

**June 14, 2009**

All Saints Sunday

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

An important part of the proclamation of the Christian faith to the world is, of course, a proper defense of that faith. We are not surprised, therefore, that this defensive ministry, called "apologetics," is very much in evidence in our records of the apostolic preaching to those outside the faith. The Apostle Paul, for instance, wrote of his "defense [*apologia*] and confirmation of the gospel" (Philippians 1:7).

Paul illustrated such a defense when given opportunity to address a Jewish mob gathered near the temple. He began by declaring, "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense [*apologia*] before you now" (Acts 22:1; cf. 25:16), and then he went on to argue for the truth of the Gospel.

This ministry of defending the faith to outsiders was not limited to the Apostles, however. Saint Peter gave a general exhortation on this subject: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you a reason [*logos*] for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15)

The discipline of apologetics allows considerable flexibility and even room for innovation, because its effective use is necessarily determined, in some measure, by the presuppositions of those to whom it is addressed. Indeed, the process can hardly begin unless the apologist shares at least some of those presuppositions.

The latter may be of various kinds:

The Christian arguing with the Jew, for instance, shares a massive theological presupposition: the canonical authority of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the Apostles, when they argued in the synagogue, invariably commenced with the Old Testament. We find the identical pattern in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*.

When arguing with pagans, on the other hand, Christian apologists often begin with a shared philosophical perspective. The earliest example of this approach may be St. Paul's speech to the philosophers on Mars' Hill in Acts 17. Again, Justin Martyr, who began the *First Apology* by recounting his youthful studies in philosophy, borrowed extensively from Stoicism in the course of his defense of

the faith. He was addressing his work, after all, to the Antonine emperors, one of whom, he knew---Marcus Aurelius---was a Stoic.

In addition to theological and philosophical presuppositions, zealous apologetics does not hesitate to examine literature and other cultural expressions to find some common ground on which to engage unbelievers. Tertullian, for instance, when he mentioned the bravery, sobriety, and self-control encouraged by the Christian faith, knew very well that these virtues were central to Rome's ascetical tradition and military culture. Clement and Origen, arguing for the Gospel in Alexandria, strove to express it in terms the local Neo-Platonists might find attractive. Augustine, in undertaking that vast historical *apologia* known as *The City of God*, demonstrated to contemporary pagans his ability to cite---and, more important, to appreciate---his Vergil and Varro with the best of them.

I speak of the necessary function of apologetics, however, as the preamble to a word of caution. Although it is an essential component of the Church's kerygmatic mission, apologetics is sometimes troublesome---or worse---to theology. Indeed, as I reflect on the matter, I am not sure I can name a single heresy in Christian history that did not have some apologetic concern near its root.

Apologetics is burdened with a very difficult task: To discover theological, philosophical, literary, and cultural windows through which to cast the light of the Gospel into the darkened minds of unbelievers. And yet the apologist is not entirely free to choose the size, shape, and position of those windows. Those choices are necessarily limited by the sympathies of those to whom the Gospel is preached. That is to say, the pagan largely governs the very terms of the discourse, and he is free, at any time, to close down the conversation.

Hence, it may happen that the Gospel, when it is defended to the pagan inquirer, is intellectually compressed to fit a mere slit of a window, or its constitutive outline is adjusted to accommodate an incompatible cultural shape. Without the guidance of sound dogmatics, the incautious apologist may be unaware that he is crafting a heresy.

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