Essays in Apologetics, Vol. II

Arguments Directed to Non-Catholics

by Jeffrey A. Mirus Ph.D.

Brief essays in defense of the Catholic Faith directed primarily toward non-Catholics, but useful also for Catholics who wish to understand better the grounds of their own personal faith.

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Introduction

September 01, 2011

There are a great many aspects of Catholic apologetics, an endeavor which may be briefly defined as giving reasons for the hope that is in us (1 Pet 3:15)—that is, offering an explanation and defense of the Faith to those who are presently indisposed to believe. Apologetics is also very useful for Catholics who wish to understand more thoroughly the meaning and grounds of their Faith, but in general it is to be distinguished from evangelization, catechesis and theological study.

The field of apologetics includes arguments aimed to convince someone of some truth of the Faith, as well as efforts to engage the emotions in order to persuade, and also to create a bond of trust with an audience. Classically, these three elements are referred to as Logos, Pathos and Ethos. In all of this, a large part of the task of apologetics is to clear away the impediments to faith, not only rational impediments but those that are not strictly rational, but may be determined in part by our culture or our passions.

In addition to these elements, the members of every audience, whether one or many, must be approached according to what they already know and believe, including what they only think they know (that is, their particular errors), and the prejudices which hold them back as well as the interests and concerns which motivate them. On the other side, too, there is a constant need to purify motives, to appreciate the good in others, and to grow in grace, so that the apologist himself might be a more fit instrument for the action of God in the heart of each potential believer.

Finally, just beyond the ordinary horizons of apologetics lie serious questions about our conception of truth, our appreciation of the importance of the mind’s conformity to reality, and our need to suspend a reflexive faith in the dominant opinions (and bad habits) of our culture so that we can engage Revelation with a clear and open mind. All of these, and more, provide fertile ground for apologetical research and practice.

For the past eight years, I have been writing brief essays on CatholicCulture.org. These have appeared under various sectional headings, but are now published as they appear in both my On the Culture blog and our section for longer commentaries, called In Depth Analysis. These pieces are not generally written with a view toward the cohesiveness of a book, but over time enough of them coalesce under various topics so that providing the more relevant essays all together in one place becomes a significant

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convenience.

Out of roughly a thousand such essays, there are at least two hundred which can be classed as at least highly relevant to the field of apologetics. Of these 200, I have chosen for this second collection those essays which primarily address issues of concern among those who are not yet Christian or at least not yet Catholic. A first volume already addresses preliminary considerations, such as the disposition of the apologist, how we think, and the way the human person responds to and arrives at truth. A future volume may address issues of moment to Catholics who face the confusions and divisions they often find within the Church. Still another may delve into the particular moral issues which so plague our culture at the present time, which are deserving of special treatment. It is perhaps unnecessary to observe that all of these areas overlap; they cannot be rigidly separated.

All of the chapters in this collection first appeared on CatholicCulture.org between 2004 and 2011, but they are here organized topically rather than chronologically. My hope is that this more unified presentation will prove to reinforce the main points of the various subjects covered, while also making particular points easier to find, both initially and when looking back. It goes without saying that I submit everything written here to the judgment of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, presided over by the Vicar of Christ Himself in Rome—that same Church which I so ardently desire all men and women to enter as their one true home, in a world which is otherwise passing away.
Intimations of Immortality

September 24, 2010

When I was growing up in the 1950s and early 1960s, my world was a Christian world, at least nominally. My earliest efforts at apologetics were all designed to explain the “oddities” of the Catholic Faith to Protestants, and to show why their version of certain Christian ideas was wrong while the Catholic version was right. Since then much has changed. Now we are just as likely to be starting from scratch with people who don’t accept any version of Christianity, or perhaps any serious version of God either.

So from time to time we may profit from reviewing some of the reasons people ought to be interested in God, and especially interested in seeking a revelation from God that can set us on the right path. While people are often brought to a serious examination of the existence of God and the truth of the Christian Faith through personal experiences—whether tragic or triumphant—there are also some intellectual starting points that can get us wondering about these things. I’ll briefly review four of them here.

Our Own Sense of Continuation

There are several indicators of the existence of an immaterial, intellective soul that is necessarily immortal, but the one that impacts us most is simply our own sense of identity and our continuation in that identity. There is no evidence that any other creature has such a sense, that any other bodily creature understands itself as a unique individual with an identity which “ought” to continue beyond the vicissitudes of this earthly life. And no other creature manifests anything like a religious sense.

It is otherwise with us. No matter what age we are, no matter how many changes and struggles we’ve lived through, no matter how many times our cells have died and been replaced in the constant cycle of growth and decay, we still think of ourselves as “ourselves”. I look out from a 62 year-old body feeling exactly like the same “me” who was once fifteen. I am astonished that I should be old, and that life should be drawing inexorably to its close. This is unfathomable; it is a contradiction of everything I instinctively feel about myself. I cannot imagine my own non-existence. I cannot imagine a time when I will be unable to reflect on myself, on who I am. So it is with every man and woman who has ever lived.

Ralph McInerny, in his memoir of his life at Notre Dame (see I Alone Have Escaped
to Tell You) makes the telling statement that even after his beloved wife of 50 years died he went on each day feeling immortal. That captures what it means to be human very well. We expect to continue as ourselves, and this leads us inescapably to ponder whether we have a persistent spiritual identity capable of transcending our current bodily existence. This in turn opens our minds to a spiritual world, and to the possibility of a God who is the very ground of our being. As the expression goes, nature abhors a vacuum. If we instinctively expect continuation, yearn for continuation, and seek continuation, then this is reason enough to presume that we will continue, and to examine carefully the question of whether in fact what our instincts tell us is so, and how this can be.

Our Perception of the World

Another profitable line of thought which is very near to us arises from our normal reactions to the world around us. There are at least two questions concerning our experience of the world which strike most of us fairly forcefully in a rather philosophical way. The first is the question of where it all came from. Ultimately, the human mind is not satisfied with the idea that the universe is eternal (which is far harder to believe than that an eternal God created it, given that everything we know about the material world suggests that it is contingent). Nor are we satisfied with the idea that the universe “just happened”, a concept which makes no logical sense to anyone who can think his way out of a paper bag.

It is not even too much to say, I think, that the human mind tends to be unsatisfied with the notion that the world could have evolved randomly from some primordial chemicals without any teleology (or tendency toward an end) having been built into it from the beginning. On the one hand, pure atheistic evolutionism simply pushes the God question beneath a few more layers of cosmic dust. On the other, the imagination has to stretch farther to see the plausibility of atheistic evolutionary theory than it does to see the plausibility of an uncaused Cause. We don’t claim to be able to encompass the Cause in our minds; but logic drives us to assume Its existence. Thus the questions “Where did this come from?” and “How was it designed?” set both the human mind and the human heart to work.

The other obvious question is why, in such a highly ordered universe, so many things are out of sync. How is it that the law of the jungle rules the beasts, that natural disasters occur, that men mistreat each other, that we lack so much in equality, justice and peace? No sooner does our experience of reality enable us to see how things are supposed to work than it shows us the proverbial sticky wicket. It is almost as if

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something that began flawlessly has somehow been broken, but we don’t see how. In *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton explains that the doctrine of Original Sin fit his experience of reality perfectly, and Blessed John Henry Newman saw things exactly the same way. We anticipate in this Christian doctrine the answer to the question, but the question itself should at least prompt us to seek an answer.

**Our Sense of Justice**

In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman also offered a third line of thought, a highly developed argument based on the personal conscience (see Newman’s Final Argument). It is a universal experience, Newman rightly states, that we instinctively apprehend a difference between right and wrong; we also apprehend that we are under an obligation to do what is right, and we sense strongly that we will be subject to some sort of judgment on this score. Very few indeed are those who have never entertained such thoughts, or who manage to keep them at bay so continually as to forget them altogether.

At the same time, we cannot escape the observation that what is right is very frequently ignored, and that justice in this world is so imperfect as often to be laughable. Too often justice is a standard to which men are more likely to hold others than themselves, yet it remains a standard all the same, and people very typically look forward to a harmonious day when perfect justice will be achieved. Some, it is true, have sought this perfect justice through utopian schemes, and have ended by attempting (unjustly!) to effect it by force. But many, many more have thought it likely that the imbalances of this life would be redressed in another life. If we find ourselves with an outraged sense of justice then, and if nature really does abhor a vacuum, we must be made for a time and place when justice will be done.

Now a sense of right and wrong presumes some sort of law, which in turn presumes a lawgiver; and a judgment rather obviously demands a judge. This realization actually suggests two parallel lines of thought. First, it reinforces the idea that there must exist a God who somehow represents the Good and cares enough to punish those who violate it. Second, it leads us to a near-certainty that such a Judge would certainly wish to reveal Himself so that we should know clearly what He approves and what He abhors. In other words, the argument from conscience points directly at Revelation. It leads us naturally to inquire whether such a revelation has, in fact, been made.

**The Christ**

Though destined for universal acceptance, Christ entered the world at a particular time in
history; His person, His preaching, and His works impress themselves upon the minds of men now at one time and now at another. It cannot be said that every human person, in his lifetime here on earth, will have heard about Jesus Christ. For many, indeed, He would be the end of a sincere search for revelation, if they could but know Him. But not all have known Him; not all, through ordinary human means at least, can know Him.

Nonetheless, a great many have now heard of Him, or have the opportunity of hearing of Him if they are in fact sincerely searching for God and His Revelation—as their consciences and personal reflections naturally lead them to do. For it is again a universal experience of the human mind (unless a man is in proud rebellion or has been carefully taught to the contrary) that one would expect to find a revelation from God precisely in that realm of activity which deals with God most directly, namely religion. And so one who has not already found this revelation ought to be spending some reasonable amount of time and energy in examining the different religions on offer throughout the world.

Now in thus canvassing the various religions, great and small, which vie for our allegiance, it becomes evident that very few claim to be based on a divine revelation, as opposed to the mere insights of their founders. And of those which claim a divine revelation, even fewer (exactly two, Judaism and Christianity) claim to be based on a revelation which was objectively validated by wonders that God alone could perform. Of these two, one claims to be the fulfillment of the other, and its founder is said to have risen from the dead—a claim as arresting as it is unique, and a claim also supported by a considerable historical testimony. My point is simply this: Someone who sincerely seeks answers, and who has heard the claims made on behalf of Jesus Christ, truly owes it to himself to take a closer look.

**The Big Picture**

The larger issue here is that too often atheists and agnostics dismiss believers by arguing that the claims of religion cannot be proven absolutely, such that on rational grounds doubt becomes impossible. That is true, but it puts the shoe on the wrong foot, as if the unbeliever has no call to look into the matter unless someone first convinces him of a particular religious position. To the contrary, any person who reflects on himself, on the world around him, on the moral order, and even on what he has heard of the claims of Christianity ought to be very serious about exploring and answering the God question. He certainly ought not to seek to ignore it, to isolate himself from its influence, or to heap scorn on those who do not give up so easily. Inquiring minds—which are the very best minds and the only responsible minds—really do want to know.
The so-called “new atheists” often try to denigrate what we call Creation by asserting that the more science learns about nature, the more we realize that everything we prize came from a few simple elements that are hardly worth our attention at all. So we shouldn’t marvel at the complexity around us, nor should we be misled into thinking it took any particular intelligence to bring it about.

Those of us who are relatively unschooled in science, but who reflect seriously on nature in other ways, have always been able to spot two flaws in this reductionist argument. First, no matter how far an atheist may pare matter back toward relative insignificance, as a matter of simple logic he cannot escape the dilemma that something can’t come from nothing. Second, the notion that a few primitive bits of matter simply evolved randomly into such beautiful complexity is counter-intuitive unless the matter was either actively guided as it developed or invested from the first with some tendency to develop in this particular way. (Interestingly, probability theory reinforces this second thought; given the scientific understanding of the age of the universe, there simply isn’t enough time for the large number of precise changes required by a series of new complex systems to repeatedly randomly coalesce at exactly the right instants for success.)

But these two flies in the atheistic ointment are not the only ones. It turns out there is a third objection to atheist reductionism which arises from science itself. We know from the study of physics that each time we reduce a complex system down to its component parts, we find that the parts themselves are characterized by a more comprehensive order which includes within it the capacity to exhibit the qualities of the resulting system as a differentiated form. When we stop to think about it, this is exactly what we should expect in a true evolutionary system—that things unfold according to their natures, and that characteristics of a later development must be implicitly included in an earlier one.

Logically, any successful evolutionary system would have to contain in its original material the potential to develop in certain ways, much as the adult person develops from the small (but very richly endowed) fertilized ovum. It is possible that God could actively add and shape things as they develop, much as a craftsman adds and shapes until he has built what he had in mind. But God is a superior sort of craftsman, and it seems more likely (actually more likely on both philosophical and scientific grounds) that when He

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creates something intended to unfold over time, He creates it complete with the seeds of its further development.

Prescinding from the God question and looking only at matter itself, this is what physics demonstrates again and again. In an essay in the October 2010 issue of *First Things* entitled “Fearful Symmetries”, physicist Stephen M. Barr of the University of Delaware explains this brilliantly. It is a shame that *First Things* asked us a couple of years ago no longer to include their material in our library, and Barr’s article is not yet available on their own web site. So I need to work a little harder. Here is Barr’s thesis in his own words:

As we turn to the fundamental principles of physics, we discover that order does not really emerge from chaos, as we might naively assume; it always emerges from greater and more impressive order already present at a deeper level. It turns out that things are not more coarse or crude or unformed as one goes down into the foundations of the physical world but more subtle, sophisticated, and intricate the deeper one goes.

Barr demonstrates this by explaining, among other things, one of the central concepts of modern physics, namely “symmetry”. In physics, a “symmetry” is an aspect of potential development which is actuated or “done” when the other symmetries of some material thing are “spontaneously broken”, such that the matter in question behaves in one particular way while losing the ability to behave in other ways. As Barr puts it, “symmetry is just one kind of order,” and the mathematics required to describe the symmetries of matter becomes more complex, not less, as we drill down.

Barr explains that there are other principles of order recognized by physics as well, such as the mathematical principle of least action, which physicists later discovered to be a special case of the even more subtle and sophisticated path integral principle, which is the basis for quantum mechanics. Once again, extremely high forms of mathematics are the only means we have of expressing the ordered relationships which characterize matter, and the mathematics for these principles also becomes more complex—and more unified, comprehensive and elegant—the further we go down into the foundations. Consider this telling passage:

Johannes Kepler discovered three marvelous geometrical laws that describe planetary motion…. Decades later, Newton succeeded in explaining Kepler’s laws—but he did not explain them down, if by down we mean reducing what we
observe and experience to something more trivial or brutish. On the contrary, he explained them by deriving them from an underlying order that is more general and impressive…. Newton’s law of gravity was later explained, in turn by Einstein, who showed that it followed from a more profound theory of gravity called general relativity…. Einstein’s theory is but the manifestation of a yet more fundamental theory, which many suspect to be superstring theory. Superstring theory has a mathematical structure so sophisticated that…it is still not fully understood.

At the risk of calling attention to the ignorance of the new atheists, what science actually teaches us is, as Barr puts it, that “the symmetries that characterize the deepest laws of physics are mathematically richer and stranger than the ones we encounter in everyday life.” Barr also cites some of the many physicists who have found a Divine beauty in the mathematic principles animating the physical world. Kepler wrote: “I thank, thee, Lord God our Creator, that thou hast allowed me to see the beauty in the work of creation.” Another great physicist, Hermann Weyl, described mathematical physics as revealing a “flawless harmony that is in conformity with sublime Reason.”

So the deeper one goes, the more profound the mathematical descriptions become. They can even be described as profoundly simple, in the sense of possessing greater elegance, economy, harmony and perfection. Put another way, the deeper one goes, the less the universe looks like trivial junk and the more it begins to look suspiciously—if we can imagine the power of intellect required—like an idea.
Religion 101: Why All Faiths Are Not the Same

September 27, 2005

Within a week in mid-August I received several rather aggressive emails which made strong claims about God. For example, one warned against joining the conspiracy of Pope Benedict XVI to cover up the third secret of Fatima, which was the revelation that “Mary is God.” Another objected to the Catholic idea that some might be closer to God than others, because in reality “everyone is God.” These claims may seem absurd, but how do we know that one (or more) of our correspondents is not right?

Honest, I am Not Making This Up

When I was in graduate school I had a discussion with a student of comparative religion which I remember all too clearly. She was holding forth on the point that all religions are essentially alike, that there was really no significant way to differentiate one from another. My immediate response, of course, was to ask whether she might not begin by distinguishing between those religions which claim to be revealed and those which do not. She scornfully replied that all religions claim to be revealed.

But they don’t, you see. Across all of religious history, the claim of a clear and specific revelation from God is relatively rare, and the claim of a clear and specific public revelation has been made exactly twice, first by Jews and second by Christians. It is worthy of note that both were talking about the same God. This claim of Revelation is not only the most obvious differentiator among religions but by far the most important. It provides the only possible answer to the skeptic’s charge that every religion is simply a product of human imagination, dreamed up to satisfy a yearning for infinity.

In addition to being an important tool in evaluating serious religions, this argument from Revelation as understood by Jews and Christians enables us to dismiss without worry claims such as those with which I introduced this column. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, religion is not something to be invented. It is something received from higher authority. When questioned, a religious adherent ought to be able to identify the authority on which he believes and teaches what he does. If that authority isn’t ultimately God revealing Himself, then his religion is built on sand.

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Where Do You Get This Stuff?

There are seven sources for the world’s religious ideas. First, there are traditional stories coming out of a culture’s distant past with no claim to a specific authorship. Such is the origin of all those religions which we call mythological. Second, some religions are founded by great teachers whose ideas strike a responsive chord and are carried on by organized groups of adherents, such as in Confucianism and Buddhism. These religions are, in large part, mere human philosophies. In the third place are those movements founded at specific points in time by charismatic individuals who claim to have had a private (and therefore unverifiable) revelation significant enough to constitute a new religion. This is the case, for example, with Islam and Mormonism.

Fourth are those religious practices more or less directly manipulated by the devil, as is clearly the case with the worship of demons or attempts to placate them, including human sacrifice. The practices of the ancient Carthaginians and Aztecs as well as aspects of African and American Indian tribal religions involving witch doctors are examples of this type. The fifth source of religious ideas is political expediency. Regimes which deify their systems or their leaders have sometimes manufactured religious or quasi-religious doctrines and practices to enhance political power. This was true of the Egyptian and Roman empires and has also been true mutatis mutandis, of some modern totalitarian regimes.

The sixth source is syncretism, which arises when significant groups of people allow ideas from more than one religion to shape an amalgamated set of religious practices and customs. The ancient Israelites constantly fell into religious syncretism when they intermarried with surrounding peoples and added foreign religious practices to their own. Islam, which is theoretically based on a private revelation to Mohammed, is thought by many scholars to be a syncretism of Mohammed’s personal ideas with ideas drawn from his own imperfect understanding of both Judaism and Christianity.

Finally, there remains the possibility of clear and public Revelation by God Himself. As time goes on, of course, even religions based on this seventh source may be corrupted by a weakening of the original message or the introduction of novel human elements. Still, it is clear that only those religions based on some claim to a public, verifiable revelation provide any reason for the impartial mind to take them seriously. If religion essentially involves the duties of all people to a god they cannot know by natural means, then the religions which claim to be revealed publicly are the only ones whose claims demand to be investigated.

A Grip on Reality

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It is not my purpose here to make the argument for the veracity of the public revelation claimed by Jews and Christians, although a general outline of that argument was included in my recent three-part investigation of the proper understanding and use of Scripture. It is sufficient for the current purpose to demand simply that we stop discussing religion like empty-headed (and very fashionable) graduate students and take seriously the one absolute need for authentic religious experience—that God Himself must in some way be publicly, verifiably and unmistakably involved. At the risk of becoming obnoxious to relativists, I repeat that only two religions claim such Divine involvement to be central to their Faith.

In the face of such an astounding claim, presuppositions and prejudices must be banished in favor of inquiry. Even if one is disposed to deny that God exists or that He has revealed Himself in an intelligible manner, the truth-seeker must confront the possibility that his dispositions will lead him astray. Again, there is only one way to confront this possibility: Those concerned about truth have no choice but to examine thoroughly and dispassionately the claims of Judaism and Christianity.

Ultimately, truth is nothing more than the mind’s correspondence with reality. Truth cannot exist without reality, and it is up to us to grasp reality, not to invent it. For natural reality, this involves the painstakingly humble application of philosophy, empirical science and a host of other disciplines. Since we are able to perceive natural reality directly, we have only to be cautious in gathering our data and reasoning to our conclusions. By contrast, supernatural reality demands a different method precisely because we lack the ability to see for ourselves. Truth here, if it exists at all, consists in the mind’s conformity to reality by means of public revelation. And as it turns out, our only candidate for such revelation begins with Yahweh and ends with Christ.
The Argument from Conscience

September 22, 2009

In his *Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Cardinal Newman attempts to explain how human persons come to assent to both ideas and realities, including both the idea and the reality of God. In the course of his study he persuasively explains the significance of the faculty we call “conscience”, and in so doing articulates an important argument which has largely fallen into disuse.

Newman points out that the operations of the conscience point strongly to the existence of a supreme judge, that is, to the existence of God. While all human faculties can be more or less developed depending on personality and circumstances, Newman rightly notices that it is the overwhelming experience of human persons to feel a strong sense of right and wrong, and to be thrown into various emotional and psychological states depending on whether they have acted rightly or wrongly. Newman sees this at work beginning in very young children, though he acknowledges that this sense of right and wrong, and its corresponding emotions, can be strengthened or weakened based on circumstances, including habitual virtues or vices.

A second point Newman observes about the emotional or psychological states which accompany our acting rightly or wrongly (that is, acting in conformity with or contrary to the dictates of our consciences) is that these feelings and attitudes are such as we ordinarily associate with persons. Nearly everyone, regardless of upbringing or early religious training, experiences what we call a good conscience or a bad conscience. We feel restless, discontented, agitated, guilty, ill at ease, worthless, sad or perhaps even despairing when we are under the attack of a bad conscience. We feel light-hearted, serene, peaceful, content and relaxed when we are in possession of a good conscience, meaning we are at one with the dictates of our own inner sense of right and wrong.

From these things, which tend to be confirmed even by their rare exceptions, Newman rightly observes that we instinctively sense the existence not only of a supreme law but of a supreme law giver or judge. It is not only that we have a sense of right and wrong; in addition, the emotions we feel when our conscience is good or bad are precisely the kinds of emotions we feel when, in other relationships, we have either pleased or offended some other person. We do not feel these emotions, these resulting attitudes or dispositions, when we trip over a rock. Though various objects may attract or
repel us, objects do not excite us in this particular way. The feelings associated with a good or bad conscience are specifically relational in nature.

