

## EVALUATION OF THE TRADITIONAL SEMINARY COURSE IN APOLOGETICS

The present-day intellectual atmosphere is the product of a strange combination of opposing currents. From one direction we sense a tendency toward the strictly scientific, characterized by a careful analysis of concepts and values, and a desire for proofs which allow no margin of doubt. At the same time, there is a certain breeze of intellectual hedonism, which bases human convictions more on the subjective attractiveness and appealing goodness of ideas than on their objective truth. Mingled with this is a degree of pragmatism: that is of genuine value which is useful and which leads to a worthwhile action. The result of these various cross-currents is a strange intellectualism which, while seeking the truth, does so by way of the good and practical. We have conviction and certitude of truth from the awareness of the goodness of an ideal and its practical value for action. Such a mentality has manifested itself to some extent in modern criticism of what we call "apologetics." The idea is conveyed that the accepted treatment of apologetics is outmoded precisely because it is too strictly intellectual. It is considered dryly rationalistic, offering little or no inspiration, and thus out of harmony with the proper methods and objectives of theology which should lead to union of mind and will with God. We are also told that this treatise is conceived in terms of past errors which are of no importance in this present day, and thus has no practical value either for seminarians or for men in general. Another way of stating the same objection is that the treatise is too negatively defensive rather than being positively ostensive. And as if to deal the death-blow to apologetics, it is contended that it must necessarily fail in its objective since it is impossible to "prove" the existence and authority of the supernatural Church through natural rational arguments.

Rather than attempt to formulate an answer to these various lines of criticism, I think that we here today might profitably set a more positive end for our considerations, seeing in this seminar an opportunity to examine our own concept of apologetics both as a

science in itself and as the subject of classroom teaching, and thus indirectly to evaluate the current criticisms aimed at both.

As a special science and as a distinct feature in the corpus of theology, apologetics is of rather recent origin. True, from the very beginning of Christianity it has been necessary to defend particular truths of faith and to demonstrate their validity. In a certain sense, the gospels themselves are apologies for the truth in that they show Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and emphasize His miracles as credentials of His divine mission. In every century from the first to the sixteenth we find Fathers, theologians, and philosophers arguing the divine origin of the Christian truth. Such, however, was not apologetics but rather apology, the object of which was to expose the full content of the revealed deposit. Along with that, however, there was an attempt to demonstrate the harmony existing between that which was believed through faith and that which was known through reason, the conclusion being that the truths of faith are not opposed to reason but are entirely reasonable.

With the Reformation a further specification was introduced. Whereas previously almost the total body of faith had been so defended and demonstrated, now the Church of Rome as a divinely constituted norm of belief became the principal object of concern. Implicit in every heretical contention of the reformers there was a condemnation of the Church of the sixteenth century, for, if what the Church then taught were contrary of the faith of the primitive ages, then the Church of Rome could not be divine; necessarily it must be humanly corrupt and fallible. Following upon the Council of Trent, then, Catholic theologians found themselves confronted with a twofold task: to show that individual Protestant doctrines were erroneous interpretations of divine revelation, and also to vindicate the Church in general and the Council of Trent in particular. This was the challenge accepted by the great post-Tridentine theologians. But while this great effort was apologetical in the sense of being defensive, it was principally theological in the strictest sense. The starting point of all argumentation and the only norm of proof was *truth as revealed* by God. The procedure was to subject verses of Scripture to rigorous exegesis and to com-

pare various passages one with another, so that by drawing the necessary conclusions the validity of developed Catholic doctrine might be unquestionably established, and so the Church vindicated as the faithful guardian of the revealed deposit. The endeavor was essentially theological because it was essentially supernatural. *Fides quaerens intellectum*.

