A Brief Reflection on the Intellectual Tasks of the New Evangelization
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“Our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ was silent when false witnesses spoke against him, and answered nothing when he was accused; he was convinced that all his life and actions ... were better than any speech in refutation of the false witness and superior to any words that he might say in reply to the accusations” (CC P.1). Such is the unforgettable beginning to the Contra Celsum of Origen, and with it, the first intellectual task of the New Evangelization: re-read and study the great classical and medieval apologetic treatises, specifically with a mind towards discerning their apologetic strategy as a useful resource for today. I am convinced that engaging this intellectual task will bear much fruit, for these great treatises, including Justin Martyr’s two Apologies, the Contra Celsum of Origen, the City of God of St. Augustine, the Summa Contra Gentiles of Thomas Aquinas, etc. offer a density of texture and a depth of apologetic purpose that lifts apologetics far beyond mere “defensive” tactics and into an “offensive” strategy that lays out a new vista for the theological imagination.

To take up my own advice, I’ll return to Contra Celsum, which begins not only with its justly famous invocation of the silence of Jesus before his accusers, but, almost shockingly, veers rhetorically too close for comfort towards abandoning the whole apologetic enterprise. Although the weight of the codex in the reader’s hand provides the comforting, happy ending of 8 full books of apologetic heavy weather, we still teeter on the edge of doubt, drawn along by Origen’s qualification. “And, God-loving Ambrose,” Origen comments to his patron, who has requested that Origen refute Celsus’s criticisms of Christianity, “I do not know why you wanted me to write an answer to Celsus’ false accusations in his book against the Christians and the faith of the churches. It is as though there was not in the mere facts a clear refutation better than any written reply ...” (ibid.). Origen then allows us readers to dwell on the silence of Christ, providing lengthy citations from Matthew’s passion narrative to display before our eyes the resolute silence of Jesus who refuses to reduce himself to the accusations leveled even by answering them. Origen goes on to strengthen his initial statement wondering what anything he might say could add to this noble silence: “I will therefore go so far as to say that the defense which you ask me to compose will weaken the force of the defense that is in the mere facts, and detract from the power of Jesus which is manifest to those who are not quite stupid” (CC P.3). In other words, Origen is worried that offering a written response to the arguments of Celsus would send the wrong message, for it would imply that the major determinant in accepting faith is argument or reasoning, and that the Gospel
is itself a product of human reasoning and operates wholly within its confines. But, as he will go on to comment in the opening chapters of Book I, “the Gospel has a proof which is peculiar to itself, and which is more divine than a Greek proof based on dialectical argument. This more divine demonstration the apostle calls a demonstration of the Spirit and of power [1 Cor. 2.4]” (CC 1.2). It is this quality of the Gospel that is represented in the opening depiction of Jesus, who, by remaining silent, “despised and nobly ignored his accusers.” The point is, He IS the Gospel, not a set of teachings added to His person, even teachings of His own, if they are separated from the basic message of His person, Himself.¹

In fact, Origen’s preface, with its careful depiction of the silence of Jesus and the rhetorical contrast to his own possible arguments, displays in a nutshell his apologetic strategy. His disparagements of his own potential attempts to answer the charges of Celsus in favor of the silence of Jesus, serve rhetorically, as it were, to offer to the reader an icon of the Lord, as the principal object of contemplation for the believer or would-be believer. Origen does, of course, comply with Ambrose’s request in the end. Recalling Rom 14.1, Origen concedes that his writing might be helpful for “those entirely without experience of faith in Christ, or for those whom the apostle calls weak in faith” (CC P.6), those who could perhaps “be shaken and disturbed by the writings of Celsus” (CC P.4). That being said, however, it is instructive to notice in detail how his arguments actually work, throughout the whole of the 8 books. Taken together, they are a brilliant display of erudition, measured judgment, strategic refutation and analysis, and yet the arguments function in exactly the same way, ultimately, as the refusal to argue did, namely, to paint an icon of the silent Christ, to point the reader’s attention not to the success of the arguments, but to draw ever more convincingly the icon of the Lord, to “write” the icon, to use the proper expression as a (rather feeble) pun here.