Thus, from a very early age, the vast majority of persons almost instinctively assent to the existence of both a supreme law and a supreme judge, that is, to the existence of God. Moreover, if the operations of the faculty of conscience are analyzed in this way, they provide reasons in support of this assent, which is nonetheless initially an assent to a reality, not to a notion, and which is initially based purely on our own experience, and not on argument. In other words, we initially assent to the reality of God through what is, in effect, a real, active, providential imprint of His presence on our very nature.

Later, with the aid of Revelation and the cultivation of virtue, we can bring ourselves to a deeper, richer and more precise assent to God or, through various kinds of intellectual rebellion and evil habits, we can diminish and weaken this assent, bury it deeply, or deny it altogether. Whatever the outcome, it seems clear that the very existence of conscience, and also even its relatively unformed operations, show from the first that each person instinctively understands himself to be subject to an ultimate judge who has made a deep imprint on his very nature. Thus each person instinctively understands himself, however dimly and imperfectly, to live and act in the presence of God.
The Case for Original Sin

December 05, 2008

At his weekly Wednesday audience on December 3rd, Pope Benedict suggested that the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin is an alternative to a “vision of despair”. At first glance, this does not appear to be an argument in favor of accepting the doctrine, and I don’t think the Pope meant it so much as a rigorous argument as a significant spiritual observation. Yet it is an observation with a certain persuasive power. Let’s take a look.

People adopt their beliefs for a wide variety of reasons, some of which are logically stronger than others. However, for any given person, the most logical argument may not be the one with the greatest personal force. An argument with great force may not be reasoned out step by step, as in a syllogism. It may simply correspond well with our own experience or our own suspicions about reality. In this way, one could easily tend to believe the doctrine of Original Sin at least partly because the alternatives are profoundly unsatisfactory, perhaps even unthinkable.

The idea of Original Sin includes or implies several important elements. In brief, it implies that God (the highest good) is the underlying principle and foundation of all things, such that everything that exists was created as good; second that this goodness has been marred by ruptures and weaknesses which arise ultimately from willful rebellion against God; and third that life can be lived in hope, since its purpose is to seek restoration of the full good through a continual return to God.

Ultimately, there are only two alternatives to this understanding of the world. The first alternative holds that both good and evil are active, co-eternal principles, with the implication that evil can never be fully overcome. This is characteristic of all philosophical and theological dualisms, such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and many modern atheistic attitudes.

The second alternative holds that ideas of good and evil have no meaning, for the only reality is matter, which in itself has no moral dimension. However we may find things, it is simply the way they are and the way we are. No insight can be derived from it and nothing can be done about it. Those who try to form judgments which raise one assessment above another are merely playing a power game. This attitude is characteristic of all forms of materialism, and it strongly influences many forms of relativism. Because the materialist/relativist viewpoint eliminates every requirement for
personal transformation, a great many of our contemporaries act as if this viewpoint were true when they want to behave “badly”. But despite the strong influence of this alternative, few live it consistently, and fewer still are dense enough to insist upon it as a consistent philosophical theory (for such insistence requires an immensely paradoxical intellectual judgment about an allegedly meaningless reality).

As the Pope suggested, both alternatives are essentially hopeless. Neither provides a vision which can facilitate anything but despair over the condition we are in, for either there is no prospect of ultimate change, or such change is ultimately purposeless. Moreover, I submit that neither alternative matches our own experience of either ourselves or of the world in which we live. The idea that the world is a good thing but a broken thing, along with the hope of restoring that broken thing to wholeness, unlocks the secret of many a puzzle about life and matches marvelously with our own deepest intuitions. It becomes much easier to understand where we are and where we are going as soon as we realize that everything in the world is actually broken. Suddenly reality becomes intelligible, for everything necessarily points beyond its current state to what it would be like if it were unbroken—or fixed.

Internal assent and even Faith itself is rooted in such correspondences—spiritual, intellectual, and psychological—between what we dimly suspect and the clear explanation which confirms those suspicions. Some explanations make sense and, in so doing, shed great light. Others don’t correspond to our experience, don’t make sense, and take light away. Recognizing the result is often the key to the whole thing. Therefore, it is no off-hand remark that Original Sin stands in immense and obvious contrast to despair. It is rather a profound fact which opens new vistas of human understanding. Maybe, just maybe, Pope Benedict meant his observation to be a sort of argument after all.
Resurrection Theory I: Did the Disciples Steal the Body?

April 05, 2006

Ever since Our Lord rose from the dead, special interest groups have attempted to convince Christians that He really didn’t. The Jewish leaders who had Christ put to death to protect their religious authority clearly had a vested interest in denying the Resurrection. All those who wish to decide right and wrong for themselves share this same interest. Militant secularists must also persuade us it just isn’t so. The Resurrection is too great a threat to how they want the world to be.

But we know too much about the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, and the subsequent dramatic rise of Christianity, to cede the field to those who wish only to deny. We have witnesses, a great host of them, including the writers of a number of different books which have come down to us in what we call the New Testament. These witnesses, who claimed to have seen the risen Christ, had every reason to retract their claims in the face of torture and death, but they held firm. Presumably, then, they believed that a true resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was the only reasonable explanation for what they had seen.

The Empty Tomb

The clearest point in the historical record is that the tomb in which Christ had been buried was really empty on Easter morning. A close look at the gospels shows that, had the tomb not been empty, the disciples would have made no claim of resurrection. Moreover, if they had claimed that Christ was risen while His body still lay in the tomb, the authorities would have gone and fetched the body to put it on public display. But there was no body to fetch. Therefore, they had to propose a theory which explained the emptiness of the tomb without admitting that Christ had risen from the dead.

Although we will consider in a later column some theories which ignore the tomb, in truth only those theories which acknowledge the emptiness of the tomb have a reason to be heard. There are two such theories, and only one of them was advanced at the time by those with most to gain, the chief priests and other members of the Sanhedrin. The disciples, they alleged, had stolen the body in order to perpetrate a lie.
Serious Precautions, Unlikely Thieves

When Christ died on the Cross, the high priest asked Pilate to secure the burial site, and Pilate authorized the use of a four-man guard, which marked the tomb with the seal of the Roman Empire. The price of breaking the seal was severe punishment and the penalty for sleeping on watch was death. Meanwhile, the disciples were in a state of profound disarray and dejection. Scripture tells us they had all left Jesus and fled. They were not about to take on the trained guardians of Rome.

Nonetheless, the enormous stone covering the mouth of the tomb was rolled back, and the tomb emptied of its contents, while the guards were on duty. Understandably, the guards were very fearful of the consequences when they reported what had occurred. But the chief priest bribed them to state that the disciples had stolen the body while the guards were asleep, assuring them that he would fix things up with Pilate so that they would not be punished.

It is, of course, inconceivable that the stone could have been moved without waking the “sleeping” guards, and even more inconceivable that the grave robbers would take the trouble to unwrap the body and set the head-covering neatly aside before getting safely away. But the logical fallacy of this accusation against the disciples is more outrageous still. As St. Augustine noted, if the guards were awake, how could the theft have succeeded? And if the guards were asleep, how could they identify the disciples as thieves?

Human Psychology

We have noted that the disciples were discouraged and frightened by the events of Good Friday. They did not understand Christ’s predictions that he would rise, and they saw his death as the heart wrenching destruction of a beautiful dream. Mark ran away naked, leaving his linen garment in the hands of those who sought to detain him. Peter quailed under the glance of a serving girl. Only a few women and young John had the courage to stand by until the end and prepare the body for burial.

When Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb to complete the burial preparations, which had been interrupted by the Sabbath, she expected to need help moving the stone. So far was Mary from imagining Christ as risen that she mistook him for the gardener. She did not see the gardener and mistake him for Christ. Yet a great shift somehow occurred as Peter received Mary’s report, no longer running away but toward the tomb to confirm that it was empty. The disciples began to gather, to view things differently, to find fresh courage. Some were hard to convince—consider Thomas!—but soon they
became missionaries to the world. This is inexplicable if they had stolen the body and known the Resurrection was a hoax.

Such are the ludicrous weaknesses of the “theft theory”, the first effort to explain the Resurrection away, the alternative offered by the best contemporary minds consulting together at a time of great need. But what else could they say? That Christ had simply fainted on the cross and later walked out of the tomb on his own? Actually, after over seventeen hundred years had passed, the so-called Age of Reason did come up with this idea. We’ll examine it in next week’s column.
Resurrection Theory II: Did Our Lord Die or Swoon?

April 12, 2006

In last week’s column, I noted that eighteenth century rationalists made a new effort to explain away the Resurrection while still accepting the fact that Christ’s tomb was empty after the third day. This alternative theory posits that Christ did not actually die on the Cross. Rather, he fainted and appeared dead, but was buried alive. Later he revived, escaped from the tomb, and appeared to his disciples, giving rise to the Resurrection Myth. How plausible is this theory?

The Certainty of Christ’s Death

The easiest way to refute this “swoon theory” is simply to establish the certainty of Christ’s death. The historical record is very precise about the sufferings Jesus was forced to undergo. First, he was scourged as an example to others. This would have been done using the flagrum, leather straps embedded with bits of bone or metal. There was no prescribed limit for Christ’s offense, which was unknown in Roman Law. The beating was undoubtedly brutal, laying bare the veins and muscles, and perhaps even the bowels.

In this weakened condition and having already lost so much blood, Jesus was forced to carry the horizontal timber of his cross for a considerable distance, up the hill to Golgotha. The weight of this timber would have been about 70 pounds, causing Our Lord to fall several times under its weight, until a bystander was pressed into service to complete the journey. Then, although criminals were sometimes tied to their crosses, Our Lord was nailed to his cross through both his feet and either his hands or wrists. The pain alone was unspeakable, the loss of blood extreme.

Crucifixion causes death in several ways. In addition to the long torment and shame, Jesus would have experienced dizziness, cramps, thirst, traumatic fever, tetanus, gangrene, and asphyxiation. In addition, a soldier put a lance into his side, opening a hole from which flowed first blood then water. According to medical diagnosticians, this sequence signifies rupture of the heart, a certain cause of death.

Betting on the Incredible
The lance thrust not only made Our Lord’s death medically certain but, in fact, was designed to do so. Pilate wanted to ensure that there was no doubt about Christ’s death before the body was released. In addition, the Jewish leaders would obviously have made sure that Jesus of Nazareth was dead. Moreover, Joseph of Arimathea would hardly have buried Our Lord in his own tomb if he were not certain the end had come, nor would the women have prepared his body for burial. In fact, it took over 1700 years for anyone to question whether Christ had really died. No one doubted it at the time.

As if all this is not preposterous enough, consider what else the swoon theory requires. Even if Jesus were barely alive, he would have had to revive sufficiently in the stone-cold tomb overnight to remove his grave clothes, an impossible task for even a healthy man because they were stuck on with myrrh, which rapidly hardens into a sort of glue. Presumably he also found sufficient energy to fold up the grave clothes neatly and lay them aside. In any case, he would have had to roll away (uphill) the huge stone covering the entrance of the tomb, a task which three healthy women knew they could not perform.

Once outside the tomb, Christ would have had to fight off the guard, walk miles on wounded feet, and finally convince his disciples that he had conquered death. Yet the disciples did not describe Christ as merely revived or resuscitated. They saw a glorious Christ, no longer bound by time and space. St. Paul described him with the word egegertai, which indicates a return to life free from corruption. This was not a walking corpse.

The Cult of Christ’s Tomb?
If Our Lord had merely swooned and revived, he would nonetheless have died eventually. In light of the tremendous following he had and the subsequent rise of the Christian faith, the ultimate grave site of the Founder would have become a beloved shrine. One need only consider Christian veneration of the saints. How prized would Christ’s own remains have been! But there were no remains: not then, not ever.

It is perhaps for this reason that one of the most popular representations of the swoon theory in modern literature, Hugh Schonfield’s The Passover Plot (1965), combined it with the theft theory. Schonfield argued that the disciples conspired to chemically induce the swoon, assist Jesus in his escape from the tomb, and perpetrate the Resurrection Hoax. This inventive theorizing, of course, has the dubious claim of running afoul of the objections to both explanations at the same time.

Did Our Lord Lie?
In general those who wish to discredit the Resurrection are willing to admit that Christ was, at least, a great teacher and a man of unparalleled integrity. It is interesting to note, therefore, that while the theft theory (considered last week) assumes that the disciples lied, the swoon theory assumes that Jesus Christ himself lied. This is contrary to what even non-believers see as the overwhelming evidence of his life and work. It adds to both the indignity and the foolishness of those who refuse to take history seriously.

As I mentioned in my previous column, only those theories which account for the emptiness of the tomb really deserve a hearing. Nonetheless, we will consider in the next installment two final theories which dispense with facts altogether, attempting rather to reinterpret the disciples’ experience at a distance. Thus we will close our consideration of alternative Resurrection theories with a look at collective hallucination and religious symbolism next week.
Resurrection Theory III: Were the Disciples Seeing Things?

April 20, 2006

To round out our consideration of the efforts to explain away the Resurrection, we must look at two modern theories. The first is the theory of general hallucination. On this view, the disciples thought Christ rose from the dead simply because their intense desires led them to see things that weren’t there. The second is the theory that accounts of the Resurrection were never meant to be taken literally. They were intended as symbolic stories of new life.

Collective Hallucination

The hallucination theory naturally surfaced in the 19th century with the rise of clinical psychology. Note, however, that Christian sources do not present us with a variety of uniquely different, highly colored individual visions of Jesus after his death. Instead, they refer to situations in which multiple persons, sometimes hundreds of persons, claimed to see the Risen Christ at the same time. If this were caused by hallucination, therefore, it must have been collective hallucination. Though the possibility of collective hallucination is denied by many psychologists, others posit it might be possible given certain essential conditions:

1. A high-strung or nervous mood;
2. A strong link between the hallucination and past personal experiences;
3. A restricted, emotion-charged locality;
4. Psychological conditioning and intense expectation.

None of these conditions were fulfilled in the reported visions of Jesus Christ. Those who claimed to see the risen Christ were in a variety of moods. Mary was weeping in sorrow, Peter filled with remorse and fear, Thomas incredulous, and the disciples on the road to Emmaus highly distracted. Nor are the reports of the Resurrection unduly tied to past experiences. It was not as if one disciple saw Jesus in one way, possessing certain unusual characteristics, while another disciple saw him in some different way, with
different characteristics. The Resurrection experiences are remarkably uniform. They also occurred in a wide variety of places: to Mary in the Garden; to the apostles in the upper room; to the seven on Lake Tiberias; to 500 on a Galilean mountain. Further, the experiences involved the senses of sight, touch and hearing. They possessed a concreteness unusual in this type of phenomena.

As for intense expectation, it simply didn’t exist. The disciples had no inkling of what Christ was talking about when he predicted his Resurrection, as their behavior at the crucifixion makes clear. When they heard the tomb was empty, their first impulse was not to proclaim the Resurrection, but to check the tomb. On at least one occasion they thought Christ was a ghost, and on two other occasions they did not recognize him at first. Thomas even insisted on touching our Lord’s wounds before believing he was truly risen. As several commentators have famously noted, Mary Magdalene did not see a gardener and expect him to be the Risen Christ; she saw Christ and expected him to be a gardener.

Two final points are also worth mentioning. First, studies suggest that repeated hallucinations either increase in frequency to a crisis or slowly fade away as mental balance is restored. But the vision of the Risen Christ did neither. It simply departed at the Ascension. Second, psychologists teach that hallucinations can cause only temporary changes in lifestyle, whereas the changes for the disciples of Jesus were permanent.

**The Resurrection as Symbol**

Faced with the difficulty of explaining away Resurrection claims which were so incompatible with the modern mood, the Modernists of the past century frequently argued that the Resurrection accounts are not meant to be taken literally. Instead, the Resurrection story, like the stories of all of Christ’s miracles, are literary devices adopted by the Christian community to express the importance of the transformed life available to those who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. This viewpoint depends on a great deal of sleight of hand, including a late dating of the gospels so that they can be taken as faith-reflections of the later community rather than first hand accounts—a late dating which has long since been rejected by Scripture scholars of every viewpoint.

In any case, there was no pre-existing literary symbolism of this type on which the evangelists could draw. The closest that Jewish tradition came to the idea of Resurrection was the “taking up” of a prophet as a ratification of his mission, which is quite different from a bodily death and resurrection. Neither does this symbol theory explain why there was no grave cult for the dead Jesus, which is what one would naturally expect if the Resurrection language was merely figural. Nor is it easy to see
how a mere symbol could have transformed the hearts of the disciples from watery fear to rocky courage, taking them from flight to martyrdom.

In fact, the gospels are early, eyewitness accounts, and there is no question that the disciples believed that Christ physically rose. They say he “manifested himself” (Mk 16:12-14), “stood among them” (Lk 24:36; Jn 20:19), and “showed them” his hands, feet and side (Lk 24:40; Jn 20:20). St. Paul uses the word opthe to express “he appeared” (1 Cor 15:3-8), a term which denotes a physical disclosure, a literal seeing. Paul, of course, was knocked to the ground by the risen Christ—a potent symbol indeed! Moreover, the Resurrection caused Christians to change the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, indicating that a remarkable intervention by God had taken place on that day.

**As It Is …**

Ultimately, if one subscribes to the symbol theory, one must believe not that the early Christian writers employed literary devices, but that they lied. To make this point, and to close this three-part series on alternative Resurrection theories, we can do no better than to cite St. Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthians around the year 56 AD (1 Cor 15:12-20):

Tell me, if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how is it that some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ himself has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is void of content and your faith is empty too. Indeed, we should then be exposed as false witnesses of God, for we have borne witness before him that he raised up Christ; but he certainly did not raise him up if the dead are not raised. Why? Because if the dead are not raised, then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, your faith is worthless. You are still in your sins, and those who have fallen asleep in Christ are the deadest of the dead. If our hopes in Christ are limited to this life only, we are the most pitiable of men.

But “as it is”, concludes St. Paul, “Christ is now raised—the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”
The Tomb of Jesus and the Christ Who Saves

October 05, 2007

Some months ago a reader asked me to say something about the Discovery Channel’s claim that the tomb of Jesus had been found in Jerusalem. I didn’t regard the request as urgent because the tomb of Jesus has been “found” many times and in many places, despite the complete absence of evidence. The first time I was told it had been found was in 1966, when a Muslim college roommate gave me a pamphlet on the subject.

Bones and the Faith

But today I happened to look at the Discovery Channel’s web page for The Lost Tomb of Jesus, which first aired on March 4th. There I found a promotional film clip of a Catholic college professor stressing that his faith would not be disturbed even if the discovery of Jesus’ bones were certain. John Dominic Crossan is an ex-priest and a co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, so it isn’t surprising that he holds such a view (nor, sadly, that he is a professor emeritus at De Paul University). According to Crossan:

If the bones of Jesus were to be found in an ossuary in Jerusalem tomorrow, and without doubt let’s say they are definitely agreed to be the bones of Jesus, would that destroy Christian faith? It certainly would not destroy my Christian faith. I leave what happens to bodies up to God.

Surprising or not, Crossan’s statement presents a far greater challenge to the faith than the ridiculous assertion that Jesus’ tomb has been found.

But first, the tomb. When the Discovery Channel began promoting the claim of Simcha Jacobovici that he had found Jesus’ tomb, Time, Newsweek and many other reputable news outlets ran fairly comprehensive stories pointing out how little evidence there was to support it. Moreover, the vast majority of scholars thought the claim patently absurd, regarding it as an effort to capitalize on Da Vinci Code mania, including the alleged marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Here is the background. In 1980, a construction crew working in the Talpiot suburb of Jerusalem uncovered a tomb containing ten ossuaries (bone boxes) bearing names
such as Jesus, son of Joseph; Maria; Mariamene e Mara; Matthew; Judas, son of Jesus; and Jose. As required by law, the site was turned over to the Israel Antiquities Authority for excavation. The IAA removed, recorded, and preserved the ossuaries, but found nothing unusual in them. With the exception of Mariamene, all the names involved were extremely common in first century Jerusalem.

It wasn’t until 1996 that the BBC (which frequently airs programs apparently designed to embarrass Christians) made a film suggesting that the ossuaries in question might belong to the family of Jesus of Nazareth, a claim immediately dismissed by statisticians and New Testament scholars alike, including both the curator of the museum in charge of the ossuaries, Joe Zias, and New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

A Specious Claim

But along came Jacobovici, Cameron and the Discovery Channel anyway. They claimed “Mariamene” was a name that denoted “Mary Magdalene” and that DNA testing showed this “Jesus” and this “Mariamene” were not related matrilineally, so the two may have been husband and wife. They also claimed they could prove by “patina fingerprinting” (a sort of residual soil sampling technique invented for the purpose) that a separate ossuary in the hands of an Israeli collector, inscribed with “James, brother of Jesus” (reminiscent of Scripture), originally came from the same burial site. Hence this is the tomb of the same Jesus whom Christians worship as God.

Well, if I must, I must:

1. The name Mariamene was not used to refer to Mary Magdalene until 185 AD, long after this burial.
2. The Jesus and Mariamene of the tomb could easily have been related patrilineally (i.e., through their father).
3. Even if Jesus were later interred by his disciples in a second tomb, he would never have been listed as “Jesus, son of Joseph” since the disciples believed Joseph was his foster-father.
4. The inscription on the “James” ossuary is known to have been altered between the mid-1970’s and 1980 and its collector was being prosecuted for fraud even as the Discovery Channel aired its program.
5. There is other physical evidence suggesting that the “James” ossuary did not
originate in the same location.

6. Eusebius of Caesarea reported in the fourth century that James was buried in a different tomb, near the temple mount, and that his tomb was a place of pilgrimage for Christians.

7. The ancestral home and presumed burial ground for Jesus and his family would have been in Bethlehem or Nazareth, not Jerusalem.

8. Not all the names on the ossuaries match up (nowhere do we hear of a brother named Matthew, for example, and it is sheer fantasy that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a son named Judas).

9. All available ancient documentary evidence (which is preserved in Scripture) identifies Jesus’ tomb as that of Joseph of Arimathea, in a known location, stating that on the third day the body disappeared in defiance of Roman law, and making it both unlikely and dangerous to remove the body only to rebury it in a family plot elsewhere in Jerusalem.

10. Finally, again, the statistical odds against these overwhelmingly common names being used successfully to identify a particular family are staggering.

The Empty Tomb

Thus is the Discovery Channel easily dismissed on the basis of facts so widely known that even most major secular news outlets scoffed from the first. We are left only with Professor Crossan’s eager protestations that, even if the bones were found, it wouldn’t upset his faith. As I said, this is a far more serious problem, a problem shared by all who believe that Christianity is essentially a mythic enhancement of the life and ideas of a wonderful teacher with a strong following, and that the Jesus of Faith is far different from the Jesus of History.

