

*Most of our contemporaries
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especially open to the Gospel.*

Three obstacles to evangelization

By Thomas Storck

■ Immediately before his Ascension into Heaven, our Lord instructed the Apostles, “Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .” (Matt. 28:19-20). And the Church of Christ through the centuries has always done this, sending missionaries across oceans and into new continents. More recently, of course, the Holy Father has begun urging us to a new evangelization, not only of those lands which have never or seldom heard the proclamation of the Gospel, but perhaps even more, of those lands which *have* heard the Gospel proclaimed, and did at one time accept the good news of Jesus Christ. In this article I want to suggest and discuss three obstacles to this evangelization, obstacles that I think are largely peculiar to the United States and to other countries of Protestant culture, and which have infected even Catholics, and

possibly contributed to some of the difficulties within the Church today.

Some of the obstacles to receiving the Gospel are, of course, as old as Adam and present in every country. They are chiefly of a moral sort—we often do not want to repent and change our lives because we are not willing to give up some favorite sin or because we despair of having the strength to do so. But the obstacles I am about to discuss are not moral, but intellectual. To a great extent they exist because of confusion in our use of words, and because of this confusion they are often not noticed and thus not addressed. But they are pervasive in America and, I think, are one of the factors keeping our fellow countrymen from even considering the claims of the Church.

Cultural Protestantism

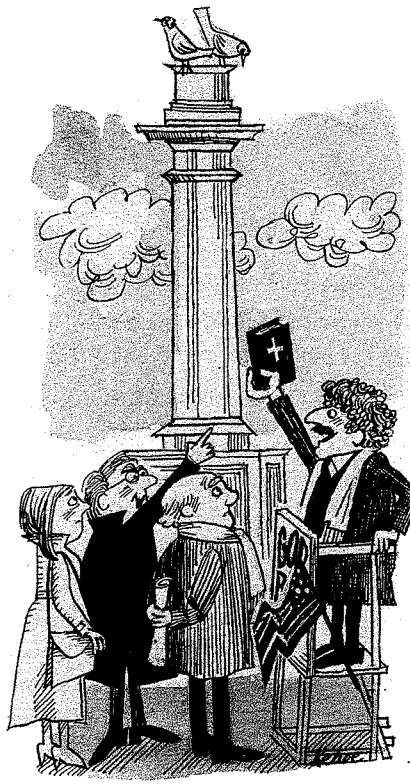
Before discussing these obstacles specifically, I need to say something briefly about

Protestant culture. Probably most of our fellow countrymen are no longer Protestants in any theological sense. But a majority are still Protestant in culture. For a religion does much more than simply create a church with a theology. It creates an entire way of life, a culture, which remains even after the theology is gone. As Hilaire Belloc put it,

A nation once Calvinist in Creed may have ceased for the most part (as Scotland has) to believe in Predestination or to trouble about Conversion and the Reprobate sense; but it will continue for generations, and probably until a new set of doctrines shall be taught it, to think (therefore, to act) in the Calvinist manner.¹

And in innumerable ways American culture is Protestant. One example, relatively trivial, is the use of the term "sin taxes." During the Bush administration, when the President and Congress were in the process of raising taxes on alcohol and tobacco, these taxes were widely referred to as sin taxes. The fact that such a term was (as far as I know) never challenged, shows the widespread Evangelical Protestant attitude toward alcohol use: It is considered at best unnecessary and at worst an evil. While, strictly speaking, it is not necessary to drink alcohol, neither is it necessary to drink soft drinks. Yet no one advocated raising taxes on these latter, or on other unnecessary items such as cream puffs or twinkies, or ever referred to taxes on such products as "sin taxes."

Another symptom of Protestant culture is the coexistence of considerable unchastity and at the same time the deep-rooted feeling that sex is dirty, in fact, fascinating because it is dirty. I remember seeing a bumper sticker once that said, "Remember when the air was clean and sex was dirty?" No Catholic, no one who really believed in the Incarnation, or even the creation of man by God, could look upon the means God chose for continuing the human race as evil. But in many ways Protestantism is a disincarnated religion, without the physicality of the Mass, of Transubstantiation,



or even of bells, incense and holy water,² and in this respect popular Protestantism often fails to accept the implications of the doctrines of creation and the Incarnation.

There are many other manifestations of our Protestant culture, including our preoccupation with moneymaking and our tendency to treat religion as a Sunday-morning only affair. And while it is true that this Protestant culture has been greatly secularized, it is still a secularized *Protestant* culture. A secularized Catholic culture has different vices.

