

THE NEW APOLOGETICS

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In recent times apologetics has become the dominant form, style and content of youth ministry and evangelism. This can be gleaned from the topics of discussion engaged by forums such as Theology on Tap and a number of university student groups which are perhaps best described as ‘evangelical’ in character.

Apologetics and youth ministry are a natural fit in the sense that apologetics seeks to clarify the individual elements of faith’s content and so lends itself to the task of catechesis.

As well, in a post-conciliar Catholic culture where issues of identity, rather than those of mission, occupy much of the Church’s energy, apologetics offers an attractive resource for the defence and promotion of Christian faith amidst the challenge of secularism and can be engaged to establish clear markers of Catholic identity and orthodoxy *within* a divided ecclesial milieu. In this way, apologetics promises to kill two birds with one stone.

The latest resurgence of Catholic apologetics among youth is explainable by the fact that in recent years there has been something to oppose. The ‘New Atheism’ and its proponents, including Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens, have provided fuel for the fire. Apologetics is parasitic in this way, relying on opposition for its vitality and vigour; it is much harder to ‘do’ apologetics when the perils for faith are less explicit.

Positively, apologetics has a long and distinguished history in the Catholic Church. From the patristic *apologia* of the second to fourth centuries, inflamed by the concerns to gain civil tolerance for Christian believers, present the messiahship of Christ to the Jews, and establish doctrinal orthodoxy amidst the Christological controversies; to the ninth-century Arabic writings of Theodore Abu Qurrah in the face of Islam; to St Thomas Aquinas in his contest of Averroism in the thirteenth century, apologetical theology has not only contributed to the conservation of Christian faith but also to its active development through systematic reflection in dialogue with a variety of truth-claims and opponents.

However, apologetics is not without its risks and its proponents among the new generations would do well to bear in mind the dangers inherent in its practice.

Foremost is the danger of constructing a Catholic identity grounded in opposition alone, a temptation for a Church experiencing a decline in practice and confronting cultural conditions which are less favourable for the reception of the Gospel it bears. In the rash enthusiasm that can accompany a spirit of confrontation, and living as we do within a stream of articulate tradition, it is easy to say more than we mean.

This danger was pronounced at the Reformation, with the rise of inter-Christian apologetics that led Catholic theologians to take positions that ran counter to tradition. Driven by polemic purposes, there was a Catholic tendency to assume that Protestant positions were necessarily wrong and that Catholics must take the opposite view.

So, with the Reformer's encouragement of the private reading of the Bible came a Catholic, almost exclusive emphasis on the Mass, leading to a neglect of Scripture, and with the Reformer's rejection of the clerical state and regard of all Christians as lay came a subsequent Catholic depreciation of the laity and the view that only clerics and religious were called to perfection. Apologetics, when driven by a polemical spirit, opens itself to such partiality and error.

Other missteps come to mind. Following the First Vatican Council there was the rejection of the term *corpus mysticum* by a number of bishops on the ground that it had been used by Protestants. Consider as well the sustained focus in Eucharistic doctrine on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This was a Catholic emphasis again fortified by the debates of the Reformation but that obscured other, interrelated dimensions of the Eucharist including sacrifice, memorial and indeed its intrinsic and constituting relation to the Church. That the 'Eucharist makes the Church' was to be the recovered insight of the *ressourcement* theologian Henri de Lubac. The same French scholar, when reflecting on reasons for the disappearance of the sacred, warned of the peril of one-sidedness in apologetical practice, "the defense of attacked truths need not make us forget the rest."

It can be added that the recent 'Religion and Atheism' debate on the ABC's Q&A program demonstrated that apologetics is questionable in its temperament as a basis for evangelisation. It is not only that the Christian faith can be presented with an aggression that seemingly belies its spirit and truth; it is also clear that argument alone rarely furnishes the ground for conversion. Indeed, while apologetics has a legitimate place within Catholic thought as an exercise of fundamental theology, it cannot sustain growth in faith as a developing encounter with the person of the Risen Jesus with a corresponding growth in the invitation of that relationship. The risk is that apologetics becomes an entire way of discipleship and, in the search for self-identity, an entire way of being Church.

Ultimately, apologetic dialogue will prove less than convincing unless it is embedded or rooted in the real life of a community itself open to conversion and where the Spirit is seen to be at work, transforming the lives of its participants. Witness will remain the precondition of any word offered in faith.

While the new Catholic apologetics in our midst can be affirmed for providing opportunities for the better grasp of faith, and can be perhaps forgiven for being more 'popular' than critical in substance, care must be taken lest its practice contradict its purpose and promise. If Catholic apologetics is to make a genuine contribution toward evangelisation, then it will need to provide positive motives for faith, remain world-engaging and conscious of the totality of faith and discipleship in the illumination of divine things.