

The New Apologetics

The New Apologetics

Defending the Faith in a Post-Christian Era

Edited by
Matthew Nelson

Published by the Word on Fire Institute, an imprint of
Word on Fire, Park Ridge, IL 60068
© 2022 by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries
Printed in the United States of America
All rights reserved

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Nicolas Fredrickson, Cassie Bielak,
Clark Kenyon, and Rozann Lee.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the
United States of America Copyright © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—
Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used by permission. English translation of the *Catechism of the
Catholic Church*: Modifications from the Editio Typica copyright © 1997, United States
Conference of Catholic Bishops—Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written
permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews. For more
information, contact Word on Fire, PO Box 170, Des Plaines, IL 60016 or email
contact@wordonfire.org.

25 24 23 22 1 2 3 4

ISBN: 978-1-685780-04-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021922718

CONTENTS

Foreword – <i>Cardinal Thomas Collins</i>	vii
Acknowledgments – <i>Matthew Nelson</i>	ix
Introduction – <i>Matthew Nelson</i>	xi

PART I – NEW AUDIENCES

1. Nones Are Not “Nothings” – <i>Stephen Bullivant</i>	3
2. Awakening the Indifferent – <i>Bobby Angel</i>	7
3. Why Catholics Fall Away: A Priest’s Perspective – <i>Fr. Blake Britton</i>	12
4. The Reason and the Remedy: Bringing the Lapsed Christian Home – <i>Tod Worner</i>	19
5. Moral Relativism: Arguments For and Against – <i>Francis J. Beckwith</i>	25
6. Countering Scientific Materialism – <i>Stephen Barr</i>	31

PART II – NEW APPROACHES

7. Digital Apologetics: Defending the Faith Online – <i>Brandon Vogt</i>	39
8. New Epiphanies of Beauty – <i>Michael Stevens</i>	45
9. Sowing “Seeds of the Word” – <i>Andrew Petiprin</i>	50
10. The Heart of Affirmative Orthodoxy – <i>John L. Allen Jr.</i>	55
11. Truth, Meaning, and the Christian Imagination – <i>Holly Ordway</i>	60

PART III – NEW MODELS

12. Socrates – <i>Trent Horn</i>	67
13. St. Augustine – <i>Matthew Levering</i>	71
14. St. Thomas Aquinas – <i>John DeRosa</i>	75
15. Blaise Pascal – <i>Peter Kreeft</i>	83
16. G.K. Chesterton – <i>Dale Ahlquist</i>	88
17. C.S. Lewis – <i>Fr. Michael Ward</i>	92
18. Flannery O’Connor – <i>Matthew Becklo</i>	96
19. René Girard – <i>Grant Kaplan</i>	101
20. Joseph Ratzinger – <i>Richard DeClue</i>	106

PART IV – NEW ISSUES

Science and Faith

21. Theology and Science: How and Why – <i>Christopher Baglow</i>	117
22. Defending a Historical Adam and Eve in an Evolving Creation – <i>Fr. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, OP</i>	122
23. Free Will and Its Challenges from Neuroscience – <i>Daniel De Haan</i>	128
24. The Quantum Revolution and the Reconciliation of Science and Humanism – <i>Robert C. Koons</i>	134
25. Creation and the Cosmos – <i>Jonathan Lunine</i>	143
26. Artificial Intelligence: Religion of Technology – <i>Fr. Anselm Ramelow, OP</i>	148

Psychology and Anthropology

27. Psychology and Religion – <i>Christopher Kaczor</i>	157
28. Happiness and the Meaning of Life – <i>Jennifer Frey</i>	162
29. Matters of Life and Death – <i>Stephanie Gray Connors</i>	167
30. Anthropological Fallacies – <i>Ryan T. Anderson</i>	172
31. The “Fourth Age” of Human Communications – <i>Jimmy Akin</i>	177

Theology and Philosophy

32. The Threefold Way – <i>Fr. James Dominic Brent, OP</i>	185
33. New Challenges to Natural Theology – <i>Edward Feser</i>	190
34. Doubt and Certainty – <i>Tyler Dalton McNabb</i>	195
35. The Existence of the Immortal Soul – <i>Turner C. Nevitt</i>	200
36. Dark Passages of the Bible – <i>Matthew J. Ramage</i>	206
37. Resurrection and the Future – <i>David Baird</i>	213
38. Ecumenical Apologetics – <i>Archbishop Donald Bolen</i>	217

Atheism and Culture

39. The Mirror of Evil – <i>Eleonore Stump</i>	225
40. The Argument from Divine Hiddenness – <i>Fr. Gregory Pine, OP</i>	233
41. Wokeness and Social Justice – <i>Matthew R. Petrusek</i>	238

Afterword – *Bishop Robert Barron* 243

Recommended Resources 246

Contributors 254

FOREWORD

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15–16). This is the charter of Christian apologetics: we must be ready, and can be ready, to offer a rational accounting for our Christian life and faith, and for the hope that impels us. Our life in Christ is reasonable and not the result of mere subjective emotional enthusiasm, which comes and goes like the clouds in the sky.

