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“Apologetics and the New Evangelization”

I recently read a delightful little book entitled *The Greatest Salesman in the World* by Og Mandino (110 pages). In this fictitious account, a young camel boy named Hafid, living during the time of Christ, is entrusted with a treasure from his employer to ensure his future success as a salesman. In the treasure are ten scrolls that are to be read, meditated on, and put into practice. I have summarized the scrolls in the following way:

1. Today I begin a new life
2. I will greet this day with love in my heart
3. I will persist until I succeed
4. I am nature's greatest miracle
5. I will live this day as if it is my last
6. Today I will be master of my emotions
7. I will laugh at the world (and at myself)
8. Today I will multiply my value a hundredfold
9. My dreams are worthless, my plans are dust, My goals are impossible. All are of no value unless they are followed by action. I will act now
10. Guide me God, help me, and show me the way.

In the end, not only does Hafid experience great success, he encounters Christ and receives the greatest treasure in the world.

Why do I begin with this story, because I want to remind us that *we* are salesmen! I do not mean this in some crass way, but in the most profound sense, we possess the greatest “product” in the world - faith in Jesus Christ and Eternal Life. Thus we are positive, energetic, engaging, and persevering - or else, who would want to buy from us?

But “selling” faith in today's world is no small task. The fundamentalist, the secular humanist, and the atheist will turn to us and ask the question “Why?” “Why do you Catholics believe...” If we were really irrelevant, as many would like us to believe, then they wouldn't be asking these questions. Thus St. Peter reminds us “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (I Peter 3:15). *Apologia* – Apologetics in the 21st century might seem outmoded by some, but I say no – when our people asks us questions or a stranger challenges us and we fail to field it well, we have dropped the ball and missed an incredible evangelical opportunity.

Very quickly after I began my first parish assignment I realized how important this was. Having just attained a License in Dogmatic Theology it was a shock to my system to learn that I had answers to questions that only professors at the Gregorian University were asking. I did not have answers to the questions being posed in Hernando County, Florida. Why do we do this? Where in the Bible does it say that? But didn't Jesus say this? Aren't these just man-made rules? I needed to go back to the basics and learn how to answer the questions on the hearts of the people around me. But not only that, I needed to arm my people, living in the Bible-Belt, to defend themselves and have confidence in their faith. The teens of my parish were mocked as vampires because they drank blood (this is before Vampire movies were in vogue), questions were routinely asked about Mary, the Pope, the priesthood, the Eucharist, the saints, Biblical authority, Tradition, etc. It is not rocket science to be able to learn a scriptural reference and know a little about the teaching of the Church to poke holes in these incessant anti-Catholic attacks.

The real challenge is to always remain charitable, patient, and kind. In addition, it is also important to be discerning when someone comes up to us. Ask if they really would like to know why we believe what we believe or do they just want to argue and volley scriptures (often proof texted) back and forth? I have found that I have matured and mellowed through the years with a much less defensive stance and much more calmly answer, "Well in our tradition we hold..." It is not in our nature as Catholics to attack other ecclesial communities – You will never hear an anti-Baptist or anti-Lutheran homily at Sunday Mass, but sadly in some churches you will hear a pastor railing against us – in a congregation that is probably made up with 50% former Catholics (remember the largest denomination behind us is that of former Catholics).

Another important point to discern is if the person in front of you is hurting in anyway, especially from a past encounter with a priest, nun, teacher, former Catholic spouse, etc. *We can be the face of healing as we speak the truth in love.* I find this particularly important today in encounters with those who have left the Church over re-marriage or moral issues. Try never to respond in kind to someone else's angry reactions or evident hurt disguised with venomous overtures. We need to say to ourselves "this is not about me" and then not take it personally. When we stoop to the level of angry discourse we have just lost the sale!

Our apologetics today are not just about answering questions of the past 500 years since the reformation, or of the past 45 since the secularism of our society began with the sexual revolution, but of the past 2000 years – Who is Jesus Christ? The atheist, the secular humanist, and the lost need us to be ready to give a reason for our hope. Pope Francis reminds us that the New Evangelization is about the basic message of the Kerygma – "Jesus Christ is Lord!" (Phil 2:11). But if we can only answer questions at 30,000 feet (I wrote this on the plane! A place where lots of good questions come up!) and not on the ground, we have all missed the mark. I have brought each of you a helpful tool – volume one of a simple series called "Beginning Apologetics." Please learn the scriptures and know our traditions in order to serve your people and the stranger on the periphery well.

