

Lies, all lies

Homily on 1 John 4:19-5:4 – Thursday After Epiphany

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Bishop Robert Barron is well known to all of you. As part of his evangelization ministry, *Word on Fire*, he frequently engages with viewers online or in blogs about the objections to Christianity. Over the years, he has made a list of the objections. It has ranged from three to nine, depending on the context. Some of the objections that made the list include:

- The problem of God – which refers to the new atheists who are not able to see a transcendent dimension to life.
- The problem of the Bible – which principally refers to the Old Testament and how it depicts God as vengeful.
- The problem of evil – or why a good God allows bad things to happen to innocent people.
- The problem of religion and science – which is basically a competition over the basis for truth. And finally,
- The problem of religious violence

Barron contends that *properly* understood, these are not problems or, at least, Christianity has a credible answer to each. But *popularly* understood, these are

enormous obstacles which stand in the way of a serious person taking Christianity seriously.

What is significant in Bishop Barron's view is the way in which the apologetic conversation has shifted in the last 100 years. In the United States of America, the apologetic question had been "which church is true." This question shifted about 50 years ago to "which religion is true." Today we are confronted with the question "is any religion true? From his on-line dialogues, Barron points to the last of the obstacles as central to the original change. The reality of religious violence is central in the minds of many people who reject religion altogether. Violence in the name of religion is undeniable. The defining moment for a whole generation, the date that will live in infamy, is not December 7, 1941, but September 11, 2001. What was different about the two is that the first attack on American soil was made in the name of the Empire of Japan. The second was made in the name of the God of Abraham.

The problem of religious violence means that our internal discussions if Christians and Muslims worship the same God, or if this is an expression of authentic Islam or a radical deviation are simply meaningless to a growing percentage of the population. For them, the violence looks like just one more crusade, one more war measured in hundreds of years which has religion as its cause. Even Hans Kung in his quite respectable book *Global Responsibility* argued that there will be no peace in the world without peace among the religions.¹ Anti-theists point to this claim by a

¹ Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004). See also, Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kusche, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's*

Christian theologian as proof that religion is itself a fundamental source of violence – a problem not a solution. If I might be allowed an understatement, we are not offering persuasive witness.

Our readings today present us with the First Letter of John. The sacred author writes:

Beloved, we love God because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother [or sister], he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother [or sister] whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: Whoever loves God must also love his brother [or sister].

James B. De Young, in his commentary on this text, takes us right to the heart of the sacred author's message. It is a false claim for one who hates his neighbor to say that he loves God.²

Such a person is a liar about love (about morality, about doctrine). One cannot love the invisible God (the hardest thing and not easily tested) if he does not love God's visible image in a brother [or sister] (the easier thing, easily tested). Verse 21 completes this section by restating the command to love both God and one's

Religions (New York: Continuum, 1993), 45. Thomas A. Baima, "Toward a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration Its Making and Its Future" in *The Community of Religions: Voices and Images of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, eds. Wayne Teasdale and George Cairns (New York: Continuum, 1996), 143-149.

² James B. De Young, "1 John" in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 1185.

brother [or sister] as a single command. To love God is to obey his command to love him and others.³

In short, the credibility of Christianity for evangelism rest in large measure on the behavior of Christians. Right now, the world is disposed to believe that religion is the source of violence. Any justification of violence, even notional violence in the form of hateful attitudes, proves the point. And thus, the obstacles to belief remain. Anything we say to the contrary sounds like lies, all lies.

Now, you may wonder why I have gone this far into my annual sermon on Christian unity speaking only about evangelism. Well, it is certainly because the reading which the Church has appointed for today authorizes, even demands it. And being a committed lectionary preacher, I have to follow the direction of the text. But there is another reason I'm speaking about evangelism and its obstacles. And that reason takes up to the heart of the message of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and our mission as the Parish-to Parish Learning Community. The reason is that evangelism and ecumenism are two sides of the same coin. Or, to stress the point more strongly, quoting my astrophysicist colleague, Fr. John Kartje, there aren't even two sides – it's a Mobius coin. In spiritual matters, sometimes things are so interdependent that it is as if they are truly only one thing.

³ Ibid.

This is how I understand the relationship of ecumenism and evangelism. They are two points on a single continuum. In 2014, at Mundelein Seminary, I preached about Christian unity. I said then:

This annual octave, from the Confession of Peter to the Conversion of Paul, is intended as a time of intense spiritual effort to repair the division in the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, in the United States, two other issues requiring intense prayer are also commemorated this week. Martin Luther King Day, when the nation remembers the sin of racism and recommits itself to the right to equality of all persons, and the Day of Prayer for the Unborn, when the Catholic Church recommits herself to the right to life for all persons. In most dioceses, then, and Chicago is no exception, the feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul occurring as it does at the end of the week, becomes the best day for remembering the unity Christ wills for the Church and recommit ourselves to the right of all persons to hear the Gospel.⁴

I went on to stress that to me, “ecumenism is all about conversion. Indeed, Christian unity is impossible without conversion.”⁵ Let me add that this is a particular kind of conversion which I will define in a moment. My reason for stating this so strongly lies in both the insights of Bishop Barron about the obstacles to evangelism and in the

⁴ Thomas A. Baima, “Is Christ Divided?” unpublished sermon delivered at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake, January 25, 2014 <https://usml.edu/wp-content/uploads/Sermon-Is-Christ-Divided-Christian-Unity-2014.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

history of the ecumenical movement, which had its birth at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910.