The nineteenth century brought its own problems and with them a change of emphasis in apologetical procedure. Deism and rationalism, with their denial of the supernatural in general and of revelation in particular, forced the defenders of the Catholic Church and of her doctrine to build their argument on truth as rationally known rather than on truth as divinely revealed. Reason thus became the necessary tool of the apologist. If Scripture were to be used in argumentation, it must first be established as authentic and historically accurate. If Christ were to be accepted as a teacher whose doctrine could be reasonably followed, He must first be shown on natural grounds to have authority above that of other men. His credentials, miracles and prophecies, must be scientifically examined and authenticated; His doctrine itself must be proved through its harmony with all the natural sciences.

A detailed history of the development of the treatises *De Revelatione* and *De Ecclesia* is not necessary for our purpose in this discussion. Yet, I think, the rather surface review we have given will throw light on the purpose of both apologetics as a science and as a classroom discipline.

What is the present position of the science of apologetics? The answer to this question will be found in the answer to others: What is its objective? What are its methods? For whom is it intended?

(1) Regarding the general objective of scientific apologetics, almost all will agree that it is to establish the credibility and credentia of Christian or Catholic dogma. In an article entitled "A Definition of Scientific Apologetics" (*Theological Studies*, V [1944] 159-183), Father Daniel J. Saunders, S.J., recently made a rapid survey of definitions as found in modern treatises and manuals, and concluded that it is possible to group a representative number into three general classes. For some, it is "the science which treats of the credibility of dogma"; others would consider it the

science "which treats of the demonstration and defense of the Catholic Church and religion"; finally for still others it is the "science of those things pre-required for the study of theology." Saunders made his survey as an introduction to a more lengthy discussion of the definition found in Cotter's *Theologia Fundamental*, in which the objective of apologetics is limited to the demonstration of one particular dogma: that the magisterium of the Catholic Church is the *regula fidei*.

While a study of definitions given in the various treatises might seem to produce more or less divergent concepts of the objective of scientific apologetics, an analysis of the treatises themselves reveals far less disagreement. Without being carbon copies one of another, they all lead to the authority of the Catholic Church as their end, and use almost identical material and procedures in doing so. Moreover, even though an author might state in his definition that he considers the credibility of dogma to be his objective, in actual fact he goes further to its credency. Thus we might justly state that modern treatises of apologetics have this common end: to demonstrate the credibility and credency of that dogma which holds that the magisterium of the Catholic Church is the proximate norm of faith. Other points must be considered, but only in so far as they logically lead to this one fact, and are foundations for a certain judgment of assent to the doctrinal authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

(2) What are the tools and methods of scientific apologetics? On this point, an examination of various authors reveals unanimity: apologetics makes use of human reason applied to data which is subjectively natural as its method and material. I purposely qualified the data on which the science is based by saying that it is "subjectively natural," in order to bring out the fact that although Sacred Scripture and apostolic Tradition are objectively supernatural, they are approached by the apologist as if they were natural history and literature, at least at the beginning of the reasoning process. Herein lies one of the specific distinctions between theology and apologetics: the one takes its starting point from revelation *qua* revelation and leads to certitude on extrinsic evidence,

while the other begins with revelation *qua* history and builds its conviction on intrinsic evidence.

This poses a question which requires some clarification. Does apologetics "prove" the existence and authority of the supernatural Church, or does it merely demonstrate the reasonableness of faith already possessed? What is the proper relationship between apologetics and faith? All too often the idea is conveyed that a complete and strictly scientific apologetical argument will necessarily lead to faith. Such a conception fails to take into consideration several facts of paramount importance: (a) Although the act of faith is an *actus intellectus*, it is also *sub imperio voluntatis*, and made by a man in the concrete, i.e., one with individual and personal modes of thought, desire, and action, individual moral qualities, prejudices, and general intellectual background. These various elements, found in different and sometimes opposing ways in various individuals, color both intellectual interpretations and volitive appreciations, and so influence the final subjective assent no matter what may be the objective evidence presented. (b) The act of faith, even though it is an intellectual judgment, requires the supernatural illuminations of grace in order that there may be certitude regarding the supernatural truths to which assent is given. What, then, does apologetical reasoning provide? Simply the assurance that to give assent to a particular supernatural doctrine is not only in harmony with right reason, but that there is a binding obligation to believe, an obligation which can be proved not only to a person who has the eyes of faith, but to anyone who exercises the use of right reason.

