

Initiation into Truth

*2014 Academic Address
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One of the most influential book in my own intellectual development was Jean Cardinal Danilou's *The Bible and the Liturgy*. it was my first introduction to the *Ressourcement* movement and it would open my mind for my encounter with the Neo-Patristic School of Orthodoxy, which shares a similar methodology with *Ressourcement*.

Danilou describes the awesome initiation rites of the early Church. In it he speaks of the Holy Spirit, sacramentally present in the initiation rites, who brings about an initiation into truth.

Initiation into truth is the theme of my academic address tonight. As Christians, we are standing at a moment in history at the junction between the modern and the post-modern, between the rational and romantic, where positivism restricts truth to the observable and measurable and the Romantic restriction restricts truth to intuition and emotion has given way to the deconstruction of truth into mere "truth claims" with support from "culturally specific narratives."

You have been called by God and by your bishops to prepare for priesthood in this moment of history. Father Barron has spoken to you many times about what is new about evangelization. He has also told you time and again that there is a new situation, where obstacles stand in the way of people even approaching Christianity.

There is hostility to Christianity which must first be overcome before proclamation can be heard. I want to argue tonight that one of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council provides us with an important component of the New Evangelization. And I want to explore one aspect of this reform as a way of beginning to understand a dynamic of the new evangelization which will be necessary to minister to post-moderns. The reform of which I am speaking is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

Approaches to truth

During the thirteen years I served in full time parish ministry, I was always involved with the RCIA. Some of the older priests with whom I was assigned would question me about the need for the liturgical dimension of the rites. They were of the old school of convert classes. In their minds, conversion was about intellectual ascent to information – to truth as a proposition. If you believed right, everything else would follow. This is, as Father Hebden points out in his lectures, the Thomistic approach to knowledge is a three-step process of sensory observation, intellection, and finally the movement of the will. This notion was popularized by Cardinal Cardijn in his famous “observe – judge – act” approach to Christian practice.¹

Now, I agree that you have to believe aright. But the approach of conversion as intellectual ascent to doctrine assumes that truth is a proposition. But what the great minds of the twentieth century, Balthasar, Congar, Danilou, de Lubac, Ratzinger and Wojtyla have shown us is that truth is, first of all, a person, Jesus Christ. Propositions

¹ See Craig Prentiss, *Debating God's Economy: Social Justice in America on the Eve of Vatican II* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

are important, but they come later. Before all else, as Cardinal Dullas has noted, is a personal, adult encounter with Jesus Christ in the Church.

Now, if it sounds as if I am saying that experience is the ground out of which we find truth, you are hearing me correctly. But, I would add, only specific experiences qualify as sources of truth. Most experience is too particular to contain the transcendence necessary to be a source of truth. Also, human experiences are, well, human. Therefore they contain elements of both sanctified and fallen reality. So, individual experiences are not usually trustworthy, because of the continuation of concupiscence in our lives. Group or community experience is also not trustworthy because whatever it is that constitutes the community, limits the community from being universal. The “model train community” is constituted by its members establishing their particular affection for model trains as an organizing principle in their identity and lives. Among all of the ideologies extant today, it seems to me that only four are able to overcome, or transcend, the limits of particularity. These four include the three great missionary religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam and the only universal secular philosophy, humanism.² Their secret to a claim to universality lies in their belief that their insights are true for the whole human race. They echo Vincent of Lerins by

² My selection of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam is based on an analysis of religion by Mortimer J. Adler in his book, *Truth in Religion: the Diversity of Religions and the Unity of Truth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). My characterization of humanism refers to the wide tradition of humanistic thought and not the narrow caricature called “secular humanism.” On the nature of humanism as a “faith” see Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 24. Critchley, who is not a theist, reluctantly comes to the conclusion that politics, his main concern, is not practicable without religion. Consequently, there is no way for politics to shape a society without an appeal to transcendence as the basis or foundation of that same society. Belief, therefore, is necessary to provide transcendence, or fullness to use Charles Taylor’s term.