The early Christians, of course, did not agree. The Gospel writers make a great point of the empty tomb, and the reason they give for its emptiness is the very reason they believe Christ really is the Son of God. St. Paul not only preached the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which necessarily left the tomb empty, but wrote to the Corinthians that if Christ had not risen from the dead, then “our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain…, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins” (15:14-17). Nor of course are the early Christians alone. They were followed by a continuous line of believers who depended on the historical veracity of the Gospels. While it is true that modern Biblical scholarship has been plagued by this separation of faith and history, the magisterium of
the Church has consistently condemned it. Benedict XVI also rejected it, from the scholarly viewpoint, in his recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

In fact, it is only a pretext of Modernism that the faith can be whatever we want it to be and still command our allegiance. To even the casual observer, it is immediately obvious that Christianity is an intensely incarnational religion, a religion firmly rooted in flesh and bone, that must stand or fall on the emptiness of the tomb and the permanent absence of the remains of its founder. It may be convenient to have a religion that makes no demands on reality, but in the end it will not do. We must abandon our faith as a lie if the bones of Jesus are ever found. Only the Christ of history saves—and only if He is risen.
Assessing the Messiah

January 13, 2011

Did you know that there is a strain of Judaism which believes it has found the Messiah in a Rabbi named Menachem Mendel Schneerson? This movement is known as Chabad, the name of the Hasidic community Rabbi Schneerson led from 1950 until 1994. Schneerson, who was a distant relative of the leaders of a Hasidic movement in Lyubavichi in Russia, and who became the son-in-law of the last “Lubavitcher Rebbe” before himself, took over the community after it had shifted operations to Brooklyn to escape the dangers and upheavals of World War II.

Though Schneerson began his professional career as an engineer, he was apparently quite charismatic, and eventually he was instrumental in changing many perceptions of Jews and Judaism in America, and also of Jews and Judaism in the State of Israel. His photograph, at least, is apparently universally recognized throughout Israel, though perhaps not so recognizable as a current pope is to Catholics. In any case, many of his followers still regard him as the Messiah over fifteen years after his death at the age of 92.

One marvels at this, considering their rejection of the credentials of Christ, which seem so much stronger even 2,000 years after His death. Rabbi Schneerson performed no signs and wonders that could validate him as sent by God, nor did he gather all Jews into a promised land and rebuild the Temple, creating a kingdom of Israel with universal influence, which the Messiah is expected to do by those who have never grasped His far greater achievement. This quirky Chabad faith leads me to wonder about what it ought to take to validate a Messianic claim.

Christ, of course, came to the Jews, and through the Jews to all of us, and one does wonder why He came at that particular time and in that particular cultural situation. Chesterton has written persuasively about the fullness of time being exemplified by the stunning achievement of Rome, in many ways the most successful of civilizations, which he rightly described as a huge and mighty wave of unparalleled human achievement—a wave which was about to curl and crash in the depths of human despair. If ever there was a time when God would step in and save a world that had done its best and failed, Chesterton suggests, it would have been then.

This emphasizes Our Lord’s universal mission. But another consideration would be
whether the time was ripe for a Messiah actually to be convincing—or, if not actually believed (which no one can guarantee), at least to be able to put forth an unmistakable case to the Jews themselves. For example, we moderns find it almost impossible to believe any claim of the miraculous. We see impossible things happening again and again in movies, and we know too well how easily illusions can be created. Moreover, one of the great perils of mass society is that a preponderance of key opinion makers is never on the scene of extraordinary occurrences; similarly, one of the perils of mass communications is that each such occurrence is immediately disputed and debunked by those who claim to have superior knowledge, with almost no simple way to verify who knows what.

It may be that a more human social scale is required for conviction. The choice to be made was perhaps far more clear in the smaller, less technological society of first-century Judaism. Christ performed his works—the very works which He logically claimed testified on His behalf—in a relatively small community by our standards, and in plain view of all the Jewish leaders, who were in a position to verify what was truly miraculous and what was not. So convinced were they of Our Lord’s special powers that they had to resort to ascribing them to Satan; no natural agency was sufficient. They could have ascribed them to God, recognized the Messiah, and brought virtually the entire Jewish community in their wake—an achievement scarcely possible for any leadership group amid the diaspora of later years.

They did not, of course, but I think it is significant in God’s plan that they could have. They chose instead to call white black so that they could continue to cling to their own self-importance, their own human traditions, and their own sins. Probably nobody had to make that kind of choice to reject the Messianic intimations of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, or any other claimant since Jesus Christ. And that’s an important fact, is it not?

That kind of deliberate choice for or against a clear reality—a reality that can be touched and almost tasted and certainly verified—should be absolutely necessary at some point in a Messianic career. Clearly the indisputable fact that such a choice was necessary would also be critical for the evaluation and response of future generations. Without any possible doubt, then, the Messiah’s credentials ought to be that strong. I mean as strong as Christ’s.
Up to Date on the Shroud

May 06, 2010

With the Holy Shroud on display in Turin until May 23rd, it makes sense to comment on some of the newer ideas concerning its authenticity. Tradition holds that the Shroud is the burial cloth of Jesus Christ, and bears the miraculous imprint of his body. Readers may remember that back in 1988 a group of scientists performed Carbon-14 dating tests on the shroud that suggested it originated in the late middle ages. New evidence calls that conclusion into doubt.

During a conference on the Shroud in the Jubilee year 2000, scientists were divided on the reliability of the 1988 tests, for three reasons: First, dating an object buried in the ground is very different than dating an object which has been cared for and treated in various ways. Second, a very small sample was taken from the edge of the shroud for dating purposes, which now appears to be from a section that had been repaired much later than the original cloth was made. Third, the shroud has been damaged by fire and even boiled at various times in its history, which can have an impact on Carbon-14 dating techniques.

Another problem with the dating is that scientists cannot figure out how the image on the shroud was made, though it seems related to some process of radiation. This accords with Christ’s glorified body, but it is difficult to imagine how, short of a miracle, anyone could have produced it in the 14th century. Moreover, there appears to be a relationship between the Shroud of Turin and the Holy Sudarium (Holy Face of Oviedo), which bears blood stains of the same type as the Shroud (type AB, with very similar DNA structure), and which is known to have arrived in Oviedo, Spain in the ninth century.

Perhaps the best evidence independent of tradition for the Shroud’s authenticity as the burial cloth of Jesus Christ is the faint writing that was discovered in 1980, consisting of Greek, Latin and Aramaic words. Barbara Frale, a historian working in the Vatican Secret Archives, has thoroughly studied this writing. In her book *La Sindone di Gesù (The Shroud of Jesus of Nazareth)*, Frale argues that the style of the script is similar to that used in ancient documents and that the imprinted text is a residue from papyrus scrolls once attached to the cloth (apparently burial certificates).

It so happens that at the time of the crucifixion it was a Jewish custom that anyone who was executed would be subjected to the symbolic disdain of being buried in a
common grave or far from their relatives for 12 months; scrolls were used to identify their enshrouded corpses. But in Jesus’ case, though the scrolls would have been prepared, Pontius Pilate released the body to Joseph of Arimathea and so the burial in a common grave did not take place. As Frale noted in an interview:

The inscriptions say: “Jesus of Nazareth, 16th year of Tiberius’ reign.” Then comes a Latin inscription: “Innecem”, i.e. “sentenced to death.” Then a Greek one, probably: “Oye kiato,” i.e., removed in the ninth hour, i.e. the time when the corpses of crucified persons had to be removed from the cross. Then there is another word Adar, i.e., the date on which the body of the person executed could be returned to his family. In the year 30, Adar occurred 12 months after Easter, which is perfectly in line with historical conjectures based on the Gospels.

Clearly the study of the Shroud is not over; there may be more to discover. But the evidence for its authenticity is getting stronger, not weaker, with the passage of time and the application of modern examination techniques.
Who wrote the gospels? How do we know?

December 14, 2010

We know more about the authors of the four gospels and when they wrote from tradition than from any other source, but on the whole the best efforts of Scripture scholars over the past two hundred years have done very little to challenge, and much to support, the reliability of the Church’s traditional assertions. Various academic fads have come and gone, not infrequently fueled by an anti-Christian or anti-Church bias which demands a very late dating of the gospels. But each time a scholar has gone off in some new direction, fresh discoveries and arguments have moved the preponderance of academic opinion back toward what has been commonly held from the beginning.

It is interesting that the same fads and biases have had a great impact on a second critical question about the gospels, that is, how quickly the four gospels we accept today were received as the only four inspired accounts of the life of Christ. This question is the subject of a new book by C. E. Hill, Professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, entitled *Who Chose the Gospels: Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*. The lurid subtitle is actually aimed at debunking the widespread myth that there were initially a great many gospels, and only relatively late did one Christian party win out. According to this myth, “orthodoxy” is a very tardy imposition by the victorious on their less successful competitors.

I’ll be reviewing Hill’s book (the first chapter is very promising), but for now let’s summarize what we know generally about the origins of the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, based on tradition as largely corroborated by scholarly studies through the years.

**Matthew**: Matthew is the tax collector Levi mentioned in the gospels. Tradition is unanimous that this was the first gospel, written originally in Aramaic, which is why it comes first in our Bibles today. But we have no fragments of an original Aramaic text, and the Greek text that we do have seems in some respects to draw on Mark’s Gospel, so some scholars conclude that Matthew’s gospel took final form only after Mark wrote. Still, it could not have been much later, for given Matthew’s themes, it is inconceivable that he would not have noted the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in

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AD 70 if those events had taken place before he wrote. Therefore the Gospel must have been written at least as early as the late 60’s.

Mark: Mark’s is considered by most scholars to be the earliest gospel, though of course there are earlier references to Christ and His teachings in the letters of Peter and Paul. According to tradition, Mark was an assistant or interpreter to Peter, whose memories of Christ he noted down. Then, shortly after Peter’s crucifixion, Mark wrote his gospel to keep Peter’s memories of Christ alive in the Church. Thus Mark’s gospel is dated to the mid-60’s AD, possibly shortly before the final text of Matthew, but not by much.

Luke: Luke was an early Christian physician and a companion of St. Paul. He wrote both his gospel and its companion volume, The Acts of the Apostles, which continues the account of the origins of Christianity from Christ’s Ascension through the establishment and early operations of the Church. Luke appears to rely in some places on Mark. He also stresses Christ’s words about the destruction of Jerusalem (21:5-38) so much that it seems he knew of their fulfillment. This places his gospel after AD 70, but probably before 85, as he betrays no awareness of Domitian’s persecutions or the struggles between the Church and rabinic Judaism which began about that time.

John: John is of course the “beloved disciple”, who was very young at the time of Our Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. Tradition holds that John wrote the gospel while in exile on the island of Patmos in about AD 90, and indeed everything about the text suggests a depth of theological reflection which is consistent with a mature mind many years after the events in question. Scholars are unanimous in the conclusion that this is the latest of the gospels.

Some scholars argue that the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were all in circulation before AD 70, while the latest respectable positions are probably 70 for Mark, 85 for Matthew, and 90 for Luke, with John placed as late as AD 100.

I will not dwell on the debates over precise dates, for two reasons. First, contemporary scholars are now arguing over just a few years, and certainly not centuries. The days of my academic youth, when we had to defend reasonable dates against largely ideological efforts to push the gospels well back into the second century, are long gone. Second, the more intriguing question is really something quite a bit deeper, and it is also where the contemporary action is. If orthodoxy is not a late imposition, how do we know that precisely these four gospels are special? Why are they considered inspired accounts of the life of Christ, and—as C. E. Hill asks—how were they selected as somehow “canonical”?

This is a question that lies at the heart of Christianity as we have received it, a
question generally appreciated by Catholics, who do not believe that Scripture is self-evidently inspired or that it can explain itself. But it is often unrecognized by Protestants except when pushed by scholars with anti-Christian axes to grind. Therefore I’m doubly interested in the work on this question done by C. E. Hill, who is after all a professor at a Protestant seminary. I’m betting we can learn something. Stay tuned.
Apostolic Authority and the Selection of the Gospels

December 17, 2010

In his fine book *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy*, the Protestant New Testament professor C. E. Hill debunks the widespread contemporary myth that the four gospels we know today were imposed by one or more dominant figures in the fourth century, presumably in order to vindicate their own ideas of orthodoxy. Recalling that the fourth gospel, St. John’s, was not written until the end of the first century, we can see that it is a remarkable service for Hill to successfully sift all the evidence which points to the acceptance of exactly four authoritative Christian gospels as early as the first quarter of the second century.

In general, the further we go back in time the less evidence we have, as we would expect. For this reason—and undoubtedly to make a better story—Hill starts near the end of the second century and works backwards. For example, he details all the reasons we may be certain that Irenaeus of Lyons, writing his work *Against Heresies* around AD 180, was already clearly aware that the Christian Church relied on four authoritative gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—to the exclusion of all others. That fact alone knocks nearly two hundred years off the worst of the conspiracy theories.

Hill is well-acquainted with a wide body of scholarly writing on this subject, and he knows the extravagant assertions of those scholars who seem to wish to make their academic reputations by undermining our faith in the authority of the gospels, eagerly arguing that gospels “multiplied like rabbits” (as one very silly scholar has put it) and that it was only very late that the Church somehow selected the Four in preference to other widely-known and equally-valid claimants. And so Hill patiently takes up the evidence from one historical figure after another, each earlier than the last, to show that in 170, no 160, no 150, no 140, no 130, no 120 and even earlier, the Four were universally regarded as exclusively authoritative.

To show that Irenaeus was not alone around the year 200, Hill introduces us to references to the gospels in widely divergent works by Hippolytus, Tertullian, Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage and several others in the early third century. And then in successive chapters we encounter Clement of Alexandria, Serapion
of Antioch, Theophilus, and the famous Muratorian Fragment; Justin Martyr, Trypho, Crescens, Celsus, Marcion, and Aristides; and finally Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome (the fourth pope), Bishop Papias, and John the Elder.

Suddenly, almost without time for a breath, we find ourselves right alongside John the Evangelist.

But Hill does not debunk the various outlandish theories only by a close examination of early writings which mention the gospels. In the very first chapter, he challenges the myth of gospels multiplying like rabbits by looking at the known fragments of papyrus which contain texts either from the four canonical gospels or from other claimants. He finds that the papyri attest to the Four being enormously more widespread than the relatively few others, with fragments running nearly 40 to 1.

He also examines the existence of derivative gospel works, such as harmonizations (which attempt to unite all the gospels into a continuous chronological narrative) and tabular arrangements (which lay out the relevant passages from each gospel concerning any given incident in four separate columns). Such works are not only used widely today; they were attempted very early. And it turns out that all of the extant examples include Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—and no others. Hill also takes note of the difference between books which Christians read for personal interest and those which were permitted to be used in the liturgy (again, just the four, always and everywhere). And he observes that the four gospels were generally published in codex form (books), whereas apocryphal works were typically published as (inferior and cheaper) scrolls.

In all, C. E. Hill makes a compelling—almost certainly an irrefutable—case that the four gospels as we know them were simply those that were handed down from the beginning, and that Christians never regarded themselves as having a choice about “which gospels” to accept. Rather, it was partly the acceptance of the gospels which made one a Christian in the first place. On the last page of the book, he puts it this way:

In one sense, of course, the answer to the question: ‘Who chose the Gospels?’ is, everybody who has known something of that indemonstrable power and majesty and, like Aristides, Justin, Irenaeus, Clement, and countless others, has chosen to live by their telling of the story of Jesus. But second-century Christian leaders would have said that neither individuals nor churches had the authority to ‘choose’ which of the many Gospels they liked, but to receive the ones given by God and handed down by Christ through his apostles. (246)

In the end, then, Professor Hill concludes that Christians have always accepted the
gospels—and indeed should still accept them—based on the testimony of the apostles themselves, that is, on Apostolic authority. It is true that he also comments on the “self-attesting” power of the gospels, and cites evidence from the early apologists that for them Scripture possessed this sort of luminous power, a conviction arising from the grace and light which characterizes the Word of God. Other writings simply lack this power. But Hill does not push this farther than it will take each individual believer or unbeliever. He notes its importance, but unlike many Protestants he does not appear to regard it as sufficient or decisive.

Rather, the early and universal acceptance of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—as well as their natural and continuous ascendancy over all rivals put forth by writers of either fiction or heresy—simply depends on Apostolic authority. This is an important validation of the gospels against modern theorists—including mere popularizers such as Dan Brown—who love to suppose a late imposition of canonicity as a brazen grab for power.

A minor weakness in the final argument is that Hill does not consider how this Apostolic authority might actually have manifested itself in the case of a serious dispute. It is very fortunate that there has never been a serious, widespread dispute among believers about the identity of the authentic Christian gospels. But in one small place the author badly handles the issue of what might have happened in the event of an actual dispute so great that a living authority would need to be found to settle it. This, of course, is the very authority issue that Protestants are incapable of addressing, since they do not fully understand how Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium fit together into a seamless whole to guarantee a proper understanding of Divine Revelation. In one place, and only one, Hill puts the question thus:

How is it that these four Gospels came to be known so widely from such an early time? There was certainly no great council of Christian churches before 150 which laid down the law on which Gospels to use. No single bishop, not even the bishop of Rome, should he ever have made such a proclamation (and there is no reason to think he did), had the clout to make it stick. (228)

Happily, Hill uses this to strengthen his undoubtedly correct argument that the gospels were accepted universally from the beginning based on Apostolic authority. But, again, this one paragraph begs the question of how the gospels would have fared if large numbers of Christians had become confused about what was demanded by Apostolic authority. In fact, exactly this problem did arise with regard to some other Scriptural
books. Most notably, Jerome and Augustine argued bitterly over the canonicity of seven of them. So how was it that Augustine won? And how was it that, when the great Jerome translated the Greek text into the Vulgate, he included those books which he had formerly insisted were apocryphal?

Hill does not answer that question and, as I said, he is fortunate that his subject does not require him to do so. For this reason, I can give my strongest recommendation to this well-written, scholarly, entertaining and even feisty book on the gospels. But the question cannot be avoided forever. I intend to answer it in a sequel to this review, and the answer will shed a whole new light on the nature and exercise of the very authority which C. E. Hill rightly describes as essential to the Christian reception of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.
Authority Both Apostolic and Petrine

December 20, 2010

In my review of C. E. Hill’s *Who Chose the Gospels (Apostolic Authority and the Selection of the Gospels)*, I suggested that the author missed an opportunity to consider how apostolic authority would have been exercised if there had been a serious dispute about which gospels were authentic. Hill was quite right to conclude that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were accepted as the four exclusive inspired gospels on the authority of the apostles, and that there had never been a significant dispute on that score. But it seems clear that had there been such a dispute, Hill would not have been able to write nearly so successful a book.

For the problem with Apostolic authority (at least, so one would assume) is that it ended with the death of the last apostle. If, for example, significant portions of the post-apostolic Church had argued over whether the Gospel According to Luke was inspired, with each side presenting inconclusive arguments, how would the dispute have been resolved? Considering this problem in the abstract, C. E. Hill wrote that “there was certainly no great council of Christian churches before 150 which laid down the law on which Gospels to use.” Moreover, he asserts, “no single bishop…had the clout to make it stick.”

Here Hill expresses a fundamental insight about Apostolic authority which is nonetheless missing a key piece. His insight, which is quite correct as far as it goes, is that the bishops are successors of the apostles and so carry on Apostolic authority, but that to bind the Church they must exercise that authority together rather than individually (or as Catholic theology would put it, as a “college”). Thus his first instinct to check for a decree from a “great council” is sound. Catholics would recognize this as an ecumenical council. But his second instinct, that no bishop has sufficient authority on his own, is unsound. Is it really true, as Hill put it with admirable precision, that “no single bishop, not even the bishop of Rome”, had sufficient authority to settle such a question?

The Bishop of Rome

It is not true because it turns out that the Bishop of Rome is something of a special case. The bishop of Rome is the head of the episcopal college and has universal and immediate authority over every church, with or without the cooperation of the other
bishops. Indeed, every other bishop exercises ecclesiastical jurisdiction only by virtue of the Roman bishop’s universal authority. For this reason, it is precisely the presence and approval of the bishop of Rome that makes a council ecumenical.

As Christ said to Peter, before Peter denied him three times: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, you must confirm your brethren” (Lk 22:31-32). In exactly the same way that other bishops carry on Apostolic authority generally in a direct line from the apostles themselves, so too does the Bishop of Rome carry on Peter’s universal and confirmatory authority over the entire Church.

In the context of this particular essay, one of the most interesting things about the Petrine authority is that the very same early authors Hill so persuasively cites for the continuous acceptance of the four gospels can also be cited for the continuous acceptance of full and complete authority over the Church by the successors of Peter in the Roman See.

In truth, the fact often precedes the theory. Thus in the second and third centuries, we see both legitimate bishops and unfortunate heretics appealing to Rome. Marcion and Praxeas rushed to Rome to gain approval for pernicious doctrines rejected by their local bishops, though Rome upheld the bishops. Basilides, Fortunatus and Felix—all bishops who were unjustly expelled from their sees—sought reinstatement from Pope Stephen. But the fact is also attested in the early writings. For example, just as Tertullian can be cited as accepting the four gospels, so also did he exclaim of the Church of Rome: “O Church, happy in its position, into which the apostles poured out, together with their blood, their whole doctrine” (Liber de prescriptione haereticorum).

The linchpin of Hill’s argument for the gospels is Irenaeus of Lyons in the late second century. But St. Ireneaeus not only testified to the authenticity of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John; he also expounded a highly-developed ecclesiology, stressing the necessity of union with Rome, and exploring apostolic succession and even infallibility. He called Rome “the greatest Church, the most ancient, the most conspicuous, and founded and established by Peter and Paul”. And he emphasized that “in this Church, every Church, that is, the faithful from every side must agree together” (Against Heresies). As a practical example of this, Irenaeus recognized Pope Victor’s authority (in Rome) to excommunicate Polycrates (in Asia Minor).

Irenaeus had been a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, who had been taught by St. John the Evangelist himself. Yet when Polycarp became concerned about the proper date for the celebration of Easter, he did not rely on St. John’s teaching, but instead journeyed all the way to Rome to take counsel with the Pope. About the same time, St. Ignatius of
Antioch—another source for the authenticity of the four gospels—spoke of that “church which has the first seat in the place of the country of the Romans” \textit{(Letter to the Romans)}. But the evidence goes back even to Clement of Rome, whom Hill also cites as providing early evidence for the acceptance of the gospels—and Clement was the fourth pope.

