Apologetics Today
Pastoral Perspectives

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An effective contemporary apologetics must learn from the past and read the current signs of the times, as Vatican II taught. Pastoral leaders today need an apologetics that can guide and inspire their efforts to explain and defend the faith for themselves and the people they serve. Our contemporary world calls for an apologetics that includes at least three fundamental perspectives: personal, mystagogical, and correlative.

Since Vatican II, a growing number of Catholics have recognized their responsibility to participate in the mission of the church. Scripture calls all the baptized to give a reason for the hope that sustains us (1 Pet 3:15). Pastoral ministers have the important task of guiding and encouraging this shared apologetic responsibility of explaining and defending the faith. An effective pastoral apologetics always functions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in the context of the church community. This article offers some perspectives for carrying out this ministry in the contemporary world with its distinctive contours.

History

Historically, Christian apologists expounded and upheld the beliefs and practices of their faith in response to challenges presented by its opponents and those who deviated from orthodoxy. Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165) argued against the

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Jews that Christ had indeed fulfilled the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225) extolled the virtues of Christianity to the pagans. Augustine (354–430) defended Christianity against the charge that it was responsible for the fall of Rome. Aquinas (1225–1274) sought to present a coherent response to various challenges presented by unbelievers. In the post-Reformation period, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) developed a comprehensive defense of Catholic teaching against the Protestant reformers.

After the European Enlightenment, theologians developed a distinct field known as apologetics to explain and defend the faith. The Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) proposed a comprehensive defense of Christianity to “the cultured despisers” of religion. In the world of Catholic theology, Johann AdamMoehler (1796–1838) made a similar attempt to defend the faith by presenting a comprehensive view of Catholic doctrine.

Within Catholicism, a less holistic and more rationalistic apologetics also developed that was considered part of fundamental theology. The theological manuals used in seminaries during the 19th and 20th centuries employed reasoned arguments to prove fundamental presuppositions of faith: for example, the existence of God, the historicity of the Bible, the knowability of revelation, the possibility of miracles, the divinity of Christ, and the authority of the church. The manualist apologetics did not treat the concrete content of the Gospel message, which was saved for dogmatic theology, nor did it seek dialogue with opposing views. In recent times, a “neo-manualist apologetics” has asserted itself as Catholic writers once again try to prove the truth of the Catholic faith without taking into account modern biblical criticism, the development of doctrine, the hierarchy of truths, the ultimately mysterious character of God and divine revelation, and the weaknesses of the pilgrim church.

An effective contemporary apologetics must learn from the past and read the current signs of the times, as Vatican II taught. Pastoral leaders today need an apologetics that can guide and inspire their efforts to explain and defend the faith for themselves and the people they serve. Our contemporary world calls for an apologetics that includes at least three fundamental perspectives: personal, mystical, and correlational.

A Personal Apologetics

Our Impersonal World

In the early years of the twenty-first century, many citizens of the United States feel constrained by what Max Weber called “the iron cage” of the modern bureaucratic world. When impersonal forces are dominant, young people use the internet as an electronic moat; employees are treated as replaceable parts of an organization; collegians get lost in large universities; citizens feel powerless to influence
elected officials and public policy; and professionals complain that required paperwork hinders their relationships with clients. Furthermore, the era of the iron cage has generated a general distrust of large institutions that prize bureaucratic efficiency and discourage personal interactions.

Within the world of religion, some Catholics feel constrained by the doctrines and rules of the church. Disaffected Catholics say their parishes were not warm and welcoming. Loyal parishioners wish they had more influence on the way parishes are run. For many, the word “religion” has negative connotations, suggesting an impersonal church institution that is either irrelevant or inimical to human progress. At the same time, the word “spiritual” functions more positively, suggesting a personal search for meaning. This combination often leaves the spiritual journey disconnected from religious institutions and practices.