The 18th century was a time of great expansion in world missions. Many Catholic religious orders were founded for foreign mission work. At the same time, many foreign mission boards were founded in the Protestant communities. In 1910, these mission boards held an international congress for returning missionaries. In Scotland, there gathered missionaries who had spent their careers in foreign lands, proclaiming Christ to new nations. At their gathering, they told their stories. One by one, they heard each other say that the main obstacle they encountered in the proclamation of the gospel was the division of the churches. They realized they were proclaiming a divided Christ – doctrinally an impossibility. And because it was doctrinally impossible, the act of doing it had another name, sin. It was, they realized, the same dilemma posed by our first reading tonight. If we proclaim love for Christ, but hate other Christians, we are liars. And the world will not believe.

The missionaries in Edinburgh faced their error with firm purpose and from them the ecumenical movement was born. For over one hundred years, ecumenists have toiled to both proclaim Christ and to love him in other Christians. They did that so that the world might believe. We must do the same, that this metropolitan area might believe.

Right now, the Archdiocese of Chicago is engaged in Renew My Church. The newspapers are treating it like a strategic planning exercise, driven by scarcity. But if that is all they see, they miss the other side of the coin. In one of his first events here in

Chicago after becoming archbishop, Cardinal Cupich addressed the Institute for Lay Formation during its annual gathering of lay ecclesial ministry candidates. It was the first program I did with him apart from his installation and the interreligious observance that accompanied it. When speaking to the lay ecclesial ministers, the Cardinal said “I didn’t come here to preside over a retrenchment. I came to grow this local church.” He went on to talk about how, if we can get the financial house in order, then instead of pouring money into old buildings, we can deploy it for ministerial personnel and programs.

And he said more. He said that he has always thought that we should spend all of seminary talking about baptism. As the foundational sacrament, if we fully understand baptism, we understand the church.

Baptism is, of course, what binds us to other Christians. So, I want to make the bold claim tonight that ecumenism is an essential ingredient to the success of Renew My Church. More than that, I will assert that each of us in the Parish-to-Parish Learning Community has some gift we could offer to the larger project of Renew My Church.

If ecumenism is an essential ingredient to the success of Renew My Church, it is because ecumenism is about conversion. The conversion which ecumenists learn is not to this or that denomination, but conversion to the intention of Jesus Christ for his body, the Church. Regardless of where we start from, the ecumenical call is to conform our lives to that of a disciple of Jesus. As Stuart Brisco once wrote: “A disciple is one who

follows Jesus, sits at his feet, learns from him, shares in his life.”⁶ The disciple conforms his will to the intention of Jesus. As ecumenists, what we can offer to our parish communities as they enter Renew My Church, is that the vital spiritual lesson equally is not about this or that parish, but conversion to the intention of Jesus Christ for the Church of Chicago.

The second way that ecumenism is an essential ingredient to the success of Renew My Church is dialogue. We hear a lot about accompaniment. Accompaniment means that we encounter individuals or communities where they are. We go to them. This is the meaning of *missionary* discipleship. We do not set as a condition that they first come to us. This condition-less attitude allows us to listen and walk with others, at their pace. Paul VI in his great encyclical letter, *Ecclesiam Suam* (Paths of the Church) said simply that, in the contemporary period, the way of the Church is the way of dialogue with the modern world. This practice, Paul VI stated, involves “circles of dialogue” within the Catholic Church and between the Catholic Church and other Christians, other believers and all of humankind, including those who either do not believe or who have rejected belief. In short, all of humanity.⁷

More so than in Paul VI’s day, the modern world is a difficult place for a Christian. Yet, as ecumenists we have developed both skills in dialogue and the virtue

⁶ Stuart Brisco, “Ordinary Folks Make Great Disciples” in *Preaching Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today) <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/047.html>

⁷ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam: The Encyclical Letter on the Paths of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), nos. 96-113.

of patience. Both are necessary for quality accompaniment. Since we have these skills and virtues, we can share them with our parish leaders.

The final reason that ecumenism is an essential ingredient to the success of Renew My Church has to do with dialogue being non-competitive. Robert Barron, in his most theological of works, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism*, focused on the biblical text of our first reading tonight. Barron writes:

The author of the First Letter of John stated [the] revolutionary insight [that God is not so much a monolith of power and ontological perfection as a play of love and relationality such that he can say] God is love. . . . [In the Christian story of creation] the order and existence of the world [came] not through any sort of invasion, manipulation, or external interference but through a sheerly generous and nonviolent act of selfless love. Herbert McCabe caught this truth beautifully when he said that the world is sustained in being by God much as a song is sustained in being by a singer.⁸

Approaches to evangelism which are aggressive or combative like classical apologetics only prove to those outside the Church that religion is violent in its nature and expression. But as ecumenists we have learned that the path to a God who is love is through non-competitive cooperation. We know that we have grown spiritually on this path. If we can give evidence of that spiritual vitality, we can offer an effective

⁸ Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 17-18. Herbert McCabe, the Dominican philosopher at Oxford University who died in 2001, actually engaged most of the “problems” which Bishop Barron names. A good first book to read is McCabe’s *God Still Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

witness in the face of one of the main obstacles to a world believing in Christianity. This could be our contribution to the evangelism which must animate Renew My Church.

My few examples here do not exhaust the ways in which those of us who work in the ministry of ecumenical and interreligious affairs can contribute to the evangelistic mission of Renew My Church. There are many others and I encourage you to discover them in your own contexts. But as you go out from the Mass tonight, resolve to look for ways to bring what you have learned in the Parish-to Parish Learning Community to the Renew My Church process. You are a gift and you have a gift. And as we know from the Christmas season which just ended, gifts are to be shared.

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