

THE LOCUTORIUM

A THOMISTIC WAYFARER

An interview with Fr. Robert Barron

by Dominic Mary Verner, O.P.

BIOGRAPHY

Father Robert Barron is an author, speaker and theologian. He is also the founder of the global media ministry Word on Fire (www.WordOnFire.org), which reaches millions of people by utilizing the tools of new media to draw people into or back to the Catholic Faith. Father Barron currently serves as the Rector/President of Mundelein Seminary University of St. Mary of the Lake. Ordained in 1986, he is a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Father Barron received a Master's Degree in Philosophy from the Catholic University of America in 1982 and a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Institut Catholique de Paris in 1992.

Father Barron has published numerous books, essays, and DVD programs, including *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path*, *Creation as Discipleship*, *A Study of the De Potentia of Thomas Aquinas in Light of the Dogmatik of Paul Tillich*, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation*, *Heaven in Stone and Glass*, *Bridging the Great Divide*, *Word on Fire: Proclaiming the Power of Christ*, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Post-Liberal Catholicism* and *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith*. He is also the creator and host of CATHOLICISM, a groundbreaking, award winning documentary series about the Catholic Faith.

INTERVIEW

What does aggiornamento mean? Accommodation to what? These were the bold questions Karl Barth addressed to Rome in 1966, one short year after the close of the Council. Almost fifty years later, these questions are still being asked and answered in different ways. In your many writings, you show that you have given a lot of thought to the matter yourself. How would you respond to Barth? What does aggiornamento mean? Accommodation to what?

I deeply sympathize with Karl Barth's line of questioning. His other teasing question, which you didn't mention, has even more sting in its tail: "When will you know when the Church is sufficiently updated?" If *aggiornamento* means using the modern world as the measure of the church, then we have a serious problem.

Unfortunately, my generation was told that *aggiornamento* meant just that, causing something of a pastoral and theological disaster. The modern world should never be the measure of the Church, because no culture can measure the Church: Christ is the unmeasurable measure. In him all things hold together. He is "the beginning and the end," as St. Paul writes to the Colossians.

How then can we understand aggiornamento? Can the Church be modernized in such a way as to avoid pastoral and theological dangers?

We need to keep in mind two things. First, the Church always has the mission to reach out to whatever world it finds itself in—that for us happens to be the so-called modern world. We must engage with it. Second, the Church must become a more apt vehicle for evangelization in light of that mission. Here I follow Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote *Schleifung der Bastionen* [*Razing the Bastions*] in the 1950s leading up to the Council—we must knock

down the bastions. If the Church is stuck behind its medieval walls in a posture of defense, it won't fulfill its mission. It has to knock down those walls to let out the life that has been preserved over the centuries. We need to modernize the church to the degree that it makes the Church a more apt vehicle for this work.

Let us go behind those medieval walls for just a moment. In many of your writings you express an appreciation for the great medieval theologians, especially St. Thomas Aquinas. How did you come to appreciate St. Thomas?

My interest in St. Thomas goes back to when I was fourteen and a freshman at Fenwick High School, run by the Dominicans. I still remember the day vividly:

It was a hot spring afternoon. We had just come in from our lunch break to religion class, and a young friar, Father Paulsen, began to teach us the *quinque viae* of Aquinas, the famous five proofs for the existence of God. He laid out the arguments, and I found them so fascinating and compelling—especially the motion and causality arguments—that it changed my whole life.

That would have been about 1974, a time when religion was mostly banners and balloons. My poor parents sent us to Catholic schools, and I went to Mass every Sunday, but I had never taken the faith seriously. Then, at the *nadir* of the post-Conciliar period, I was exposed to Aquinas. It was like a bell going off. It lit a fire in me, and I've never left that path really. My whole life was determined by that afternoon, it is not an exaggeration to say.

I started going to the library with my little fourteen-year-old mind, and I checked out books of Thomas Aquinas. I've spent most of the rest of my life studying St. Thomas, and I've spent most of my major academic work on him. He has figured prominently in every book I've ever written, and remains of great importance to me.

What was St. Thomas's great appeal?

St. Thomas taught me that religion could be a matter of serious intellectual exploration. This had never occurred to me before then. I thought it was fascinating that you could make a case for the reality of God. Though I reverence and love the Bible in every way, it wasn't the Bible that got me interested in religion; it was these arguments of Aquinas. And I think his intellectual rigor and scientific approach are something of enormous usefulness in our era of the New Atheism, in which people repudiate religion in the public square as a bunch of pre-scientific nonsense. It is for us to recover the power of our great tradition, by which we can make public arguments for God. This recovery is enormously important today.

You mentioned Hans Urs von Balthasar earlier in our conversation in the context of breaking down medieval walls. What do you find most appealing about Balthasar's method and theology and what do you view to be his most important contribution for the Church's aggiornamento?

Even though I subscribe to the power of Aquinas for public arguments, nevertheless, in the postmodern context, there is often an antipathy to truth claims. "Who are you to tell me what is true?" and "Who are you to tell me how to live?" are typical objections we face because of postmodern relativism.