Faith and religious life

With this, let me turn to the specific obstacles I will discuss. And in the first place, I will speak of what is at the root of a person's religious life, the very notion of faith or belief. For even this basic matter is understood differently by Protestants and Catholics. Although it is true that in the popular Protestant or post-Protestant culture, faith is rarely explicitly defined, nevertheless it does have a meaning that is more or less assumed. It is not debated or usually even stated in terms of a definition, but the general nature of religious

faith is simply taken for granted. Let us look at certain statements, found more or less at random, from several contemporary sources.

From a blurb advertising a book, *The Physics of Immortality* by Frank J. Tipler:

Frank J. Tipler, a leading physicist, presents a purely scientific argument for the existence of God and the physical resurrection of the dead—without appeal to revelation or a “leap of faith” to further the argument.³

Or the following, from an article on Evangel College, an Assemblies of God institution in Springfield, Missouri, taken from the June 1, 1994 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.⁴ A student at the college is quoted as saying, “I’ve asked myself a dozen times: How do I know this is the right religion? How do we know we’re right? I think it’s just faith.”

And in the same issue of the *Chronicle*, from a letter to the editor.

I realize that one of the basic urges of Christianity is to proselytize, to convert the heathens, but in dealing with matters of religious faith—by definition not amenable to logic—one must respect and accept the differences of others.⁵

Or this last, from a blurb on a book about prayer and healing.

Like many who believe they must choose between the rational and the intuitive, the intellectual and the emotional, the analytical and the spiritual, Larry Dossey graduated from medical school with the belief that prayer was little more than superstition.⁶

Here one can see the idea of religious faith as it exists in the American or Protestant mind: religious faith is irrational.⁷ Whether believers or unbelievers, very many Americans, of Protestant faith or Protestant culture, instinctively consider the rational and the religious to be antithetical. There is not space to go into all the reasons for this, which lie deep in the Protestant rejection of scholastic philosophy and in the English empiricist philosophers and their rejection of metaphysics. But we must note the fact and its influence on reli-

gious life in the United States.

Catholics, on the other hand, do not look at religion and reason as hostile to each other or even as strangers to each other. I can show this, not just by going to the *Summa* of St. Thomas or the works of Maritain. An edition of the Baltimore Catechism that I possess⁸ has an appendix entitled, “Why I Am a Catholic.” The first question is, “How does our *reason* point out the truth of the Catholic religion?”⁹ Following this are questions with answers presenting reasoned arguments for, *inter alia*, belief in God, the immortality of the human soul, and the authenticity of the ministry and message of Jesus Christ. It is true that these arguments are not presented with entire philosophical or historical rigor, but they are meant simply to provide a handy summary of the reasons for being a Catholic. They are not a substitute for the more rigorous philosophical or historical study that Catholic students could pursue elsewhere, nor were they ever meant to be. But they do show, unmistakably it seems to me, that even on the level of her mass educational efforts, the Catholic Church never considered her faith as opposed to, or even apart from, human reason. It is clear, then, that the Church does not expect any of her children to adhere to her teachings based on a blind leap of faith. Instead, the Church provides arguments from reason to justify her teaching, which is indeed what Holy Scripture itself commands (1 Pet. 3:15). But most people do not know of the Church’s deep respect for the rational. Instead they judge Catholicism by the Protestantism that they abandoned in their youth—or that their parents or grandparents abandoned in *their* youth.

Even the very word *faith* is understood in different ways by Protestants and Catholics. We saw above that Protestants constantly oppose faith and the rational. But when an orthodox Catholic says, “This is a matter of faith to a Catholic,” he does not mean, “I am

bound to believe this by some kind of irrational or non-rational act of the will, a blind leap of faith." Rather, to quote the Baltimore Catechism again,

Faith is the virtue by which we firmly believe all the truths God has revealed, on the word of God revealing them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. . . . A judge or jury believes the testimony of a witness. . . . To believe a mystery that can be known to us only because God has revealed it is to assent to it on divine faith. We believe men in human affairs; we should not find it difficult to believe God even in matters we cannot understand, since God can neither deceive nor be deceived.¹⁰

In other words, when we have satisfactorily proven by rational arguments that God has spoken, it is reasonable to believe him, even if we cannot entirely understand everything he has said. It is not a blind leap of faith to do so, any more than to believe a trustworthy friend or colleague when he speaks about something he knows about. So in the use of this word—faith—we ought to be careful to explain exactly what we do and do not mean by it. For the associations that it raises in a Protestant mind are unfortunate and apt to create the wrong impression.

