

Avery Cardinal Dulles and the Future of Catholic Apologetics in America

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The funeral of Avery Cardinal Dulles at St. Patrick's Cathedral on December 18, 2008 was a key moment for the history of the Catholic Church in the United States.

Cardinal Dulles, along with Fr. John Courtney Murray SJ, are the two most significant and influential Catholic American theologians.

Cardinal Dulles left many theological legacies.¹ He believed in an *evangelizing theology* and he believed that the rebirth of Apologetics could be of great service to the New Evangelization.

This Keynote Address is a celebration of the August 24, 2018 100th Anniversary of the birth of Avery Cardinal Dulles. It is also an effort to be a catalyst of further discernment of the *Future of Catholic Apologetics in America*.

The key sources of Cardinal Dulles' thought on Apologetics are his 1999 second edition of *A History of Apologetics*² in which he traces through Church history how thoughtful Christians have striven to “give a reason for the hope that was in them” (1 Peter 3:15) and his Fordham University Laurence J. McGinley lecture delivered on March 2, 2004 entitled “The Rebirth of Apologetics.”

At the end of “The Rebirth of Apologetics”, Cardinal Dulles states: “While I applaud the resurgence of apologetics that we have recently seen in this country, I suggest it could benefit from the kind of personalism that Pope John Paul II professes. I have for some years been advocating an apologetics

¹ See Patrick W. Carey's *Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ: A Model Theologian (1918-2008)*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2010). This is a very helpful synthetic analysis with a comprehensive bibliography.

² Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

of religious testimony. It could capitalize on the personalist categories with which Christian philosophers such as Gabriel Marcel have familiarized us: testimony, invitation, response, engagement, fidelity, and communion. These categories attune us to biblical thinking and especially to the Gospels as documents of faith.

The apologetics of personal testimony is particularly suited to the genius of Catholicism. In the act of Catholic faith, reliance on testimony goes out indivisibly to Christ and to the Church through which he continues his mission in the world. Such testimony invites us not only to individual conversion but also to communion with the whole body of believers.

Recent popes have been calling the Catholic Church to a new evangelization. To evangelize, we must follow the testimony of God, of the apostles, and of the Church to speak through us. This we cannot do with confidence and success unless we have assured ourselves that the testimony is credible and unless we are able to convince others that this is the case. Holy Scriptures instruct us not to neglect apologetics. ‘Always be prepared,’ says the First Letter of Peter, ‘to give a defense of the hope that is in you’ (1 Peter 3:15). If we love Christ and cherish our faith, and if we wish to spread its saving influence, we will not shirk this important responsibility. The time is ripe, the need is urgent, for a rebirth of apologetics.”³

Cardinal Dulles’ urgent and passionate call to American Catholics in 2004 resonates with the passionate call of Pope Francis in 2013 in *The Joy of the Gospel* to be humble but confident evangelizers who lead.

Pope Francis writes: “A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigor and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody.”(266)

When we think of the Catholic Apologetics of the Twentieth Century, we often think of G.K. Chesterton, Msgr. Ronald Knox, the Catholic Evidence Guild, the married couple Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward and their Sheed and Ward publishing company that shared the work of so many apologists to the wider

³ See Avery Cardinal Dulles, SJ’s “The Rebirth of Apologetics,” in *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988-2007* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 430-442.

public. In his 2010 Address entitled “The Urgency of a New Apologetics for the Church in the 21st Century”, William Cardinal Levada correctly observed: “A new apologetics can also learn from the ‘old’ apologetics.”

With the Second Vatican Council and the critical teaching of documents like *Dei Verbum*, an emphasis on fundamental theology emerged. Dulles states: “Unlike apologetics, fundamental theology did not try to speak to unbelievers but contented itself with analyzing for the sake of believers how God brings human beings to assent to his word.”⁴

Still, Dulles would assert in *A History of Apologetics* that biblical theologians such as Fr. Rene Latourelle at the Gregorian University “sought to maintain a rightful place for apologetics as a function of fundamental theology.”⁵

In general, the transitions experienced in the post Second Vatican Council Church resulted in a temporary eclipse of Apologetics in the life of the Church.

But gradually with the Pontificate of St. John Paul II, a New Apologetics began to emerge with such leaders as Peter Kreeft, Scott and Kimberly Hahn, Karl Keating, Timothy Gray, Edward Sri, Bishop Robert Barron and many others.

There has been a rich ferment and Cardinal Dulles’ 2004 Fordham University McGinley Lecture called the question and raised the urgency of a further “Rebirth of Apologetics.”

