

THE POPES AS FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGIANS

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ONE OF THE principal convictions of fundamental theology is that reasoned explanations of Catholic faith can play a pivotal role in making a case for the Gospel. Undoubtedly, fundamental theologians want to affirm and utilize philosophical and evidential approaches in giving an account of faith.

Be that as it may, a careful examination of papal teaching indicates that popes are much more concerned to reinforce or highlight existential means of persuading skeptics. Popes are also heavily concerned to elaborate upon the meanings of divine revelation and Catholic teaching. To support my thesis, I comprehensively engage all papal encyclicals spanning from John XXIII to Pope Francis.

Papal Teaching and Human Reason

In the classical method of apologetics, theologians began their case by providing philosophical arguments for the existence of God.¹ Of all the popes in recent memory, John Paul II is the only one to defend or mention natural knowledge of God.² Elsewhere, we find mere allusions or indirect references to issues related to natural theology.³ The closest we ever get to hearing commentary on Aquinas' Five Ways is when the popes argue for the connection between objective morality and the Eternal Law-Giver (here we are close to Aquinas' Fourth Way).⁴

Instead of defending the existence of God, contemporary popes are much more concerned with eliciting action in defense of basic moral truths. Thus the words 'defend' and 'safeguard' (and this includes variations on those words) are used more often in reference to human life,

dignity, rights, and duties than any other topic related to defending the Catholic faith.⁵

Another contrast pertains to the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Church. After demonstrating the existence of God, the classical apologists provided evidence for the unique character and claims of Jesus. Catholic teaching continues that tradition and holds that a historical and theological study of Jesus can draw individuals to faith.⁶ John Paul II is the only pope to mention the fundamental reliability of the New Testament writings and the eyewitness testimonies of the first apostles.⁷ Here and there we find the popes mentioning or alluding to Christological signs, such as miracles or the cross of Christ.⁸

However, fundamental theologians should take notice of the unique emphases of the popes. The pontiffs rarely mention issues related to Jesus for the sake of improving the case for faith. Rather, there is much greater interest in the supernatural work of the risen Jesus *in the Church*. The Church itself is both sign and instrument of grace in the world.⁹ Thus the Church, insofar as she remains faithful to the Gospel, serves as sign of credibility.¹⁰ Regardless of whether certain cultured despisers acknowledge the fact or not, many established institutions of the West are direct outcomes of a Catholic Christian frame of mind.

Unity, Holiness and Love

Mentioned earlier, the popes are not heavily invested in philosophical, historical, and/or sociological defenses of faith. Although the amount of references is not always indicative of how important the popes view a particular

topic, the encyclicals demonstrate that the credibility of Christianity is usually found within the realm of lived experience. Here I highlight some commonly overlooked issues in the popes' case for faith: human holiness, love, and unity.

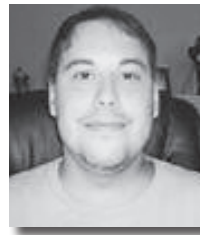
First, the experience of Church unity is directly related to issues related to credibility: 'that they may all be one...so that the world may believe that you have sent me (Jn 17:21).'¹¹ I do not doubt that Catholic apologetic debates with Protestant Christians can help spur on unity. But the major impetus behind the ecumenical movement is about producing interior conversions to Christ, and working together in providing a comprehensive, ecumenical witness.

Also, the unity engendered by marriage and family life can serve as a sign of God's love; marriage and family life need to be continuously safeguarded.¹² Similarly, priests and those called to religious life express their love for Christ by living a celibate life. A priestly life, faithfully discharged, can serve as a convincing sign of the Kingdom of God.¹³

Unanimously, popes emphasize the potential of charity and holiness for the purposes of evangelization.¹⁴ An example is displayed brilliantly by the life and death of the martyrs. As Tertullian famously said, the 'blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.' John Paul II argued that martyrs 'provide evidence of a love that has no need of lengthy arguments in order to convince. The martyrs stir in us a profound trust because they give voice to what we already feel and they declare what we would like to have the strength to express.'¹⁵ Or again: 'This universal presence of the Saints, is in fact a proof of the transcendent power of the Spirit. It is the sign and proof of God's victory over the forces of evil which divide humanity.'¹⁶

Fundamental Theology and the Religious Others

One of the perennial challenges to Christian



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faith lies in reconciling the omnibenevolence of God and the historicity of Christ's revelation. It should go without saying that the popes emphasize the universality of Catholic mission.¹⁷ Nowhere do the popes qualify who should (or should not be) evangelized. Everyone is called to believe in the Gospel.