In order to overcome this deep-seated misunderstanding about faith, I suggest that, when speaking to non-Catholics about religion, Catholics ought to emphasize this insistence on the part of the Church that we be able to rationally justify our beliefs. This I think will come as a surprise—I hope a welcome surprise—to many Protestants or cultural Protestants. It is true that the decline in the ability to reason, caused by poor education and the influence of irrational philosophies, such as post-modernism, have lessened men's interest in rational argument. But still, it seems worthwhile to make better known the Catholic Church's tradition of rational apologetic. There will always be some people whose interest will be caught. Grace can do many things.

Goodness and being

There is a bumper sticker that I have seen once or twice that says, "Good girls go to Heaven. Bad girls go everywhere." Silly as this may be, it reveals, I think, the attitude of the popular post-Protestant mind to goodness. Goodness is something namby-pamby, something dissociated from life, from substance, from being. In order to understand what I am getting at here, and to see what the Catholic position is, let us begin with Thomas Aquinas.

Toward the beginning of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* there is a discussion that might at first seem strange. In article 3 of question 5 of the first part of the *Summa*, Thomas asks, Whether every being is good? Now I imagine that at first glance this seems not only an odd question, but one with an obvious answer. Of course not every being is good; Hitler and Stalin were bad and, of course, the devils are especially bad. It surely would not take too much to prove *that*. But in fact St.

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Thomas concludes the exact opposite, that indeed every being *is* good. And if we understand what he means by that and how he shows it, we will, I think, gain another insight that might be useful in dealing with obstacles to evangelization.

How does Thomas go about showing this? The point of his argument is that every being, *insofar as it is a being*, is good. As he says, "no being is called evil, insofar as it is a being, but insofar as it lacks something; as a man is called evil, insofar as he lacks virtue, or an eye is called evil, insofar as it lacks sharpness of sight."

We might paraphrase his argument as "Every being, insofar as it is what it is supposed to be, is good. And to the extent that it is not what it is supposed to be, it lacks part of its being and is bad." For anything that lacks a quality that is proper to it, we call bad. A car that does not run is a bad car, because it is proper to a car to be able to run.¹¹ It is in accord with the "nature" of a car to be able to run, and to the extent that it lacks what is part of its "nature," it lacks part of its being.¹² And similarly, as Aquinas says, "a man is called evil, insofar as he lacks virtue," because human virtue simply perfects or completes human nature. Just as a fish lacking the ability to swim would not be whole, because such an ability is a distinctive part of being a fish, similarly a human being, lacking any of the virtues, begins to lose the ability to live in a distinctively human way. This might be hard to discern if someone is only slightly lacking in virtue, but can be clearly seen the more degraded he becomes. So when something falls short of the being that is demanded by its nature, to that extent it is bad. Therefore, as St. Thomas says, every being is good, to the extent that it is a being, that is, to the extent that it is itself. For evil has no nature or being of its own. There is no nature of a devil, for example. The only nature the devils could ever have is that of an angel. Insofar as they are in rebellion against

God, they have lost the integrity of their own selves and received nothing in return. Every evil thing is simply a failed good.

The implications of this are far reaching. If we were to cut someone's arm off, for example, to that extent we would render him a less than perfect man, not morally evil, of course, but ontologically so, as in the example of the car that will not run. But as soon as the *will* enters in, so does the possibility of moral evil. If someone has himself sexually sterilized, and so frustrates the natural order and use of his sexual powers, he takes away part of what he is meant to have as a human being. He renders himself, on the level of being, less than perfect, and since the consent of his will is involved, he commits a moral evil. But the moral evil of his act of the will presupposes the ontological evil of the destruction of part of his being.

We can now see that, though bad girls might go everywhere, good girls go everywhere that it is natural for human beings to go. Goodness is human; it is natural.¹³ Goodness is not something that restricts human life, but something that allows our true and natural humanity to be expressed. Evil is in fact constricting, because it cuts away part of what it means to be human. But unfortunately, as I said just now, goodness is currently seen as something with no connection with life or being or substance. Goodness is considered as a subtraction from being and life, while evil is seen as allowing life and being to express themselves.

How can the truth, as expounded by St. Thomas, for example, inform our evangelistic efforts? How can this truth help to overcome one more obstacle to being willing to listen to the Gospel? In this case, I think that most Catholics do not understand exactly what goodness is. We are too apt to see it as having no connection with our being, instead of as something integral to any desire to be human. The chances of our widely diffusing

this truth are slim, however. It takes a long time to correct popular errors, and informed orthodox Catholics are not exactly in control of the media. But any efforts we can make will doubtless be to the good.

Moreover, we will see that this topic of goodness and being is related to my next subject, original sin.

