

THE THEOLOGY
OF
ROBERT BARRON

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MATTHEW LEVERING

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INTRODUCTION

I. WHY THIS BOOK?

Why publish a book about Robert Barron's theology? After all, Barron is one of the most prolific and readable Catholic theologians in the world, and anyone who wants to get a sense for Barron's perspective can read his books or listen to his YouTube videos and homilies. Surely a book by Barron is better than a book about Barron! Besides, Barron is still in his theological prime and so his ideas may continue to develop.

I have chosen this moment to publish a scholarly introduction to Barron's theology for two main reasons. First, I find Barron's theological vision, as developed over the past thirty years, to be deeply instructive. Unlike many theologians who specialize rather narrowly, he has written about almost every theological topic, and he is able to show the coherence of Catholic doctrine and life. He argues powerfully for a God-centered understanding of reality, in which the Creator God who is revealed in Scripture stands in a noncompetitive relationship to his creatures and in which the truth of "coinherence" (which I will explore below) prevails. While valuing historical-critical scholarship, he defends the veracity of the scriptural portraits of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and places these portraits within the context of the Scriptures of Israel. He illuminates the goodness, truth, and beauty of Catholic tradition, without glossing over the many grave failures of Catholics. He makes clear that the Catholic moral life is both cross-shaped and conducive to true human flourishing, as can be seen in the lives of the saints—in their virtues and their sufferings. He develops a spirituality that is doctrinally and liturgically rich and that is lived out through mundane practices such as the works of mercy and

the Rosary. As Francis Cardinal George says, Catholicism “involves a ‘spirituality’ . . . that is historical, public, and communal.”¹

Second, at every step, Barron’s work responds to the current difficulties facing the Catholic Church in many parts of the world, especially the West. These difficulties include a widespread loss of faith and, correspondingly, a failure to transmit the faith to future generations. Serious misunderstandings of the faith today afflict even churchgoing Catholics. For example, there is a widespread view among Catholics that belief in God is not a rational commitment. This view is accompanied by a loss of trust in God’s sovereignty, in Jesus as the universal Savior, and in the Bible’s narratives. Even many Catholics, let alone non-Catholics, think that Catholic tradition and morality are untrustworthy.² It is not surprising, therefore, that the Catholic world is experiencing a noticeable dearth of vibrant spiritual life and a shrinking of the number of vocations to the priesthood, the religious life, and marriage.

Attending to the paths taken by Barron in his writings will help academic Catholic theology assist in reversing this devitalization of Catholic life.³ Unfortunately, much theology today is driven by relatively peripheral matters (peripheral within the broad schema of Christianity), such as reconfiguring the distribution of power in the Church. Theologians are trained to prioritize the call for the Church to “reform and modernize in order to prevent serious erosion of [the Church’s] following.”⁴ By contrast, Barron perceives that this erosion will only continue—as proven by the accelerating erosion of membership in Christian denominations that

1. Francis Cardinal George, OMI, *A Godly Humanism: Clarifying the Hope That Lies Within* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 131.

2. This is particularly the case with Catholic sexual ethics, as Barron points out in his “The Least Religious Generation in US History: A Reflection on Jean Twenge’s *iGen*” and “What I Learned Talking with Thousands of Skeptics on Reddit,” in *Redeeming the Time: Gospel Perspectives on the Challenges of the Hour* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2022), 17–19 and 47–49.

3. See Barron, “Apologists, Catechists, Theologians: Wake Up!” in *Redeeming the Time*, 50–53.

4. Ian Kershaw, *The Global Age: Europe 1950–2017* (New York: Viking, 2019), 209.

have long since “modernized”—if Catholics cannot provide and embody strong reasons why people should belong to the Catholic Church. Put simply, theologians must articulate what distinguishes the Catholic Church and show why this distinctive way is worth giving one’s life for. This task is precisely where Barron focuses his theological labors.

Bearing somber news, the Catholic theologian and sociologist Stephen Bullivant has recently pointed out that in Great Britain “current conversions *to* Catholicism are dwarfed, by a ratio of one to ten, by disaffiliations away *from* it.”⁵ At the end of his sociological study, Bullivant echoes words written in 1972 by the American National Council of Churches researcher Dean Kelley: “Declining churches are not victims of changing times but of internal failure—the inability to provide a needed product or service. They have not adequately understood or performed their essential business: the dispensing of religion.”⁶

Given this context, Barron’s theology is refreshingly different: he tirelessly addresses the religious needs and difficulties of Catholics head-on. Thus, he has eagerly embraced Pope Francis’ superb metaphor of the Church as a “field hospital” whose purpose is “to heal wounds and to warm the heart of the faithful.”⁷ Of course, in any thriving hospital the doctors must have confidence in the ability of their medicines and procedures to heal. A pressing problem today is that many Catholics, including many theologians, doubt that the medicines that belong to the Church’s

5. Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 39.

6. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 35, as quoted in Bullivant, *Mass Exodus*, 261.

7. Pope Francis, interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ, in “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*, September 30, 2013: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>. Pope Francis has repeated this metaphor numerous times over the years. For the place within the field hospital of worship, service to the poor, and evangelization, see Barron, “The Ratzingerian Constants and the Maintenance of Harmony in the Church,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 247–49.

constitution—the Church’s teachings and sacraments—are true and salvific.

Fifty years ago, the influential theologian Karl Rahner exemplified the growing presence of such theological doubts in his *The Shape of the Church to Come*, the original German edition of which was published in 1972 in preparation for the German Bishops’ Synod. Rahner argued that the Church’s moral teachings—the Church’s teachings about how to follow Christ on the path of sanctification—may have been “quite rightly proclaimed as binding” in the past, but the (supposed) evolution of human nature has now caused a number of these teachings to be superseded.⁸ Rahner added that a certain “fluidity and indefiniteness” in Catholic faith and doctrine must now be accepted, including doubts about the truth of the Church’s teachings about the sacraments of marriage, the Eucharist, and Holy Orders. For example, Rahner deemed it to be an open question whether in emergency situations a lay person, male or female, can consecrate the Eucharist.⁹ If this really is an open question, it would follow that the Church has proceeded for centuries without understanding the Eucharist and the priesthood. That would be a damning indictment of the Church’s ability (past, present, or future) to know the truth about its own core realities.

Answering such concerns, Barron concentrates first of all on explaining and defending the two most important pillars of Catholic faith: the noncompetitive Triune God who created all things and Jesus Christ as the universal Savior. On the foundation of God and Christ, Barron explores the Catholic tradition, the Catholic moral life, and Catholic spirituality. The result is a coherent and impressive theological vision that deserves academic attention.

Here may be the place to observe that, by comparison with most academic theologians, Barron’s vocation has taken him on a quite unusual path. Most academic theologians today spend their

8. Karl Rahner, SJ, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Seabury, 1974), 65.

9. Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come*, 72–75, 94–100, 109–14.

whole career teaching and writing at a university, college, or seminary. Barron, by contrast, has branched out in multiple directions, including founding the media ministry Word on Fire with the encouragement of his mentor Cardinal George in the early 2000s, becoming an auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles in 2015, and becoming Bishop of Winona-Rochester in 2022. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the worldwide capital of media and communications, was surely a fitting place for his Word on Fire media ministry. Located in a broadly rural area dotted with farms, the city of Rochester, Minnesota is famous for the presence of the Mayo Clinic. Viewed in this light, Barron’s vocational path brings us back to the metaphor of the Church as a “field hospital.” Indeed, Barron’s cathedral in Rochester is literally overshadowed by the towers of the Mayo Clinic, to which tens of thousands of ailing people from all over the world travel each year. Here Barron exercises his mission of illuminating the beauty, truth, and goodness of the teachings and sacraments of the Church, the “field hospital” for all nations.

II. BARRON’S BACKGROUND

In lectures delivered in 1983 at Oxford University’s Campion Hall, the great Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles argued that “each major era of Church history has a special task or vocation. By living out the integral Christian reality in its own way, it makes a distinct contribution to the ongoing tradition.”¹⁰ Although Dulles had major eras such as the patristic era or the medieval era in view, his point can be extended to include the distinctive contributions made by every epoch in the Church’s life. Commenting on Dulles’ lectures (later published as *The Catholicity of the Church*), Lawrence Welch remarks that for Dulles the “communion between different generations of the Church is marked by a real ‘communion in

10. Avery Dulles, SJ, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 102. See also Patrick W. Carey, *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ: A Model Theologian, 1918–2008* (New York: Paulist, 2010).

difference' as each generation has its own distinctive character that complements what earlier generations have initiated."¹¹

I think Barron's theological contributions can be grasped both in terms of his distinctive era and in terms of his distinctive generation. His is the first post-Vatican II generation, since he was only six years old when the Council completed its work. Given Vatican II's evident importance for the Church today, Barron therefore reflects a notable theological era. Likewise, although not a member of the so-called "John Paul II generation," whose members he taught while at Mundelein Seminary, he was surely influenced by Pope John Paul II's reception of the Council, which began in 1978, the year after Barron graduated from high school. Barron's seminary training, doctoral work, and more than half of his academic teaching career coincided with the years of John Paul II's pontificate. Barron was still in his teens when the pontificate began, and he was forty-five when it ended.