For example, Origen reports that Celsus, early on in his treatise, mocks the blood of Jesus, because, when it was poured forth on the Cross, it became obvious that it was not ichor, such as flows in the veins of real respectable gods, but actual -- and merely -- human blood. But we should have known that anyway, Celsus implies, because Jesus when a child had to be taken into Egypt lest he be murdered, and this does not seem to fall within the job description for a proper god: “It is not likely that a god would be afraid of death,” Celsus drily observed. In any event, apparently the father

¹ It is almost as though Origen had read the lineamenta for the Synod on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, which notes that the “Gospel is much more” than “only a book or a set of teachings,” but rather “is a living and efficacious Word ..., not so much a system of articles of faith and moral precepts ... but a person: Jesus Christ, the definitive Word of God, who became man” (sec. 11). The lineamenta add that “the goal of the transmission of the faith is the realization of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ” and that “transmitting the faith means to create ... the conditions for this personal encounter of individuals with Jesus Christ” (ibid.).
of the god did not think him of much consequence, either, since he did not protect him with two visible angels to guard him from all harm. Origen’s reply is spare. He cites two passages from the Gospel of John: “But we believe Jesus himself when he says of the divinity in him: I am the way, the truth, and the life, or any similar saying; and again when he says this, meaning that he was in a human body: But now you seek to kill me, a man who told you the truth.” “So,” Origen goes on to explain, “we say that he was a sort of composite being. And as he had come into human life to live as a man, it was right for him to take care not to run into danger of his life at the wrong time [cf. CC 2.10 on the lamb of God].” There is no precise technical christology here, no attempt to give a precise account of this Person. He is “composite,” meaning, though divine, he acts as a finite free agent in this world with all the vulnerabilities and limitations properly attaching to a free agent especially as far as His own person is concerned. There is no vulgar display of the miraculous to curtail the freedom of those who would kill him. He is thus not reducible to “myth,” and is a true historical agent in a truly historical narrative. And yet he is not reducible simply to an historical agent. He is the Son of God, the divine Logos, and in this history a divine purpose is being accomplished that cannot be derived from or reduced purely to a human purpose from within history. When he does shed his true human blood, it will be not at the “wrong time,” but when His hour has come. Origen’s point is not to resolve the mystery of Christ’s person, but to present it precisely as a mystery. The Gospel is not myth, yet it cannot be accounted for by purely human agency, and thus limited to history alone.

Thus, even in and through his argumentation, Origen’s icon painting continues. Between myth and history we find mystery. Origen’s argumentation does not serve as a substitute for the peculiar proof or demonstration that is the Gospel’s own. Here he has painted an icon, as it were, of the Flight to Egypt, where the helplessness of the infant Jesus mirrors the silence of the accused Christ. Like his silence, his helpless babyhood, in the sovereign purpose it contains, “despises and nobly holds in contempt” those who would mock his Person with accusations of mythology, or with what the mockery as mockery implies, that he is not divine but simply a man fully reducible to historical causes that show him up as a fraud. Origen’s argumentation serves not to substitute for the peculiar power of the Gospel, but to make distinctions so that the way can be cleared for the weak Christian or the non-Christian to encounter and contemplate that power him or herself. Origen’s apology is very aptly, I think, compared to the painting of an icon which is intended, in later Greek Christianity, to mediate an encounter with the Person of Christ.

