

Praise for *The Strangest Way*

“What a wonderful book! Drawing on a wide variety of sources, theological and literary, Robert Barron helps us find a way through the darkness of our imaginations. What a gift!”

—**Stanley Hauerwas**, Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law, Duke University Divinity School

“Bishop Barron has the rare talent of making ancient, timeless truths applicable to our twenty-first-century worldview, then taking that worldview and helping us reshape it into the mold of that immutable wisdom. As a convert from a lifetime of being Protestant, I appreciate his winsome ways of leading us to beauty, then goodness, and finally truth. These were no small stepping stones on my journey to a deeper faith. And this is what he does with *The Strangest Way*, reminding us that the hope of Christ is hope for the whole world, even though it’s so antithetical to our culture steeped in modernism; in fact, this is precisely why it’s *the* hope. We urgently need this message more than ever.”

—**Tsh Oxenreider**, author of *At Home in the World, Shadow & Light*, and *Bitter & Sweet*

“Bishop Barron once again shows that he has a special gift for revealing the general and complex truths of philosophy and theology in the vitality and color of the particular: through art, through the lives of exemplary Christians, and in our everyday experiences. This book is a timely reminder that Christianity is not beige, bland, or reflective of the status quo, but strange, mysterious, beautiful, and profoundly life-altering. More importantly, Barron urges us here not just simply to have orthodoxy (right belief), but orthopraxy (right practice)—and he is helpfully specific about the practices we need to adopt in order to walk the strange path of Christianity with more purpose, direction, and attention.”

—**Jennifer A. Frey**, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina and host of the *Sacred and Profane Love* podcast

“Bishop Robert Barron’s *The Strangest Way* is an eminently readable, yet quite substantive, text on the centrality of Christ as God’s overture of love to all of humanity. Rejecting all Cartesian attempts to reduce Christ to a quasi-Gnostic interior movement, it emphasizes throughout that a commitment to the uniqueness of the Incarnation of God in human history requires a total conversion of the entirety of our existence into a set of ‘practices’ that embody the new divine life that Christ communicates to the disciple. Bishop Barron combines profound theological analysis with practical insights on how to appropriate God’s Christological grace into a thrilling spiritual journey. An added bonus are the many forays into literature (Dante, Flannery O’Connor, Evelyn Waugh, et al.) that deftly illustrate the main themes of the text and underscore the ‘strange’ and shocking nature of the Christian claim. The text is a masterful call to reject all forms of lukewarm and ‘beige’ Christianity and to embrace the true radicality of the Gospel.”

—**Larry Chapp**, retired Professor of Theology, DeSales University

“With his usual clarity and brilliant synthesizing, Bishop Barron illuminates the strange way of the Gospel. He shows us how to break out of our apathy to pursue the path of holiness and to understand, as Flannery O’Connor put it, ‘You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.’ Here’s to embracing the glorious oddness of the Christian life!”

—**Haley Stewart**, author of *The Grace of Enough* and co-host of *The Fountains of Carrots* podcast

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Walking the Christian Path

ROBERT BARRON



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Preface

STRANGE CHRISTIANITY

*Something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mister Jones?*
—BOB DYLAN

*We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block
to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*
—I CORINTHIANS 1:23

In 1996, there was a gathering of Christians and Buddhists at the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. At the meeting were scholars and monks from both traditions, as well as the Dalai Lama himself. After days of intense conversation and shared prayer, one of the Buddhist participants spoke to an urgent point. What had been bothering him throughout the conference was the prominent display, in almost every room of the monastery, of a suffering man pinioned to a cross. To his mind, the crucifix represented the agony to which the meditation and practices of his religion were the solution. And thus he asked his Christian interlocutors, what precisely was the point in showing this terrible scene over and over again? Those who were there say that this question—blunt, direct, and challenging—changed the tenor of the meeting for the better, forcing representatives of both sides to cut to the heart of the matter.

I love that man's question. More to the point, I love the *bother* that prompted it. Christians have become so accustomed to seeing the crucifix—in churches, in schools, on seasonal greeting cards, worn as jewelry around people's necks—that they have long since lost any sense of how awful and strange it is. But to the first Christians, the cross of Christ was that and more. Paul called it “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23), insinuating that it was sure to bother just about everybody. For the first several centuries of Christianity, artists were reluctant to depict the death of the Lord because it was just too terrible. They felt, perhaps, something of what that Buddhist commentator at Gethsemani felt. And yet, Paul can say, “We proclaim Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23), and the entire Christian tradition—from Augustine to Francis of Assisi to Dante to Ignatius of Loyola to Trappist monks in the hills of Kentucky—has echoed him. Somehow, they knew, that writhing figure, pinned to his cross, *is* the whole story.

