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2013: The New Evangelization

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 7, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

In 1929, Walter Lippmann published ?A Preface to Morals.? I have forgotten to whom I loaned my copy, but there is one phrase from that work that I committed to memory the moment I read it. Lippmann wrote of the ?acids of modernity? which eroded not only belief, but the disposition to believe. He went on, unsuccessfully, to ground a new basis for morals seeing as the older, more traditional sources of moral authority had fallen into disrepute, holding out the hope of ?disinterestedness? as the basis of his moral vision. Of course, you can see the problem immediately: Lippmann?s disinterestedness is not only a little thin as an organizing principle, why should we be disinterested in ascertaining the ultimate meaning of human existence? Indeed, should we not be vitally interested in that? (Note to my conservative friends: Secularization did not start with the inauguration of President Barack Obama.)

Last September, Archbishop J. Augustine DiNoia, O.P. gave a talk in Cincinnati. He spoke from notes so I was unable to publish a text but he was kind enough to explain to me the gist of what he had said. He noted that the danger of secularization is not just outside the Church in the ambient culture, but the real danger is the way secular modes of thought had entered our own minds, our Catholic imaginations, and pushed aside the religious sense. The phrase, ?religious sense,? calls to mind Don Luigi Giussani?s book of the same name and whatever their differences of outlook, and they are several, on this point, DiNoia the Thomist and Giussani the deLubacian, are at one: The Church must be the place where people make room for the religious sense in their imagination and find the answer to the deepest yearnings of their heart in the encounter with Jesus Christ.

DiNoia?s comment about secularism affecting the way we Catholics think struck me like a thunderbolt. I had never quite put it that way, but once he had put it that way, I see evidence of it everywhere I cast my eyes.

I see it in the way some Catholics have drunk deeply at the well of our American culture, which lionizes dissent - indeed our culture was founded by dissenters - and so when confronted with a theological work that dissents from the Church?s Magisterium, these Catholics tend to grant the dissent, not the Magisterium, the benefit of the doubt. One would think that even a cursory familiarity with the multiple calls to obedience in the New Testament, the Catholic mind would be at least a little suspicious of dissent.

I see it in the empty pews at Mass on Sunday. What do people do if they are not here? Where are they searching for answers to what ?Guy Noir? calls ?life?s persistent questions? if not here at church?

I see it in the countless advertisements on TV, in the newspapers, on the side of the Metro platform, all of which promise happiness at a relatively accessible price.

I see it in the way social scientific analysis is used in place of theology, as if truth is something that can be polled. (America voted for Nixon. Twice.) Do not get me wrong ? there is a place for social scientific analysis, but it cannot replace theology.

I see it in the way the faith is treated like whipped cream on a sundae by conservatives who argue that the market would work really well at meeting all of society?s needs, if people would just behave better. The market itself they do not question. Indeed, for a certain type of neo-con, faith is sidelined in favor of ethics, and then they wonder why people stop going to church and blame it on us liberals.

I see it in the way conscience is reduced to private judgment, as if that most Protestant of Protestant principles has any place in a Catholic argument, as if it were not abundantly clear, and for some time, that in our tradition, the whole judges the part.

I see in the way some writers ape the trends of the times, trying to squish and change and mold the Catholic tradition to suit the fashions of the day, adopting feminist theory and queer theory and Marxist theory and Lord knows what else, forgetting that intellectually, there is no slavery so complete as being a child of one?s own age.

I see it in the pulpits of our churches where we hear a lot about ethics but so little about the intransigent historical claims upon which that ethics, and indeed our entire faith, is based.

I see it in a culture that is fascinated by the new, by the utilitarian, by the precise, but seems incapable of allowing itself to discern the wonderful.

This is what the New Evangelization must be about. It is not primarily about using social media to spread the faith. It is not primarily about the laity witnessing to their faith. It is, it must be, primarily about recapturing the religious sense. It is about encouraging people to ask themselves a simple question: What do you want? Of course, we all want world peace. We all want a more just and humane society. We all want people to be kinder to one another. (I want Obamacare to cover pet surgery!) But, what we really want, and what the world cannot deliver, is to live forever with those we love. Our hearts desire what the human person cannot create for herself. And so, our desire itself points to the necessity of God?s intervention into human history. The Incarnation came as a surprise ? and indeed, it is still surprising. But, the Incarnation actually is the most reasonable event in the world, better to say, the most reasonable event in that world but which also transcends the world. We must recapture the sense of wonder that comes with the realization: Our deepest desire has an answer, an answer who, as Fr. Giussani used to say, was once a clot of blood in the womb of the Virgin.

Yesterday was the Epiphany, the feast of the manifestation of the Lord. We are in the midst of the ?Year of Faith? marking the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. The Synod on the New Evangelization remains fresh in our minds. If we, as a Church, are to manifest the Lord, if we are to deepen our faith and our appreciation for the riches of Vatican II, if we are to evangelize anew, we must first re-evangelize ourselves, we must make room in our minds and our imaginations for the wondrous, for the divine, for the mysterious, and this requires us to be suspicious of the acids of modernity and how they crowd out the divine from our thoughts.

I place before us two questions which cut to the heart of the New Evangelization. Can you explain yourself, your thought, your attitudes, your behaviors, without reference to your faith and the invitation to share in the divine love of the Most Holy Trinity as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ? And, secondly, if you were to awaken tomorrow and, through some tragedy, had lost your faith in the night, would you be recognizable to yourself? If, dear readers, you answer these questions in the negative, as I hope you do, then you have already begun to walk down the path of the New Evangelization. And now comes the easy part: Go out and tell someone about why your answer to these questions is no, why you see wonder where they see banality, why you see the mysterious presence of the divine where others see only the pedestrian, how you see, not apart from the quotidian but within it, the little epiphanies of faith.

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