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—George Weigel

Distinguished Senior Fellow and William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies
Ethics and Public Policy Center

“We all know Bishop Robert Barron’s engaging style as a preacher and teacher. In *Vibrant Paradoxes: The Both/And of Catholicism*, we find this gifted writer at his best. With freshness and insight Bishop Barron explores seemingly opposite realities: sin and mercy, suffering and joy, faith and reason. His profound understanding of the spiritual life guides the reader to discover how the Christian faith is ‘permanently fresh, startling, and urgent.’ *Vibrant Paradoxes* is a must read for anyone looking for a new presentation of our ancient faith.”

—Cardinal Donald Wuerl

Archbishop of Washington

“Bishop Robert Barron, like Fulton Sheen before him, speaks with an authority that is more than episcopal. He came by his episcopal authority long after he had won the trust and admiration of a multitude. These short essays show you how he did it. They treat eternal and ephemeral matters in fascinating ways. His methods somehow combine the techniques of Chesterton and Aquinas with a dash of Bob Dylan—and the mix is always exactly right. His Excellency is especially good when he treats biblical themes. His words are wise and luminous. So why are you reading mine when you could be reading his?”

—Dr. Scott Hahn

Author of *Rome Sweet Home* and *The Lamb’s Supper*

“Bishop Robert Barron is one of the most effective evangelists in the Catholic Church. His new book collects some of his best essays, on a typically wide variety of topics, and is written in his trademark inviting, accessible, and knowledgeable style. He’s a real blessing for our Church and his new book will be a real blessing for you.”

—James Martin, SJ

Author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“If you’ve ever wanted to share one of Bishop Robert Barron’s fantastic meditations on Christianity but can’t quite remember where he said it (or how he said it!), then look no further. This book is for you. *Vibrant Paradoxes* is a cornucopia of wisdom, overflowing with insights into sin and mercy, reason and faith, matter and spirit, suffering and joy.”

—Dr. Brant Pitre

Author of *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ*

"*Vibrant Paradoxes* is a wonderful collection of clear, accessible, and learned articulations of different aspects of Catholic faith and practice. With the publication of this book, it is evident why Bishop Robert Barron is more and more being recognized as America's premier Catholic priest public intellectual, the likes of which we have not seen since the days of Archbishop Fulton Sheen and Fr. John Courtney Murray."

—Francis J. Beckwith

Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies, Baylor University

"In *Vibrant Paradoxes*, Bishop Barron puts to rest the caricature that draws Catholicism as something narrow in thought and discriminating in practice. In one entertaining and accessible essay after another, he demonstrates Catholic thinking as broad, paradoxical, respectful, and much too thorough to demand "either/or" when it can so clearly (and wisely) argue for the sake of "both/and". This book will surprise you, enlighten you, and help you to appreciate the width and breadth of Catholicism."

—Elizabeth Scalia

Author and U.S. Editor-in-Chief at Aleteia.org

"The riches of Catholic moral teaching are like a hidden treasure chest, waiting to be discovered. In *Vibrant Paradoxes*, Bishop Barron cracks open the chest and leaves us standing in awe of the riches it contains. Written in a warm, fatherly tone with straightforward prose that anyone can understand, this is a book that is sure to change a lot of people's lives."

—Jennifer Fulwiler

Author of *Something Other Than God*

"*Vibrant Paradoxes* is a stimulating exploration of contemporary issues via the deep, broad, and inclusive lens of Catholicism. Bishop Barron's essays offer invaluable insights for anyone committed to dialoguing from a place of love and truth in this skeptical, yearning world."

—Amy Welborn

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"What does our Catholic faith mean practically, generously, daily? Bishop Robert Barron helps us see. *Vibrant Paradoxes* illuminates the opportunities for seeing the light of faith everywhere—in every news story (both those that are well-covered and those that are not), in every cultural moment, in every human encounter. Our mission is integral and eternal, and Bishop Barron is tireless in highlighting the opportunities for mission."

