



# CENTERED

THE SPIRITUALITY  
*of* WORD ON FIRE

ROBERT BARRON

INTRODUCTION *by* MATTHEW R. PETRUSEK

WORD  on FIRE

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# INTRODUCTION

*by* MATTHEW R. PETRUSEK

SENIOR DIRECTOR *of the* WORD ON FIRE INSTITUTE

Pope Benedict XVI observed that three commitments define a fully Christian life: (1) worshiping God, (2) caring for the poor (more generally, loving your neighbor), and (3) evangelizing. There's an unfortunate tendency in contemporary Catholicism to pit number one and number two against each other, defining religious identity either as a "traditional Catholic" (i.e., someone who is attentive to liturgical integrity and personal virtue) or as a "social justice Catholic" (i.e., someone who works to improve the world). Such a separation, as Bishop Barron might put it, is so much nonsense: There's no right worship of God without loving our neighbor, and we cannot know what authentic love of our neighbor looks like without knowing God, the source of love itself.

But even if we can heal this artificial rift within the Church (and God willing, we can), we still have the third criterion of Christian life, which all too often doesn't register as an obligation at all: evangelization. Evangelizing, however, is not optional. It's not a responsibility only for those who are "experts" in the faith or for those looking for a fast track to sainthood. Nor is it something that is outsourceable to priests, religious, and missionaries alone. To evangelize—to actively and consistently work to create new disciples—is essential to being a Catholic.

Just like praying, going to Mass, and regularly doing concrete acts of charity, it is something that every single one of us is called to do.

And it's the reason that the Word on Fire Institute exists.

The Institute's mission is to help the Church to form, in the words of Bishop Barron, an army of evangelists made up of people just like you, no matter where you are in your journey with the Lord. And the book you're holding now, *Centered*, is your field guide. Drawing on Bishop Barron's spiritual wisdom and his decades-long front-line evangelical experience, *Centered* provides a starting point—or restarting point—for anyone asking, “How do I evangelize?” Animated by the eight principles of the Word on Fire ethos, *Centered* offers theological, philosophical, and moral insights that bring into focus both what evangelization is for and how we can effectively carry it out in a secularized, digitized, and existentially adrift world.

Below are the eight principles. I encourage you to meditate on them and to ask, in prayer, how they might help you to respond to Christ's call to create new disciples.

1. **Christocentrism:** To evangelize is to invite others into a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ, the eternal Logos and incarnate Redeemer, in unity with the Father and the Holy Spirit.
2. **Evangelization of the Culture:** Effective evangelization requires both speaking to the culture in a way that it finds compelling and working to transform the

culture to render it more receptive to the Gospel. Evangelists are thus both constructive critics and creators of culture.

3. **Special Commitment to New Media:** Evangelization requires going to where the people are—and the people, increasingly, spend most of their time online and on their phones. We must meet them there.
4. **Rooted in the Mystical Body:** Christ is active not only in the ecclesial structures of the Church but in the whole community of the baptized. We evangelize *for* the whole Church *with* the whole Church.
5. **Leading with Beauty:** Our age is intensely skeptical of, if not hostile to, claims about truth and goodness. Beauty, however, retains the distinctive power to lower people's guards and invite them to reconsider the divine. Accordingly, evangelists lead with beauty not at the *expense* of truth and goodness, but for the *sake* of truth and goodness.
6. **Affirmative Orthodoxy:** Evangelists are not afraid to say an unambiguous “no” to evil in the world; however, each “no” must always be motivated by, and have the goal of leading to, the great “yes” of the Gospel: yes to human life, yes to human dignity, yes to God's unfailing offer of mercy and renewal for all.

7. **Solidarity in Mission:** Clergy and laity have irreducibly distinct roles within the Mystical Body of Christ (only priests can give us the Eucharist, for example), but both are necessary to bring the Gospel into the world. We stand united in the mission to evangelize.
8. **Grounded in the Eucharist:** The Eucharist is the eternal Christ actively present in space and time with his people. In this sense, the Eucharist is the goal of evangelization, the ground of evangelization, and the power that drives evangelization forward.

Evangelization is and always has been difficult and sometimes dangerous work. It requires creativity, persistence, and thick skin. It will not always—or even frequently—be successful in the ways we’d like it to be. Yet as we move together, out into the world with the Gospel in our heads, hearts, and hands, it’s important to remember two things: (1) As Mother Teresa put it, we’re called to be faithful, not to be successful, and (2) faith itself is a gift from God none of us can fully receive until we start giving it away.



