

A Patristic Reflection on the Nature and Method of Theology in the New Evangelization
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The very notion of a “new evangelization” immediately provokes a sense of excitement and ready assent in the hearts and minds of many sincere Christians. But in reflecting on the intellectual task of the new evangelization, it seems appropriate to probe more analytically into the attractiveness of this notion. While the rationale for evangelization should not at any time require justification, the fact that at this moment in the history of the Church and the world we are impelled to qualify that evangelization as needing to be “new” requires closer scrutiny. Why is it that we now feel the need to speak of a *new* evangelization? Notwithstanding all the cogent and compelling explanations that refer to the need for Christians to respond to the steadily increasing hegemony of a secularist worldview, I would like to suggest that there is an even deeper reason why many Christians respond to the call for a new evangelization with great enthusiasm and joy. I believe that the deepest ground for this joy is that the gospel itself is essentially and incorruptibly new and whenever we are moved to authentically welcome the message of the gospel, we are impelled first and foremost to proclaim its undiminishable newness. This clarification allows us to properly identify the contrast of old and new implicit in the notion of a “new evangelization,” especially insofar as it considers itself as responding to modern secularism. In the very last analysis, this contrast cannot be between an old proclamation of the gospel and a new one, but rather what is ultimately at stake is the proclamation of the ineradicable newness of the gospel over against the oldness of what the fourth evangelist calls “the world,” which is not the created world as such but precisely the posture of self-sufficiency that characterizes all kinds of secularism, both modern and ancient. We desire and need a new evangelization, first and foremost, because we need and desire a new world, a new heaven and a

new earth, and we know that the content of this newness is present only in Christ. As Irenaeus put it, “He brought all newness in bringing himself.” (*Adv. Haer.* 4.31.1)

In light of these considerations, it seems to me that the theological foundation of the “new evangelization” must begin by properly locating the designation of “newness” within the scriptural contrast between the essential “oldness” of the world, to the precise extent that it resists the newness of Christ, and the unsurpassable “newness” of Christ himself, which redeems and restores this old world. In the Old Testament, we see the foundation of this contrast in the psalmist’s opposition between the radical corruptibility of the material creation and the undiminishable vitality of Israel’s God:

Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you endure;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You change them like clothing, and they pass away;
but you are the same, and your years have no end. (Ps 102.25-27)

Human beings, too, despite their divine likeness are also perishable and, again, the psalmist contrasts the corruptibility of the human condition with the immutable vitality of God’s love:

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
They flourish like a flower of the field;
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone...
But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. (Ps 103.15-17)

In Second Isaiah, we find intimations that the abyss between human corruptibility and the unflagging newness of divine life will one day be bridged over. In the midst of Israel’s exile, the prophet announces in the name of Israel’s God:

Do not remember the former things (τὰ πρῶτα) ,
Or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
Now, it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Is 43.18-19)

But it is not until the New Testament that it becomes fully manifest that the new thing that God has done is nothing less than to utterly merge the essential newness of his indestructible divinity with our perishable humanity in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In an allusion to the prophecy from *Isaiah*, the book of *Revelations* concludes the New Testament with a vision of the universal sovereignty of God's newness:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things ((τὰ πρῶτα) have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' (Rev 21.1-5)

If we turn from a consideration of the scriptural witness to a discernment of the signs of our own times, we find that there is a surprising expanse of common ground between the worldview of the gospel and that of postmodern secular culture. Even if modern secularism does not acknowledge the redemptive newness which Christ has brought, it recognizes at least the "oldness" and tiredness of a Christ-less world. Quite independently of the judgment of the gospel, secularism itself declares the human condition to be not young and vigorous but rather old and fatigued. As Charles Taylor has amply (and voluminously) shown, disenchantment, pervasive malaise, and a sense of decay has pervaded the rise of modernity since the Enlightenment.¹ Our advanced technological expertise, which has undeniably resulted in the production of many new things, nevertheless has not only not renewed the earth itself, but has enabled us to measure with ever-increasing alarm its rapid demise, much of it caused by our irresponsible use of that same technology. But the oldness of humanity goes beyond a misuse