Rational explanation, of course, has never been sufficient. The even more ancient classical wisdom of the art of persuasion reminds us that if we are effectively to give an account for the hope that is in us, we must first establish the bond of trust and touch the heart, thus disposing the hearer to be attentive to the reasons we offer. In an age in which scandals have shattered trust and people’s hearts are lured away by the emotionally potent distractions of our secular world, they will not pay attention to words and reasons alone.

The early Dominicans built trust through austere, sacrificial lives that were radically different from those of the corrupt clergy of their day, and through a life of prayer and simple piety they touched the hearts of those who had deserted the Church. Then they were able to offer clear reasons for Christian hope, refuting the false ideas of their time. The stern St. Charles Borromeo and the charming St. Francis de Sales won the trust, and won the hearts, of their heretical contemporaries because of the gentleness and reverence of their saintly lives. Then their clear teaching could have an impact.

But if reason is not sufficient in itself, it is nonetheless the essential foundation of apologetics. So many people are being led away from life in Christ by specious reasoning. And our secular society is caught up in all kinds of irrational delusions about the nature of the human person and the purpose of

life; these have quickly hardened into an anti-Christian orthodoxy that it is perilous to oppose.

The New Apologetics is a fountain of life-giving clarity in a sterile secular desert, offering priceless assistance to us so that we can give a reason for the hope we have. Truth is simple, but error is complex, and the many short chapters address the complex challenges to Christian faith in these days, which require fresh thinking from the Christian apologist.

God placed our heads in such a prominent place on our bodies that surely he wants us to use them. A dumbed-down and mindlessly subjective faith is useless; we can rejoice in the fruitful insights offered by each of the many authors in this book, each examining one of the many facets of the modern apologetical enterprise. And each offering is blessedly brief, a lesson for us all in how to communicate, especially in a modern society of restricted attention spans. Each brief but insightful chapter invites the reader to go beyond what is offered to the feast of faith and reason to which it leads.

Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Matthew Nelson

From start to finish, editing this book has been a labor of love. First, thank you to the contributors of this volume. I was asked to put together my all-star team of philosophers, theologians, apologists, and evangelists for this book. Recruiting so many first-rate contributors for a single volume seemed in the beginning like a far-fetched dream. But given what a book like this could do for the Church, it was worth a shot. So, I went for it; and by God's grace, you all said yes. Thank you—not only for your contributions to this book, but for what you continue to do in your own apostolates and professions for the greater glory of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Equally, thank you to the master apologists who first showed me the incredible power of apologetics done well: Patrick Madrid, Scott Hahn, Tim Staples, Jimmy Akin, Peter Kreeft, Mark Brumley, Trent Horn, Stephanie Gray Connors, Steve Ray, Edward Feser, N.T. Wright, William Lane Craig, John Lennox, and Bishop Robert Barron. I am especially grateful to Karlo Broussard for his friendship and encouragement. You are one of the best, brother.

I owe an immeasurable amount of gratitude to my friends in the Word on Fire publishing department: Brandon Vogt, Matt Becklo, Dan Seseske, Jason Paone, Edyta McNichol, and James O'Neil. Thank you for all of your hard labor and intellectual rigor that you have quietly invested into making this book into something special. I constantly marvel at your ability to make good writing great.

Additionally, thank you to Rozann Lee, Cassie Bielak, and the design team for making this book look and feel like gold. You have proven once again that alchemy is real.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to Oxford University Press for

Acknowledgments

permission to reprint a revised version of “The Mirror of Evil,” from *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*.

INTRODUCTION

Matthew Nelson

In my early twenties, I ditched Catholicism for the world. It did not take long for my religious convictions to become doubts. A few years later, after a reluctant but providential visit to the confessional, I returned home to the Catholic Church. This spiritual reversion was marked by an immediate and profound “conversion of heart.” But my “conversion of intellect” was not so immediate. Despite my existing belief in Christ, which was basic but deep, I still harbored questions, hesitations, and criticisms, all of which remained in me like mental cobwebs.

Those cobwebs were eventually cleared away—but not without a process. I was introduced to the writings of C.S. Lewis, Frank Sheed, G.K. Chesterton, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI, all of whom taught me indispensable truths of the faith, while pointing me back to more ancient teachers like Aquinas, Bonaventure, Anselm, and Augustine.

Maybe most impactful on my intellect was the discovery of the books, talks, lectures, and debates of contemporary “ace” apologists like Patrick Madrid, Scott Hahn, Peter Kreeft, Steve Ray, Tim Staples, N.T. Wright, William Lane Craig, and Bishop Robert Barron. Their subtle mix of charity, creativity, intelligence, and tact exemplified for me then—and continue to exemplify now—how apologetics should be done.

With a new sense of where we are and where we are going as a culture, this book is meant to contribute to and carry forward the evangelical task embraced by those apologists. The cultural moment we now find ourselves in demands, possibly more than any other time in history, a potent and spirited renewal of apologetics in the Catholic Church.