—Kathryn Jean Lopez

Senior fellow, National Review Institute

VIBRANT PARADOXES

The Both/And of Catholicism

ROBERT BARRON

WORD
on FIRE

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD IX

INTRODUCTION XIII

SIN AND MERCY

1

God Joins Our Dysfunctional Family.....	2
Extreme Demands, Extreme Mercy	5
Evangelizing on the Road to Emmaus	8
Revisiting Spiritual Warfare.....	11
Seeing Political Corruption with Biblical Eyes.....	14
Wise Words from the Bishop of Rome	
Concerning the Clergy Sex Abuse Scandal.....	17
René Girard, Church Father	20
The Field Hospital Is Open	24
The Parable of the Talents	28
Pope Benedict and the Logic of Gratitude.....	31
Pope Francis and True Mercy.....	34
The iPhone App and the Return to Confession	37
The Revolutionary Message of Palm Sunday	40

REASON AND FAITH

45

The Indecipherable Writing of Thomas Aquinas	46
The Myth of the War between Science and Religion	49

Playing at Atheism	52
Why the Sciences Will Never Disprove the Existence of God	55
Woody Allen's Bleak Vision.....	59
What Faith Is and What It Isn't.....	62
Why I Love My Invisible Friend	65
What Makes the Church Grow?.....	68
Does Religion Really Have A "Smart-People Problem"?.....	71
America Needs You, Thomas Aquinas.....	75
Revisiting the Argument from Motion.....	78
Revisiting the Argument from Desire.....	82
Einstein and God.....	85
Pope Benedict and How to Read the Bible	88
Preaching the Strange Word.....	92
The Genesis Problem	95
Mother Nature Is One Unreliable Lady	98
<i>Laudato Si'</i> and Romano Guardini	101
The Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas Merton's Birth	104
The Pope, the Congress, and a Trappist Monk.....	108
Ross Douthat and the Catholic Academy.....	111
John Henry Newman at the Synod on the Family	114
A Lion of the American Church: Thoughts on the Passing of Cardinal George	118
Priests, Prophets, Kings.....	127

MATTER AND SPIRIT

131

St. John's Christmas Sermon	132
Why You Need Spiritual Food	136

Bruce Jenner, the “Shadow Council,” and St. Irenaeus.....	139
A Case for Celibacy by Priests.....	142
Why Jesus and Religion Are Like Two Peas in a Pod	145
What Easter Means	148
The Startlingly Good News of the Resurrection	152
Why the Ascension of the Lord Matters.....	155

FREEDOM AND DISCIPLINE

159

What Is Our Fundamental Problem?.....	160
Dietrich von Hildebrand and Our Relativistic Age	163
Pope Benedict XVI Among the Germans	166
The Death of God and the Loss of Human Dignity.....	169
Your Life Does Not Belong to You	172
Why Goodness Depends on God	175
The Tiny Whispering Sound	178
St. Irenaeus and the God Who Doesn’t Need Us.....	181
The Glory of God Is a Human Being “Fully Alive”	184
Thomas More and the Bishop of Rome.....	187
Why St. Junípero Serra Matters Today	190
Why Having a Heart of Gold Is Not What Christianity Is About.....	194
A “No” to a “No” Is a “Yes”	198
Brian Williams, Chris Matthews, and Letting the Fly out of the Fly Bottle	201
We’ve Been Here Before: Same-Sex Marriage and the Room of Tears.....	204
Love, Tolerance, and the Making of Distinctions	207
The “Waze” of Providence.....	210

What the Hell?	213
Pope Benedict As a Witness to God	216
A Prophetic Pope and the Tradition of Catholic Social Teaching.....	220
The Cleansing of the Temple	224

SUFFERING AND JOY

227

Stephen Fry, Job, and the Cross of Jesus	228
God and the Tsunami.....	231
Stephen Colbert, J.R.R. Tolkein, John Henry Newman, and the Providence of God	234
Hospital-Land and the Divinization of One's Passivities	237
The Dangers of the Prosperity Gospel	240
The Lesson of Calcutta	243
A Saint of Darkness.....	246
The Lesson of Lough Derg	249
A Tale of Two Skulls.....	252
The Fire at Namugongo	255
A Persecuted Church and Its Heroes.....	258
A Message in Blood: ISIS and the Meaning of the Cross	261
The Joy of Evangelizing	264
What Are You Waiting For?	267

FOREWORD

Any publisher will tell you that collections of short essays usually sell as well as thread. But this book will be a best seller, because these little gems are pearls.