In the Roman See, Clement succeeded Anacletus, who succeeded Linus, who succeeded Peter. And in this context of Apostolic authority, what Clement did was really quite remarkable. In AD 96, Clement wrote to a distant diocese, Corinth, to settle a dispute which was upsetting normal church order. Word reached him of the rebellion of some members of that church against their lawful superiors, and so Clement wrote a letter to set things right. Hill, unfortunately missing the larger point while pursuing his gospel project, describes this as if it were a common exchange of letters among the various churches.

But among other things—and already using the pontifical “we” when referring to himself—Clement set forth the ordinary hierarchical structure of the local churches, taught that the apostles were to have successors in each place, and insisted that each person must not transgress the limits of his own rank. He also made his own authority clear: “Should any disobey what has been said by [Christ] through us, let them understand that they will entangle themselves in transgressions and no small danger.”

This letter was written \textit{while St. John was still living}. Yet so well was the Petrine authority understood throughout the Church that it settled the dispute immediately; all parties accepted Clement’s judgment. Thus we find testimony to papal authority both as early and as strong as the testimony for the exclusive authenticity of the four gospels, and from most of the same sources cited by Hill in his excellent study of the latter question.

It is also true that, just as with the four gospels, the testimony in favor of papal authority grew more voluminous, specific and highly-developed throughout the third and fourth centuries, and was fully represented in the works of the great fourth century Fathers of the Church. But perhaps St. Cyprian put it most succinctly when he asked in his treatise \textit{On the Unity of the Church} around AD 250: “Does he who opposes and resists the Church, who resists the Chair of Peter on whom the Church was founded, flatter himself that he is in the Church?”

\textbf{The Biblical Canon: A Case Study}

In light of all this, we can ask again what might have happened if a significant dispute had developed over which books were part of inspired Scripture. In fact, exactly such a problem arose in the late third and fourth centuries, during which it became increasingly
clear that there was significant disagreement over whether the so-called deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament were inspired or not.

The dispute arose because there were seven books which many regarded as part of inspired Scripture despite the fact that they were not included in the Hebrew Bible: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, 1 Maccabees and 2 Maccabees (and some fragments of other books as well). But these books were commonly read in the Greek translation of Scripture known as the Septuagint.

Among the most prominent Fathers of the Church, St. Jerome regarded the disputed seven books to be apocryphal, while St. Augustine accepted them as canonical. Jerome was probably the most knowledgeable Scripture scholar in the world at that time, as well as a great linguist. Most Protestants follow St. Jerome’s original opinion today. But Jerome’s opinion ran contrary to early tradition on this matter, and eventually Jerome changed his mind. What could have caused such a great scholar to renounce his position? It was the authority of the successor of Peter.

The full list of the canonical books of Scripture was promulgated at the councils of Rome, Carthage and Hippo in the late fourth century. The first of these councils was called by Pope Damasus I in 382, for Damasus had a special interest in the question. He wanted to make all of Scripture more accessible to the Latin Church, and a few years earlier, he had summoned Jerome to Rome to serve as his secretary and to translate the entire Bible into Latin, producing what is now known as the Vulgate—a Bible in the language of the people.

Now, at first Jerome did not wish to include the deuterocanonical books in his translation, but when Damasus made it clear to him that he held these books to be inspired, Jerome dropped his opposition. Thus they were included for well over a thousand years as part of the official Christian Bible in the West, until the Protestants arbitrarily rejected them anew in the 16th century. It was this that prompted the Council of Trent once again to reaffirm the canonical list that had first been published authoritatively by Damasus I, even though the list had also been proclaimed at the Council of Florence just a century earlier.

In his debates with the heretic Ruffinus, Jerome upheld the See of Peter as the touchstone of orthodoxy in the Church of Christ. In one famous passage he exclaimed, “whoever is joined to Peter’s chair, he is mine” (Letter to Pope Damasus). He lived what he wrote.

Thus Jerome and Augustine, Cyprian, Tertullian and Irenaeus, Polycarp and Ignatius, Clement of Rome—and surely John the Evangelist himself, who taught Polycarp and witnessed Clement’s settlement of the problems of the Church in Corinth—all
recognized what C. E. Hill unfortunately has not yet considered, though he cited the very same authorities on the gospels: There is indeed one bishop who did and does have “the clout” to settle questions of this kind, and this clout was acknowledged from the earliest possible date throughout the length and breadth of the Church.

That would be the Bishop of Rome. It is precisely this Petrine power, carried on by the popes, that gives the Church of Christ an authority capable of settling questions of Faith here and now. When there is irreconcilable disagreement about the meaning of the evidence remaining from Apostolic times, we must remember that Revelation was consigned to the Church and that Scripture itself is first and foremost the Church’s book. Through her very embodiment of Apostolic Succession—that is, her college of bishops united with its head, the pope—the authority of Christ Himself remains living and present, so that the Church may teach all nations to observe all that He has commanded, “even to the end of time” (Mt 28:20).
A number of visitors have emailed us recently to correct “Catholic errors” by explaining what “the Bible says”. Some of these messages seem to have been triggered by our posting of the official prayer for the intercession of John Paul II. For example, we’ve been told that the Bible says there is only one intercessor between man and God and that the Bible says we must not communicate with the dead. Personally, I’m not so sure what these things mean. The Bible is a tough book.

**How Do We Know What the Bible Says?**

In the Protestant tradition, the Bible is read most often as if it were a contemporary newspaper written with the required ninth grade vocabulary and reviewed for consistency of editorial style. Especially among Fundamentalists, the nuances of Biblical interpretation are dominated by this question: “Can’t you understand plain English?” Never mind the subtleties of context and genre: even problems of translation are ignored. Unfortunately, Sacred Scripture itself opposes such an approach. For example, in 2 Peter 3:16, Peter comments on Paul’s letters: “There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”

Moreover, it is easy to find isolated texts which appear to contradict each other. Consider these two which relate to the debate over the ordination of women: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). And, “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says” (1 Cor 14:33-34). Even with problems of context and genre set aside, it is not always so easy to know what “the Bible says.” There may be a significant number of difficult or apparently contradictory texts to consider.

For this reason, proper interpretation demands that we know and use all the texts—that we haven’t overlooked any, and that we haven’t played favorites. Few have studied Scripture so exhaustively as to be sure they have every relevant passage in mind,
and the temptation to hang one’s argument on a text one knows and likes is very strong. It would seem, then, that at least a minimal level of scholarship is essential to the proper understanding of Scripture. This becomes even more evident when we return to context and genre, which cannot be ignored.

**Context and Genre**

Context is critical to the interpretation of all human communication. If I say to my teenage son, “You cannot take the car”, I might mean that he may not use the car for a specific purpose, that he may not use it at a particular time, that he may not drive at all until further notice, that he may not steal the car (which should, I hope, be obvious), or even that the car has broken down. The meaning will depend on the context. Indeed, most of us have had people draw exactly the wrong conclusion about our meaning by taking our remarks out of context on no few occasions.

One might think that context is always obvious, but it isn’t. When we overhear only part of a discussion, for example, we may misconstrue the context. And when we have a deficient knowledge of a subject, we will miss important contextual clues as to the meaning of what is being said. The various Biblical books have contexts rooted in historical circumstances, customs, situations, and even attitudes that most of us know very little about. Some books can even depend on contexts established in others.

The case is similar but even more complex with genre. For example, when we read an historical novel, we know that the author intends what he writes to be true to the setting in a general sense, but we don’t expect every action of every character to be factually correct, and we don’t expect the dialogue to be a series of actual quotes from real historical documents. We don’t question the honesty of the author because some of the material is invented. The culture we’ve been formed in enables us to understand what the historical novel intends to communicate almost instinctively, without giving it much thought.

In the same way, ancient peoples had their own genres which they understood. They knew how to extract the intended truth from a given text based on its genre, whether it was poetic song (as in *Psalms*), apocalyptic (which uses dramatic images and symbols, as in *Daniel* or *Revelation*), or any other form. We may not easily understand or even recognize some of these genres today.

**Why Should We Care What the Bible Says?**

As if all this is not bad enough, after we’ve settled what “the Bible says”, we are faced with an even deeper problem: Why should we care? A book cannot testify to its own
truth, or we’d all be Mormons. The Fundamentalist may take Scripture for granted as the
Word of God, but he doesn’t know how he knows this. Indeed, how could he know it?
Without evidence, it is merely part of his cultural conditioning or an option to which he
prefers to cling. What basis can he find for his faith?

The Old Testament comes down to us through Jewish tradition, but even the Jews
disagreed on which of their sacred books were divinely inspired. The Palestinian Jews
accepted a shorter list than did the Alexandrian Jews. The list of books accepted by both
groups eventually came to be known as protocanonical, and the remaining books came to
be called deuterocanonical. Catholics accept both as canonical today, but Protestants
generally reject the deuterocanonical books. In any case, it is at best difficult to see why
Christians should take any Jewish tradition as the sole determinant of their own
canonical books.

With the New Testament, of course, there was no such tradition. What about the Shepherd of Hermas, a book of visions written in the second century which was highly
regarded by many early Christians and included on some early canonical lists? What
about the Infancy Gospel of James, also written in the second century? Or the Epistle of
Clement, the third successor of Peter, written while St. John was still alive, and widely
regarded as inspired for a time? These books are now called pseudepigraphical by
Protestants and apocryphal by Catholics. How do we know that the gospels of Matthew,
Mark, Luke and John are inspired, but the gospel of James is not? Indeed, how do we
know God was involved in any of these books at all?

**Order out of Chaos**

It is not my intention to cast doubt on the inspiration of Scripture, but only to show how
thin is the ice under the feet of those who would claim to tell the Catholic Church what
“the Bible says”. By their own lights, how do they know, and why should we care? Let it
suffice for now to raise these issues and reflect on what they mean. But don’t give up. In
next week’s sequel, I’ll show how Scripture works—in the heart of the Church.
Scripture in the Church: Community and Authority

September 06, 2005

In my last column I explained the immense difficulties which plague Scriptural interpretation when the Bible is considered in a vacuum. So great are these difficulties that, with only the text to go by, it is impossible to know whether the Bible is even the inspired word of God. Thus when proponents of *sola Scriptura* attempt to correct the Church by proclaiming what “the Bible says”, they are standing on quicksand. But if this is so, how can we ever benefit from Scripture?

Community of Revelation

The answer lies in the fact that salvation history proceeds primarily through the formation of communities. It is God’s chosen method to effect salvation by forming communities around His Revelation, communities which must accept His precepts as part of a covenant by which He will be their God. This process began under the Old Covenant with the community of the Jews. It continued under the New Covenant with the community of those who accept God’s Son as the Messiah.

In ancient Israel, the community preserved certain writings which it believed were inspired by God as part of His care for His people. Although there were some variations in the list of sacred books among Jews in various regions, it was nonetheless through the ongoing life of the community that each new generation learned that a sacred repository existed and what (more or less) it included. Of course, the community also preserved and communicated much more than these sacred texts, such as prayers, liturgy, customs, teachings, social norms and other practices—in a word, tradition. But our focus here is on Scripture.

With the advent of Christianity, this process reached a new stage. The Christian community also had books, chiefly those of apostolic origin, which it regarded as inspired by the Holy Spirit. These texts were one of the ways Jesus fulfilled His promise not to leave his followers orphans. Again, it was through the community that each new generation received an understanding of the nature and identity of these sacred writings. And again, there were some disagreements over the exact scope of the books which
made up the inspired rule, or canon, of Scripture.

**Evidence for Divine Inspiration**

The community’s preservation of the knowledge of God’s saving acts provides the basis for our conviction that there are inspired texts. The community is a living link back to those who first received these sacred books. But immediately two questions arise. On the one hand, did the early community have sufficient reason to regard Scripture as divinely inspired? On the other, how is it possible to resolve subsequent disagreements about which books are inspired and what they mean?

The first question is addressed by observing the conditions under which the texts were received. Under the Old Covenant, God proved that He was at work by performing remarkable signs showing His superiority over all other gods. In a long process, most notably during the exodus, God demonstrated His power in increasingly public ways as He formed a community faithful to Himself. In the midst of these signs God gave Israel the Law, established the priesthood and sent the prophets. Moses and other key figures became the authors or subjects of books which were understood to be inspired in this context, and the priesthood preserved the texts.

Again, this process culminated in the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of Christianity. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and revealed God as three Persons. His mission was validated by public miracles, ultimately by His own Resurrection from the dead. He too used the miracles to form a community. He recruited followers, including apostles who were commissioned to carry on after His return to the Father. These apostles and their close collaborators left various writings which the community understood to be inspired. Like the Jews, the early Christians had powerful reasons for accepting these texts.

**The Need for Authority**

The second question hinges on the regrettable fact that the voice of the community has not always been unanimous. Christian memories, teachings, prayers and liturgy, customs and practices, new reflections and later developed ideas—all have been passed down from generation to generation in a tradition which is marred by this lack of perfect unanimity. Sometimes the list of inspired books has been disputed, and there have always been disagreements over their interpretation. For this precise reason, God has always preserved and protected both His revelation and the community He has formed around it by vesting precise authority in specific men.

God formed the Jews through authority conferred upon Abraham, Moses, the
priesthood, the prophets and later the kings as represented by David and his line. There was in the Old Covenant a threefold authority of priest, prophet and king which ideally worked together to keep the community pure in its fidelity to God’s will, correcting abuses and rejecting false ideas. Similarly but even more directly, God formed the Christian community through Jesus Christ (God incarnate as a man), who combined in Himself the offices of priest, prophet and king. Jesus in turn conferred authority on his apostles and especially on Peter.

Indeed, the early community knew full well that Christ told His apostles “He who hears you hears me” even before this was written down (for Christ did not write it). The community also knew that He had built his Church on Peter, prayed for Peter so that Peter could confirm the other apostles in the true Faith, and commissioned Peter to tend His flock. (Later, a few of the many things Christ had said on this point were written down in Matthew 16:18, Luke 22:31 and John 21:15-17.) This knowledge of Christ’s teaching explains why the early community accepted the authority of the apostles and Peter even before the New Testament books were written, and why the same community accepted the authority of their successors.

Through this Church authority, God continues to purify His community, increasing its understanding of the truth, and correcting its errors. The ideas and practices preserved in Christian tradition which are recognized by Church authority as authentic form sacred Tradition, itself a font of Truth. Similarly, those “scriptures” which have been authoritatively identified as inspired constitute sacred Scripture. In fact, as confusion on this point grew during the first few Christian centuries, Pope Innocent I wrote to Bishop Exuperius of Toulouse in 405 to provide a complete list of canonical books. This list was later confirmed by other popes and councils, including the Council of Trent when the Protestants raised new doubts.

**Scripture Now Secure**

Perhaps God could have arranged things otherwise, but such was His plan. Having received the sacred books through the Church under the authority of Peter and his successors—and only in this way—we have an adequate basis for accepting Scripture as inspired and for beginning to read it properly. But Scripture is secure only in the heart of the Church, and we really do need to read it properly rather than twist it to our destruction, as St. Peter warns. The final installment of this series will explain how this is done.
It’s the Church’s Bible

May 05, 2006

In a recent issue of *First Things* editor Richard John Neuhaus criticized the New American Bible and commented on some problems plaguing modern Biblical translations in general. One of the contributors to the revised NAB wrote in to defend the scholarship of the translators. Fr. Neuhaus replied that the Bible is “the Church’s Bible, not the Bible of the academic guild.” What can this possibly mean?

**Determining Meaning**

One of the examples Fr. Neuhaus used was Genesis 1:1-3. What has been traditionally rendered as “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” has recently been changed to “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,” which fails to capture the full force of the Christian understanding of “the beginning”. Of course, this is not so much a quarrel over the translation of a particular verse as over a trend. For example, we see a similar loss of force in the Christian understanding of Psalm 23:6. In this verse, “I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” becomes “I will dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.”

Richard J. Clifford, SJ of the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, the defender of the NAB in this instance, argues that scholars rightly based their new Genesis translation on such things as “the phraseology of comparable Near Eastern cosmogonies, and the Masoretic vocalization” of the text. He further notes that at the time of the psalms, Israel “had no belief in life after death in a modern sense”, and one cannot push later interpretations onto early texts. “Tradition,” says Fr. Clifford, “should not determine biblical translation.” This seems quite sound.

**A Unique Text**

But is it really? It is certainly true that a translator ought not to impose on the text a meaning that it cannot bear, no matter what his theological presuppositions lead him to prefer the text should say. But when the language used can admit of a variety of interpretations, or when the meaning simply isn’t completely clear, translators face an unusual challenge with Scripture. The challenge is to remember that the Holy Spirit is the primary author. It is, therefore, the Holy Spirit’s mind the translator must ultimately
try to read, not the mind of the human agent who drafted the text.

With apologies to Fr. Clifford, tradition can and must affect how Scripture is translated. Tradition is reflective of Faith which, in turn, is reflective of the mind of the Holy Spirit. Knowing more about the truths the Holy Spirit wishes to convey than did the original human authors of the Old Testament, the Church sometimes comes to see a particular fullness of meaning in a Scriptural verse which a good translator is bound to respect. In other words, the role of the translator is not to do his best to return us to the understanding of reality held by the human agent who penned each ancient book. Rather, the translator must attempt to translate in such a manner that the greatest possible range of meaning inspired by the Holy Spirit is conveyed.

This is a daunting but not an impossible task. It is possible precisely because “it is the Church’s Bible, not the Bible of the academic guild.” In other words, what may sound to some like petulance on the part of Fr. Neuhaus is not petulance at all. It is, in fact, the sine qua non of Biblical translation. Without this precise attitude, the Bible becomes just another book, one of a great many interesting products of the human mind.

For Years to Come

Take the translation of Psalm 23:6. The verse employs a Hebraism perhaps best translated as “for length of days”, which is not an idiomatic expression in English, though it can be (and has been) translated that way, with perhaps not unsatisfactory results. Now, among many possible choices for translation of this Hebraism, let us consider two: “forever” (the traditional translation) and “for years to come” (in the NAB). Which is better?

Admittedly, the question is not simple. It seems reasonable that the Hebrew refers to a great length of time. But if we consider the sketchy understanding of the after-life in those days, we naturally think a little harder about whether it really means “forever”. Given the Hebrew propensity for poetic intensification or even hyperbole, however, we can see that “forever” might well have been understood at the time in an accommodated sense, even without a full theological understanding. Thus, for example, on our wedding days we all expect to be married forever. Even, perhaps, forever and a day.

What to do? Well, the Church knows something about the mind of the Holy Spirit that the human author didn’t know. The Church knows that we will ultimately dwell in the house of the Lord forever in the fullest eschatological sense, and the Church also knows that this is one of several layers of meaning the Holy Spirit intended in this text. Because the Church knows this, as reflected in the tradition of her interpretation, it is the translator’s job to select a phraseology which is faithful to the literal text without
unnecessarily obscuring this richer meaning.

Clearly, then, the translation “for years to come” fails. And it fails precisely because it divorces Scripture from the mind of the Holy Spirit, insisting instead that its meaning is exhausted by the conceptual limitations of the human agent who penned the words in a particular time and place. The translation “forever”, in contrast, leaves the text open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to whom all the sequential stages of Revelation are equally present. And it does this without imposing upon the actual words a meaning which they cannot bear.

**The Church’s Bible**

I’ve emphasized several times in other contexts (with no originality whatsoever) that the Bible must be interpreted in the heart of the Church. Because no language, especially no ancient language, can be translated into another with exact correspondence, translation is in part an act of interpretation. The richer the text, the more difficult it becomes to convey in the new language all the shades of meaning present in the original. This task becomes even more difficult when the translator himself, perhaps inevitably, does not perceive all the meanings the text contains.

In dealing with the works of a living author, of course, the translator should consult the author. But this is also possible with Scripture, for which purpose there is only one way to consult the Holy Spirit. Now we understand what Fr. Neuhaus means when he says: “It’s the Church’s Bible.”
The Coming of Jesus Christ in the Flesh

January 18, 2010

I’ve recently been exchanging emails with a correspondent who inquired into the Catholic Church’s official stand on the possibility of salvation for Muslims. I explained that the Church teaches that any person who, responding to the grace he has been given, seeks to know God and do His will (or if he has no opportunity to know God, at least seeks to know the good and to do it) may be saved. Obviously, access to all the goods given to us for our salvation through Christ and His Church constitutes a sort of high road to union with God. Yet the possibility of salvation remains for those who do not know Christ and the Church.

But let us suppose, he replied, that we have a Muslim who seeks to know God and do His will but denies that Jesus Christ the Son of God has come in the Flesh. Can he be saved? I answered that, if we suppose that the Muslim in question has had no real chance to know Christ and so erroneously accepts what he has been taught, namely that Christ was a prophet and not God Incarnate, then on that account his salvation is not impossible. But my correspondent could not accept this because a number of passages in Scripture assert that those who refuse to acknowledge “the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” are to be rejected; they are even described as antichrists.

So I tried to take him in a bit deeper. He must not assume, I said, that he understands perfectly the meaning of various passages of Scripture, but must look to the Church for guidance so that he might understand properly. All that the Holy Spirit has inspired both in Scripture and Tradition must be taken as a unity, and each point or passage must be understood in such a way that the truth of all is upheld. Christ, I reminded him, built His Church on Peter, gave Peter the power of the keys, and prayed for Peter that his faith might not fail, precisely so that he could confirm the faith of his brethren. This Petrine power was recognized by the first generation of Christians to be an essential power of the Church, passed on to Peter’s successors, and exercised through what we call the Magisterium, the Church’s teaching authority.

Here, however, he has thus far missed my point. He responded that he can hardly accept the Church’s authority when there is such an obvious difference between what
that authority teaches and the clear sense of Scripture, especially on a point so central as the necessity of Christ to salvation. He reminded me of Acts 4:12 which, referring to Jesus Christ, states: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

But now we are starting to go around in circles, for I had stated clearly from the outset that my answers did not mean the Catholic Church doubted the absolute necessity of Christ for salvation. Before tackling these questions, I had urged him to read *Dominus Iesus*, the document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000 “On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.”

The question we were discussing was not whether Christ is essential for salvation. That goes without saying. Rather, the question was what steps must a person follow, in the wake of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, to appropriate Christ’s saving work to himself, so that the work of Christ actually becomes efficacious in his own particular case. That is a very different question, and the answer does not depend on saying “Lord, Lord”, for not all who say it will enter the Kingdom Heaven (Mt 7:21). Rather it depends—as suggested by the parable of the talents—on how we respond to whatever grace we are given, whether we ignore it or multiply it through love.

Unfortunately, the Protestant typically attempts to discern the “rules” of salvation by reading Scripture as if it is an unusually reliable contemporary newspaper, perfectly clear in the context of our own contemporary concerns. But, in fact, when Scripture warns against those who deny the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh, it is not talking about pagans or others who have not yet had the benefit of the light of Christian teaching. The reference is rather to members of the Christian community who became Gnostics and began teaching a different way of salvation than what the apostles had handed on.

