

# Essays on Apologetics Volume I

*Preliminary Topics:  
The Human Response to Truth*

*by Dr. Jeffrey Mirus*

A Catholic Culture publication.

# Essays in Apologetics, Vol. I

## Preliminary Topics: The Human Response to Truth

by Jeffrey A. Mirus Ph.D.

Brief essays exploring the issues that need to be addressed before apologetics can even begin, from the disposition of the apologist to an understanding of how the human person responds to and arrives at truth.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction to Apologetics Volume I .....	5
Apologetics: First of All, I'd Like to Thank Myself .....	7
Friendly Persuasion .....	10
The Obligatory Nature of Truth .....	14
The Universality of Truth .....	15
I Know, and So Do You .....	16
Modern Knowledge .....	19
The Meaning of Newman's Grammar of Assent .....	25
Slavery of the Mind: The Cultural Case against the Church .....	28
Enslaved by the Dictatorship of Relativism .....	31
Mindless Ways of Limiting God .....	34
How We Think .....	37
Evolution: Thinking Clearly about Randomness .....	39
Evolution and the Faith, Revisited .....	43
Eliminating the God of the Gaps to Make Room for God Himself .....	45
A New Apologetics .....	47
More Impediments .....	50
Revelation Sheds Light on Natural Law .....	52
Through a Glass Darkly .....	54
Apologetics and Faith: Different Convictions .....	57
Understanding Proselytism .....	62
The Implausible God Who Died .....	66
Eucharistic Astonishment .....	67
The Church Perfect .....	69

# Introduction to Apologetics Volume I

September 08, 2011

There are a great many aspects of Catholic apologetics, an endeavor which may be briefly defined as giving reasons for the hope that is in us (1 Pet 3:15)—that is, offering an explanation and defense of the Faith to those who are presently indisposed to believe. Apologetics is also very useful for Catholics who wish to understand more thoroughly the meaning and grounds of their Faith, but in general it is to be distinguished from evangelization, catechesis and theological study.

The field of apologetics includes arguments aimed to convince someone of some truth of the Faith, as well as efforts to engage the emotions in order to persuade, and also to create a bond of trust with an audience. Classically, these three elements are referred to as *Logos*, *Pathos* and *Ethos*. In all of this, a large part of the task of apologetics is to clear away the impediments to faith, not only rational impediments but those that are not strictly rational, but may be determined in part by our culture or our passions.

In addition to these elements, the members of every audience, whether one or many, must be approached according to what they already know and believe, including what they only think they know (that is, their particular errors), and the prejudices which hold them back as well as the interests and concerns which motivate them. On the other side, too, there is a constant need to purify motives, to appreciate the good in others, and to grow in grace, so that the apologist himself might be a more fit instrument for the action of God in the heart of each potential believer.

Finally, just beyond the ordinary horizons of apologetics lie serious questions about our conception of truth, our appreciation of the importance of the mind's conformity to reality, and our need to suspend a reflexive faith in the dominant opinions (and bad habits) of our culture so that we can engage Revelation with a clear and open mind. All of these, and more, provide fertile ground for apologetical research and practice.

For the past eight years, I have been writing brief essays on CatholicCulture.org. These have appeared under various sectional headings, but are now published as they appear in both my *On the Culture* blog and our section for longer commentaries, called *In Depth Analysis*. These pieces are not generally written with a view toward the cohesiveness of a book, but over time enough of them coalesce under various topics so that providing the more relevant essays all together in one place becomes a significant

convenience.

Out of roughly a thousand such essays, there are at least two hundred which can be classed as at least highly relevant to the field of apologetics. Of these 200, I have chosen for this first collection those essays which address preliminary considerations, such as the disposition of the apologist, how we think, and the way the human person responds to and arrives at truth. A second collection will address issues of concern among those who are not yet Christian or at least not yet Catholic. A future volume may address issues of moment to Catholics who face the confusions and divisions they often find within the Church. Still another may delve into the particular moral issues which so plague our culture at the present time, which are deserving of special treatment. It is perhaps unnecessary to observe that all of these areas overlap; they cannot be rigidly separated.

All of the chapters in this collection first appeared on CatholicCulture.org between 2004 and 2011, but they are here organized topically rather than chronologically. My hope is that this more unified presentation will prove to reinforce the main points of the various subjects covered, while also making particular points easier to find, both initially and when looking back. It goes without saying that I submit everything written here to the judgment of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, presided over by the Vicar of Christ Himself in Rome—that same Church which I so ardently desire all men and women to enter as their one true home, in a world which is otherwise passing away.

# Apologetics: First of All, I'd Like to Thank Myself

May 24, 2004

It is not uncommon for athletes to give credit to God and thank their mothers and fathers when complimented on their abilities. Most of us don't remember to do this most of the time. When I think of my own abilities, for example, I am always painfully reminded of the contrary tack taken by a young basketball player after he was drafted by the NBA in 2003: "First of all, I'd like to thank myself." After all, he explained, he's the one who put in all the work and sweat.

Whatever the merits of these more selfish comments, it is clear that this particular player is not going to be selected as an ambassador for the NBA. His attitude does not inspire confidence. Instead, it raises a character issue. The same issue is at the forefront of Catholic apologetics.

## Reason and Witness

In his McGinley Lecture at Fordham University on March 2nd, Avery Cardinal Dulles surveyed the recent rebirth of apologetics and offered some guidance for its continued development. Dulles noted that it is impossible to force the intellect to assent to Revelation by means of logical argument. The purpose of apologetics is twofold: for the non-believer, it clears away obstacles to belief, so that mistaken notions do not obscure the Faith or prevent assent to it; for the believer, it provides reassurance that his various beliefs do not violate reason and, in fact, are in keeping with it.

But Revelation is necessary precisely because we cannot know the truths of the Faith through reason. Consequently, there has to be something else at work to make us want to embrace Faith, to use our reason to support it rather than to ignore or deny. Cardinal Dulles identifies that additional element as *witness*.

## Logos, Pathos and Ethos

This is not a new idea, but a timely reminder. God the Father bore witness repeatedly to Israel, and Christ Our Lord bore witness to those of us privileged to live after the Incarnation. Then he sent his disciples to be witnesses even to the ends of the earth (*Acts*

1:8). Unlike mere argument, personal witness demands a response, engaging the heart and mind. Insofar as the witness is both attractive and credible, there will be a tendency toward positive engagement. The listener is more likely to give favorable consideration to what the witness has to say.

In fact, apologetics requires three elements to be successful. The traditional Greek terms for these elements are: (1) **Logos**—the ideas or argument used in the effort to *convince* the mind; (2) **Pathos**—the emotional attraction of the presentation, the attempt to *persuade* by appealing to the heart; and (3) **Ethos**—the bond of integrity established between the witness and his audience which enables the hearer to listen and respond without instinctive denial.

### Humility at the Core

Ethos is the *je ne sais quoi* of apologetics. It begins with personal integrity, by which I mean the harmonious wholeness of the person, with all the faculties properly integrated, nothing out of place, nothing at war. This personal integrity in turn starts with humility, with knowing who we are and who God is, leading us to acknowledge our weakness and our need for grace. For apologetics as for life, there are two very important consequences of humility. First, this virtue enables God to shape us, to make us perfect as He is perfect (*Mt 5:48*). It opens us to that integrity on which ethos is based.

Second, humility puts us in solidarity with everybody else. We don't just say we are "poor sinners" (a pious expression too often used while we silently congratulate ourselves on being unlike other men). Instead, we recognize that this is what we really are. In this light, if we notice another person's deficiencies, we don't feel superior because we understand that we are largely blind to our own faults. In fact, we think it very likely that if we are doing better in some respect than someone else, it is because we haven't been as strongly tempted. We thank God for not putting us to the test. Precisely because we do not thank ourselves, ethos is completed in us. Humility forges that bond of integrity which leads to trust.

### The One Thing Needful

In apologetics (as in life), trust is the "one thing needful" (*Lk 10:42*). Before we open ourselves to another, we need to be confident that we won't lose something in the process, that our time won't be wasted, that we won't be fooled, used, or hurt. Personal witness that fails to establish this bond of trust is doomed to fail.

We remember as a sort of consolation, of course, that not even God always succeeds in establishing that bond, though He is eminently trustworthy. But our success rate will

be very low indeed if our attitude toward others is summarized by the question, “Who are you and where are you going in that handbasket?”

Now, personally, I’m not in a handbasket. I climbed out a long time ago. I work hard at what I do and I expect others to do the same. I know the truth, value the truth, and follow the truth. I fulfill my obligations. I keep the commandments. I follow Church rules. I tithe. I fast. I pray. (*See Lk 18:10-12.*)

But if this is my attitude, my apologetical efforts will fail. Truly, I will have only myself to thank.

### **Further information on apologetics and humility at CatholicCulture.org:**

1. [John Paul II, Allow Me to Profess Before You with Humility and Pride the Faith of Christians, 2001](#)
2. [Avery Cardinal Dulles, The Rebirth of Apologetics, 2004](#)
3. [Jeffrey A. Mirus, Apologetics: Forgotten Science, Lost Art, 1983](#)
4. [Janet Smith, The Christian View of Sex: A Time for Apologetics, Not Apologies, 1966](#)
5. [Litany of Humility](#)
6. [Catholic Answers \(web site\)](#)
7. [Catholic Apologetics Network \(web site\)](#)

# Friendly Persuasion

March 27, 2009

Over the years, I've been fairly heavily involved in apologetics. During my professorial years, I developed the apologetics program at Christendom College and taught the core apologetics course there for six years. I also edited and co-authored an apologetics text (*Reasons for Hope*, Christendom Press, 1978, rev. ed. 1982) and, in my last year of teaching, I wrote a brief popular guide to the nature of apologetics ([Apologetics: Forgotten Science, Lost Art](#), 1983), by which I hoped to contribute to a broader revival.

in the early years of Trinity Communications, when we were devoted to print, audio and video media (pre-Internet), I produced (and starred in!) a series of eight lectures on apologetical topics called *The Catholic Challenge*. When we had to close down our general publishing operation, we donated the series to Christendom. Then Trinity reinvented itself in the new online world, and since that time I've written a number of commentary articles and blog entries on this subject. Readers familiar with my work on CatholicCulture.org might remember—fondly, I hope—the following list of items, which I provide here simply for those interested in following up: [Apologetics: First, I'd Like to Thank Myself](#) (2004); [The Implausible God Who Died](#) (2005); [Eucharistic Astonishment, A New Apologetics](#) and its sequel [More Impediments](#), and [Can Faith and Reason Work Together?](#) (2007); [Apologetics and Faith: Different Convictions, Understanding Proselytism, Mary Ever Virgin](#), and of course our *What You Need to Know* item on [Apologetics](#) (all in 2008).

## A Drop in the Bucket

The good news is not the incredible brilliance and magnitude of my own work but the fact that my work is just a drop in the bucket of the revival of Catholic apologetics since the late 1970's. In fact, the volume of work has been so great that I need to mention only one name to dwarf myself: Karl Keating. After a fundamentalist group leafleted a Catholic parish during Mass, Keating (an attorney) wrote and distributed a reply, signing it "Catholic Answers". The response was enormous, and Catholic Answers was to become the name of the most prominent organization devoted to Catholic apologetics in the world.

Eventually Keating left the practice of law to devote his full time to the new

enterprise. Among other things, he and his team have developed leaflets, books, World Youth Day materials, radio programs, a series of public lectures and debates, apologetics-based pilgrimages (and cruises!), and an outstanding monthly magazine, *This Rock*. While Keating is by no means any longer isolated in the field of Catholic apologetics, the success of [Catholic Answers](#) is sufficient unto itself to demonstrate how far apologetics has come over the past twenty-five years.

Of course, apologetical energy can be directed in so many directions that there can never be enough of it. It is part and parcel of both evangelization, where it is used to overcome obstacles to the first hearing of the gospel, and catechesis, where the basics become a necessary adjunct to effectively teaching and explaining the doctrines of the Church. In the larger sectarian and cultural debates which no serious religious idea can escape, apologetics must be developed to deal with objections from every side: atheism, secularism, and scientism; the emotionalism of affective and artistic immersion; Protestantism and related devolutions from Catholicism; devotion to cults of various kinds; commitment to other major religious traditions; the analysis of both psychological barriers and motives of credibility; and many more. There is no end to the task of being “always ready to give a reason for the hope” that is in us (1 Pet 3:15).

### **The Components of Apologetics**

As I’ve written in the past, apologetics has also been traditionally (and very usefully) divided into its three component parts: *Logos*, *Pathos* and *Ethos*. This further illustrates the complexity of the task, and provides yet another reason why the apologetical effort is essentially endless.

When people think of apologetics in general, or first try to do it in particular, they think in terms of *logos*—the word, the content, the argument. But effective apologists soon find that if they do not have *ethos* (a certain bond of integrity between themselves and their audience) they make little headway no matter how good their arguments may be. One of the classic demonstrations of this was St. Dominic’s mission to reconvert the Albigensians. Some of the regional bishops had tried to do this for some years with absolutely no success, very likely because the Albigensians tended to adopt lives of poverty while the bishops were quite worldly. But when Dominic and his brothers came preaching they also exhibited in their lives an even deeper and more firmly rooted poverty than that practiced by the heretics. This was something good that their audience could relate to and admire. With respect to the Albigensians, then, the Dominicans had *ethos*, and it made all the difference.

In one of my more recent commentaries, I raised the question of whether we

shouldn't be attempting or offering some forms of writing that, essentially, were more engaging of the whole man than mere data and argument can ever be (see [Am I Writing about Nothing Today?](#)). In general the response, though modest, was favorable, but there were one or two who wrote in to suggest that such a thing would be a betrayal of the seriousness of our Christian calling. Despite the fact that some people simply don't get it, every successful apologist has to address this question with respect to his own work. It is very difficult to engage a person's mind if one does not appeal to his heart—his attitudes and emotions, his core values, his likes and dislikes, his interests, his personality as a whole. We may convince (conquer powerfully) through logic, but we persuade (make something sweet to another) through the one component of apologetics I haven't yet explained: *pathos*.