CHAPTER I

G O D

Precisely because God doesn't need the world,  
the very existence of the world is a sign that it  
has been loved into being.

*Catholicism, 75*



# BEING ITSELF

## **Being Itself**

The great theologians of the Christian tradition do not typically refer to God as the highest being—which is to say, one being among others, or in David Burrell’s phrase, “the biggest thing around.” Rather, they tend to use the mysterious and evocative language of “Being itself.”

*Exploring Catholic Theology, 66*

## **What God Is Like**

For the classical theological tradition, God is not a being in the world, one object, however supreme, among many. The maker of the entire universe cannot be, himself, an item within the universe, and the one who is responsible for the nexus of causal relations in its entirety could never be a missing link in an ordinary scientific schema. Thomas Aquinas makes the decisive point when he says that God is not *ens summum* (highest being) but rather *ipsum esse* (the sheer act of Being itself). God is neither a thing in the world, nor the sum total of existing things; he is instead the unconditioned cause of the conditioned universe, the reason why there is something rather than nothing. Accordingly, God is not some good thing, but Goodness itself; not some true object, but Truth itself; not some beautiful reality, but Beauty itself.

*Seeds of the Word, 233–234*

## **Beyond the Genus of Being**

Aquinas goes so far as to say that God cannot be defined or situated within any genus, even the genus of “being.” This means that it is wrong to say that trees, planets, automobiles, computers, and God—despite the obvious differences among them—have at least in common their status as beings.

*Catholicism, 63*

## **The Serenity of God**

In his *Dogmatik* of 1925, Paul Tillich speaks of the *Klarheit* (clarity) possessed by God, and in his *Summa theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas speaks of God’s characteristic attribute of simplicity, and in his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth insists upon the *Gotttheit Gottes* (the Godliness of God). All three theologians are describing what I have chosen to call the serenity of the divine reality. In one sense, God is like the clear unbroken surface of an unroiled sea, or like a single Doric column rising into a cloudless sky, or like a pure solo soprano voice singing the simplest of melodies. There is a peaceful untrammelled serenity to the divine being, since God is the sheer act of existence. As the sacred name “I am who I am” (Exod. 3:14) suggests, God is not this or that kind of being, not this or that particular deity, but rather the act of Being itself. There is therefore something clean, pure, untroubled, and uncomplicated about the divine reality.

*And Now I See, 133–134*

## **Continuously Creating**

Creation is not a once-and-for-all act of the essentially transcen-

dent God, but rather the ever-present and ever-new gift of being poured out from the divine source. Thomas Aquinas describes creation in an unusually poetic way as *quaedam relatio ad Creatorem cum novitate essendi* (a kind of relationship to the Creator with freshness of being). What he implies is that the creature *is a relationship* to the energy of God, which is continually drawing it from nonbeing to being, making it new. When Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well and promises her “water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14), he evokes what Aquinas means by creation: the presence of God always at work at the very roots of our being.

*And Now I See*, 141

### **The Best Argument for God’s Existence**

You and I are contingent (dependent) in our being in the measure that we eat and drink, breathe, and had parents; a tree is contingent inasmuch as its being is derived from seed, sun, soil, water, etc.; the solar system is contingent because it depends upon gravity and events in the wider galaxy. To account for a contingent reality, by definition we have to appeal to an extrinsic cause. But if that cause is itself contingent, we have to proceed further. This process of appealing to contingent causes in order to explain a contingent effect cannot go on indefinitely, for then the effect is never adequately explained. Hence, we must finally come to some reality that is not contingent on anything else, some ground of being whose very nature is to-be. This is precisely what Catholic theology means by “God.”

*To Light a Fire on the Earth*, 195–196

## **Our Transcendent and Immanent God**

The Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages expressed in stone and glass an eloquent ambiguity in the assigning of names to God. I would draw your attention—to give just one example—to the mountainous cathedral that looms over the Rhine River in Cologne, Germany and dominates, even today, the skyline of the city. Every line on the exterior of the building points dramatically upward; the logic of the structure compels the viewer's gaze skyward; the sheer immensity of it makes it hard to take in. I can personally witness to the fact that vertigo sets in as one tries to comprehend its dimensions. All of this speaks of the transcendence, strangeness, and radical otherness of God. The building is telling us that whatever idea we have of God has to be abandoned as inadequate; it is summoning us always to look higher. But the same Cologne Cathedral, which speaks so compellingly of the divine transcendence, preaches just as convincingly the immanence of God. All over the surface of the structure—but especially around the portals—one spies plants, animals, trees, planets, the sun and moon, angels, devils, and saints—the whole panoply of creation, both natural and supernatural, vividly portrayed. All of these creatures have to do with God, and God has to do with all of them.