My most common response when asked to write a Foreword, or a recommendation to a publisher, or a blurb for a book, is a polite “thanks but no thanks.” I am a curmudgeon, for I have read so many books that I am bored with most of them. Occasionally I will say yes because the manuscript sent to me is worth publishing; but even then I usually merely do my duty, like a professor reading a term paper, giving it just a good enough read to know it is good enough to publish, but without much passion, love, fire, or enthusiasm, and certainly not reading the whole thing from cover to cover with delight. That is how it is with 90% of the books I’m sent, and 100% of the collections of short essays.

Until now.

Everyone complains about the dullness of Catholic homilies and essays. Nearly all our priests are good priests (their job, of course) and some are good kings (administration), but none are great prophets and preachers. Since Fulton Sheen died, there have been exactly zero Catholic masters in this field.

Until now.

Technically, Bishop Barron’s articles are essays, not homilies, because most are not reflections on the Scripture passages assigned in the liturgy of the Mass. They range, like free horses. Some are philosophical, some theological, some ethical, some apologetical,

some psychological, some sociological, some personal, some historical, some about current issues, some about perennial issues, some about all of the above. They are “homiletic,” though, in that there are pastoral. Pope Francis memorably said that the Church’s shepherds ought to smell like the sheep. These do. They point to crucial foods or dangers that the sheep most need to know today.

Bishop Barron is already famous for his blockbuster *CATHOLICISM* film series and is a master of both visual and verbal media. Here he shows another side: he is simply the most readable and delightful Catholic essayist alive.

As a philosopher, I like to prove my claims with logical arguments, especially when they sound outrageous. Here’s my proof. Its major premise has 12 parts. It answers the question: What are the most important qualities of a Catholic essay? The minor premise is the data you hold in your hand. Each of these essays do all 12 of these things. The conclusion is my First Place award.

So what should a good essay be?

First, it should be interesting. It should wake us up, not put us to sleep. After it is finished, the reader should spontaneously pray, “Thank God for that!” rather than “Thank God that’s over!” If it made him happy, its termination should make him unhappy.

Second, it should have “existential import.” It should make a difference to our lives. Life is too precious and time too short to waste it on mere words.

Third, it should be short. Like his hero, St. Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Barron has an amazing ability to put a lot of stuff into a small space without stuffing it. These are bite-sized edibles. Each is just the right size to read and think about over a single cup of coffee in the morning, or a quick trip to the bathroom an hour later.

Fourth, since it is short, it should be concentrated, unified. It should teach just one major point. In the classic Protestant “three-

point sermon” the preacher first told you what he was going to say, then said it, then told you what he said. Sermons were invented in an age before all our technological time-saving devices robbed us of leisure. Homiletic essays should not be sermons, not even short sermons.

Fifth, it should be clear. I think it’s quite clear what “clear” means. The mind’s eye should not have to search for its light.

Sixth, it should make us think, not just feel good. In fact it should make us think deeply. It should be profound.

Being clear is rare, but being clear and profound (points five and six) at the same time is extremely rare. St. Thomas Aquinas did exactly that. So does his disciple and apprentice.

Seventh, it should be surprising. It should tell us something we didn’t know, or understand, or appreciate before. (This is almost never true in Catholic essays, except in the sense that I find it always surprising that Catholic essays are never surprising.)

Eighth, although it is short, it should be tall; though small, it should teach a “big idea,” an idea that stays with us. We don’t have enough space or time in our memory banks to hold millions of little ideas; that’s why we remember only a few big ones. We don’t have to deal with the moth on the living room rug but we do have to deal with the elephant.

Ninth, it should be apostolic. That is, it should stem from a strong, loving, and enthusiastic personal faith in *The Faith*. When we read it we should hear the authority of Christ and his apostles, to whom he said, “He who hears you, hears me” (Luke 10:16).