Apologetics, then, is essentially a discipline which treats the rational justification of *fides jam possessa*. It does not intend to lead in a practical way to conversion itself. Thus we must constantly insist on the distinction between scientific and practical apologetics. The latter has about it elements of a science in that it contains definitely determined principles, but it is primarily an art in that it demands insight into character and personality in order to choose the proper approach, and prudence in the application of its principles and conclusions. Whereas scientific apologetics aims at intellectual conviction, practical apologetics finds its proper

term in action. Perhaps it is the failure to make this distinction between the scientific and the practical which has led to criticism of apologetics as a strict discipline, or which has led some to weaken it in their attempts at popularization. And I might add, by way of a slight digression, that it is a similar failure to understand theology in general primarily as an intellectual science that has brought about a lack of appreciation for the metaphysical thought of St. Thomas and the other outstanding scholastic theologians.

Apologetics, then, is essentially an intellectual discipline designed to produce intellectual conviction of truth rather than to move to action. Thus to criticize it as dry or rationalistic, out of harmony with the proper objectives of faith, or to minimize its value because of an apparent misuse of revelation, as some modern critics are wont to do, is to misunderstand the peculiar end of the treatise *De Revelatione* and so fail to appreciate its specific content and methods. By its very nature, apologetics is a rationalistic science, based upon data which is at least subjectively natural, and intended to lead to rational certitude. Were it to be otherwise, it would not be scientific apologetics. Hence a study of St. Paul's doctrine of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, with its implicit revelation of the teaching office and authority of the Church, would be out of place in a scientific treatise of apologetics for the evident reason that such as based on revelation as supernatural evidence and is a matter of faith rather than of rational certitude. Moreover, from what has been said, it is evident that apologetics is an ostensive rather than a defensive science; while it does offer a defense of faith on rational grounds, its principal aim is to demonstrate in a positive way the necessity of the act of faith and the harmony between faith and reason.

This brief discussion of the nature and objective of scientific apologetics leads to a problem which is of more immediate and practical concern to us as seminary professors. We might formulate our general question thus: should the seminary course in apologetics be confined to the strict science, or should it contain other elements, such as a study of the practical approaches to the non-Catholic

mind, or a theological analysis of the Church based on revelation *qua tale*?

It seems to me that the answer to this practical pedagogical problem lies in a careful determination of the objectives of the seminary course, and in the establishment of a hierarchy of values among the many possible ends which the course is intended to serve. Is the course in apologetics merely an introductory treatise in the full corpus of theology? Is it for the benefit of the seminarian's own *fides jam possessa*? Is it part of his intellectual equipment for later apostolic work in the field of convert-making? Both as a possible solution to our problem and as a suggested subject for further discussion, I would like to submit the following considerations:

(1) The primary and immediate purpose of the seminary course in theology (and thus in apologetics) is the formation of scientific theologians. In other words, we first seek truth for the sake of truth. God is Truth, and He has manifested Himself both through nature and divine revelation. The human reason, created by Him, has as its immediate objective the possession of truth, certitude of the truth, and thus knowledge of God Himself. And when the *ex professo* subject of study is God either in Himself or in His operations *ad extra*, *a fortiori* the mind of the student must diligently seek the true for its own sake. If this principle be accepted (i.e., that the primary and immediate end of seminary studies is the formation of scientific theologians), it follows that the entire course of theology and its related parts must be fundamentally and essentially scientific. Nothing less than the most thorough knowledge possible must be the principal aim of student and professor; otherwise there is danger of serious error. The treatise of apologetics, then, must never be watered-down or weakened; rather it must be solidly scientific in order to serve as a firm foundation for the entire structure of revealed theology.