*Catholicism, 73–74*

# NOT *a* COMPETITOR

## **Union with God**

The proximity of God is not a threat to a creature but, on the contrary, that which allows the creature to be most fully itself. If a fellow creature were to enter into the very constitution of my being, I would be the victim of an aggression, and my freedom and integrity would be undermined. But the true God can enter into the most intimate ontological unity with a creature, and the result is not diminution but enhancement of creaturely being. God and the worldly are therefore capable of an ontological coinherence, a being-in-the-other, so that each can let the other be even as they enter into the closest contact.

*The Priority of Christ*, 56

## **Not a Competitor**

The Incarnation tells central truths concerning both God and us. If God became human without ceasing to be God and without compromising the integrity of the creature that he became, God must not be a competitor with his creation. In many of the ancient myths and legends, divine figures such as Zeus or Dionysus enter into human affairs only through aggression, destroying or wounding that which they invade.

*Catholicism*, 1-2

## **The Divine Difference**

If in Jesus a divine and human nature come together non-competitively in ontological unity, there must be something altogether different about the divine nature. The divine way of being must not be a worldly nature, one type of creaturely being among many; rather, it must be *somehow else*. The difference between divinity and creatureliness must be a noncontrastive difference, unlike that which obtains between finite things. God is indeed other than any worldly nature, but he is, if I can put it this way, *otherly other*. Nicholas of Cusa expressed this paradox neatly when he said that God is both *totaliter aliter* (totally other) and the *Non-Aliud* (the non-other).

*The Priority of Christ, 55*

## **On Fire But Not Burned Up**

Stealing the fire, which was the unique preserve of the gods, Prometheus aroused the wrath of Zeus and suffered the grim fate of having his liver chewed out and eaten daily by an eagle. In the desperate zero-sum game of classical mythology, human flourishing is an affront to the gods and must be punished. And then there is the Bible. When the true God—the God Who Is, the God whose essence is identical to his existence—comes close to creatures, they are not consumed; rather, they become more beautifully and radiantly themselves, on fire but not burned up. This theme runs through the whole Bible and was given splendid expression by St. Paul who said, in an ecstatic exclamation, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Though his entire existence was taken over by Jesus Christ, Paul is not less himself; he is, instead, the richest version of himself.

*Arguing Religion, 105–106*



# DIVINE LOVE

## **Why God *Is* Love**

There must be within the structure of the divine to-be a play of giver, gift, and giving. Prior to the event of Jesus Christ, it might have been possible to see that God, due to the simplicity of his existence, could give with unalloyed generosity to creatures, but it was not possible to see that the divine being is itself a play of generosity. That God loves can follow from the simplicity of his being and the fact of creation, but that he *is* love appears to us only through the icon of the Incarnation and its display of a manifold within the divine reality. Now we begin to see more clearly: what the simple God gives with utter generosity is the giving that he is. The to-be of God is to-give, is to-be-for-the-other.

*The Priority of Christ, 238*

## **Seeds of the Trinitarian Doctrine**

Though a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly presented in Scripture, the New Testament is filled with the seeds from which that doctrine would eventually grow. At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus commands his disciples to spread the Good News to all nations and to baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Sprinkled throughout the Pauline literature are references to the triunity of God: in the letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that the Father has sent his Son in the fullness of time in order that we

might all become his sons and daughters, and he specifies that it is only in the Spirit that we can call God “Abba” or Father. All of this New Testament witness to the triune nature of God is summed up in the implicitly trinitarian formula in 1 John 4:16: “God is love.” If love is not simply an activity in which the one God engages but rather what God essentially is, then God must be in his nature a play of lover, beloved, and active love.

*The Priority of Christ, 240*

### **A Family of Persons**

There is in God a play of lover and beloved; but the lover and beloved are connected by the love they have in common. Therefore, the God disclosed in Jesus is a family or community of persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The ground of being is not a thing or a monolith or an absolute; rather, it is a *communio* of being and letting be. From all eternity, the Father forgets about himself in love and generates the Son, and from all eternity, the Son forgets about himself and looks to the Father, and the mutual love of Father and Son is the Holy Spirit. Active generation, passive generation; active spiration, passive spiration. Breathing in and breathing out; being and letting-be. God is like a set of lungs, or like a heart—taking in and letting out, a rhythm, a cadence, a back-and-forth of love.

