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Q & A: Professor Julia Brumbaugh

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Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we continue to hear from young theologians about the challenges they face, and their hopes for their work. All the respondents participated in the Fordham Conversation Project earlier this month.

Today, we hear from Professor Julia Brumbaugh of Regis University in Denver, Colorado.

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 Brumbaugh:

The divisions in the American Catholic Church embody failures in both our political and ecclesial lives. On the one hand, they appear to be symptomatic of the divisions in our larger political and social culture. On the other hand, they appear symptomatic of a failure common on both sides of the divide to see each other as belonging to the same community, as longing to be moved by the same Spirit and to be faithful to the same great tradition. The second failure is far greater because it expresses a lack of real faith in each other, but also in God who is the source and fulfillment of our communion.

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. 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, Mid-

western, 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.

In the end, it breaks my heart to see the judgment, the mean-spiritedness and the general lack of creativity that mars our communion. But I do have hope. Sometimes it feels like hope against the evidence because I don't see many signs of hope for healing the Church at the national level. Fundamentally, I am hopeful, though, because I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church in ways I can see and ways I can't, and so I look for the work of the Spirit high and low. Most of what I see that gives me hope is very local or very global. I see the tenacity of some of my friends (mostly Gen Xers) who have stayed in the church, who are raising their children in it, and living in the light of its teaching?often in spite of the fact that the local church does little to welcome them. Among my students I see young people from all sorts of persuasions asking good questions about Christianity and Catholicism, and looking to our tradition and community for meaning and support in their lives. In my personal experience, I gain hope from the fact that for many years now I have felt called by God to this work of studying, theologizing and teaching within the Catholic Church. At the global end, I have hope because the Church is wildly bigger than the American (Anglo) Catholic experience might suggest, and that context reminds me that our situation is not static, but dynamic.

Tomorrow's Interviewee: Professor Patrick Clark of the University of Scranton.

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