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007)

and depletion of natural resources. One of its distinctly modern expressions is a sense of disgust at the whole sad story of human history, with its dispiritingly pervasive cruelty and injustice, punctuated by episodes of boundless savagery. This sentiment was famously expressed by James Joyce's modern-day Ulysses, Stephen Daedalus, who complained: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake". In a similar vein, the English novelist D. H. Lawrence spoke of the collective broken heart of modern humanity, saying that we "have become repulsive to one another...we stink in each other's nostrils." (quoted in Saul Bellow's Nobel acceptance speech, 1976). It is to this sense of deep malaise and incapacity for genuine vital hope that the new evangelization must speak and I am convinced that the spontaneous excitement generated by the very notion of a "new evangelization" is due to the fact that it offers the prospect of a deliverance from the despair of living in a materially and spiritually depleted and senile world that seems to lack any credible resources for renewing itself.

If it is true that the foregoing is at least a partial account of the present meeting-point between the world's need and the gospel's promise, we can now ask what should be our conception of the nature and proper method of a theology that would be of service to the aspiration for a new evangelization. We can begin our response to this question by defining theology, from the perspective of the new evangelization, precisely as ordered discourse on the newness of Christ and of the renewal of all things in Christ. Similarly, catechesis can be conceived as the initial communication of this message of how, in Christ, the old has passed away and a new heaven and new earth are now taking shape in our midst. From this point of view, the fundamental criterion that distinguishes authentic and correct theology from distortions and aberrations can be characterized as the preservation of the essential and objective newness of Christ. This clarification preempts any inclination to overlook the riches of the Church's tradition

in the name of a misconceived desire for superficial newness and enables us to recognize that the high points of this tradition are in fact precisely those that witness most authentically to the newness of the gospel and partake of its perennial vigor and imperishability. Throughout the tradition, we find classic instances of theologies whose conformity to the newness of the gospel is evidenced by the fact that they remain fresh and vital despite the passage of time; they do not seem to grow old. In our efforts to construct a theological discourse for our own time that is an authentic witness to the essential newness of the gospel and thus serviceable for the Church's new evangelization, we can benefit greatly from learning from these classic theologies. We turn to them not with the assurance that they are infallible in every detail but simply with the recognition that they have proven to be built on the solid rock of the new terrain of the authentic gospel.

Certainly, the theological reflections of the Church Fathers would be widely acknowledged as exhibiting this vital character of evangelical newness, and I do not think it is merely coincidental that the present call for a new evangelization coincides with a renewed interest in the theology of the Church fathers. But what is the best use that the new evangelization can make of Patristic theology? I do not think it would be sufficient merely to repeat Patristic formulations of the Christian mysteries, though these are certainly luminous sources for meditation. Rather, what is most necessary and foundational for the project of a new evangelization is to retrieve the Patristic *method* of theological reflection, which was so successful in unpacking key elements of the newness of the gospel.

It is true that Patristic theology is not entirely homogeneous and it would be valid to speak of Patristic *methods* of theology. But we can also recognize a certain unity of approach within individual distinctions among the great Patristic theologians. Perhaps the most

methodologically self-aware account of Patristic theology is Origen's *Preface* to his *On First Principles*, written in the third century. It bears the unmistakably distinctive character of the great Alexandrian theologian, but its exposition of the fundamental structure of theological method would be substantively shared by all the great fathers of the Church. For the remainder of my talk today, I would like to focus on this short text by way of responding to the question of the nature and method of theology in light of the new evangelization. In particular, I will recommend to your attention three key features of Origen's prescription for authentic Christian theology which, in my judgment, should also be integral to a modern theology and catechesis which aspire to be of service to the new evangelization: a commitment to the absolute primacy of Christ; a proper conception of tradition; and an openness to the comprehensive range of the truth of the gospel.