There is a painting of the awful death of Jesus that the German artist Matthias Grünewald completed in 1484 for the patients and staff at a hospital specializing in diseases of the skin. It is one of the most terribly beautiful depictions of Calvary ever made. The two greatest Protestant theologians of the twentieth century—Paul Tillich and Karl Barth—had a reproduction of this masterpiece over their desks as they worked on their dogmatics. The body of Grünewald's Jesus had been, it is obvious, impressive and powerful, but now it is wracked, twisted, and disfigured—the neck at an almost impossible angle to the torso, the hands and feet distended, the legs bowed almost to the point of breaking, the chest covered in wounds, scratches, and blisters, the head wreathed in a particularly brutal crown of thorns. What is, for me, most disturbing are the shut eyes and the gaping mouth: this Christ is no longer seeing or speaking; he is simply lost in the terror of the moment. To the right of the crucified Christ stands

John the Baptist performing his usual iconic task of pointing at the Lord, but what is remarkable are the contortions in his arm, hand, and fingers as he indicates the Christ. It is as though his own life has to be twisted into a new and unusual form if he is to function effectively as a prophet of the suffering Jesus.

When I was coming of age as a postconciliar Catholic, great stress was placed on Christianity's outreach to the modern world and to other religions. In accordance with this emphasis, Christianity's distinctive qualities and bright colors tended to be muted and its rough edges smoothed, while points of contact and continuity with the non-Christian and secular realms were consistently brought into the light and celebrated. As a result, the Christianity into which I was initiated was relatively bland and domesticated, easy to grasp and unthreatening.

Then, in the course of my formal theological education, I began to read the mystics, saints, and scholars of the classical Christian tradition. What I encountered there took my breath away. Whatever this Christian phenomenon was, it was certainly not the beige system of thought that had been presented to me. Rather, it seemed to me the strangest, most exotic, surprising, and uncanny of all of the religious paths I had encountered. For at the very center of it is what the Buddhist scholar at Gethsemani and Matthias Grünewald saw with such clarity: a God who comes after us with a reckless abandon, breaking open his own heart in love in order to include us in the rhythm of his own life. Christianity, I saw, was not our disciplined quest for God, but God's relentless quest for us—even to the point of death. God died in order that we might be his friends. Whatever you think of that last statement, whether you deem it true, false, or nonsensical, the one thing it is not is bland; the one thing it is not saying is what everyone else is saying.

And friendship with God—not simply worship, discipleship, seeking, or ethical uprightness, but real intimacy with God—entailed, I

discovered, a giving of self that mirrored the radicality of God's own gift of self in Christ. The point of the Christian life is to be holy with the very holiness of God, and this means conformity with a love unto death. On both the human and divine side, therefore, there is a radical, even disquieting extremism about Christianity, and the best spirits in the Christian tradition do nothing to soften it; on the contrary, they intensify it.

It is this strange way that I wish to explore in the course of this book. My purpose is not so much apologetic as expository; that is to say, I am interested not primarily in making arguments in support of Christianity, but in presenting Christianity in its odd particularity. Accordingly, my target audience is my fellow Christians, perhaps especially those members of my own generation who came of age during a rather beige time, though I would hope, too, that non-Christians and nonbelievers would find much to ponder in these pages. The philosopher Wittgenstein famously urged his overly rational colleagues: "Don't think. Look!" My approach here is Wittgensteinian. I want to show the Christian way as it is displayed on three distinctive paths and to invite my reader to look, or better, to walk. I will use numerous and diverse sources in my work of exposition: poetry, drama, painting, theology, spirituality, architecture, philosophy, the lives of the saints, and literature.

In the introduction, I will argue that Christianity is not so much a system of thought or set of convictions as a path or series of practices. Like baseball, philosophy, or being an American, it is a whole pattern of life. I will also explore the typically modern assumptions that led us away from a practiced Christianity to the attenuated form that I encountered as a young man. Then, in the next three chapters, I will present the paths that constitute the Christian way: finding the center, knowing you are a sinner, and realizing your life is not about you. At the heart of each of these chapters will be a literary display of

the path, the first taken from Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, the second from Dante's *Purgatorio*, and the third from Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away*. And each chapter will conclude with a presentation of a set of concrete practices designed to keep one close to the path in question.

If it is not already obvious from these literary choices, I am a Roman Catholic, and this book has, unapologetically, a Catholic flavor and orientation. But I have always retained a deep sympathy for C.S. Lewis' project of recovering "mere" Christianity—that is, the essential core of a classical faith shared by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians.¹ It is my ecumenical hope that Christians of all stripes and styles could profit from these meditations on walking the strange way of the Lord.

1. See C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).