Origen’s icon painting only increases in power as it goes along. One of its most enduring accomplishments, perhaps, is one of the implications that Origen draws very forcefully from his ability to distinguish biblical narrative from myth. Just sticking with Book 1, Origen’s account of Celsus has him lifting up an ideal of “true doctrine,” by which Celsus understands a kind of koinonia of wisdom, a set of teachings that everyone who is rational can agree upon, and which is present, in various forms, in any respectable ancient culture. In a way, it is a mark of having
attained to civilization to have grasped and taught, in some form, this ancient wisdom: “There is an ancient doctrine which has existed from the beginning, which has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men,” Celsus is reported as saying, including “the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians, Persians, Odrysians, Samothracians, and Eleusinians,” among others (CC 1.14). Often this ancient wisdom is present in a symbolic form, that is, in myths of these various cultures, but a proper rational approach to these myths can extract from them the common philosophical wisdom that is expressed in the various symbolic forms, and this is done through allegorical exegesis (CC 1.20, etc.). The Jews and Christians are excluded from this koinonia of wisdom, although at other points Celsus seems willing to admit that there is in their Scriptures some glimpses of it, all the more unfortunately obscure for being borrowed from Plato or elsewhere. The rest seems to be a set of histories or prophecies, hopelessly chauvinistic, self-interested and parochial, and, to that extent, certainly not susceptible to allegorical, that is, philosophical, interpretation, and also likely simply to be legends that are not even true as histories. Celsus suspects they do not even rise to the level of “myth.”

Origen is well aware how difficult it is to prove that anything happened historically, and mentions the Trojan War as a good example, one in which Celsus apparently believes as historical, offering some criteria for making a reasonable judgment (CC 1.42ff). Nor is it necessary that a narrative be untrue historically in order to have meaning that transcends a particular historical situation, as Origen repeatedly insists. But this is not the same as extracting a kernel of philosophical truth from the stories, guided by the koinonia of wisdom that all civilized, sophisticated texts supposedly share. The Bible cannot be translated into a philosophical koinonia because, as Origen repeatedly asserts, its form is just as important as its content, and the two cannot be distinguished, such that the content, the spiritual wisdom, can be extracted from the form, and then the form, the Scriptural text, left behind in favor of other symbolic versions of the same truths. “Moses,” Origen notes, for example, “in his five books acted like a distinguished orator who pays attention to outward form and everywhere keeps carefully the concealed meaning of his words,” but these very outward words are themselves part of the “oration” and as such “have moved many even of those alien to Jewish culture to believe, as the writings claim, that the God who first made these laws and gave them to Moses was the Creator of the world. For it was fitting that the Creator of the whole world who appointed laws for the whole world should have given a power to the words that was able to overcome people everywhere” (CC 1.18). The name of God, for example, is not indifferent; it does not mean the same thing as Zeus, for example, and cannot be interchanged with it, as the syncretistic koinonia of ancient wisdom would suggest (CC 1.25). The careful rhetorical intention of Moses, reflecting the inspiration of God, disposes his “oration” so that it has a beneficial effect on anyone who hears it, no matter what their level of education is. To try to extract a common kernel of common philosophical or religious wisdom from the text overlooks the form of the text as itself a significant fact, “concealing” what is higher not as a kernel of wisdom to be extracted, but as a divine act of generosity, of love, of “philanthropia,” which is expressed in the words, which cannot then be discarded as
an irrelevant husk once the interior truth has been extracted. The outward form possesses the power of the divine *philanthropia* which simultaneously eludes all words as something “concealed” and yet is tied to these very words as something revealed. Origen’s apologetic job is not to reduce these words of Scripture to a common fund of spiritual wisdom, but to make the necessary distinctions that permit his apologetic to efface itself in the process and to present the reader with the power of the Scriptures themselves. One contemplates the Scripture as irreducibly “good news,” irreducibly “Gospel,” – *not* an extracted set of philosophical or religious truths that can be contemplated independent of contemplating the text itself once it is extracted. The apology, in a way, allows the Scripture to serve as its own “icon” of divine truth, allows Scripture in the end to paint itself, to propose to the reader the particular and unique power of its presentation of God’s otherwise unimaginable *philanthropia*, or love.

