

Giving Others a Reason to Be Christian

By [Michael Pakaluk](#) APRIL 13, 2021

We may speculate whether God would have become incarnate if man had not fallen. But the only reason that Scripture suggests is he did so to save us from our sins. So says St. Thomas Aquinas, echoing the Fathers. So says, the Creed too – “for us men and for our salvation.”

It is salvation *from sin* that Christ won, after all, and not any other salvation, in this life. “He saved others; he cannot save himself,” mocked the Scribes and elders (Mt 27:42), wrongly understanding by “salvation” merely his miracles – his healings and exorcisms. A strange mockery, this, which leads the mockers to take up common cause with disease and the devil!

But we join them if we look to Christianity solely for earthly benefits or, worse, a utopia.

Those miraculous “savings” were only signs, even the raising of Lazarus, who died later. The mockers failed to see that this one called “Jesus” from conception, precisely “because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21), this Jesus would not have attained the sort of salvation that God willed for us, from sin, if he had come down from the Cross as they demanded.

It was a costly cup, “poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins” as the canon of the Mass reminds us daily, and which the Easter Triduum vividly recounts each year.

I was obliged to focus on this essence of our faith when, recently, students at the University of West Virginia asked me to speak on the topic, “Why you should be or consider being a Christian?” I gave the presentation through the admirable initiative of the Dominicans called [The Thomistic Institute](#),

designed “to promote Catholic truth in our contemporary world,” especially on university campuses.

What does the question even mean? Christianity is a big deal after two millennia; there is nothing “mere” about it any longer. The mustard seed has grown into a great tree. It always was a faith meant to engage every aspect of our being: “heart, soul, strength, and mind.” (Mt 22:37)

And by now it has become such a thing in the world, a Catholic Thing, in fact, encompassing all of these: a doctrinal system of profound truths; a sacramental system providing mysterious spiritual nourishment; a system of reliable and wise ethical teaching; and a system too (yes, let’s call it that) of prayer, asceticism, and dedication to being a co-redeemer with Our Lord through suffering.

This Catholic Thing presents us, here and now, with a life full of truth, beauty, and goodness. We can sense the scope of this catholicity, this wholeness, as refracted through so many saints, luminaries, and works.

*

It’s not possible today to decide for or against Christianity without deciding for or against Newman, Péguy, Dante, Copernicus, Boethius, Christmas, birthdays, the Milan Cathedral, St. Thérèse, Chesterton, Mendel, Leonardo, Elgar’s *Dream*, the *Summa*, “Pied Beauty,” Flannery O’Connor, Georg Cantor, Allegri’s *Miserere*, “Silent Night,” St. Francis, the Sistine Chapel, the Pietà, the beautiful church down the street (if you are so fortunate), Thomas à Kempis – not to mention the abolition of slavery, the concept of natural rights, universities and hospitals, courtship, chaste love, esteem for mothers in households, esteem for childhood, and a free society on principle – to give a quirky and parochial list. But you get the point.

It makes eminent sense, then, to say to a young person, “you were created to embrace all of truth, beauty, and goodness, and can you find some other way of beginning to do so with gusto, now, with your whole being?” Every Catholic college should present this argument to its students.



But let's not fail to insist that this Catholic Thing would not exist at all, except that Jesus came to save us from our sins. Christian civilization superposes three dimensions at once: man as created, man as fallen, man as redeemed. (Everything great comprehends all three.) Its fullness presupposes and does not hide sin.

Even then, I suspect, the argument's power will depend upon a hearer's personal, felt sense of sin. It is not a merely aesthetic argument.

We cannot sense sin without reflection and introspection, indeed. And sin is felt here mainly, I think, through a sense of lost youth. What is youthfulness, after all, except a sense of life as a great gift? Think of the *Diary of Anne Frank* – and the specific appeal of the author's personality as a young girl. Youthfulness like that senses, too, that there should not be death. We know intellectually that everyone dies, but very few of us preserve beyond youth the sense, of the heart, that we were not meant to die.

What I am maintaining is that that **choice for the fullness of life is not simply an embrace of the good, but also a plea for salvation from bad: it is the expression of a plea, by someone entering perhaps into adulthood, who sees within himself that, through narrow ambition, bad choices, bad friends, and bad habits, he no longer is that person he was a child. He has lost his life. That life needs to be saved. To become a Christian, for him, is his only chance to recover life as he once knew it, a gift, holding the promise of being everlasting.**

To be sure, some of us, **clerics above all who are “signs of contradiction,”** may have the vocation of becoming irksome, if necessary, by proclaiming publicly the need of others to repent of sins. There is too little of this, as apparently it is shocking today, simply to **refrain from blessing sin.**

But if my argument is correct, insofar as it is, then **the chief way for a layperson to witness to sin would be through an upright life marked by optimism and youthfulness – as someone who has passed through that Night which “restores lost innocence and gives mourners joy.”**

***Image: *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* by Vincenzo Catena, c. 1520-30 [Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC]**
© 2021 *The Catholic Thing*. All rights reserved. For reprint rights, write to: info@frinstitute.org

The Catholic Thing is a forum for intelligent Catholic commentary. Opinions expressed by writers are solely their own.