I want to close by inviting us into the heart and mind of three great men named Francis. The first is the retired Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis George. There has been no more brilliant prelate in the Church in the United States in the past twenty-five years, and so when he speaks or writes, it is worth listening. I quote him here at length because I believe it to be very pertinent to our topic and succinctly summarizes tonight's message:

A new apologetics will — following Christ’s example — combine truth with charity. Apologists need both clear minds and open hearts. Since only the truth transforms and unites, much work needs to be done to understand and articulate the Magisterium’s moral and doctrinal positions, with particular attention paid to cultivating an authentic understanding of conscience and religious freedom, as taught by Vatican II. [...]

But given our fallen human nature, the call to conversion at the heart of the Gospel will only be heard if it is made with love for the one who has not yet adequately accepted the faith. Since no Christian evangelizer preaches himself or herself, the call to conversion must be made with humility, and to all. And given our modern appreciation for the uniquely subjective dimension of any human act and of human freedom, the call must presuppose the goodwill and respect the dignity of those in need of conversion. [...]

How does the Church reach out in truth and love to abortionists and secularists, to those who believe the Holy Father is the anti-Christ and those who think Catholics are not Christians? Only a Church internally united around Christ and the apostolic faith will be able to reach out effectively to speak the truth in love to the whole world. The language of love is more universal than the more specialized vocabularies needed for apologetics today, but all languages are essential for the new evangelization. [...]

[I]t is clear that the faith still has enemies and that new arguments are needed to create a new apologetics in the service of the new evangelization” (Francis Cardinal George, “A New Evangelization in a New Millennium: A Call for a New Apologetics,” *Lay Witness* 21 no. 4 [May 2000]).

The second Francis is our Holy Father who likewise is encouraging us to preach the truth in love (as did his predecessors). He is challenging us and the men and women of various ecclesial communions when he spoke during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this past January:

So many past controversies between Christians can be overcome when we put aside all polemical or apologetic approaches, and seek instead to grasp more fully what unites us, namely, our call to share in the mystery of the Father’s love revealed to us by the Son through the Holy Spirit. Christian unity – we are convinced – will not be the fruit of subtle theoretical discussions in which each party tries to convince the other of the soundness of their opinions. When the Son of Man comes, he will find us still discussing! We need to realize that, to plumb the depths of the mystery of God, we need one another, we need to encounter one another and to challenge one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who harmonizes diversities, overcomes conflicts, reconciles differences (Homily at Vespers on the Solemnity of the Conversion of St. Paul, 25 January 2015).

The Holy Father is calling us beyond mere apologetics for the sake of winning arguments. After all, I can be 100% correct and at the same time totally wrong if I lack the love and pastoral sensitivity needed for the New Evangelization. But that does not negate the need to understand what and why we do it, and articulate it to those truth seekers wanting to know the reason for our hope. Pope Francis is also reminding all Christians of our common witness to the world, an “ecumenism of blood”:

Spiritual ecumenism is “praying and proclaiming together that Jesus is Lord, and coming together to help the poor in all their poverty. We must not forget that today the blood of Jesus, poured out by many Christian martyrs in various parts of the world, calls us and compels us towards the goal of unity. For persecutors, we are not divided: we are not Lutherans, Orthodox, Evangelicals, Catholics. No! We are one. For persecutors, we are Christians. It is an ecumenism of blood that we live today!” (31 October 2014).

And finally, the third Francis is the “poverello” who taught by the example of his life of radical attachment to Christ. We are all so familiar with the Franciscan axiom: “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.” Our very lives are the greatest apologetic the Church has, that is, if we are striving to live them with genuine integrity. The life of a priest is enigmatic to the world and leaves many people scratching their heads saying: “Well maybe there is something more to life.” Thus we had over 900 people on campus last Thursday night and a couple of months ago we had over 350 young adults on campus because *you* are an answer to their prayers and *we* give them a reason to hope. The faithful need us to be great salesman for our Lord and “sold out” on our commitment to serve them like the “good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep” (John 10:11).

If we teach the new apologetics with truth and charity, then we will show that:

- 1.) We know our product;
- 2.) We know that it is the best one on the market;
- 3.) We believe that it is important for us and others;
- 4.) And we use it and put it to practice in our own lives.

Then we will be like Hafid and become “The Greatest Salesman in the World.” Or at least the best we can be with God’s grace!

Understand what you do, *imitate* what you celebrate, and *conform* your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”