Tenth, it is not scholarly but personal, so the tone should not be at all pompous or patronizing. It should reveal that the shepherd has been among his sheep, sensitive and listening to their needs and questions and ignorance and hungers, and that he cares about their souls and minds and lives.

Items nine and ten do not lead in opposite directions, although many people think they do. But Jesus was neither compromising nor insensitive. Truth and love were equally absolute for him.

Eleventh, because it shines eternal truths on temporal things, it should be both old and new. This involves what theologians call a “hermeneutic of continuity” rather than a “hermeneutic of discontinuity.” Jesus said it more simply: that every scribe of the Kingdom should take from its storehouse things old and new. St. Augustine called God himself “Beauty ever ancient, ever new.” Good essays should make old points in new ways, apply old truths to new events, and show how the Catholic faith is truly “catholic,” that is, “universal,” like a prism that translates its unitary light into many different colors.

Twelfth, and most important of all, it should bring us closer to God.

These little gems shine brightly from all facets. Enjoy their light and color.

— Dr. Peter Kreeft

INTRODUCTION

One of the books that truly re-arranged the furniture of my mind is G.K. Chesterton's 1908 masterpiece *Orthodoxy*. As many have commented, there are enough rhetorical fireworks and intellectual insights on any page of *Orthodoxy* to last a lifetime. But the idea that particularly struck me and which has stayed with me throughout my life, influencing practically every book and article I've written, is what I would call "bi-polar extremism."

Chesterton said that Catholicism keeps its beliefs "side by side like two strong colors, red and white...It has always had a healthy hatred of pink." What he meant was that Catholicism consistently celebrates the coming together of contraries, not in the manner of a bland compromise, but rather in such a way that the full energy of the opposing elements remains in place. And so, to give just one instance, the communion of saints, which includes the warrior Joan of Arc and the pacifist Francis of Assisi; the towering intellectual Thomas Aquinas and the barely literate Catherine of Siena; Antony, the recluse of the desert, and Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor of England, who, as Chesterton delights in recalling, wore under the splendid vestments of his office a penitential hair shirt.

The deepest ground for this uncompromising celebration of the both/and is, I would argue, the orthodox Christology of the Church. According to the Council of Chalcedon, Jesus is not partly divine and somewhat human, nor partly human and somewhat divine. Instead, he is both fully divine and fully human, each nature non-competitively present to the other in the unity of his person.

Early heresies missed this both/and principle. Monophysitism hyper-stressed the Lord's divinity, and Nestorianism hyper-stressed his humanity; and Arianism presented the apparently reasonable compromise—a blend of divinity and humanity. Yet Chalcedon, with extraordinary finesse, said no to each of these positions, and waved the flag of divinity and the flag of humanity with equal vigor.

Once you grasp this principle, you begin to see it everywhere in the great Catholic tradition. Grace and nature; faith and reason; Scripture and tradition; body and soul; God's immanence and God's transcendence: what the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth called "that damnable Catholic 'and'" is what I would call its vibrant paradox.

The essays collected in this book, written over the course of several years and destined for a variety of audiences, reflect the Chestertonian master idea. They bring together themes and motifs that many would consider mutually exclusive or, at best, awkward in their juxtaposition. I have tried to show that the coming together of opposites, considered according to the deeper logic of the Incarnation, actually causes light to shine in every direction.

—Bishop Robert Barron
Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles

SIN AND MERCY

Many receive the message of divine mercy as tantamount to a denial of the reality of sin, as though sin no longer matters. But just the contrary is the case. To speak of mercy is to be intensely aware of sin and its peculiar form of destructiveness.

— BISHOP BARRON

God Joins Our Dysfunctional Family

The Gospel reading for the Mass of Christmas Day is taken from the prologue of John's Gospel, and it includes what is probably the best-known line of the New Testament: "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). God's Word became flesh, entering into the temporality, finitude, muck and mud of our human condition. This incarnation of God is the hinge on which the whole of Christianity turns. To get a further feel for the texture of it, I would suggest that we turn from the prologue of John to the prologue of Matthew.

