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Young Theologians Meet at BC

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 16, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I drove up to Dover, Massachusetts where Boston College has a retreat center. I was invited to attend the second meeting of what is now known as the Catholic Conversation Project. The retreat center?s old stone walls kept my phone from getting a signal, which is normally a blessing but with a flooding basement back home in Connecticut and my Dad charged with taking care of my three dogs, this was a challenge. But, the day was extraordinary nonetheless.

The Catholic Conversation Project was the brainchild of Professor Charles Camosy and Father Mark Massa, S.J. Camosy graduated with a doctorate from Notre Dame in 2009 which is to say his commencement ceremony exposed some of the stark divisions within the Church: Notre Dame?s 2009 commencement speak was President Barack Obama. When Camosy returned to Fordham, where he had already begun teaching, he spoke with Massa who had long been concerned about the way the left v. right categories that we seem stuck with needed to be transcended. These categories sometimes obscure as much as they reveal. For example, I range myself on the left-of-center on most issues, to be sure, but I am pro-life, I usually attend a Latin Mass on Sundays (novus ordo) and I think Cardinal Francis George is one of the most brilliant writers in the American Catholic Church.

The junior theology faculty at Fordham began meeting with some regularity to discuss the issue. Last summer, they extended an invitation to other junior faculty from around the country to join them at what was then called the Fordham Conversation Project. Participants needed to be under 40, untenured, and teaching theology at a Catholic college or university. Massa transferred to Boston College last year, where he now serves as Dean of the School of Theology and Sacred Ministry, and he hosted the annual meeting this year.

The meeting was off the record so I can?t divulge details. I can say that for the first day, in addition to myself, they invited senior faculty from Boston College. We all gathered in one of the many great rooms of the facility, meeting people with whom we had only previously emailed, greeting those we had met before, and engaging new theologians.

Once everyone had braved the rain and arrived, we all went to the chapel for Mass. Presiding was Bishop Michael Mulvey of Corpus Christi who, like myself, was a friend of a friend of Camosy?s. It was fitting not only that the meeting began with Mass ? which is, in its way, where all theology begins ? but especially that we began with a celebration of the Feast of the Assumption. This feast has a special place in the heart of American Catholics: The first bishop in the United States, John Carroll, was consecrated on the Feast of the Assumption and the first cathedral built in the U.S., in Baltimore, is dedicated to Mary under the same title. But, the feast seemed propitious for another reason. Belief in the Assumption began as a popular devotion, springing from the sensus fidelium, then becoming a sound theological opinion and finally a proclaimed dogma. The Assumption ran the theological gamut you might say. In his sermon, Bishop Mulvey gave a deeper explanation of the significance, holding out Mary as the model of Christians, especially her capacity to let go of her own deepest identity at the foot of the Cross, bowing to the inscrutable will of God.

After Mass, the first panel discussed the relationship between theologians and bishops. The topic had been

chosen before the imbroglio surrounding Sr. Elizabeth Johnson erupted, but it was only the more timely because of that controversy. Again, I can?t go into the details because the session was off the record, but I can say that everyone agreed that we have to create both a culture and structures to promote dialogue between bishops and theologians and that this meeting was itself a first step in that direction. It is in the nature of the beast that some of the best conversations happen as participants break from the formal meeting and navigate the halls and stairwells heading to the refectory. I was lucky enough to walk alongside Professor Dana Dillon of Providence College who is simply put a theological star, and a rising star, having just begun her teaching career. Next week she heads to Rome for a year to help establish a program for Providence College students there.

We then had dinner where the conversation continued and then the panelists reconvened to take questions from the audience. The conversation was frank but respectful and very lively. My conclusions are not off the record: These young theologians are bright, able, and they perceive the need to re-establish the ecclesial identity of professional theology. The previous generation, the first to include many lay people, had a different task: Establishing their professional bona fides in an academic environment often hostile to religious intellectual claims. These young theologians benefit from that fact that those bona fides have been established, the theological niche in the modern academy has been carved out, but they clearly want more than tenure. They want to relate their work to their worship, they want to get to know their bishops and engage them as human beings as well as official teachers, and while they want to engage the issues that have animated previous generations of theologians, they also want to do so in ways that build up the communion of the Church rather than rend it.

When the Q & A concluded, everyone retired to yet another great room for cocktails and conversation. Before heading back to the flooded basement and the dogs in Connecticut, I had a chance to catch up with Camosy and Hoffsman Ospino of Boston College, who was the principal organizer at BC for the event. They were both very pleased with the way the meeting was going. The theologians will meet again today, without the senior faculty and with the lone journalist in attendance. Their last session will focus on the future of the Catholic Conversation Project for which I have two suggestions. First, keep it going, my dear young theologians ? the Church needs you. Second, next year, can I attend ?on background? so I can share some of the conversation, which was fascinating, with our readers?

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