John Paul II's pontificate was organized around the effort, begun by Pope Paul VI, to undertake a new evangelization of the post-Christian world.¹² Thus, Barron's commitment to evangelization resonates strongly with John Paul II's pontificate. Barron also found in John Paul II's vision an answer to the postconciliar polarization between Liberal Catholics, who advocated for the "spirit" of the Second Vatican Council but often rejected its "letter," and Traditionalist Catholics, who blamed the Council itself for the difficulties faced by the postconciliar Church.¹³

Firmly grounded in the documents of Vatican II, Barron's theological outlook is marked by the same sort of overlap of "new"

11. Lawrence J. Welch, *The Presence of Christ in the Church: Explorations in Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia, 2012), 17.

12. See Douglas G. Bushman, *The Theology of Renewal for His Church: The Logic of Vatican II's Renewal in Paul VI's Encyclical Ecclesiam Suam, and Its Reception in John Paul II and Benedict XVI* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2022).

13. For background to this divide, see Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II: Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Yves Chiron, *Histoire des traditionalistes* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022).

and “old” that one finds in the Polish pope. As is well known, Pope John Paul II took advantage of a wide array of sources and methods. He was trained in phenomenology, and he was a close friend of members of the *Ressourcement* school. He was also trained in Thomism and was indebted to scholastic insights and methods. Embodying this combination of “new” and “old,” John Paul II was well positioned to appreciate that the Church lives in history and must make the Gospel of Jesus Christ present anew in every era, in continuity with earlier eras.

Like John Paul II, Barron owes intellectual debts to a wide variety of philosophers, theologians, saints, and artists, seamlessly combining the “new” and the “old.” As we will see, Barron’s doctrine of God is Thomistic but also informed by the distinctive emphases of the *Ressourcement* movement. His reading of Scripture and his understanding of Christ are governed by a Catholic sensibility that pushes past historical-critical boundaries, in accordance with the creedal “rule of faith” that was so important to Irenaeus. His engagement with postliberal Protestant thinkers like George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas, along with his interest in the thought of John Henry Newman, provides much of the grounding of his thought on tradition and life in Christ. His integration into his theology of Catholic literary giants such as Flannery O’Connor and Dante and saints such as Thérèse of Lisieux and Edith Stein, and his fulsome appreciation of Christian art and architecture, give his theology a cultural and spiritual spaciousness. His reading of Thomas Merton, whose work is informed by the classical monastic tradition, ensures that his theology stays close to the impulses and intuitions of Catholic spiritual life. His admiration for Dorothy Day’s concrete practice of the works of mercy has a similar effect. His time at the Catholic University of America in the early 1980s, where he earned a master’s degree in philosophy, exposed him to Thomistic philosophy and to phenomenology through the eminent priest-philosophers John Wippel and Robert

Sokolowski. Recalling this period of his life, Barron says gratefully that it transformed his ability to think, giving him “not simply new ideas and information, but new eyes and a new mind.”¹⁴

Theologically, his training as a seminarian was generally Rahnerian, as was then the norm. Describing his education at Mundelein Seminary (he was ordained by Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago in 1986), he states, “The contemporary theologian who had the greatest impact on my thinking was Karl Rahner. By the time I finished my four years in the seminary, I had read through most of Rahner’s major texts, and I had composed my STL dissertation on Rahner’s interpretation of the Christology of the Council of Chalcedon.”¹⁵ For Rahner, as Barron says, “universal human experience was consistently constructed as the starting point and interpretive matrix for doctrine.”¹⁶

By contrast, as Thomas Baima has observed with Barron’s mature theology in view, “The post-liberal move is to locate authority in the person and event of Jesus, accessible to us through the greatest meta-narrative ever told, and within a community which reads that narrative contextualized by their doxology.”¹⁷ Such a perspective first became available to the young Barron at the Institut Catholique de Paris through the person of his doctoral advisor, Michel Corbin, a Jesuit theologian and disciple of Henri de Lubac. Unlike Barron, Corbin was a critic of Aquinas. He considered that, in comparison to the Church Fathers and monastic medieval thinkers such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Anselm, Aquinas lacked sufficient “scriptural density, unambiguous Christocentrism, and

14. Robert Barron, “Paths and Practices: Recovering an Embodied Christianity,” in *Bridging the Great Divide: Musings of a Post-Liberal, Post-Conservative Evangelical Catholic* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2004), 22–31, at 25.

