

Evangelizing the Nones

Robert Barron

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Evangelizing the Nones by Robert Barron

by Robert Barron

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By far the fastest-growing “religious” group in the United States is the “nones,” that is, those who claim no religious affiliation. In the latest Pew Research Center survey, fully 25 percent of the country—80 million people—say that they have no formal religion, and the growth of this cohort is nothing short of startling. In 1970, only 3 percent of the country self-identified as nones. In the last ten years, the number has gone from 16 percent to the current 25 percent. When we focus on young people, the picture is even more bleak. Almost 40 percent of those under thirty are nones, and among Catholics in that age group, the number rises to 50 percent. Of all the Catholic children baptized or confirmed these last thirty years, half no longer participate in the life of the Church.

These statistics are, in many ways, an unnerving commentary on the effectiveness of our evangelical strategies, despite all the encouragement from popes, councils, and encyclicals. They are certainly a wake-up call for teachers, catechists, evangelists, apologists, priests, and bishops. I would like to propose a number of paths that effective evangelization should follow. My suggestions are born not only of theoretical musing, but also of my nearly fifteen years of practical experience evangelizing nones, atheists, agnostics, and seekers who dwell in the shadowy but fascinating space of the virtual world, our version of Paul’s Areopagus.

In his theological triptych, Hans Urs von Balthasar purposely reversed the Kantian arrangement of the transcendentals. Whereas Kant had moved from the true (*The Critique of Pure Reason*) to the good (*The Critique of Practical Reason*) to the beautiful (*The Critique of Judgment*), Balthasar turned it around, commencing with the beautiful (*The Glory of the Lord*), moving through the good (*The Theo-Drama*), and ending with the true (*The Theo-Logic*). As Balthasar demonstrated, the beautiful has been a theme in classical Christian theology at least from the time of the Pseudo-Dionysius, but typically it had been subordinated to the good and especially the true. Balthasar intuited something in the middle of the twentieth century, just as the postmodern critique was getting under way: that initiating the theological project with truth or goodness was a nonstarter, since relativism and skepticism in regard to those transcendentals was powerful indeed. If such subjectivism was strong in the fifties of the last century, it has become overwhelming at the beginning of the twenty-first, with Joseph Ratzinger’s “dictatorship of relativism” now taken for granted. Any claim to know objective truth or attempt to propose objective goodness tends to meet now with incredulity at best and defensiveness at worst: “Who are you to tell me what to think or how to behave?” But there is something less threatening, more winsome, about the beautiful.

Balthasar was deeply influenced by Paul Claudel, who famously underwent a conversion to Catholicism on Christmas Day 1886, while he was standing in Notre Dame Cathedral, gazing at the north rose window and listening to sung vespers. It was not argumentation that brought Claudel to faith, but a visceral experience of the beautiful. We find a similar dynamic in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Charles Ryder, the narrator of the story, is a skeptic, a professed agnostic, convinced that religion is outmoded mythology and a function of "complexes and inhibitions." But he finds himself drawn in by the physical beauty of his Oxford companion Sebastian, who in turn leads Charles to his family home, a country estate called Brideshead. St. Paul referred to Christ as head of his bride the Church, and thus the manor is evocative of the Church in its various dimensions. Recalling his first summer sojourn at Brideshead, Charles remarks, "It was an aesthetic education to live within those walls." Many people across the centuries have been led to the gospel along the aesthetic path. As the novel progresses, we see Charles drawn into the moral world of the house and finally, after a long struggle, into acceptance of the truth that it represents. The Balthasar rhythm, from the beautiful to the good to the true, is on display.

Now, why precisely should this work? How does the beautiful evangelize? Following Dietrich von Hildebrand, we should say that the truly beautiful is an objective value, to be distinguished from what is merely subjectively satisfying. This means that the beautiful does not merely entertain; rather, it invades, chooses, and changes the one to whom it deigns to appear. It is not absorbed into subjectivity; it rearranges and redirects subjectivity, sending it on a trajectory toward the open sea of the beautiful itself. I am taking this image, of course, from the Diotima speech in Plato's *Symposium*, according to which the particular beautiful thing opens the mind to a consideration of ever higher forms of beauty, conducting finally to the source and ground of all beauty, the form of the beautiful.