Interestingly, even given that strong call to evangelize the world, one is very hard pressed to find the popes modeling or even endorsing issues related to interreligious apologetics.¹⁸ Once again, the emphasis is on clarifying the theological meanings of Church teaching, not with providing arguments for Jesus in a world of different religious founders. Meaning itself can have an apologetic draw upon skeptics and lukewarm believers in a world of conflicting religions.

For example, Jesus Christ is the one redeeming mediator between God and humanity.¹⁹ It follows that Christ's revelation is unique, full, ultimate, and definitive.²⁰ However, to accept that Jesus is the one true savior does not mean that 'formal outsiders' cannot be saved. Rather, the risen Christ makes himself present to everyone, including those who are inculpably ignorant of the Gospel.²¹

Because the 'formal outsiders' can be saved, a type of revelation must be accessible to them.²² This general sense of revelation is, in the words of John Paul II, 'always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding. Faith alone makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently.'²³

By accepting God's revelation in Jesus, Catholics can know something about the 'formal outsiders' that the latter do not know about themselves. It follows that non-Catholic worldviews are not as objectively salvific as Catholicism. 'Indeed,' says Paul VI, 'honesty compels us to declare openly our conviction that the Christian religion is the one and only true religion, and it is our hope that it will be acknowledged as such by all who look for God

and worship Him.'²⁴

Conclusion

Today fundamental theology serves to correct and complement the older classical apologetics. The signs of salvation cannot be reduced to theoretical defenses, but are seen directly in the multifaceted meanings of Catholic teaching and in the lives of believers working together.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the classical apologetics, see Jared Wicks, 'Manualistic Theology,' in René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella, (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 1102-1105.

2. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 2, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 37, *Centesimus Annus*, 37, *Veritatis Splendor*, 43, *Fides et Ratio*, 4, 9, 19, 22, 24, 36, 53, 67, 76, 83, 84.

3. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 63; Paul VI *Humanae Vitae*, 8, John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 73, 79; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 29, 74, *Spe Salvi*, 5; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 34.

4. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 208, 217, *Pacem in Terris*, 5, 6, 38, 47, 49, 50; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 49, 104, *Populorum Progressio*, 42, *Humanae Vitae*, 10; John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 36, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2, 9, 36, 39-41, 43, 45, 60, 84, 99, *Evangelium Vitae*, 21, *Fides et Ratio*, 36; Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 30, *Caritas in Veritate*, 45, 68, 75.

5. John XXIII, *Princeps Pastorum*, 24, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 129, 139, *Grata Recordatio*, 15, *Mater et Magistra*, 1, 15, 16, 20, 22, 37, 85, 89, 103, 108, 109, 111, 179, 249, *Pacem in Terris*, 9, 14, 24, 50, 56, 68, 56, 60-63, 65, 77, 104; Paul VI, *Mense Maio*, 8, *Populorum Progressio*, 39, 42, *Humanae Vitae*, 20, 23; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10, 12, 13, 17, 18, *Dives in Misericordia*, 1, 11, *Laborem Exercens*, 8, 13, 20, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 9, 10, *Redemptoris Missio*, 60, *Centesimus Annus*, 3, 6, 7, 13-15, 22, 24, 29, 30, 36, 46, 55, 61, *Veritatis Splendor*, 34, 51, 101, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1, 2, 5, 6, 27, 34, 41, 42, 48, 55, 57, etc., *Ut Unum Sint*, 74, 76, *Fides et Ratio*, 60, 90, 102, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 20; Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*,

28, *Caritas in Veritate*, 11, 22, 34, 29, 43, 55, etc.; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 54.

6. For all commentary on the person and work of Jesus Christ, see Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 20, *Populorum Progressio*, 13; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 7, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 31, *Redemptoris Mater*, 16, 37, *Dives in Misericordia*, 3, *Redemptoris Missio*, 11, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2, 66, 106, 108, *Evangelium Vitae*, 29, 36, 100, *Fides et Ratio*, 11, 13, 80, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 38; Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 17, *Spe Salvi*, 43.

7. John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 1, 5, 6, 19, *Redemptoris Missio*, 23, *Evangelium Vitae* 80, *Fides et Ratio*, 94.

8. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 4; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 75; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 37, *Redemptoris Missio*, 11, *Evangelium Vitae*, 50, *Fides et Ratio*, 13, 16; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 30.