**Personal Content**

The impersonal character of life today calls for an apologetics that is thoroughly and consistently personal. Contemporary theology provides pastoral ministers with personal categories for explaining and defending the faith. Christian anthropology insists that human beings are not cogs in an impersonal machine, but are children of God, redeemed by Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we are members of the human family responsible for the common good, social creatures seeking fulfillment in healthy relationships, interdependent persons called to love our neighbor as ourselves. Contemporary theology reminds us that the gracious Mystery is trine, a dynamic communion of love that enters into a threefold intimate relationship with all human beings. The one God as Father calls each one of us by name, and as Word shares our human condition, and as Holy Spirit lives within us, closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine described it. Central to a personal apologetics is a Christology that insists that Christian faith is not an abstract philosophy of life nor one ideology among others, but rather a personal relationship to Jesus Christ as the absolute savior and definitive prophet. As Karl Rahner came to see late in his life, faith enables Christians to throw their arms around Jesus in an act of love. The church is the community of faith that keeps alive the memory of Jesus by participating sacramentally in his death and resurrection and by sharing actively in his work of spreading the kingdom of justice and peace in the world. By emphasizing the personal relationships at the core of Christian faith, apologetics helps counter the impersonal trends in the contemporary world and makes the faith more credible as a valuable countercultural force.

**Common Personal Ministry**

A personal apologetics is concerned not only with the content of the faith but also with how it is presented. Pastoral ministers are called to give personal witness to the inherent power of Christian faith to guide and energize life in our world today. The better prepared we are to give a reason for our hope, the more effective
we will be in making the faith more credible for those we serve. Authenticity is a vital virtue for pastoral ministers. Parishioners know when we have wrestled with the great challenges of our times and are speaking out of our faith experience. Local parishes, where most Catholics experience the church, have great opportunities to present the faith in personal terms. Homilies can include concrete examples of individuals who have lived the Gospel message. Lectures and seminars can provide a theological framework for personal reflection on the great issues of the day. The whole RCIA process should focus on developing a deeper personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Christian service projects offer opportunities to serve persons in need and to enter into genuine dialogue with them. Spiritual direction and pastoral counseling are great settings for a personalized apologetics that helps individuals meet the specific challenges to their Christian faith.

Pastoral ministers should recognize the common challenges to the faith shared by most people today. We are all searching for meaning in a world filled with absurdity; for an overarching purpose in an historical process that often seems capricious; for depth in a culture given to superficiality; for inner peace in the face of the great tensions of life. The people we serve fall in love, establish families, care for children, know sickness, and grieve the loss of loved ones. We can help them relate their experiences of life to their Christian faith while prescinding from the specifics of their spiritual journey. For example, homilists who know the human heart can preach effectively without knowing the precise shape of the challenges faced by everyone in the congregation.

**Serving Older Catholics**

On the other hand, an effective pastoral ministry responds to the diversity found in the church today. Generational differences are important. In broad terms, older Catholics who grew up in a comprehensive Catholic subculture experienced Vatican II either as a liberation from the constraints of traditional practices or as an intrusion on a religious way of life they treasured. Each of these groups can be subdivided. Some of the leaders and scholars who favored the Vatican II reforms were interested in greater dialogue with the modern world, while others supported the reforms as a way of reappropriating the beliefs and practices of the early church. Among those who opposed the conciliar developments, some have gradually adapted to them, while others remain opposed and favor a reform of the reform. As Cardinal Bernardin feared, this understandable pluralism has at times devolved into a destructive polarization within the church. In addressing the older generations, pastoral ministers have to deal with a variety of issues: interpreting the council documents; looking for common ground in response to ecclesial polarization; examining the development of doctrine; responding to distrust in the church; promoting dialogue; and establishing a christological focus for the Catholic symbolic system. Parish educational programs that present various responses to Vatican II and promote dialogue on divisive issues perform a valuable service.
Serving the Younger Generations

A personalized apologetics must find other ways of addressing the challenges to faith facing the younger generations of Catholics, including the growing number of millennials. For them, Vatican II is ancient history and does not immediately engage their interest. Most of them grew up without the influence of a robust Catholic subculture. Millennials have known a great deal of instability caused by secular events such as divorce, random violence, the terrorist threats and school shootings as well as by church issues, such as inadequate religious education, parish closings, and the priest sex abuse scandal.