Original sin

The Protestant doctrine of original sin, assumed by most Americans to be the only doctrine of original sin, has thoroughly colored popular religious thinking in the United States and has helped to form a general distaste for any form of Christianity. In this case I will take the Protestant teaching, not from popular articles or statements, but from Martin Luther himself. In his catechism, he asks the question, "What is original sin?" and gives the answer, "Original sin (inherited sin) is the *total corruption* of our *whole human nature*."¹⁴ In other words, man is entirely evil, his nature totally corrupt.

The Catholic and true explanation of original sin is not this one, however. In the Baltimore Catechism, in its discussion of original sin, is the statement, "Although we have a strong inclination to evil as a result of original sin, our nature is not evil in itself; it can perform some good actions in the natural order without the aid of grace."¹⁵ This is in accord with our own experience of reality, where we have good deeds as well as serial killers and mass murderers. On the other hand, if the Protestant doctrine of original sin were true, we would be hard put to explain good actions performed outside of grace.

The Protestant doctrine, however, is the one which holds sway over the popular religious mind in America. Most people simply assume that any Christian, Catholic or Protestant, holds that man is utterly evil. If this were so, then Christians would hold that

goodness is something with no intrinsic relation to our humanity, to what it means to be human, at least in the present state of mankind. It is something arbitrarily imposed by God from the outside. But as a matter of fact, it can rightly be said that what God asks of man is that he be a man, that he conform to what his human nature demands. It is true that because of the Fall and original sin we cannot do this very well or for very long without grace. And it is also true that often the moral law *seems* like a restriction on our being and nature. But in fact it is not. Just as in the case of goodness and being, so also in this case of original sin, Protestant thought makes goodness something alien to being human. Only if the connection is seen between goodness and our human nature, wounded but not entirely corrupted by original sin, we can escape from the notion of goodness as something disincarnate, and ultimately, as something namby-pamby, insipid and weak, fit only for those who have nowhere to go but to a dull Heaven where they face an eternity of sitting around on clouds playing harps.

Conclusion

Most of our contemporaries do not seem especially open to the Gospel. In fact, for them, it is hardly Gospel, that is, Good News. Some of the reasons for this, I think, lie in the subjects I have discussed in this article. If this is correct, then not only ought we to be alert to the fact that words and concepts have different meanings for most of our fellow countrymen than they do for instructed Catholics, but even more so, that very many of our contemporaries regard any form of Christianity as inimical to human life and freedom. If we are aware of this, and if we are able to correct the confusion in the use of words, then we might remove some of the prejudice that prevents a hearing for the Faith. And if this allows God's grace to work more effective-

ly, then in its own small way it may contribute to his glory through the formation of his kingdom and the salvation of souls. ■

¹ *Essays of a Catholic* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN, 1992) p. 240.

² "So one may logically conclude that the Protestant church will have to learn what culture means in its broadest sense; that man is a 'feeling' as well as 'believing' creature; that life is a sensory, physical thing as well as a spiritual phenomenon—a score on which the Roman church has never had any doubts." Waldemar Argow, *What do Religious Liberals Believe?* (Antioch Press, c. 1950), p. 90.

³ *Library Journal*, vol. 119, no. 9, May 15, 1994.

⁴ "What the Lord Wanted" vol. 40, no. 39, pp. A31 and A34. Quote is on p. A34.

⁵ P. B4.

⁶ From the dust jacket of *Healing Words*, by Larry Dossey (San Francisco: Harper, c. 1993).

⁷ This attitude is not unique to America. In his autobiography, Arnold Lunn humorously recounts the story of a young Englishman who had just become aware that reasonable arguments could be made for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. The young man is quoted as saying "Lunn has convinced me that there is a real case for Christianity, not all this faith business, but good solid argument." *Now I See* (New York: Sheed &

Ward, 1938), p. 109.

⁸ *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism* (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild, c. 1941 and 1949). I am deliberately using the Baltimore Catechism in this article, rather than a more sophisticated theological source, because I want to use a text that was widely used by Catholics in America on a popular level.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 396. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

¹¹ Of course I do not mean such a car is morally evil. But we often use terms denoting quality even when moral evil is not in question. For example, we might say, "This is a good horse, because it runs well," or "This is good food, because it tastes good and nourishes us." Moral evil is a special case of this general evil. It is evil involving something lacking in the *will* of a rational creature.

¹² Strictly speaking, a car does not have a nature, since it is simply a collection of separate things with no internal unifying principle. Only a natural thing has a nature. We might say that a car, or any product of art, has a quasi-nature.

¹³ Thomas even says that in a way every sin is against nature, that is, human nature. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, art. 3, ad 2.

¹⁴ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia, c. 1943) p. 87. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 45-46.



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