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Q & A: Professor Michael Peppard

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Distinctly Catholic

We close out this week of hearing from young theologians with commentary from Michael Peppard, Assistant Professor of Theology at Fordham University and one of the founders of the Fordham Conversation Project.

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 Peppard: In my experience as an educator of Catholics at the high school, undergraduate, and graduate level, I can testify that I have hardly ever seen bitter, irreconcilable theological divisions among my students. For the most part, they are faithful, open-minded, and charitable in their disagreements. That's the good news from where I stand. I'll get to the bad news in a moment.

The fact that I haven't seen stark divisions of the kind that cause protest, rage, and vicious name-calling is in part due to the fact that such divisions in the American Catholic Church are less present on the ground than they are in the virtual spaces of talk radio, television punditry, print media, and the blogosphere. I pay attention to these Catholic media, and I know where most of the fault lines are. But a few years ago, when I gave up the Internet for Lent, I realized how little I saw of these divisions in my real life. I went to work, to teach, to church, and to social engagements without encountering them for 40 days. It was a relief.

That being said, the divisions among Catholic opinion-makers in the media are not fabricated out of nothing. It's just that they are sometimes more like caricatures, exaggerating divisions at the expense of commonalities. The "new media" are different than the old in myriad ways, but not in this one: if it bleeds, it leads. Conflict still sells.

Are we more divided than past eras? 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.

This brings me back to the bad news from where I stand. One reason I haven't seen bitter divisions among Catholic college students is that they may have sorted themselves out before they even got to me. Students who selected their school out of the Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College, for instance, are not ever going to end up in my classroom, or any Jesuit university, for that matter. They will be at a "Cardinal Newman Society approved" Catholic campus with like-minded peers. In their classrooms, they too will probably disagree with good manners because their differences with each other are not that large. The process is akin to the demographic self-sorting described by Bill Bishop in the book, *The Big Sort*. Just like Americans in general, many young American Catholics are sorting themselves into enclaves of like-minded people. For my part, I am convinced that John Henry Newman and Dorothy Day would have enjoyed a conversation, if they had ever been able to meet. But often I worry that young devotees of these two luminaries do not meet in "real" spaces of encounter, where they might talk and pray with each other.

I don't despair, though, for the American Catholic Church. I see hope in the younger generation during the Eucharistic liturgy. One way that younger people are less divided than the members of the Vatican II generation is with regard to sacramentality, especially the aesthetics of the Mass. I have been involved in music ministry for about 16 years in high school, college, and parish settings. Let me tell you about a student I directed named Tony, who was the best vocal soloist (and a fearsome defensive lineman) in his high school. Tony loved chanting the *Salve Regina* in Latin; he relished the chorus of the acoustic guitar anthem, "Take, Lord, Receive"; he was the best player of the djembe drum during our Gospel-style Mass setting. He liked singing Latin AND English AND Spanish; kneeling AND clapping; incense AND drums. Tony was like most young Catholics in that he had no innate sense of the liturgical divisions he was "supposed" to feel about all of this. He found it all prayerful, as long as it was done well. The aesthetic diversity seemed natural to him. He had that quintessential "both / and" sensibility of Catholicism?what Pope Benedict has called "the great et et.?"

Contrast this with an experience I had in a different parish, when I took over as music director for one of the masses. That parish hadn't been doing much music that was very old, but I knew from interviews that many parishioners would have welcomed more of a mix. So we (re)introduced chant during Lent, just the basic *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* for starters. But for some members of the Vatican II generation, this was an obstacle to their prayer. To some who had lived through that era, the singing of Latin felt reactionary. Granted that some found the chant comfortable; but others found it frustrating. Many had no nostalgia for the old rite that Latin, for them, symbolized.

The world of ideas and the virtual spaces of the Internet are places where American Catholic divisions will likely continue to grow and fester. But I take solace in the communion of the Eucharist. As St. Paul taught in 1 Corinthians, which is the earliest extant text about a fragmented church: there are bound to be factions among us, but they must never be present when we meet as the body of Christ.

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