

## Catholic Conversation Project

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 15, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Just back from the Catholic Conversation Project, a gathering of young theologians who started meeting at Fordham three years ago with the hope of transcending the facile and unproductive categories of left v. right that have unhappily migrated from the political sphere into the Catholic world. The shrill histrionics on all sides that surrounded Notre Dame's decision to invite President Obama to receive an honorary degree prompted the formation of the group, which started with young theologians at Fordham and has grown to include theologians from across the country. They now meet through the generous support of Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, and the meeting is held at a retreat center owned by BC, the former St. Stephen's Priory in Dover, Massachusetts.

It is not news to regular readers that I am a big fan of these young theologians and am deeply committed to their goal of transcending the divisions within the Catholic intellectual community. To be clear — both for myself and for the theologians — unity and uniformity are not the same thing. Each of the young theologians brings different talents and perspectives to their work. But, we Catholics need to get past the shouting match.

It is not possible to entirely eradicate the left v. right divide. Maritain once said something to the effect that all of us are born into the world with a certain kind of heart. Some have a more liberal heart, others a more conservative one, in any event, it is not the kind of thing a person can do much about — you have the heart you were born with. But, it is the better part of learning to recognize the kind of wisdom that resides in the kind of heart you did not get. It seems to me that the Catholic Conversation Project is, in part, an effort to share conversations in such a way that those with more liberal hearts can access the wisdom of those with conservative hearts, and vice-versa. This is mere intellectual honesty and humility. It is lovely to see in action.

This process involves, as it must, a very self-conscious reflection on the role of theologians in the Church today. It is astounding to think that fifty years ago, theology was something only clerics did and that most theology was related to the training of seminarians or clergy. Only in the past fifty years has theology become something undertaken by dozens of laymen and laywomen, in academic institutions distinct from seminaries, with students who will not be clergy. This change requires extensive analysis by theologians and by the bishops: The canons of the modern research university are different from the canons of the Church. In our plugged-in culture, academics can as easily be cast as spokespersons for the Church in the media as can a bishop. And, in our anti-authoritarian U.S. culture, the media is always on the lookout for divisions and conflicts to report, creating a narrative that it is far too easy for all of us to fall into. The CDF's notice about Sr. Margaret Farley's book made headlines. You will never read a headline, "Vatican declines to condemn hundreds of theology books." It is news that the train derailed. It is not news that the train arrived on time. Consequently, if all your average Catholic in the pew knew about the state of Catholic theology was from reading the newspapers, that average Catholic would perceive a narrative that is largely untrue.

This year's meeting of the Catholic Conversation Project intended to focus on the role of the Church in the public square, with special focus on the recent struggles over the HHS mandates. I think everyone was acutely aware that the religious liberty debate was irrevocably shaped by the fact it arose in the context of two of the

Church's most contentious teachings, opposition to artificial contraception and support for undocumented immigrants. This created problems for the Church's side in the debate. The Catholic Left tends to agree that it is wrong to expect the Church to demand documentation from those we serve. The Catholic Right tends to agree that it is wrong to force catholic institutions to pay for contraception. But, a funny thing happens when academics gather to talk. In the formal discussions, the conversation tended to veer off into other areas while at the informal discussions over drinks or dinner, the conversation tended to stay more on the topic of the Church in the public square. I did not get an answer to the question I brought to the meeting "was Murray right?" but I learned a lot about how others view the religious liberty issue, the role of the Church in the world, and the role of theologians in shaping that role.

One of the decisions that the organizers of the Catholic Conversation Project made early on was to invite a member of the hierarchy to join them for the meeting. Last year, Bishop Michael Mulvey of Corpus Christi participated and this year Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville joined the group. Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley also sat in for one session and joined us for lunch. I cannot say how vital I think this opportunity to meet and discuss issues informally is for both bishops and theologians. If theologians are to recover their distinctly ecclesial mission, this must be done by working with, not in opposition to, the bishops. Conversely, if the bishops are to be effective in proclaiming the Gospel today, they must engage the theological community. At this time in our culture, these discussions are vital. We were meeting in Massachusetts where, in November, there is a referendum on euthanasia, and days after the GOP selected a candidate who rose to fame on the strength of his position on entitlement reform, a position that, to my mind, reveals an attitude towards the elderly, who have earned the right not to concern themselves with the possibilities of an "Opportunity Society" and to not worry about paying for health care, that is almost as crazy as that espoused by the advocates of euthanasia. I would add that the underlying anthropological assumptions of the advocates of euthanasia and of turning Medicare into a voucher program are disturbingly similar. I am very much inclined, at such a moment, towards the "all hands on deck" approach to the Church's role in the public square. There are many assaults on human life and dignity. They are all related and they must all be combated. This transcends political divides. The prospect of getting bishops talking with the theological community and the theological community talking with the bishops can only help the Church confront those assaults.

One last thought. It is very beautiful and significant "intellectually significant too" that the meeting began with Mass and ended with Mass. (It helped that Bishop Flores delivered a rock-star quality homily at the opening Mass!) As we all think about our role in the Church, me as a journalist, the group as theologians, the bishop as a bishop, it is good to be reminded that all of us are called to submission to the Lord Jesus who reveals himself in the Scripture and feeds us in the Eucharist. Modern academic life, like modern journalism, rewards self-promotion and self-assertion. You get published for being novel and get attention for being edgy. But, as baptized Catholics, we are called first and foremost to place ourselves in a narrative that we did not generate, a narrative that began when God set the stars in the sky and sent his prophets and then his Son to save us and His Spirit to sustain the Church. The great gift of the Eucharist places us all under the scandal of the Cross and turns us, converts us, to fix our hearts and minds on Christ. That is how all intellectually activity in the Church must begin, with hearts and minds fixed on Christ.

Blessings on the Catholic Conversation Project. I expect great things from these young theologians, not only in their individual work but in their commitment to come together and consider how they can further define their own role within the Church, as well as the unique contributions the Catholic intellectual tradition has to offer our broken world. The Church needs them just as the world needs the Church.

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