In our radically relativistic time, it is advisable to commence the evangelical process with the winsome attractiveness of the beautiful, and thank God, Catholicism has plenty to offer in this regard. As Ewert Cousins pointed out, part of Catholicism's genius is that it never "threw anything out." Accordingly, there is a "grandma's attic" quality to the Church. At our best, from the time of John Damascene onward, we have resisted the iconoclastic temptation, and thus we have Chartres Cathedral, the Sainte-Chapelle, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the haunting icons of the East, Dante, Mozart, and the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. This last reference is a reminder that evangelically compelling beauty does not exist merely at the rarefied level, but at the popular level as well. John Paul II had a deep

appreciation for the finest of the fine arts, but he also had a sure feel for forms of popular devotion and religiosity. The same can be said of Pope Francis, who loves German opera and whose spirituality draws from the wells of the devotional lives and piety of ordinary believers: processions, relics, statues, and images of the saints. Of course, as John Paul in particular realized, the Church is most beautiful in her saints. Just as we might instruct a young person in a given sport by showing examples of the greatest practitioners of that game, so we show the nature of Christianity best, perhaps, in its heroes.

John Henry Newman said that one of the principal indicators that Christianity is properly developing and not falling into corruption is that its representatives are stubbornly thinking about the data of revelation. For the great English convert, Mary, treasuring the events of salvation history in her heart, is the model of a faith that is consistently and seriously *quaerens intellectum*. At its best, the Catholic tradition has resisted Tertullian's suggestion that Jerusalem should have nothing to do with Athens. Instead, it has treasured figures, from Irenaeus to Ratzinger, who insisted that the dialogue between faith and reason is indispensable to the evangelizing mission of the Church.

In the middle of the twentieth century, there was an extraordinary renaissance of Catholic intellectual life across a variety of literary disciplines. One thinks of Waugh, Graham Greene, Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, Georges Bernanos, Balthasar, Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and many others. Furthermore, the documents of Vatican II were produced by the cream of the crop of mid-twentieth-century Catholic philosophy and theology: Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, Ratzinger, Yves Congar, and Karl Rahner, to name a few. And yet, in the years following the council, a debilitating anti-intellectualism came to hold sway in the Church, at least in the West. I know this not from books of sociology, but from direct experience, for I came of age in this period. To make the faith accessible through appeals to emotion and common experience was the preferred catechetical method, and within a properly theological context, the experientialism of Schleiermacher and his disciples was all the rage. Accordingly, during this "banners and balloons" period, biblical distinctiveness and theological precision were, to put it mildly, underplayed. Some years ago, the late Francis Cardinal George showed me his fourth-grade religion book from the 1940s. My jaw dropped at the complexity, intellectual rigor, and technical vocabulary on offer, especially in comparison to the texts that my generation had read for religious instruction.

The dumbing down of the faith has been a pastoral disaster, contributing to the mass exodus of two generations from the Church. A childish, intellectually shallow religion cannot stand in the face of

the trials of life and the questions of a skeptical mind. One of the most deleterious consequences of this anti-intellectualism was an almost total compromising of the apologetic art in the context of evangelization. My generation was indoctrinated to consider apologetics anti-Protestant, arrogant, hostile to the culture, defensive, rationalistic, and so on, and this indoctrination was accompanied by a naive embrace of the wider culture, as though reading the signs of the times entailed accommodation. “The world sets the agenda for the Church” was the wrongheaded watchword of that time. When significant segments of the culture turned against the faith in the wake of the sex-abuse scandals and the events of September 11, we were left in most cases defenseless against our enemies. For evidence of this, witness the pathetic performance of the vast majority of Christian spokespeople against the sharpest of the New Atheists.