The Duty of Apologetics

In more recent times, apologetics has gotten a bad rap, being falsely conflated with “arguing about religion,” in the worst sense of the phrase. But for Christians, apologetics, or giving a reasoned explanation or defense of the faith, is a necessity and duty; and it has been since St. Peter declared in his first epistle, “Always be ready to make your defense [*apologia*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

During his apostolic journey to the United States in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI fervently echoed St. Peter’s summons. To the American bishops, he insisted that “the Church needs to promote at every level of her teaching—in catechesis, preaching, and seminary and university instruction—an apologetics aimed at affirming the truth of Christian revelation, the harmony of faith and reason, and a sound understanding of freedom.”¹

Notice the grand scope of Pope Benedict XVI’s vision, with training in apologetics being promoted *at every level of Church life*—in the home, parish, seminary, and university. Given the unique and compounding intricacies of the modern world, there is an urgency to respond to this papal summons.

What Is the New Apologetics?

First, here is what the New Apologetics is *not*. It is not a rejection of arguments and methodologies from the past. Rather, it is a necessary refinement of these arguments and methodologies according to new cultural trends and the circumstances of our times. Indeed, there is a sense in which every major cultural shift demands a “new” apologetics. Thus, the New Apologetics is a recalibration of sorts, a reconsideration and adjustment of arguments, methods, and expressions according to the specific requirements of what is now a post-Christian, post-religious, post-new atheist, relativistic, scientistic, ideology-ridden society. It is in the spirit of and in conformity with Pope St.

1. Pope Benedict XVI, “Responses of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Questions Posed by the US Bishops,” April 16, 2008, Vatican.va.

John Paul II's "New Evangelization," and he has sketched a framework for how we ought to proceed.

The New Apologetics must be sophisticated, smart, and joyful. It should be outward-facing, both online and on the ground, to reach a more expansive public audience. More specifically, the New Apologetics must pay special attention to the questions asked by young people. It must reflect the Catholic Church's reverence for the physical sciences and be devoted to the affirmation and clarification of the relationship between science and religion. It must seek to know the enemies of Christianity better than they know themselves and understand the history of religious skepticism—including the polemics of figures like Sartre, Nietzsche, and Marx—and how much of contemporary atheism is rooted in it.

The New Apologetics must be engaged with the robust intellectual tradition of the Church. Apologists must be steeped in (to borrow a phrase from Matthew Arnold) "the best which has been thought and said"² in the Christian tradition, drawing especially from the wisdom of the Doctors of the Church; and while doing so, it must simultaneously maintain a spirit of creativity by which it will integrate new and inventive arguments and methods.

Furthermore, the New Apologetics must be imaginative, fixing beauty as its arrowhead and never forgetting its evangelical potency. In Bishop Barron's words:

Balthasar intuited something in the middle of the twentieth century, just as the postmodern critique was getting underway—namely, that initiating the theological project with truth or goodness tends to be a nonstarter, since relativism and skepticism in regard to those transcendentals were powerful indeed. If such subjectivism and relativism were strong in the fifties of the last century, they have become overwhelming at the beginning of the twenty-first century; Ratzinger's "dictatorship of relativism" is now taken for granted. Any claim to know objective truth or any attempt to propose

2. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Friendship's Garland* (New York: Macmillan, 1924), xi.

objective goodness tend to be met now with incredulity at best and fierce defensiveness at worst: “Who are you to tell me how to think or how to behave?” But there is something less threatening, more winsome, about the beautiful.³

Our presentation of the Catholic faith must appeal to the heart as much as it does to the head. As Msgr. Ronald Knox once wrote, we must combine “the lucidity of St. Thomas with the unction of Pascal.”⁴ The New Apologetics must therefore be *person-centered*. While applauding recent renewals in apologetics, Avery Cardinal Dulles nonetheless insisted that a proper incorporation of the personalism advocated by Pope John Paul II has been lacking. Dulles highlights the potential efficacy of testimony, for instance, which can “attune us to biblical thinking and especially to the Gospels as documents of faith.”⁵ Person-to-person apologetics must not become excessively abstract, as though we were merely “thinking things”—that is to say, minds lacking bodies, senses, moods, appetites, and the like. And just as the Church must tailor its apologetics to the unique needs of a given era or culture, the evangelizing Christian must also attune his methods and arguments to the needs of every individual to whom he preaches Christ. For every single person comes with his own distinctive abilities, assumptions, attitudes, dispositions, experiences, and influences.

Finally, the supreme requirement of the New Apologetics—without which the entire project is doomed to fail—is that it be *driven by the Holy Spirit*. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is absolutely primary. Prayer and the sacramental life animate the life of the apologist and make it possible for his efforts to be supernatural in effect. To be grounded in the Spirit, we must be open to it. We do that by making prayer and sacrament our nonnegotiable

3. Robert Barron, *Renewing Our Hope* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 23.

4. Ronald Knox, *Proving God: A New Apologetic* (London: The Month, 1959), 43.

5. Avery Dulles, “The Rebirth of Apologetics,” *First Things*, May 2004, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/05/the-rebirth-of-apologetics>.

first priority. Indeed, the interior life is, in Jean-Baptiste Chautard's words, the "soul of the apostolate."

What Lies Ahead

This book is intended to make the New Apologetics a manifest reality. It is a manifesto of sorts, a starting point—a public declaration of what we must do if we are going to "become all things to all people," as St. Paul did, that we might save some (1 Cor. 9:22).