1. The primacy of Christ:

The first sentence of the Preface to Origen's *On First Principles* lays down the foundation for theological enquiry as follows: "All who believe and are convinced that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ, and who know Christ to be the truth (in accordance with his own saying, 'I am the truth') derive the knowledge which calls people to lead a good and blessed life from no other source but the very words of Christ."² There is much to unpack in that one sentence that is relevant to both catechesis and theology in the service of the new evangelization. First, Origen is telling us that the properly Christian experience of encountering Christ is precisely to encounter Christ as Absolute Truth. It would follow, then, that the task of catechesis must be to present Christ as this absolute norm, Christ as the Truth not just in some theoretical sense but quite practically and existentially, as the exclusively sovereign source of the way to "a

² Pref. 1; ET: G.W. Butterworth (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973) p. 1

good and blessed life.” The task of theology, then, is simply to apply this absolute and unique normativity of Christ to the whole extent of our knowledge of reality, whether theoretical or practical.

Anyone who has even dabbled in Origen’s writings will immediately recognize that Origen cannot mean that Christian theology should make no use whatsoever of any knowledge that is not derived explicitly from positive revelation. Rather, he is really making the very same point that the contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, Bruce Marshall, makes when he speaks of the “epistemic primacy” of the Church’s identification of Jesus Christ as Lord. Speaking in the idiom of analytic philosophy, Marshall explains that the epistemic primacy of Christ means that “when it comes to the epistemic relation between beliefs- when it comes to deciding what is true- the identification of Jesus which relies on the church’s canonical narrative must have primacy...if identifying descriptions of Jesus in the church’s canonical narrative are held true, then the sentences by which we identify and describe other things must, if we are to hold *them* true, at least be compatible with (that is, not contradict) the sentences by which we identify and describe Jesus.” (*Trinity and Truth*, 116) For his part, Origen is presuming the Aristotelian definition of a science (*epistēmē*) as based on first principles that cannot themselves be interrogated lest there be an infinite regress of interrogation, rather than an ordered construction of a positive body of knowledge. Christian theology must seek its very first principle in the encounter with Jesus Christ as the Truth in person and as the criterion by which all claims to truth are to be tested. This does not mean that Christian theology can be content to be irrational and obliviously unperturbed by the demands and agitations of human reason. It is the Church’s proclamation of Christ itself which asserts that the proper functioning of human reason is a certain participation in Christ, who is truth and Wisdom. But the striving of reason must always

be guided and normed by the Church's identification of Christ as the Truth. Only in this way will the essential newness of the gospel be preserved.

2. The Role of Tradition:

After identifying the starting point of theology as an encounter with Christ as Truth, Origen goes on to explain that the words and teachings of Christ are comprised not only of the utterances of Jesus in his humanity but in fact of the entire Christian Scriptures- the Old Testament which proclaims Christ in the mode of prophecy and the New Testament in which Christ speaks both in his own person and in the apostolic witness. Yet Origen, who is arguably one of the greatest biblical exegetes of the Christian tradition immediately recognizes that the mere recourse to Scripture does not of itself guarantee a continuity with the Truth of Jesus Christ. And that is because this Egyptian theologian of the third century was no less aware than the contemporary philosopher Paul Ricoeur of what the latter calls "the conflict of interpretation". Origen notes: "Many of those, however, who profess to believe in Christ, hold conflicting opinions not only on small and trivial questions, but also on some that are great and important." (*Princ.*, Pref. 2; Butterworth, 1). For Origen, this inherent possibility and indeed perennial actuality of a conflict of scriptural interpretation necessitates recourse to a standard of judgment that will again prevent an endless regression of interrogation and unmediated disagreement. Origen refers to this standard of judgment as "a definite line and unmistakable rule (*regula/kanōn*)" (Pref. 2). This canonical principle is supplied by the living witness of the tradition of the Church, which Origen presents not as an alternative or rival source of revelation but as enabling and safeguarding the authentic contents of the scriptural witness to Christ as the Truth. For Origen, to reject the continuity of tradition and scripture is to be in danger of straying

from Christ as the source and content of Truth and to revert to ambiguous and unreliable extra-Christian accounts of truth:

