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Q & A: Professor Charles Camosy

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Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we will be hearing from a new generation of Catholic theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project meeting earlier this month, which aims to heal the polarization within the American Catholic theological community.

First up is Professor Charles Camosy, Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics at Fordham.

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 Camosy:

For those working and praying for unity in the American Catholic Church, the buildup to Obama's being honored at Notre Dame might have seemed like a low point. Vicious attacks, often uninformed by any attempt to understand the other's position, were the order of the day in the blogosphere, newspaper editorials, and in general conversation. The divisions of the Church were widened and deepened as result. 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.

Indeed, this moment has already inspired a major national conference at Princeton this October designed to find new ways to think and speak about abortion; and the Fordham Conversation Project, similarly inspired, last week hosted a colloquium of young theologians in the Bronx who have a desire to teach our many thousands of students, produce scholarship, and otherwise serve the Church in ways which push

back against our current polarized discourse. Though we had differences of opinion on important issues, the spirit of the group—characterized by friendship rather than demonization, intellectual solidarity rather than defining by opposition—created a safe place for very personal points of view to be expressed.

Unfortunately, such safe places (especially in today's mobile and virtual world) are often neighborhoods (real, TV, or online) where we choose to interact with like-minded people. But in our classrooms, writings, and public addresses, theologians have the chance to craft safe "neighborhoods" that are intellectually diverse without being defined by the tired, polarizing categories and rhetoric that plague our current discourse. Indeed, I was thrilled to find many members of the colloquium (like so many of my other younger colleagues I've met around the country) allergic to using the binary political categories of "liberal/conservative" to describe our complex world.

The generation that went before us (the generous support from several members of which, it should be noted, made it possible for the FCP to exist at all) grew up in a pre-modern Church that people on most sides agree benefited from the reforms of Vatican II. They were theologically formed during the culture wars of the 60s 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.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Professor Julia Brumbaugh of Regis University in Denver.

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