

Review of: "Catholicity in thirteen words"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Review of Pablo Blanco, "Catholicity in Thirteen Words"

The task Pablo Blanco set for himself, namely, to distill the essence of a large, complex topic into a form accessible to students possessing little if any knowledge of or interest in that topic is challenging. It also is familiar to anyone who has taught a required introductory course. Distilling the essence of a topic in a way that is accessible to students and retains the integrity of a field is the art of introduction.

Reading about how someone has selected and organized the material in a distillation can stimulate professors' imaginations around their own courses. It is no easy project, however, to explain one's distillation so that readers might grasp its pedagogical power. Doing so requires effectively conveying its shape and coherence as well as providing sufficiently fulsome explanation of course purpose, and description of context such that a reader can glimpse it in the author's context and imagine applying or adapting elements of the distillation to their own course. In the current version of "Catholicity in Thirteen Words," Blanco's presentation is too compacted a summary of his distillation, and his explanation of the purpose of his course and description of his context too abbreviated to allow a reader to gauge whether his approach might be translatable to their context. Three revisions to the essay can make it more accessible to readers: 1) Clarify the purpose of the course. 2) Situate the course in the context in which it is taught. Context includes students, the place of the course in the curriculum, and the culture of the program and the institution. 3) Recast the presentation of the thirteen words to show their coherence as a structure and how this structure works, including communicating how the words connect course purpose, students, and institutional context. What follows develops these suggestions.

The current description of the course's purpose is ambiguous. The title of the essay begins with "Catholicity." The abstract describes the course as an "introductory course in Christianity," then narrows it to "summariz[ing] the Christian faith," and concludes with the statement that the author settled on his thirteen words as he explained them "historically, according to what we call the history of salvation." From the body of the essay, it appears that the course is about Roman Catholic doctrine and ethics as presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Some precision would help, here, for the terms are not equivalents. That Blanco is comfortable using them as equivalents suggests a context thickly embedded in the Roman Catholic community with strong ties to the institutional church. It also suggests at least the possibility that, while this is a university course, one of its goals is persuading students of both the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the Catholic community's faith and worldview. My inferences may be in error, but absent clearer and fuller presentation on course purpose and context, I cannot know. Nor can a reader assess the utility of the thirteen-word structure Blanco

proposes.

Being clear on purpose is especially important when one's readers are global. To illustrate, in the primarily English-speaking scholarly context in which I work, Catholicity, Catholic doctrine, Christianity, and the history of salvation are not equivalent terms. The first three, though related, have different meanings, and professors use different approaches to teaching them. For example, introduction to Christianity courses often follow the historical development of Christianity and its institutions, some are organized systematically around key dogmas and doctrines, and still others are structured according to categories from comparative religions for the purpose of comparing different strands of Christianity, and Christianity with other world religious heritages, among other possibilities. A course on Catholic theology or doctrine looks different from a course on the history of Catholicism or history of Christianity. And a course on Catholicity often emphasizes sensibility, ethos, a "feel" or orientation evident in the work of Catholic artists and writers as well as some theologians. Again, while the terms are related, each has a particular specificity. Further, only at a minority of faith-inspired universities in my context would the "history of salvation" be invoked as an essential perspective or organizing principle for an academic course in Christianity or Catholicism. In most institutions the term would signal a shift to the "catechetical," i.e., with an agenda to inculcate belief and persuade to practice.

I have not made distinctions among Blanco's terms or described different approaches to teaching Catholicism and Christianity to assert that Blanco needs to change what he does. Rather, I am urging greater clarity and precision in describing the purpose of the course and the standpoint from which he teaches. (For example, this is a course at a Catholic university with a requirement that all students study the content and basic practices of the Roman Catholic faith as presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and I teach it as a practicing member of the Catholic community) Making these clarifications will render the essay more useful to readers from contexts quite different from Blanco's.

Readers also need to know something of the author's teaching context to be able to weigh his proposal of organizing an introductory course around a specified set of key words. A large feature of context is the students in the classroom or on the screen. Who are they? Their age? Their concerns? How have students informed choice, organization, and presentation of the thirteen words? Answers to these questions would help readers, and Blanco clearly knows much more about his students than he shares in this essay.

Blanco tells readers that he opted for provocation, i.e., his use of the number thirteen, to garner student interest and that it worked. This claim raises interesting questions that I hope Blanco will answer in a future version of the essay: What makes provocation (the number thirteen) effective for piquing student interest, getting them into the material, and keeping them engaged? How does this provocation connect, if at all, to the questions students bring with them to the course? Has provocation inflected the relationships among the thirteen words?

In reading Blanco's presentation of the thirteen words, I sensed a teacher who sees and even feels palpably the power of a structure he has created for teaching the course. But as a reader I cannot see what he sees, at least not in this version of the essay. Readers need to be shown more than told. How does the structure of the thirteen words work? How does he make its coherence and logical structure, which he asserts in his final paragraph, visible to students such that they find it plausible? Presenting the words as a structure and showing, not asserting, the connections among them would

strengthen the essay.

Finally, I would be remiss as a reviewer, were I not to point out that some of the claims made in the summary presentations of his thirteen words do not meet accepted standards of many contemporary Scripture scholars and historians of Christianity. One example, the claims under “Bible” that the early Church determined what books were “true” and what were “fake,” and the claim that there is coherence between the different writings. The formation of today’s canon of Christian Scripture is more complicated than the essay suggests. Perhaps the issue here is, in part, the compactness of Blanco’s summarizing.

I do hope Blanco will strengthen his essay. Even if his context is so distinctive that I could not adapt his thirteen words approach to my setting, better understanding his approach, purpose, and context would help professors gain better understanding of their own.

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