For just as there are many among Greeks and barbarians alike who promise us the truth, and yet we gave up seeking for it from all who claimed it...after we had come to believe that Christ was the Son of God and had become convinced that we must learn the truth from him; in the same way when we find many who think they hold the doctrine of Christ, some of them differing in their beliefs from the Christians of earlier times, and yet the teaching of the church, handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles, is still preserved and continues to exist in the churches up to the present day, we maintain that that only is to be believed as the truth which in no way conflicts with the tradition of the church and the apostles. (*Pref. 2; Butterworth, 2*)

We see from the last sentence that Origen has moved in the space of just a few paragraphs from affirming the identity of Christ and the Truth to asserting that the determination of the contents of this truth must be in conformity with the tradition of the Church. It is clear that for Origen, there is no tension at all between these two statements. The truth of Christ, which must be appropriated as a personal experience on the part of each believer, is mediated through both Scripture and tradition. But it would be both anachronistic and an actual distortion of Origen's conception to see tradition as merely a record of propositional pronouncements that pass judgment on disputed questions. For Origen, tradition is many-layered and contains different gradations of explicitness and normativity. Moreover, the activity of theological investigation and enquiry is integral to the stream of tradition. I would like to quote almost the whole paragraph that immediately follows upon Origen's assertion that Christian truth is evidenced by conformity to tradition, and then comment on some of the features of his understanding of tradition, which I believe to be relevant to the project of a new evangelization:

The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ, took certain doctrines, those namely which they believed to be necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers, even to such as appeared to be somewhat dull in the investigation of divine knowledge. The grounds of their statements they left to be investigated by such as should merit the higher gifts of the Spirit and in particular by such as should afterwards receive through the Holy Spirit himself the

graces of language, wisdom and knowledge. There were other doctrines, however [also?], about which the apostles simply said that things were so, keeping silence as to the how or why; their intention undoubtedly being to supply the more diligent of those who came after them, such as should prove to be lovers of wisdom, with an exercise on which to display the fruit of their ability. The people I refer to are those who train themselves to become worthy and capable of receiving wisdom. (*Pref.*, 3; Butterworth, 2)

Part of the background of this passage is Origen's struggles with the phenomenon of Gnosticism. The gnostics divided the human race into three categories: the materialists, the psychics, or soul-like; and the pneumatics. They thought of themselves as comprising the latter category; they were the spiritual people in whom indwelt a spark of the *pleroma* and who had access to a secret knowledge that will lead them back to their spiritual homeland. For these "gnostics," ordinary Christians comprised the middle group of "psychics" who were misled by the plain meaning of the Scriptures and by the doctrines and sacraments of the visible Church. It was Irenaeus who in the second century waged a massive battle against the Gnostics, insisting that the contents of the gospel were given freely and openly to the whole human race. It is ironic that modern readers sometimes discern a gnostic flavor in a passage like the one just quoted above, whereas Origen was certainly adopting an Irenaean approach. As we can see clearly in this passage, for Origen, however high and deep may be the reach of any individual's contemplation of the mysteries of Christian revelation, the foundation of this contemplation must be the basic doctrines which are "delivered in the plainest terms to all believers." For our own purposes, we can say that the content of the Church's catechesis must be the foundation and norm for all theological contemplation. To suggest otherwise, that the content of catechesis is in any way separable from that of sophisticated investigation and enquiry, is to revert to a Gnostic schema which separates a class of "fleshly" people from the self-proclaimed pneumatics.

Nevertheless, for Origen, the articulation of these basic doctrines does not put a stop to thought and enquiry but is indeed a provocation to further questioning, investigation, and contemplation. Of course, such questioning does not put the basic doctrines themselves into question, which would be a betrayal of the epistemic primacy of Christ, but rather probes into the inexhaustible luminosity of what is revealed. For Origen, what we would call theology is exactly this activity, which is both a human labor and a gift of the Spirit. The fruit of this graced activity is wisdom, which is a participation in the Word and Wisdom that is Christ himself. Origen does contend that there are particular individuals who are especially endowed with such wisdom but, apart from his affirmation here that this is a wisdom whose foundational principles are universally shared by all Christians, he makes it clear elsewhere that those gifted with this wisdom are called to share its fruits liberally with those who cannot procure these fruits by their own labors.