claiming that something is true, *ubique, semper ab omnibus* (everywhere, always and by all). In other words, truth applies across all cultures.³

Truth is unitive. Ideology is, by contrast, particular and divisive. Now, I could talk for about thirty years about the four “faiths” but since we all want to go to dinner sometime before 2044, which incidentally would be the 200th anniversary of USML, let me dispose of the other “faiths” with three sentences. Both Buddhism and humanism locate truth in the nature of the human person. Both Islam and Christianity locate truth in the nature of God. Christianity alone sees truth as relational. It can do so because, as Father Barron reminded us in his rector’s address, of the non-competitive transcendence of God which is revealed in Jesus Christ.⁴

Consequently, truth is something we are initiated into before we assent to it in propositional form.

My point is that we are initiated into truth by our incorporation in the Church. If Christ is the truth, then incorporation into Christ inserts us into truth. Archbishop Arthur Roche, who delivered the 2014 Meyer Lectures, noted that the liturgy is an icon of the heavenly reality, which is to say, an image of the perfected Church.⁵ And that

³ This is the famous “canon of Vincent of Lerins” mentioned by John Henry Newman. Vincent’s statement was that three criteria: *ubique, semper, ab omnibus* (everywhere, always and by all) when simultaneously present indicated what is true in Catholic doctrine. I am applying his canon here to illustrate the notion of truth as transcultural which underlies it.

⁴ See Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Post-liberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Books, 2007), 17.

⁵ See Arthur Roach, *Actuosa Participatio* (unpublished manuscript, University of Saint Mary of the Lake, March 27 & 28, 2014).

church of heaven is nothing other than life in the mystery of the Trinity.⁶ So, as Archimandrite Vasileios of Stavronikita has said, the sacramental “structure of the Church [is] an initiation into the mystery of the Trinity.”⁷ Maximos the Confessor puts it well when he writes that “the holy Church is an icon of God, for it brings about among the faithful a unity the same as that which is in God.”⁸ Vasileios goes deeper with this idea:

The church has a mission to bear witness to unity, because in it God is known not simply as sole ruler, but as a perfect communion of three persons [The Word] becomes flesh in order to demonstrate the spiritual mission of the flesh, and to show how everything has come into being and increases and is transfigured through the unity and fecundity of the Trinity.”⁹

My experience as a parish priest

The unity and fecundation of the Trinity is revealed in the rites of Christian initiation.¹⁰ One story will make my point. I was parish priest at Our Lady of the Wayside in Arlington Heights and directing RCIA. A number of you have done field education there or been interns, and, of course, Father Barnum served as pastor there a few years

⁶ This is the central insight of John Zizioulas, whose doctrine of God is described around an ecclesiological heuristic. See Helen Theodoropoulos “Introduction to John Zizioulas” (unpublished lecture, University of Saint Mary of the Lake, July 15, 2014).

⁷ Vasileios of Stavronikita, *Hymn of Entry: Liturgy and Life in the Orthodox Church* (Chestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 41.

⁸ Maximos the Confessor, *Mystegogy*, Ch. 1, in PG 91:668B.

⁹ Vasileior, op. cit.

¹⁰ See Jean Danilou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973).

after me. The candidates could not understand the idea that the diocese, and not the parish, was the local expression of the Catholic Church.

But then came Lent and it was time to go to the Cathedral for the rite of election. What they could not understand intellectually from my teaching, they received from the rite itself. The Church of Chicago was *revealed* to them. Being received and elected by the bishop, they came to see the bishop not only as the pastor's boss, in other words as an administrator, but as a principle of unity among all the parish churches. And they saw that it was the same for the whole Catholic Church under the ministry of the Pope. The nature of the church was revealed to them in that liturgical rite. And they came to realize that though they were only a few people from Arlington Heights, they were part of a multitude across the archdiocese. Thousands of adults were finding their spiritual home in the Catholic Church. They were not alone. Participation had revealed this truth.