What is desperately needed, if the work of evangelization is to move forward, is a new apologetics. Drawing on years of frontline engagement with a skeptical culture, I would identify five major areas of focus: the doctrine of God, the interpretation of the Bible, theodicy, religion in relation to violence, and religion in relation to science.

I would like to concentrate first on the last issue—for in that Pew study, it was listed as the number one reason why people, especially young people, are leaving the Christian churches. It is sadly becoming axiomatic among many that religious faith is incompatible with a scientific worldview. As philosophy at the university level has degenerated into deconstruction, relativism, and nihilism, and as literary study has devolved into political correctness, trigger warnings, and the uncovering of microaggressions, the hard physical sciences remain, in the minds of many, the sole reliable bearers of truth about the world. And many have bought the critique that religion is, at best, a primitive and outmoded version of science. Read Daniel Dennett, Stephen Hawking, Sam Harris, Lawrence Krauss, and Richard Dawkins if you want the details. I can testify from direct engagement with the contemporary culture that the disciples of these figures are thick on the ground—and these devotees have not been hugged into atheism; they have been argued into it. We have to argue them back to our position.

The most fundamental problem in this regard is scientism, the reduction of all knowledge to the scientific form. The smashing success of the physical sciences and their attendant technologies has, understandably enough, beguiled the young into thinking that the scientific method is the only legitimate route to truth and that anything lying outside its purview is nonsense or fantasy. As Cardinal George once observed, the effective disappearance of

philosophy as a mediating discipline between science and religion has had a deleterious effect on epistemology in general. When philosophy was construed as a legitimate bearer of truth, people saw that a discipline could be nonscientific and yet altogether rational. Given the self-destruction of philosophy, religion seemed, a fortiori, relegated to the shadows of irrationality and superstition. Scientism is, in point of fact, a rather silly position to hold. It is operationally self-refuting: In no way can it be proven through the scientific method that the scientific method is the sole route of access to truth. Moreover, as I have frequently endeavored to show in my apologetic work, people readily, though without assenting to it consciously, accept drama, painting, literature, and philosophy as not only diverting but truth-bearing. Though they are anything but scientific texts, *Hamlet*, the *Symposium*, and *The Waste Land* teach truths about the world, destiny, and human psychology that could not be known in any other way.

I have also found traction demonstrating that the modern physical sciences emerged when and where they did precisely because of a Christian thought-matrix. As a number of theorists have maintained, two assumptions are essential to the development of the sciences: that the world is not divine (and hence can be investigated and analyzed rather than worshipped), and that the universe is intelligible (and hence in correspondence with an inquiring intelligence). Both of these assumptions are corollaries of the properly theological doctrine of creation, which insists that the world is other than God and endowed in every dimension with intelligibility, since it was thought into being by a person. Ratzinger says that this connection is signaled by the word “recognition,” literally re-cognition, implying that every act of knowledge is a re-thinking of what had been antecedently thought by a higher intelligence. If this last point is true, then religion is not only compatible with science; in a real sense, it is the precondition for the possibility of science. I believe that addressing this issue should be priority one for a new apologetics.

N. T. Wright has argued that most of the Christology of the past two hundred years, Protestant and Catholic, has been largely Marcionite in form—that is to say, developed in almost complete abstraction from the Old Testament. Consider Schleiermacher’s presentation of Jesus as the human being with a constantly potent God-consciousness, or Kant’s account of the archetype of the person perfectly pleasing to God, or Bultmann’s paragon of the existential choice, or Tillich’s appearance of the new being under the conditions of estrangement, or Rahner’s insistence that Christology is fully realized anthropology. All of these approaches are intelligible apart from the dense texture of Old Testament revelation and expectation.