15. Robert Barron, “How von Balthasar Changed My Mind,” in *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 65–84, at 67. This essay was originally published in 2008.

16. Barron, 67.

17. Thomas A. Baima, “Incredible Christianity: Toward a Post-Liberal Apologetic for the Historical Christ,” *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 1079–87, at 1084.

spiritual power.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Corbin also taught Barron “to read Thomas Aquinas as a spiritual master,” as Barron says on the dedication page of his first post-dissertation book, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*.¹⁹

At a Parisian bookstore, the young Barron purchased Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale* in its French translation. As Barron recalls in his essay “How von Balthasar Changed My Mind,” he discovered that “the method employed [by Balthasar] was radically other than the [Rahnerian] one to which I had become accustomed.”²⁰ Balthasar’s method begins with the inbreaking of God in Christ to accomplish the radical fulfillment of God’s covenants and promises to Israel, whereas Rahner’s begins with the universal human experience of self-transcendence in the presence of Absolute Mystery.

After returning from Paris and beginning his teaching career, Barron set to work developing an alternative to Liberalism and Traditionalism. In popular lectures and essays, he rejected each side’s standard attacks on the other and urged that both sides focus upon the strangeness of the Incarnation—God’s simultaneous radical immanence and radical transcendence.²¹ In these early writings, Barron insists that neither Traditionalist restorationism nor Liberal revisionism lives up to the challenge brought by Christ (and by the Council). He bemoans “beige Catholicism,” or “balloons-and-banners Catholicism,” for dumbing down the Catholic faith and for the resulting failure of catechesis both at the parish level and in Catholic colleges and universities. Barron argues that cultural accommodation has turned Catholicism on all sides into something far more bland and non-threatening than it should be. The solution, Barron suggests, is to rediscover the

18. Barron, “How von Balthasar Changed My Mind,” 67.

19. Robert Barron, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, [1996] 2022), vii.

20. Barron, “How von Balthasar Changed My Mind,” 66.

21. See his essay (originally published in 1995) “The Virtue of Bi-Polar Extremism,” in *Bridging the Great Divide*, 3–10.

radical Gospel of transformative commitment to the “troublesome, fascinating, and culture-transforming person of Jesus Christ.”²²

In his writings over the past three decades, Barron has worked out this postliberal theological project. His writings exhibit a constructive and critical dialogue with the preeminent theologians, biblical scholars, and philosophers of his era. I will highlight this dialogic dimension of Barron’s thought throughout the present book. Each chapter will begin with a lengthy discussion of a figure or figures who reflect the intellectual currents of the years in which Barron’s theology was developing. In Barron’s hands, these dialogues have borne fruit in a theology that directly engages the main areas in which the postconciliar Church needs strengthening, thus highlighting the profound relevance and vitality of Barron’s theology.

III. THE PLAN OF THE WORK

This work contains six chapters. Let me briefly outline their contents. Chapter 1 focuses on Barron’s theological practice of evangelization, in light of the irrepressible priest-sociologist and popular novelist Andrew Greeley, Barron’s fellow Chicagoan, whose career was at its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. While Greeley was in certain respects aligned with Liberal Catholicism, he was also a strong opponent of the beige Catholicism that was characteristic of the 1970s. He sought to reassert the colorfulness or distinctive practices that make Catholicism an embodied way of life. In his evangelizing work, Greeley paid close attention to culture and the arts. Barron adopted various evangelizing strategies and emphases from Greeley, while bringing to bear his own much deeper theological mind.

In chapter 2, I examine Barron’s theocentrism. I begin by

22. Robert Barron, “The Trouble with a Beige Catholicism,” in *Bridging the Great Divide*, 11–21, at 21. This essay was originally published in 2000.

probing the doctrine of God offered by his dissertation director, Michel Corbin, a close reader of Karl Barth and an admirer of Anselm and Bernard over against Aquinas, whom Corbin charged with being a rationalistic translator of Christianity into the discourse of Aristotle. By contrast, Barron argues that Aquinas has Christ and revelation at the heart of his theology of God. Barron pays extensive attention to Aquinas' discussion of the Creator God's existence and attributes, thereby revealing the influence of his teachers Wippel and Sokolowski.