Knowing through participation in the rite changed everything about their understanding of Christ in the Church. Six weeks later when they were baptized and confirmed, though they were only five in Arlington Heights, they knew that they were in communion with nearly three thousand other adults across Chicagoland. While I could teach them the doctrine intellectually, until they experienced it through liturgical participation, they could not really know it.

Communio, then, the central concept of the *Ressourcement* theologians is, as Vasileios would put it:

. . . the center and principle of the world both visible and invisible. There is one way to true unity and existence: the way of life of the Holy Trinity. And this is what Jesus asks of the Father, that the faithful may be united even as we are, that they may be united because we are united; and there is no other way to authentic and fruitful living. . . . [this is]the Trinitarian basis of ecclesiology”¹¹

Study adult conversions

This fruitfulness is revealed in the attractive power of adult conversions. If you want to be effective new evangelists, you need more than apologetic arguments. You need to study contemporary conversions. I specifically say contemporary conversions because there is a specific dynamic to the movement of the Spirit in the post-modern age which is different from earlier times. In the modern period, most conversions involved people who were already believers of some sort who needed to be accompanied into the full expression of Christianity which is the Catholic Church. But the post-modern convert is different. The reason is their need to overcome hostility to religion itself which has developed as a result of secularism and relativism. I want to share some of social science findings with you because knowing the experience of post-modern converts will allow you to take from your studies here at Mundelein what will be most helpful in the new evangelization. We now have large enough samples to make reliable ranging claims.¹² What I am going to describe are patterns or stages of which have been observed in the testimonies of two thousand post-modern converts and then highlight

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹² Weddell and Schaupp

approaches to ministry to individuals at each stage. Finally, I will relate this to the theology I have been developing in this address thus far.

Based on these testimonies from post-modern converts, I can see certain patterns emerging in the journey they make from hostility to Christianity to faith in Christ. Let me make seven statements which complete the phrase “The post-modern convert . . .” and explore the detail of each.

1. The post-modern convert had little or no childhood formation in faith-life.

The first element of the emerging pattern is that these individuals had little or no childhood formation in faith-life. If they were baptized, it was not followed by any kind of catechesis. Perhaps more importantly, their home life was lived without reference to God.

2. The post-modern convert turned away from faith as an adult and developed of a hostile attitude towards religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Another element of the pattern seem to be that upon reaching young adulthood, by which I mean the college years, there was a conscious turning away from religion. Religion in general as a category of thought was rejected and Christianity in particular was seen to embody all of the qualities which a right-minded person needed to reject. This element of the pattern is what is distinctly post-modern, for what is being rejected intellectually are the universalized truth claims of religion and the exclusive behaviors which result from them.

3. The post-modern convert had an experience of Christianity as a contrast to dominant society

The converts next tell of how they lived their lives happily without God or religion. Indeed, they often conceived themselves as more moral persons than Christians, whom they perceived as openly intolerant. They were “good without God” meaning that they thought themselves moral, indeed exemplars of morality because of their inclusive attitudes.

But they also report that some event occurred in their lives where they saw a different side to Christianity. They saw Christians living as a contrast society, to borrow a term from Avery Dulles. Now, listen closely, they did not agree with the contrast (indeed, in most cases they found it repellant), but they were able to admire the persons living that contrast.

4. The post-modern convert engaged in a long period of dialogue with through a friendship with a Christian which resulted in their becoming a seeker

All of the people whose testimonies I read report that the experience of Christians as a “contrast society” led them to enter into a friendship. That friendship became a dialogue of life. Two things are important here. The dialogue was not directly about the issues which separated them. Indeed, in the testimonies I read, if the Christian had tried to share the gospel or invite the secularist to church, it would have driven them away. No, the dialogue period, which in all the testimonies lasted two or more years, was entirely experienced as the establishment of human communion.