### **The Role of Pathos**

There are dangers in persuasion. When abused, it degenerates into emotional manipulation. For example, we might press someone to adopt a particular religion by suggesting that this was the most cherished dream of his recently deceased wife or mother, or by suggesting that he can be happy (perhaps with a certain woman) if only he joins a particular group (some cults operate this way), or by constant badgering, or even by offering various blandishments to convert or threats against falling away (quite common in Muslim countries). Such techniques inspire misplaced emotions such as guilt, lust or greed, tension seeking relief, or even fear. These techniques more or less deliberately twist another to our will.

When “converts” are won in this way, it is called proselytism, and although some Orthodox leaders seem to think it is proselytism if a Catholic in their territory so much as opens his mouth to speak, the proper understanding of proselytism always includes manipulation: It interferes with the due freedom with which a person should respond to the Gospel. This is regarded as a sin by the Catholic Church.

Nonetheless, Christ himself sought to win not only minds but hearts. He lived a most beautiful life, He made lovely things from wood, He enjoyed the companionship of those to whom He ministered, and He often clothed His teaching in very entertaining stories, stories frequently drawn from the warp and woof of his hearers' lives, with implications that resonated through the whole person. There were even occasions when He deliberately told stories (such as that of the ungrateful tenants) which positively roused his hearers to anger and indignation against those who were at fault, only to have them become chagrined (or angered still more) when they guessed He was referring to themselves. Truly, Our Lord knew how to engage the human emotions, to move the

heart to embrace His cause. Nor is it irrelevant to apologetics when we break down and cry while contemplating the Passion of His love.

It ought to go without saying that those who wish to defend and advance the Faith must live exemplary lives. But we must also learn to act, to speak and to write in ways that are calculated to make our message pleasing. In addition to choosing the right time, the right moment, to make an appeal, this includes taking the trouble to invest our message with a sympathetic understanding of the lives of those to whom we speak, and to do our best to make the message attractive and enjoyable. This requires not only prudence and rhetorical skill but imagination and empathy—though with empathy we begin to cross the blurry line between *pathos* and *ethos*. Also related to both components is the need to become all things to all men, as St. Paul says of himself (1 Cor 9:22), so that others may be attracted to our message and, by more readily accepting it, find salvation.

### **Persuading Others**

At the very least, we must learn to root out of our personalities and our presentations those things which appear harsh, callous, curt, dismissive, hasty and ugly. This is a minimal foundation for beginning to present things in ways that are actually attractive to others. To be sure, there are times when we must bear witness to the Truth no matter how harsh or unpalatable it may sound, and it is a grave sin—far too often committed over the past generation or so—to alter the content of the message so others won't dismiss it or dismiss us (which is more often the real motive). But those of us who are tempted to regard the world with an exceedingly jaundiced eye may sometimes feel we have done our duty, in season and out of season, simply by shouting down or pronouncing a verdict upon those with whom we disagree. Then, after all, we can more quickly write them off and get on with life!

But again, I don't recall that Christ ever took this approach. Even his rare condemnations—and he alone has the right to condemn—were exceedingly colorful, if one can consider whited sepulchers colorful! Apparently He calculated all he said to move his hearers. So we must ask: Is the servant greater than the Master? If not, then let us do the same.

# The Obligatory Nature of Truth

March 28, 2007

Here comes that “truth” business again. I’ve been using *Proverbs* for spiritual reading lately, with the assistance of the excellent pastoral commentary available in the *Navarre Bible*. Chapter 19 verse 9 says: “A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who utters lies will perish.”

The commentary immediately shows what lies behind this proverb, quoting Vatican II’s *Declaration on Religious Freedom*:

It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons, that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing personal responsibility, are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. (No. 2)

This passage could well have been written twenty years after the Council by John Paul II; perhaps it shows the early influence of Karol Wojtyla. In any case, it incorporates a profound philosophical insight: By our very nature as persons we are ordered toward truth and have a moral obligation to seek it.

It is in the nature of persons to know, and to will to act in accordance with what they know. As the Council stated, this implies a responsibility to know and will rightly, that is, according to the truth of things. Only persons are capable of this responsibility. It belongs neither to animals, nor to plants nor to inanimate matter.

But why do we have an obligation to seek religious truth above all? Because religion itself is an obligation. Every person reflects, sooner or later, on the question of whether he is a created being and, if so, whether he can know the God who created him. If, in fact, we are created, we have a two-fold obligation: first, to thank and glorify the Being who gave us life; and second, to see what that Being has to tell us about all the other realities our nature is designed to know and will.

Truth, especially religious truth, makes demands upon us precisely because of who we are. To proclaim glibly that everything is relative so that we can do whatever we want is a serious abdication of our essential responsibility as persons. Some readers will recall that I said in an earlier reflection that “there are still many aspects of truth to explore.” Truth’s obligatory nature is one of them.

# The Universality of Truth

March 22, 2007

Truth, of course, is the mind's conformity with reality. It is hard to see why our age has difficulty with such an elementary concept. All falsehoods, including all forms of relativism, are simply mental deviations from reality.

Within this proper understanding, there are still many aspects of truth to explore. For example, in an address on March 20th to a gathering of youth interested in journalism, Archbishop John Foley stressed that the media has an obligation to deal in truth because people have the right to truth. (The Vatican itself could take a cue from Foley, the head of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, when it decides whether to be frank the next time a pope is ill, but never mind.) In what sense is truth a right?

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine gives us part of the answer when he says that truth is the common property of all. Moreover, he who "speaks of his own", says Augustine, "speaks a lie." There are two interesting concepts here: first, that reality, the object of knowledge, is the heritage of all; second, that those who are most intent on advancing their own peculiar theories—like all those who attempt to mask reality for their own ends—are liars. The nature of a lie, perhaps, is that it steals truth by obscuring reality.

Apparently, Benedict XVI is similarly interested in this subject. In his last Wednesday audience (March 21), he argued that reason is the antidote to both myths and relativism. Citing Justin Martyr, the pope pointed out that it is through Christ, the Divine Word, "that is, the eternal Word, eternal Reason, creative Reason," that everything comes to be. Therefore, all of us participate in this "logos" by the use of our reason.

We begin to see what Augustine might have meant when he said that truth is the common property of all, and what Archbishop Foley meant when he said we had a right to the truth. Again, there are many aspects to consider. For example, you aren't morally bound to shout all your darkest secrets to the world. But in the midst of these many considerations, focusing on the sheer universality of truth makes a good start.

# I Know, and So Do You

March 13, 2006

I had one of those intuitive moments on my last evening walk. It was one of the first warm nights of an early Spring, and although turbulent weather was threatening, the sky was still clear, and the moon full. No leaves yet, so the view was perfect. Shining through a few light clouds and between the branches, over a wind strong enough to be heard, the moon was trying to tell me something. The moon was trying to speak.

## It Is All So Clear

In such a setting we may hear no words, yet meaning surrounds us. Which of us has not been caught in a moment of wonder when it suddenly became absolutely and obviously clear that there was a being greater than ourselves at work in the universe? There are times when we just *know* this; we can *see* it as clearly as we can see the moon, the stars, the sun, the sky, the sea. Most men have known it throughout history. Most of us have a stubborn religious streak deep down inside, confirmed in moments of vision such as this.

Never mind for the moment our quarrels over what God has revealed. I refer now only to the inescapably obvious fact that God is. So obvious is this fact that it takes considerable rhetorical sophistication and no little intellectual sleight-of-hand to get away with asserting the opposite. This sophistication and sleight-of-hand consists primarily of convincing people that one has a special expertise, a special qualification to speak which others may not gainsay. But really, these others generally accept the expertise without accepting the conclusion. They may keep grudgingly silent in the face of their supposed “betters”, but they still know what their betters do not.

## The Temptation of Science

What else can it mean, for example, that a huge percentage of Americans would like the evidence for intelligent design presented in public schools after two generations of brainwashing to get them to believe that evolution is a fact which disproves the existence of God? Examples of this sort can be multiplied. People seem to go along, but when they are quietly polled, they answer not based on what they have been taught, but on what they know. And they know God is.

The temptation of science is to believe it explains so much while actually explaining

so little. Science is not at war with philosophy or theology; it operates on another plane. It seeks answers to questions about how nature ordinarily functions. It does not seek answers to the question of why nature exists at all. To observe certain laws or predictable processes (or lack thereof) in nature tells us absolutely nothing about how nature came to be. And people know this, too. They may be occasionally confused, but they know and, ultimately, they do not forget.

Science is rooted in utility, the same as magic, though it is a superior system. The goal is to understand how nature works so that we can harness nature's forces for the benefit of ourselves. This is excellent, but it is not all, not even by half. When a man stops being useful for a moment, he begins to wonder not about how things work but about the nature of reality itself, and why what is real should, well, *be*.

### **The Grand Alliance**

But there are those who have a vested interest in quashing this sense of wonder. Who are they, and why? Was it Churchill who remarked that he had seen the enemy and it was us? There is a temptation in all of us to be a god, and to do this we must erase the memory of the real God. Our motives may vary. For one, it may be a moral problem. He naturally seeks to overturn the moral order that he may be comfortable with his sin. For another, it may be the desire for worldly glory or gain. He must bury the idea of God which nags him away from what he seems to desire. A third may wish to be seen as the font of wisdom, the very eminence of knowledge. For the proud, God is not a judge but a rival.

Can you imagine it, this incredible competition with God? It is the same in every age, and in every age the most worldly—who are almost inevitably the dominant group in any culture—must seek the most effective way to keep God at bay. For moderns, the best game in town is science. And so, in the name of science, God becomes a very doubtful proposition. We may well erase Him entirely. Then we may do as we please, and it is a small price to pay to worship the scientific savants, who are too wise to attempt to make us change our lives. That science plays this role is not essential to science; it is merely a convenience, very like an accident of history.

### **The Triumph of Wonder**

But those of us who are not so far gone, know. All those who are neither sophisticated nor deceptive enough to call black white and white black, know. And even those who have given themselves more completely to the world, the flesh and the devil—in moments of disgust or fear or true peace, they know too. Thus the world goes on and, in

general, despite enormous problems and obstacles and a propensity to trip all over itself, the world knows.

How is this? How do we know? We know because we are human and, despite the fallibility of our vision, we have been fashioned to perceive reality directly. As a scientist, a person measures only the manifestations of reality, the *phenomena*. But as a person, he or she sees things whole and as they are. The empirical data, the measured tangibles, these are less than the whole. Persons, by virtue of being persons, exist in relation to other persons and to things. We do not see only the shapes of noses and the lengths of eyelashes. By instinct, we look deeply and perceive essences. Like Adam, we have the power to name.

And why should we have the power to name? It is what I've been saying. It is because we know.

# Modern Knowledge

November 14, 2008

In these modern times, knowing things is paradoxically very difficult. Whether in the university, on the street or within families, we find ourselves divided between absolutists and relativists, conservatives and liberals, believers and atheists, creationists and evolutionists, poets and scientists. Indeed, the world is invariably divided into two kinds of people on every subject imaginable—all, more or less, depending upon what we think we “know”. Whenever we assert a particular proposition (say an interpretation of history, a political conclusion, or even a statement about the measurable material world, such as global warming), we find a hundred facts immediately adduced in favor of a contrary position. We can look up support for any idea at all on the Internet, in mere seconds. Just when we think it has never been easier to know the truth about anything, we become hopelessly embroiled in a sea of contradictions about everything.

This is frustrating, of course, and it is also potentially damaging in many ways, but there is both good and bad news to report. The good news is that it is not, in fact, any more difficult to know things now than in prior ages. The bad news is that this is so because it has never been easy to know anything. The modern world has certainly knocked enough settled claims on their proverbial ears to realize that what people thought they knew in the past may not have been true knowledge at all. But the increasing frustration and relativism characteristic of our own era also suggests that we are beginning to realize that being modern is not the key to being right. In fact, we humans find ourselves confused in every time and place, whether we know we are confused or not.

## The Importance of Truth

As I have had occasion to say before, truth is the mind’s conformity with reality. But reality is hard to grasp simply and solely because it is so *enormously* simple that finite minds can focus only on small aspects of it at any one time, creating an astonishing complexity of partial understandings, each of which may be marred by this or that error, making the innumerable parts even more difficult to fit together into a coherent whole. Nonetheless truth is important. Not only is the understanding of reality a good in itself, but it is the *sine qua non* of other goods. If we understand reality rightly, we at least have

a chance at success in anything. If we don't, the only possibility is ultimate failure at everything. For this reason, the right attitude toward knowledge is, first, a great respect for truth and its importance and, second, a profound appreciation for how hard it is to come by, and how little of it we possess.

Because truth is important, we do well to understand the various means by which it can be known. There are three general possibilities: revelation, deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning. Unlike earlier periods in our own Western tradition, we moderns have experienced a sort of crisis of first principles. From the early modern period on, three factors—the division of Christianity, the discovery of new cultures based on very different world views, and the rapid expansion of material knowledge with its attendant advances in technology and prosperity—have combined to create a peculiarly modern prejudice in favor of inductive reasoning. The prejudice at work here holds that deductive reasoning, which proceeds from the general to the particular and so attempts to logically derive subsidiary truths and corollaries from first principles, is exceedingly unreliable because it is so easy to get the first principles wrong. In contrast, inductive reasoning, which proceeds from the particular to the general, attempting to discern a pattern of general laws from a multiplicity of individual facts, is safer and more productive because it is so easy to get the facts right.

