Recovering the Apologetics of Humility

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The church particularly needs to help people provide a reason for our faith and for our commitment to the church in the midst of so many challenges we face today. Three styles of apologetics are assessed here—perfection, decline and renewal, and humility. An apologetics of humility can be enlisted to help us face the anxieties and challenges raised by postmodern culture.

Many people cringe when they hear someone bring up the topic of apologetics or, even worse, Catholic apologetics. As someone who has spent a great deal of time studying the way reformers use apologetics and polemics throughout the history of the church, I find such reactions unfortunate but understandable. In its original sense, apologetics referred to a defense that would be offered in a legal context. Later it came to signify a response or an answer to a charge or a question concerning validity. First Peter 3:15-16 obliges Christians to practice this more general type of apologetics: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (NRSV).

Throughout the first sixteen hundred years of church history, this answer or justification could be presented in many ways. Early apologists, faced with charges of licentiousness and subversion of public order, answered by pointing out that Christians were morally upright and that they were good citizens. Some apologists tried to convince their audiences that Christians were not atheists and others tried to demonstrate how their faith was consistent with Jewish prophecies. When...
Christianity became a state-supported religion, apologists had to respond to questions about public scandals in the church to a variety of heterodox and heretical Christians, gnostics, and pagans. Because of the variety of critiques, questions, and charges, apologetics included multiple modes of discourse and methods. Perhaps the best defense of the faith, in this tradition, was the example of the martyr who, like Christ, forgave his or her persecutors.

So why are people bothered by apologetics? The answer can be found in the eighteenth century. According to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, apologetics came to be defined as the argumentative defense of Christianity in 1733. Essentially, its objective was to defeat an opponent through the use of rational argument. We should recognize that the term “rational” refers to the syllogistic style of presentation. Apologetics, as it is generally understood today, is a particularly modern mode of discourse. It rests on several assumptions, namely, that there is a generally shared understanding of the value of reason, a common epistemology, a unified view of the world, and a belief in absolute truth. Since postmodern culture tends to reject all of these assumptions, it is not surprising that apologetics has fallen out of favor in theological discourse at the various Catholic institutions of higher learning. Although apologetics has moved out of the academy, it has found a new home on the World Wide Web.

After doing a search on the internet for “Catholic apologetics,” I found more than 98,000 results. Catholic Answers, one of the more moderate sites, includes what it calls an “Apologist’s Bookshelf,” which is heavily populated by the works of modern authors such as John Henry Newman and G.K. Chesterton as well as titles such as “Refuting the Attack on Mary.” It also has a page that gives the following advice to those who are starting out as apologists:

> If you engage in apologetics, which is the branch of theology that deals with how to defend the faith, sooner or later you will be brought up short by someone who says disagreeing with others about religion is “divisive.” (“Divisive” seems to be the “in” word nowadays.)

While this site’s understanding of apologetics is reminiscent of the type of fortress Catholicism prevalent in the post-Reformation period, it avoids falling into the excesses that can be found on other apologetic websites. The Traditional Catholic Apologetics site, for example, defends the church’s role in the Spanish Inquisition and concludes: “So we see that the TRUE Church of God (Christ) does have the authority and the responsibility to protect the immortal souls of the faithful by whatever means it deems necessary, even if that means putting [to] death the heretic.” The site leaves one wondering why we ever stopped killing people who do not agree with us, and it fails to meet the standards of gentleness and reverence laid out in 1 Peter 3:16 for Christian apologetics.

Can we afford to give up on apologetics as hopelessly irrelevant or cede it to the lunatic fringe? The reality is that we particularly need to provide a reason for our
faith and for our commitment to a church with so many evident and well-publicized failures. When I think of the current investigation of women’s communities by the Vatican, I recognize how vitally important it is to try to find an answer to the question, “Why would any woman want to belong to a church that marginalizes women and that appears to be intimidating those who have dedicated their lives to serving its mission?” Of course, Rome makes for an easy target. It is just as important to be able to explain why Catholics fail so miserably at following the church’s social justice teachings or at observing the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” If we are honest, then we can see that we have a lot of issues that demand a serious and reflective and honest response.