9. For remarks on the positive impact of Christianity on civilization (including the relevant commentary on the negative impacts caused by dechristianization), see John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 6, 8, 19, 21, 25, 26, 58, 130, 140, *Mater et Magistra*, 89, 178, 179, 209, 217, 256, 259, *Princeps Pastorum*, 14, *Pacem in Terris*, 1, 37, 46, 147, 151, 152, 167, 168; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 10, 13, 14, 42, 51, 64, 95, 98, 100, *Mense Maio*, 8, *Mysterium Fidei*, 33, 67, 69, *Populorum Progressio*, 53, 55, 73, 76, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* 47, *Humanae Vitae* 18, 20, 22; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10, 11, 15, 21, *Dives in Misericordia*, 11, 14, *Laborem Exercens*, 8, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 7, 25, 30, 40, 57, 60, 61, 63, *Redemptoris Mater*, 25, 43, 52, *Sollicitudo Rei*

- Socialis*, 30, 31, 33, 38, *Redemptoris Missio*, 36, 42, 58, *Centesimus Annus*, 5, 13, 22, 24, 29, 36, 44, 46, 55, 57, 60, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2, 8, 25, 26, 88, 89, 99, 101, 106, 118, *Evangelium Vitae*, 4, 6, 19, 21-23, 27, 38, etc., *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22, 49-51; Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 5, 7, 9, 11, 17, 24, 29, etc., *Spe Salvi*, 10, 23, 25, 30, 39, 42, 58, 59, 61, 69, 70, *Caritas in Veritate*, 4, 5, 9, 22, 29, 34, 53-56, 68, 76, 78; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 18, 25, 34, 45, 48, 51, 54, 57.
10. Avery Dulles was one of very few theologians to emphasize the Church itself for the purposes of credibility: *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 41-52; *idem*, 'The Church: Sacrament and Ground of Faith,' in René Latourelle and Gerald O'Collins, eds. *Problems and Perspectives of Fundamental Theology*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 259-273.
11. John Paul, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1. See John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 64, 65, 86, 90, 92, 120, *Aeterna Dei Sapientia*, 10, 11, 24, 35, 36, 41, 65, 77, 78, *Paenitentiam Agere*, 24; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 6, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 14, *Redemptoris Mater*, 29, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1, 36, 50, *Ut Unum Sint*, 6, 7, 23, 29, 36, 40, 96, 98, 99; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 39.
12. For all passages that explicitly link married life with credibility, see Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 57; *Humanae Vitae*, 8, 16, 18, 21, 25, 26; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 42, *Evangelium Vitae*, 86, 92, 93, 99; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 44, 53.
13. Paul VI, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 75, *Princeps Pastorum* 14, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 13, 24, 26, 31, 34, 43, 45, 46, 56, 57, 79, 91, 98; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 45, 70, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 52, 62.
14. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 31. For all passages that connect love and credibility, see John XXIII, *Princeps Pastorum*, 26, 37, *Mater et Magistra*, 1, 239, *Aeterna Dei Sapientia*, 75, 76, 79; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 63, 103, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 24, 26, 45, 56, *Humanae Vitae*, 29; John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 3, 6, 12, 13, 14, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 9, 10, 11, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42, 48, *Redemptoris Missio*, 42, 43, 70, 89, 91, *Centesimus Annus*, 57, *Veritatis Splendor*, 3, 20, 26, 89, 95, *Evangelium Vitae*, 63, 77, 81, 86-88, 99, *Ut Unum Sint*, 36, 93; Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 8, 17, 19, 24, 28, 30, 32, 33, 40, 42, *Spe Salvi*, 28, 38, 39, *Caritas in Veritate*, 1, 2, 4, 5, 78, Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 45, 51.
15. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 32. For all commentary on martyrdom as a testimony to faith, see Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 26, *Mysterium Fidei*, 15; John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 60, *Redemptoris Missio*, 11, 45, *Veritatis Splendor*, 89, 91-94, *Ut Unum Sint*, 1, 47, 84, 90, 103, *Fides et Ratio*, 32; Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 39.
16. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 84. For all commentary on the saints and human holiness as motives to believe in Jesus, see John XXIII, *Paenitentiam Agere*, 15, 32, 41, *Grata Recordatio*, 13, *Princeps Pastorum*, 14, 34, 35, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 2, *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*, 3, 10, 13, 14, 16, 29, 39, 79, 80, 81, 84, 101, *Aeterna Dei Sapientia*, 2, 8, 12, 27; Paul VI, *Christi Matri*, 1, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 10, 41, 42, 51, 63, 88, *Mysterium Fidei*, 33, *Christi Matri*, 9, 10, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 16, 39, *Humanae Vitae*, 21; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 19, *Redemptoris Mater*, 43, *Dives in Misericordia*, 13, *Redemptoris Missio*, 36, 42, 43, 66, 69, 70, 77, 87, 90, 91, *Centesimus Annus*, 5, 57, *Veritatis Splendor*, 26, 88, 89, 91, 107, *Ut Unum Sint*, 15, 21-23, 26, 48, 57, 82, 87, *Fides et Ratio*, 105, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 62; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 45.
17. For the universal call to evangelize the world, see John XXIII, *Princeps Pastorum*, 4, 23, 40, 55, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 108, *Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*, 98; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 19, 88, 91, John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 6, 7, 10, *Redemptoris Mater*, 49, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 11, 18, 20, 23, 24, 28, 35, 36, 39, 45, 46, 49, 52, 55, 61-63, 77, 82, 86, 89, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2, 106, *Evangelium Vitae*, 2, 3, 78, 80, *Ut Unum Sint*, 5, 7, 19, 98, *Fides et Ratio*, 5, 38; Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2, 28, *Caritas in Veritate*, 55; Francis, *Lumen Vitae*, 37.
18. It is very difficult to find passages that openly state the inadequacies or errors in other religions. For all commentary, see Paul VI *Ecclesiam Suam*, 107; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1, 5, 46, 55, 56, 63; Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 9, *Spe Salvi*, 2, 5, *Caritas in Veritate*, 55.
19. For the universal nature of the redemption won by Jesus Christ, see John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 2; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 69, 76, 95; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 4, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 16, *Redemptoris*