Here we must, regrettably, leave Origen’s masterpiece of apologetics. Unfortunately we cannot attend to it further in any detail. It would be tempting to consider, for example, what Origen has to say about the proof from prophecy. Origen relies very heavily on this idea and I think that for many moderns this seems to be a weak leg of Origen’s apology in particular, and of all ancient *apologia* in general, discouraging serious study of them for any advice on an analogous modern project. But this is because, I think, we assume we know what the proof from prophecy means, namely, that the prophets accurately predicted the events associated with the birth, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus so many years in advance. And, while Origen does believe this, the simple accurate prediction of the future is not the proof from prophecy. Pagan soothsayers can predict the future, too. The proof rather resides in the way in which Origen *distinguishes* biblical prophecy from pagan rites and practices of telling the future, that is, in the way in which prophecy is lifted from a mythological framework and its “spirit,” not to mention its “power,” while at the same time not reducing it simply to an accurate historical prediction based on canny observance of the currents of history. Prophecy operates in the same realm of “mystery” as does the Gospel.

But what “intellectual tasks” for the New Evangelization might have been suggested by this all too brief foray into one of the most sophisticated apologia in all of Christian theology? The first has already been noted, namely, that we cultivate a serious study of the classical Christian *apologia* as a source for our own discernment of the intellectual tasks of the New Evangelization. I suggest this on its own merits, but also for two other reasons, that indicate tasks of their own. Perhaps we ourselves need re-evangelization. Perhaps we need to be reminded at a deep level that the Gospel, and the Person of Jesus who is identical with the Gospel, as well as the Scriptural narrative proclaiming the Gospel, really does have a “demonstration” all its own, a unique, irreplaceable proclamation that really does carry “spirit and power,” and in that, re-discover our vocation as theologians to propose and transmit it. Perhaps, in the second place, this is easier to do if we can remind ourselves, by careful study, that the tradition presents such an imperative for evangelization in a way that is sophisticated, not fundamentalist, and yet in a way that such
sophistication is part of, rather than an obviation of, the imperative to evangelize. Beyond that, what we have discerned so far, perhaps, is the task to create an apologetics that, while using reason, does not reduce Christian faith to a religion that can be accepted purely on the grounds of argumentation or plausibility, or even on the grounds of the clearing away of specific objections. The clearing away of objections to Christian faith, the rebuttal of critiques, must itself be the brushstrokes, as it were, of a positive project of icon painting that transcends argumentation and presents the mystery of the Lord’s person, with its own intrinsic power of demonstration and appeal, its own nobility, to the reader’s (or the student’s) mind and heart. This task could be accomplished in a free standing apologetics, introduction to the Catholic faith, or as an intention suffusing projects in each of the theological disciplines. For example, have we moderns yet been able to approach the sophistication of Origen’s account of Scripture in terms of rejecting the alternatives of myth or history? Do we approach the text with as sophisticated a sense of mystery, appropriate, of course, for our own time? An example of such a project, still in its fledgling pioneering stages overall, is Pope Benedict’s two volume work, *Jesus of Nazareth*, or Raymond Brown’s repeated intuition that the point of biblical exegesis was to find the “real” Jesus, as distinct from the “historical” Jesus that is in the end a scholarly construct. But as both Brown and Benedict assert, these are only beginnings. Part of this apologetic project would be its determined resistance to translating the biblical message into a supposed *koinonia* of general spiritual wisdom available in any true philosophy or religion; this resistance would itself be part of the “icon” painting; without at the same time cutting off the bonds of philosophical illumination and connection that, like Origen, permit a true address on the basis of some share in a common intellectual and/or spiritual quest. Uniqueness and evangelical spirit do not, that is, translate into sectarianism. Reminding ourselves of this is part of re-evangelizing ourselves and giving ourselves the confidence to evangelize in turn. Evangelization should not be defined by evangelicals, nor our imaginations limited to their model, even as we can learn something from the mass of conversions their activity produces, many of them former Catholics.