If God is the center of Barron's theology, Jesus Christ the incarnate Lord is also the center, as I show in chapter 3. I open this chapter by examining the historical-critical biblical scholarship predominant during Barron's formative years, represented here by Raymond Brown, Edward Schillebeeckx, and John Meier. Well versed in these thinkers, Barron follows a much different biblical-theological path. He is filled with wonder by Christ's fulfillment of Israel's covenantal history and Israel's sacrificial cult. Christ, the New David, rules by supreme nonviolent love, repudiating the pride and violence by which human societies seek to justify and sustain themselves. The ontological noncompetitiveness of God and creation shapes Barron's theology of the Incarnation of the divine Son.

Chapter 4 probes Barron's appropriation of the Catholic tradition. I open this chapter by exploring the interest in tradition shown during Barron's formative period by the Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck and the Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Both these thinkers evince the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein and his notion of "language-games." From this perspective, learning to be Christian is something like learning the skills and practices of a game: the game becomes enjoyable once one is fully immersed in it, or fluent in its "language." Like Lindbeck, Barron argues that experiential-expressivist theologies that prioritize a universal religious experience rather than the particularity of Christ have

made a major error. Like MacIntyre, Barron holds that Christian reasoning is tradition-constituted. Ultimately, Barron concludes that Christ is the ultimate warrant of truth. He rejects the quest for a Christianity free from the two millennia of Christian tradition, that is, free from creeds, dogma, the liturgy, and so on. He takes inspiration from John Henry Newman's theory of doctrinal development and from Newman's epistemological emphasis on *phronesis* and on the weight of cumulative probabilities.

Chapter 5 treats Barron's theology of life in Christ, in light of the moral theology of the Methodist Stanley Hauerwas. Aided by Hauerwas' critique of the prominent moral theories of Seventies Catholicism, Barron rejects consequentialist ethics and the Rahnerian ethics of the fundamental option. He focuses instead on virtues and practices as constitutive of life in Christ, grounded in a hylomorphic and teleological anthropology. Hauerwas helped to ensure that Barron recognized that neither conservative nor liberal visions of America represent the proper measure of the Gospel. Instead, the Gospel is the measure of America and of all nation-states. This contrasts with the perspective of much religiously liberal Catholic theology, in which the norms adopted by eminent social and cultural institutions are assumed to be normative for the Church. For Barron as for Hauerwas, moreover, telling the stories of the saints is a necessary part of doing Christian ethics.

Chapter 6 explores Barron's spirituality. Barron proposes the following spiritual path: finding the center (God and Christ), knowing you are a sinner, and realizing that your life is not about you. As I show through attention to the work of Richard Rohr—a Franciscan friar and popular spiritual guide, whose work embodies the principles of Catholic religious liberalism—something like these three steps can be found in Rohr, which is not surprising due to Barron and Rohr's shared appreciation for Thomas Merton. But the content that Barron gives them differs sharply from Rohr's content. Barron approaches each of the three steps through stories

about the saints and through fictional narratives that refract the light of the biblical stories. For Barron's embodied spirituality, particular Catholic practices are central. Barron also draws upon Bernard Lonergan's four imperatives: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible.

While writing this book, I have occasionally encountered friends who admire Barron's theology except for one or two things that they would like to correct. These points of correction vary widely: Barron's view of (for instance) Martin Luther or John Duns Scotus; or his perspective on the doctrine of hell; or his criticisms of neo-scholastic theology; or his concerns about historical-critical biblical scholarship. Such points can loom so large that people can become quite aggravated with Barron's public ministry, despite otherwise being in full agreement with him about the contents of the Catholic faith. Whenever that happens, the fact that even the saints and doctors of the Church disagreed with each other on large points has been overlooked.

As will be clear, my book takes an appreciative stance. My approach is fundamentally expository. As an analytical device, I situate his work especially within the theological, philosophical, and exegetical context of his formative period, which was my own formative period as well. By employing his own words as much as possible, and by doing the same for some of his major interlocutors, I hope to inaugurate the scholarly reception of his theology in a manner that is faithful to his insights and to the full scope of his work. My approach inevitably involves some dense prose and a certain amount of repetition.

Having benefited from Barron's writings since I was a graduate student in the late 1990s and having had the privilege of being his colleague and friend, I am no neutral scribe. Allowing

for the occasional difference, I greatly admire Barron's project and consider it crucial for the Church's present and future mission. He offers necessary guideposts for a Catholicism that is deeply and richly Catholic (and catholic) while also being ecumenical and contemporary. In my view, his theological vision exemplifies the salutary sanity of a "wise man who built his house upon the rock" (Matt. 7:24)—the rock of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.