Consider the key passage in 2 John:

> For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is a deceiver and the antichrist. Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. (vv. 7-9)

Those who abandoned apostolic teaching for Gnosticism claimed that a certain secret knowledge of Jesus Christ was essential for salvation and that, once one had this knowledge, it did not matter whether one obeyed Christ’s commandments, whether one
acted out of love. Part of this so-called secret knowledge was the teaching that Christ did not become the Son of God until His baptism and He ceased to be God’s son before His Passion. In other words, the defining characteristic of the Gnostics was their refusal—after having initially embraced the Faith—to “acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh”, that is, to acknowledge the Incarnation, the inseparability of the divine nature and the human nature in the one Christ. John is warning against Christians who subvert the Gospel.

And what is John’s warning? Abide, he says, in the doctrine of Christ. Remain steadfast in the apostolic teaching, the Faith that was given to you not from clever and learned writings but by the authority of the apostles themselves. And here John includes himself, describing himself in the opening verse as “the elder”, the one in authority over them. And by this apostolic authority, what does he teach?

And now I beg you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we follow his commandments; this is the commandment, as you have heard from the beginning, that you follow love. (vv. 5-6)

Thus the very passage which my correspondent thought challenged the authority of the Church is actually part of an argument in favor of both apostolic authority and the need to hold fast to the law of love. In closing, then, let me restate that argument: It is not possible to understand the Gospel apart from the apostolic authority of the Church.
Conscience and Authority: The Protestant Dilemma

October 24, 2007

After writing last week’s column (Authority and the Logic of Revelation) I was distressed to read Gilbert Meilaender’s article in the November issue of First Things, entitled “Conscience and Authority”. Meilaender is a learned and deeply religious man who teaches Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University. But Meilaender is also a Lutheran and, on Protestant grounds, the task of explicating the relationship between conscience and authority is not merely Herculean. It is impossible.

The Protestant Solution

The article looks squarely at three imperatives which Meilaender takes as givens: the need for the “Church” to speak with authority in order to preserve and transmit Christianity; the need for the individual Christian to respect that authority; and the need for the Christian to form his conscience ultimately through a direct personal relationship with God. As the author rightly notes, these givens necessarily create a tension which cannot be completely resolved. After struggling for some 5,000 words to maintain both the authority of the “Church” and the primacy of the individual conscience, Meilaender concludes that when the individual Christian feels bound to disagree with the “Church”, he may do so only while acknowledging that he cannot claim “Church” authority for his decision.

In one sense, the author has struck a blow for integrity. For example, he would have no patience with Catholics who use their authority as representatives of the Church to teach something the Church does not approve. But in the end he strikes this blow purely on the level of sociology. His case and his conclusion for the “Church” are indistinguishable from any intelligent case and conclusion for the State, or for any other body claiming human authority in the context of a tradition. Unfortunately, this leaves an enormous hole in the argument. For it is perfectly permissible for us to work for change in the principles of any organization. Whether we can ultimately claim the authority of that organization for our ideas depends solely on whether we win an internal battle for control. We ought not to dishonestly claim any organization’s authority to promote

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something contrary to its official position, but we are perfectly free to attempt to influence the organization to change its position. If we succeed, we can then claim its authority for promoting what we had all along asserted it should say.

The reason Gilbert Meilaender cannot do any better than this is that Lutherans, like all Protestants, lack a coherent idea of “Church” (hence my quotation marks). Not only do they have no way to guarantee the rightness of private conscience, but neither can they establish the rightness of the “Church”. Because Protestantism has no adequate notion of “Church”, the Catholic Church (without quotes) refers to Protestant groups as sects. In fact, Protestantism consists of multiple ad hoc groups of individual believers who attempt, sociologically, to rally around Scripture in the context of what they individually conceive of as the Christian tradition. In this way, they attempt to retain something of a corporate Christian core, with many bodies pointing in various imperfect ways to a central idea. The “Church” is either a specifically structured human organization representing this tradition or the entire body of Christians taken in their connection to it. Meilaender is clearly right to recognize that, to be intelligible, Christianity must have a corporate identity. He is therefore certainly right to face the inevitable puzzle of “Church” authority. But he will be incapable of solving this puzzle until he understands how Christianity’s corporate core is constituted.

**Conscience Formed by Authority**

As I have said several times in the past, the only solution is to recognize the force of Newman’s famous dictum that there cannot be so great a difference in dispensation between the first Christians and ourselves as that they had a living infallible authority and we have none. In other words, any attempt to conceive of Christianity without a living infallible authority is precisely the same as saying that there have been three covenants: the Old Covenant before Christ; the New Covenant when Christ was alive; and the Newer and More Confused Covenant thereafter. The lack of a living infallible authority on earth after Christ’s Resurrection is a radical change in the New Covenant. It is, in fact, a deal breaker.

Fortunately for us, the deal wasn’t broken. Unlike all other authorities, the Church’s claim to authority is based on a divine guarantee. The guarantee consists in the historical facts that Christ gave Peter the power of the keys and the power to bind and loose; that Christ prayed for him that he might not defect in faith; and that Christ commissioned him to feed his sheep and confirm his brethren. The early Church consistently acted on the understanding that this power was conveyed to Peter’s successors in the office of the papacy. Indeed, as Newman and many others have pointed out, the contrary belief breaks
the deal: it is ecclesiologically untenable. For this reason popes are called vicars of Christ. Christians are obliged to believe what these vicars of Christ have formally taught and do continue to teach about faith and morals, and in precisely this measure Christians are guaranteed that what they are taught will be certainly and unquestionably true.

Thus the resolution between conscience and authority in the Church is achieved by forming one’s conscience according to the Church’s teaching authority without exception. The only possible conflict of conscience with the Church occurs when one must resist particular fallible churchmen in order to defend what the Magisterium requires Catholics to believe. Such a conflict is not at all a crisis. The conscience must always be formed by the Church’s Magisterium; only then may it be properly pitted against the sinful or unfaithful demands of Catholics in positions of authority who fail to respect that same Magisterium. One fights such a battle of conscience, in the rare cases when it occurs directly, precisely by claiming the authority of the Church. Magisterial authority does not weaken the Catholic conscience; it strengthens, perfects and guarantees it.

**Personal Decisions**

If a matter of dispute has not yet been settled, then there is no authority to be claimed, and so there is no breach of Church unity in going one way or the other. There was a time when good Catholics could disagree over whether Mary was immaculately conceived. Thomas Aquinas himself chose the wrong side. But now that the Church’s Magisterium has made the matter clear, Catholics form their beliefs according to this assured doctrine. The same is true of moral teachings. Once the Church has made it clear, for example, that *in vitro* fertilization is immoral, we are guilty of improperly forming our consciences if we elevate any personal concerns, contrary authorities, or prayer experiences above that single unassailable fact. For those successfully following the divine scheme, a true crisis of conscience is always the result of misunderstanding or sin. It may happen, but it never happens necessarily. Such a crisis cannot arise, as it does for Meilaender, as a result of a flaw in God’s design.

In this we see that the relationship of personal conscience to the Church is fundamentally unlike its relationship to any other authority. The Church has been precisely and deliberately constituted so that her teaching authority provides the sole certain path to eternal life. Her authority is not merely a handy guide to be measured in the crunch against what we learn from other sources or from our own private relationship with God. Honesty about the source of our opinions is laudable. Indeed, it is sadly lacking in our own age. But sincerity, however refreshing, cannot justify the opinions.
This is why I was distressed when I read Gilbert Meilaender’s article. Not because of any inclination to attack Meilaender: to the contrary, I both respect and appreciate his consistently deep and intelligent commitment to Christian witness. Even in this current effort, he has much to say about what it means to accept authority. But on the title question of his article he was defeated before he began. Without a Catholic understanding of the Church, the problem of conscience and authority cannot be solved.
Private Judgment and the Rise of Relativism

May 10, 2011

To round out my recent discussion of Protestantism and private judgment, I think it will be helpful to say something about the strong connection between Protestantism and the rise of relativism. There are several important historical factors which led over time to what Pope Benedict XVI has called the “dictatorship of relativism”, and Protestantism unfortunately has played a leading role.

Relativism has grown steadily over several centuries from the skepticism about spiritual and moral truths that emerged in the 17th century. There were two major developments in the sixteenth century which led directly to this skepticism. The first was the cataclysmic division of Christianity resulting from the Protestant Revolt. The splintering of Christianity was sufficiently acrimonious, leading even to religious wars in the 17th century, that many people naturally concluded Christianity could not be a firm basis for public life, and that it would be better if individual Christians each went their own private way, without conflict. In addition, Christian disagreement about God and His relationship with man—including the demands He makes on our moral conduct—led to a predictable reaction: If even leading Christians cannot agree about Truth, then it seems that Truth is simply unknowable.

The second development was the extensive geographical exploration, and the resulting cultural discoveries, which took place during the same period. It quickly became obvious to Europeans that there were many diverse peoples around the world and that they were capable of forming even highly developed cultures (consider China) without benefit of Christianity. Indeed, in order to foster respect for the various peoples among whom they worked, missionaries often sent back glowing reports about the qualities and accomplishments of these peoples. This sparked a sort of cultural relativism, or the idea that different arrangements and social mores are perfectly workable for different people at different times and places.

All of this was exacerbated by the fact that most people don’t make suitable distinctions among different forms of knowledge and different cultural patterns. When key elements of their basic worldview are undermined, many people begin to doubt
everything in that worldview. In subsequent centuries, the rise of empirical science (which had its roots in Christian convictions about an ordered universe) created a welcome emphasis on knowledge about what we can see and touch as opposed to constant quarrels over the unseen. This emphasis bore significant tangible fruit, leading to a doctrine of human progress without spiritual absolutes.

Throughout the succeeding centuries, it was not helpful that Protestantism was so influential in the leading nations and cultures of the dominant West, for the Protestant doctrine of private judgment is in itself a precursor of full-fledged relativism. At first, of course, this doctrine that the Holy Spirit leads each Christian privately into all truth brought its proponents absolute certainty in their beliefs. But against this certainty stood the obvious fact that private judgment led different people, with equally credible claims as good Christians, to different conclusions; and also the obvious result that Protestantism spread through what is called *separatism*, with one congregation after another splitting off of the family tree to pursue its own distinct understanding of the Truth.

In other words the principle of private judgment is completely incompatible with the idea that truth is one. This creates an unbearable intellectual and psychological tension. The initial outcome may well be an insular conviction that everybody else is wrong, but the secondary outcome, for slightly more reflective people, is the growing suspicion that there is something terribly wrong with our method of knowing, or that spiritual principles and moral values cannot be known, or that there is simply no such thing as absolute and unitary spiritual and moral truth. The inevitable cultural outcome is a pressing need to live as if what seems true to me will work fine for me, and what seems true to you will work fine for you. This is practical relativism.

Where practical relativism leads, true relativism is almost certain to follow, characterized by a deep psychological refusal to acknowledge or consider the question of truth, along with an insistence that the values a person should hold are whatever values make him comfortable with himself. In our day, this unbridled relativism has been transformed into subservience to the reigning group values, but that is a subject for another discussion. Suffice it to say that, given the mysterious ways in which cultural trends and even mere fashions shape our lives when we have nothing else to shape them, all of this tends to degenerate into the dictatorship of relativism that Benedict has so persuasively described.

My only point here is to trace the clear connection between the Protestant principle of private judgment and the rise of relativism. Interestingly, the war between evangelicals and mainline Protestant churches demonstrates that Protestants who have
not yet spun off into relativism generally abhor it. But this war is very different from that between orthodox Catholics and Modernists. In the Catholic case, the orthodox are fighting against a corruption of their faith by the relativism of the surrounding culture. In the Protestant case, the conservative Christian is attempting to stave off an inevitable development in his own fundamentally irrational intellectual and moral culture.

Relativism follows from private judgment as night follows day. Private judgment allows no way of apprehending the unity of Truth; relativism simply ceases to seek what so obviously cannot be found.
How Do We Know Our Faith?

May 02, 2011

This is hard for us. Every day we come across people who make the wildest assertions about what is true and not true with respect to faith in God, Jesus Christ, Mary, the Saints, Christian morality, hell, heaven and so much more. Many people sound absolutely certain about these things, one way or another. And yet in reality most of them are not in the slightest position to know.

Let me take a quick case in point. I had message through our contact form yesterday, right after the beatification of John Paul II, asking how Catholics could call people holy, other than God. The subject of the message was “beautification”, which suggested a writer who knew very little about the Catholic Church, and probably had little formal education in theology. Toward the end of her message, it became clear that she mainly wanted to argue. Still, this is an instructive case in the classic Protestant mold. Here is what she wrote:

I would like to know why Catholics look at the pope as someone who is Holy. Only God is holy. Jesus is the only person who ever lived who was perfect and did not sin. He is the only one who should be looked upon as being holy, not a human person. Something is wrong here. Mary was not holy either. She needed to be saved just like we do. She was blessed among women but she was still a sinner. The Catholic religion is in trouble because you put the pope and other religious leaders above God.

There are a great many misunderstandings in this brief paragraph, yet the writer is absolutely certain she knows the truth of these matters. Despite the argumentative tone, I decided to answer. I explained that she was certainly correct that the only One who is absolutely holy, absolutely perfect, is God, but that she appeared to be confused about Catholic teaching on several other points. I tried to explain Catholic teaching with some Scriptural references, because I thought that might make things easier to accept.

Specific Issues

For example, I explained that Mary was given special gifts by God (she was “highly favored” or “full of grace” (Lk 1:28)) so that she would be a fitting mother for His Son.
She cooperated completely with God’s will for her (“Let it be done unto me according to Your word” (Lk 1:38)), and so she avoided actual personal sin. She is, as Wordsworth so nicely put it, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast.” So Mary was not a sinner. In fact, she was immaculately conceived, preserved from all sin by an advance application of the merits of Jesus Christ. I noted that theologians called this a “preservative” redemption.

I also explained that those who are declared saints by the Catholic Church are simply declared to have achieved a high level of union with God and conformity to His will, such that they are certainly with Him in heaven. This does not mean they were perfect, and many saints were, earlier in their lives, guilty of significant sins. But they repented and gradually achieved the holiness God desired of them (“Be ye therefore perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48)).

Finally, I explained that popes may be holy or not. Some have been significant sinners. Some have been great saints. Most have been good Christians, though not necessarily especially holy. But what Popes do have is authority. They carry on in the Church the authority given by Christ to St. Peter (“Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church” (Mt 16:18). “I have prayed for you that you might not defect in Faith, and you, when you have turned back [i.e., after Peter repented of his denials of Christ and was strengthened by the Holy Spirit], must confirm your brethren” (Lk 22:32). “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep” (Jn 21:15-17). “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19.).

For this reason, I concluded, it is ultimately the successors of Peter, the popes, who are the sure guide for the Church, preserving it from teaching any error, ensuring the sacredness and power of its sacraments, stimulating its members to holiness, despite their many sins—for the Church is at once a group of sinners in desperate need of Christ and the bride of Christ “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph 5:27).

You can probably guess from the tone of the original “inquiry” that this response did not result in immediate agreement. Instead, today I received the following:

Yes she did get pregnant the first time supernaturally by the Holy Spirit. Nowhere in the Bible does it say she was not a sinner. Show me where it says that. Read Luke 1:46-47. And Mary said “My soul glorifies in the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” She says “in God my Savior” meaning she also needed a Savior; she was not perfect, she was a sinner too. You do know that once she got married she did have sex and have other children.

Jesus is the only person who ever lived without sin. Read Hebrews 4:15. The Bible
also says it is a sin to worship idols and other gods. When people pray to Mary that is exactly what they are doing—idol worship. Mary is to be respected and she is blessed among women, but that is it.

The Root of the Problem
Now this response brings us to a critical point. The primary issue here is not differing assertions about Mary. The primary issue is this: How do we know? My correspondent makes two enormous epistemological assumptions: First, that everything we can know about these matters is in Scripture (“Nowhere in the Bible does it say she was not a sinner”). Second, whatever Scripture says it says plainly and obviously (“Show me where it says that…. Read Luke 1:46-47… Read Hebrews 4:15”). Yet when we follow her references, we see that they are insufficient to prove her case. And we might well ask, how can mere flesh and blood assert a definitive meaning for a passage of Scripture anyway?

I tried to get at these problems in a follow-up reply:

Yes, Mary needed a savior. I had already said that she was redeemed preservatively. In God’s plan, she was apparently conceived without original sin by virtue of the merits of Christ’s redemption (for God, of course, is outside time). But the angel addressed her as “full of grace”, and during her life on earth she conformed her will perfectly to God’s, and did not commit any actual sins. This is the unbroken Christian tradition from the first century, not significantly questioned until after the Protestant revolt in the 16th century.

As you can see, this second response attempts to address both epistemological concerns: (1) It is not as easy to interpret Scripture as we may think; and (2) There is something other than Scripture necessary here. I also addressed her classic Protestant misunderstanding of Catholic devotion to Mary and the saints, a devotion which is fundamentally intercessory in character, and I explained why this has nothing to do with idolatry. But it is the “something other than Scripture necessary” which is the crux of the entire discussion.

Therefore, I explained that there is also an unbroken Christian tradition concerning the fact that Mary did not have children other than Jesus. It is certainly not fitting—and, indeed, probably ridiculous on its face—to assume that a woman who was in effect the spouse of the Holy Spirit in conceiving the Christ would ever have had relations with a
man, or that she had children by Joseph or anyone else right along with Jesus. And of course we know that she did not do this. First, she had a vow of virginity, which is why she asked the angel, “How can this be since I do not know man?” (Lk 1:34). More important, we have once again the unanimous and unbroken (until very late) Christian tradition that Jesus was her only son.

The value of this tradition is twofold. It tells us what the earliest Christians understood Scripture to mean, and it provides an additional source of revealed truth in its own right, in fact one that is prior to Scripture itself.

A Question for All of Us

It is at this point that I must direct the discussion away from this one correspondent, so that we might all take seriously the need to consider very carefully the means by which we know what God has really revealed. This particular lady, like millions of other people, is absolutely certain that she knows, yet she is really simply repeating what she has been taught by others. On examination, her arguments are completely circular; they reveal no basis for secure knowledge whatsoever. They reveal instead assumptions about Scripture and about her own reading of Scripture, assumptions so baseless that they can never result in a secure grasp of Truth. She believes it is self-evident that Scripture contains all of these truths, when it is not self-evident at all; and she believes the truths themselves are self-evident as expressed therein, even when her citations could be (and have been) read a hundred different ways.

So now we have to ask ourselves how it is that we know our Faith. We cannot know everything from Scripture, both because people disagree in their interpretations and because even Scripture itself says that not everything is in in Scripture (to take but one example, John says this specifically in his Gospel, chapter 21, verse 25). But the even deeper question is how we know what alleged Scriptural books are truly inspired. Why accept Matthew, Mark, Luke and John but not the early alleged gospels of Peter or of Judas?

It is only by the authority of the Church, as manifested in her judgments and approved traditions, that we even know what constitutes the inspired Word of God. No Protestant would know this apart from the tradition and usage of the early Christian community as passed on and affirmed by that community’s authoritative leaders, the early bishops, councils and popes. And it is from these same traditions and this same authority that we learn definitively that Revelation comes to us from two sources, Scripture and Tradition; that Christ established a Church with authority to hand on this Revelation free from error; and that He gave a special power to secure that authority to
Peter and his successors, and to the apostles and their successors in union with him. Apart from this, everything is mere assumption and mere assertion, which gets us nowhere at all.

The problem of how we know our Faith is not, of course, limited to Christians. Those who adhere to other religious faiths, or even faith in nothing supernatural at all, have no way of knowing the truth of their respective convictions apart from discovering some revelation. The reason is simple: Supernatural truths cannot be learned independently by human persons, who are capable of learning only natural things through their own powers. Moreover, to claim legitimacy as a true revelation, the body of knowledge in question must be delivered with attendant signs and wonders such as can make its divine origin unmistakable. (When, I wonder, will the world see that this immediately eliminates the claims of every religion but Judaism and Christianity?)

And once we have found that Revelation, we have a further problem, the problem I have been discussing here. Are truths that go beyond nature likely to be self-evident and simple to understand for those who are purely natural, with all their attendant weaknesses? Will there not be, inevitably, countless misunderstandings, arguments and conflicts over what the Revelation means, how it is to be understood? I submit that Revelation is totally unworkable unless an obvious authority is established by God Himself to guarantee and interpret that Revelation over time, for succeeding generations. The great Blessed John Henry Newman, as I have said so many times, had it right when he argued this point. There simply cannot be so great a difference in dispensation between the first Christians and ourselves, Newman said, such that they had a living and infallible guide and we have not. Such a dramatic shift is unworkable. It is, in truth, unthinkable.

**Getting Serious**

I am in danger of writing these things, I suppose, for the thousandth time. But we absolutely must carefully consider how we know our faith, whatever our faith may be. Taking it for granted and thus insisting on its obvious truth is not nearly enough. There must be a Revelation which we can reasonably certify as a Revelation, and which further includes within it provision for a living, protective and interpretive authority. This is, in fact, what we mean when we refer to the “authority principle” which is ultimately unique to Catholicism. Anything else is sheer presumption; under any other kind of system, we cannot escape talking through our hats. It follows that if we cannot identify such a system, we have no warrant to assert what we cannot possibly know.

As human persons, of course, we have a terrible propensity to take things for granted.
Once we take them for granted, we find it difficult to see how anyone else could question our convictions, for they appear to us to be obvious and certain. What I said at the outset is true: This is very, very hard for us. But in matters which concern God, do we not owe a little more effort? We ought to begin that effort by asking how we know the things we claim to believe, whether they arise from traditional sources or modern nihilism. The question can be frightening; it can disrupt our relationships and destroy our sense of security. Even among Catholics it can challenge our commitments and incur the wrath of the lukewarm. But to fail to ask is to accept mediocrity. To fail to ask is to deny what it means to be fully human. And to fail to ask is to turn our backs on God.

We are not, I hope, mere parrots. When it comes to God questions, I ask my correspondent and I ask every reader exactly what I ask myself: How, then, do we know what we claim to know?

**Note:** *This line of thought is continued in The Exegesis of the Reformers: Authority Redux*
The Primacy of Peter

April 14, 2005

The other day my son asked me for some help with a Religion assignment for his 9th grade class. The assignment was to write an essay on papal primacy which showed that the true Church of Christ could be identified by looking for the pope. Not a bad topic at this moment in history!

At age 15, my youngest son has generally concluded that I am pretty ignorant, but this time I had him cold. Of course, I had an unfair advantage: my doctoral dissertation dealt with papal authority. Still, the argument isn’t difficult, so let’s review it briefly here.