The New Apologetics is not essentially a compendium of arguments, though it contains many within its pages. It offers something more fundamental: a necessary prelude to systematic argumentation. Arguments are no good if they are not heard. It is neither being learned, nor being eloquent, nor being witty, that is the vital outcome for the apologist; it is *being heard*, for "faith comes by hearing" (Rom. 10:17). Thus, *The New Apologetics* is a kind of intellectual and tactical map for the apologist who wants to be heard in today's world.

Part I acquaints apologists with the people they will meet—the "New Audiences" of our times. In the twentieth century, it was primarily Protestants who occupied the attention of Catholic apologists. In the early 2000s, it was the "new atheists" who were of principal concern. Though both Protestantism and atheism remain important interests for Catholic apologists, today's spiritual landscape is now riddled with dogmatic relativism, religious disaffiliation, spiritual indifference, and anti-religious sentiment. This first section of the book focuses especially on these cultural demographics.

Part II zeroes in on "New Approaches." These chapters consider the various trends and nuances of contemporary culture and offer practical insights and methods for engagement of nonbelievers, given who they are, what they are, where they are, and how they are most likely to be reached.

Part III of this book offers "New Models" for apologists. This section highlights some of the people in Church history, ancient and modern,

Catholic and not, who have best exemplified what it means to “destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4–5). All of the models in these chapters were, in their time, formidable in the rational defense of the truth—and all were models of steadfastness in “gentleness and reverence” toward critics (1 Pet. 3:15).

Part IV is the largest section of this book and is dedicated to the “New Issues” of our times. Although many of the topics discussed in this section are not unique to today (indeed some, like the problems of evil and divine hiddenness, are perennial), the treatment of these issues is truly new and cutting edge. The theologians, philosophers, and scientists who authored these chapters look at the big questions and assumptions of our time and offer profound insights into how we might convince people to see the world as the Catholic Church sees it.

At the turn of the millennium, Pope John Paul II provided a cultural diagnosis that is as accurate today as it was then. “Today we face a religious situation which is extremely varied and changing,” he observed. “Peoples are on the move; social and religious realities which were once clear and well defined are today increasingly complex.”⁶ Given this complexity, and the ever more prominent post-religious nature of society, the time has come once again for a new resurgence in apologetics—a New Apologetics for our time. It is my prayer that this book might serve as a powerful impetus for this necessary and urgent missionary undertaking.

6. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* 32, encyclical letter, Vatican.va.

PART I

NEW AUDIENCES

Nones Are Not “Nothings”

Stephen Bullivant

“None.” “Nonreligious.” “Nothing in particular.” “Unaffiliated.” Despite often being described as America’s fastest growing religious affiliation, such terms can feel a little awkward as personal labels. Some scholars have argued that “none” and its compatriots aren’t genuine identities at all. They’re just the artificial by-product of tick-box surveys. To suppose one can speak of “nones” as a genuine group, this line of argument goes, is as silly as thinking that “Other (please specify)” is a real occupation.

There’s some truth to this, to be sure. The nones *are* a very large, broad, and diffuse category. They have to be. They currently make up about a quarter of US adults (and a third of young adults), and over half of British adults (and two-thirds of young adults): it’s hard to fit that many people into a single “type.” And they are, to a certain extent, a statistical convenience. Many of those who end up counted within the “X% of nones” on handy infographics may not instinctively describe themselves in that way. But the same is true of other familiar abstractions like “liberals,” “Hispanics,” “mainline Protestants,” or “LGBTQ.” These are all accepted as being useful and meaningful short-hands, precisely *because* they bring together a diverse collection of much more specific identity groups.

That said, supposedly empty categories like “none,” “nothing,” or “non-religious” very often *can* be personally owned. And this is frequently true for those brought up and/or still living in deeply religious contexts—something true of a high proportion of America’s nones. Prior to the pandemic, my team

and I had the great pleasure of traveling around the US—not *quite* “from California to the New York island, from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters,” sadly, but not all that far off—interviewing dozens upon dozens of different nones. Those living in the southern states, or those who were raised in highly religious families, often genuinely owned the identity of being *nonreligious*.

Even for those preferring a more specific identity—“atheist” or “agnostic,” say—adopting a generic label can often be useful. “Oh, I’m nonreligious,” “I’m not really very religious,” or “I guess I’m one of those ‘nones’ you keep reading about” feel like more socially acceptable replies when the subject comes up (as it inevitably does) at parties, in the workplace, or on dates.

For each of these nones, though the precise meaning and personal salience of such a broad label clearly varies, it’s far from just a statistician’s fiction. (Note, too, that the meaning and salience of broad labels like “Christian” or “Jewish” or “Buddhist” differ greatly among self-ascribers.) As the British sociologist Lois Lee puts it, “Generic non-religious identifications are not merely imposed on people by social researchers but can be made and performed by them in their everyday lives. . . . It is wrong to assume that the ‘nones’ are always nothings.”¹

In America, this is likely becoming more the case simply because being a “none” has become a definite *thing* in the past decade or so, helped greatly by the term gaining common currency through media reports. Not incidentally, this is similar to how “Evangelical” and “Born-Again Christian” suddenly became widely understood and embraced identities in the 1970s. It’s not that such people didn’t exist before, but now they had both a “brand” and the self-confidence that comes from headlines inducting them into a millions-strong movement.² People like to belong. This is true even among self-conscious nonconformists: the goths, emo kids, and AV clubbers are as

1. Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 132, 153.