Finally, the Prologue of the *Contra Celsum* suggests even another dimension of a renewed apologetics. After painting his icon of the Person of Christ by allowing His silence to point our attention to the whole of his Person as mystery, Origen adds, “Now Jesus is always being falsely accused, and there is never a time when he is not being accused so long as there is evil among men. He is still silent in the face of this and does not answer with his voice; but he makes his defense in the lives of his genuine disciples, for their lives cry out the real facts and defeat all false charges, refuting and overthrowing the slanders and accusations” (*CC* P.2). At first glance, this may seem to be something easier to say in the mid-third century than in the twenty-first, in the Church of the martyrs rather than in a Church which over the years has made some martyrs, and yet this would be too easy a brush off of Origen’s concern. The persecution of Decius, some few years after the *Contra Celsum* was written, produced massive defections and apostasies of varying degrees, and Origen is keenly aware of the liabilities of his contemporary Church in this regard. Further,
The Church of the martyrs is present now, in many parts of the world. The Church has not stopped producing martyrs in profusion, and saints too. Origen’s point is that the Person of Christ, the icon painting of His Person, cannot be artificially separated from an icon of the Church as it continues to produce witnesses, “martyrs” in the broad sense of the term, whose lives and deeds participate in the “demonstration of spirit and power” that is the unique mark of the Gospel. Christ’s silence empowers, one could say, the lives of his disciples to speak. The mystery of the Person of Christ and the mystery of the Church are intrinsically connected. Perhaps another aspect of a renewed apologetics would be the recovery of and rearticulation of this link, especially in contexts where the New Evangelization is addressed to formerly Catholic persons and countries. The Church is part of the mystery of the Person of Christ.

To more fully specify for our imaginations the character of a renewed apologetics, appropriate for the New Evangelization, let us for the time being leave the third century and make another stop, this one in our own time, namely, with Pope Benedict’s encyclical letter, God is Love. The letter is written, I think, precisely with the questions in mind that are so pertinent to the intellectual tasks of the New Evangelization that is our present concern. Is the Christian message credible in our world today? What are the grounds for Christian persuasiveness? What would be the basis for a renewed Christian apologetics? Is there anything credible enough in its own right – anything with its own peculiar demonstration of spirit and power, as Origen might put it – that it would need nothing else besides itself to found its credibility? Benedict wrote his encyclical, I believe, to remind us that at the heart of the Christian message there is indeed such a reality, namely, love, and that if, as 1 John 4.16 claims, God is Love, then the religion is founded on something that is beautiful to a degree that it verifies itself. Love needs no “apology”; it is always its own apology, defense, persuasiveness, attractiveness. Love is the one reality that is always, by itself and on its own, credible. Speaking against the instrumentalization of charity as a means of proselytism, Benedict writes,

Those who practice charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love and that God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love. He knows ... that disdain for love is disdain for God and human beings alike, it is an attempt to do without God. Consequently, the best defense of God and man consists precisely in love (DCE 31c).

In other words, love is not an instrument to be used in persuasion or in defense of Christian claims, but rather it is the defense, the persuasiveness. It is intrinsically credible. “Let love alone speak!” – that could be the motto of the whole encyclical letter. This does not mean that love never has a voice and can never speak persuasively in actual words – far from it – but that the job of the Christian
apologist, one might say, is to get out of the way and to let Love speak, for that will be something that will require no defense apart from itself, a defense in “spirit and power” peculiar to itself, to use Origen’s way of speaking.

The immediate background of this idea is to be found in the theology of Hans urs von Balthasar, who wrote a little book called Love Alone is Credible; the thesis of which is, to paraphrase, that the fundamental authority, the source of all authority, is something that contains its authority within itself and needs no further foundation, something so intrinsically appealing that it is its own defense, the beauty or “majesty” of absolute love. Scripture has no authority except insofar as it is the written proclamation of this love; Tradition (or “kerygma” as von Balthasar refers to it) has no claim upon us except as the living proclamation of this love, and the magisterium of the Church is not a self-constituting authority in itself, but an authoritative witness to something that is, namely, divine love (see p. 57, for example).

If Scripture itself is only authorized by the Love that it proclaims, how much more will this be true of Christian apologetics! To go back to the words of Benedict, “Let love alone speak!” A renewed Christian apologetics must be what we could call the apologetics of love, not so much a defense of love, but a getting out of the way of love so that it alone can speak and it alone is the defense. Isn’t this somewhat similar to what we’ve seen in Origen, namely, an apologia that is a kind of icon painting, or a revealing of Scripture itself as an icon painting of the divine philanthropia revealed in the Person of Christ? And, sure enough, Benedict is very clear that the “love” of which he speaks is not an abstract concept which the teaching of the Gospel can be seen to match, but rather it is a Person:

Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John’s Gospel describes that event in these words, *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life* (Jn. 3.16).