First, we establish from the words of Christ and the beliefs of the early Christian community that Christ gave authority over the Church to Peter. This is most easily done by citing Matthew 16:18-19 where Our Lord tells Peter he is the rock upon which Christ will build His Church, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail; and He promises to give him the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, including the power to bind and loose. One might also cite Luke 22:31-32 where Our Lord tells Peter that he has prayed for him that his faith might not fail and that, “when he turned”, he must confirm his brethren. Then, to those who say that Peter lost this power by his denial of Christ, we can point out that Christ’s promises were in the future tense, and were confirmed in fact after the denial, as recounted in John 21:15-17 where Christ gives Peter the threefold injunction to feed His sheep.

There are a variety of ways to go for the second step. I like to use what I call the ecclesiological argument next. In other words, the nature of the Church clearly requires the powers that Peter was given—the keys to the Kingdom, the power to bind and loose, the rectitude to confirm the brethren in Faith, and so on. Moreover, Christ promised to be with his Church until the end of time (Mt 28:18-20). Clearly, if such essential power were to pass out of the Church, it would mean that Christ was no longer with the Church, making his promise a lie. Since this is impossible, and since Our Lord obviously knew that Peter was going to die (and in fact foretold it in John’s gospel), it is obvious that Christ intended Peter to have successors who would carry on his power and his role in the Church.

Third, we turn to history and find exactly what we expect from logic: there are
immediate successors to Peter in Rome who continue to exercise his power, and they are universally accepted by the early Christian community. Thus Linus succeeded Peter, Anacletus succeeded Linus, and Clement succeeded Anacletus. In the mid 90’s, while St. John was still alive, we find Clement exercising power over not only the Roman Church but the Church in Corinth, a clear historical instance of what we have come to call papal authority. Cardinal Newman offers a score of similar historical instances continuing through the fourth century in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, written shortly before his conversion.

Fourth and finally, because the powers essential to keep the faithful true to Christ are vested in Peter and his successors alone, it is immediately clear that only those who accept the authority of these successors (now called popes) can reasonably claim to be united fully to the true Church of Christ. Therefore, we can identify Christ’s Church by looking for the Pope. Of course, all of this can be said infinitely more succinctly in epigrammatic Latin: *Ubi Petrus, ibi ecclesia*.

Where Peter is, there is the Church.
Why Mary Matters

May 02, 2008

A thousand questions can be raised about Mary, the mother of Jesus. We can discuss what it means for her to be full of grace, or why she was immaculately conceived and assumed body and soul into heaven. We can examine her role in our redemption from the virgin birth to her suffering at the foot of the cross. We can meditate on Mary as the model of discipleship and as both symbol and mother of the Church. We can look at Protestant objections to the emphasis Catholics place on Mary. But I think the first question to be answered is broader and more fundamental than any of these: Why does Mary matter?

Theological Precision

Let us start at the intellectual level. There are aspects of the identity of Christ which are protected by Mary’s existence as His mother. In other words, an understanding of Mary’s role is a great aid to Christological precision. Consider the Father’s problem, if we may call it that, in planning to send His only begotten Son to become man and die for our sins. The Son, a Divine Person, had to take on human nature, becoming incarnate as Jesus Christ. Then, throughout his public ministry, His miracles, wisdom and surpassing holiness proclaimed His Divinity. But what was to prevent us from regarding his humanity as merely a phantasm or a charade (as some heretics in the early Christological controversies actually did)? The answer is Mary. God the Son joined a human nature to His Divine nature in Mary’s womb, and was born of a woman, just like ourselves.

But then we come up against original sin, that fallen state of separation from God which each generation inherits because of the disobedience of our first parents. Of course, the Son could have had a miraculous immaculate conception in Mary’s womb, even though it was undoubtedly more fitting that she who bore Him should be sinless. But as the Father clearly wished the Son to inherit His human nature whole and entire from a human mother, it was even more appropriate to ensure that this inheritance could not be questioned on the grounds that Christ’s humanity was fundamentally different from His mother’s. Thus Mary’s Immaculate Conception was a further protection of a proper understanding of the full humanity of Jesus Christ. Mary, though free from any stain of sin, was surely human, and she passed on her sinless nature to Our Lord.

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It is worth noting that Mary’s Assumption further strengthens our understanding. For if Mary was free from original sin, she could not be subject to death as we know it, but only to a sort of falling asleep and translation (as it is called) to the direct presence of God. Such would have been the lot of Adam and Eve had they not sinned, for the violent separation of the soul from the body in death is a consequence of the Fall. Here as everywhere, then, Catholic doctrine remains all of a piece: The Assumption corroborates the Immaculate Conception which corroborates the full humanity of Jesus Christ which corroborates His ability to redeem us by becoming like us in all things except sin.

Male and Female He Created Them

This initial perspective on why Mary matters may seem overly intellectual, but we should never discount the importance of clarity in understanding the actual substance of reality. Life is not a game of mere concepts. Nonetheless, another important perspective on this question is more psychological and perhaps emotional, relating especially to the human differentiation we call sexuality. Recall that in God there is neither male nor female. Apart from the human nature assumed by God the Son, there is no sexuality in the Persons of the Trinity, for they are completely spiritual. But God does contain within Himself every perfection, which means that He has all the perfections (we might call them strengths) which we characterize as feminine and masculine.

Jesus Himself gave a special hint of this when he cried out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Mt 23:37) Such maternal expressions notwithstanding, to take on our nature the eternal Son had to take on maleness or femaleness. Having chosen maleness (for reasons we cannot fully comprehend and which, in any case, go beyond the scope of this essay), He provided us with a means of relating to the Father through particularly male strengths. But what of gentleness, compassion, nurturing, the uniquely feminine aspects of mercy, and the sheer tenacity of maternal love? The answer again is Mary.

Just as the Father wanted the incarnate Son to have a human mother, so did He want her to become ours as well. From the cross, Jesus cried to us again: “Behold your mother!” (Jn 19:27) As a result, that physical and psychological bifurcation and complementarity which so colors all of our relationships was recognized in the work of Redemption, and fitting provision was made for it. Because Mary is so close to her Son in all things, and because He has given her to us as a way of drawing closer to Him, we can now take equal advantage of the feminine strengths. By entering into relationship with both Jesus and Mary, and to some extent with Jesus through Mary, we find more
natural modes of expression for the movements of our hearts, and a richer variety and depth of spiritual delight for our souls.

**Going Beyond Infinity**

This loving human embrace of Mary along with her Son comes very naturally, especially to children. In fact, for this to fail, you have to be carefully taught to be suspicious of it, as happens with many Protestant groups who foolishly believe that Mary is exalted only at the expense of Jesus, when in fact the whole reason for her exaltation is that she was chosen to bring us Christ. We must have a poor appreciation—perhaps even a deep distrust—of Divine providence if we think God has provided so perfect a means only so that we must disdain and avoid it. And this brings us to a third perspective on why Mary is important. She is important because she represents and mirrors the overwhelming generosity of God.

Fr. William Most, in a wonderful book entitled *Our Father’s Plan: God’s Arrangements and Our Response* (published by Trinity Communications during its former print-based life), notes that God could have redeemed us through a simple act of His will, or through an Incarnate Son Who did not suffer, both of which would have had infinite value. So the Father actually goes “beyond infinity”, so to speak, by sending His Son to be born in a stable, and to suffer and die on the Cross. And although God’s plan is necessarily infinite, the Father seems determined to show His overflowing love by adding such finite things to His plan, going “beyond infinity” again and again.

Clearly He also wanted to add Mary’s cooperation to His plan of Redemption. As Vatican II expressed this in *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*:

… in suffering with her Son as He died on the cross, she cooperated in the work of the Savior, in an altogether singular way, by obedience, faith, hope and burning love, to restore supernatural life to souls. As a result, she is our Mother in the order of grace. (#61)

Note that God has arranged this for us out of sheer generosity—not even primarily for Mary’s benefit, but for the benefit of every person who participates in the economy of grace. The Father has given incomparable gifts to Mary precisely because He loves us immeasurably, and will hold absolutely nothing back in His unceasing effort to get us to love Him in return.

Here are three reasons, then, why Mary matters very much indeed. Her unique cooperation with God safeguards our understanding of the identity of her Son; her
femininity complements Our Lord’s masculinity in ways that makes it easier for us to
draw close to God; and she is, if you will, the ultimate detail demonstrating the supreme,
infinitely painstaking fullness of the Father’s love. Justly is Mary called the daughter of
the Father, the mother of the Son, and the spouse of the Holy Spirit. Surely, as
Wordsworth so aptly wrote, she is “our tainted nature’s solitary boast”. But ultimately
Mary matters because she can “hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk 11:28), so that her
“soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk 1:46). In this way, she brought our Father’s plan to
fulfillment, by which He gave her all these gifts not only for her sake, but for ours.
Mary Ever Virgin

September 16, 2008

One day fairly early in my Catholic teaching career, a student raised a question about the importance of Mary’s virginity, and I responded that the doctrine was very important for this reason: “If Mary had sexual relations prior to the birth of Christ, it would call into question Christ’s Divine paternity.” This exchange took place in an apologetics class I used to teach at Christendom College. During the ensuing discussion, some other students wanted to know what the importance of Mary’s virginity was in partu.

What? Oh, it wasn’t the Latin that troubled me. I simply had always focused on the ante partum and post partum virginity of Mary—her virginity before and after the birth of Christ. It had never occurred to me to think about Mary’s virginity during the birth (in partu). The students, who had all completed Christendom’s first-year course in Catholic doctrine, knew precisely what the Church taught, but wondered about its significance. Their apologetics teacher, who lacked the benefit of a systematic Catholic education, sensed the significance, but didn’t recall the fullness of the Church’s teaching.

Fortunately, I did what any good teacher should do. I neither blustered nor starting spinning out my own opinions about what the Church probably taught, or ought to have taught, and why. I said I wanted to look into it a little more, and we’d take it up again in the next class. The incident took place roughly thirty years ago, but I haven’t forgotten what I learned.

The Church teaches that Mary is perpetually virgin, that she retained her virginity before, during and after the birth of Christ, which makes even the physical reality of Christ’s birth in some senses miraculous. The virginity of Mary in both conception and giving birth was at least hinted at in the first chapter of St. Matthew’s gospel, for the evangelist saw the virgin birth as a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, which he quotes: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel” (Mt 1:23, emphasis added). But most of our evidence comes from tradition.

The Eastern Fathers consistently emphasized Mary’s experience of joy and freedom from pain in giving birth to Christ, and the Western Fathers clearly taught Mary’s in partu virginity as a preservation of her bodily integrity and exemption from the ordinary pangs of childbirth. After all, the bringing forth of children in pain was a consequence of the Fall, and both the Fathers and later theologians have specifically seen the virgin birth...
as one of several signs that Mary was immaculately conceived, and therefore exempt from both concupiscence and the pains of childbirth. Pope St. Leo the Great taught Mary’s virginal conception and virginal birth in 449, and this teaching was adopted at the Council of Chalcedon.

The tradition is universal that Mary remained a virgin, and had no other children, after the birth of Jesus. Tradition holds that the “brethren” mentioned in Scripture are cousins (the term for “brethren” was frequently widely applied at that time). The ancient formula for Mary’s threefold virginity “ante partum, in partu, post partum” was already well-established by the fourth century. Some theologians, including Protestants such as Martin Luther, have seen a proof text for post partum virginity in Ezekiel 44:2 applied to Mary: “This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut.” Throughout the liturgical and doctrinal tradition of the Church, Our Lady has been frequently referred to as “the glorious ever Virgin Mary.” The phrase appears in the ancient Eucharistic Prayer I, and was reaffirmed very recently at Vatican II.

Mary’s three-fold virginity is not only appropriate to her as the immaculately-conceived Mother of God, but serves as a symbol of the sacramental fruitfulness of the Church’s spiritual motherhood. It also signifies the importance of consecrated virginity and celibacy, through which many devote themselves more wholeheartedly to the service of God. All of this is worth serious meditation: Ante partum, in partu, and post partum—in case you didn’t know.
Sing of Mary

January 01, 2010

Most Catholic theologians could write a book about Mary, and though I’m not quite a theologian by training, I could write such a book as well. In fact, any devout Catholic who writes easily could probably do the same. And in each case, the book would be a combination of salvation history, Christology, ecclesiology, popular devotion, personal experience, and just plain love. I’m not going to write a book here, but it is a fitting observance of the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God to reflect on the great gift God has given us in Mary, the paradoxical gift by God to us of the woman who gives us God.

Marian Reflection

Reflection on the gift of Mary has been an occupation of devout Christians from the earliest days. We see Christian writers as early as the second century mining Scripture for references to Mary, whom the Fathers saw immediately as the daughter of the Father, the spouse of the Holy Spirit, and the mother of the Son. She is, of course, central to the very existence of the New Covenant, as amply recounted in the New Testament. Here are some textual references:

- Matthew’s infancy narrative and his later comments on Jesus’ mother and brothers;
- Luke’s incomparable Gospel account of the annunciation, the nativity, the visitation, the presentation and the finding in the temple, plus his quoting of the woman who exclaims how blessed is the womb that bore Jesus; and also his reference to Mary’s perseverance in prayer in Acts;
- St. John’s narrative of the wedding feast at Cana and Mary at the foot of the cross, where her dying Son gave her to us as our mother as well;
- St. Paul’s nascent Marian theology in Galatians chapter 4.

These texts constitute a rich vein leading to the woman clothed with the Sun in chapter 12 of the Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation.

It demonstrates the Marian devotion of the earliest Christian writers that they sought...
Mary also in the Old Testament. They found her as the “woman” in the third chapter of Genesis, whose offspring would conquer Satan. They found her in Isaiah’s great prophecy of the virgin who would bear a son named Immanuel (God with us) (Is 7:14). They found her in Micah’s reference to Bethlehem, from whom the ruler of Israel was to come forth “when she who is to give birth has borne” (Mic 5:1-2). They also found references to Mary in Jeremiah 31:22 (“The Lord has created a new thing upon the earth: the woman must encompass the man”); in Psalm 45 (“Here, O Daughter, and see…. All glorious is the king’s daughter as she enters”); in Judges 15 (“You are the glory of Jerusalem, the surpassing joy of Israel; you are the splendid boast of our people”); in Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24 (when they describe Wisdom, they seem also to describe Mary); and of course in the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs.

Having reflected on salvation history, mined Scripture and thoroughly absorbed the Catholic tradition, these early writers and all the Fathers after them sing of Mary—St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus, St. Athanasius, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, the list is too long to be completed here. They tell us that Mary is not only the mother of Jesus Christ, but also the New Eve, the model of Faith. She was immaculately conceived in order to become the mother of God; she still possesses a three-fold virginity even after the Savior’s birth; and she was assumed into heaven where she intercedes for all her children. Indeed, she is the mother of all the faithful and even a model, symbol and prefiguring of the Church itself. On this last point, hear Augustine: “The Church, therefore, like Mary, possesses perpetual integrity and incorrupt fruitfulness. For what she merited in the flesh, it has kept in the mind; save that she brought forth one, and it brings forth many to be gathered into one through one.”

What was learned in theology began as devotion, and as that theological understanding increased, it spilled over into still greater devotion throughout the Church. It probably goes without saying that the Apocrypha, which were written out of Christian devotion, also contain many references to Mary. Taking all these things together, the faithful rapidly began to celebrate Marian feasts, which were added to the liturgical calendar at a very early period, such as the Conception of St. Anne, the Nativity of Mary, and the Dormition (or Falling Asleep) of Mary, all of which were inspired in part by the Apocrypha; and also the Presentation of Our Lord, the Annunciation and the entire Christmas cycle, which had more than ample inspiration in the text of the gospels themselves.

**Our Debt to Mary**
The most important Christian doctrines—all those having to do with the identity of Jesus
Christ as both God and man—are intimately bound up with a proper understanding of Mary. This is so true that it is impossible to get Jesus right, so to speak, without getting Mary right. One can take any Marian doctrine, such as the Immaculate Conception, and show how it is necessary to preserve and protect the proper understanding of Who Our Lord really is, and also necessary to fully grasp the Father’s merciful plan for our redemption. Though an exposition would far exceed our space, it is hardly too much to say that Christology and Mariology are forever interlinked.

It is no surprise then that the Church teaches that Mary plays an intimate role in our salvation, describing Mary as our advocate and even as the mediatrix of grace. It was immediately clear to the Fathers that she played a critical role in the redemption. For example, St. Ambrose wrote that “Alone Mary has worked the salvation of the world and conceived the redemption of all.” In an objective sense, among all human persons, this is certainly true because of her consent to become the Mother of the Savior, and so cooperate with the Father’s plan to bring the Son into the world as a man. It is also true in a more proximate sense, for she clearly joined herself with Christ’s sufferings on the cross at Calvary, uniting her sorrow with His holy will in a common obedience to the Father. In a more subjective sense, Mary was also able to cooperate in the work of Christ in the same way that we can, by uniting our own sufferings with those of the Savior, though Mary did this in a preeminent way because she was directly involved with the actual salvific acts of Christ in time.

These ideas have confused many, particularly Protestants. There is no question here of Mary adding something essential to Christ’s sacrifice, which was by itself already infinite in value. But the redemption is brought about by obedience to the Father’s will, not by “changing the Father’s mind” through a sacrifice. And what the Father willed was that Mary would be the subject of what we call the Preservative Redemption (preserved from Original Sin by the merits of Christ’s sacrifice before it took place in time, for God is outside time), precisely so that she could cooperate with the work of her Divine Son for the benefit of everyone else. In somewhat the same way, Christ willed to share his mission with men, particularly through His apostles and their successors in the sacramental ministry, by which the graces of the Redemption are infallibly applied, and in so many other ways as well. Thus even St. Paul, who emphasizes that Christ is the “one mediator” who brings about a radically new relationship between God and man, also writes that by his own (i.e., Paul’s) sufferings he “makes up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church” (Col 1:24).

So, yes, Christ has ushered in this new relationship with God called the New Covenant. Without Christ, there would be no new relationship, no divine union of love
with men, no filiation—no cry of “Abba, Father!” from men to God. But this means that we must ask ourselves what our role is in this new relationship. What we find is that the Father wills us to participate in the work of His Son. And then we also legitimately ask about Mary’s role in this new relationship. And now we find something as astonishing as it is wonderful. We find that she was asked to play a role so special, so intimate, so sacrificial, so involved in Christ’s work that we owe everything to her magnificent “Fiat! Let it be done to me according to your Word” (Lk 1:38). This fiat was her whole life, first as the mother of God, and then as our mother, cooperating with Christ, seeking our salvation as she rejoices in her own, working now and until the end of time according to the Father’s will for us all. It was no small thing when Simeon foretold that a sword would pierce Mary’s soul, so that the thoughts of many hearts might be laid bare (Lk 2:35).

**Confidence in Mary**

When it comes to what we might call tenacious tenderness, there’s something about a woman, there’s something more about a mother, and there’s something even more about Mary. It ought not to surprise us, male or female, that our Father’s will for us includes the self-effacing love of not just a woman, but of the woman. Throughout history, countless Christians, including the greatest saints, have testified to Mary’s beauty, love and power. Consider these witnesses, chosen almost at random:

- Asked if she prayed to the saints, St. Thérèse of Lisieux replied: “No, I never pray to the saints. They take too long to answer. I pray to Our Lady. She answers immediately.”
- St. Simon the Carmelite performed miracles by giving a cup of water to the sick in the name of Mary.
- St. Clement Hofbauer converted hardened sinners by praying one devout Rosary.
- Asked which of the Vatican’s treasures was the greatest while giving a tour to visiting dignitaries, Pope Pius IX pulled out his Rosary and said, “This is the greatest treasure in the Vatican.”
- Alexander of Hales had such a strong devotion to Mary that he said he would never refuse a request made in Mary’s name. Among his students: St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure.
- St. John Bosco said he founded his institute on the Rosary.
• St. Anselm wrote: “It is impossible that a devotee of Mary, who faithfully pays homage to Her and recommends his soul to her, should be damned.”
• St. Alphonsus de Liguori: “A true child of Mary will never be lost.”
• St. Bonaventure: “It is the privilege of the glory of Mary, that after God, our greatest happiness is from her.”
• St. Robert Bellarmine: “And who would ever dare to snatch these children from the arms of Mary when they have taken refuge there. What power of hell or what temptation can overcome them if they place their confidence in the patronage of this great Mother, the Mother of God, and of them?”
• St. Teresa of Avila: “The devotions we practice in honor of the glorious Virgin Mary, however trifling they may be, are very pleasing to Her Divine Son, and He rewards them with eternal glory.”
• St. Philip Neri: “Believe me, there is no more powerful means to obtain God’s grace than to employ the intercessions of the Holy Virgin.”
• St. Louis de Montfort: “When the Holy Spirit finds Mary in a soul, He enters that soul completely and communicates Himself completely to that soul.”
• St. Catherine of Siena: “Mary is the most sweet bait, chosen, prepared, and ordained by God, to catch the hearts of men.”

If the light is not yet beginning to dawn, here’s more: The Franciscans developed the 7 Crown Rosary, the Dominicans the 5 Decade Rosary, the Servites the 5 Sorrows Rosary, and the Carmelites the Brown Scapular. St. Bernard, commonly regarded as the most brilliant man and the greatest saint of his age, wrote a Marian prayer which has remained in common use for nearly a millennium: the Memorare. Of all the apparitions, locutions and miracles that have been given to us since the close of the Apostolic age, the three commonly regarded as the deepest, most dramatic and most continuing in their effects are the appearances of Mary at Guadalupe (resulting in the conversion of millions), at Lourdes (providing hope for the ill and suffering, and a showcase for the Church’s custody of miracles), and at Fatima (predicting the errors of Communism, a great war, and the triumph of the Immaculate Heart, particularly through Eucharistic Reparation and the Rosary).

**Love upon Love**

Mary’s role in our salvation, our recognition of that role, and our consequent devotion to
her are all the direct result of the will of God. St. Bernard of Clairvaux stated it well when he said that God wishes us to have everything through Mary. That’s simply the Father’s plan for us. And the great truth about the Father’s will is that His will is synonymous with love. So every gift God gives is not only for the benefit of the one who receives the gift directly, but also for the benefit of all those who are to receive the gift indirectly. Every gift is for the building up of Christ’s body the Church. Because the Father loves His only Son, He willed that, when He became man, He should have a mother. Because God loves His only Son and His mother, He willed that His mother should have certain prerogatives, certain special gifts of grace which make her, as Wordsworth said, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast”.