2. Robert Wuthnow, *Inventing American Religion: Polls, Surveys, and the Tenuous Quest for a Nation’s Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chap. 5.

much high school “tribes” as are the jocks and cheerleaders (if not more so). And for Americans turned off by religion to varying degrees, “a quarter of the US population and growing” is a serious tribe to feel part of, even for those with little desire to seek and hang out with the others.

There’s a lot that can be said about “the nones” as a socio-demographic group—that is to say, about *who* they are in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, geographical distribution, political convictions, religious/spiritual beliefs, and all the rest of it. That’s important and interesting work, but all it can show us is various *average tendencies* within what is, after all, a very large and growing chunk of the population. *As a group*, nones have a distinctive profile: in the United States, they tend to be, say, a little bit younger, maler, and more politically liberal than the general population. But—and this is very important to realize here—one never, ever meets nones *as a group*. Likewise, it’s perfectly possible to construct a picture of the “typical none,” based on the midpoint of various statistical distributions. But then this really *is* a statistical fiction. The vast, vast, vast majority of real nones certainly won’t conform perfectly to the image of the “typical none.” And indeed, a very large proportion of them won’t even come close to it.

A couple of years ago, for fun, I ran the numbers from the highly respected General Social Survey to come up with America’s “average weekly Mass-going Catholic.” For the record, it was *a forty-eight-year-old white woman, with no college degree, who lives somewhere toward the eastern side of the Midwest, and who quite likes reggae, hates rap, and has mixed feelings about opera*. Now this is, as the young folks say these days, a “true fact,” and I have the stats to prove it. And, to a very limited extent, it might tell us *something* about the makeup of churchgoing Catholics. But it obviously doesn’t tell us very much about them. It certainly wouldn’t be a sound strategy for, say, a business targeting the Catholic market, to tailor its whole product range to just this person. Likewise, Church leaders definitely should not start basing their entire pastoral strategy around catering to this hypothetical person’s needs and whims.

Something very similar, of course, is true of “reaching the nones.” Just think, for example, of all the people you know who would, or might (since you’re unlikely to know for sure), regard themselves as having no religion, or being religiously unaffiliated. Even in your own families and friendship groups I imagine that the nones will add up to a very diverse bunch of people indeed. And this will be true, even if, as with “nones in general,” the group “skews” in particular ways.

Furthermore, just as each is different in all manner of outward and obvious ways, they will also be different in their inner moral, religious, and/or more broadly spiritual lives too. Crucially this is true not only of the present—America’s nones include out-and-proud atheists, New Agey “spiritual” types, doubting churchgoers and synagogue-goers, and all points in between—but of the past also. In the United States, as indeed in many other countries, a large proportion of nones will likely have been brought up in a religion, at least to some extent. Roughly 70 percent of American nones, for example, say they were raised religiously. Incidentally, this group includes 16 million ex-Catholics, 7.5 million ex-Baptists, 2 million ex-Methodists, 2 million ex-Lutherans, and 1 million each of ex-Episcopalians and ex-Presbyterians.

For all these reasons, anyone hoping to engage with “the none” needs, first of all, to stop thinking in terms of *the nones*, and instead start thinking in terms of this or that individual and unique friend, family member, co-worker, social media sparring partner, or what-have-you. Fortunately, finding out more about Chad, or Juanita, or Zeke, or Cindy-Lou, or Chip, or Shawn, or Taylor, or Bud, or Darleen doesn’t require learning a lot about statistics. All you have to do is ask them.³

3. Parts of this essay have been adapted from the Word on Fire Institute course “Understanding the ‘Nones’ and How to Reach Them” and from Stephen Bullivant, *Nonverts: The Making of Ex-Christian America(ns)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

Awakening the Indifferent

Bobby Angel

We're living in what I like to call a "Culture of Meh."

Having taught for almost nine years at an all-boys Catholic high school, I am well acquainted with the apathetic shoulder shrug of the modern young man who simply "can't be bothered" about matters of morality, Scripture, or even the question of God himself.

This inability of modern men and women to muster the slightest energy to care about a philosophical idea or issue of moral depth elicits, in even shorter phraseology, the pithy response "I can't even."

People are indifferent. And such people simply can't be bothered with the big questions of life.

But all human beings, including the religiously indifferent, share certain irrevocable cravings.

We—being the humans we are—*do* crave meaning, purpose, and depth, and we all have the need to belong and to be understood. We do want someone to call greatness out of us (look no further than the "Jordan Peterson effect" upon young men for evidence of this ache). Passion *does* exist in the heart of modern men and women, although it's often directed toward greater societal justice (if we could agree on a definition of justice), environmental stewardship, or the grievous flaws in the latest comic-book movie. Simply put, our passionate energies get directed toward politics or entertainment. But when it comes to questions of higher purpose, the origins of morality,

and the nature of God, our generation tends to, as Bishop Barron often states, drop these questions *just* when they become truly interesting!

