tradition: Franciscan, Benedictine, Celtic, Midwestern, Catholic Worker or Vincentian, just to name a few familiar ones?

?But we don?t talk in fundamentally Catholic or even religious categories that might give texture and therefore points of contact and communion with each other; we talk in political lingo, lingo that is increasingly constructed in our country to divide and alienate,? Brumbaugh said.

Patrick Clark, assistant professor of theology and religious studies at the University of Scranton, Pa., noted how the divisions bequeathed to his generation have corroded the church?s liturgy. ?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,? Clark wrote.

?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?? Clark asked.

All the contributors were clear that they saw it as their job as Catholic theologians to try to heal the divisions within the church. Dana Dillon, assistant professor of theology at Providence College in Rhode Island, noted that a group similar to the Fordham Conversation Project, ?New Wine, New Wineskins? has been bringing young, pre-tenure moral theologians together for annual meetings since 2002. In addition to discussions about moral theology, the group shares meals and prayer together.

Peppard also questioned whether today?s church is more divided than in previous times, or if the divisions simply take on different forms. ?Are we more divided than past eras?? Peppard asks. ?I?m not sure. The Irish and Italian immigrants weren?t exactly praying the Angelus together in the New York of yesteryear. Nor were the Poles, Slovenians and Croatians in Chicago. In past eras, ethnic parochialism sometimes threatened Catholic unity.

?What we have now is something different: a parochialism that is both virtual and ideological. The opportunities afforded by online social networking and internet media have catalyzed a compartmentalization of Catholic subcultures in virtual space.?

[Michael Sean Winters writes ?Distinctly Catholic,? a daily blog on **NCRonline.org**.]

More reports from *NCR* on the Fordham Conversation Project:

- Winters' extended interviews with young theologians at his *NCR* blog, Distinctly Catholic [1].
- *NCR* senior correspondent John L. Allen Jr. on the Fordham Conversation Project [2].

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