When Jesus is presented in this manner, he devolves into a sage, an exemplar of moral virtue, or a teacher of timeless truths. But evangelization—the declaration of good *news*—has precious little to do with any of this. It has to do with the startling announcement that the story of Israel has come to its climax, or to state it a bit differently, that the promises made to Israel have been fulfilled. Not to understand Israel, therefore, is not to understand why Jesus represents such good news.

To develop this idea fully would require many books, but allow me to unfold it according to two simple motifs: priesthood and kingship. On Genesis's poetic telling, the world comes forth from the Creator in the manner of a liturgical procession, each element following the previous one in stately order. At the close of the procession is the human being, who functions, therefore, as the high priest of the chorus of praise. It is no accident that all the creatures mentioned in the Genesis account—planets, the sun, the moon, the earth itself, the animals that move upon the earth—were, at one time or another, worshipped as deities. By placing them in the liturgical procession and ordering them to the praise of the Creator, the author of Genesis effectively demoted them and gave them their proper orientation. The early Jewish commentators, as well as the Church Fathers who followed them, appreciated Adam prior to the Fall as the first priest and the Garden as a primordial Temple. Walking in easy harmony with God, Adam was naturally in the stance of *adoratio* (literally, “mouth to mouth”) vis-à-vis God, all of his energies properly aligned to the Creator. What this right praise produced was order, first within the person of Adam and then in the world around him, cult cultivating the culture. Again, both the intertestamental sages and the Church Fathers understood the divine permission to eat of all of the trees of the Garden save one as an invitation to engage in philosophy, politics, the arts, conversation, science, and so on, the right ordering of these enterprises contingent upon the right praise (orthodoxy) of the one who enters into them.

In light of this reading, we can see that the Fall involved a compromising of the priestly identity of the human race. Grasping at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve arrogated to themselves the prerogatives of godliness, which is to say, the privilege of determining the good, the true, and the beautiful. This will to power amounted to the suspension of right praise and so conduced to the disintegration of the self and society. The antagonism between Adam and Eve (“The woman you put here made me do it”), and between humanity and nature (“The snake made me do it”), suggests that the harmonization of all elements of creation through the rightly ordered priesthood of Adam has been fatally compromised.

Now Adam prior to the Fall was interpreted not only as priest but also as king, specifically a king on the march, for his purpose was not only to cultivate the Garden but also to expand its borders outward, making the whole world a place where God is correctly praised. Under this rubric, we can understand the Fall as a failure in kingship. Compromised in his basic identity, Adam was no longer able to defend the Garden, much less increase its empire. Consequently, he and Eve were expelled from paradise. We should read this not as an arbitrary punishment, but rather as spiritual physics. From the loss of priestly and kingly identity follows, as night follows day, the loss of the Garden. The Fall, of course, is described in the third chapter of Genesis, and it is most instructive to read the ensuing chapters, which proffer a concentrated account of the permutations and combinations of dysfunction that follow from the original disintegration. We find stories of corruption, violence, envy, murder, imperialistic machination, and cruelty. St. Augustine did not miss the Bible's identification of the fratricide Cain as the founder of cities, seeing in this the skewing of the political order that ought to have followed from right kingship. He practically delighted in the echo of this identification in the story of Rome's founding by another fratricide.

God's answer to all of this was a rescue operation, in the form of a holy people who would listen to his voice, learn to praise him correctly, and draw all the nations to right order through the splendor of their way of life. After creation, the Fall, and the consequences of the Fall are described in chapters 1 through 11, chapter 12 of Genesis introduces us to Abraham, the father of Israel, the father of faith. This new Adam figure is the progenitor of a priestly and a kingly people. He and his descendants, from Isaac and Jacob, through Isaiah and Ezekiel, to David and Solomon, would attempt, through the disciplines of Torah, Temple, prophetic speech, kingly rule, and sacred covenant, to restore a properly ordered humanity. The coming together of the priestly and kingly offices is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in the exuberant dance of King David, wearing the ephod of a priest, before the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the tablets of the Law. But the priests of Israel tended to fall into corruption and run after false gods, and the kings of Israel, time and again, betrayed their office. Even the greatest king, David, was an adulterer and murderer. Much of this dissolution is summed up in Ezekiel's devastating vision, recounted in the tenth chapter of his prophetic book, of the *Shekinah*, the glory, of Yahweh leaving his Temple and moving toward the east. But the enduring hope of Israel is expressed in that same prophet's prediction that one day the glory of the Lord would return to his

Temple, and on that day water would flow forth from the side of the building for the renewal of creation.