Morally speaking, our generation is in a relativistic stupor. Good and evil are considered antiquated concepts that our enlightened society should cast aside in favor of universal, bland tolerance. As Christina Hoff Sommers, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, writes, “When tolerance is the sole virtue, students’ capacity for moral indignation, so important for moral development, is severely inhibited. The result is moral passivity and confusion and a shift of moral focus from the individual to society.”¹ When everything is mere preference, opinions, and value clarification, nothing is worth even getting that upset about. An abortion elicits the same moral response as an ice cream preference: “Meh.”

Furthermore, with the conveniences of modern technology, it’s all too easy to live as practical atheists, as though God didn’t exist at all. *If* God exists, he’s just a nice uncle in the sky who wants us to be decent people, have fun, and not kill anyone. Otherwise, we’re free to live in our air-conditioned bubbles, have products shipped directly to our door, and post online for a reward of dopamine while simultaneously signaling how virtuous we are. The sociologist Christian Smith calls this conceptualization of a disinterested deity who simply wants our unrestricted happiness “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a vision Smith outlines in his book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Matters of sin, repentance, prayer, and holiness are outmoded; my subjective happiness reigns supreme.² Only when personal or global tragedies occur do a few individuals bother to angrily assert, “Where *was* God?” as if we were promised to never suffer at all; as though we are entitled to know the mind of the divine.

How, then, do we reach the indifferent?

A sailor can always work when the wind is blowing, even if the wind is

1. Christina Hoff Sommers, “Ethics Without Virtue: Moral Education in America,” *The American Scholar* 53, no. 3 (September 1984): 381–389, at 386.

2. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–164.

blowing violently. It's arguably easier to dialogue with a passionate atheist who has a visible zeal for life, than it is to attempt a conversation with someone who is apathetic and indifferent (I know from experience). When there's no wind to be had, little sailing can be done.

As an evangelistic strategy, I propose a few angles.

First, we need patience. To return to the ocean metaphor, surfers, sailors, and fishermen alike know that one must be patient for the catch. We cannot manipulate a person into desiring the things of God; we must wait, shoring ourselves up for the propitious moment. Christ taught about the efficacy of prayer and fasting (Mark 9:29) and so we should approach every person not as a project but as a beloved creature of God, interceding for them by prayer and fasting. If there will be any softening of the heart and conviction of the will, that work shall be done by the Holy Spirit and not by us. So, fish with patience and watch the horizon for the beginnings of the wave.

Second, show interest in the areas a person *does* care about. We so often want the student, friend, coworker, or family member before us to know the love of the Lord and experience his mercy as we've encountered it, but starting off on that foot can be perceived as pushy, preachy, or overwhelming because they simply aren't ready yet. It may cause you frustration that this individual doesn't care deeply about what *you* care about, but zero in on areas they have a passion for and meet them in that space. It might be a love of skateboarding, movies, computers, dieting, or music. "Oh, you like the music of ____? Tell me about that." Once common ground is discovered and goodwill displayed, then follow-up questions might be, "Why do you find that beautiful? What do you think makes something beautiful? Where does beauty come from?"

One student I taught missed just about every Sunday Mass because he was frequently traveling for baseball tournaments. I would try to teach this freshman with conviction about the God who revealed himself through the Old Testament and in the person of Jesus Christ, the evidence for God's existence from Aquinas and modern authors, and the life-giving vision of John

Paul II's theology of the body. Meh. He wasn't having it. It wasn't until I visited him in the dugout of the baseball field one day after school and displayed an interest in how his pitching had improved and listened to his rant on the upcoming Anaheim Angels' prospects that something deeper inside him clicked: *This teacher actually cares about me; he cares enough to listen and try to know me.* From then on, this young man made a better attempt at making Mass, even while traveling, and started to pay attention in class. As young men are often reluctant to give heartfelt affirmation of any kind, I would only find out years later of the deeper impact I had on this young man when his mother told me that something clearly happened to her son through this theology class because he took his Bible to every game he ever traveled to since. All glory to God.

Third, be ready for the long game, and be ready for the interruption. We are all sowers of the Word that has been sown in us. Some people till the soil, some sow the seed, some provide water and nutrients, others prune, and finally there are those who are privileged enough to witness the final form burst forth from the ground. We may be serving in any one of those stages, and we are not entitled to see the fruit of our work. To be sure, God graciously gives us moments where we do see and witness the transformation that the Holy Spirit has worked through us, but we need to realize that we are not owed that privilege.

The Gospels often record how Jesus was interrupted while en route from one place to another. This is when the pivotal moment of grace offered and received is materialized. The request to assist at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1–12), the hemorrhaging woman grasping at Jesus' garment (Luke 8:43–47), and the blind Bartimaeus crying out on the side of the road (Mark 10:46–52), among many others, illustrate how Jesus was “on the way” when the providential, life-changing moment occurred. It might not be the time for the indifferent individuals around us to have that moment of encounter; in fact, it might not be for many more years. But when it happens and we find ourselves at that privileged point of intersection, we must be willing to be

personally interrupted so that we might incarnate that merciful love of Christ. Welcome that interruption, as others were likely interrupted for your sake.