(2) One of the secondary objectives of the seminary course is the nurturing of the personal religious and apostolic spirit of the seminarian himself. For this a solid and well-rounded intellectual training is fundamental, and a thorough study of the rational foundations of faith, together with a religious penetration into their

meaning and implications, should serve well to stir a convinced desire to live as a man of the Church and to spread a knowledge of it as the divinely established teacher of truth. The order of faith is not rational, but it is intelligent. Thus the more firm is the conviction of the truth of the Church, the stronger will be the faith and love, and consequently the greater the zeal of the Apostle to make the Church known and loved. In this way, knowledge helps to provide the motive for future apostolic work.

(3) A final objective of seminary studies which must be considered is the acquisition of a knowledge of the practical techniques to be employed in apostolic work. Despite the fact that a priest may have a thorough intellectual training along with a burning desire to make Christ and the Church known and loved, he will not be successful as a shepherd unless he possesses also a sympathetic appreciation of actual problems regarding the acceptance of Catholic truth and a prudential understanding of practical means of explaining the Catholic position and of stirring desire to embrace the Church. This applies to his dealings with Catholics as well as with non-Catholics.

Our pedagogical problem, then, seems to reduce itself to an evaluation of these various objectives and a determination of the manner in which they can all be accomplished. Depending upon our interpretation of the scope and purpose of the seminary course in apologetics, there will be necessary modifications in the approach and method, various points of emphasis, various ways of treating the scriptural data, and various means of indicating the practical usefulness of the matter in general.

Having thus set the background of the problem, I would like to suggest some questions for discussion:

- (1) What is the total objective of the seminary course in apologetics?
- (2) To what extent should the secondary objectives color the classroom treatment?
- (3) Should there be a complete separation between the courses in scientific apologetics and practical apologetics? If not, how

should they be joined without detriment to the science itself? If so, how should that be carried out?

- (4) Finally, with what degree of success does the traditional seminary course serve both the theological and apostolic formation of the future priest?

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**Digest of the Discussion:**

*Father Benjamin Fay, O.P.*, of Washington, D. C., opened the discussion by posing two questions aimed at a clarification of the objectives of the course in Apologetics: May it not be possible that these objectives will vary in different seminaries and at different times due to the special needs of communities and individuals? May we not leave it to the seminarian to analyze his own needs, and hence study Apologetics in the light of his conclusions?

Father Hogan answered that it is true that all seminary studies have an apostolic objective which will take into consideration particular needs; but they must also be genuinely scientific. The problem, then, is to determine how both of these ends can be accomplished without detriment to either.

*Msgr. George Shea*, of Darlington, N. J., described the method at Immaculate Conception Seminary. Scientific apologetics is handled as part of the course in fundamental theology given to first year theologians. Then during the second and third years the practical application of these principles is developed in a special course in convert-making. He felt that this is more advisable since it is difficult to combine the two aspects in one class.

Father Hogan interjected that this system is similar to the one followed at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore where Apologetics is taught in the first year and a special course in convert-work is given to fourth year theologians by Father John McGinn, C.S.P. However in Baltimore Apologetics is separated from Fundamental Theology, there being concurrent courses by different professors. This is done in order to insure a psychological distinction between Apologetics (a rational science) and Fundamental Theology (a science of faith).

*Father Edward Hanahoe, S.A.*, of Washington, D. C., reported that in the Atonement Seminary the course in Apologetics is supplemented by weekly seminars on (1) Non-Catholic Movements, (2) the Art of Apologetics, and (3) Study of Protestant works and biographies.

Father Girard, O.F.M.Conv., of Chaska, Minn., remarked that most seminaries are classified as professional schools as distinct from universities. Thus their purpose is evidently to train general practitioners. He made the comparison between general physicians and specialists in the field of medicine. He also reported that at Assumption Seminary a separation has been made between courses in scientific and practical Apologetics, and Father Cotter's text adopted for the scientific course. Father Girard also brought out the fact that emphasis should be given to the general objective of Apologetics, namely, to give a rational intellectual basis to our faith. He felt that Father Cotter's text was excellent for accomplishing that end.

