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Q & A: Beth Haile

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This week, we are continuing our discussion with young theologians who were involved with the Fordham Conversation Project. Today we hear from Beth Haile who is an instructor at Laboure College.

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?

Beth Haile: I would have to say that I am much more optimistic about the future of the Catholic Church than some of my colleagues. I write this on the feast day of St. Augustine, that great Catholic saint who, when faced with the Donatist controversy, did everything in his power to restore unity with those in disagreement with the Church. For Augustine, the Catholic Church would always remain imperfect while on this earth and would, therefore, have to tolerate sinners in the midst of its saints. St. Augustine reminds us that the true church is always a little-c catholic church.

The deep divisions that exist in the church, while very real, are not new. The church has always been divided on particular issues of faith and morality. What is distinctive about the church is that she stands on the solid rock of Christ, and so long as Christ is the source and summit of the faith, I am convinced that no division is too great to overcome our essential unity.

I teach in a Roman Catholic nursing school, with many students who come from the "south," which is where sociologists tell us the faith is moving. John Allen, in his new book *The Future Church*, writes, "The South is the Faith, and the Faith is South" (15).

My students, especially my southern students, constantly surprise me in their failure to conform to any religious or political dichotomy I may have in my mind. Most of them are unaware of the controversy

around birth control. Few of them have read (or even heard of) the Catechism, but they know their Bibles and have no qualms about grounding their moral arguments in a literal reading of scripture. They find debates about liturgical form uninteresting and irrelevant to their lives, but conversations about whether there is a duty to provide health care to the poor carry over long after class has ended. Most adamantly insist abortion is immoral, and many of them are raising children they bore as teenagers, yet they were outraged at the recent excommunication of Sister Martha McBride. Many see no problem in saying that they are morally opposed to abortion and would never have one themselves, yet still think abortion should be a legal option.

Western Catholics for too long have defined ourselves according to what we are not. We have been too willing to say that those with whom we disagree are "not Catholic." My students, however, remind me that the church universal is the true Catholic Church. I find my students calling themselves "Christian" more often than they call themselves "Catholic." I find them turning to the words of Jesus or Paul more readily than they turn to the words of a bishop or the pope. I know that there are contrary trends in the US, especially among "millennial" Catholics, many of whom I am very close with. But I can't help thinking that the future of the church will be more little-c catholic than we in the western world can possibly imagine.

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