Jesus also loved people enough to respect their free will, knowing that all he could do was offer the opportunity for conversion; individuals were, and still are, free to reject that gift. In the end, we can never force anyone to respond to the offer of Christ to receive life in abundance (John 10:10). All we can do is pave the way and work to make the Gospel as attractive an option as possible.

We are surrounded by people self-identifying as “nones” and seemingly indifferent to the deepest questions of humanity that have been pondered throughout the centuries. I contend, however, that men and women are hungrier than ever to have meaning in their lives and to belong to a community where they are known—and, in turn, to be increasingly open to the strange and stubbornly historical person of Christ.

Be patient, find common ground, and lean into relationships with joy and zeal. As Pope St. John Paul II, the model of a patient and joyful evangelist, affirmed to the young people of World Youth Day in Rome in 2000: “It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be ground down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal.”³

3. John Paul II, “15th World Youth Day Address of the Holy Father John Paul II: Vigil of Prayer,” Tor Vergata, August 19, 2000, Vatican.va.

Why Catholics Fall Away: A Priest's Perspective

Fr. Blake Britton

In his opening speech at the convocation of Vatican II, Pope St. John XXIII highlighted a passage from the Gospel of Luke that has since become a foundational principle of the New Evangelization: “Read the signs of the times” (Luke 12:54–56). The Council Fathers echoed these words in *Gaudium et Spes*, reaffirming the Church’s responsibility of “scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” so as to carry out her task of sanctifying the modern world.¹ The Church is not a spectator of history. By her very nature as a sacrament, she is intrinsically bound to the world and its ultimate end.

This requires Catholics—especially apologists—who are keenly aware of the various movements and trends in the culture, while simultaneously recognizing the desires that give birth to these tendencies in the first place. It is not enough to simply affirm or deny society’s impulses; we have to understand them at their root and wrestle with them in the depths of our being.

There are few people who appreciate this better than priests. More than anyone else, our vocation—if it is lived genuinely—requires us to dive into the remotest recesses of souls and regularly navigate the drama of life. We cannot afford to see things superficially or at face value. Every day that we wake up, the Lord entrusts us with the most precious gift of creation, the

1. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 4, *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 217.

human soul; each syllable we utter and every action we take directly influences people's eternal destiny.

This affords priests a unique and indispensable perspective in regard to apologetics. Whereas a typical apologist might promote or defend the faith in response to a set of proposed ideologies, the priest must "see into the heart" (see 1 Sam. 16:7) and approach the same set of questions from a pastoral perspective. This is colloquially termed, "meeting people where they're at." And that is precisely the purpose of this essay, to help the reader better appreciate the state of average Catholics in our parish pews—to see where they are at. The Lord provides a wonderful and clear explanation in the Gospels.

Let us consider this familiar scene from the Sacred Scriptures:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns,

this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23 is one of the few occasions in which Jesus clearly expounds a parable word for word. The Lord notes four different types of tendencies or attitudes that develop in the human heart: those who hear and do not understand, those who hear and fall away, those who hear and become worldly, and finally, those who hear and bear fruit. It is helpful to interpret the first three analogies as states of the soul that eventually lead to a life of sin. For the purposes of this essay, we will not spend much time reflecting on the good seed, as its meaning is self-explanatory. Rather, since this book is intended for apologists, I think it better to provide an exposition on the three analogies of the seeds that do not bear fruit, since this will help apologists better know the heart of their listener, especially one that is struggling with or outright rejecting the faith.

State 1—Those Who Hear and Do Not Understand

It was Plato who said that only the ignorant can refuse the good. Created in God’s image and likeness (Gen. 1:26), humanity is innately drawn to what is comely and wholesome. Whatever smacks of truth stirs our innermost being. Nothing is truer than Catholicism. Willingly rejecting the Church, therefore, can only be the result of a failure to see her beauty and appreciate her wisdom. This is most certainly the case for millions of Catholics who have left the faith in the past sixty years.

Sadly, the majority of Catholics who stop practicing their faith—especially those who leave the Church and return later in life—do so out of ignorance. “Father, if I only knew what the Church actually believed”—I hear

that phrase far too often in the confessional or in counseling. However, it is hard to know what is not taught. Even more, it is difficult to believe what is taught if the teacher lacks conviction or proper knowledge. As Pope St. Paul VI said so aptly, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”²

I find in my pastoral ministry that many Catholics in the pew suffer from an ignorance of the faith. Not just its basic teachings, but its ethos as a whole. These are the Catholics most likely to become “nones” or “unaffiliated.” The Evil One takes them because they do not have a good synthesis of the faith—which is to say, an authentic and comprehensive understanding of its nature. The uniqueness and profundity of Christianity is lost on them. With such a lack of knowledge, it is only a matter of time before something has to fill the void. As C.S. Lewis keenly observes, if we starve the spiritual sensibilities of the people, it makes them “easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged.”³ And it has been avenged viciously. The restless heart of humanity is desperately searching for fulfillment. Netflix binges, porn addictions, Amazon Prime shopping sprees, career ladder-climbing, social media trending, political activism, pop-star adulation, socialist movements . . . the list goes on and on. Every sinful tendency manifested in the culture is nothing more than humanity’s attempt to fill the existential void only faith can fill.