Benedict’s encyclical is actually itself a kind of icon painting of this Person, or rather is an extended contemplation of a Scriptural image that allows the reader to contemplate that image and his or her imagination to be formed by that image, namely, the image of the pierced side, or heart, of Jesus hanging dead on the Cross, from John 19:

By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. John 19.37), we can understand the starting point of this Encyclical Letter, *God is Love* (cf. 1 John 4.8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation, the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move (*DCE* 12).
Again, “faith, which sees the love of God revealed in the pierced heart of Jesus on the Cross, gives rise to love” (DCE 39). The encyclical does not use as a starting point any concept or any pre-rationalized notion of what love is that we might bring to the text. Divine Love is not persuasive because it is something pre-contained in our own rational categories. To cite von Balthasar in the background:

The plausibility of God’s love does not become apparent through any comparative reduction to what human beings have always already understood as love; rather, it is illuminated only by the self-interpreting revelation-form of love itself. And this form is so majestic that we are led to adore it from a reverent distance whenever we perceive it, even if it does not explicitly command us to do so (p. 56).

Benedict uses an image from the Bible rather than a description such as the famous 1 Cor. 11 because the image suggests a piercing beauty that refuses to allow as a starting point any “comparative reduction to what human beings have already understood as love,” a reduction to any or all of the narrow conceptions of “love” we might bring to the discussion. The image insists rather on drawing all of that narrowness into itself, reshaping it and fulfilling it according to its own piercing beauty. This love is not a concept but a Person, and the job of the apologist of love, it would seem, both in the case of Origen and in the case of Benedict, would be to permit or pave the way for this Love itself to speak, to paint an icon that would allow the Gospel itself to present its own peculiar demonstration, in “spirit and power.” In the encyclical God is Love, the image of the pierced heart of Christ painted by Benedict’s words from the Gospel of John, is meant to provide a kind of meditative starting point for this encounter, an appeal to the imagination to move beyond its own preconceived notions of what “love” is or can be.

Benedict also makes it clear that the encounter with this Person, with this Love, is intrinsically connected to the Church. The encounter is sacramentally available in the Eucharist. Continuing his comments on the Gospel image of the pierced side of Christ, Benedict notes that,

Jesus gave this act of oblation an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. ... The ancient world had dimly perceived that man’s real food – what truly nourishes him as human – is ultimately the Logos [and this idea is taken over directly from Origen], eternal wisdom; this same Logos now truly becomes food for us – as love. The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation ... [W]e enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving (DCE 13).

Whenever our idea of love threatens to become too narrow, too “reasonable” as it were and less “foolish,” we can enter into communion with the utterly expansive self-giving of Christ and let ourselves be formed by it. Further, one enters into communion with all others to whom Christ’s self-giving was (and is) directed: “Union with Christ is also union with all others to whom he gives himself,” (DCE 14),
presumably, to other members of the one Body, and then, in and through the living communion that is the one Body, to the whole world. Formed in the love that is the pierced heart of Christ, our formation becomes a “light” by which we learn to see the world anew, a seeing “with the eyes of Christ” that enables you to see your neighbor differently and to provide them with the “look of love they crave” (DCE 18). A person formed in love of god and love of neighbor sheds light on the world, the light that is God, who is love.

According to the encyclical *God is Love*, then, the most persuasive apology for the Christian faith is the witness of Christians formed in the love pouring from the pierced heart of Christ on the Cross and so bringing the light of God into the world, a glimpse of a love so self-giving, free and disinterested, the *philanthropia* singled out by Origen, that it persuasively invites others to see the world with a new intelligibility and hope. But this also presents those of us who preach or teach with a fuller characterization of the renewed and broadened apologetics that we have deduced from our brief reading of the *Contra Celsum*. It will be an apologetics of love that will, by the intellectual distinctions it makes, by the reasonings it applies, reply to objections and criticisms not, in the end, by the sum total of those replies, but by the way in which they all transcend themselves, erase themselves, manage to be so many brushstrokes in the painting of an icon, or an eloquence (if a Western, Augustinian metaphor is required), of Love itself.