The categories of progressive and conservative commonly used to describe reactions to Vatican II do not apply easily to millennials. For apologetic purposes, it seems more useful to employ categories that describe dominant tendencies in the lived spirituality of young people today. These types of spirituality can be named: eclipsed, private, evangelical, ecumenical, prophetic, and communal. Millennials who have allowed their spiritual longings to be eclipsed by the cares of the world need to bring their spiritual aspirations to greater consciousness. Young Catholics who no longer go to Mass but pursue the spiritual search in private need to recognize the value of religious practices for guiding and energizing the spiritual quest. Catholics who resemble evangelical Protestants need a more critical understanding of the Bible and encouragement to engage the modern world. Millennials who are naturally open to ecumenical dialogue and have very little institutional loyalty need solid reasons to stay with the Catholic community. Young people who are committed to the prophetic cause of justice and peace need the guidance and encouragement of Catholic social teaching. Catholics who have a strong communal spirituality need a solid theology of the Eucharist that includes the ethical demand to love our neighbor as ourselves. There are no pure types of spirituality among the Catholic millennials, and the categories often overlap. This typology, however, is a useful guide for pastoral ministers responding to the specific needs of young people today. Furthermore, it seems that all the types still display elements of the sacramental spirituality common to previous generations of Catholics. Their religious imagination is still shaped by frequent celebrations of the Eucharist, creating the conviction that the infinite is present in the finite. In other words, Catholic millennials are still predisposed to find God in all things and to detect signals of transcendence in the ordinary flow of life. Pastoral ministers...
can tap this incarnational spirituality as part of their effort to serve the younger generations.

To sum up, a personal apologetics presents a Christocentric exposition of the Christian faith and looks for methods of safeguarding the faith designed to meet the spiritual needs of diverse individuals and groups.

A Mystagogical Apologetics

Secularization

In his massive and important book *A Secular Age*, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor examines in great detail the dynamics and contours of the contemporary context in which people make decisions about belief in God and religious practices. He points out that in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, while today many find unbelief not only easy but acceptable. The background framework that naively supported belief in the past has been called into question. Examining presuppositions and contexts is now an accepted part of living a reflective life. The modern world prompts new questions: what is the nature and function of belief? What constitutes human flourishing and the good life? Do people recognize a transcendent element in their lives and find clues to a mystery dimension? Is there a higher goal than human flourishing? Questions of this kind have contributed to the deconstruction of the traditional context for belief. In the modern context, belief has become one option among others. The process of secularization has spawned a new option, a self-sufficient humanism that promotes human flourishing without reference to transcendent goals or divine interventions.

In the last decade, a number of authors, commonly known as “new atheists,” have become more aggressive in attacking Christian belief and promoting an atheistic humanism that excludes the God hypothesis. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins attempts to debunk the traditional proofs of theism while claiming that evolutionary science best explains the human condition as we know it. Furthermore, he argues that the atheistic option is the more enlightened view since it is commonly held by scholars and the intellectual elites, such as Nobel Prize winning scientists.

Vindicating Belief

To counter exclusive humanism, we need a mystagogical apologetics that can recognize, name, and appropriate the presence of mystery in our lives. It is not a matter of proving to atheists that God exists but of vindicating the faith shared by believers. Although the traditional proofs for God are not compelling to many people today, they do point to common human experiences that open up the question of belief and point to the theistic option. Apologetics must show that belief in
the God manifested in Christ facilitates human flourishing in ways that self-enclosed humanism cannot. Our claim is that theism is a better option than atheism in the struggle to find meaning and purpose in life and in trying to live more authentically and effectively.