All of this—and I am but touching on highlights—is the necessary background for understanding the good news regarding Jesus Christ. The New Testament writers and kerygmatic preachers of the first century consistently presented Jesus not according to a philosophical system, but *kata ta grapha* (according to the writings). In a word, they interpreted him against the loamy background of Israel, its identity, its failure, and its aspiration. Accordingly, they saw him as priest and as king and hence, as Paul so clearly stated, as the new Adam. When Matthew arranged the genealogy of Jesus according to three groups of fourteen generations, he was declaring Christ as the new David, for fourteen is the number that corresponds, in the Hebrew custom, to the name *Dawid*.

All four Gospels compel us to see Jesus through the lens of John the Baptist, and this means the lens of Temple and priesthood, for John was the son of a priest and he was performing the rituals of an alternate Temple in the desert. When Jesus comes, John cries, “Behold the Lamb of God,” signaling that Christ was, above all, the one to be sacrificed. In accord with this hermeneutic, Jesus says, in reference to himself, “You have a greater than the Temple here,” and he performs the great ministries of teaching, healing, and forgiving that were customarily carried out by the Temple priesthood. At the climax of his life, he comes to the Jerusalem Temple and announces that he will tear it down and in three days rebuild it, referring, John tells us, to the temple of his body. The night before he dies, Jesus identifies the Passover bread with his body, which will be “given away,” and the Passover wine with his blood, which will be poured out like the blood of lambs sacrificed in the Temple. This trajectory ends on the cross, properly interpreted not simply as a Roman execution, but as the carrying out of the definitive act of right praise. When the Roman soldier pierces the Lord’s side and blood and water come out, no first-century Jew should have failed to see the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy that when the *Shekinah* of Yahweh would return to his Temple, water would flow forth from its side for the renewal of a new Garden of Eden. Therefore, to evangelize is to announce that the priestly identity of the holy people Israel has been realized in a manner beyond all expectations, that Mt. Zion, the place of the crucifixion, has indeed finally become the place to where all the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to join together in right praise of the true God.

All of the gospels, moreover, insist that Jesus’s essential message was of a kingdom. In Mark’s version of Christ’s inaugural address, the Lord says, “The time of fulfillment is now. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news.” If the kingdom has

come, then the king, the new David, must have arrived, and this indeed is what Jesus announces continually regarding himself. And in line with all of Israel's kings, this ultimate king will fight, and indeed he does, from the moment of his birth: against Herod and all Jerusalem, against the scribes and Pharisees, against those who seek to stone him and destroy him, against the demons themselves. At the climax of his life, the whole panoply of evil comes at him: hatred, cruelty, violence, injustice, stupidity, institutional corruption. On the cross he fights, but not in the worldly manner, meeting fire with fire, but rather swallowing all of it up in the divine mercy. The victory would be complete when the risen Jesus would say to those who had abandoned and betrayed him, "Shalom." What the first believers came to understand was that God's love is greater than anything that is in the world, and therefore they were willing to hold up the cross, which was meant to terrify Rome's enemies into submission, as a sort of taunt. One might distill the earliest kerygmatic preaching as "Caesar killed him, but God raised him up." This made Pontius Pilate, in a delicious irony, the first evangelist, for he had put over the cross a sign, in the three major languages of that time and place: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Any first-century Jew would have understood that the king of the Jews would be, by extension, the king of all the world, and this is precisely why Rabbi Shaul, once he met the risen Jesus and became the Apostle Paul, conceived the mission to tell the world that it had a new king. Hence his constant message, "*Iesous Kyrios*," "Jesus is Lord," meant as an ironic challenge to the oft-used phrase "*Kaiser Kyrios*," "Caesar is Lord," landed him frequently in jail, for the authorities knew exactly what Paul meant. Once again, this evangelical claim, and its accompanying mission, make not a lick of sense apart from the story of Israel.