Since the *lineamenta* of the upcoming Synod of Bishops cite Pope Benedict as remarking that there is an “educational emergency” (sec. 22) that characterizes our time, and I agree, I would like to suggest that one of the primary and most urgent intellectual tasks of the New Evangelization for teaching theologians is to think of courses that invent, imagine and execute the apologetics of love in introductions of students to the Catholic faith. Undergraduates today have so little knowledge of the Catholic faith. It seems as though it would be a persuasive way of teaching Christian doctrine to show how all of the major Catholic teachings are ways of talking about, and referring the believer to, mysteries of divine love that, while they cannot be reduced to formulas, must nevertheless be passed on in normative expressions that ensure these very mysteries are being handed on. These include creation and fall, revelation, the Trinity and Incarnation, and most especially the mystery of the Church and associated mysteries – the sacraments, the Mother of God, and the saints – that are so often pilloried by aggressive evangelicals or else have been seemingly deflated by the secular drift towards reducing all religions to a kind of respectable *koinonia* of spiritual wisdom available to any reasonable person. The *Catechism* notes, for example, in what I regard as the single most important section, if I had to choose (#766), that

> The Church was born primarily of Christ’s total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. ‘The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus’ [*LG* 3; cf. Jn. 19.34]. ‘For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the
cross that there came forth the “wondrous sacrament of the whole Church” [SC 5]. As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross [cf. Ambrose, *In Luc* 2. 85-89, but also Augustine, *City of God* 22.17-18, etc.].

An apologetics of love would teach that contemplating the Church, not the idea of the Church, or an idealized Church, but the one we see now as visible, one is contemplating primarily the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the Cross. Can we teach students, for example, that we don’t have to wait for the society of twelve perfect people to show up to be the Church we can love, but that contemplating this very Church we see now, “at once holy and always in need of purification” (*LG*), we are contemplating an icon of Christ’s love? Can we teach our students to be open to this mystery, even as we learn ourselves to be open to it, so that the People of God does not merge into a mere voluntaristic society, “We the People,” which mediates not the awesome self-gift of Christ on the Cross, but the will and characteristics and qualifications of those who have chosen to create it? I would like to go out on a limb and suggest that the project of creating such a course as an introduction to the Christian faith, a project intended to imagine, invent and yet re-discover the most ancient apologetics of all, the apologetics of love, will contain within itself all of the major intellectual tasks of the New Evangelization, at least in nuce. The first is that we will be engaged in re-evangelizing ourselves, in gaining the intellectual and moral confidence that we can actually do this, that we can, in an intellectually credible way appropriate to a college or university, pass on the faith, and engage in evangelization (if not proselytizing). The second is that we will at some point be required to go back to the classical apologists, perhaps even to use them in class, to be refreshed and surprised, perhaps, at the sophistication deployed there, as we learn from them to paint our own icons of the Lord, of the Love that is inseparable from its revelation in Scripture and Tradition. The third is that we will be learning the rudiments of what kind of theological endeavor we might need to support this very project, for it is most often in the process of trying to communicate something to those who are uninitiated, who are not in the guild or club, as it were, that we are forced back to the most fundamental identity of our discipline and find ourselves bearing witness in the zeal to communicate an insight or a clarification. The fourth is in fact an apologetics of love, that does not shy away from, but is not in the end reduced to, rebuttal and critique, but is more like painting or unveiling an icon. And the fifth? Perhaps to an age unaccustomed to mystery and impatient with any problem that is not able to be stated in scientific terms, we may, by training the eye on the mystery that is the Church, and the mysteries refracted by the Church, all of them mysteries of divine love, provide to our contemporaries at very least a training in an openness to mystery that is really nothing other than an openness to love itself, for *God is Love*. 