My opening paragraph should be enough to disabuse anyone of the notion that it is easy to get even the simplest of facts right, but just as deductive reasoning must proceed very carefully, because of the risk of false initial assumptions and logical fallacies, so too must inductive reasoning proceed with great caution, because it takes an enormous number of undisputed facts to suggest a pattern that only one hypothesis can accurately fit. In fact, while deductive reasoning will always be as strong as the propositions involved and their logical relationship with one another—and so is at least theoretically capable of generating certainty—inductive reasoning can by its very nature lead only to provisional conclusions. For as more “facts” are uncovered, the suggestiveness of the factual pattern may change, and as fresh minds come into play, a new pattern that better fits the facts may be discerned.

Revelation, of course, provides the most certain knowledge of all. Learning from tradition or authority is based on the principle of revelation, where what is passed down is at least likely to be reliable because of the hard-earned wisdom of the tradition or the degree of expertise involved. But I am concerned here only with ultimate Revelation from God Himself, which we accept based on the authority of God revealing, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Unfortunately, to make anything out of Revelation, one must first come to the conclusion that an authentic Revelation actually exists. This is in

itself an inductive process, for how else are we to know that God has revealed something unless there are unmistakable attendant signs that this “something” could have come only from God? Moreover, once the fact of Revelation has been established, there remains the problem of interpretation, for God’s mind is so very much deeper than our own. Despite these drawbacks, it is important to emphasize again that an authentic Revelation, for what it covers, is necessarily the most certain means of knowing truth. In fact, given that all methods of inquiry are based on some initial supposition (in this case, the existence of the Revelation), strict adherence to Revelation is our sole means of acquiring absolute certainty, without any possibility of error.

## Human Origins

The controversy over human origins is a case which nicely illustrates the problem of coming to know the truth. Some ancient philosophers addressed the question of origins deductively based on what they perceived as first principles. Also, Christians have sometimes attempted to reason deductively based on philosophical first principles and also based on Revelation. For example, proceeding deductively from the necessity of a First Cause and taking the Book of Genesis into account, Christians have often argued that God must have created each thing individually out of nothing. But neither the philosophical first principle nor a necessary interpretation of Genesis demands this conclusion. If we accept both sources of truth, we really know only that God’s involvement was necessary, without knowing exactly how He was involved.

At the same time, proceeding inductively from very careful observational study, and attempting to perceive similarities across the range of life as well as patterns of chronological development, many have concluded that an evolutionary process is responsible for what we call Creation and that, as this process can be explained materially, it is clear that God does not exist. But of course these are inductive leaps that can never be justified by the accumulation of any amount of material evidence. It is not at all clear that any material process provides its own entire self-explanation, nor that the absence of one kind of imagined divine causality proves the absence of every other possible kind—let alone proves that God does not exist.

Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed the need to properly integrate all sources of knowledge, avoiding logical errors and assertions beyond the evidence, in his recent address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, which met in November to discuss the topic “Scientific Insight into the Evolution of the Universe and Life” ([Universe Does Not Originate from Chaos: It Is a Cosmos](#)). Among other things, the Pope said the following:

...there is no opposition between faith's understanding of creation and the evidence of the empirical sciences. Philosophy in its early stages had proposed images to explain the origin of the cosmos on the basis of one or more elements of the material world. This genesis was not seen as a creation but rather a mutation or transformation. It involved a somewhat horizontal interpretation of the origin of the world. A decisive advance in understanding of the origins of the cosmos was the consideration of being *qua* being and the concern of metaphysics with the most basic question of the first or transcendent origin of participating being. In order to develop and evolve, the world must first *be*, and thus have come from nothing into being....

To state that the foundation of the cosmos and its developments is the provident wisdom of the Creator is not to say that creation has only to do with the beginning of the history of the world and of life. It implies, rather, that the Creator founds these developments and supports them, underpins them and sustains them continuously.... Thomas [Aquinas] observed that creation is neither a movement nor a mutation. It is instead the foundational and continuing relationship that links the creature to the Creator, for he is the cause of every being and all becoming....

To "evolve" literally means "to unroll a scroll", that is, to read a book. The imagery of nature as a book has its roots in Christianity and has been held dear by many scientists. Galileo saw nature as a book whose author is God in the same way that Scripture has God as its author. It is a book whose history, whose evolution, whose "writing" and meaning, we "read" according to the different approaches of the sciences, while all the time presupposing the foundational presence of the author who has wished to reveal himself therein.

### **The Necessity of Frameworks**

Because it is effectively impossible to gather data without some organizing principle with which to make sense of it, scientific research proceeds through the formulation of hypotheses. Thus, even for an inductive process, we start with a provisional assertion which describes how some aspect of nature functions. This hypothesis will be drawn from among many that could fit the data already known. Then, through observation and experiment, an attempt is made to verify or refute the hypothesis. Unfortunately, the mere failure to falsify the hypothesis does not ensure that it is true, for another hypothesis—perhaps one not yet imagined—might well pass the same tests. In exactly

this vein, G. K. Chesterton used to delight in writing mystery stories which provided multiple explanations for the same set of clues. For this reason, among the best scientists, hypotheses are slow to become theories, and theories even slower to become laws. And even laws may ultimately be disproved, as happened with Newtonian physics (which “works” only for objects of a certain size, and may in fact be only a useful approximation even for them).

If frameworks are important to inductive reasoning, they are the very essence of deductive reasoning, which is used to build such frameworks in order to offer the general principles by which we may more easily understand specific instances. If one starts in the right place and is exceedingly careful, the principles deduced in philosophy actually have the potential to be more effectively proven than those induced from the scientific accumulation of data. For example, it is possible to assert as beyond doubt that spirit, such as the human soul, cannot evolve from matter, such as the human body. Instead, the creation of the soul requires a special intervention by God. Still, a philosophical recognition of a first principle, or a derivation from that principle, may later be shown to be incorrect, either through a better central argument or through conflict with conclusions drawn from first principles that are even more certain.

Revelation also provides a framework. Whatever is certainly revealed is, by its nature, absolutely certain. Yet the proper understanding of these certainties is seldom immediately obvious; moreover, while deductive reasoning based on these truths is capable of elucidating other subsidiary questions, such reasoning may not always be correct. Catholics solve these problem through the authority principle, by which Jesus Christ, with full authority over the Revelation He imparted, also established a similar authority in His Church to protect and elucidate that Revelation through time. This authority principle governs the development of authentic Catholic teaching, providing the world with absolute truth in everything so revealed or elucidated. But even the Church’s Magisterial authority operates only within very narrow limits. The result is that while we Catholics possess considerable knowledge about how to go to heaven, we know very little with certainty about how the heavens go.

Or indeed about almost anything else: What motivates this or that person? What will be the impact of various political, social or economic policies? Which sources of information should we trust? What will the weather be like next week? Select any area of knowledge outside the Catholic revelational framework, and even Catholics can lay claim to very little. My point is simply this: While the very exercise of reason demands frameworks for organizing our thoughts and our ideas and our data, nonetheless, as with physical frameworks, we must beware of building more upon them than they can bear.

## Love for Truth

I am a firm believer in the reality of Revelation and the authority of the Catholic Church. I regard the careful assertions which officially flow from this source to be certain, and I do not wish to cause anyone to be less certain about these ultimate things. God Himself has blessed us with this knowledge. But precisely because this is so, we Catholics bear a special responsibility for understanding how paltry and provisional all human assertions are in comparison. And we ought to be doubly careful—even fearful—of asserting with the certainty reserved to Revelation any of the extraneous ideas that we have either picked up from others or worked out solely for ourselves. Above all others, we should have both a deep reverence for truth and a deep awareness of our own limitations in grasping it.

I wish I could give you a perfect example of this attitude, but first you would have to show me a columnist who has never pushed an idea farther than warranted, and has never answered a correspondent by asserting more than his certain knowledge could sustain. This is emphatically not possible in my own case, and it evokes a sadness which brings me to yet a deeper reason for this carefulness we all ought to have about truth. For us Catholics, truth is ultimately a Person, Jesus Christ, creator of heaven and earth, who contains and sustains all things in Himself. But every time we press our own private ideas too far; and every time we ignore, dismiss or ridicule the aspects and glimmers of truth we find in the ideas and arguments of others: Exactly so many times do we make Christ more difficult to know.

“I am the way and the truth and the life,” says Jesus Christ. “No one comes to the Father except by me” (Jn 14:6). How important are these words, and how they should guide us in our interactions with others regarding truth! In our mistakes and our contentiousness, and sometimes even in our zeal, I fear that even we who know better rather frequently abuse truth. I began by discussing modern knowledge, and we have now arrived where all discussion of modern knowledge must end. For every distortion exacts its price. We must be very careful lest we mar the visage of Christ with our own misplaced blows and buffets, and so make Our Lord not only more difficult to know, but more difficult to love.

# The Meaning of Newman's Grammar of Assent

November 16, 2009

I'm down to the last few pages of John Henry Cardinal Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Now that the Vatican is preparing to beatify Newman, and since, as I admitted in July in [Newman the Writer, Newman the Saint](#), my failure to read this work lowers my credibility as a Catholic thinker, I have made it a point to make up for my previous neglect.

*A Grammar of Assent* is a very serious, prolonged, and deep examination of how the human person (that is, you or I) comes to believe something. The book is not for everyone; in fact there are two reasons for many people to avoid it altogether: first, the prose is difficult; second, the matter is highly analytical. Neither of these are faults of Newman, but both may warn many readers away.

As for the prose, Newman represented the highest genius of the nineteenth century style. His precision, balance and clarity are unmatched, but so are both the length of his sentences and the complex interdependence of his phrases and clauses. A typical sentence in Newman is frequently longer than a whole paragraph of contemporary prose, and a whole paragraph is frequently longer than this entire blog entry. Contemporary style demands shorter sentences, simpler syntax, and briefer paragraphs, which in turn afford greater rest to the eye. You may delight (as I genuinely do delight) in the intellectual and architectonic richness and beauty of Newman's writing, but if you don't typically read far outside the modern idiom, it will take a great deal of getting used to.

As for the book's analytical depth, well, not everyone needs to study this matter in the very great depth with which Newman has set forth his thesis. He himself would be the first to admit that the vast majority of persons evaluate the truth or falsity of a position through an act of judgment, a capacity native to man, which frequently resolves in a few moments what it may take a scholar hundreds of pages of dense prose to explain. Newman, I can assure you, will not be insulted in the least if you have no need of *A Grammar of Assent*. To the contrary, it is in one sense the whole point of his work to establish that you don't need it.

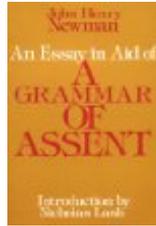
But if you have ever been seriously perturbed by assertions, so rightly foreign to your

own natural state of mind, that the great questions of human affairs, including religious belief, must be determined, if they are to be determined rightly, through some sort of scientific research or a strictly logical analysis, then you would want very much to read *A Grammar of Assent*; for in it Newman explains how the human mind proceeds in matters of inference, assent and certitude, and how the faculty of judgment (for Newman, the “illative sense”) ranges over a far greater diversity and quantity of different kinds of evidence than can ever be produced by logic or science, and so brings us through doubt to certainty on the vast majority of human questions, which both logic and experiment are singularly ill-suited to address.

You’ll note, I trust, that the previous paragraph is composed of exactly one sentence—and it may well be a short one by the standards of John Henry Newman. Still, it is to Newman that we owe the profound insight that we become certain of things not through a discursive analysis of all the logical arguments which may be made for and against (for logic, which is so useful with respect to abstractions, offers very little when it comes to facts), but rather through a growing awareness—either over considerable time or in just a few moments—that there is such a convergence of probabilities in favor of the thing under consideration that it must be true. From this convergence of probabilities arises certitude.

Thus the same staggering probability that England is an island, though most persons will never put this to the test, is equally at work in our conviction that Christ is the Son of God, or that the Church speaks with Christ’s own authority. I cannot do justice here to the “grammar” according to which our minds proceed to withhold or grant assent, any more than I can easily explain in a few words the grammar on which my own prose depends—and, surely, the former is far deeper and exceedingly more complex than the latter.

But if you need such an analysis, or if you would find it fascinating to explore it, then you will benefit from *A Grammar of Assent*. And if not, you will find yourself far more at home with Newman’s poems, sermons, tracts and autobiographical works. For it is axiomatic with Newman that, as a man or a woman, you are (whether you realize it or not, whether you reflect on it or not) already quite at home with the only method we have for arriving at the fundamental truth of most things that really matter: namely, the faculty of human judgment.



[An Essay in Aid of a Grammar Of Asse...](#)

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# Slavery of the Mind: The Cultural Case against the Church

October 11, 2010

There are several ways that the example of slavery can be used to indicate how different societies can be culturally blind. But slavery cannot be used as an example of changing Church doctrine. In other words, you can effectively argue that a society which perceives abortion as permissible is very much like an earlier society which found slavery permissible: The same sort of cultural blindness is at work. But you can't argue, for example, that the Church will change its position on homosexuality just as she did on slavery, because the Church hasn't changed her position on slavery.

This may be obvious, but it is not what many people think. There is in fact a deceiving double-speak which goes largely unnoticed in those who criticize the Catholic Church. In one sense this is understandable. After all, it is hard enough even for those of us who are deeply committed to the Catholic Faith to remain perfectly aware at all times of just what we mean by the word "Church". Sometimes we use the term to refer to the Church's members, including ecclesiastical leaders, and we are all too aware that Catholics can behave very badly indeed, including and sometimes led by their priests and bishops. But at other times we use the term "Church" to indicate what is not purely human about her—the Church's doctrines, sacraments, and sacred structure or divine constitution.

So we may give others the benefit of the doubt. But what usually happens when people wish to score points against the Church is that they criticize the divine side of the Church when they wish to reject her current teaching against a contemporary cultural trend; and they criticize the human side of the Church whenever they wish to prove she has been wrong—and has changed her tune—in the past.