A few years ago, the daughter of one of my Word on Fire colleagues came to our office. Her mother said, "Tell Fr. Barron how much you know about *Star Wars*." With that, an eight-year-old girl launched into a detailed account of the *Star Wars* narrative, involving subplots, extremely minor characters, thematic trajectories, and so on. As she was unfolding her tale, I thought of the many educators whom I have heard over the years assuring me that young people cannot possibly take in the complexities, convoluted plot twists, and strange names found in the Scriptures. I don't know, but I don't think Methuselah and Habakkuk are really any more puzzling than Obi-Wan Kenobi and Lando Calrissian.

There is nothing new in the arguments of the New Atheists. They are borrowed from Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Sartre. And what all the atheists, new and old, have in common is a mistaken notion of God, for to a person they construe God as one being among many, an item within the nexus of conditioned things.

The roots of this misconception are deep and tangled, stretching back to antiquity, but I would put a good deal of the blame for the present form of the problem on the transition from an analogical to a univocal conception of being, on display in Duns Scotus and especially William of Occam. On Aquinas's analogical interpretation, God is not one item, however impressive, in the genus of existing things. Indeed, Thomas insists that God is not an individual and is not to be categorized in any genus, even that most generic of genera, the genus of being. God is not so much *ens summum* (highest being) as *ipsum esse subsistens*. But if, as Scotus and Occam would have it, being is a univocal term, then God and creatures can be considered under the same ontological rubric, and they do indeed belong to an identical genus. This means, in consequence, that God, though he might be described as infinite, is one being among many, an individual alongside other individuals. Occam would state the principle with admirable economy of expression: *Praeter illas partes absolutas nulla res est* ("Outside of these absolute parts, there is nothing real").

I realize that this might seem the very definition of medieval hairsplitting, but a great deal hinges on this point. On the analogical reading, all of finite reality participates in the fullness of the *actus essendi* of God, and hence God and creation cannot be construed as rivals, since they don't compete for space, as it were, on the same ontological grid. But on the univocal reading, God and creation are competitive, and a zero-sum game does obtain. The Reformers were massively shaped by the nominalist view that came up from Occam, and they therefore inherited this competitive understanding of God's relationship to the world, which is evident in so much of their speculation concerning justification, grace, and providence. If God is to get all of the glory, the world has to be emptied of glory; if grace is to be fully honored, nature has to be denigrated; if salvation is all God's work, cooperation with grace has to be denied. When this notion of God became widespread in Europe after the Reformation, it provoked a powerful counter-reaction, which one can see in almost all of the major philosophical figures of early modernity. The threatening God must be explained away (as in Spinoza), fundamentally identified with human consciousness (as in Hegel), internalized as the ground of the will (as in Kant), or shunted off to the sidelines (as in most forms of Deism). In time, the God of late medieval nominalism is ushered off the stage by an impatient atheism that sees him (quite correctly) as a menace to human flourishing. Thus, Feuerbach can say, "*Das Nein zu Gott ist das Ja zum Menschen*," and every atheist since has followed him. Jean-Paul Sartre, in the twentieth century, captured the exasperation with the competitive God in a syllogism: "If God exists, I cannot be free; but I

am free; therefore, God does not exist.” And Christopher Hitchens has restated the Feuerbach view, observing that believing in God is like accepting permanent citizenship in a cosmic version of North Korea.