In honor of the 100th Anniversary of Avery Cardinal Dulles’ birth, I would like to explore with you thematically in this Address the *Future of Catholic Apologetics in America*.

In short, what is “new” about the New Apologetics in the 21st Century? What bold missionary New Evangelization directions is the Holy Spirit leading us to? How in 2018 and beyond do we move forward the urgent points that Cardinal Dulles articulated in his 2004 McGinley lecture?

⁴ Dulles, “The Rebirth of Apologetics”, 432.

⁵ Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 327. Dulles states: “According to Latourelle, fundamental theology, in its dogmatic aspect, studies the Word of God as the foundational reality of Christianity. Under this aspect, it elaborates the basic categories of theological science, including revelation, tradition, biblical inspiration, and the Magisterium of the Church. In this first phase, fundamental theology considers the response of faith as a grace-given, free, and decisive acceptance of the Word of God. In its second, or apologetic aspect, fundamental theology seeks to demonstrate the Word of God, as it comes through history, is worthy of acceptance by persons who have not yet received it. It confronts the signs of revelation with the demands and resistances of reason.”

The future of Catholic Apologetics in America rests on an integration of *Fides et Ratio* and *Cor ad Cor Loquitur* and the genius and Splendor of Truth of Catholicism’s holistic anthropology.

In *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion, and Culture* published in 2009, five years after Dulles’ McGinley lecture, Francis Cardinal George submitted four characteristics of the New Apologetics: “First, the new apologetics must have a deep understanding of the Catholic faith on its own terms...Second, the new apologist must fully understand the positions of the others whom he or she invites into dialogue...Third, the new apologist must create responses to these challenges through positive articulations and explanations of the faith – a faith that employs terms and concepts understood by one’s interlocutors without diminishing the substance of faith...Finally, and most importantly, the new apologetics must be a personal and non-defensive loving response to arguments against the Catholic faith even by those who in fact hate the Catholic Church...We must love enemies of the faith.”⁶

Cardinal George’s four characteristics of the New Apologetics connect deeply with the Culture of Encounter advocated by Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel* and by St. John Paul II in his analysis of the conversation between Our Lord and the Rich Young Man in the first chapter of his 1993 encyclical *The Splendor of Truth*.

I propose exploring ten themes concerning the *Future of Catholic Apologetics in America*. You will be happy to hear given the thirty minute time constraint of this Address that I will limit myself to only three of those ten themes. As our Lord said to the disciples in John 16: “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now!”

These ten themes build on the foundation of the Catholic Apologetics enterprise in history which has always explored such themes as the existence of God, the problem of evil and the Cross of Christ as the answer to the problem of evil, the identity of Jesus Christ as the Unique Redeemer of the World, the Church of Christ subsisting in the Catholic Church, the inspired Word of God, the Sacraments, and the baptismal call to holiness and missionary evangelization.⁷

⁶ Francis Cardinal George, OMI, *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion, and Culture* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 74-75.

⁷ See Peter Kreeft’s *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) and *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

For anyone who would like to follow up in more detail with all ten themes and a more academic and research-driven presentation, a more thorough analysis is available upon request. In addition, you will receive a one page outline of all ten themes at the conclusion of the talk.

The three themes that we will now analyze this evening are:

1)The New Apologetics is framed in the context of the New Evangelization: “A New Apologetics for a New Evangelization”;

2)The New Apologetics is an Apologetic for deep Intimacy with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an Intimacy which animates and drives the Mission of the Catholic Church in History; and

3)The New Apologetics recognizes the Interdependence of a Catholic View of Ecology and Protection of the Environment with a steadfast Commitment to Objective Truth, the Sanctity of Human Life and Natural Law.

Let me turn to the first of these three themes.

1)The New Apologetics is framed in the context of the New Evangelization: “A New Apologetics for a New Evangelization.”

The New Apologetics is enriched by the thought and movement of the evangelization documents: the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes*, Blessed Pope Paul VI’s *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), St. John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and *Ecclesia in America* (1999), the *Aparecida* document (2007) of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean which helped forge Pope Francis’ global vision of evangelization, and Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortations *The Joy of the Gospel* (2013) and *Rejoice and Be Glad* (2018).

Each one of these documents has enriched and expanded the Church’s missiology and approach to the New Evangelization.

Think of Blessed Paul VI’s insight that the holiness of catechetical evangelizers “stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live.” (21)

Think of St. John Paul II’s motivational points that “*Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!*”(2) and “*The Church proposes; she imposes nothing.*”(39)

Think of Pope Francis inspirational encouragement to all *missionary disciples*: “Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always ‘new.’ (11)

The evangelization documents of the Church provide a framework, context and inspiring heart of the New Apologetics. A creative approach to the New Apologetics, grounded in a holistic Catholic anthropology that reaches mind, heart, soul and every dimension of the human person, is one of those “new avenues” arising and one of those “new paths” of creativity opening up.