The opening lines of Matthew's Gospel—and hence the first words that one reads in the New Testament—are a listing of the genealogy of Jesus, the 42 generations that stretch from Abraham to Christ. If the Word truly became flesh, then God had not only a mother but also a grandmother, cousins, great-aunts, and weird uncles. If the Word truly dwelt among us, then he was part of a family that, like most, was fairly dysfunctional, a mix of the good and the bad, the saintly and the sinful, the glorious and the not so glorious. And this is such good news for us.

Let me highlight just a few figures from Jesus' family tree. Matthew tells us that the Messiah was descended from Jacob, a great patriarch and hero of Israel, and also a man who wrestled with God. In a lyrical passage from the 32nd chapter of the book of Genesis, we hear that Jacob struggled all night with the Lord and was wounded permanently in the process. I imagine that there are some reading

these words who have wrestled all their lives with God, questioning, doubting, wondering, struggling mightily with the Lord, perhaps even bearing spiritual wounds as a consequence. Well, the Messiah came forth from Jacob and was pleased to be a relative of this fighter.

Matthew's genealogy informs us that Ruth was an ancestor of the Lord. Ruth was not an Israelite, but rather a Moabite, a foreigner. She married into an Israelite family, and even after her husband died, she remained loyal to her mother-in-law, returning with her to the town of Bethlehem, where she eventually married Boaz and became the mother of Jesse, who in turn became the father of King David. I would be willing to bet that there are some reading these words who have felt all their lives like outsiders, not part of the "in" crowd, perhaps looked at askance by others. Well, the Messiah came forth from Ruth the foreigner and was pleased to be her relative.

And we should say a word about Ruth's famous grandson, who is mentioned prominently in the genealogy. David was, it could be argued, the greatest figure in the Old Testament. He was the slayer of Goliath, the king who united Israel and formed her into a great power, a man of intense prayer and piety, a composer of psalms, and an incomparable warrior. But he was also a murderer and an adulterer. Reread that devastating account of David's seduction of Bathsheba from the second book of Samuel (11-12) to get the details. I'm sure that there are some reading these words who feel a bit like David. Perhaps you're a person of great success, power, and influence...who harbors a secret sin. Perhaps you've abused your power in order to freeze out someone who was threatening you or to demean someone whom you envied. Maybe you've done worse. Well, the Messiah came forth from David and was pleased to be a relative of that deeply ambiguous character.

If preserving Jesus' respectability was Matthew's goal, he would certainly have found a way to eliminate the name of Rahab

from the genealogy. As you recall from the book of Joshua (2, 6), Rahab was a prostitute living and working in Jericho at the time of the Israelite conquest of the promised land. When Joshua sent spies into the city, Rahab hid and protected them. As a consequence, when the entire city was destroyed and the people put to the sword, Rahab and her family were spared. Are there people reading these words who feel like Rahab? Who think that their whole lives have been sunk in sin, who have become unrecognizable to themselves? Well, the Messiah came forth from Rahab the prostitute, and he was pleased to be her relative.

And Matthew mentions Abiud, Zadok, and Azor as ancestors of Jesus. Who were they? No one really knows. Their identities and accomplishments are lost in the mists of history. I'd be willing to bet that there are some reading this article who feel like those forgotten figures: unsung, unaccomplished, unknown. Well, the Messiah was pleased to become a relative of those nobodies Abiud, Zadok, and Azor.

The good news of Christmas is that God himself pushed into the dysfunctional and ambiguous family of man. And he continues to join us, even though we, like so many of his Israelite ancestors, are unworthy of him. Like them, we are flawed, compromised, half-finished. But he becomes our brother anyway. That's the amazing grace of the Incarnation.

