

Q & A: Aaron Canty

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 2, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

Our second contribution at Q & A today comes from Aaron Canty, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at St. Xavier University in Chicago. See below for the contribution from Professor Candida Moss of Notre Dame. Both participate in 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 Canty: I am not sure if I can generalize about divisions within "the previous generation," because the generation that accompanied and came after Vatican II has within it sub-groups that often disagree about weighty topics; what is obvious is that the next generation of Catholics in America will not be shaped by the same challenges.

Some of the challenges they face include mounting cultural hostility to their faith and religious practices, the rapid technological advances that can increase the ease and quantity of communication but also can dehumanize interpersonal relations, and the augmented sense of isolation resulting from the fragmentation of intergenerational family life. Young Catholics of very different backgrounds all face these challenges and often are unaware of the challenges faced by the generation of Vatican II and its immediate reception. The Church's pastoral outreach to young Catholics can provide them with a basis for communion and solidarity if its pastors and lay leaders are sensitive to these needs.

Regarding the Catholic students I teach, I can echo the reflections of Michael Peppard and Beth Haile, who relate that their students do not easily fall into politically conceived categories. Many students at Saint Xavier are first-generation college students from working- and middle-class urban and suburban families, and while that might mean that their politics tend to be "liberal," I find that political labels rarely reflect how those students think about Catholic theology or religion in general.

Whether they have a burning passion to learn more about theology or whether they are just curious, they certainly do not reflect the polarization characteristic of those opining in the media. The students who demonstrate a thirst for learning about Catholic theology and practice might lack the knowledge and experience of older Catholics, but they have a receptivity and openness that is refreshing.

While many may not know much about doctrine or religious practice, they are willing to admit it. They tend to lack any "hermeneutic of suspicion," and while attributing to them a "hermeneutic of charity" might be too optimistic, nonetheless they certainly are open not only to people of other religions, which one might expect in an academic environment, but also to how fellow Catholics believe and practice their faith.

When they hear "Rahner" or "Balthasar," "Trent" or "Vatican II," they have no visceral reaction, because they know practically nothing about them, and they rarely have heard from their elders specific examples of how they might be "good" or "bad." They are willing to try to understand authors studied in class in terms that those

authors would recognize; caricature tends not to be on their horizon, because they have yet to acquire the learned skill of rendering different but overlapping approaches to theological problems as diametrically opposed beliefs. Also, the social consciousness they have developed thus far, which always impresses me, allows them to be open not only to seeing the causes of societal evil in others, but also in themselves.

The hope of youth is delicate, though. Their openness ? to faith, to the needs of the poor and marginalized, and to personal and communal prayer ? can be closed by a rupture of relationships, by pride, greed, cruelty, laziness, or abuse by others ? in short, by sin. If we had to look only to ourselves for the creation of visible unity, the prospect would be rather bleak.

Hope in Christ, however, is sure. This hope maintains and nourishes that openness. The next generation may believe that not all divisions will be bridged, and they may prioritize the resolution of divisions differently from my generation or my parents? generation. The persevering desire to bridge divisions, however, which young Catholics often possess, requires humility, a willingness to challenge others, and a personal willingness to be transformed. Not all young Catholics possess these traits, to be sure, but among those that do possess these traits, these signs of hope are a consolation for those who are weary of the familiar dichotomies that have shaped their experience of the Catholic Church in America.

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