I find in my work of evangelization that the competitive God still haunts the imaginations of most people today, especially the young, and this is certainly one reason why the New Atheists have found such a receptive audience. We who would evangelize simply have to become better theologians, that is to say, articulators of the truth about who God is. I would suggest that the best biblical image for God is the burning bush—on fire, but not consumed—which appeared to Moses. The closer the true God comes to a creature, the more radiant and beautiful that creature becomes. It is not destroyed, nor is it obligated to give way; rather, it becomes the very best version of itself. This is not just fine poetry; it is accurate metaphysics. We can find this truth in the narratives concerning David, Saul, and Samuel, wherein God definitively acts, but not interruptively. Rather, he works precisely through the ordinary dynamics of psychology and politics. Nowhere is the God of the burning bush more fully on display than in the Incarnation, that event by which God becomes a creature without ceasing to be God or undermining the integrity of the creature he becomes. It is most instructive to note how the formula of the Council of Chalcedon—two natures in one person—held off an extremism of the right (monophysitism), an extremism of the left (Nestorianism), and, if I can put it this way, an extremism of the middle (Arianism). “Fully divine and fully human” is intelligible only within a metaphysical framework of non-competition. Feuerbach felt obligated to say no to the Occamist God, but St. Irenaeus, who had the biblical idea of God in his bones, could say, “*Gloria Dei homo vivens.*”

Michael Buckley argued many years ago in *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* that one of the conditions for the emergence of aggressive atheism in these last two centuries has been the ineptitude of Christians at articulating what they mean by the word “God.” My experience on the evangelical frontlines suggests that his observation remains relevant today.

I have spoken so far of the beautiful and the true. I will close by saying a word about the third transcendental, the good. One of the better-known one-liners from the ancient Church is the observation made by Tertullian about the followers of Jesus: “How these Christians love one another.” There is little doubt that one of the principal reasons that the Christian Church grew within the context of the Roman Empire was the witness of its adepts, especially their willingness to care for the suffering of those around them, including those who were not members of their community. So out of step was

it with the tribalism and elitism of the time, this practice led many to embrace the faith. We find something very similar in the example of the desert fathers, beginning with Antony. Their lifestyle of simplicity, poverty, and trust in God's providence brought armies of young men and women to the desert, and *The Life of Antony*, composed by the great Athanasius of Alexandria, had a galvanizing effect on some of the best and brightest of the fourth and fifth centuries, including Augustine. It is said that the young Gregory Thaumaturgos came to Origen seeking to understand Christian doctrine, and the great teacher said, "First come and share our life, and then you will understand our doctrine."

In the sixth century, when the order of Rome had definitively collapsed, monastic communities began to form in the West. The best known was that of Benedict and his brothers. Prayer, poverty, simplicity of life, and confidence in providence were, once more, the hallmarks of this form of life. It is commonplace to observe that these communities served not only to evangelize Europe, but to restore its civilization. Something very similar happened in the thirteenth century, during a time of significant clerical and institutional corruption. Both Dominic and Francis opted to return to evangelical basics, and both helped to revitalize the mission of the Church. After the French Revolution, when the Church was threatened with extinction in Western Europe, many great missionary orders arose: the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Congregation of Holy Cross, and the Marianists, to name three. The twentieth century, the time of greatest persecution in the history of the Church, witnessed the rise of Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation, and Focolare, as well as the stunning example of St. Teresa of Calcutta.

In light of the recent sex-abuse scandals and the emergence of an aggressive New Atheism, the recovery of a radical form of the Christian life is essential to the task of evangelization. We must regain our moral and spiritual credibility, and this happens, as it always does, through a back-to-basics evangelicalism. We must recover Christian practices—study, fasting, contemplative prayer, the corporal works of mercy—in their intense forms, both as an expression of resistance and as an evangelical witness.

In its most elemental form, Christianity is not a set of ideas, but rather a friendship with the Son of God, a friendship so powerful and transforming that Christians up and down the ages could say, with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." When it is radically internalized in this Pauline way, the friendship with Jesus fills the mind, fires the heart, awakens the will, and changes the body. And then it sends us on mission.

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