## Examples

For example, the Church's teaching that homosexuality is disordered and homosexual acts are sinful is widely condemned today, now that our enlightened culture has "learned" to regard homosexuality as a blessing. Here the critics really mean to rebuke the Magisterium of the Church. After all, it is annoying (and even infuriating) to many

people that our culture has won over huge numbers of Catholics, including many priests and some bishops, on the question of homosexuality, but the culture cannot get “the Church” (the official Church, the magisterial Church, the divine side of the Church) to abandon its clear teaching to the contrary. To those who are culture bound, the Church’s position is an affront to reason and decency.

But when the same people wish to argue (as several have argued in emails to me this past week) that the Church is wrong about homosexuality, they invariably bring up examples which reflect the Church’s human side. Thus they will assert that the Church will one day change its position on homosexuality just as in time past she changed her position on slavery. But the Church’s Magisterium has invariably opposed slavery in principle and, through the influence of her doctrine, her hierarchy and her instruments of grace, the Church has historically been the primary influence in getting people to abandon slavery altogether. It is only “the Church” as a collection of sinful human persons that has at times favored slavery, in that many Catholics have held false views of the human dignity of minorities or conquered peoples, they have defended slavery, and they have owned slaves.

In exactly the same way, people will condemn “the Church” for her opposition to abortion, embryonic stem cell research or *in vitro* fertilization—despite the fact that millions upon millions of Catholics favor all three—because the Magisterium won’t leave these issues alone and opposition to these practices increases among Catholics in direct proportion to how often they frequent the sacraments. But these same people will condemn “the Church” of past ages for approving torture or religious warfare or the suppression of women because many Catholics at all levels, influenced too much by the cultures in which they lived, favored torture, participated in feudal warfare or were certain there was no good reason to educate girls. Note that at the same time, the Church’s teachings, sacraments, and divine constitution gradually mitigated the deficiencies of early Western juridical practices, the excessive warfare among Europe’s nobles, and the lack of opportunities for women.

### **A Convenient Fallacy**

In one context “the Church” (seen in terms of her divine or unchanging elements) is condemned for not being responsive to her more culture-bound members, and in another context “the Church” (seen in terms of her culture-bound members) is condemned for not being responsive to her official teachings and her ministry of grace. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, this means that “the Church” will be mocked for her official teachings during contemporary controversies (despite the sins of those numerous members who

embrace whatever is popular) while being ridiculed for the sins of her members in past circumstances (despite Magisterial and sacramental opposition to those sins).

All of this is coming to a head again on the issue of homosexuality and gay marriage, which has become the new flashpoint of the culture wars, eclipsing even abortion. Because of their fundamentally broken understanding of human sexuality, contemporary citizens of the first world find it impossible even to imagine that people who experience same-sex attraction should be considered disordered or that it should be less permissible for them to satisfy their sexual desires than it is for their heterosexual counterparts. It seems overwhelmingly obvious in our culture that the Church must be wrong. And if “the Church” claims she has some superior insight into the question, then it is necessary to assert that “the Church”, despite her claims, has obviously changed her position on similarly great issues in the past.

I sympathize somewhat with this incredulity. Sadly, the Church’s human side—in which I include myself—all too often fails to properly represent her divine side. Thus the Church is always less effective than we would like in liberating people from the selective slavery of the mind which each and every culture so effectively imposes in its turn. Presumably most of us will be unwittingly hampered by one enormous cultural blind spot or another. But in another way, I cannot sympathize, for the argument against the Church with respect to these major cultural issues will nearly always be made by switching the human and divine references to suit the needs of the moment. This kind of argument, which good Catholics must endure again and again, may not always be disingenuous. But it will still be wrong.

# Enslaved by the Dictatorship of Relativism

September 17, 2010

I flirted with [Absurdophobia](#) as a rallying cry, but clearly the “dictatorship of relativism” is a far more serious contender. Pope Benedict has used this phrase repeatedly, most recently in Scotland, in order to focus attention on what Catholics must resist.

“The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times,” said Benedict in his [homily](#) at the Mass in Glasgow’s Bellahouston Park on Thursday, “when a ‘dictatorship of relativism’ threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man’s nature, his destiny and his ultimate good.” He continued:

For this reason I appeal in particular to you, the lay faithful, in accordance with your baptismal calling and mission, not only to be examples of faith in public, but also to put the case for the promotion of faith’s wisdom and vision in the public forum. Society today needs clear voices which propose our right to live, not in a jungle of self-destructive and arbitrary freedoms, but in a society which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offers them guidance and protection in the face of their weakness and fragility.

It would seem, at first glance, that relativism could not be the source of any sort of dictatorship, but the Pope has repeatedly said otherwise. This is because relativism is untenable as a philosophical outlook, and so it can only be held as a kind of psychological excuse or cover for the failure to seek the truth. The most common reason people fail to seek the truth is that they do not wish to change their lives. They are clinging to choices and even habits which they at least dimly suspect a serious engagement with truth would require them to abandon. To preserve their own comfort, they instinctively try to extinguish those voices which call them to account.

In the last analysis, relativism is an excuse for sin. It is at least highly likely that far more people know this than are actually willing to admit it. But it is certain, at the very least, that those who are attached to sin instinctively recoil against the defense of virtue. Even those who live virtuously are perceived as a negative judgment on themselves. Just when a sinner should be losing his life to save it, he instead lashes out against virtue in a

perverse sort of self-defense. Our Lord put the matter succinctly when He explained the way things stood to Nicodemus:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (Jn 3:19-20)

Again, this need not be a conscious decision; it is often merely instinctive. And in defense of this instinctive opposition to the light—just to be as fair as possible—we must admit that there is a limited logic on its side. After all, if you have been taught (or have convinced yourself) that there is no absolute truth—and certainly no absolute morality—you will have a tendency to regard those who argue to the contrary as killjoys and trouble-makers, obnoxious busybodies who create problems where none need to exist. Since no one lives as a consistent relativist, this veneer of reason is very thin, but it can nonetheless be sincere. Thus, even though we may understand the wellsprings of human inclinations in these matters, we need not attribute bad faith or a deliberate commitment to evil to those who appear to embrace the gospel of relativism.

But their relativism will become a dictatorship nonetheless, an insistence that no person and no institution has the right to interfere with the way of life and ideas which “work for me”. Again, to preserve the relativist comfort zone, all the instincts I have mentioned conspire together to eliminate the influence of contrary voices—to shut them up, or to shut them down.

The Pope knows quite a lot about this dictatorship, and he also knows, first, that it is necessary for all of us to resist it and, second, that the best resistance is fearless personal witness to the good. Benedict made this point again when, after encouraging the laity to be examples of faith in both word and deed—that is, in both articulating the case for truth and living it—he next addressed the clergy.

In the same homily, to Scotland’s bishops, he said: “One of your first pastoral duties is to your priests and to their sanctification. As they are *alter Christus* to the Catholic community, so you are to them. Live to the full the charity that flows from Christ....” Then, to Scotland’s priests, he said: “You are called to holiness and to serve God’s people by modeling your lives on the mystery of the Lord’s cross. Preach the Gospel with a pure heart and a clear conscience. Dedicate yourselves to God alone....”

Finally, in his closing exhortation to youth, the Pope explained the goal of this resistance against the dictatorship of relativism:

There is only one thing that lasts: the love of Jesus Christ personally for each one of you. Search for him, know him and love him, and he will set you free from slavery to the glittering but superficial existence frequently proposed by today's society. Put aside what is worthless and learn of your own dignity as children of God.

It may be paradoxical that the dictatorship of relativism is a work of slavery. But then sin is slavery, and this explains very well why people behave so irrationally under its influence. Since only Christ saves, it is also true that only Christ frees. Fidelity to Christ, like all resistance to dictatorship, is not only a work of Faith: It is a work of freedom.

# Mindless Ways of Limiting God

May 19, 2011

In *The Idea of a University*, Blessed John Henry Newman had occasion to discuss three attitudes toward knowledge, as it relates to God, which must be corrected if the idea of a Catholic university is to be rendered intelligible. The first is the attitude, perhaps even more prevalent today, that religion does not consist at all in knowledge, but trades exclusively in sentiment. The second, more closely allied with Catholic triumphalism, is that Catholics need not engage in the study of arguments and insights generated beyond the borders of their own Church. And the third is that an adequate conception of God is coterminous with what is revealed by the natural processes we study in other fields.

Citing statesmen, educational theorists and school officials of his own day, Newman found that the prevailing classification of religion in a program of studies was well-represented by the following typical quotations: “The inculcation of sentiment embraces reading in its higher sense, poetry, music, together with moral and religious Education” or, again, “According to the classification proposed, the essential idea of all religious Education will consist in the direct cultivation of the feelings.” Newman then proceeded to sum up the hollowness of the prevailing view in a typically luminous passage:

What we contemplate, then, what we aim at, when we give a religious Education, is, it seems, not to impart any knowledge whatever, but to satisfy anyhow desires after the Unseen which arise in our minds in spite of ourselves, to provide the mind with a means of self-command, to impress on it the beautiful ideas which saints and sages have struck out, to embellish it with the bright hues of a celestial piety, to teach it the poetry of devotion, the music of well-ordered affects, and the luxury of doing good. As for the intellect, its exercise happens to be unavoidable, whenever moral impressions are made, from the constitution of the human mind, but it varies in the results of that exercise, in the conclusions which it draws from our impressions, according to the peculiarities of the individual.

If this is all that can be said of religious study—that is, if there is no real knowledge to be gained from it—then it really does have little or no place in a university. Such a view renders theology the sentimental servant of all other studies, and the master of none.

But there can be an opposite tendency, Newman noted, which understandably arises from the Catholic's awareness that he has a Magisterium on which he can rely for the articulation of life's essential truths. This tendency can, and certainly sometimes does, lead Catholics to discount the value of discoveries made in other fields, or of abiding insights gained in different studies or among different religious or even non-religious groups. To the contrary, Catholics ought to recognize and revere truth wherever it is found, drawing it into a more complete system, and elucidating it with greater clarity, much as the Church Fathers did with Plato, and Aquinas with Aristotle. In forming his idea of a university, therefore, Newman felt free to draw on a great deal of secular knowledge, as well as on ideas worked out in English education by Protestants, particularly at Oxford, and he offered this justification for availing himself of the contributions of learned persons who are outside the fold:

I do so, Gentlemen, as believing, first, that the Catholic Church has ever, in the plenitude of her divine illumination, made use of whatever truth or wisdom she has found in their teaching or their measures; and next, that in particular places or times her children are likely to profit from external suggestions or lessons, which have not been provided for them by herself.

Finally, Newman found no solace in the protestations, very frequent in the nineteenth century and still sometimes echoed today, that the study of all the human sciences is sufficient to lead one to a proper understanding of and belief in a Supreme Being. Instead, he very much questioned what those who maintain this view actually mean by God, for it is not at all what any serious Theist means by God. Therefore, after describing briefly what a Theist philosopher, a Muslim, a Jew, a Protestant, and a Catholic all, in fact, mean by the word "God", he gave voice to the following elegant lament:

Nothing is easier than to use the word, and mean nothing by it. The heathens used to say, "God wills," when they meant "Fate"; "God provides," when they meant "Chance"; "God acts," when they meant "Instinct" or "Sense"; and "God is everywhere," when they meant "the Soul of Nature." The Almighty is something infinitely different from a principle, or a centre of action, or a quality, or a generalization of phenomena. If, then, by the word, you do but mean a Being who keeps the world in order, who acts in it, but only in the way of general Providence, who acts toward us but only through what are called laws of Nature, who is more

certain not to act at all than to act independent of those laws, who is known and approached indeed, but only through the medium of those laws; such a God it is not difficult for anyone to conceive, not difficult for anyone to endure. If, I say, as you would revolutionize society, so you would revolutionize heaven, if you have changed the divine sovereignty into a sort of constitutional monarchy, in which the Throne has honour and ceremonial enough, but cannot issue the most ordinary command except through legal forms and precedents, and with the counter-signature of a minister, then belief in a God is no more than an acknowledgment of existing, sensible powers and phenomena, which none but an idiot can deny.

I admit in passing that it is exceedingly bad style to quote at such length in an otherwise brief exposition, but I must make an exception, in Newman's case, for the sheer joy of reading his exquisitely poised, balanced and brilliant prose.

However made, the point is that the three errors Newman elucidates are but three different ways we limit God in order to ensure that our range of knowledge remains eminently comfortable, incapable of threatening our natural complacency. The first makes God an object of the imagination used to stimulate our finer feelings; the second restricts His power and influence to the Chosen People and practically denies it in the Gentles (referring here to Catholics and non-Catholics, respectively, as if we Catholics have succeeded in domesticating the Deity); and the third pares God down to the size and scope of the natural world He has created, shrinking Him conveniently to our own stature. All three were deadly to Newman's university project, as they are deadly still to all who would ponder successfully the deepest questions of life.

# How We Think

February 24, 2009

Two interesting stories in the special “Mind & Body” issue of *Time* (February 23rd) raise significant questions—as I suppose they should—about how we think in contemporary America. First, Jeffrey Kluger’s cover story, “How Faith Can Heal”, explores the growing evidence for the healing power of our own “spirituality”, and the growing evidence that our spiritual inclinations are reflected in various aspects of brain development.

Or vice versa, of course. That is, our spiritual inclinations presumably reflect something of how we’re “put together”. In any case, the article inevitably skirts the question of whether or not our spiritual inclinations (and the corresponding design and development of our brains) actually point to a spiritual reality outside ourselves. The author does not appear hostile to this truth-question; rather, the point of his article—and apparently his own general assumption as well—is that it is best to prescind from that question so that doctors and pastors can get on with the business of collaborating effectively on what matters: healing.

