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Q & A: Candida Moss

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Distinctly Catholic

Apologies, again, for the absence of Q & A the last two days. It is back today with two entries, both from participants in the Fordham Conversation Project which brought together young theologians from around the country.

First, we have this submission from Candida Moss, Assistant Professor of Theology at Notre Dame.

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 Moss: In many ways I find myself unable to answer this question. Not being American, I am learning about these divisions?if there are divisions?inductively and attempting, as I go, to be wary of rhetorical postures, caricatures, and bad manners. I cannot presume, therefore, to venture an opinion on what divides Americans Catholics from one another nor on how to heal such divisions (We British have a bad habit of attempting to solve other people?s problems and I don?t want to fall into old habits).

In coming to the United States it was immediately clear to me that I don?t map onto the landscape of American Catholicism in a way that would seem coherent to anyone but me. In discussions of Catholic identity or goals, I sometimes find myself disagreeing with my fellow Catholics not just on ?substantive issues? but on what are the substantive issues. I have come to an appreciation of the fact that my experience of what constitutes a division or impasse in discussions about the Church are just that; my experience of what constitutes division. I only realize divisions are there when I see them, up close and personal, in local disputes (be those inter-institutional debates that make headlines or in the cozy atmosphere of the virtual neighborhood) and feel them grating against my own sense of what cannot be

given up.

When I first arrived at the Fordham Conversation Project I was optimistic. The excitement and interest of the organizers and participants was contagious and it's hard not to get swept up in that. We were and are all committed to making things better, coming together, seeking a way forward. Time and time again we expressed our desire to overcome divisions, heal rifts, and inspire passion in our students.

As energized as I was by the sentiment of the conversation, I was concerned that there wasn't much to back up our hope. I somewhat pessimistically ventured my opinion that not every division can and will be mended. Lurking beneath the surface of the group's buoyant optimism were stark differences of opinion, differences that, while not creedal, are real and elephantine. I was worried, I must confess, that we were playing Catholic hop-scotch: avoiding precisely the issues that would force a schism in our small group. Moreover, I wondered, is it hubristic to imagine that I have the right to speak for, or on behalf of, or with any degree of authority about ways to mend divisions in the Church? Who am I to do that? I know something about martyrdom, but I don't have much experience with intercession.

Unity, it seems to me, is nothing more or less than our desire to be unified. It is an expression and a stance towards one another and ourselves. To return to the Corinthian body (1 Cor. 12), Paul doesn't ask that we all become the same part of the body but that as different members we act in harmony and with a common sense of purpose. Perhaps the desire to be unified and move forward together doesn't address substantive issues or heal divisions but it does express a desire to stand together in solidarity and unity as we address them. In that sense unity, as global concept over and against local factionalism, is substantive. Divisions, disagreement, and discord have always been with us (witness, for example, the disagreements between Peter, James, and Paul) but there is something meaningful and substantive about the desire to commit oneself to finding unity regardless. If the Fordham Conversation Project has taught me something, it is that the desire to move forward and stand in unity as part of a global community is itself a strong stance and one that takes great courage.

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