



FAITH & REASON

THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Spring 1983 | Vol. IX, No. 1

EDITORIAL: THE CATHOLIC SCHOLAR AS APOLOGIST

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IN THE SPRING 1981 EDITORIAL, I DISCUSSED THE NATURE OF CATHOLIC SCHOLARSHIP, and argued that Christianity demands more than mere knowledge on the part of its scholars: it demands the placing of that knowledge at the service of the ongoing redemptive work of Christ. I further suggested that in these times when the Truths of the Faith are attacked or denied on every side, Catholic scholars should ask themselves whether or not they might be called to a direct use of their abilities for the advance of the Faith. I now wish to address those scholars who do think they are thus called; that is, I wish to address the circle of apologists this journal hopes in some small way to nurture.

Before discussing the field of apologetics proper, I should point out that any scholarly apologist will have to answer a preliminary question concerning what his audience will be. Does he wish to answer directly the erroneous (and often vicious) works of other scholars in his field of expertise, or does he wish to translate relatively complex apologetical strategems into a format of use to the Catholic man-in-the-street? It is a rare man with ability and energy to do both tasks well. However, what follows really applies in some measure to either task because the nature of the attack on the Faith today is, to be precise, scholarly demagoguery. By this I mean simply that the technique used by the enemies of Christ is to raise questions and doubts, under the guise of scholarship, and then place these questions and doubts before a large and untrained audience which, it is hoped, will be sufficiently overawed by the scholarly credentials of the author to imbibe the doubts and errors enshrined in his work. In other words, today's heretics and apostates, even the most scholarly among them, really are playing to the "masses" and attempting to effect a coup d'eglise in precisely the manner of a demagogue. As a result, even those apologists who are engaging primarily in the direct refutation of their wayward confreres will have to play the game to get noticed: they will have to be sure their material is not entirely lost in the dust-bin of specialized journals which are unrecognized by the prevailing intellectual elite.

The reason I make this point will become apparent when I discuss the relationship of good style to good apologetics. For the moment, however, let us emphasize first and foremost that apologetics is a challenging science requiring rigorous study, and that those who undertake it should not be deceived into thinking they are ready for it based upon their regular reading of what we might call newsprint Catholicism. The difficulties posed by Modernism (the chief rival to orthodoxy today) are not such as can be easily grasped and resolved without careful study of the nature of Revelation, the structure of human speech, the logical relationship among propositions of faith, and the nature of religious conviction. One has not exhausted the field when one has cited a papal document; an effective apologist must attempt to master the theology upon which the documents are based. This theology will itself owe a great debt to philosophy and history, and, insofar as it deals with the natural order, to political theory as well. Finally, there is a great fund of literature upon which one can draw to derive illustrations of human problems and to gain a corporate sense of the Faith, matters of no small moment in an age divorced so much from a religious consciousness that its people find it difficult even to think in religious terms. The apologist then must take care both to broadly educate himself and to study in detail the relationship of his own discipline to the larger theological life of the Church. Otherwise he will not be able

to perform his essential task, which may be defined as demonstrating the compatibility between the facts of Revelation on the one hand and the ordinarily accepted facts of human experience on the other. Insofar as that compatibility is forcefully demonstrated, the apologist establishes for the unbeliever the appropriateness (in some cases, the obligation) of belief, and so clears away the obstacles to Faith.

Returning now to the public and even demagogic character of the academic assault on the Faith today, we come at once to the question of how an apologist can best present his case so as to influence men toward the acceptance of Truth. Here the persuasive power of the apologist is paramount; it must serve his logical ability to convince by making the message intrinsically attractive and desirable. As one having now some eight years' experience as an editor of the work of some of the best Catholic minds in the United States, I can testify to the utter inadequacy of much of the prose characteristic of Catholic writing today. In many cases, scholars have simply lost sight of the simple rules of effective communication, let alone the fine points of rhetorical style. Often, papers of otherwise good content lack such basics as clear focus, logical organization, effective connectives between ideas, and forceful introductions and conclusions.

It would be a great apologetical error to assume here that the above-mentioned elements of style are alone sufficient for the work at hand. There is a deplorable lack of interest among orthodox Catholics in literary things—a disdain for what many apparently regard as frivolous in an age when we should be busy about the fundamental task of loudly and repeatedly (and logically, of course) reaffirming truth upon truth upon truth. We are, however, in no danger of preferring beauty of expression to quality of content. But logical utterances devoid of beauty (which I fear are too often the pattern of contemporary apologetics) seldom appeal to anyone, and are most often simply dismissed. Where today do we find the rolling assonance of St. Augustine, or the delicately balanced syntax of Newman, or even the somewhat artificial alliteration of Chesterton? Do well-educated Catholics read poetry anymore? Truly, to judge by the manuscripts received in our offices here, we are in the grip of graduateschoolese, a disease characterised by atonal and arrhythmic prose. (The beginning of the cure may be found in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*).

One could expound at some length on the need to go beyond even the sounds of the language (and the matching of sound with sense) to an inclusion of certain extrinsic colorful or dramatic elements in apologetical

presentations: dynamic use of Scripture, Christian symbolism, even entertaining analogies. We would still be a far cry from the sort of fictional apologetics engaged in by Chesterton in the Fr. Brown stories and some of his novels or, more notably, by C.S. Lewis in the Narnian chronicles and his famous space trilogy, including *Perelandra*. The power of the written word should not be underestimated by apologists, but that power derives from the author's own rhetorical ability to make the reader want to accept what he reads almost before he has fully analyzed its logic.

Some traditional manuals of apologetics called the scientific aspect of apologetics by the Greek term *logos* and this rhetorical or artistic element by the term *pathos*. They also used a third term, *ethos*, by which they referred to the personal integrity of the apologist and his consequent ability to form a bond between himself and his audience such that, in identifying with the apologist, people follow his ideas to the ideas of Christ. This *ethos* is of great importance because it reminds us all that neither knowledge nor rhetoric are sufficient to save souls, and that only holiness allows Christ to do that through ourselves as instruments of His grace. The apologist will become attractive to others, both in the written and the spoken word, in direct proportion to the integration of his personality. Here integrity must be understood not in its somewhat cheapened (but still worthy) sense of mere uprightness or honesty (which while admirable can also be forbidding) but in the sense of the complete integration of all the positive aspects of what it means to be human into one properly ordered character. Christ is, of course, the model of integrity; the imitation of Christ is the school of integrity; grace is integrity's means; holiness is its result.

Scholarly apologists, like their less specialized counterparts, are prone to think in a subjective age that what is needed for proper apologetics is an insistence on cold, hard, flawless logic, and persons with advanced degrees are very likely to have been further trained to think that all that matters is the sophistication of their data (quite apart from logic, in many cases). The data and the logic certainly are the core of apologetics, but the elements of persuasion and personal integrity have been emphasized here as a corrective to an exclusive and therefore ineffective focus on the element of science. The world desperately needs apologists skilled in all three elements of their work: men of learning, speaking gently but persuasively to their brothers, out of love for Christ.

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March 4, 1983