This preference, in a major news magazine, may not reveal a great deal about how most Americans think, but it does reveal something about how our cultural elites think such questions ought to be addressed. In fact, one would have had to grow up in a vacuum tube not to be already well aware of the social desirability of prescinding from the question of truth when discussing spirituality. We have all been carefully taught to maintain the polite fiction that what is important about spirituality is our own feelings, and not any external reality. And this surely tells us something important about how we think, or perhaps how we’re afraid to think.

The second story, Carl Zimmer’s “Evolving Darwin”, covers discoveries since Darwin’s day, including DNA, which most scientists see as generally corroborating the broad outlines of Darwin’s theory while at the same time leading to significant alterations of that theory. The article is—remarkably—free from any foray into “spirituality”. It does not suggest that evolutionary theory reflects negatively on ideas about God; nor that God-fearing souls ought to be wary of evolutionary theory. Granted, this may be so only because Zimmer assumes that “science” has long since won the strange quarrel over evolution between itself and “religion”. Still, there are no silly pot

shots taken, and none received.

That's a very good thing, because people on all sides of the evolution debate need to get it through their heads that evolutionary theory tells us absolutely nothing about the existence of God. God creates out of nothing and sustains all that He creates. Whatever He creates has within it the potential to develop according to whatever His intentions are in creating and sustaining it. There is no question of God having somehow "botched" creation so that it sort of works but He has to intervene now and then to make adjustments. He creates and sustains out of nothing in a single act. Without God no natural thing could exist even for a split-second. In other words, God and creation are completely prior to questions about how nature works.

Therefore, while our study of the wonders of nature surely ought to lead us to praise the wisdom and power of the Creator, just as St. Paul affirms in the first chapter of *Romans*, there is no sense whatsoever in arguments that one theory of natural processes "proves" there is no such thing as God while another "proves" that only God could have bridged some gap between two aspects of nature. Apart from gaps in our knowledge, there are no "gaps" in God's creation, which functions exactly as He has created and sustained it to do. God does not create as we do, out of pre-existing parts, imperfectly, and with constant corrections required; God creates and sustains instantaneously and perfectly out of nothing at all.

All of nature testifies to God's creative power, not because of this or that theory of how things work, but simply because contingent existence is impossible without God. For this reason, the relevance of the second article to the first ought to be obvious. Whether or not we recognize this connection will also tell us something about how we think. Or how we ought to.

# Evolution: Thinking Clearly about Randomness

October 11, 2005

When Cardinal Schönborn argued in July that Church teaching is incompatible with neo-Darwinism, he touched off a firestorm of journalistic incredulity. Was the Church now retreating from John Paul II's statement that the theory of evolution is "more than a hypothesis"? Was the Cardinal rejecting Pope Pius XII's teaching in *Humani Generis* that evolution was compatible with the Faith, barring only polygenism and the evolution of the soul? What could it all mean?

## Schönborn's Thesis

In a July 7th opinion piece in the New York Times, Cardinal Schönborn vehemently rejected the suggestion that "the Catholic Church has no problem with the notion of 'evolution' as used by mainstream biologists—that is, synonymous with neo-Darwinism." Because neo-Darwinians posit natural selection acting on random genetic variation as the mainspring of evolution, Schönborn asserted that "evolution in the Darwinian sense [is] an unguided, unplanned process of random variation and natural selection." He concluded his argument by quoting a document on this very subject, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, issued by the International Theological Commission in 2004 under then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: "An unguided evolutionary process—one that falls outside the bounds of divine providence—simply cannot exist."

Unfortunately, Cardinal Schönborn ignored the same document's careful explanation of the fact that the scientific term *random* does not imply that a process is "unguided". By ignoring this distinction, the Cardinal succeeded only in increasing the Catholic confusion over evolution.

## Questions About Evolutionary Theory

There are many reasons for Christians to be cautious in their handling of evolutionary theory. Historically, the theory has frequently been used to justify materialism and atheism, abetting modern man's flight from God. It has suited the temper of modern

times well enough to be given a largely uncritical reception in many quarters. And in the wrong hands it is often transmuted into a philosophical world view. But as Pius XII pointed out, none of this baggage is essentially linked to the theory, which is not in itself incompatible with Faith. Indeed, many devout Catholic scientists are convinced that evolutionary theory provides the description of biological development most consistent with the available evidence.

It is, of course, part of the nature of scientific theories to be provisional and to be revised toward greater accuracy as more information accumulates. Science is doubtless in its infancy in understanding human origins, and not all scientists (and even fewer publicists) handle the provisional nature of their theories with sufficient scientific and philosophical care. Moreover, evolutionary theory in particular is exceedingly difficult to verify because it deals in large part with processes and events which are not directly observable. For these reasons, various competing theories are not only criticized from the outside but continue to be debated within the evolutionary camp. Nonetheless, the vast majority of scientists accept the importance of neo-Darwinian mechanisms in the history of life, and the case for randomness in genetic mutations is widely regarded as very strong.

### **Providential Randomness**

Because of the importance (if not the certainty) of neo-Darwinian theory, it is vital that Christians understand that “chance” in the scientific sense does not in the least undermine the Christian understanding of Providence. In this discussion, I am indebted to Stephen M. Barr’s article “The Design of Evolution” in *First Things* (October 2005). Barr rightly points out that the notion of “chance” in science is precisely “statistical randomness”. Statistical randomness is based on nothing more than a lack of correlation among things or events which can still be helpful in understanding reality through the use of probability theory. We have statistical randomness in our world because, as Barr puts it, events “do not march in lockstep” but “are part of a vastly complex web of contingency.”

Now contingency is such an important part of the Catholic intellectual tradition that it is necessary to quote *Communion and Stewardship* at length to better realize how Catholic thought fits in with the scientific notion of randomness:

Many neo-Darwinian scientists, as well as some of their critics, have concluded that if evolution is a radically contingent materialistic process driven by natural selection and random genetic variation, then there can be no place in it for divine

providential causality. But it is important to note that, according to the Catholic understanding of divine causality, true contingency in the created order is not incompatible with a purposeful divine providence. Divine causality and created causality radically differ in kind and not only in degree. Thus, even the outcome of a purely contingent natural process can nonetheless fall within God's providential plan.

*Communion and Stewardship* goes on to quote Thomas Aquinas to emphasize how integral this understanding of contingency is to a coherent Catholic worldview. Some 700 years ago Thomas stated: "The effect of divine providence is not only that things should happen somehow, but that they should happen either by necessity or by contingency. Therefore, whatsoever divine providence ordains to happen infallibly and of necessity, happens infallibly and of necessity; and that happens from contingency which the divine providence conceives to happen from contingency." For this reason, the International Theological Commission points out that "neo-Darwinians who adduce random genetic variation and natural selection as evidence that the process of evolution is absolutely unguided are straying beyond what can be demonstrated by science." Needless to say, Christians who are concerned that such randomness must be denied to preserve their Faith are guilty of the same misconception on the other side.

### **Please, Give Me an Example**

The density of these concepts may leave many readers crying out for an illustration. How can we conceive of statistical randomness as compatible with Divine Providence? Barr offers two necessarily incomplete analogies which may be useful. First, consider license plates on passing cars. The sequence of states exhibits a certain randomness in that observing a particular car from a particular state tells us nothing about where the next car will come from. Yet the trips of all the cars are planned, and each has a specific destination. Second, consider prose, which has lines with final syllables that do not rhyme. Because the ending syllables of these lines do not exhibit a particular kind of correlation (with respect to rhyming, they are "statistically random"), this does not mean the sentences are unplanned.

Thus God can impose various kinds of correlations on various kinds of events—or not—without the least reflection on His planning ability. The very possibility of an evolutionary process which could produce the kind of creatures that populate our world presupposes a universe with a very particular (and rather special) character. The God who created this universe is more than capable of working with extremely complex and

apparently diffuse mechanisms, achieving very particular ends through a vast web of contingencies which we are unable to correlate. There is, in fact, much to suggest that the God we know and love prefers to work indirectly, through a variety of instrumental causes, and with a degree of complexity which very often defies our observational abilities.

The existence of “randomness” in the scientific sense therefore says nothing at all about the philosophical concept of intelligent guidance or the theological concept of Providence. The best scientists, of course, will not make the mistake of suggesting that statistical randomness points to an unguided universe. But for exactly the same reason, the best theologians will not feel constrained to defend their faith by denying the validity of scientific observations on specious spiritual grounds. In other words, there is no need for a quarrel when careful thought will suffice.

# Evolution and the Faith, Revisited

October 20, 2005

The feedback I received on my recent column concerning evolution reveals the deep divide which separates Catholics on this issue. Over 30% of respondents expressed passionate disagreement, often insinuating that my position proved I was not a good Catholic. These particular writers clearly refused, under the claim of Faith, to give the matter careful consideration. For their benefit, a few more distinctions are in order. First, those who thought I was defending the theory of evolution are quite simply mistaken. I am not competent to judge the strengths or weaknesses of that theory, as I have not done nearly enough reading and research in this area. My very limited purpose was to explain that the scientific notion of randomness does not undermine the concept of Divine Providence. Therefore, Catholics need not fight evolution as if it were based on scientific findings which contradict the Faith.

One correspondent argued that my refusal to say clearly whether I was for or against evolution betrayed the false supposition that one must somehow be especially qualified to express a judgment. I confess that I regard this supposition as neither false nor debatable. The theory of biological development through uncorrelated mutations and natural selection is not philosophically impossible and it does not contradict Revelation, as the Church has made clear. Therefore, its truth or falsity must be settled on scientific grounds (as Intelligent Design theorists rightly assert as well). A serious academic effort is required to sift the evidence and come to an informed conclusion. I have not made this effort.

Second, I was not defending any of the philosophical nonsense which has been perpetuated in evolution's name. Too many correspondents argued that the harmful effects of evolutionary theory require all sound Catholics to oppose it. For them, my whole column was a sort of dereliction of duty. But I must insist that such obfuscation cannot serve any reasonable purpose. The scientific merits of any theory must be separated from its impact on the popular mind, especially if some proponents are unwilling to make the distinctions needed for proper understanding.

Consider a parallel case: Many who witnessed the infancy of modern astronomy found the claim that the earth was not the center of the universe to be both theologically significant and spiritually upsetting. Scriptural arguments were advanced to condemn it.

But this did not mean that Copernicus and Galileo were wrong, nor that the information they provided was in conflict with the Faith. Several popes and a number of prominent theologians saw at the time that there was no conflict, and nobody at all has trouble seeing this today. In the same way, the spiritual problems often attendant upon evolutionary theory prove neither that the theory itself is false nor that the spiritual difficulties are necessary.

The failure of some scientists and secular publicists to present the theory properly is no excuse for Catholics to make the same mistake in reverse. As I stated in my column, there are many good reasons to handle evolutionary theory with great care. But this caution cuts both ways. Among the best reasons for care is a desire to serve the cause of light, as opposed to heat. In this, those of us who claim to be servants of the Light have the very first obligation to lead.

# Eliminating the God of the Gaps to Make Room for God Himself

April 16, 2007

In 2005, Christoph Cardinal Schönborn touched off a firestorm in a *New York Times* opinion piece which raised significant concerns about the relationship among science, reason and faith. That intervention was not as successful as it might have been because of the Cardinal's assessment of the idea of "randomness" in science. Returning to the subject in the April 2007 issue of *First Things*, Cardinal Schönborn makes what I believe is a far more successful presentation.

Most sound Catholic commentators over the past two hundred years have argued strenuously that there can be no intrinsic quarrel between faith and reason, or between religion and science. The chief problems have arisen because many scientists mistakenly believe—on the basis of unrecognized philosophical preconceptions—either that a mechanistic knowledge of nature is the only kind of knowledge possible, or that an explanation of how things work in a mechanical sense somehow eliminates the idea of teleology (that is, a consideration of nature's design and purpose).

The problem has been exacerbated at times by religious thinkers who insist on a fundamentalist view of God's interaction with the natural order, assuming that the only premise compatible with religious faith is that God brings about his effects in nature chiefly through direct action. It is this position which leads to the "the God of the gaps". In this view, direct supernatural agency is posited as necessary to explain this or that natural phenomenon, which in turn proves the existence of God. But as scientists show that this or that natural phenomenon operates according to intrinsic properties and material laws, the need for God is squeezed out, and He becomes the God of the gaps—a cheap means of explaining the ever-narrowing gaps in scientific knowledge.

The point that Cardinal Schönborn makes in his latest essay is that this way of thinking depends on a view of matter as something inert that must be designed and set in motion from outside, as if it can have no teleology built into it by which it changes and develops toward its own ends. In other words, on the part of both religious thinkers and scientists, nature is too often regarded in an entirely mechanistic way, with atoms like so many billiard balls, moved either supernaturally or randomly into their various

configurations and interactions.

As Schönborn points out, this modern viewpoint is singularly limited; other understandings of nature can bear greater intellectual fruit. For example, he cites St. Thomas Aquinas: “Nature is to be distinguished from technology only in that nature is an internal causal principle, while technology presents us with an external principle.” Thomas continues: “If the technology of a ship’s structure were immanent to the wood, then the nature (of the wood) would bring forth the ship, such as normally happens through technology.” And a little later, he says: “Nature is nothing other than a certain technology, namely, the skill of God, which is infused into things, and which is directed towards its determinate end by the things themselves.” To sum up: “This is as though the builder of a ship could impart the capacity to the wood pieces of being moved from within themselves to bring forth the structure of the ship.”

What Cardinal Schönborn is suggesting is that once nature is viewed in this fashion, the possibility is open for an investigation of both its mechanisms by scientists and its teleology by philosophers without any conflict between the two. What he is further suggesting is that scientists need to recognize where their scientific inquiries end and their mechanistic presuppositions begin. After all, might not this inner ability of natural things to develop toward their own ends be ultimately one of the greatest proofs of the existence of God?

In other words, properly viewed, everything discovered by science is a contribution to our understanding of nature’s teleology, not an attack upon it. By rethinking our attitude toward nature, as well as the presuppositions which accompany that attitude, a new kind of consideration of science, faith and reason may well be possible.