Fundamental theology, or what we can call “mystagogical apologetics,” provides a framework for vindicating belief against the claims of exclusive humanism. Many years ago I proposed one approach that still seems useful to me (Bacik 1980). It begins by disclosing or bringing to light signs of mystery in common human experiences: for example, bearing the burden of freedom, falling in love, maintaining friendships, helping people in need, grieving the loss of loved ones, and enjoying the beauties of nature. The field of phenomenology encourages careful descriptions of human consciousness, of ways of being in the world and of the symbolic character of human existence. These descriptions are more likely to disclose the mystery dimension of life when they use evocative language that is colorful, vivid, and poetic. The next step is to demonstrate that these experiences of mystery can be properly understood only on the condition that human beings are essentially oriented to a mystery that is gracious and benign. Finally, mystagogical apologetics must vindicate the claim that the gracious Mystery that we call God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Ministers as Mystagogues

The structure of this theological argument suggests that pastoral leaders ministering in a secular environment are called to be mystagogues. Effective ministers are in touch with the mystery dimension of their own lives. We need to be good listeners in order to pick up the signals of transcendence in the experience of those we serve. In teaching, preaching, and directing, we need to feed back to people what we heard about their joys and triumphs, as well as their sorrows and failures. A national survey conducted a few years ago indicated that one of the best predictors of perceived homily effectiveness is the statement: “The preacher understands my heart” (Bacik and Anderson, 148ff.). All Christian apologists become more effective when they speak of the human condition in ways that resonate with the experience of those they serve. Mystagogues can speak of God as the Supreme Source of the dynamics of the human spirit and as the Gracious Goal of the longings of the heart. Christ is the parable of the Father and the exemplar of fulfilled humanity. He knows the restless heart and makes irreversible and definitive the promise of final fulfillment. For Christians, the embrace of mystery is enlightening and energizing. It guards us against complacency and provides motivation for the ongoing effort to foster human flourishing. The best responses to a self-contained humanism come from Christians actually living their faith in vibrant and effective ways: parents who make the family a genuine school of virtue; social activists who sustain the effort over the long haul; groups that work for justice and peace even when the cause is not popular; parishioners who generously attend to those in
need. Pastoral ministers have many opportunities to remind parishioners that the gracious Mystery calls us to help transform society and humanize culture.

**A Correlational Apologetics**

**A Period of Transition**

We are living through one of the great transition periods in the history of the human family. The modern world created by science and technology, by urbanization and industrialization, by exploration and discovery, was filled with optimism about the possibility of human progress. In Europe, this optimism was challenged by World War I and further eroded by the global depression and World War II. In the United States, the modern optimistic spirit generally remained intact through the World Wars and the depression only to be undercut by the assassination of President Kennedy and subsequent events, including random violence, terrorist attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the most recent economic crisis.

This more somber mood has been reinforced by recognition of the limitations of important elements of modernity: the patriarchal structures that constrained women; the colonialist policies that subjected whole nations, the industrialization that helped pollute the earth, and the technology that produced nuclear weapons. Detached scientific reasoning itself has come under attack. Scholars speak of a postmodern outlook that debunks metanarratives and overarching explanations of reality; that distrusts doctrinaire ideologies and traditional institutions; and that trumpets the death of God and the collapse of all absolutes. In these developments, Pope Benedict XVI detects “a tyranny of relativism” that has abandoned the quest for authentic truth. In a period of great transition, the human hunger for stability and security is intensified as is the desire for ultimate meaning and clear purpose.