**The Apologetics of Perfection**

Since the Reformation era, our way of responding to manifest scandals was to proclaim loudly the perfection of the Catholic Church. While I am not an expert on the papacy in the modern and contemporary periods, I believe it is accurate to say that John Paul II was the first pope since the 1550s to speak as if the church sins or fails as a corporate body. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that he seemed to recognize a need for corporate penance for the sins of the members of the church. The International Theological Commission, in an attempt to clarify the John Paul II’s apologies, explained that the church “is holy, though she includes sinners in her bosom.” This leads to an interesting problem in terms of the relationship between ourselves and the church, because it would seem that we are not the church. The distinction between the church and its members has roots reaching back into the nineteenth century.

In the early 19th century, the official stance of the Catholic Church was that it was perfect and that it had never changed. Pope Gregory XVI released the encyclical *Mirari Vos* in 1832 declaring that it is absurd and insulting “to suggest that the church stands in need of restoration and regeneration,” since the church had been instituted by Jesus Christ and is guided by the Holy Spirit. For Gregory XVI the church could never stand in need of reform because it was, as he stated in his encyclical, impervious “to exhaustion, degradation or other defects of this kind” (Duffy, 220). This position was challenged by John Henry Newman, who defined the perfection of the church in terms of its ability to move to an ever deeper understanding of the revelation it has received. Perhaps Newman’s most valuable insight was that history, which reveals both the triumphs and the failures of the church, was not something that Catholics should fear. These ideas were promoted by Pope Leo XIII in 1889 in the encyclical *Depuis le Jour*, which proclaimed: “God does not want our lies.” Leo XIII said church historians were serving the church’s interests when they “keep back nothing of the trials which she has had to experience in the course of the ages through the frailty of her children, and sometimes even of her ministers” (Shelley, 94).
Whereas Newman and Leo XIII were defending the possibility for reform and development within the Catholic Church, they were still essentially employing the apologetics of perfection. Given their historical situation, it was a strategy that made sense; but the question remains as to whether it makes any sense to try to maintain this apologetic stance. How many people are moved by the claim that the Catholic Church is perfect even if the members are not? Are postmodern people likely to accept the types of syllogistic arguments and claims of access to absolute truth common to Newman’s age? Given the hermeneutics of suspicion, such arguments tend to foster distrust rather than win over hearts and minds. Rather than giving up on providing an answer for our faith, we should consider our alternatives.

Apologetics of Decline and Renewal

In the two centuries prior to the Reformation and its fallout, the dominant strategy for defending the church’s authority in the face of its manifest failures was to point to the natural rhythms of decline and rebirth or renewal. Actually, the popularity of this idea led to the designation of the period as the Renaissance. Though the apologetics of decline and renewal became increasingly popular in the fourteenth century, the origins of this strategy can be traced back at least to the twelfth century (Ladner, 1–33).

Approaching apologetics this way was effective because the culture perceived decline as inevitable and required periodic moments of rebirth and renewal. A good example can be found in Edgidio da Viterbo’s address to the Fifth Lateran Council:

Divine things certainly do not need correction because they are not subject to motion or change. But celestial and human things, being subject to movement, long for renewal. . . . If the paths of the stars in the heavens, even though constant, eternal, and everlasting, nevertheless return and are restored, what then does this third division of [human] things do, since they are changing, transitory, and mortal? Indeed, either they inevitably perish in a quick destruction, or they are restored in a continual renewal. . . . And as no living thing can long survive without nourishment from food, so man’s soul and the Church cannot perform well without the attention of Councils.

He proceeded to employ several vitalistic images, such as tilling and pruning a vineyard, to explain why there needs to be regular attention paid to the problems in the church. With this apologetic position, one would expect ongoing deficiencies in the church. Though this form of apologetics of renewal is absolutely consistent with Vatican II’s statement that the church “follows constantly the path of penance and renewal” (Lumen Gentium 8), it does not seem to be a strategy embraced by modern apologists; or, if they do embrace it, they do so in its more radical form.
Some late medieval and renaissance theologians employed the apologetics of decline and rebirth in a manner that tended to increase tensions within the church by positing a virtually perfect early church that fell into decline over time. While this allowed Catholics to extol the church in its ancient purity as they excoriated the corruptions they faced, it also tended to reinforce the idea that the church can achieve a nearly perfect state within the confines of history. One important source for this new apologetic was the recovery of classical Greek and Latin sources on the nature of history. The ancient idea of history as a decline from a glorious antiquity came to seize the European imagination during the Renaissance.