# A New Apologetics

June 11, 2007

Apologetics, or the defense of the Faith, generally takes one of two forms. Either it offers convincing arguments which show the truth of various doctrinal propositions, or it offers persuasive demonstrations that the Christian faith is the best way to fulfill legitimate human aspirations. Both approaches have their place, but I believe a third approach is also needed.

## Can You Hear Me?

I don't mean to offer something totally new, but I think it is time to bring to the fore what classical apologists have generally regarded as merely a preparation for apologetics: a consideration of the impediments to faith. Such impediments are all the intellectual, emotional, cultural and psychological factors, both conscious and subconscious, which make it impossible for a given person to genuinely consider the Christian message. It seems to me that the modern world is so tilted against faith, and in so many different ways, that this problem of clearing the impediments must now be the greater part of apologetical work.

Essentially, the effort to clear away the impediments to faith is the effort to determine why a given person or group simply doesn't take the arguments for the truth of the Catholic Faith seriously. They aren't interested, or they're uncomfortable, or they "know" the arguments are absurd, or they just can't relate to all this talk about the soul, truth and God. The question is, why? And how can the apologist overcome these impediments so that the person or group in question really hears what he has to say?

## We Have Issues

Some of the impediments are universal in every age. Human pride, with its refusal to serve, always undermines the virtue of religion. We're also quite capable of trying to ignore the "last things" because we don't really want to think about death. Then again, in every age there is a constant temptation to prefer expediency to truth. And, though it may just be another form of pride, it often takes us quite a long time to learn to accept our own limitations, both the limitations of human nature and our own personal peculiarities and deficiencies. It is hard to be open to God when we're in denial about

ourselves.

Other impediments arising from attachments are similarly universal. We have a great capacity for material enjoyment which we often find difficult to transcend. If we do think about turning toward God, it always seems that we must relinquish control; there is an element of risk which deters us. Worse, when we have given ourselves up to this or that vice, we become enslaved. Our own bad habits make it very hard to open ourselves to God. Universal as all these issues are, I think it is fair to say that modern culture exacerbates nearly every one of them by specifically reinforcing all the wrong attitudes, feelings and attachments.

For example, it is difficult to conceive of a period in history so preoccupied with the tangible as to essentially deny the existence of anything that cannot be measured. It is also of the essence of the “modern” outlook that the new is always better than the old, which engenders a disdain for traditional beliefs and values. In many other cultures, tradition has been a chief means of inculcating a healthy regard for the supernatural. The modern era also boasts a distinctively false idea of freedom, which is always defined as an absence of restraint rather than a perfection which leads to the fulfillment of potential. Finally, for a variety of reasons, the modern period is intensely relativistic. The lack of comprehension of absolutes is certainly an impediment to faith.

### **And That’s Not All**

You may think that’s a lot of impediments, but we’re just getting started. Consider the prejudices most people grow up with in the modern world. Many are taught by their parents, and all of us are taught by the mass media, that religion is silly, weak or dangerous. Nearly all of us grow up infected by the prejudice of liberalism—that is, the notion that legitimate authority is either untrustworthy or non-existent. Politically, we’re all very committed to democracy and, whatever else may be said for democracy, it tends to foster excessive individualism and the notion that everyone’s ideas are equal. All of this creates a tremendous peer pressure against commitment to any absolute value or belief system. Even when we don’t reject such systems from within, we refuse to embrace them for fear of looking foolish to the world.

Then there are all the distractions common to humankind which we’ve also raised to new heights in modern times. Consider the tremendous press of modern affairs, the unrelenting rapidity of the pace of life, the difficulty of finding a quiet space and, because of the ubiquity of attractive entertainments, the difficulty of even *wanting* to find a quiet space. We are so full of commotion that we scarcely know what to do without it. Sometimes we are actually afraid to be without it. Under these circumstances, how hard

it is to “be still and know that I am God!”

### **The Final Mystery**

As if all this did not make the apologist’s task sufficiently difficult, we know from Scripture that God rarely makes Himself known to those who lack the correct disposition. A passage from the Book of Wisdom, which I recently quoted in my blog, is well worth repeating in this context:

Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth, think of the Lord with uprightness, and seek him with sincerity of heart; because he is found by those who do not put him to the test, and manifests himself to those who do not distrust him. For perverse thoughts separate men from God, and when his power is tested, it convicts the foolish; because wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul, nor dwell in a body enslaved to sin. *(1:1-4)*

For all these reasons, it may be time to take up apologetics again with a new emphasis on the impediments to faith. It may be time to attempt to clear away the intellectual, social, cultural, psychological and personal debris which prevents people from seeing things as they are. Instead of initially offering arguments for the Catholic Faith, we might better start by challenging fundamental assumptions and urging others to question the very things they take most for granted. There is an important book to be written here, a book to help the modern world understand its own blindness.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. For every impediment I’ve listed, you can probably think of one or two more. Before we write that book, let’s get the whole picture. Please send me your ideas.

# More Impediments

June 19, 2007

Following my recent column outlining the impediments to Faith characteristic of the modern world, many have written to suggest other aspects of our current culture which impede our relationship with God. These fresh ideas fall into several categories.

**Electronic Media:** The first category includes the problems caused by the omnipresence of electronic media. Several readers pointed out that young people are inundated with electronic information, entertainment and stimulation from stereos, radios, televisions, movies, computer screens and various hand-held communication appliances. The result is exposure to huge numbers of images, massive amounts of commercial propaganda, and enticing virtual worlds long before a person is mature enough to handle it all. All of this tends to arrest human development and lock the individual in a self-centered sensory world in which the God question is kept at bay.

**Competing Authorities:** A second and closely-related category covers the problems posed by competing authorities. Our pervasive media exposes us to disparate authorities which compete with the traditional authorities of home, church and state (which, in the modern world, have been disparate enough). Mass culture imposes its own authority, and the Internet puts people in instant touch with various self-proclaimed authorities on every individual subject. Even before complete media immersion, the mass media frequently broadcasted a sort of authority of the fashionable, including the so-called intelligentsia, which undermined traditional thinking and behavior patterns. Competing authorities undermine our sense of God as a single authority who speaks truth about reality.

**Diabolical Influence:** Other readers have suggested that the more sinister features of modern life, at least when pushed to their extremes, constitute a category of growing diabolical influence. Thus the devil's grip increases as each individual person tends to become separately addicted to certain stimuli, becomes more focused on self, and is ultimately drained of meaning. This in turn very often leads to a fascination with sexual experimentation and, for reasons psychologists and exorcists may combine to explain, preoccupation with death. Obviously, not all are affected in the same way or to the same degree, but this pattern poses a grave danger for our culture, with isolated individuals enclosed in impenetrable false worlds throughout much of their lives.

**The Failure of Relationships:** Several correspondents also called attention to the

contemporary crisis of relationships. To be sure, the problems of all the preceding categories have militated against deep and abiding relationships, which have been discouraged by media dream worlds and replaced with virtual relationships in virtual worlds. But other forces have clearly been at work, including the extensive individualistic mobility of modern social and especially commercial life. This individualistic mobility has profoundly damaged all social ties, especially the family and even marriage itself. The divorce rate and widespread use of contraception support the contention that our deepest relationships are defined by the proverbial *egoism À deux*. When human relationships are truncated or broken, the natural ground and model for relating to God is swept away.

**A Crisis of Thought:** A fifth category of impediments, or perhaps a new consequence of all the others, is what readers describe in various ways as a crisis of thought. Indeed, there does appear to be a singular absence of deep thought in our world, almost in direct proportion to our material dominance and our power to publish (ahem). Sadly, not a few who contributed to the discussion also pointed out that, in opposition to this flight from reason which characterizes our age—and on which Pope Benedict XVI has so frequently remarked—the Church in general has not had a great deal to offer.

**The Church:** And so we come at last to an enormous sixth category, the failure of those who have been given much to credibly represent the Faith to others. Complaints range from the failure of leadership and zeal on the part of clerics who are way too comfortable to the lukewarmness which afflicts us all. Particular note was taken of the seeming refusal of many bishops to teach the whole truth about any sensitive topic. And of course there are all the scandals. I've commented on much of this in various columns and blog entries over the past couple of years. I wish this were sufficient to prove I'm not lukewarm myself, but it isn't.

This is a depressing catalogue, to be sure, but it is hardly the last word about anything. If you're still wondering what it's all about, see the column that started it, [A New Apologetics](#). I'm deeply grateful for all those who sent me their insights on the important question of what keeps modern man from taking the Catholic faith seriously.

# Revelation Sheds Light on Natural Law

November 24, 2008

In a brilliant article in the November issue of *First Things* entitled “Natural Law Revealed”, J. Budziszewski explains why Revelation makes it so much easier for people to understand the natural law. One might think that since the natural law is, well, natural, we would not need any special help to get it right. One might also think that any advantage brought to us by Revelation must somehow invalidate the “naturalness” of natural law.

Both of these thoughts are wrong, and Budziszewski’s argument is so good that I want to summarize it for you here. The author shows that Revelation sheds at least five different kinds of light on nature. The first light is that of *precept*. Sometimes God commands or forbids something that the mind itself can recognize as right or wrong, such as the prohibitions in the Decalogue against murder or stealing. Of this kind of light, St. Thomas said that the promulgation of such laws is useful because, in a few cases, people can be led astray concerning them. So here, by command, Revelation strengthens our perception of the natural law in question.

The second light is that of *affirmation*. Here Revelation affirms something about the nature of things that makes it easier for us to work out the logical moral consequences. Budziszewski offers the example of conjugal sexuality. The Book of Malachi (among other revelatory sources) affirms that God has made us to communicate life to others and that He expects us to take this purpose seriously through faithful and fruitful marriage. Once that is affirmed, it is not difficult to work out the logic that marriage is unique among all types of human association, and is apparently deliberately ordered toward a stable procreative end. Our particular age may have trouble seeing this, yet the Divine affirmation prods both our vision and our logic.

The third kind of light is *narrative*. Left to ourselves, for example, it might take a long time to figure out that everything around us is broken, and to reason from that fact that nature has something to communicate to us which we have to get past the brokenness to see. Thus the Biblical narrative of the Fall enables us more easily to perceive that, of course, the ideal condition of nature was something other than what

we have now, and so everything begins to make more sense. As Budziszewski points out, if we had never seen a healthy foot, we might not realize that a broken foot is broken. Once we do realize that the foot we are examining is broken, it becomes easier to discern the purpose of a foot.

Fourth, Revelation provides the light of *divine promise*. Budziszewski suggests that two promises—forgiveness and divine providence—are particularly important in our ability to understand the natural law:

Without the promise of forgiveness, natural law would show us only a face of accusation. Few could bear to look at it at all; none could bear to look at it steadily. Without the promise of providence, contemplation of the wrongs of the world would drive us to yet greater wrongs. Whether by its own guilt or by rage at the guilt of all others, the intellect would be undermined, and the counsels of natural law would be pulled in perverse directions.

Fifth and finally, Budziszewski argues that Revelation sheds light on nature through the *sacraments*. For example, St. Paul's teaching that the submission of husbands and wives to each other in marriage is a mystery that refers to the relationship of Christ to the Church is quite astonishing. Paul is "saying that a natural reality and a supernatural reality not only happen to correspond but were made for this correspondence—that is, in the depth of God's creative plan, the marriage of the spouses invokes the Marriage of the Lamb and in some measure makes it present." Thus some natural events are not just signs of supernatural events but participations in them. Grace does not violate nature, but perfects it. Looking at the supernatural reality helps us to understand more fully why the natural reality was designed as it was.

The article is not yet available on the [First Things web site](#), and *First Things* has recently asked us to no longer include their materials in our document library (a decision we accept sadly but without the least rancor, as this is their right). In any case, the ideas in this article can provide a universe of meditation, as well as demonstrating once again the remarkable correspondence between the supernatural and the natural for those who worship the One who created everything as an expression of Himself.

# Through a Glass Darkly

September 21, 2007

The blood of St. Januarius liquefied on schedule in Naples on his feast day, September 19th. Januarius was martyred in the persecutions of Diocletian in the early fourth century. His blood, now preserved in a vial displayed in the local cathedral, has liquefied on a regular schedule for over 400 years. Many find in such miracles evidence for the truth of the Catholic Faith. Others are not convinced.

## Evidence for Christianity

The primary proofs in favor of Christianity derive from the history of Christ and His Resurrection, the remarkable vitality of the Church under every conceivable circumstance, the sublimity of Christian teaching and its transformative power. To these we may add specific personal spiritual experiences and innumerable well-attested miracles over the centuries, including, for example, miracles wrought by saints and the astounding dancing of the sun at Fatima. All of these fit into a framework consisting of the signs of Revelation experienced by ancient Israel before Christ's time, and the broader and very strong philosophical arguments for the existence of God.

Even the strongest combination of evidence, however, does not convince everyone. It remains possible even for intelligent persons of good will to fail to give assent to the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, and the providential role of the Catholic Church. Again, while many are convinced by the evidence and the attendant miracles, others are not. Why should this be the case? Ignoring for the moment those who are chronically pig-headed, the Catholic may well ask why the evidence for his Faith always falls just short of being absolutely compelling. In other words, why has God not made the matter so plain that it would be impossible for anyone to disbelieve?

## What God Wants

The answer to this question is that God, knowing the source and cause of man's ultimate happiness, wants man not merely to recognize his self-interest but to love. When self-interest in a relationship is too evident, it is a serious obstacle not only to love itself but to the kind of "stretching" of the human person which increases one's capacity to give and receive love. Both the ability and the willingness to love in man are

mysteriously tied to a process of growth, a process which includes suffering. This process leads us to an increasingly honest and accurate self-assessment, which in turn enables us to value everything with increasing accuracy. We learn that we are broken, we strive for perfection, we reach out to others, and our love slowly expands beyond the narrow confines of self.