**The Correlational Method**

Christian apologetics can respond to this situation by following a correlational methodology. In general terms, this method creates a mutually enriching conversation between the contemporary world and the Christian tradition. In this dialogue, the postmodern mood demands a critical appropriation of the Bible and church teaching. An apologetics that seeks to be authentic and relevant cannot simply present scripture verses as proof for Catholic teaching or repeat traditional doctrines to defend the faith. Scripture scholars, such as Sandra Schneiders and the late Raymond Brown, present valuable resources for pastoral ministers dependent on the Bible for their apologetic work. They help us understand the major biblical themes, the background of the various books, the intent of the authors, the use of literary forms, and the meaning of individual passages. They also encourage us to appreciate the Bible as classic literature with inspiring narratives that touch
our hearts as well as our minds. Theologians help pastoral ministers appreciate the doctrinal tradition of the church, its development over the centuries, and its role in pointing to the mystery of divine love revealed in Christ. They reinterpret traditional doctrines and refocus our attention on neglected truths. Our apologetic ministry today is enriched by the theological giants of the twentieth century, Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, who offer us fresh perspectives on the fundamental Christian message.

Aided by modern scholarship and guided by the Spirit, pastoral leaders should enter the conversation with the secular world with a humble confidence that enables us to learn from the positive elements in the culture and to critique its destructive tendencies. We want to show that the Catholic tradition as a whole is a credible and attractive response to the contemporary hunger for purpose and meaning.

**Guidance from Rahner**

Karl Rahner’s classic work *Foundations of Christian Faith* is a good example of a correlational theology. He rejects a Catholic fundamentalism that would refuse dialogue with the modern world out of pride or fear. He also rejects a mindless relativism that denies the truth claims of Christianity. He realizes that theology today cannot answer all of the challenges presented by the contemporary world. No school of thought, no theologian, no individual Christian can understand all the objections to the faith, let alone respond to them effectively. Rahner’s solution is to offer a first-level reflection in defense of the Christian faith. This means that *Foundations* bypasses many of the debates about individual points of doctrine and scriptural interpretations. Instead, Rahner attempts to present the Christian faith as a whole in all of its beauty and power. He demonstrates how Christian faith provides a credible response to the question that we humans are. For him, Christian faith is not an ideology but a commitment to Christ that offers the best guidance for navigating through the diverse challenges of the world today.

There are important lessons for pastoral leaders in Rahner’s approach. We have to accept our limited ability to answer every challenge to the faith. At the same time, we want to develop a clearer sense of what the Christian faith means to us as a whole and how it can illumine and guide the struggles of the people we serve. We cannot get distracted by technical debates, polarized positions, and arguments over nonessential elements of the tradition. We do need to keep focused on Christ as the centerpoint of the whole Catholic symbol system. All of the doctrines, rituals, and institutional elements point to Christ, who is the mediator between God and the human family.

**Specific Correlations**

Furthermore, contemporary theology suggests correlations between individual Christian doctrines and specific concerns raised by the culture today. For example, a Christian understanding of human beings as social creatures challenges the
individualism so prevalent in our culture. The doctrine of the Trinity interpreted as God for us responds to the quest for meaning and purpose in our chaotic world. Recognizing the superficiality of our culture, a theology of grace sets a framework for recognizing and identifying the transcendent element in ordinary experience. Christology responds to our search for a credible role model and for a guide who is totally trustworthy. Ecclesiology tries to show how the Church as a community and institution responds to the current hungers for community, stability, and an effective way of working for justice and peace. Sacramentology shows how our official liturgical rites correspond to the great human need to find deeper meaning in the life cycle. Eschatology assures us that the longings of our heart will find fulfillment and that our efforts to tend the earth now are an important contribution to that day when the cosmic Christ completes his work.

There are, of course, many ways to correlate Scripture and our doctrinal tradition with the needs of our contemporary world. Part of the pastoral art is to discern creative connections so that our parishioners are able to appropriate their faith in a more credible way. The broader our knowledge of the rich and diverse Christian tradition and the deeper our understanding of the hearts and minds of the people we serve, the better apologists we will be. With this base and the guidance of the Spirit, we can more effectively employ an apologetics that is truly personal, mystagogical, and correlational.

References