And because God loves His only Son, and His mother, and each of us, He willed that His mother should play an intimate role in the work of redemption so that we also can know and love not only His Son, but the divinely-ordained mother of His Son; not only the Man but the Woman as well; not only the baby Jesus but the one He called “mama”, whose special feast the whole Church so rightly celebrates today: Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ and our mother too—Mary, the Glorious and Ever-Virgin Mother of God.
Why Be Catholic? 1: Revelation

March 10, 2009

There are plenty of reasons to be a Catholic, and the mix of motivations can have as many variations as there are people. For me, however, the very first reason that comes to mind is that Catholicism is the only religion in the entire world that has a logical and consistent approach to the problem of Revelation.

Authentic religion, if it exists, must be either natural or revealed. Apart from ideas made up from whole cloth, human reason and intuition can supply a certain amount of religious information: The fact of God’s existence, the certainty of creation, man’s imperfection and dependence, the obligation in justice to honor the Creator, even the significance of man’s yearning for immortality and his sense of something greater than himself. This is natural religion; it has been all but universal throughout history, though it is frequently mixed with ideas from other sources which may be more or less corrupt.

The only possible way to get beyond this primitive religious state is for God to reveal Himself to men. If God has done so (or were to do so in the future), this would demand assent because of God’s own authority. After all, God is the only one who perfectly knows either Himself or His works. Therefore, the first requirement for accepting an alleged revealed religion must be the presentation of significant and compelling evidence that it has in fact been revealed, that God alone could be its author. What will suffice? Some would argue that a certain sublimity of doctrine would be a strong indication, but clearly the most powerful argument would be that the revelation in question was corroborated by signs and wonders that only God could perform.

Among all the religions advanced throughout the centuries, only two have credible claims that the revelation on which they are based was accompanied by such signs and wonders: Judaism and Christianity. Few other religions even make such a claim, and those that do refer only to the alleged experience of one or two persons. Religions that purport to be revealed without advancing such a claim fail the first essential test of authenticity, and religions that essentially privatize this claim—by restricting “evidence” of God’s involvement to a very small number of people—cannot present a credible argument for their own authenticity. If revelation, and the signs and wonders that testify to it, are not both clear and public, then its claims are worthless.

Now the difference between a believing Jew and a believing Christian is that the

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Christian accepts certain signs of public revelation which the Jew rejects, chiefly (but not only) the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe is also the fulfillment of all that was promised by God to Israel. At the very least, it should be obvious that the evidence of this further Revelation through Jesus Christ is as strong and as public as the evidence for God’s earlier Revelation to the Jews. In the absence of bias, there is no reasonable basis for accepting the former and rejecting the latter. Therefore the more reasonable position is to regard Christianity as the stronger—or more complete—claimant to the best that Revelation has to offer.

But among Christians themselves, there are significant differences in the matter of Revelation. All Christian groups agree that their font of Revelation, Jesus Christ, has long since returned to the Father, yet most Christian groups provide no means of assuring later generations that they will receive the same Revelation that the first generation received. As John Henry Cardinal Newman pointed out, this is a terrible deficiency. It is inconceivable, Newman noted, that there should be such a vast difference between the first generation of Christians and ourselves as that they should have had a living infallible guide and we have not. This would amount to a third dispensation, a religion so different from what was revealed in Christ that it can scarcely be considered part of the same Covenant with God.

In the end, only the Catholic Church offers a clear and consistent approach to this problem of retaining the purity and completeness of Divine Revelation after the fact. Because Revelation depends on the authority of God revealing, the Catholic understands that God, Who completed and perfected His Revelation through Jesus Christ, must also have instituted an ongoing principle of authority by which the veracity of that Revelation could be guaranteed after Christ completed His work on earth. As I noted at the outset, Divine authority is the keynote of authentic Revelation. The Catholic Church claims that just such authority persists in Peter and his successors—an ongoing guarantee by Christ Himself that our grasp of Revelation will remain authoritative over time.

One can, of course, argue for and against the truth of this belief. My point here is that anything less abandons the Christian claim to special Revelation, squandering it in endless human confusion, rendering it useless. Even the Protestant reliance on the Book provides no guide to the Book’s interpretation, as the incessant splintering of Protestantism itself attests. Because a principle of authority is essential to Revelation, and because only the Catholic Church makes a clear and consistent claim to such authority, something very important follows. What follows is not that the Catholic Church must be right, but that the Catholic Church is the only religion which advances a credible claim.

It is this character of the Church as the sole rational exponent of the necessary
principles of authentic Revelation which causes her to stand out among all other religions. To me the inescapable conclusion is simple: If any existing religion fully represents Revelation, it can only be the Catholic Church. As soon as one becomes aware that Christian Revelation is authentic, the road to truth does not end until it reaches Rome.
Why Be Catholic? 2: Freedom

March 18, 2009

Among the great issues addressed by Christianity, two generally strike each of us as more than merely academic. These are the issues of suffering and freedom, which touch us so very personally. Many would give the issue of suffering the first place. After all, suffering is a profound riddle and, by definition, it is the most painful riddle of human life. But I prefer to examine the issue of freedom first.

An initial caveat is required. I do not wish the title of this series (“Why Be Catholic”) to give the impression that I deny that non-Catholic Christians will very often share the key insights which characterize the Catholic faith. There are many significant things that divide Catholics from other Christians, beginning with their handling of Revelation, as I discussed in the first item of this series. Nonetheless, in those areas in which other Christians have not (or not yet) deviated from the original Christian message, they share in Catholic truth. This is largely true regarding freedom.

For the Christian, then, freedom is not the mere absence of restraint, either external or internal. Various prominent schools of thought, none of which are Christian, identify freedom with the absence of external restraints, such as political or economic restraints or even the restraints of cultural convention. Others identify freedom with the absence of interior restraints, such as compulsions of various kinds (a valid insight) or ignorance (a semi-valid insight) or guilt (an invalid insight, unless the guilt is unwarranted). But for anyone who has thought deeply enough about the matter, freedom is essentially the spiritual power to perfect oneself.

This is a natural or philosophical truth, but it is one of those natural truths most of us will not reach without benefit of Revelation. Still, once one grasps the idea, it appears silly to regard the deepest sort of freedom as anything less than the ability to direct ourselves toward our true end. Insofar as we are to one degree or another incapable of doing so, it is because we are enslaved to something. Insofar as we can perfect ourselves in this way, we are enjoying freedom. Of course, this leaves unanswered the question of what our true ends might be.

Cutting through both intellectual labor and philosophical chatter, St. Paul gives us a short course in freedom based on Christian Revelation, in a passage on which one can meditate for a lifetime:

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Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. *(Rm 6:16-23)*

The fact that Saint Paul speaks about two different kinds of slavery here should not confuse us for a moment. Slavery to sin leads to death, but our free offering of obedience to God leads to eternal life through Jesus Christ. Thus did our Lord challenge those among the Jews who had begun to believe in Him: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” *(Jn 8:31-32).* Typically we live under the illusion that we are most free when we have “chosen” to do something evil. But generally we are just indulging our passions, to which we are enslaved. If we have any doubts, the simple test of trying to break a bad habit should remove them.

But when we turn to Christ, we are given a share in Christ’s life by which our intellects are illuminated and our wills strengthened. It is this grace, and this alone, which enables us to perfect ourselves, to become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect *(Mt 5:48).* Because the end or purpose of anything is simply its own proper perfection, for us this means life in Christ—perfection in this life, and the vision of God forever in the next. It is not coincidental that this is the same thing as a life of perpetual love, though love itself is a topic for another day. For now, we must be content with the facts about freedom—a powerful and personal reason to be Catholic.
Why Be Catholic? 3: Suffering

March 31, 2009

The oldest and most painful riddle of human existence is the riddle of suffering. In every
time and place, man has sought an answer. Yet apart from Judeo-Christian Revelation,
man has had very little to say. Stoic fortitude, Epicurean pleasure-seeking, Buddhist
negation, the Utilitarian calculus of pleasure and pain: It seems nobody has very much
useful to say about the riddle of suffering, except God.

Two lessons are taught about suffering in the Old Testament. The first is the great
lesson of Genesis concerning the consequences of the Fall. Here we learn that suffering
is the result of sin, which breaks creation from the Creator and causes everything to fall
out of kilter. The second lesson comes through the height of Old Covenant wisdom
reached in the book of Job. Here we are taught that we cannot begin to understand the
significance of suffering on our own. In fact, we are exceedingly foolish when, thinking
we understand suffering, we devise some human theory to explain it or, perhaps, we
even challenge the justice of God’s plan.

“Where were you,” God asks Job, “when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me,
if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!” (Job
38:4-5). God’s answer to Job’s complaints in chapters 38 through 41 conveys a vital
lesson which Job is not slow to grasp: “I have uttered what I did not understand, things
too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3).

This twin understanding—that suffering is rooted in sin and that we cannot on our
own understand how it is supposed to work out—sets the stage for Christ’s further
revelation of the Father’s love. For in Christ we see God Himself take on a human nature
and suffer as an offering for sin. Suffering, then, is at once the consequence of sin and
the means God has built into Creation for overcoming sin and all of its effects. God’s
justice and mercy are ever one. In Christ suffering becomes the means of repairing the
rift between God and man, of bringing man back into union with God. Suffering is, in a
word, redemptive.

The Catholic Church teaches that there is both a natural and a supernatural aspect to
the redemptive character of human suffering. On the natural level, suffering is quite
obviously the best possible teacher about our limitations. Through it we learn that we are
not in control of the most important things in life and so, if there is to be an alternative to

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despair, we must depend on Another. On the natural level, then, we can dimly glimpse that suffering has the positive value of increasing our understanding of what we are and what we are not, of inculcating a certain basic wisdom.

On the supernatural level, this basic understanding is clarified and elevated in three distinct and complementary ways. First, we learn through Revelation the identity of this Other on whom we must depend. Second, we learn specifically that the infinite debt of sin and the effects of sin in human suffering can ultimately be overcome only by the infinite cost of Christ’s embrace of suffering out of love. Third, we learn that it is part of God’s plan that we should joyfully join our own sufferings to Christ in order, as St. Paul says, to “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24).

This Catholic understanding of suffering is not only a unique answer; it is the only answer that actually makes sense because it fits suffering into a coherent pattern of human life. All Christians who have not altogether lost the concept of sin and redemption understand Christ’s salvific role. But a great many Christian groups have lost the understanding that we are much more than passive beneficiaries of Christ’s suffering. Again, the Catholic doctrine of suffering includes a profoundly active element: It is the gracious will of the Father that we are to participate in Christ’s redemptive work by joining our sufferings to His.

This should, of course, be the pattern of our existence, continually offering our lives to God in Christ. But Catholics have the opportunity to do this in a special way at each Mass, when through the action of the priest the sacrifice of Calvary is represented anew in an unbloody manner. Thus we participate fully in the Sacred Liturgy precisely by joining ourselves to the Son in His sacrificial offering to the Father. In the Holy Eucharist, which is our foretaste of eternal life with God, we partake again of Christ’s freely offered body and blood. At these sacred Catholic moments, the significance of suffering becomes clear: Suffering becomes a participation of love in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.
Why Be Catholic? 4: Resurrection

April 14, 2009

Though I take it up as the fourth in this series, surely the Resurrection of Jesus Christ provides the first and most obvious reason to be both a Christian and a Catholic, for it is Christ’s Resurrection which bears ultimate witness to the truth of the relationship between man and God which He both revealed and accomplished.  

*Question:* How do we know Christ’s teachings are true?  
*Answer:* Because He rose from the dead.

Christ himself argued that we should believe in Him because of the works He did. His miracles were a proof that He came from God and, therefore, that His words were true. Indeed, when he drove the money-lenders out of the temple, claiming that it was his Father’s house, he replied to those who challenged his authority by referring them to a stupendous miracle still to come: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again” (Jn 2:19). In several places, Scripture makes clear that He was talking about “the temple of His body” (cf. Jn 2:21)—that is, His own Resurrection from the dead.

The Resurrection, then, is the culmination of all the signs which validate Christ’s authority, the truth of His teaching, the reliability of His message, the reality of His Divine sonship, into which he would incorporate all of his followers. But note that there is a double significance to this formidable proof. In the first place, again, it is the guarantee of the Divine authority behind all of Christ’s sayings and everything He instituted. Apostles, bishops, priests, sacraments, the Church: all are guaranteed by the Resurrection to be Divine institutions, established by the One who proved He came from God. The first great significance of the Resurrection, then, is that it directly or indirectly guarantees not only the truth of Christ’s own words but the authority of the Church, the inspiration of the Scriptures, and the efficacy of the whole order of grace.

This is, if you will, the Resurrection’s macrocosmic significance. But what of its microcosmic significance? What of the significance of the Resurrection in that microcosm of the Christian mystery which is my own personal life, my own being? St. Paul addressed this question specifically when he rebuked those who denied the resurrection of the dead:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have
fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor 15:16-22)

In other words, Christ’s Resurrection is the guarantee of our own resurrection, our own personal immortality, not just as disembodied souls but as complete human persons, body and soul united to God. An inkling of what this means may be gained by reflecting on the aging process. As we get older, we sometimes look in the mirror with surprise. We don’t think of ourselves as “old”. We think of ourselves as simply ourselves—the same as ever, the same self we were aware of when we first reflected as children, not necessarily the young self, but certainly the very same self. We find it strange, even a little disturbing, that the body can betray through change, growth, and decomposition this self, this me whom I permanently understand myself to be.

In Christ's Resurrection, this “permanent me” is guaranteed to enjoy the fullness of life forever: Elevated, purified of sin, perfected, living in unlimited love—but always essentially myself. No other philosophy or religion offers so much or, to put it differently, no other philosophy or religion captures so perfectly what we instinctively understand about ourselves, about our difference from the rest of nature, about the essentially permanent and potentially glorious character of our own being. The reason is simple, for no other philosopher or theologian boasts a resurrection, and when it comes to being Christian and Catholic, all the difference is made by that single, solitary, concrete and miraculous historical fact.
Why Be Catholic? 5: Perfection

May 21, 2009

Anyone with aspirations to human perfection ought to investigate Catholicism seriously. This is, in some ways, an extension of the second number in this series dealing with personal freedom, for freedom is essentially the ability to pursue one’s proper end, which is also the path to perfection. But here we approach things from the point of view of perfection itself, and we find that no other religion or philosophical system presents such an all-encompassing understanding of human nature and the means by which it may be perfected. Catholics call this perfection “holiness”, but by whatever name it answers a deep need of the human person to be in full possession of himself so that he might direct himself toward the Good.

The nature of the Good is a perennial human question which has occupied the attention of every philosophical and religious tradition. Christianity has a particularly cogent understanding of the Good in relationship to the whole man, not only because Christianity is revealed by God (a separate argument) but because it builds upon and enriches both the spiritual wisdom of Judaism and the remarkable natural wisdom of classical philosophy. All three traditions understand that, ultimately, it is a proper integration of all human faculties which enables a person to pursue the Good. That is, the Good for man is necessarily rooted in integrity. Christianity also provides the most complete knowledge of the end toward which man must strive, namely God Himself.

It is a natural human instinct to strive for perfection; we are all impatient with our weaknesses and limitations. The deepest form of happiness derives from the successful integration of our faculties and our own ability to direct them in a unified way toward our proper ends. The satisfaction of doing this far exceeds mere material pleasure, as nearly every philosopher and spiritual leader has asserted, no matter how many other errors their systems may embody. Catholicism too recognizes this claim, further recognizing that man is a composite being of body and soul who finds himself without complete integrity owing to sin, and who finds a solution in Divine grace which will repair and perfect his nature.

The Judaeo-Christian tradition is very nearly unique among the world’s religions in its insistence that we serve God by living rightly, that striving to do good is the key to both imitating and pleasing God. This is summed up in the Christian commandment to
love. Thus are the spiritual and the ethical uniquely joined in Christianity. They are even more fully joined in Catholic Christianity by the Church’s insistence that we are made holy not by grace alone but by continual cooperation with grace in the effort to understand and do God’s will. Although God’s will is generally learned only by degrees, it is most fitting here to capture its essence in relationship to the human impulse central to this discussion, using a formulation we have seen before: “You are to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” (Mt 5:48).

Now the entire Catholic economy is ordered toward this goal. Through her Scripture and Tradition, her governance and her sacraments, the Catholic Church alone teaches, rules and sanctifies to effect the perfection of man through union with God. The sublimity of the Church’s doctrine and her mighty charitable works alike testify to her perfecting power over mind and heart.

Each sacrament provides a special grace of perfection: Baptism, to initiate us into the life of Christ and incorporate us into His Church; Penance to restore us when we fall; Confirmation to impart the gifts of the Holy Spirit; the Eucharist to transform us in Christ Himself; Matrimony to sanctify the family, ensuring generations to come; Holy Orders to spiritually nourish all God’s people; and Anointing of the Sick to strengthen us for the final stage of our journey to God.

Similarly, each doctrine and spiritual counsel is architected to illumine our minds and hearts, to help us battle our own weaknesses, to trust in God, to learn to love day by day. As many times as we fall, the Church lifts us up a little higher through her understanding of human nature, her forgiveness, her ability to nurture, direct and guide. Thus can Catholics, more easily than others, be brought to the perfection which at once marks the unique integrity of the human person and secures his greatest happiness.

Anyone who doubts that the Catholic Church possesses the greatest understanding of perfection and the greatest ability to achieve it in her children need only study the lives of the saints. In every age, these extraordinary men and women demonstrate the heights of both human accomplishment and human happiness. Indeed, the holiness of so many of her members is a great motive of credibility for the Church. In the end, Catholicism alone can fully satisfy that innate thirst for perfection through which Christ, now that He has been lifted up, draws all men to Himself (Jn 12:32).
Why Be Catholic? 6: Divine Intimacy

June 10, 2009

Among all the concepts of God the world has known, only one draws the believer into the most profound intimacy of love. This intimacy is completely dependent upon the unique way in which the Christian God interacts in its three persons, and in which the Catholic God interacts with men. I refer, of course, to the doctrine of the Trinity and its wonderful relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary, leading to the Incarnation of the Son who accomplishes our Redemption through a completely self-sacrificial love.

The Christian drama of intimate love begins with the Trinity. God’s nature, as Christians understand it and philosophers ought to, is such that a relationship among three persons in God is absolutely required. Taking the Father as the first in logical priority (though not in time), we can see that if God’s knowledge of Himself is to be perfect, then that knowledge must in fact be another person, coeternal and coequal with the first, and aptly named (in priority) the Son. But the Son and the Father must also love each other infinitely and perfectly, so this love must itself be a person, also coeternal and coequal with the Father and the Son. We call this infinite perfect love the Holy Spirit.

Philosophers might have figured this out on their own, though it is always dangerous to assert too much from natural reason about God. In any case, Revelation is ever an aid to reason, and reality does tend to be intuitive once it is known. The point to grasp here is simply that the Christian God is in very truth a family in a relationship of perfect love, a love that is also infinite in its very intimacy, in the depths to which the beloved is known and cherished by the lover, and to which the lover pours himself out to the beloved. Moreover, this love, being infinitely intimate, always desires to include others within its magnificent scope.

Thus has God created other persons to share in His love, both angels and men. While the very act of creation is an act of love, the subsequent relationship of God to His creatures reveals how God loves each creature in the manner most fitted to its nature, establishing an intimacy of love between Himself and creation. The most striking instance of this from our own point of view, of course, is how God has chosen to love man. Just as the Father created man as a composite being, material and spiritual, body and soul, so too does He love man—and each man and woman—most appropriately through the astonishing Incarnation of the Son, the Word made flesh, infinity made...
intimate to human persons.

And what does this Incarnate Christ do? He lives a life of self-sacrificial love in deep obedience to the Father, a self-sacrificial love for every other person. His purpose in doing so is to draw us all into the intimate fire of love shared by the Trinity, now dwelling in us through sacramental power, shaping us in love from within. Everything in the Divine plan is connected to this purpose. The sacraments, for example, are outward signs instituted by Christ to “give grace”—that is, to impart the Divine life, which is love. The Eucharist itself is a participation in the life, death and Resurrection of Christ, enabling us to eat His body and blood, so that we become what we have received: We are deified in intimate love.

In some measure all Christian groups retain much of this understanding, though many of them are gradually losing their sense of the Incarnation and of the persons in the Trinity as a rising tide of secularism minimizes the richness of the original apostolic teaching. But when it comes to the ultimate act of this drama of love, very few Christian groups understand the gift they have been given. For just as God loves in a manner wholly appropriate to a creature whom He has created body and soul, so too does He love in a manner equally appropriate to a creature whom he has created male and female. This is why the Catholic understanding of God, and of Love, includes a special and even pivotal role for Mary.

In order to bring about the Incarnation of the Son for the purpose of enacting His redeeming love, God adopts a plan which incorporates the power of the masculine and the feminine to which human nature was expressly designed to respond. And not only does human nature respond through maleness and femaleness, but it responds in this way with extraordinary power and attraction, seeking to be made whole. Therefore, Christ is brought into the world through the most appropriate loving intimacy of a woman and a mother.

Here God’s condescension is breathtaking. He creates for this purpose a woman whom He so fills with grace that she becomes, as Wordsworth so aptly wrote, “our tainted nature’s solitary boast.” In the deepest sense, then, is Mary the daughter of the Father. Next, God brings about the conception of the Word made flesh through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, an intimate marital union which equally makes Mary the spouse of the Holy Spirit. Finally, God the Son grows in Mary’s womb, being born in the course of time as an infant, and being raised by Mary, who is finally and rightly called the mother of the Son. Thus is the woman, Mary, drawn into the deepest intimacy of Trinitarian love in order to bring forth the Christ, who teaches us Who love is, and who sacrifices Himself for us out of deepest love.

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Nowhere is this account of love, this deep understanding and experience of infinite intimacy, more fully represented than in the Catholic Church. The richness of her doctrine is a richness of the knowledge of love; the power of her sacraments is the power of the experience of love. The Church is not only the body but the very Bride of Christ; marriage becomes the human model of Christ’s relationship to the Church. People talk about Catholic guilt, and with so many blessings, I am sure we have much to be guilty about. But they ought rather to talk about Catholic intimacy. The hallmark of the Church is intimacy with the God of Love.
This is not primarily an essay about Sacred Tradition, which is certainly another worthy apologetical topic. Instead, I have in mind here the Catholic Church’s unique vision of human nature, a vision so profound that one particular dimension of it is just now beginning to be grasped in the 21st century. That dimension is the role of tradition in defining what it means to be human. Stated positively, the core insight is that tradition is essential to being human. Stated negatively, we could say that, devoid of tradition, human reason is essentially useless.

