

## **More Christianity**

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#### Protesting too much

When I was a student at an Anglican theological college at Oxford I came across a little saying that transformed my life. The aphorism was by the Victorian Anglican socialist, F.D.Maurice. He wrote, 'A man is most often right in what he affirms and wrong in what he denies.'

This saying made me sit up and think. It was a powerful criticism of the whole world in which I had been brought up. I had come to Oxford and Anglicanism from a strict American Evangelical background. Maurice's statement helped me to see that our Protestant identity was formed much more by what we denied than by what we affirmed, and what we denied was Catholicism. In a whole range of theological issues our position was determined not by what we positively believed, but by what we didn't believe. So, for example, we were not sure what we believed about authority in the Church, but we were sure that we did not have a Pope. This negative mentality is not exclusive to conservative Protestants. It is a state of mind anyone can slip into. It is essentially a lazy mindset. It is easier to deny than to affirm. It is more comfortable to be close minded than open minded. To be open minded towards the new and the strange requires energy, thought, and risk. But by some gift of grace, as a young theological student this way appealed to me. Thereafter, whenever I came across an idea or practice that seemed new and strange I vowed to give it the benefit of the doubt, and if I couldn't accept it to at least leave it on one side and promise to come back to it later. Maurice's little saying bred in me a questioning attitude, not a negative doubting attitude, but a questioning attitude that wanted to understand and not reject that which was strange and new. This attitude eventually led me into the Catholic Church.

#### A New Apologetic

This little principle not only encourages open-mindedness about that which is new, but it encourages us to be open-minded about that which we already know. In their enthusiasm, converts sometimes turn against the religion in which they were brought up. But if Maurice's dictum encourages us to consider the new with an affirmative attitude it also makes us remember the past with gratitude. In both the new and the old we should be gleaning all that is good and trying to understand what is best in both traditions. This attitude is at the heart of my book *More Christianity*. I have tried to explain the Catholic faith to non-Catholic Christians in a way that endorses all the good things they already believe and practice. While endorsing the good beliefs and practices of non-Catholics, I also encourage them to consider how the Catholic faith fulfils and completes their

already excellent Christian religion. Admittedly, the book is aimed at Evangelical Christians, and not to the more liberal brand of Protestant. It is aimed at them not only because I used to be an Evangelical, but because I believe the most fruitful ecumenical and apologetic work is now to be done with Evangelicals, not the liberal mainstream. The ecumenical movement has accomplished much within the last forty years. It has succeeded in breaking down the historic prejudices and bigotry on both sides. Evangelicals and Catholics now trust one another. Catholics have learned much from Evangelical styles of worship and devotion while Evangelicals are increasingly interested in liturgy, the church year, lectionaries, Catholic spirituality and Catholic social teaching. Like family members who have been estranged, then tentatively reconciled, we are now talking and learning to trust each other. Now the time has come to start talking about the things that separate us. To do this a new apologetic is required. Both theologians and ordinary Catholics need to take the initiative in the new apologetic. First we need to listen to our Protestant brothers and sisters. We need to understand their mindset and their viewpoint. Then we have to present the Catholic view with vigour, clarity and charity. To do this the concept of 'More Christianity' is vital.

#### Not Right and Wrong—Less and More

When engaging in conversation with non-Catholic Christians it is vital to first discover what is good about their tradition, and to be positive about it. If Catholics expect other Christians to learn from them, then they must also be willing to learn from the good things that 'the other side' has to offer. This doesn't mean that non-Catholics have got everything right, and that we can never correct error. It is a question of where we start. In any confrontation, if we can start by recognising the positive aspects to the other side, then the conversations can continue in a creative and positive way. In fact, Catholics will be able to agree with far more with a Protestant than a Protestant will be able to agree with a Catholic. I have found that in virtually every case where a non-Catholic is affirming something I can affirm that truth with him. The truth he affirms may only be partial, or it may be mixed up with a denial of some sort, but where it is positive the Catholic apologist can build. A good example of this is the use of Scripture. A Baptist may deny the authority of tradition. However, he will read the Scriptures within his own denominational background and theological context. In other words, he reads the Scriptures within his own tradition even though he denies the authority of tradition. The apologist using the 'more Christianity' method will point out that the non-Catholic does, in fact, believe in tradition. He affirms that as a good thing and encourages him to consider and include the richer, fuller and more ancient tradition of Catholicism. The Anglican believes tradition is important, but he picks and chooses. He takes the bits of tradition he wants and ignores others. The apologist then affirms the Anglicans love of tradition, but challenges him to consider the whole body of tradition, and most importantly to think about the living authority structure that defines and defends the traditions he considers important. The 'more Christianity' approach therefore builds on the positive beliefs of the non-Catholic and attempts two things. First it attempts to show how

Catholic beliefs are not something different, but something more. Then it uses Scripture, logic and the tradition to explain why the fuller Catholic belief is not only desirable but necessary. In this way error can be corrected not by proving the other person wrong, but by encouraging them to embrace 'more Christianity.' The error was in the denial, and when they cease to deny and accept the fullness of the faith the error is automatically and positively corrected rather than being proven 'wrong' in a negative way.

### Informing Not Reforming

One of the hallmarks of the modern ecumenical movement was the attempt at 're-formulation of the faith.' Ecumenists believed that Christian theologians needed to return to the sources of our beliefs and then reformulate the beliefs according using the language on which we could all agree. In many ways this was a creative and positive process. Certain theological words carried emotional baggage. They were the flash words of centuries-old debates. The ecumenists wanted to avoid the flash words and devise new language that was not so encumbered with the bigotry and misunderstanding of the past.