Extreme Demands, Extreme Mercy

The Catholic Church is often criticized as rigorist, unrealistic, and unbending, especially in regard to its teaching on sexuality. How could anyone, we hear over and over again, possibly live up to the Church's demands concerning masturbation, artificial contraception, or sex outside of marriage? Moreover, every poll that comes out suggests that increasing numbers of Catholics themselves don't subscribe to these moral demands. Few expect the Church to acquiesce to the moral laxity of the surrounding culture, but even many faithful Catholics think that the Church ought at least to soften its moral doctrine, adjusting a bit to the times to become a tad more realistic.

I wonder whether I might address these questions a bit obliquely, shifting the focus from the sexual arena into another area of moral concern. The Church's teaching on just war is just as rigorist as its teaching on sexuality. In order for a war to be considered justified, a number of criteria have to be simultaneously met. These include declaration by a competent authority, a legitimating cause, proportionality between the good to be attained and the cost of the war, that military intervention is a last resort, etc. Furthermore, in the actual waging of a war, the two great criteria of proportionality and discrimination have to be met. The latter means, of course, that those engaged in the war must distinguish carefully between combatants and non-combatants, targeting only the former. If these criteria are strictly applied, it is difficult indeed to find any war that is morally justifiable. Many would hold that the Second World War

met most if not all of the criteria for entering into a war, but even its most ardent moral defenders would have a difficult time justifying, in every detail, the waging of that war. For example, the carpet bombings of Dresden, Frankfurt, and Tokyo, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents, certainly violated the principles of discrimination and proportionality. Even more egregious examples of this violation, of course, were the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Catholic moral theology would characterize all of these actions as intrinsically evil, that is to say, incapable of being justified under any circumstances.

In the wake of the atomic bombings in 1945, the English moral philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe made the Catholic case vociferously in a number of public debates. She went so far as to protest President Harry Truman's reception of an honorary degree at Oxford, on the grounds that a great university should not honor a man responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents. In answer to Anscombe's criticisms, many Americans—Catholics included—used frankly consequentialist forms of moral reasoning, arguing that the atomic bombings undoubtedly saved untold numbers of lives, both American and Japanese, and effectively brought a terrible war to an end. And I am sure that a poll of American Catholics conducted, say, in late 1945 would have revealed overwhelming support for the bombings. But does anyone really think that the Church ought to lower its standards in regard to just war? Does anyone really think that the difficulty of following the Church's norms in this arena should conduce toward a softening of those norms?

Here is the wonderful and unnerving truth: the Catholic Church's job is to call people to sanctity and to equip them for living saintly lives. Its mission is not to produce nice people, or people with hearts of gold or people with good intentions; its mission is to produce saints, people of heroic virtue. Are the moral demands

regarding warfare extravagant, over the top, or unrealistic? Well, of course they are! They are the moral norms that ought to guide those striving for real holiness. To dial down the demands because they are hard and most people have a hard time realizing them is to compromise the very meaning and purpose of the Church.

Now let us move back to the Church's sexual morality. Is it exceptionally difficult to live up to all of the demands in this arena? Do the vast majority of people fall short of realizing the ideal? Do polls of Catholics consistently reveal that many if not most Catholics would welcome a softening of sexual norms? Well, of course. But none of these data prove much of anything, beyond the fact that living a heroically virtuous life is difficult. As in regard to just war, a compromising of the ideal here would represent an abdication of the Church's fundamental responsibility of equipping the saints.

However, here is the flip-side. The Catholic Church couples its extraordinary moral demand with an extraordinarily lenient penitential system. Suppose the pilot of the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (I believe he was a Catholic) came into a confessional box and, in an attitude of sincere repentance, confessed the sin of contributing to the deaths of 100,000 innocent people. The priest would certainly give him counsel and perhaps assign a severe penance, but he would then say, "I absolve you of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And that man's sins, before God, would be wiped away. Period.

The Church calls people to be not spiritual mediocrities, but great saints, and this is why its moral ideals are so stringent. Yet the Church also mediates the infinite mercy of God to those who fail to live up to that ideal (which means practically everyone). This is why its forgiveness is so generous and so absolute. To grasp both of these extremes is to understand the Catholic approach to morality.

Evangelizing on the Road to Emmaus

The greatest evangelist is, of course, Jesus himself, and there is no better presentation of Jesus' evangelical technique than Luke's masterful narrative concerning the disciples on the road to Emmaus (24:13-35).