The best way I’ve found to make this point is to quote at some length an important passage from Principles of Catholic Theology by Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI:

Humanity and historicity, intellect and history, are inextricably related. The human spirit creates history; history conditions human existence…it is as memory that intellect proves itself qua intellect; memory generates tradition; tradition realizes itself in history…for without the necessarily trans-temporal relationship of person to person, humanity cannot be awakened to itself, cannot express itself…. The most distinctive characteristic of tradition is, in fact, the ability to recognize my now as significant also for the tomorrow of those who come after me, and therefore, to transmit to them for tomorrow what has been discovered today. On the other hand, a capacity for tradition means preserving today what was discovered yesterday, in that way forming the context of a way through time, shaping history. This means that tradition properly understood is, in effect, the transcendence of today in both directions…. Tradition, as constitutivum of history, is constitutive of a humanity that is truly human, of the humanitas hominis. (87)

Now this expresses an apparently complex idea which, once grasped, becomes as luminous as it is simple. Tradition is, in effect, the ground of thought and even an essential component of a unified human personality. No understanding of any reality, including the most abstract philosophical theory or the most technical scientific theory, is possible without being rooted in tradition, which in turn provides a fundamental way of looking at all of reality. Man is incapable of divorcing himself from tradition and, insofar
as he attempts to do this—as the Western world has generally attempted to do over the
past two centuries or so—he spirals down into meaninglessness. As we slowly come to
make some sense out of our post-modern condition, philosophers are just beginning to
fully appreciate how tradition informs rationality, and how bankrupt is the quest to
separate the two.

There are, in effect, two choices open to man: tradition or nihilism. The one tends
toward wholeness and hope, the other toward chaos and despair. The Catholic Church
has always recognized that tradition is an essential part of what it means to be human
and, moreover, that tradition is in fact distinctively human. Thus tradition is a far more
decisive separator of man from animals than any definition of reason. The most obvious
difference between ourselves and animals (and the most obvious indicator that man is a
spiritual being while animals are not) is the enormous fact that we alone have tradition.
We alone have the capacity to project our present backwards and forwards in time. Not
only does this uniquely spiritual capacity lie at the heart of the Catholic Faith generally,
but human tradition is uniquely confirmed and reinforced by the Catholic understanding
of Sacred Tradition. This Sacred Tradition, which is one of the two sources of Divine
Revelation, is in essence Revelation transmitted through the ongoing life of the Catholic
community.

Significantly, with its conviction that grace perfects nature rather than obliterates it,
the Catholic Church has always embraced reason as well, recognizing that a reflective
analysis of human tradition must be used to purify that tradition wherever it fails to
reflect reality and so fails to lead to the proper formulation of truth. But at the same time,
the Church understands that reason cannot be divorced from tradition, that it cannot
conceptualize anything useful without relying on what it has received as a ground for its
operations. This interplay between tradition and reason constitutes an inescapable
dimension of human life, without which life becomes unintelligible. The Church alone
conserves and rightly explains Sacred Tradition, which stimulates a continuous
purification of reason, while at the same time she encourages reason, thus secured, to
purify human tradition in its turn.

I am convinced that no other institution or belief system enshrines this fundamental
understanding of man as a being at once marked by tradition and capable of purifying it
with the help of God—with the help of God who communicates Himself as the Logos in
Tradition, as the Word operating through time. Is this too abstract? Perhaps so, but it is
abstract only in its articulation, for this is something which all of us live instinctively.
The fundamentally traditional character of man is suppressed and weakened, with great
damage, by those who would ideologically divorce man from the very ground of his
identity mediated through time. The Church, then, has tradition right. Autonomous man liberates himself from tradition only to his shame. His glory is to be the bearer of a continually purified tradition, and ultimately of Sacred Tradition itself. It is another reason to be Catholic.
Why Be Catholic? 8: Incarnation

December 26, 2009

There is, in the Catholic vision of reality, a profound understanding of the impenetration of matter by grace which we call the Incarnational principle. The Incarnation of God the Son as Jesus Christ is the bedrock which underlies the Christian vision of the relationship between God and man. In assuming a human nature, God demonstrates at once that creation, including human nature, is not only good but is capable of being further elevated through the impenetration of the Divine life.

This is the basis of the entire sacramental system, which uses outward (material) signs to transmit to us a share of God’s life, from the initiation of the believer’s journey in Baptism to its conclusion in Anointing of the Sick. It is the basis of the Church, a visible society which itself serves as a living connection between God and man, a sort of meta-sacrament for the transmission and embodiment of grace. It is even the basis for all of society, which begins with a proper understanding of matrimony, which St. Paul tells us is a model for the relationship of Christ and the Church. For in matrimony a man and a woman join in a profound sanctifying union of both body and spirit, a union which is both faithful and fecund, generating new life.

This understanding of the goodness of creation, of matter, of humanity and of human joys and aspirations—and the lesson that this goodness is designed to be further filled, animated and elevated by the love of God—is so central to God’s plan that Christianity begins and ends with it. It begins with God’s self-emptying of glory as He takes on human flesh and it ends in the Resurrection of the glorified Christ, who henceforth forever retains His identity as man.

It ought to be obvious to just about everybody that no other religion incorporates this particular (and particularly profound) understanding of the relationship of nature to nature’s God. Every human philosophy inevitably makes too much of nature or too little, and sometimes both at once, as in modern secularism which sees nature as all and so ignores that to which it points. What may be surprising, however, is that even among Christians those who have doctrinally fallen away from Rome have largely lost the unique and special wholeness of this Christian vision. Thus, from its beginning, Protestantism has been preoccupied with what it regards as the depravity of human nature, its radical incapacity for goodness, its reliance on grace as on something which
supplants man’s nature rather than penetrates it.

Here we find the cause of Protestantism’s inability to understand the importance of works to salvation, which led Luther to revise Scripture and declare the letter of St. James to be apocryphal. Here also we have the root of Calvin’s notion that some are predestined for heaven and others for hell by nothing but the arbitrary will of God. Nor are we surprised to find Protestant sects which have outlawed the celebration of Christmas itself, distrusting the human values and human joy which Christmas both represents and fulfills. Indeed, from the point of view of nature, Protestantism must be described as a very thin, a very incomplete religion.

By contrast, Catholicism flowers in nature, transforming and elevating not only man himself but man’s culture. The astonishing achievements of Catholic culture over two millennia—in art and literature, sculpture and architecture, education and government, work and play, fast and feast—are one and all rooted in the Incarnational principle. The sense that the human body is itself a repository of grace, a temple of the Holy Spirit, fosters a unique Catholic mode of being in which the mind and spirit are never alone, never cut off. Rather man worships God in his body, and carries all of nature beyond itself in the quest to fulfill the very end of religion, which is for all creation to give glory to God.

Not in the abstract, then, is Catholic salvation worked out, but in the concrete; not in the general, but in the particular. The Catholic vision is not one of being “attached” to Christ, but of “putting on” Christ (Gal 3:27), not one of merely receiving an external gift, but of living the Christ life deep within—so that I live, no not I, but Christ lives in me (Gal 2:20). Each virtue is cultivated, each habit transformed and elevated, each relationship purified, each work ennobled. And the power for this continuous transformation is nourished—no, actually ingested—and formed into community through the Eucharist, the Word quite literally made Flesh, the Body and Blood really and actually present, not in figure or even in grace alone, but in its very substance.

Every Catholic is called to a life-long process of incorporating (I choose the word advisedly) his whole self, body and soul, into Christ, and not only his self but his loves, his labors, his own small creations, and the entire world over which he has been given dominion. This project, in which no detail is neglected or flattened, and no element lost or discarded, is unique to Catholicism. As I have said, it is a project rooted in the Incarnational principle. But even the Incarnational principle is not so much explained as demonstrated, not so much taught as lived. It was lived first by Christ Himself, born of Mary and protected by Joseph, in Bethlehem, in a stable, in a manger—and so at length in us.
Why Be Catholic? 9: The Fall

February 02, 2010

It is difficult—it has always been difficult, I think—to find a worldview that makes perfect sense. For example, if we believe the universe is created and governed by an all-loving God, we have trouble explaining natural and moral evils. But if we believe we are not created and there is no God, we have trouble explaining our own sense of right and wrong, our innate fear of judgment, and our yearning for something that transcends nature and endures beyond it.

In Orthodoxy, G. K. Chesterton wrote that he accepted the traditional claims of orthodox Christian doctrine because that doctrine fit perfectly into all the openings, chasms, protrusions and fissures he found in examining the world. It all interlocks, he said, like a vast and exquisitely designed machine. Only when coupled with Christian doctrine does the universe make a complete and intelligible whole. These ideas led him into the Catholic Church. The great John Henry Newman also reflected on his own experience of the world. To him, it was impossible to explain the constant conflict between human aspirations and human failures—the deep sense everyone has that there is a great deal wrong which ought to be right—unless man is somehow fallen from an ideal state which is still embedded in his consciousness. Newman too became a Catholic.

For both Chesterton and Newman, then, Catholicism presented a worldview which fit reality. Catholicism required them neither to deny their deepest aspirations (as does secularism), nor to make a monster out of God (as do Deism and Islam). Rather, Catholic teaching takes things as they really are, including taking ourselves as we most deeply perceive ourselves to be (when we aren’t engaging in special pleading to satisfy our flesh or our egos), and then Catholic teaching explains exactly what is right and what is wrong, and why, through the doctrine of Original Sin. The Church teaches that we were created for God and designed to live in close union with Him. But through rebellion against him, we have lost the perfect integrity that comes from living in that unity. The results are plain to see all around us. This is an explanation that makes consummate sense.

Happily, this Fall was not sufficient to thwart our destiny. Rather, it stimulates us to a sort of divinely inspired frustration with our weaknesses and limitations, and a divinely inspired dissatisfaction with all the natural and moral problems in the world. Our sense
of frustration and dissatisfaction causes us to look again to God for the means to restore our unity with Him—a means that we can find only in Jesus Christ. There is a sort of inescapable logic in this account of fall and redemption. It may not always speak perfectly to what we’d like to believe or like to do at any given moment, but it does speak perfectly to what we most deeply perceive of reality when we’re being honest with ourselves.

To Deists and some simplistic Christian sects, because the hand of Providence guides things perfectly, it follows that whatever is is right; those who fail to accept this are justly doomed. To secularists, by contrast, whatever is is wrong; insofar as we can engineer something better, especially to ensure our own temporal satisfaction, we must do so; those who stand in the way must be coerced or thrust aside. It is not surprising that many secularists regard religious people as a threat, because religious people don’t place much confidence in man’s ideas about how to make a perfect world. They are likely to keep trying to help others, one by one, out love; they are not likely to trust programs to end all programs, or wars to end all wars.

For the deeply religious person, and in particular the person who has tuned in to the Catholic vision of reality, everything is right with God but human sin has mucked up the world pretty badly. Sin alone is sufficient to explain all of our trials, struggles, disasters and sorrows. Christian doctrine fits what we see of the universe as a hand fits a glove, or as the hand of God fits the world He created. Therefore, it makes sense to the Catholic to seek first the Kingdom of God, and to expect that everything else will follow (Mt 6:33).

At bottom, in the recesses of our hearts, I suspect all of us know we need something more to save us than the plans of the intelligent, the rich, the famous and the powerful. This is because we know we need someone to save us not just from this or that situation but from ourselves. Initially we perceive the goal but dimly, because we are fallen, but that we are fallen becomes increasingly obvious as we mature. The fundamental mission, the only mission that will work, is to restore man’s lost integrity. This integrity can exist only in union with God, without Whom perfection is impossible. But if the problem is that we are fallen, then who can lift us up? Only the Son can draw us back to union with the Father. Only Jesus Christ can restore our integrity, and with it the integrity of the entire universe. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God, can honestly say the words we most yearn to hear: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rv 21:5).
At first glance, a title which makes “Reason” a point in favor of Catholicism may look odd to modern eyes. We’re accustomed, after all, to thinking of reason as a faculty which we must use independently of faith to solve human problems, something that faith obscures. It has been the entire project of modern history for the past several hundred years to “free” reason from faith, and to kill faith. So perhaps my title does seem curious.

But I might also note that the post-modern critique of the modern experiment has chillingly demonstrated that reason divorced from faith implodes into uselessness. Even though post-modernism offers no solution, it explains why all around us we now see not only the familiar flight from faith, but a flight from reason as well, a flight generally toward pure desire. Whatever floats your boat. The world is meaningless anyway. Different strokes for different folks. Maybe it’s time to take another look.

The Catholic Church is essentially alone in proclaiming that it is not understanding that leads to Faith but Faith that leads to understanding. It is extremely difficult—in fact, it is impossible—for anyone to start from scratch using pure reason and expect to get very far in interpreting reality. Instead, we must accept a great deal as given, and all that we accept as given becomes the framework within which we pursue further knowledge and understanding in particular areas. If the framework is fundamentally unsound, future conclusions are very nearly doomed to be wrong.

In addition, when we reason, we need to be protected from ourselves. As humans we are prone to letting all manner of distraction and weakness interfere with the diligence, the objectivity and even the perspicacity with which we ought to employ our reason. We are all, compared with the task at hand, not only relatively dull-witted but also mentally lazy and deeply prejudiced. Frequently we do little more than seek to justify what we already think is true or—what is very much worse—what we want to be true. Witness the many otherwise intelligent atheist scientists, like Richard Dawkins, who so very much want to be justified in thinking there is no God that they spin out books containing arguments any schoolboy could refute, while heaping scorn on equally-accomplished colleagues who express Faith. How are we to protect ourselves from the sloth, self-interest and impure motives which attack our own reason at every turn?

Then there is the natural law. What nature teaches us about the fundamental reality
of things—especially the fundamental moral reality—is deeply imprinted on every man, but it is very difficult to discern and articulate in detail. Innumerable controversies arise in trying to work it out. Again, as we become progressively blinded in this effort by inordinate attachments of various kinds, we are prone to start calling black white and white black, until even such basic things as the evil of murder may no longer be clearly perceived. We may look for certainty, but will it lead to comfort or truth?

To all of these problems, Catholicism has answers, the answers of Revelation, authority and grace, and the answer that grace perfects nature rather than supplanting it. Revelation provides the soundest of frameworks for human inquiry, the Petrine authority guarantees the integrity of that framework, and this Revelation and authority also point to and reinforce the precepts of the natural law, which has the same Author. Therefore, Faith opens up a vast panorama of understanding about the great “why” questions: Why do things exist? Why we are here? Why is one thing good and another bad? Why must we struggle so hard to get things right? With these answers comes a much-enriched understanding of the deepest nature of things, an understanding that enables us to begin to make sense out of not only our surroundings but our history, our culture, our lives. Truly ought we to seek faith that we may understand.

Moreover, this understanding opens us to grace, to that share in the life of God which clears our intellects, purifies our motives, and strengthens our resolve to reason well. Grace becomes the first line of defense against all that would lead us to abuse reason by proclaiming the false true. But Catholicism offers also one thing more, which most other Christian groups fail to offer, and that comes through its doctrine of grace perfecting nature. Thus reason is not to be shunned, as it is shunned in most of the Protestant tradition, as a tainted work of reprobate nature sunk in depravity. Rather, reason like all of human nature is seen as fundamentally good, but weakened by the Fall and now to be purified and exalted by grace so that it too may offer fitting service to God.

Truly are our minds darkened in the absence of faith. As Chesterton pointed out in The Everlasting Man, just as the marvellous experiment in reason which was the Greco-Roman world had exhausted itself, just as the great wave of human intellectual achievement was about to curl and crash, just at that moment God the Father deemed it to be “the fullness of time” into which He would send His Son. Thus it is no surprise that the triumph of Greek philosophy meshed so well with the even greater triumph of Jewish reliance upon the one God, at exactly the time that Christianity was born. Pope Benedict XVI made this point in his famous address at the University of Regensberg, in which he challenged both the West, which has now turned its back on its heritage, and the Muslim
world, which was immersed from the first in voluntarism, to find the right place for reason:

The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance. The vision of Saint Paul, who saw the roads to Asia barred and in a dream saw a Macedonian man plead with him: “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” (cf. Acts 16:6-10) - this vision can be interpreted as a “distillation” of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek inquiry. In point of fact, this rapprochement had been going on for some time…. Thus, despite the bitter conflict with those Hellenistic rulers who sought to accommodate it forcibly to the customs and idolatrous cult of the Greeks, biblical faith, in the Hellenistic period, encountered the best of Greek thought at a deep level, resulting in a mutual enrichment evident especially in the later wisdom literature…. A profound encounter of faith and reason is taking place here, an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion. From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith...: Not to act “with logos” is contrary to God’s nature.

Logos, the Word of God, the mind of God, Wisdom: Logos is the goal and the engine of engraced reason, just as it is also the key to that ultimate correspondence of the mind with reality which we call truth.

There is something very special in the Catholic regard for reason, and in the Church’s ability to bring reason to the highest possible achievement in her faithful children and saints. It is precisely the Catholic perception of the nature, needs and uses of reason which is capable of producing an Augustine and an Aquinas, a Copernicus and a Pasteur. It may seem odd at first sight but, without any possible doubt, another motive for being Catholic is love and respect for reason.
Another one of the many reasons I am grateful for being a Catholic is the peace it brings to my life. The history of the Church and the lives of the saints suggest that this is a universal experience, and we shouldn’t be surprised: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,” Jesus told His disciples. “Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27).

This isn’t the superficial peace of “feeling good” for a little while (peace as the world gives it), but a deeply rooted confidence that we are living in grace, sure of our course, full of hope and fundamentally unshakable. “For if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31) Ultimately this peace comes from the indwelling of the Trinity in our souls, and more particularly from the action and gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is nourished by the sacraments and in prayer. Accordingly, like a full faith, this peace comes primarily by living in the Lord, so that “I live, not I, but Christ in me” (Gal 2:20). But this peace operates at the natural level as well, and for very good reasons.

Several points I’ve made in previous entries in this series come into play here. While Catholics can spend a lifetime deepening their appreciation of the inner meaning of Catholic doctrine, of how the various teachings fit together, and of how they correspond to our own experience of reality, the Catholic actually reaches certitude on all the teachings of the Church through a very simple process. The potential Catholic looks first to see if there is any credible evidence that God has revealed Himself to us, and he finds that only a very few religions actually claim a public revelation which is in any sense verifiable. Then, once he is convinced of the veracity of Revelation, he must find a religion which possesses a corresponding authority which guarantees that this Revelation will be understood correctly over time.

What he finds is that only one religion in the entire history of mankind—Roman Catholicism—possesses both a verifiable public Revelation and an unimpeachable authority for interpreting it. Once he is convinced of these two foundations, everything else follows as day follows night. A convinced Catholic has no need to agonize over the truth or falsehood of each individual element of the Catholic creed, or each individual moral precept. Thus Catholics will “no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful
wiles” (Eph 4:14). Confident that truth is not first one thing and then another, the Catholic knows the profound peace of being firmly and unalterably anchored not only in Christ’s grace but also in His truth.

This peace is imparted even more deeply by the Catholic’s realization that the sheer sublimity of Catholic teaching and the incomparable means of holiness offered by the Church are such that nothing better can be found by any person who truly seeks perfection. The nobility and consistency of the Church’s teachings, the supreme blending of the spiritual and the material in her sacramental system which speaks so powerfully to the nature of man, the riches of the Catholic tradition in guiding souls, and the extraordinary spiritual power witnessed in the lives of her saints: These are but so many reminders that it is quite impossible to attain through any other means anything which so perfectly answers the highest aspirations of the human heart.

In other words, whenever he is prone to wonder or to question, the Catholic finds that the profound peace of soul he discovers in living his faith is quite logically supported in the grand scheme of things. Therefore, as the great John Henry Newman said, a thousand questions do not constitute a single doubt.

But to enter into Christ’s peace, which is precisely the peace offered by the Catholic Church—the “peace of God, which passes all understanding” (Phil 4:7)—we must arm ourselves with a certain humility, a willingness to be possessed by God so that we can also possess Him. Through the freedom of his will, man can always perversely choose a course of denial, a course perhaps most easily illustrated by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche tried mightily to convince himself that Christianity is a great inversion of human values, an assault on the pride of man, and a system now left broken by the death of God. Predictably, he went insane in this deliberate attempt to flee from Christian peace. His was a madness rooted in a profound refusal to accept the humble certainty that man need not devise his own purpose, because man is not his own end.

The proud cannot find peace, for they seek it in themselves, where it does not exist. This is why peace increases with an ever-deepening life in Christ, and why it is the very living of the Catholic life day by day and year by year which frees us from our worries, our apprehensions and our terrors. “Martha, Martha”, said Our Lord to one of his dearest friends, “you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful” (Lk 10:41-42). He explained that her sister Mary, “who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching,” had chosen “the good portion.” She had, in fact, chosen Christ’s presence and His peace over every other good. And to Martha, to Mary, and to each of us He made a great promise: It will not be taken away.
When Two Wrongs Make a Right

May 03, 2010

Apologists have often noted that it is a motive of credibility for the Church that she is constantly attacked from opposite sides for opposite things. A case in point is the New York Times analysis of the conclusion of the Vatican’s Visitation of the Legion of Christ, in which the Times claims that “the the case was marked by the same delays and bureaucratic caution that have emerged in the handling of other sexual abuse matters crossing Benedict’s desk.”

It’s funny how those who complain that the Church is precipitate and authoritarian when she takes years to investigate wayward theologians are so quick to fault the Pope for “delays and bureaucratic caution” when he proceeds carefully and methodically with a full investigation of a religious order. When you combine this with the fact that it was precisely Pope Benedict XVI who, unable as a cardinal to overcome the curial reluctance to investigate the Legion’s founder, ensured that a proper investigation took place as soon as he was elected Pope, then perhaps the Times would be wise to exercise some delay and bureaucratic caution of its own before it trips over its collective tongue.

It’s the same with the sex abuse scandal as a whole, of course. On the one hand, the Church is unceasingly attacked for her rigidly unhealthy teachings against any sexual expression outside of a marriage open to life; and on the other, she is excoriated for her failure to discipline those who refuse to abide by her rigid and unhealthy teachings. Even more amusing, both criticisms come largely from the same sources.

In fact, you’ll find this same pattern across the board. The Church is rebuked at one and the same time for putting excessive emphasis on the next life and for preserving magnificent works of art in this life. She is abused for failing to protect the downtrodden (such as the Jews in Nazi Germany) and for condoning the use of force to liberate Christian captives under Islam (such as in the Crusades). She is ridiculed for disdaining human nature and for claiming that God took on that nature in the Person of her Lord and Savior. She finds her social teachings ignored even while she is accused of failing to use her influence for human good. On and on goes the secular litany of complaint. The Church is ever too much and too little, and all at the same time.

“To what then shall I compare the men of this generation, and what are they like?” asks Jesus Christ.

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They are like children sitting in the market place and calling to one another,

“We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not weep.”

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say,
“He has a demon.” The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say,
“Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Mt 11:16-19; Lk 7:31-34)
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