There was a problem with this 'reformulation' however. Too often the new 'shared' language meant one thing to one party and another thing to the other side. Within the discussions everyone seemed to agree, but beneath the surface the same disagreements still existed. By being flexible with language all that was produced was rubbery language that communicated an illusion of agreement where none really existed.

An example of this is the present use of the term 'real presence.' I have heard Baptists say they believe in 'the real presence.' By this they mean that they feel especially close to Jesus at their communion service. This is laudable, but an Anglican means something very different by 'real presence.' He means that the bread and wine really do become 'in a spiritual manner' the body and blood of Christ or he believes that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ when a Christian receives the element with a faithful heart. At the same time Catholics use the term 'real presence' to signal their belief in transubstantiation. It is easy therefore to assume agreement between the Baptist, Anglican and Catholic when no real agreement exists at all.

Instead of reforming the language, we need to use the traditional language and inform others precisely what we mean by the terms we use. Usually the problem is not with the language, but the way the language is misunderstood. Terms like 'papal infallibility', 'immaculate conception' or 'transubstantiation' are difficult concepts. It is easy for a non-Catholic to get the wrong end of the stick and sincerely disagree with what he thinks Catholics believe rather than what the Catholic Church really teaches.

The bulk of my own apologetics work, therefore, is simply to explain what Catholics really believe. I don't reform but inform. I don't expect my opposite number to agree, but I do expect him to disagree with what I really believe rather than what he thinks I believe. It must be assumed that if I expect my partner do take time to listen and understand what I really believe, then I must do the same, and have the courtesy to really listen and understand what he believes.

## Practical and Positive

My parish priest once expressed his frustration with the local Churches Together group. He said, 'They all think we have arrived and I think we've only just started the journey.' If you are interested in apologetics you will find a curious lack of interest amongst many non-Catholics. This is not because they are suspicious of 'the Catholic menace' but because many non-Catholics really don't see the point of further theological discussions. There are three reasons for this. First, Protestant Christians have a very subjective and personal approach to the faith. For them, what you believe is secondary to your personal experience. As a Methodist lady said to me when I announced that I was to become a Catholic, 'But surely all that matters is how much we love Jesus!'. Increasingly non-Catholics steer clear of dogma or theological discussions because they don't think such things matter or because they think dogma is 'divisive.'

Second, non-Catholic Christians often do not believe in the visible church. They believe that all physical manifestations of the church are necessary evils. The real church consists of all those who believe in Jesus Christ and have accepted him as their saviour. On the one hand, this means they can be tolerant of Christians of all denominations. On the other hand, they therefore treat the Catholic Church as simply another denomination. They are surprised to learn that Catholics believe that there is more to it than that, and that working towards visible Christian unity is an imperative.

Third, this subjective relativism really has made great inroads into the mainstream Christian churches. Deep down, many ordinary non-Catholic Christians avoid dogmatic discussion not only because they think them divisive or difficult, but because they don't believe them possible. They don't really believe in such a thing as objective truth. They think all the words we use to discuss God can never be more than approximate poetic language. Therefore doctrinal discussions are a waste of time.

As a result, one of the first tasks of the Catholic apologist today is to initiate discussion and debate. In a positive way we must actually invite others to the table to talk things through. The objective of this is never to be divisive, but to move forward to a unity built on truth. This practical and positive approach can be stimulated by organising public debates in a friendly atmosphere. Catholics should join local ecumenical groups and propose theological discussions as well as the usual range of friendly activities.

## The Church of the Twenty First Century

An Evangelical friend of mine criticises the Catholic Church because he says our view of ecumenism is simply that all non-Catholics will simply join the Catholic Church. He does not understand that the Catholic mentality does not look back in this way. We are not trying to go back to a medieval model for the church. Instead we are building a new kind of church unity—one that no one can predict or specify.

While we cannot say what will happen exactly, it is possible to spot certain trends and predict in general terms which way the church is going. Philip Jenkins' book

The Next Christendom points out that Christianity will continue to grow in the Third World. Others predict enormous growth in the Church in the Far East. At the same time, falling birth rates and increasing secularisation mean that Christianity will probably continue to contract in Western Europe. Within these areas, the mainstream Protestant denominations are shrinking at a most alarming rate. The only two Christian groups that are growing are conservative Evangelicalism and Catholicism. If the downward curve in the mainstream Protestant denominations continues, our traditional ecumenical partners will simply die out, and Catholics will look to the conservative Evangelicals as the main focus of ecumenical activity. This requires a major shift in ecumenical focus. We will need to see that ecumenical discussions with mainstream Protestantism is a dead end. As Cardinal Avery Dulles has said, we need,

To welcome the more traditional and conservative churches into the dialogue. For the Catholic Church it may not prove easy to reach a consensus with the conservative evangelicals, but these churches and communities may have more to offer than some others because they have dared to be different. Catholics have the right and duty to challenge the adequacy of some of their positions, but they should be invited to challenge Catholics in their turn. [1]

If this is so, then the twenty first century Church will look very different than the Church we are in today. Many old structures will have died out. Old alliances will fade away. As the principles of the Second Vatican Council are integrated into the Church it will become a gospel church in a fresh way. The twenty first century church will be young and enthusiastic. Because of the new communities and the New Evangelisation the Catholic Church will be at once totally Catholic and yet will appear much more 'evangelical'. At the same time, the Evangelicals will be much more open to work with and listen to the Catholic witness and ways of worship. For this new synthesis to emerge in a positive way a new apologetic is vital. Catholics at all levels must look to the Evangelicals and learn to listen to their views, examine their methods and integrate the best from their traditions. We must also listen to their real objections to the Catholic faith, then as St Peter himself tells us we must, 'be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.' (I Pt. 3:15)

[1] Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, New York, Crossroads, 1992, p. 780