This is especially true for Millennials and members of Gen Z. We are among the first generations raised by a secular, practically atheistic culture. Society tells us God is dead and the world can make us happy in his stead. So, we abandon our souls to materialism, running from pleasure to pleasure, confusing stimulation for satisfaction. Of course, these things leave us empty, and we become desperate. Every day is a concerted effort to escape, medicate, or in some way fill the hole in our hearts. But no matter how successful we are or how much we achieve, that nagging thought gnaws at the back of our mind, telling us there has to be something more to life. Eventually, the seed

2. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41, Vatican.va.

3. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 1944), 14.

of faith is trampled by jadedness and depression as we suffer from the human need for transcendence while constantly striving to suppress it. The existential tension is too much. The voice of the enemy is welcome relief. The seed is ready to be stolen.

State 2—Those Who Hear and Fall Away

“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). Why? What unique characteristic does a child possess? There are multiple answers: innocence, enthusiasm, confidence, trust, etc. But there is one specific attribute that stands out among the rest: wonder. Children are wonder-*full*. Everything around them is an adventure. Life is never tiresome or humdrum. All is gift. Yet somewhere along the way, the world starts to beat that wonder out of us, to mock and deride it as an infantile fantasy. We become boring and stifled by a hyperactive self-awareness that is more concerned about perception than reality. Slowly, we lose sight of what is most valuable and waste our energies on things that ultimately mean nothing. The same is true in our faith.

Following our First Holy Communion, it is tragic how quickly we tend to forget it. The jubilant expectation of that day fades away within the year and the poison of complacency set in. The rocky ground of passing concerns stunt the roots of faith, keeping us superficial. We remain Catholic, but as a spectator. We start going through the motions of faith. We do not necessarily live horribly sinful lives or leave the Church, but at the same time, we are not actively striving for holiness.

The Church Fathers refer to this vice as *the demon of acedia*. This demon specializes in mediocrity and comfort. His goal is to make sure we never progress in the spiritual life. To put it another way, *acedia* is the demon that whispers in our ear, “That’s too hard,” or “Someone like you could never be holy.” Only Christians striving to improve, learn, and change are dangerous to the reign of evil. The best way to combat the demon of *acedia* is to avoid

putting our faith on autopilot. We need to actively engage in the practices of our Catholic faith and constantly seek to grow. Only then can we become what the demon fears most: a saint.

State 3—Those Who Hear and Are Choked

We live in a materialistic society. This is a direct result of secularism. If there is nothing beyond the material, then we had better get as much as we can while we can. Jesus employs a powerful image when describing this mentality: choking. There are few sensations more infuriating. To desperately gasp for life and powerlessly fear death.

The worldly forces vying for our freedom are countless: politics, health, career, finances, social media, technology. In addition to these external influences, we have internal struggles, such as personal trauma, spiritual or family wounds, vices, and addictive habits. Without being rooted in Christ, these things can easily strangle us. Intimacy with the Lord allows us to see reality with proper perspective, whereas distance from God skews our perception. The further we are from Christ, the more intimidating or important worldly things become. Darkness grows as light diminishes. That is why we either succumb to the anxiety of these forces or sell our soul for a false sense of control over them.

Every Catholic sitting in the pew has a story. There are countless sentiments and apprehensions that ebb and flow throughout their daily lives. Part of being a good apologist is speaking directly to these concerns by reconciling the truth of faith with the reality of an individual's unique experience of the world. Christ does not exist in abstraction, but in the drama and rawness of being. That is what makes Christianity more beautiful than any other religion. We believe in a God of flesh, an "Emmanuel," a "God-who-is-with-us." Catholic apologetics does not start with convincing someone that we are right, but rather with convincing them that there is something more. It is not in conveying the wrongness of someone's action, but the ability to recognize

the goodness they long for and how it can only be fulfilled in Jesus. This style of apologetics is not primarily rooted in words or ideas but in our own innate joy and enthusiasm for Catholicism, the unmitigated fact that we have met someone and that someone has changed our lives by removing the weeds of worldliness and allowing us to live “in the freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).

Signs of Hope

When seeking to explain and defend the faith, it is vital to know the heart of the listener. In particular, when trying to evangelize fallen-away Catholics, we have to appreciate the struggles they are experiencing. In my pastoral ministry as a parish priest, I find the Lord’s words in Matthew 13 quite insightful. Average Catholics in the pew want to believe. Their hearts desire Christ and the fullness of truth. But ignorance of the faith leads to lukewarmness and complacency. This in turn makes the heart hungry for sustenance. That is when the world comes in and tries to fill the void, leading Catholics astray. That being said, I join St. John Paul II in calling myself a “witness to hope.” My parishes have seen a recent uptick in the number of Millennials coming back to the Church, particularly through the sacrament of Reconciliation. Love for the sacred liturgy and the tradition of the Church is also on the rise among youth. They are realizing quickly that the world cannot satisfy them. Now, we just need to show them the splendor of our faith.