This vision of a virtually perfect early church came to full bloom at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century. What began as an affirmation of church authority in the face of scandal by reformers came to be used to undermine the authority of the Catholic Church by a new generation of reformers in the sixteenth century. Depending on the ecclesiology a reformer wanted to establish, the apologetics of decline and renewal permitted one to assert that the church had fallen from its pure or nearly pure state in the age of the apostles, or of the martyrs, or of the early fathers (Anderson, 157–158). Such an idea allowed reformers to identify corruption or decline with specific events or periods such as Constantine’s decision to support the church, the rise of the papal monarchy, the establishment of the mendicant orders, the Babylonian Captivity, the Great Schism, or the acts of some specific council such as the Fourth Lateran or Constance.

Today the radical form of the apologetics of decline and renewal is used by those who wish to identify the point of corruption with Vatican I, Vatican II, or with any number of pontificates. By positing a time when the Catholic Church was supposed to be nearly perfect, whether the time is the 1850s or the 1970s, people establish a church that never was. They come to imagine a pure church uncontaminated by history. As they move from the actual church to the one they imagine, they dissolve the bonds of charity with their actual but flawed brothers and sisters. The danger of positing a time when the church was perfect, rather than always being in need of purification and renewal, is that it tends toward polarization and schism. In the end, it is a manifestation of triumphalism. The apologetics of decline and renewal employed by Vatican II, however, humbly recognizes the ongoing struggle of the church to be faithful to the Gospel. Though humility is sorely lacking among our contemporary apologists, the apologetics of church fathers such as Augustine and Gregory the Great were grounded in the power and attractiveness of humility.
The Apologetics of Humility

The apologetics of humility is ultimately grounded in the revelation conveyed to us through the incarnation. Early Christians had to explain why the messiah was conceived out of wedlock, born in a manger, raised as a carpenter, and died on a cross. When they experienced persecution and moral failures, they began to associate these problems with the ongoing passion of the body of Christ (Gregory the Great 1979, 3.19.35). If salvation comes through a humble and wounded messiah, then a humble and wounded church can still be a viable means for salvation. Ecclesiological apologetics emerged out of Christology. This form has three clear advantages: it is more likely to appeal to postmodern sensibilities, it is absolutely consistent with Lumen Gentium, and it is firmly rooted in our theological tradition.

Augustine was instrumental in popularizing and justifying the apologetics of humility. He was responding to the Donatists, who wanted to establish a pure church. Augustine argued that the church as we experience it in history is always a mixed reality. Though the church is the body of Christ, he said that people must distinguish between the body and the head. The head, Jesus Christ, is without sin; but the body, which is made up of us, sins and falls short in many ways. He did not see this as contradicting the image of the church as a spotless bride. He explained that scriptural texts that speak of the perfection of the church refer either to God's predestining decision, which is certainly spotless, or to the eschatological age to come when there will be a "new heaven and a new earth" (3.34.49). In other words, language about the perfection of the church indicates either an eternal, and therefore atemporal, act of will, or an unrealized, but promised, future status.

Gregory the Great applied Augustine's ideas to his own exegetical endeavors, but his application of these ideas to the problems of pastoral care gave the apologetics of humility practical relevance. Gregory faced a multitude of problems with the clergy that ranged from greed, to sexual abuse, to forced conversions, and even to murder (Richards, 108–125). Of course, the state of the laity in the late sixth and early seventh centuries left much to be desired as well. Throughout his career he had to respond to the question of why there are so many evil people in the church and what that meant about the credibility of the church and the validity of its sacraments. In order to understand why God allows so many evil people in the
church, Gregory argued that one must come to recognize that God uses the people we despise in order to save us (Gregory the Great 1979, preface.5.12–6.13).

The history of salvation as it is presented in scripture led Gregory to the position that God uses the people we despise to save us. He pointed to the stories of God choosing the lesser, the younger, the alien, the impure, and the disenfranchised to be his prophets and servants (Gregory the Great 1979, 7.35.53–54). The people we despise can indicate those we disregard or consider insignificant, those we dislike, and those we recognize to be malicious. Since the church is the body within which we are purified and saved, Gregory concluded it must also be full of people we despise. The malicious or evil members of the church serve an important soteriological function by helping the faithful to grow in holiness.