It is not clear how God would achieve this result if He did not leave us to some extent in the dark. If He made all his gifts psychologically unmistakable, how quick might we be to ask of every situation: “What’s in it for me?” Or, so clearly pampered by God, would we have the capacity to embrace Him not for His gifts but for Himself? Will the rich man and his poor relation be nobler spirits and truer friends than two brothers-in-arms who have suffered everything together? The entire Christian story speaks of a God who wants us to grow until we are capable of recognizing Him in the ordinary struggles of daily life.

### **Human Perfection**

It is not only the secret of our suffering but the great boast of our nature that we are perfected through struggle. Every adult eventually gains at least some limited perception of the fact that he is a better person for having endured whatever he has endured, and for having groped toward understanding when the way was not clear. These experiences stretch or expand our very souls until we realize that through trial we have become much more of what, in some mysterious sense, we were supposed to be from the first. We also become more sensitive not only to those around us but to fleeting glimpses of deeper meaning and a deeper Presence in our lives.

Not everyone ultimately recognizes God in these glimpses, and we cannot always tell why. But those who sense God’s presence find themselves thirsting for more. They gradually purify their motives, which has a bracing effect on their minds. As their intellects clear, they begin to perceive greater force in all the reasons adduced in support of the Faith. These reasons may never appear completely compelling, but they gradually appear significantly stronger than the contradictory notions of the past. As these persons continue this same process after becoming believers, they invariably find themselves progressively more aware of God’s personal involvement in their lives. They recognize this as spiritual growth. It becomes for them a source of ever-growing joy and, when they look back, they see very clearly a continuum that began in darkness and will end in light.

### **It Just Wouldn’t Work**

At a certain stage of spiritual maturity, every Christian begins to realize that, in his own

life at least, an alternative approach simply would not have worked. If God had begun by manifesting Himself with unmistakable clarity and providing every conceivable gift, the mature Christian knows—he knows deep in his bones—that he would love God less, or perhaps not really love Him at all. The mature Christian understands far too much about his own shallowness, greed, laziness and ingratitude to imagine that he could have been brought to this peak of love without darkness, uncertainty, delays, suffering and longing.

This explanation, of course, will no more compel everyone than the philosophical arguments, the historical evidence, the energy of the Church, the sublimity of doctrine, the transforming holiness, or the miracles. But it does offer an intelligible answer to one portion of the riddle of man's relationship with God, the riddle of why things cannot be any clearer than they are. To the Christian, this pattern is immediately recognizable. It explains why God the Father, knowing in advance of the Fall and all its attendant sufferings, still chose to create a universe in which his preeminent gifts are also the most subtle. These gifts are faith, hope and love. As St. Paul says, the greatest of these is love, and this love comes to us in many forms. But when it is incarnate, it carries a cross.

# Apologetics and Faith: Different Convictions

January 04, 2008

Over the twenty centuries of the Church's life, Christians have advanced all kinds of arguments to convince non-Christians to accept the Faith. Some systematic apologists have come perilously close to arguing that every truth contained in Revelation can be proved by natural reason. Others have avoided philosophical proofs and concentrated only on how the Christian Faith addresses the deepest needs of the human heart. These methods, along with an astonishing array of more balanced initiatives, have all been designed to make non-Christians certain of the truth of Divine Revelation.

## **Apologetical Certainty**

The wide variety of arguments used in different situations over the years—logical, philosophical, historical, psychological, apodictic—has been admirably documented in Avery Cardinal Dulles' *A History of Apologetics*, originally published in 1971 but revised in the late 1990's and now available in a second edition from Ignatius Press. It is fascinating to review the divergent approaches that have been taken, including differences as to whether apologetics can fully prove the faith or whether it can merely clear away obstacles to belief. In wrestling with all these questions, however, apologists in every age have been acutely aware that the certainty of a believer is always far greater than that of a non-believer.

This statement may sound strange, but consider what it means. It means that no matter how much force an argument for the truth of the Faith may have, the non-believer who accepts the force of the argument will always be less certain of the truth of the Faith than the believer, including a believer who is completely unfamiliar with the same argument. That is, the logical force of the presentation is not as capable of imparting conviction to the mind and will as is the very gift of Faith itself. I could argue here that this shows the primary purpose of apologetics is to remove obstacles and predispose the person to the acceptance of the gift of faith, rather than to actually convince him to rationally embrace the propositions of Revelation. However, my point is not to stress the provisional nature of apologetics, but to call attention to the peculiar

truth-bearing power of Faith itself.

### **Nothing Convinces Like Experience**

Some apologists have urged non-Christians seeking the truth to first begin to live as if Christian Revelation were true, convinced that this exercise will lead to Faith. This approach takes the formative power of experience very seriously. Its proponents have perceived that God offers the gift of Faith more frequently than it is received, and that the obstacles to receiving it are often rooted in bad habits, unfortunate attachments, and considerations of human respect. For this reason, if the sincere seeker can bring himself to live now as if the Faith is true, he will go far toward overcoming precisely those prejudices and hindrances which might otherwise cause him to reject the illuminating Presence of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, this experiment in experience, so to speak, is not to be confused with Faith itself. For whatever reason, it seems that the gift of Faith—and all Catholics must acknowledge that Faith is in the end a supernatural gift—may sometimes be withheld, at least for a time, even from well-disposed souls. In any case, a simulated faith experience is merely an external discipline used to better prepare for the possibility of faith. As such, it is very different from the experience of Faith itself, which actually transforms the believer from within. For Faith is its own form of experience—perhaps the very deepest form—with its own power to generate not only intellectual conviction but heroic constancy. This is why it is the gift of Faith itself which most deeply convinces us that God exists, that He has revealed Himself, and that what He has revealed is absolutely trustworthy.

### **Benedict's Second Encyclical**

In *Spe Salvi (Saved by Hope)*, Benedict XVI touches on this theme; in fact, it was when I read this second encyclical just a week or two after finishing Cardinal Dulles' book that these ideas came to mind. The Pope discusses Christian Hope from many different vantage points, but the one most relevant here is his extended commentary on *Hebrews* 11:1, where the Holy Spirit teaches us something vital about the relationship of Hope to Faith:

*Est autem fides sperandarum substantia rerum, argumentum non apparentium*—faith is the “substance” of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen. Saint Thomas Aquinas, using the terminology of the philosophical tradition to which he belonged, explains it as follows: faith is a *habitus*, that is, a stable

disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to what it does not see. The concept of “substance” is therefore modified in the sense that through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say “in embryo”—and thus according to the “substance”—there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the whole, true life. And precisely because the thing itself is already present, this presence of what is to come also creates certainty: this “thing” which must come is not yet visible in the external world (it does not “appear”), but because of the fact that, as an initial and dynamic reality, we carry it within us, a certain perception of it has even now come into existence. (#7)

What Benedict is saying, in essence, is that through Faith we actually *experience* the Kingdom of God. And precisely because we experience it (and this in the very depths of our being), we become absolutely certain of its reality. For this reason, our minds and wills hold to all the related propositions of Revelation with a security that no mere argument can impart. The believer is sure that the propositions of *the* Faith are correct because he has already experienced the Kingdom by the very fact of *his* Faith.

### Impact on Apologetics

The believer has already experienced the reality which the propositions of Revelation describe. In contrast, the unbeliever has no such experience. This difference has enormous consequences for apologetics, and for how believers and non-believers interact in general. First, we should be neither surprised nor perturbed by the fact that many non-believers regard believers as credulous simpletons who have hastily attached themselves to a whole series of questionable ideas. As if to reinforce this view, some believers may not be capable of learned explanation or debate, and so some unbelievers may run intellectual circles around them. But the believer has one thing that the unbeliever lacks, and that one thing is the best teacher: Experience.

Second, the believer must recognize that the unbeliever’s attitude toward the claims of Revelation (whether he is well-disposed or ill-disposed for whatever reason) must necessarily be fundamentally different from the attitude of the believer. In this light, the unbeliever’s doubts will be understandable, and his fears predictable. The unbeliever is something like a person who is being asked to swim unaided for the first time. He is to be forgiven if he cannot bring himself to go near the water. Better if the water comes to him, engulfs him, and allows him to experience that he was made to swim.

The analogy limps (or perhaps sinks), but at least it indicates why the apologist must proceed patiently, and with as much empathy as he can muster. Unless he is an adult

convert, the apologist must imagine what it is like to be without Faith. He cannot hope to substitute for the irreplaceable experience of Christ and His Kingdom that the gift of Faith provides. All he can hope to do is answer objections and urge the adoption of values which, once embraced on natural and rational grounds, can open the non-believer to the possibility of Faith; can suggest that it would be most appropriate if the Faith were true; and can even inspire him to desire it. Only God can do more.

### **Into the Light**

The point is that the believer is in a fundamentally different experiential position from the unbeliever. Consider a man who habitually lives on the surface of the earth, caressed by the breeze and warmed by the sun. When this man ventures beneath the surface of the earth he encounters a whole host of persons who have never been outside the vast caverns in which they dwell. These cave-dwellers may well ridicule the visitor from the surface, dismiss him as a lunatic (perhaps a dangerous lunatic), and try to convince him that the sun and the breeze are mere chimeras of his overheated imagination. But though a thousand questions be raised, the visitor from the sunlit lands will not doubt. He has experienced the sun. He knows by a means that mere argument can neither diminish nor augment.

The believer is like this man, though the sun is in his very soul. No matter what incredulity he encounters, he understands that the non-believer is at best only dimly aware of the complex dynamics which tether him to his unbelief. These dynamics may be cultural, emotional, material or psychological, but they are always intensified by spiritual stirrings of opposite kinds: fascination and fear, surrender and resistance, love and hostility. On both sides of this divide, only the believer sees all that is at stake, and all who are at war.

I do not wish to argue that the conviction of Faith can never be dimmed or extinguished, that logical reasons have nothing to do with Faith, or that Faith itself cannot burn with greater or lesser intensity. That is a subject for an even longer discussion. But even so, the believer is in a radically different position from the unbeliever, and is capable of a radically superior kind of certainty. A proper understanding of Faith, not as an intellectual assent but as “the substance of things hoped for”—as a nascent interior experience of the very Kingdom of God—is for all these reasons absolutely critical not only to apologetics but to evangelization itself. Without it we are doomed to be sounding brass and clanging cymbals, disgruntled arguers for a certainty which we can never fully explain. With it, we are witnesses to a rich experience that others cannot yet fathom, ambassadors of a kingdom they have not yet seen,

harbingers of a great light which—for unbelievers—has not yet dawned.

# Understanding Proselytism

March 28, 2008

If you look up the verb “proselytism” in most dictionaries, you’ll find it defined as any effort to persuade a person to give up one point of view in favor of another. The word is sometimes used in a political sense, but most often it is used religiously. The most common synonym for “proselytize” is “convert”. This will come as a surprise to Catholics, and it requires clarification.

For Catholics, who have a highly developed spiritual vocabulary, the standard definition is not adequate. In the Church’s lexicon, proselytism typically refers to conversion efforts that fail to respect the prospective convert’s freedom and dignity. High pressure tactics; telling lies about the other person’s current religion; comparing the weaknesses of another’s religious community with only the strengths of one’s own; attempting to convert children in opposition to their parents; offering worldly inducements to change one’s religious allegiance—these are what Catholics would call proselytism. In contrast, a sincere effort to share one’s faith so that others might freely choose to embrace it is considered a virtue. Terms with positive connotations are used to describe such generosity: evangelization, apologetics, catechesis, personal witness, or even simply “winning converts”.

## Sources of Confusion

But not every religious community uses the term “proselytism” in the same way. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church regards all efforts by Catholics to win converts in Russia as proselytism, and complains of it frequently to the Vatican. The Russian Orthodox have a strong sense of their own “canonical territory”, within which the Russian Orthodox Church is supposed to have a privileged status. This concept is fueled partly by patriarchal tradition, in which each patriarch is considered the highest source of Christian authority in his own region. It is also fueled partly by Russian insularity. Anything other than Russian Orthodoxy is considered an unRussian novelty. But this attitude is fueled by human nature as well. Isn’t it obvious, after all, that your efforts to convert someone from my faith look suspiciously like proselytism, whereas my own efforts to convert your coreligionists are always marked by charity and respect?

Sensitivity to the negative side of proselytism also derives from ecumenism. Conflict

among divergent Christian groups is a great scandal. The Protestant Revolt and all its subsequent controversies have probably contributed more to the rise of relativism and secularism than any other single factor. Collectively, the West largely concluded in the 17th and 18th centuries that if even Christians cannot agree on revealed truth, then it is probably best to admit such truth is unknowable and move on. By the twentieth century, it became obvious to Christians that the rising tide of unbelief was a far greater threat than sectarian differences. Since then many shepherds have been reluctant to be involved in what they have come to consider “sheep stealing”. The process of converting one’s fellow-Christians has, in this context, come to require a very light touch indeed.

All of this is understandable, but it may also represent something of a failure of nerve. The Islamic world feels no such need to tread lightly. There the full force of punitive law and the allure of material and political blandishments are routinely used both to prevent the conversion of Muslims to Christianity and to convert Christians to Islam. Serving a voluntarist God, Islam has left notably undeveloped any notion of human dignity based on God’s image and likeness. Christianity finds God’s own nature reflected in His creation in ways that are accessible to human reason. This perception of the Logos at work in all things forms the basis for both human dignity and natural law. In Islam, the emphasis on God’s will alone is so strong as to be scarcely linked to the nature of being. For this reason, an understanding of the deep freedom required for true religious assent has gone largely undeveloped in Islam.