I propose turning now to the second theme.

2)The New Apologetics is an Apologetic for deep Intimacy with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an Intimacy which animates and drives the mission of the Catholic Church in history.

As Catholics, grounded in the inspired Word of God and the prayer experiences of Saints and Mystics through the centuries, we believe that we can be deeply intimate with the Trinity.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Rejoice and Be Glad*, Pope Francis states: “Do not be afraid of holiness. It will take away none of your energy, vitality or joy. On the contrary, you will become what the Father had in mind when he created you, and you will be faithful to your deepest self...Do not be afraid to set your sights higher, to allow yourself to be loved and liberated by God. Do not be afraid to let yourself be guided by the Holy Spirit.” (32, 34).

One of the goals of the New Apologetics in a world grounded in superficial concerns, distractions, trifles, constant noise and social media addiction is to make a clear case that human beings find their true meaning, purpose and destiny in a deep intimacy with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We emphasize that intimacy with God is not only possible but that it completely transforms our existence and eternal destiny.

We also witness with the Catholic saints and mystics of history how the discipline of contemplative silence leads to true and lasting productivity and discernment in every dimension of the practical details of daily life.

The New Apologetics therefore draws on the autobiographies, biographies and writings of the saints. As Pope Benedict XVI states in *Verbum Domini*: “The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading, and assiduous meditation. The great currents of spirituality in the Church’s history originated with an explicit reference to Scripture...Every saint is like a ray of light streaming forth from the word of God.” (48)

The biblically and doctrinally enriched life testimonies of the saints model for us the personal testimonies that Avery Cardinal Dulles is calling us to in contemporary American culture.

Simultaneously, the saints help us understand Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman’s connection between true doctrine and authentic prayer experience. They help us understand the Splendor of Truth of Catholic Anthropology as it applies to progress in prayer.

Every dimension of the human being is engaged in prayer experience. An emphasis on faith and reason (*fides et ratio*) is interdependent with a simultaneous emphasis on the heart, the emotions and the will.

Authentic Trinitarian theology guides the saint-mystic’s experience of the indwelling Trinity in silent prayer and the missionary creativity that is unleashed by that prayer. It also steers us away from contemporary expressions of Gnosticism and Pelagianism that Pope Francis so timely warns us about in *Rejoice and Be Glad*.

The French Spiritual theologian Fr. Gaston Courtois expressed it this way: “In the present day world, prey to so many contradictory currents, what can be of more help for stabilizing it serenely than to the increase of contemplative souls who accelerate My taking over. Contemplatives are the true missionaries and alone can be the true spiritual teachers. Ardently desire to be a high fidelity transmitter. The fidelity of your lips assures the fidelity of My Word and the authenticity of My Voice through yours.”⁸

⁸ Gaston Courtois, *When the Lord speaks to the Heart* (Quebec: Editions Paulines, 1991), 147. This passage resonates deeply with Pope Francis’ reference to the words of St. Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) in *Rejoice and Be Glad* 8: “The greatest figures of prophecy and sanctity step forth out of the darkest night. But for the most part, the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Certainly the most decisive turning points in world

Finally, let me briefly discuss the third theme.

3)The New Apologetics recognizes the Interdependence of a Catholic View of Ecology and Protection of the Environment with a Steadfast Commitment to Objective Truth, the Sanctity of Human Life and Natural Law.

Pope Francis' holistic vision of the steadfast interdependence of Catholic Ecology, objective truth, the sanctity of human life and the natural law provides significant opportunities for the New Apologetics in the contemporary world.

For instance, as we prepare to celebrate the canonization of Blessed Pope Paul VI and the July 25, 2018 50th Anniversary of his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, we as Catholics tap into the cultural theme and trend “to go natural” whether it is in regard to having a healthy and balanced diet or whether it means being spiritually in tune with nature and respecting God’s creation or whether it means understanding and living the interdependence of the love-giving and life-giving dimensions of marital intimacy.

We have entirely new means of convincing new generations of couples of the objective truth of the Church’s call to use Natural Family Planning by connecting this call to Catholic ecological sensitivity, objective truth, the sanctity of human life, the natural law and the ethical advancements in reproductive science expressed by the rise of Gianna Centers in New York, New Jersey and other parts of the country,

In Pope Francis’ address to the United Nations on September 25, 2015, he states: “The defense of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself, one which includes the natural difference between man and woman (cf. *Laudato Si*’, 155), and absolute respect for life in all its stages and dimensions (cf. *ibid.*, 123, 136).”

history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history book ever mentions. And we will only find out about those souls to whom we owe the decisive turning points in our personal lives on the day when all that is hidden is revealed.”