“Moving Beyond a Beige Catholicism,” Talk

### **To Make Love Real**

The one God of Israel, “I am who I am” (Exod. 3:14), is a play of subsistent relations—“God is love” (1 John 4:16)—and thus we

learn the deepest meaning of the verb to be is “to love.” It was the Son, the Father’s beloved, who became incarnate in Jesus, and it was the Holy Spirit, the love breathed back and forth between the Father and the Son, that came to dwell in the Church. And the Church’s mission, therefore, is to make real in the world precisely this love that God is.

*Catholicism, 87*

### **God’s Unselfish Love**

God cannot be caught in an economic exchange because he can in no ontologically real way benefit from either our gifts or our gratitude; nor can he be hurt by the lack thereof. Because he is not, as Thomas Aquinas put it, really related to the world, God can—indeed must—give in a totally non-self-interested manner, and if love means willing the good of the other as other, then God’s acts of self-offering on behalf of the world are loving in the fullest possible sense. Further, whatever gift is given back to God by a creature must necessarily redound to the benefit of the creature, since it cannot add to the divine being. The gifts of God, therefore, even as they awaken gratitude in those who receive them, involve neither party in the vicious cycle of a mutually obliging economic exchange; rather, they ground a loop or cycle of grace between the divine and the nondivine.

*Bridging the Great Divide, 47*

### **Loved into Being**

Precisely because God doesn’t need the world, the very existence of the world is a sign that it has been loved into being.

## **Out of Nothing, Out of Love**

In all of the philosophies and mythologies of the ancient world, creation takes place through some act of violence or domination—the chaos, matter, other gods, or principles are subdued through a greater act of violence on the part of the most powerful god. There is none of this in Christianity. The true God creates *ex nihilo*, literally from nothing, implying that there is nothing standing outside of God, nothing that needs to be mastered, overcome, manipulated, or dominated. Rather, in a sheer, unimaginably generous act, God makes the world out of nothing and out of love.

“Moving Beyond a Beige Catholicism,” Talk

## **A Nonviolent, Relational God**

The crucified Jesus returned alive to those who had abused, abandoned, denied, and fled from him, but he confronted them not with threats and vengeance but with the nonviolence of compassion and forgiveness. The moral disorder produced by the Crucifixion of the Son of God was restored not through a violent imposition of divine retributive justice but through restorative divine forgiveness, not through a suppression of will by Will but by an insinuating invitation to love. On the basis of this luminous revelation, Christians concluded the nonviolent and relational character of God’s own being. God is not so much a monolith of power and ontological perfection as a play of love and relationality. The author of the first letter of John stated this revolutionary insight with admirable laconicism: “God is love” (1 John 4:16).

*The Priority of Christ, 17–18*

CHAPTER II

# JESUS CHRIST

Christianity asserts that the infinite and the finite  
met, that the eternal and the temporal embraced, that  
the fashioner of the galaxies and planets became a  
baby too weak even to raise his head.

*Catholicism, 9*



# UNWAVERING CHRISTOCENTRISM

## **The Someone at the Center**

One of the most important things to understand about Christianity is that it is not primarily a philosophy or a system of ethics or a religious ideology. It is a relationship to the unsettling person of Jesus Christ, to the God-man. *Someone* stands at the center of Christian concern. Though Christian thinkers have used philosophical ideas and cultural constructs to articulate the meaning of the faith—sometimes in marvelously elaborate ways—they never, at their best, wander far from the very particular and unnerving first-century rabbi from Nazareth.

*Catholicism*, 10

## **The Lord of All**

To be sure, Christians should never enter the public arena violently, aggressively, or in meanness of spirit, for such a move would undermine the very principles we are endeavoring to propagate. But we should do so boldly and confidently, for we are not announcing a private or personal spirituality, but rather declaring a new King under whose lordship *everything* must fall. If Jesus is truly Lord, then government, business, family life, the arts, sexuality, and entertainment all come properly under his headship.

*“Imago Dei as Privilege and Mission,”* Talk

## **The Power Source**

Christianity is, first and foremost, a religion of the concrete and not the abstract. It takes its power not from a general religious consciousness, not from an ethical conviction, not from a comfortable abstraction, but from the person Jesus Christ. It is Christ—in his uncompromising call to repentance, his unforgettable gestures of healing, his unique and disturbing praxis of forgiveness, his provocative nonviolence and especially his movement from godforsakenness and death to shalom-radiating Resurrection—that moves the believer to change of life and gift of self.

*Bridging the Great Divide, 19–20*