At the heart of Origen's view of tradition is a certain dialectic between receptivity and activity, in which the former always has the initiative. It seems to me that this dialectic determines the proper mutual ordering of catechesis and theology. The reason that receptivity is the primary movement is simply because the truth of Christ, the truth which is Christ, is not constructed by human activity but simply received. Both scripture and tradition are primarily vehicles for receiving the truth of Jesus Christ and the task of catechesis is to introduce others into this stream of receptivity. At the same time, this receptivity itself calls forth an active dynamism that seeks to travel ever farther and deeper into fullness of the life in Christ. We are disposed perhaps to be bemused by Origen's explanation that the apostles kept silent about the rationale of certain doctrines in order to provide diligent lovers of wisdom "with an exercise on

which to display the fruit of their ability.” Yet, a more general familiarity with Origen’s work would lead us to see that he conceives of such exercise is for him an exertion that is the same as the impulse of desire for the divine Beloved. Tradition, for Origen, is not just a repository of information or legal judgments but rather a storehouse of provocations for the play of a searching desire. The tradition of the Church presents to us the truth of Christ both as a gift freely given and gratefully received and as an inexhaustible field for an active loving contemplation. In their authentic forms, both catechesis and theological investigation participate in this dialectic of receptivity and activity within the flow of tradition. Catechesis must always motivate its audience towards an ever deeper contemplation of the Christian mysteries, while theology is bound to anchor its investigations in catechesis and to present itself as a seeking within the unfathomable depths of the faith that has been already found and received in the universal teaching of the Church. Preserving the newness of Christ in the consciousness of the Church requires the careful maintenance of this dialectic of receptivity and contemplative activity. It requires in the first place a dogmatic fixity which distinguishes authentic features of Christ’s presence from spurious ones. But the fixation of these parameters does not put an end to our seeking and searching and questing but rather stimulates them all the more, illuminating the horizon of Christ’s presence as containing all the newness of the new heaven and new earth. A new evangelization must therefore look to the Church’s tradition as both defining the contents of the newness of Christ and as inviting us to an ever-new seeking for the fullness of that newness.

3. The Comprehensive Range of the Gospel:

Consistently with his own prescription for the proper conduct of theology, Origen goes on in his *Preface to On First Principles* to outline the primary doctrines of apostolic teaching. In the first place, these doctrines confess the Church’s Trinitarian faith: in the one God, who is the

“Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”; in Jesus Christ, begotten of the Father before all creation, who emptied himself and became human, suffered and died and rose from the dead; in the Holy Spirit “united in honor and dignity with the Father and the Son”. Then, Origen outlines the Church’s basic doctrines on the destiny of the human person; the existence of angelic and demonic beings; the creation of this world from nothing; and that the Scriptures have both a literal meaning and a hidden spiritual meaning. (*Pref.* 8) Finally, Origen concludes his methodological preface by placing the theological task within a hermeneutical circle or a dialectical movement that goes back and forth between the parts and the whole of Christian revelation. The theologian’s work is to connect individual doctrines so as to discern the whole vision adumbrated by Christian revelation and then to apply this vision of the whole in order to understand further the individual doctrines. It is again worthwhile to quote his own words:

Everyone therefore who is desirous of constructing out of the foregoing a connected body of doctrine must use points like these as elementary and foundation principles, in accordance with the commandment which says, ‘Enlighten yourselves with the light of knowledge’. Thus by clear and cogent arguments he will discover the truth about each particular point, and so will produce, as we have said, a single body of doctrine, with the aid of such illustrations and declarations as he shall find in the holy scriptures and of such conclusions as he shall ascertain to follow logically from them when rightly understood. (*Pref.* 9; Butterworth, 6)