5. The post-modern convert experienced a subtle shift – a quiet conversion

Experiencing such human communion with Christians had a profound effect. All of the converts I read describe feeling accepted as persons, in spite of the fact that they knew their new Christian friends held beliefs and values in sharp contrast to the ones that animated the convert's life. But the acceptance, which they describe as "I could tell that he liked me, even though I held different beliefs and values" became the bridge across which they could walk in their eventual conversion.

All of the stories describe the convert coming to a point of going to church. Now again, the details are important. Their new Christian friends did not bring them to church. The converts report that they had to find their way there on their own, and it had to be this way. They had to be anonymous and unmolested in their entrance to Christian worship. Interesting word "unmolested." I think it refers to the intuition that there is something overwhelming about entering into worship of a holy God. They all report that they needed to be the one responsible for their entrance. But all report that so long as they could enter, anonymous and unmolested, enter they did. And slowly, sometimes over months, they began to pray with the assembly. And one day, they realized they were speaking to God as to a person. And they knew that they had become believers.

I use "belief" here in the sense of "ascent." It is important to see that they gave ascent to a person, not a proposition. What *Pastores Dabo Vobis* says about priestly formation is equally true in evangelism: human communion is the basis for intellectual and spiritual communion with Christ and the Church.

6. The post-modern convert suffered through a dramatic life reorientation after their conversion

As subtle and perhaps invisible as the conversion event was in these cases, what followed for each of the testimonies was anything but subtle. The new relationship with Christ and the Church quickly reordered all other relationships. The converts describe this period as a “trainwreck” or “worse than the worst divorce.” Relationships which were the center of their lives ended in irreparable ways and with great pain. Post-modern conversions are costly grace. Cardinal Danilou, in his descriptions of the rites of holy week speaks about the high point of the rite being the death of baptism. The post-modern convert would want to edit that chapter and add that the death of baptism is followed, not preceded, by a Way of the Cross. The passion of conversion, which produces an anguished cry of *Eloi, eloi, lama sabachtani* for the depth of the convert’s being, comes from the way a relationship with Christ and the Church reorders all other relationships. Some of the people the convert loved the most will turn their backs on him or her and shake the dust from their feet in testimony against the convert. Every convert is also an apostate from some other community and worldview.

It is in this phase that the converts report that the church is most important as a human community. Here all anonymity and control are gone. What is needed is a kind of intensive pastoral care and community support. And it is in this phase that doctrine becomes important to the new convert. One cited the Gospel of John:

Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.

You see here the paradox of the role of doctrine in the new evangelization. The paradox is that its effect is posterior to conversion – it has a *mystegogical* role.

7. Right after conversion, the post-modern convert needed to be surrounded by ordinary but fervent Christians, living in churches which have a clear identity, a clear spirituality and a clear apostolate.

Mystegogy, the final stage in Christian initiation, is also different in the post-modern conversion. Because the church has the role of contrast society, mystegogy requires Christian communities which have a clear identity, a clear method of spirituality and a clear apostolate in order to form disciples for this age. I can prove this with two examples: religious orders which have these three clear elements are having no trouble with vocations. The new ecclesial movements also show the same three elements. They have attractive power which builds credibility before a secular world.

To conclude, let me say just a few words about the ministerial dimension. In ministry, it's not enough to be right, you also have to be effective. And being effective depends on you being that human bridge which Father Barron talks about, across which people can walk to encounter the Living God. As you study theology, if you would be new evangelists, remember that in addition to learning the arguments of theologians, you must also learn the skills of pastors. Cardinal George has said over and over again to the Lay Ecclesial Ministry candidates, "if you get the relationships right, everything else will follow."