### **Sensitivity and Paralysis**

Christians are right to be sensitive about proselytism, but they are foolish to become paralyzed by it. I’ve written elsewhere that it is the nature of true conviction to seek converts. The person who is convinced of something necessarily believes he has recognized a helpful truth. He must be either a fool or a knave to withhold it from others. The result is a great cacaphony of ideas, discussions and arguments, not only concerning religion but concerning just about everything. Those who assert that such arguments are detrimental to the human race are correct only insofar as it would be better if all had long since come voluntarily to the whole truth. The only other alternative to incessant debate is for all to come involuntarily to a lie. That’s why the Catholic usage of the term “proselytism” is so valuable. It recognizes that human dignity demands discussion and choice. It holds, therefore, that there are right and wrong ways to engage in the discussion.

Still, the distinctions are not always easy. It may be wrong to run a soup kitchen at which only those willing to listen to a Christian homily will be served. But is it wrong to

host regular evenings of prayer and preaching at which all who attend may avail themselves of a free meal? It may be wrong to refuse material aid to someone because he is not a believer, but is it wrong to expend one's charitable energies first in one's own religious community? It may be wrong to require parents to enroll their children in Christian schools, but is it wrong to encourage them to do so by offering strong financial aid? It may be wrong to restrict public office to Catholics, but is it wrong to restrict public office to those who recognize the natural law?

The answer to all of these questions depends primarily on the intention, which will also determine the manner in which various goods are presented. If I am offering support, aid, education, political advancement or any other non-religious benefit to certain persons *so that they will adopt my religion*, then I am proselytizing. If I am sharing an enthusiasm for my religion with them in the hope that they might convert to it, I am not proselytizing. And if I am offering benefits for other legitimate reasons, I am not proselytizing either, even if these benefits can in some cases create a cultural preference for my faith, should that faith happen to be dominant in some way. For example, I may wish to deny public office to those who do not recognize a higher and more rational law than that of the state, and so I might support an oath of office which includes these elements, but my motive would be to ensure good government, not to win converts. Or I may establish an orphanage to care for needy children and, in the process, give them everything I can, including Christian instruction, but my goal would be primarily to serve the needy, not to win converts.

### Love and Hate

I say “primarily” because, in fact, I will very probably have multiple motives for nearly everything I do. Indeed, to have only one motive is at some times unhealthy and at most times impossible. Therefore, I will neither hide my light under a bushel nor risk obscuring it through selfish motives or unfair tactics. If I cannot respect the other's freedom and dignity, if every gift I offer comes with spiritual strings, then the God I claim to serve will appear distorted—He who lets the sun and the rain fall on the good and the bad alike. The value of “my” conversions will be dubious indeed.

So Catholicism has it right again. It is always abhorrent to use conversion tactics which do not respect the freedom and dignity of the potential convert. It is equally abhorrent to have so little regard for others that we refuse to share our faith, which we hold more precious than any gift save life itself. The word we use to describe the former is proselytism. Catholics are not to engage in it. Nobody should. But the latter is simple lack of charity, a privation of love, that is, hatred. Catholics are not to engage in that

either. And neither should anyone else.

# The Implausible God Who Died

March 25, 2005

Like many serious Catholics, I'm coping with listlessness today—the result of too little food. But on Good Friday it is difficult to think long about one's own sufferings without remembering the much greater sufferings of Christ. It is astonishing that God should have suffered for us. In fact, it is so astonishing as to be implausible. Is it really true?

Such wondering need not be harmful; it can deepen Faith. There are many excellent historical, logical, experiential and ecclesiological arguments for the truth of everything we believe, and we can all benefit from a healthy dose of apologetics from time to time. But sometimes formal apologetics isn't required. Sometimes the effect of a question can be altered profoundly simply by viewing it in a different light.

For example, is the idea of a God Who died really implausible? Well, yes and no. In terms of what we naturally expect of God, His suffering and death is certainly surprising. But in terms of why people accepted it when they first encountered it, and why they have continued to accept it over time, the very implausibility becomes an inducement to belief.

Consider that in those first days of Christianity nobody could possibly have believed such a bizarre and unlikely story *unless they had extremely strong evidence that it were true*. The proclamation of the crucifixion of God is hardly calculated to inspire confidence, yet witnesses of the actual event converted in large numbers, and then suffered and even died for this implausible truth in their turn.

Properly considered, then, implausibility very quickly changes from an argument against the Faith into what apologists call a motive of credibility. Christianity is fond of turning the obvious on its head in this way. Frequently all it takes is a change in perspective to resolve a doubt.

# Eucharistic Astonishment

May 08, 2007

I was thinking of the Eucharist not long after capsizing my little sailboat in the Potomac River in high winds last Sunday. Attempting unsuccessfully to right a boat after the cabin has filled with water, and while hanging on to its upturned side in a three-foot chop, tends to make you appreciate more than just the neglected fundamentals of sound seamanship.

Lots of things come to mind—wife, children, God. Granted, this mishap probably wasn't life threatening, though the thought crossed my mind. I always wear my life jacket when single-handing, I was sailing not far from a popular local fishing tournament, I was only a quarter-mile offshore, and I'm in reasonably good shape (for the shape that I'm in). But it was rough, unpleasant, cold, frustrating, very bad for the boat and, yes, I swallowed a little water and I got a little scared. Forty years ago I would have come away thrilled. Sunday, I came away acutely conscious of my mortality.

So when I went to Mass on Monday morning, the wonder of the Eucharist struck me with renewed force, and what hit me hardest was how wildly improbable the Eucharist is. It is not improbable in the sense of being unlikely, given what we know about how it came to be, but it is most improbable in the sense of being totally unpredictable. It is highly doubtful that any human person would or even could make up a religion with the Eucharist at its heart.

Here we have God in what appears to be a piece of bread, or a sip of wine. The improbability is staggering, yet this is believed by millions upon millions of well-educated, modern, sophisticated people—as unprejudiced and self-conscious as modern criticism can make them. Moreover, people have believed it for nearly two thousand years. Every conceivable human regime has, at one time or another in that long history, tried to make people stop believing it. Yet they still believe. Nearly every one of these believers has had a doubt or two about it at one time or another. Yet they believe again and more strongly.

Paradoxically, one of the greatest motives of credibility for Catholicism is its sheer untamed, unfathomable incredibility. God becomes man, starting out in the womb like everybody else. For the most part, he lives a humble and obscure life. Toward the end, he preaches a number of doctrines, some of which make his listeners fear he is insane or

possessed. He says he is going to give himself up to death, and he claims to offer his body in bread and his blood in wine as a perpetual memorial. Then he allows himself to be executed.

Millions of people believe in this perpetual memorial. More importantly, I believe in it. Most readers know why, but this is not the time to talk about why. Rather, this is the time simply to appreciate again what *is*—to receive it fresh, to let it seep in a little deeper. There is a season for everything. There is a season for meditative theology, and a season for reasoned apologetics. There is a season for fiery preaching, and a season for evangelization. But there is also this particular season: the season for astonishment, the season for gratitude, the season for joy.

# The Church Perfect

January 08, 2010

Considering the frequent criticism of ecclesiastical persons on this web site, I think it essential to consider why the Church remains so important, so special and so beautiful despite the sins of her members. This need may be greater for some readers than for others; some of our correspondents have betrayed a deeper disaffection with Church leadership than CatholicCulture.org has ever expressed. But all Catholics, at least, ought to recall that the only legitimate reason for criticizing contemporary bishops, priests, religious communities, Catholic agencies, politicians and theologians is that they fail to uphold the standards of the Church herself.

Please pay close attention to what I'm saying here: Considered in her members, their organizations and their activities, the Church is legitimately subject to criticism only when she differs from what she actually is, considered in her essence. This fundamental fact of Catholic life is unlike any other fact concerning any other organization in history, and it is extraordinarily instructive. It not only indicates the sole legitimate criterion for criticism of ecclesiastical persons and organizations; it also expresses the reality that the Church possesses a perfect identity, an identity which transcends the individual actions and even the general associational impact of her members.

## Getting it Wrong

Despite (or often because of) the consistent effort of our writers to operate within this layered understanding of the Church, we not infrequently attract correspondents who rail against the Church for all the wrong reasons. The secular or liberal or modernist critique, for example, does not base itself on a standard of judgment drawn from the Church's own perfection; rather it derives its standard from outside the Church, invariably from the dominant (and ever shifting) attitudes of the larger contemporary culture. On this reading, the Church is deeply flawed because she is not a democracy, or because she won't accept moral conclusions reached by people struggling in the real world, or because she ignores contemporary ideas about human nature and human satisfaction, or because she passes judgment on contemporary trends and describes contemporary "virtues" as sins.

Similarly, a more individualistic or Protestant or even pentecostal critique draws its

criteria from personal religious experience. Here the Church is charged with being hopelessly encrusted in the trappings of human power. She is insufficiently open to the Holy Spirit. She unjustly refuses to accept the wisdom of private religious experience and interpretation, and she self-servingly distrusts prophets and visionaries, including those who claim preternatural locutions and apparitions. Finally, even some common historical or traditional critiques are ultimately based on criteria extraneous to the Church herself, chiefly stemming from emotional, psychological or aesthetic attachments to the human arrangements of previous periods. By these lights, the Church is much too open to social, political and liturgical changes, which have caused her to distort her own doctrines; her modern style—that is, her praise of human goods and her reluctance to condemn human frailty—are necessarily evidence of a fundamental abandonment of her Lord.

This is not to say that an insight from contemporary thought, personal experience or human tradition cannot enable us to focus more easily on some aspect of the Church's inner life that is being neglected. Indeed, as soon as some feature of the Church's true inner life is properly identified and contrasted with a present behavior, the resulting criticism is as inevitable as it is just. But divorced from the Church's own interior account of herself, all of these critiques—and many others like them, such as those stemming from ideology—are fundamentally wrong-headed. And why? Because none of them measure the performance of the Church in her members against the perfection of the Church in her essence.

### **The Bride and Body of Christ**

There are several keys to understanding this essential identity which the Church possesses as a perfect society despite the sins of her members. These keys originated in the teachings of Christ; they were carried on by Tradition and outlined in the New Testament; they were developed by the Fathers and have been further articulated by the Magisterium. The two most powerful keys to this proper understanding were conveniently provided by St. Paul in a particularly blessed passage in his letter to the Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves

himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (5:15-32)

Let anyone who understands something about Christian marriage tremble at the unfathomable intimacy of this passage. Here St. Paul not only introduces marriage in the context of Christ’s love for the Church, but the Church in the context of marriage and Christ’s love for His own body. And here are our two keys to grasping the Church’s perfect identity, the Church as the bride of Christ and the Church as the body of Christ. In both senses, the Church is so fully and deeply joined to her Lord as husband and head that she is made supremely holy through her union with Him.

It has often been remarked, and not without wisdom, that the Church is a hospital for sinners. But here we see, at one and the same time, that she is the bride “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” and she is even the very body of Christ. As bride she is enraptured for holiness by Christ’s sacrifice; as body she is created and extended through Christ’s own body and blood. Nor is this bridal and bodily identity just an identity of ideas. No, the flawless bride and the holy body of Christ is a real, objective, discernible organization, composed of institutional bone and muscle. The bone is her hierarchy, led infallibly (for all its human flaws) by the successor of Peter, who serves as Christ’s vicar until He comes again. The muscle is her membership, activities and works which—again, despite all the many sins, failures and miscues—imprint the image of Christ on a fallen world.

This bride, this body, is infused with the very life of God, coursing in her veins through her participation in the high priesthood of Jesus Christ, embodied in action by the sacraments, through which grace flows into the world. In fact, grace flows here so perfectly and completely that all attachment to Christ depends ultimately on the existence and mission of His Church. This is why a positive response to grace by any person under any circumstance tends toward unity with the Church; it also explains how connections with Christ’s body may be formed by men of good will everywhere, often beneath the level of juridical membership, but always in direct consequence of Christ’s mysterious action through His Church. Thus is every grace and good intimately dependent upon the Church, which by virtue of her supreme holiness has become the universal sacrament of salvation extended through time.

## The Mind of the Church

The Church is also the repository of Revelation, of all that we know about God, about His ways with men, about His salvific plan, about what it means to conform ourselves spiritually and morally to Him. Moreover, as recorded in the deposit of Faith in both Scripture and Tradition, Christ imbued the Church with the Petrine power so that the brethren might be confirmed in faith and strengthened (Lk 22:32), and this power has been exercised now by the Church's Magisterium for nearly two millennia. The result is a wealth of clear and specific teaching about reality, life and love which serves to express quite fully both what the Church is and what we must do—and must even become—to be worthy of her. This teaching, so fruitful in producing holiness, has indeed enabled many to become worthy of what the Church is. Those who become so are called saints.

But most of us are not worthy of the Church. It is this pervasive unworthiness that creates the Church's human flaws. In the final analysis, it is we ourselves who open the Church to criticism. Recognizing this, we have a strong obligation to root all criticism in what is, in spite of ourselves, the Church's own perfection. That perfection is expressed in what I earlier referred to as the Church's internal account of herself, which is commonly called the "mind" of the Church. When we combine the Church's doctrines with the witness of her Fathers, doctors and saints, who have given individual expression to her perfect fruitfulness in every time and place, we come into possession of this "mind". It is formed by Scripture and Tradition, and all that the Church has officially taught, as this has been consistently extended and interpreted by those who, across the generations, have been most formed by her holiness. This mind of the Church is the complete standard for our own spiritual growth, and it is the sole criterion by which we may presume to judge what is or is not wrong with ourselves, as well as what is or is not "wrong with the Church".

The Church is, or ought to be, everything to each of us: our consistent encounter with Christ, the source of our salvation, the font of grace, the theory and practice of holiness, a haven for all the living, and the rule for the ultimate judgment of all things. It is only by putting on the mind of the Church that we put on the mind of Christ. It is only by holding ourselves to the Church's measure that we can tell where anyone, including anyone who exercises leadership in the Church, has fallen short. Indeed, it is against the Church's perfection that her very imperfections must be measured and corrected. The bride-body of Christ must be our one standard, just as it is, in the end, our only hope.

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