The story opens with two people going the wrong way. In Luke's Gospel, Jerusalem is the spiritual center of gravity: it is the locale of the Last Supper, the cross, the Resurrection, and the sending of the Spirit. It is the charged place where the drama of salvation unfolds. So in walking away from the capital city, these two erstwhile disciples of Jesus are going against the grain.

Jesus joins them on their journey—though we are told that they are prevented from recognizing him—and he asks them what they are talking about. Throughout his ministry, Jesus associated with sinners. He stood shoulder to shoulder in the muddy waters of the Jordan with those seeking forgiveness through the baptism of John; over and over again, he ate and drank with disreputable types, much to the chagrin of the self-righteous; and at the end of his life he was crucified in between two thieves. Jesus hated sin, but he liked sinners and was consistently willing to move into their world and to engage them on their terms.

And this is the first great evangelical lesson. The successful evangelist does not stand aloof from the experience of sinners, passing easy judgment on them, praying for them from a distance; on the

contrary, she loves them so much that she joins them and deigns to walk in their shoes and feel the texture of their experience.

Prompted by Jesus' curious questions, one of the travelers, Cleopas by name, recounts all of the "things" concerning Jesus of Nazareth. "He was a prophet mighty in word and deed before God and all the people; our leaders, though, put him to death; we thought he would be the redeemer of Israel; this very morning, there were reports that he had risen from the dead."

Cleopas has all of the "facts" straight; there is not one thing he says about Jesus that is wrong. But his sadness and his flight from Jerusalem testify that he doesn't see the whole picture.

I love the clever and funny cartoons in the New Yorker magazine, but occasionally there is a cartoon I just don't understand. I've taken in all of the details; I've seen the main characters and the objects around them; I've understood the caption. Yet I don't see why it's funny. And then there comes a moment of illumination: though I haven't seen any further detail, though no new piece of the puzzle has emerged, I discern the pattern that connects them together in a meaningful way. In a word, I "get" the cartoon.

Having heard Cleopas' account, Jesus says, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets said." And then he opens the Scriptures to them, disclosing the great Biblical patterns that make sense of the "things" that they have witnessed.

Without revealing to them any new detail about himself, Jesus shows them the form, the overarching design, the meaning—and through this process they begin to "get" him: their hearts are burning within them. This is the second great evangelical lesson. The successful evangelist uses the Scriptures in order to disclose the divine patterns and, ultimately, the Pattern who is made flesh in Jesus.

Without these clarifying forms, human life is a hodgepodge, a blur of events, a string of meaningless happenings. The effective

evangelist is a man of the Bible, for Scripture is the means by which we “get” Jesus Christ and, through him, our lives.

The two disciples press him to stay with them as they draw near the town of Emmaus. Jesus sits down with them, takes bread, says the blessing, breaks it, and gives it to them, and in that moment they recognize him. Though they were, through the mediation of Scripture, beginning to see, they still did not fully grasp who he was. But in the Eucharistic moment, in the breaking of the bread, their eyes are opened.

The ultimate means by which we understand Jesus Christ is not the Scriptures but the Eucharist, for the Eucharist is Christ himself, personally and actively present. The embodiment of the paschal mystery, the Eucharist is Jesus’ love for the world unto death, his journey into godforsakenness in order to save the most desperate of sinners, his heart broken open in compassion. And this is why it is through the lens of the Eucharist that Jesus comes most fully and vividly into focus.

And thus we see the third great evangelical lesson. Successful evangelists are persons of the Eucharist. They are immersed in the rhythms of the Mass; they practice Eucharistic adoration; they draw the evangelized to a participation in the Body and Blood of Jesus. They know that bringing sinners to Jesus Christ is never primarily a matter of personal witness, or inspiring sermonizing, or even exposure to the patterns of Scripture. It is primarily a matter of seeing the broken heart of God through the broken bread of the Eucharist.

So prospective evangelists, do what Jesus did. Walk with sinners, open the Book, break the Bread.