Initiation into truth through participation

Brothers and sisters, we will get those human relationships right if we understand the Church as the icon in the world of the Holy Trinity. Ecclesial reality is the relationships of persons who, by their union with Jesus Christ, are caught up in the divine life of the Trinity. Ecclesial reality is union with the Logos, rationality himself, which reorders understanding to conform it to the truth of the Trinity.

Charity is above all human communion. It is a place which leaves the individual unmolested. It is a place which proclaims their human dignity, separate from any sin they may have committed. Pastoral care begins with that human dignity. The evangelistic move is to introduce a person to *the* Person – Jesus Christ, in his body, the Church. We do this as Jesus did, with Zachaeus, “Zachaeus, I intend to come to your house tonight.” Recall that Jesus came to Zachaeus’ house before Zachaeus’ repentance. It was the relationship with Jesus that led Zachaeus to repent and make restitution.

What is required of you? Does theology make such a demand as well? I believe that the conversion to theology has a similar dynamic to conversion to the Christian life.

Let me take read John 7:17. Jesus, speaking to his disciples says: “. . . My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me, if any one may will to do His will, he shall know concerning the [doctrine], whether it is of God, or -- I do speak from myself.”¹³ Now, as Gary M. Burge has noted, what is at issue in this passage is Jesus authority to

¹³ John 7:16-17 (translation mine).

teach. The authority to teach came from rabbinic ordination, which formed an unbroken chain from Moses to the rabbinic scholar.¹⁴ Burge writes

. . . the Jewish notion of authority was specialized. No one possessed inherent authority; it was secondary and indirect. Authority was passed down and conferred to the rabbi through ordination. . . . Jesus' problem was this: he was not ordained. On whose shoulders was he standing? What traditions were his? What was the source of his authority? Jesus answer is clear; his authority stems directly from God.¹⁵

Truth grounded in inherent authority is accessed by participation. Said another way, it is found through relationship. Relational learning is a different kind of knowing. I'll speak more about that in a future academic address, but for now I want to apply it to our purpose here at Mundelein.

The post-modern moment is a crisis of knowledge. One popular response is secularism (living as if there is no God). This attitude leads to two similar stances: agnosticism (saying we can't know), or fideism, which throws reason out the window and forced the will to believe. Both deny rationality, which is the very nature of divine being. But there is another response which in an odd way unites the two aspects of the secular response. Kenneth Smith has called this "the hermeneutics of obedience." He points to John 7:17 as an example.¹⁶ He asserts that knowledge comes after the

¹⁴ Gary M. Burge, "John" in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1989), 857.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, see the text of John 7:14-18.

¹⁶ Kenneth Smith, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience" unpublished sermon delivered at the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church (1999).

experience of obedience. Jesus says: “. . . My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me, *if any one may will to do His will, he shall know concerning the [doctrine],* whether it is of God, or -- I do speak from myself.”¹⁷

There is a subtle shift here, but one which takes us back to Jean Danilou. “. . .if any one may will to do [God’s] will, he shall know concerning the [doctrine] . . .”¹⁸ This is not fideism, believing a proposition after the abandonment of reason, but knowledge through participation. It recognizes Jesus’ inherent authority. It means trusting God before understanding, using that trust to move our will to conform ourselves to the will of the person we are trusting, and from that experience coming to certainty about his teaching. It is not forcing belief, as fideism does, but giving a secure experience from which we can “know concerning the doctrine.” John 7:17 represents the culmination of the entire process of post-modern conversion, which I earlier described.

Sisters and brothers, regardless of which degree program you are following, you are called by the Popes to take up the work of the new evangelization. This will demand of you a level of theological skills not required of earlier generations. But the good news is after some decades of studying and reflecting on the papal teaching, from Pope Saint John XXIII, through Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul I, Pope Saint John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis, we have a refined sense of both what and how we need to proceed. We must be initiated into truth so that we might become intentional disciples, which in turn will equip us to be new evangelists.

¹⁷ John 7:16-17 (translation mine).

¹⁸ Ibid.

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