Gregory claimed that the evil members of the Body of Christ are there to teach the other members humility, patience, and mercy. He knew that people have a tendency to judge the value of a person and set expectations based on how that person is behaving in the present. He believed that the experience of knowing people who have a conversion of heart in the church forces us to recognize power of grace. It challenges our tendency to give up on people. As Gregory put it, “One who comes after us may frequently pass us by through the swiftness of his [or her] good works; tomorrow we may with difficulty follow one today we appear ahead of” (1990, 83). His example was the apostle Paul, who prior to his conversion persecuted Christians and participated in the murder of the first Christian martyr. Why would God choose such a man to be the Apostle to the Gentiles? For Gregory, the answer is that God uses the evil members to teach us that we should not be presumptuous about either our status or the status of others in the church.

Another benefit of the apologetics of humility is that they engender hope in the faithful. How does the concept of the church as a mixed body provide hope? It allows us to see that we may never despair about the salvation of someone we love, even if they have committed murder, because we can never know the riches of divine mercy (Gregory the Great 1990, 83). Such hope gives people the strength to work to maintain unity and to try to keep even notorious sinners within the body of Christ. If we need an imperfect church to grow in perfection, then we should not allow failures and scandals to discourage us. Gregory identified the people who fail to recognize the validity of a wounded church as heretics. By trying to defend God they come to offend God (Gregory the Great 1979, preface.6.14). Ultimately, he argued that their failure to exhibit patience in the face of ecclesial shortcomings reveals their lack of love.
Gregory explained to his people that patience is the virtue required for being willing to bear another person’s burdens and is necessary for one to love. He cited Galatians 6:2 to demonstrate why this is necessary: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so you shall fulfill the law of Christ” (Gregory the Great 1950, 3.9). Maintaining this type of unity through patience is the act of following the law of Christ, which Gregory defined as charity in unity. Those who follow the law of Christ, he continued, are those who do not fall away when they are struck by oppression, tribulation, or scandal (Gregory the Great 1950, 3.9). He argued that Christians are purified by accepting these burdens.

The heretics, on the other hand, suffer from a triumphalistic form of ecclesiology. When they look upon the deeds of the church, according to Gregory, they have to look up on it for they are in the lowest place. Given their perspective, they see the works of the church as being very high. As a result, the heretics fail to recognize the wounded church, which takes the evils of the world into itself in order to come to its eternal reward by means of purification (Gregory the Great 1979, 3.24.47). In other words, the heretics recapitulate the sin of those who rejected Christ’s divinity because of the scandal of the Cross. Using this model, Gregory urged people to recognize their duty to participate in healing the body.

The apologetics of humility were adopted by many medieval theologians and saints including Peter Damian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Innocent III, Francis of Assisi, and Bonaventure. It was a favorite among medieval reformers because it was disarming to groups like the Cathars or Waldensians who criticized the church as well as for the opponents of reform within the church. Several of the periti who were involved with the drafting of Lumen Gentium were intimately familiar with these sources, including George Tavard and Joseph Ratzinger. The image of a pilgrim church constantly proceeding by means of penance and renewal synthesized the apologetics of humility with those of decline and renewal. The humble answer Vatican II offered to the criticisms of the modern world succeeded in diffusing opposition, encouraging engagement, fostering dialogue, promoting evangelization, etc. Moreover, it anticipated the anxieties and challenges raised by postmodern culture.

The distrust of absolutes, of authoritarian metanarratives, and of a unified view of the world, which are characteristic of postmodern thought, are reinforced by arguments based on the perfection of the church; but the humble response of the council fathers that the church is a pilgrim community following a penitential path does not provoke the distrust of the people we are trying to reach. Rather
than pointing to absolute truth, we should be highlighting the apophatic dimension of our faith. After all, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) made it clear that whatever we say about God is more unlike than like God (Tanner, 232). So our tradition clearly states, in the form of a dogmatic formulation, that we have to see our ideas and concepts as provisional. Of course we do not see truth as relative, but we do see truth as fundamentally relational.

Our apologetic strategy should be to let postmodern people know that we have multiple theological and spiritual traditions, a metanarrative that aims at liberation, and diversity in terms of forms of life. We should be honest about our failures as a community, but we should make it clear that the process of both confronting and forgiving one another in community is the way that we learn to be like Christ. When asked why we do not walk away from a church that has so many problems, we need to explain that giving up on the church is giving up on people. In the end, the number of people we are willing to give up on is a measure of how much love we have lost. If we have the confidence to employ the apologetics of humility, we will find a much more effective answer to the legitimate criticisms we face.

References


