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Diversity at the CTSA

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 9, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The Catholic Theological Society of America has, after some delay, released the report of its ad hoc committee on diversity within the CTSA. The report, in its entirety, is at the end of this post. A letter from CTSA President Richard Gaillardetz accompanied the report. That letter is below, too.

The CTSA has very self-consciously embraced diversity as a value. They have repeatedly been concerned about including different voices, different gender, different racial, different ethnic, and different sexual orientation voices within its fold. But the report concludes that the organization has been less concerned about including conservative voices. According to the report, the CTSA meetings frequently "include jokes and snide remarks about, or disrespectful references to, bishops, the Vatican, the magisterium, etc. These predictably elicit derisive laughter from a part of the audience." It further notes that public discussions at CTSA meetings frequently display demeaning references toward conservative theologians and cites these two examples: "The phrase 'thinking Catholics' is sometimes used to mean liberals. The phrase 'people who would take us backwards' is sometimes used to mean conservatives." The report charges that CTSA elections are tilted away from the concerns proper to a profession society: "Scholarly credentials seem often outweighed by voters' partisan commitments."

The report concludes its indictment with strong words: "In sum, the self-conception of many members that the CTSA is open to all Catholic theologians is faulty and self-deceptive. As one of our members put it, the CTSA is a group of liberal theologians and 'this permeates virtually everything.' Because the CTSA does not aspire to be a partisan group, both attitudes and practices will have to shift if the CTSA is to become the place where all perspectives within Catholic theology in North America are welcome."

The ad hoc committee makes several recommendations, which you can read below. All of them seem advisable.

In the letter accompanying the report, Gaillardetz strikes the right note, calling for a "hermeneutic of generosity" among the theologians. He notes that the CTSA board does not share all the concerns of the drafters of the report but urges the members of the CTSA to take their concerns seriously.

It is no secret I am not much of a fan of what has passed for professional theology in recent decades. I understand that academic theologians have felt, for the first time, the need to justify their budgets to members of a university faculty who represent the chemistry department and the architecture school. I understand too that for many theologians, the past 35 years have been characterized by fear of ecclesiastical censure. To my mind, these facts do not excuse some of the faddishness and thinness of contemporary theology, and I am delighted to see a younger generation of theologians who embrace Aquinas and revel in Augustine, who understand that the theological task is an ecclesial task and can never, not for a Catholic, be separated from the church that, after all, provides the data -- Revelation -- and most of all, who do not have a chip on their shoulder against the hierarchy but wish to engage them.

Nor is it news that the academy often resembles the sand box in its turfiness and pettiness.

So, the CTSA is to be commended for setting up this ad hoc committee and for sharing its findings with its members. It is well advised to practice the diversity they have been preaching. And some of the more liberal members just might learn a thing or two by arguing with a thoughtful conservative, and vice versa.

Here is the text of the report:

Report to the CTSA Board From the Ad Hoc Committee on Theological Diversity [1] by National Catholic Reporter [2]

Letter from Richard Gaillardetz to CTSA [3] by National Catholic Reporter [2]

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