Mater, 38-41, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1, 4, 5, 6, 8-11, 16, 20, 23, 28, 29, 55, 89, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2, 7, 106, *Evangelium Vitae*, 3, 25, 33, 36, *Ut Unum Sint*, 66, *Fides et Ratio*, 38, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22, 27; Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 28; Francis, *Lumen Vitae*, 35.

20. For all references supporting the unique, full and ultimate revelation given in Jesus, see John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 17; Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 107; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 1, 6, 7, 11, 13, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 15, 16, 18, 21, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 11, *Dives in Misericordia*, 7, 8, *Redemptoris Mater*, 41, 49, *Redemptoris Missio*, 2, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 28, 29, 55, 56, *Veritatis Splendor*, 2, 8, *Evangelium Vitae*, 36, *Ut Unum Sint*, 41, *Fides et Ratio*, 11-13; Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 5, 6, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12, *Caritas in Veritate*, 59; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 18.

21. For passages that speak on the salvation of the inculpably ignorant (*i.e.*, those who are cognitively ‘unaware of the Savior’), see Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 79, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 97, *Christi Matri*, 12; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 7, 11, 13, 14, *Centesimus Annus*, 62, *Redemptoris Missio*, 10, 11, *Veritatis Splendor*, 7, 8, *Fides et Ratio*, 13; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 35.

22. For the universality and applicability of Christ's revelation through the power of the Holy Spirit, see Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 19, 97; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 6, 11, 13, 14, 18, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 5, *Centesimus Annus*, 62, *Redemptoris Missio*, 5, 12, 13, 16, 25, 28, 45, 55, 56, *Veritatis Splendor*, 8, *Fides et Ratio*, 11, 12, 38.

23. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 13.

24. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 107.

It is possible for us to attain natural truth by virtue of our intellects. But all cannot do this easily; often their efforts will result in a mixture of truth and error. This is particularly the case in matters of religion and sound morals. Moreover, we cannot possibly attain those truths which exceed the capacity of nature and the grasp of reason, unless God enlightens and inspires us. This is why the word of God, ‘who dwells in light inaccessible, in His great love took pity on man's plight, ‘became flesh and dwelt among us,’ that He might ‘enlighten every man who cometh into the world’ and lead him not only to full and perfect truth, but to virtue and eternal happiness. All men, therefore, are bound to accept the teaching of the gospel. For if this is rejected, the very foundations of truth, goodness, and civilization are endangered.

It is clear that We are discussing a serious matter, with which our eternal salvation is very intimately connected. Some men, as the Apostle of the Gentiles warns us, are ‘ever learning yet never attaining knowledge of the truth’. They contend that the human mind can discover no truth that is certain or sure; they reject the truths revealed by God and necessary for our eternal salvation.

Such men have strayed pathetically far from the teaching of Christ and the views expressed by the Apostle when he said, ‘Let us all attain to the unity of the faith and of the deep knowledge of the Son of God... that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine devised in the wickedness of men, in craftiness, according to the wiles of error. Rather are we to practice the truth in love, and grow up in all things in him who is the head, Christ. For from him the whole body ... derives its increase to the building up of itself in love.’

—Pope John XXIII, *Ad Petri Cathedram*, 6-8.