Father Murphy, of the Catholic University of America, said that in practice most seminary courses are based on a degree curriculum. Would it not be better to gear the course to the preparation of practical parish priests rather than to degrees?

To this Father Hogan answered that there is great danger of the course in theology becoming a glorified catechism class if too much emphasis is placed on the so-called practical aspects. Priests are not merely to be practitioners; they should have all the knowledge that is possible for them. Rather all professors should examine themselves and their methods to see why they are not successful in stimulating the interest of their seminarians in the intellectual side of theology. In modern seminarians the attraction is toward the "practical." But the real question here is: what is genuinely practical? He felt that the more scientific knowledge possessed, the better is the priest prepared for the practical problems of the ministry. During the seminary course the students should be stimulated so that as priests their interests will continue and be manifested in the reading of theological books and periodicals. The practical must be built upon the solid foundation of speculative theology.

Father Dorenkempfer, C.P.P.S., of Carthagina, Ohio, backed up this opinion by insisting that a seminary is a very special kind of professional school, in which the most practical course is that in which the students learn the most about God. Everything in seminary training should be general to this end, so that not only the class studies but also the spiritual life itself is part of one great effort.

Regarding the distinction between scientific and practical Apologetics, he brought out that the first is based on "most certain" arguments, i.e., *external arguments* such as miracles and prophecies; while the other is concerned with how arguments affect and fit particular persons through the use of *internal arguments*. This latter part would be more forceful if studied in a special course at the end of the seminary curriculum.

Father Augustine Rock, O.P., of Dubuque, Iowa, raised a question regarding the distinction between Apologetics and Theology. He in-

sisted that Theology is one science and wisdom. The purpose of any school is to train the intellect according to the order of the discipline itself. Apologetics is the defensive part of theology. It cannot prove its own principles, but it can defend them. Thus it should be confined to the defensive part of theology, showing that the truths of faith are not contrary to reason. Otherwise, students will have the erroneous impression that they are proving the divinity of Christ, which is only had by faith.

Father Hogan agreed with this, saying that when we use the word "prove" in theology we should do so by placing it in quotation marks. *Father Doremkempfer*, however, pointed out that we are really proving the reasonableness of these truths.

*Father Murphy* then asked in what *scientific* apologetics consists? The manuals are all cast in terms of the errors of past centuries, giving a defense of the truth as it has been denied in history. Should there not, then, be a reorganization of the entire treatise?

Father Hogan answered that this is true not only of Apologetics, but also of Dogmatic Theology. The manuals appear to be cast in the light of heresies, and from a defensive point of view. However, the errors listed at the beginning of each thesis might well be used to bring out the history of the development of the truth, thus showing the immediate reason for the Church formulating her doctrine in specific terms and theses.

*Father Rock, O.P.*, again emphasized that as far as the apologetical approach is concerned, we start out with an acceptance of the truth of a thesis, and then go back in order to show from the rational point of view that these truths are not contrary to reason. Thus we can abstract from individual objections and errors.

One of the Fathers from Washington, D. C., then remarked that a systematic course is necessary for a scientific study. However the application of the principles will always fall upon the competency of the person applying the principles. Thus consideration must be given to the current ideas circulating regarding personality, etc.

*Father Dillon*, of St. Paul, Minn., then raised a question concerning the validity of credentia as an objective of the course. Does Apologetics lead to credentia or merely to credibility? If credentia is the objective, then it should lead to faith itself. And if reason can accomplish that, it should be used in all of dogma. If it is a choice between faith and reason, *Father Dillon* said that since faith is obscure, he should prefer reason in order to have certitude. However, he believed that the only possible objective would be credibility, i.e., to show that we have a reasonable faith.

This question then brought up the much larger problem of the

genesis of the act of faith. How far can and does reason go in the process of faith? Where does the supernatural enter in? Is the act of credentia solely rational and natural, or is it such that supernatural grace is necessary?

At this point, Fathers Dillon, Shea, Rock, Murphy and Doremkempfer engaged in a lively discussion of the genesis and final resolution of the act of faith.

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