

Fr. Perozich comments —

Recently a faithful Catholic couple contacted me regarding some ambiguity that was being posted by one of the people on a website, something that omitted the fact that the posted Catholic group was not in full communion with Rome.

Their response was to lay out the facts which did a service to the church teaching and informing other readers on the site, but perhaps not the fullness of an approach to apologetics.

David Bonagura, Jr. reminds the reader that the purpose of apologetics is “to convince those without faith that it is reasonable to believe in God and His Son Jesus Christ.”

His technique for apologetics is to build trust between the apologist and the interlocutor with personal testimony:

“that contemporary apologetics should prioritize the personal testimony, or witness, of the apologist over the content of his arguments. This testimony, Dulles continues, is best supported by the personalist philosophy expounded by Pope St. John Paul II. By focusing “on the aspirations of the human heart for communion with the divine,” apologists can more effectively persuade “readers who suffer from the anonymity of contemporary collectivism or the isolation of contemporary individualism.”

Many of us have family members, friends who have abandoned the faith. The whole Catholic church seems to have abandoned the course of apologetics in favor of climate change, immigration, income redistribution, sexual rights, change in power structures in the church, etc.

My power rests in my faith in Jesus and my proclamation of that in any place, time or medium where I can share it on a personal level rather than on the arguments alone.

The apologist will suffer for his faith even from hierarchy in the church by the cancel culture there as well as in the secular arena. Peter was crucified upside down, Paul beaten, imprisoned, killed, as were all the apostles save John. This is the reward of martyrdom for fidelity to the mission.

The trust needs to be built, that the person to whom one is evangelizing is cared for, with the apologist knowing that in every human heart is planted a desire to know God, even if that heart be hardened as we see in so many people today.

Apologetics in the “Age of Cancellation”

By David G Bonagura, Jr.
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In 2004, as a precursor to his important book *A History of Apologetics*, Cardinal Avery Dulles – one of the great American theologians of the 20th century – called for a rebirth of “apologetics.” Though its specific forms have changed over the centuries, the purpose of apologetics (a technical theological term in Catholicism) has remained constant: to convince those without faith that it is reasonable to believe in God and His Son Jesus Christ.

Due to increasing skepticism and secularism, Dulles proposed that contemporary apologetics should prioritize the personal testimony, or witness, of the apologist over the content of his arguments. This testimony, Dulles continues, is best supported by the personalist philosophy expounded by Pope St. John Paul II. By focusing “on the aspirations of the human heart for communion with the divine,” apologists can more effectively persuade “readers who suffer from the anonymity of contemporary collectivism or the isolation of contemporary individualism.”

In the years since, the Internet has offered chances for an apologetics boom that Dulles likely never could have imagined. And it confirms Dulles’ **preference for personal testimony prior to philosophical argumentation as the correct approach for a nihilistic age.** The Internet offers at an instant not only the entire Catholic Tradition and every philosophical argument ever waged in defense of the Faith, but its ubiquitous video and social media features allow for apologists to witness as human beings in a form of the interpersonal encounter that Dulles rightly deemed essential.

Apologetics succeeds, in this view, when trust develops between the apologist and his interlocutor, who accepts the testimony only when he comes to trust the apologist as a person. As such, converts will often name the apologist instrumental in their conversions before naming specific arguments. By contrast, “to reject the message is to withhold confidence in the witness,” wrote Dulles. Consider the damage that an Internet apologist exposed as a fraud can do to converts or potential converts just starting to warm to the faith. (There have been some sad cases.)

Within the last few years, the Internet’s shadow side has also presented a dangerous challenge to the apologetics of testimony: the fractioning of groups and the “canceling” of anyone who dares to transgress the codes of the groups in power.

Often, before pressing play on an apologist’s podcast or video, the interlocutor wants to know to what tribe the apologist belongs. If he supported the wrong candidate, appeared on the wrong channel, or wrote for the wrong platform, he is dismissed out of hand.

In this environment, it becomes that much more difficult to form the interpersonal relationship of trust that successful apologetics requires: the interlocutor does not want to listen, and the apologist, fearing being “canceled” for his statements, becomes more guarded about continuing his life-giving work.

How should apologetics proceed in this environment?

Since the purpose of apologetics has not changed over time, neither have the characteristics of the ideal apologist: he or she must possess holiness, humility, and genuine faith in Jesus Christ. These qualities transcend the limits of time and culture, as they have generated converts in every age and on every continent.



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The martyrs are the apologists *par excellence*; the testimony of their lives poured out for Christ is the most profoundly uttered sermon. They have the courage to give their lives only because they have received the graces of holiness, humility, and faith in abundance.

The martyrs' death as the highest form of apologetics is ironic, because, in human terms, their murders show that their apologetic enterprise has failed – their message is rejected, and with it goes the messenger. Certain people refuse to trust the apologists, so they eliminate them. But their elimination proves to others that these saintly apologists are the most trustworthy witnesses.

Today, “canceling” presents a new fear for the evangelist. The Internet apologist’s “white martyrdom” happens out of sight, and can blend in with the scores of other “cancellations” that have nothing to do with religion. There is no public account of how the canceled apologist bears his fate in the privacy of his home, and thus his witness of holiness, humility, and faith is almost impossible to see.

The Internet apologist, then, must pray for the same courage that the missionary martyrs had, as he realizes that, though he does not seek martyrdom, it may be part of God’s providential plan.

Short of that, however, to earn the trust of potential converts, the Internet apologist can follow the lead of the great missionary apologists before him: learn the language of the target audience, and find a way to be with the people.

The “Nones” and the atheists today will be no less distrusting of apologists than the English were of Augustine, the Germans of Boniface, the Native Americans of Jogues, the Chinese of Ricci. The missionaries who made the best impact won the people’s trust by working alongside them in worldly occupations.

In the Internet age, rather than till the fields together, apologists can bridge the distance between screens by taking time to engage interlocutors personally, via email or other means of one-on-one correspondence, and by being seen working diligently at parish events or in community service among their people at home.

Apologetics in our age is not for the faint of heart. But it never has been. Wise as serpents yet innocent as doves, today’s apologists may work through a different medium than their predecessors. But the goals and the traits for success remain the same.

While so many today tremble at the prospect of being “canceled” for thinking or believing the wrong thing, perhaps the willingness of a few apologists to be a fallen grain of wheat will be enough witness to produce the fruit of a new harvest of believers.

***Image:** *Martyrdom of the Seven Hebrew Brothers* by Attavante degli Attavanti, c. 1450 [Vatican Apostolic Library]

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