Balthasar begins with beauty, which for evangelical purposes is really important. I've always found something winsome and unthreatening about the beautiful. You can say, "Look at that! Look at how beautiful that is—that painting, that sculpture, that building!" In Jesus, and the saints who cluster around him, you see the beauty of a life, the beauty of a commitment. And this beauty can often be a less threatening way in. Once you are through the door of the beautiful, you can share the good and the true.

This is actually the method employed by Evelyn Waugh in *Brideshead Revisited*. Charles Ryder, who is like a contemporary



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atheist or agnostic non-believer, is first drawn in by the beauty of *Brideshead*, which is symbolic of the Church. Ryder eventually gets to the good and the true, but it takes much more time. The beautiful is his way through the door. You look at Tolkien and Lewis and you find the same intuition: you draw people in with the beauty of a story—the symbolism, the imagery, the character and narrative—and lead them to the good and the true. I think that is still a good evangelical method.

In telling the story of Christ to those who have little knowledge of the faith, it is not uncommon to encounter a forgetfulness of history and a lack of appreciation for the relevance of the past. The rejection of past narratives, which once helped man to appropriate his identity, seems especially characteristic of our postmodern culture. How do we communicate the historical particularity of Christ and the historical event of the Resurrection in a way that can break through this lack of historical consciousness?

Boldness in telling the story. Good evangelization is based upon the story of Israel, with Jesus as its great climax and culmination. When we forget that story, then Jesus becomes merely a guru or a spiritual teacher, rather than the fulfillment of Israel. We must become adept at telling the great story of Israel. Your instinct is right: we are a historical religion that is rooted in certain events in which we claim God has acted in the world—most notably in the Resurrection. Don't apologize for it, but tell that great story. And then show the lives that have been changed by it.

I was just struck by the historicity of our faith recently when I was over in Rome doing commentary for the papal conclave. I tried to say it whenever I could on the air: "Here we are because of a Galilean fisherman who ended up crucified upside-down right down there. His body was thrown on an old grave over which they eventually built that giant building right in front of us, and now the whole world is staring at this smoke stack that will announce the election of his successor." It's an uncanny thing really. And it's grounded in this weird historical fact—that this Galilean fisherman ended up here on this hill in Rome. The dense historicity of Christianity is still efficacious today and remains evangelically rich.

Aside from a lack of historical consciousness, what are some of the main obstacles to faith that you've encountered in your ministry?

I've learned a tremendous amount from my work on the internet, especially through my ministry of video commentaries. I hear from a great number of people who have some obstacle blocking their hearing of the Word.

The first big obstacle I come across is a misunderstanding of who God is. People see God as a threat to their humanity and a threat to their freedom. It's the old Feuerbachian problem, which comes right up through Marx, then Freud, then Sartre, and into Christopher Hitchens: God is seen as a threat to my freedom. So, a "No" to God becomes a "Yes" to man. I see that all the time. The answer, of course, is that our God is *ipsum esse subsistens* [subsistent being itself], the God who sustains freedom itself, and that, as St. Irenaeus teaches, his glory is the human being fully alive. People have these very faulty views of God because the biblical idea of God is not out there.

The second obstacle is a perceived incompatibility of religion and science. Religion is seen by many people as the enemy of science: science is great, it's forward looking, it's successful, it's predictive, and religion is everything but that. Religion is obscurantist; it's obstructing progress; it's irrational.

The third obstacle is the Bible and violence. The Bible presents big problems for some people because it's viewed as pre-scientific nonsense, Bronze Age mythology, old worn-out ideas by primitive people, and excessively violent.

Then there is the ethical teaching of the Church—especially concerning sex. People see the Church as retrograde, puritanical, anti-humanistic, and opposed to freedom.

These are the big obstacles that I've encountered: God, science, the Bible, violence, and sex.

How do we respond?

For you Dominicans, you young Dominicans, we need a new apologetics. And we need it to be clear, confident, bold, and smart. I've told the professors here at Mundelein Seminary in the

various departments: “I’ll tell you exactly what, in your various departments, is bugging people. Teach the men to respond to that.”

I go to the department of fundamental theology and tell them that no one understands what we mean by faith. Faith in the popular imagination means credulity, pre-scientific naïveté; it means accepting any old crazy wives’ tale. Then I go to my Bible department, and I’d say everything I said above: The Bible is perceived as a violent and primitive mythology. Then to the systematics department: God is misconstrued as opposed to human freedom. Then to the ethics department: People aren’t seeing the beauty of the Church’s teaching on sex, marriage, and family.

It is very important that we know the obstacles and know how we must respond.

So, would it be fair to say that you are in favor of a more dialectical or apologetic pedagogy in the training of priests and preachers?

When I was coming of age, we had dropped all apologetics. It was seen as anti-ecumenical, negative, disputatious, and all that. But what happened was we dropped all of our weapons. And then the culture—not entirely, but sections of it certainly—turned on us pretty energetically. Read Dawkins, Hitchens, or Sam Harris, or watch Bill Maher, and you’ll find vitriolic opposition to religion. If the culture likes us and is open to dialogue, great, but if the culture has turned on us, then we better have some weapons. We didn’t train the last two generations of priests to have any weapons, to be equipped for apologetics. I would say that you Dominicans should be in the forefront of that recovery.

Dominic Mary Verner entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.