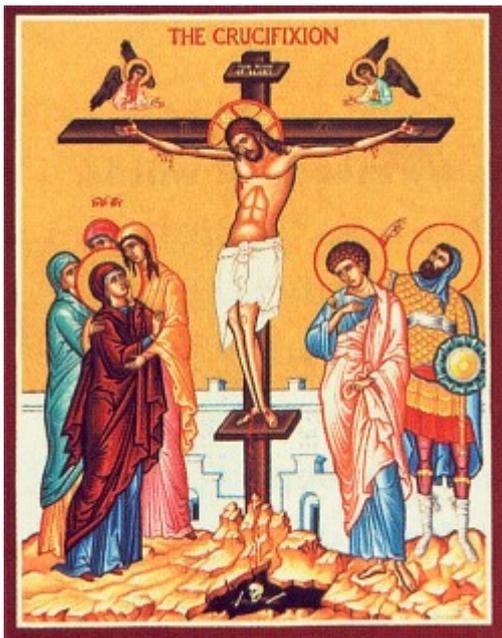


# I Get Mail: A Response to a Catholic Reader

I got an email awhile ago from a young Roman Catholic gentleman who expressed appreciation for some of what I've written on my blog, following a growing frustration with online rationalist Roman Catholic apologetics.

*I first came across your blog ten years ago when I was fifteen and beginning to seriously study the Reformation and Roman Catholicism from a Baptist background, and read it intermittently for a couple of years. I did eventually become a Catholic, at twenty four, but recently began reading your blog again. . . . The reason I've returned to reading your blog is largely because of a burnout with modern Catholic discourse [especially rationalist Catholic apologetics] . . . I've found that reading solid devotional writing like yours, whether from Catholics, Protestants, or Orthodox, does far more for my faith than the old polemical reading I used to do.*



Dear xxxxx,

I've been meaning to reply to your kind email. It is Ash Wednesday, and I have a little time. Your email was quite encouraging to me. Around six months ago, I began receiving repeated emails from a Roman Catholic gentleman who would ask one-line questions such as "Who founded your church?," while including links to conservative Catholic apologetics sites. I sent several replies that I hoped would be charitable, but he ignored what I actually wrote, and just kept bombarding me. Finally, I had to block his email address. So imagine how encouraging it was to receive a positive email from a Catholic reader of my blog. I often wonder whether what I write is helpful to anyone except myself, and I am always happy to hear when it is.

Concerning what you write about rationalist apologetics: I find conservative online apologetics to be generally toxic; it does not matter what brand is being sold. The biggest problem with these people seems to be a peculiarly modern obsession with epistemological certitude coupled with an obsessive Cartesian anxiety about doubt. These folks spend way too much time focusing on arguments as to why their side is the only correct one, and far too little time exploring the substance of their Christian faith, whether they be Catholic, Orthodox, some kind of Protestant, or Anglican (like myself).

One of the most helpful books I have read in recent years was D. Stephen Long's *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation* (Fortress Press, 2014). In this book, Long (a Methodist) writes about how Balthasar (a Roman Catholic) rediscovered the heart of Christian faith through reading Karl Barth (Reformed). Barth's theology focused on the Nicene-Chalcedonian center of Christian faith: the Trinity and the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Balthasar believed that if Catholicism were going to be renewed in the 20th century, it needed to return to this Nicene-Chalcedonian center, and abandon the unfruitful manualist Apologetics of the late 19th and early 20th century that focused on Catholic quarrels with

Protestantism and modernity. It is this creedal center that I have found most fruitful for my own theology and spiritual life.

I too am a former Baptist who, after pursuing an MA at a Roman Catholic seminary, got as far as Canterbury (Anglicanism), but never was quite able to cross the Tiber. Still, I received all of my graduate training at Roman Catholic institutions and have always been grateful to those Catholic donors who made possible my scholarship at the University of Notre Dame. I have learned much from Catholics, and continue to read them with profit.

If you have now found your home in the Catholic Church, I would encourage you to begin exploring the riches of your tradition. In the modern era, I would recommend reading people like von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, or Louis Bouyer. Among better contemporary writers, I would point to Matthew Levering, Giles Emery, Robert Barron, and Thomas Weinandy. I return again and again to the spiritual writings of Dominican Simon Tugwell, but also have appreciated Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day.

If you still find yourself drawn to apologetics, I would recommend reading modern Catholic philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre or Charles Taylor.

Of course, you should not neglect the stream of Catholic tradition from which all modern orthodox Christians drink. (Since they wrote before the Reformation, I am happy to claim these people as well). Thomas Aquinas continues to be the pre-modern thinker I read most, and, fortunately, there is a modern revival of scholarship. The best introduction to Thomas's thought is probably Jean-Pierre Torrell's two volume work on *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and his Work* and *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*. Although he is primarily a philosopher, I have learned much from my doctoral dissertation director, David Burrell. Just as important are

Medieval spiritual writers like Julian of Norwich and Walter Hilton.

And, of course, there is the entire treasure of patristic writers to explore: Irenaeus, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, the Cappadocians, Augustine.

Finally, if enough time has passed that you're willing to venture again into non-Roman Catholic territory, I would recommend reading for spiritual refreshment (among Anglicans) the poetry of George Herbert, the sermons of John Donne, and the spiritual writings of Thomas Traherne. In theology, besides Karl Barth, Thomas F. Torrance is perhaps the greatest of modern ecumenical theologians. Among philosophers – again, there's that apologetic stuff – I would recommend James K. A. Smith's *Kingdom* trilogy (or the popular short version, *You are What You Love*), or the writings of David Bentley Hart (Orthodox). In the area of Christian ethics, Stanley Hauerwas and Oliver O'Donovan can't be beat.

What all of these writers have in common is a generous Catholic (or catholic) theology that is rooted in the creedal center of Nicene-Chalcedonian orthodoxy. If you immerse yourself in the writings of such people, and combine it with a spirituality rooted in Scripture, daily prayer, and regular liturgical worship, you cannot go far wrong. And you're right. Stay away from the apologetics blogosphere. It is toxic.

Grace and Peace,  
Bill Witt