Origen’s conception of the unity of theology offers an important corrective to a modern tendency toward fragmentation and division, a tendency that is inimical to an authentic proclamation of the gospel, whether in the mode of catechesis or theological investigation. On this point also, Origen’s position is anticipated and illumined by Irenaeus’s struggles with the Gnostics. In this struggle, one sees a Titanic clash between two antithetical world-views, one that privileges otherness, division, and separation as the ultimate hermeneutical key to the meaning of reality and one that privileges unity and harmony. The Gnostic world-view explained reality in terms of a series of irreconcilable antitheses: the divine pleroma and this world which was

created by a delinquent lower god; spirit and matter; different human natures; the visible Church with its Scriptures and sacraments and the esoteric Gnostic gospel; the fleshly Jesus and the Christ from the divine sphere. In contrast to this fundamentally oppositional world-view, Irenaeus has been called the theologian of unity. His theological vision insists on the unity and harmony of God and the world; matter and spirit; the visible Church and its mystical reality; the plain sense of Scripture and its spiritual meaning; the vicissitudes of human history and the recapitulation of this history in Christ. It seems to me that our postmodern temperament is more spontaneously inclined to the Gnostic world-view rather than the Irenaean: we privilege otherness and diversity and are suspicious of unity and meta-narratives. Ultimately, the Christian view of reality is one that discerns a Christological unity which both preserves and harmonizes distinctions, such as we find in the great theological vision of Maximos the Confessor in the 7th century. But such a vision is based in the first place on the hearing and proclaiming of the gospel as providing a comprehensive and unified view of reality. The gospel does not tell us just a bunch of thing about God and the world; it proclaims the reconciliation and recapitulation and renewal of all things in Christ. The manifold phenomena of reality are thus gathered up in the single mystery of Jesus Christ, who brings to actualization the unity of all creation with the holy Trinity. Such a vision does much more than merely affirm the internal logical coherence of the gospel as a system of teaching; it also affirms the value and meaning of this world and its history as enfolded by the proclamation of the gospel.

The new evangelization would be very well served by taking account of Origen's conception of the task of theological reflection as ordered toward a unified and comprehensive view of reality. A program of new evangelization can legitimately address many distinct issues that happen to be controverted in our time: human sexuality, social justice, the evolution of

creation, etc. But it cannot be merely reactive in addressing these issues in a piecemeal fashion because the power of the gospel is seriously undermined when we see it merely as a set of responses to a long list of human quandaries and dilemmas. Rather, the power of the gospel resides in the first place, as we have been saying, in its announcement of a new heaven and a new earth whose common and unified content is the newness of Christ himself. The new evangelization must be oriented ultimately to this comprehensive Christological vision, which Origen insisted was the necessary goal of all theological reflection.

Conclusion:

I suggested at the outset of this paper that what ultimately motivates the current aspiration for a new evangelization is something that goes deeper than the recognition that Christians must redouble their efforts to proclaim the message of the gospel in the midst of a secularism that increasingly encroaches upon the world-view of even self-proclaimed Christians. I believe that this deeper motivation is the inspired realization that the essential newness of the gospel needs to be urgently proclaimed as an antidote to a pervasive albeit often unconscious sense that just as the earth we live on seems long past its prime, so humanity itself seems increasingly incapable of aspiring to a future which transcends the nightmare of history and actualizes its noblest aspirations. This situation makes it imperative that Christians authentically proclaim the fullness of newness that Christ has brought into the world. The Christian tradition offers invaluable resources for this proclamation. Taking Origen's methodological *Preface* to his *On First Principles* as paradigmatic of the Patristic approach to theology, I have proposed three features of this approach that seem to me to be indispensable to our contemporary efforts to proclaim anew the newness of Christ. First, we must steadfastly claim the epistemic primacy of Christ as

the fundamental critical principle of Christian discourse; second, we need to look to the tradition of the Church both for canonical safeguards for this Christological critical principle and for inspired provocations toward the ever-deeper questing for the fullness of the new life in Christ; and, finally, our proclamation of the gospel must endeavor to enfold every aspect of human reality within its horizon, which is always nothing less than the horizon of a new heaven and a new earth that extends even into the heart of the ever-new and incorruptible life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.