In *Laudato Si'* 155, Pope Francis states: “Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment...”

In *Laudato Si'* 123, Pope Francis states: “The culture of relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labor on them or enslaving them to pay their debts...In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds, and the fur of endangered species? Is it not the same relativistic logic which justified buying the organs for resale or use in experimentation, or eliminating children because they are not what their parents wanted?”

Pope Francis’ Catholic ecological vision rejects the dictatorship of relativism and embraces objective truth and the natural law. In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis connects a respect and care for the environment with the objective truth concerning the Catholic sacramental and moral theology of marriage – a theology that grounds marriage in the natural law objective truth that marriage is between one man and one woman and that marriage is a permanent commitment involving radical fidelity that is spiritual, emotional and physical.

In a post SCOTUS *Obergefell vs. Hodges* (2015) world with increasing pastoral complexity for the families we serve, we also remember our religious liberty rights and our conscience rights. And, as we prepare for the 25th Anniversary on August 6th of St. John Paul II’ *Veritatis Splendor*, we remember the liberating Splendor of Truth of our Catholic teaching on marriage as a true expression of the Divine Mercy.

Connecting Pope Francis’ Catholic ecology to his emphasis on the objective truth of the natural law of marriage being between one man and one woman gives a more holistic, more persuasive and more attractive approach to presenting these Catholic teachings which liberate all of humanity at a critical crossroads moment of history.

Pope Francis' Catholic ecological spirituality is a holistic vision. It is not possible to choose the ecology without simultaneously choosing objective truth, the sanctity of human life and the natural law.

Conclusion: Avery Cardinal Dulles and the Future of Catholic Apologetics in America

I began this Address with the observation that the funeral of Avery Cardinal Dulles at St. Patrick's Cathedral on December 18, 2008 was a key moment of Catholic Church history in the United States.

I conclude this Address by observing and celebrating with you that August 24, 2018 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Avery Cardinal Dulles.

This anniversary offers us the opportunity to reflect on his many theological legacies whether it is the inspiring story of his Harvard University conversion and his discernment of a call as a priest and a member of the Society of Jesus captured in *A Testimonial to Grace*, his classic *Models of the Church*, or what we have focused on this evening – his urgent call to Catholic Americans in his 2004 Fordham University McGinley lecture for a “Rebirth of Apologetics.”

This evening we also think of Cardinal Dulles' fellow Jesuits in American history and their missionary spirit which helped launch our Catholic faith in the United States.

We think of Cardinal Dulles' confrere Father John Courtney Murray (1904-1967), the key theological architect of the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Religious Liberty*.

We acknowledge with Jesuit historian Hugo Rahner (the other Rahner) that the rich contributions of Jesuits through the centuries have their roots in the contemplative missionary heart of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Avery Cardinal Dulles, like our Holy Father Pope Francis, was a son of St. Ignatius and his Spiritual Exercises.⁹ Cardinal Dulles' life, his theological contribution and his lasting impact on the history of the Church is one of

⁹ See Avery Cardinal Dulles' Fall 2006 Fordham University McGinley lecture entitled “The Ignatian Charism at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century,” in *Church and Society: The Lawrence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988-2007*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 497-508.

many persuasive arguments for the Catholic Church to proclaim, at long last, St. Ignatius of Loyola to be a Doctor of the Church.¹⁰

We also celebrate this evening closer to home the historical theological and formational presence of Avery Cardinal Dulles in the lecture halls and hallways of St. Joseph Seminary and, of course, at nearby Fordham University.

God's providential hand is a beautiful and inspiring hand. It was alive and well in Avery Cardinal Dulles' life and its influence on the historical narrative of Catholic America.

And it is alive and well as our Holy Spirit driven Catholic Church in the United States boldly pursues her New Evangelization future and confidently discerns the *Future of Catholic Apologetics in America*.¹¹

¹⁰ See Pope St. John Paul II's *Divini Amoris Scientia* (Apostolic Letter Proclaiming St. Therese of Lisieux a Doctor of the Church), October 19, 1997 for a review of the criteria.

¹¹ Much of this conclusion I draw from Bishop W. Francis Malooly's "The Theological and Missionary Legacy of Avery Cardinal Dulles (1918-2008)" in the December 18, 2008 Diocese of Wilmington paper *The Dialog*. As Diocesan Chancellor at the time, I had the privilege of helping Bishop Malooly with this piece.