

Review of: "Catholicity in thirteen words"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

First, let me say that I appreciate Professor Blanco-Sarto's efforts to summarize Christianity in just 13 carefully considered words. This is not an easy task. Indeed, each descriptor offers a potent and meaningful counterpoint that begs further elaboration and hermeneutics beyond what is capable in what I understand to be a brief introduction to his course.

Ultimately, I would expect that each descriptor would warrant at least an entire class of dialogue for his students to even begin to comprehend its import, particular understanding within the tenets of the Christian Faith, and its interrelationship and interconnectedness with each of the other descriptors, which together provide a more fulsome understanding of the Christian faith.

As a general comment, the brevity of the article lends itself to the challenges of being concise, and yet, as the author suggests, provocative enough to inspire interest. As a result, I find that the short paragraphs are insufficient to adequately identify the fullness of each word's meaning as it relates to the Christian Faith. In some cases, the content may also prove somewhat confusing to an unchurched audience, but I will attempt to address where I concur with Professor Blanco-Sarto or in some cases, identify any critique under each word being sure to identify my own biases as someone who has studied theology in a Roman Catholic Institution.

Creation: Every faith tradition relies on its creation narrative to establish the meaning of existence and answer fundamental questions of where do we come from? how did we get here? what values will guide us as we move forward? The mythical biblical narrative as it unfolds is indeed similar to the origins and evolutionary process derived empirically from science. It might be helpful then to contextualize the Christian story within this greater narrative. Christianity is an incarnational faith. We may wish to consider the Cosmic dimension of Christ who could be understood as the creative helpmate of God in the entire creation process. I refer to the opening lines of John's Gospel. All of creation is therefore redeemed by Christ's death and resurrection.

As someone who has studied eco-theology, the universe and more intimately the earth represents the primary source of divine inspiration. When I studied theology, I was taught that revelation comes to us via holy scripture (the word of God) and through God's creation. But I digress. I wholeheartedly agree with Professor Blanco-Sarto that both love and sense (consciousness) were gifts of the Big-Bang. As Thomas Aquinas would suggest, the universe from its very beginning has a psycho-spiritual dimension in addition to its physical-material dimension.

I wonder if introducing the topic of evil and freedom at this point might be confusing for some and rather focusing on creation alone is sufficient here.

Bible: Identifying holy scripture as revelatory might be a more meaningful point of departure for this topic than focusing

on the challenges of determining which books represented orthodoxy and which fell outside the true faith. Although hermeneutics and the various types of biblical criticism may be too advanced for undergraduate students, a simple introduction with examples might pique their interest. I wholeheartedly agree that we must read the Bible as a whole and within the context of its origins and our own times with other sacred writings like those from the church fathers, mystics, and theologians throughout the ages in all contexts.

Covenant: I agree that this is a foundational descriptor for the Christian Faith which emerges from Judaism. Covenant or relationship with God based upon certain agreed principles forms the basis for Sacramental life. Each of the Seven Sacraments represents a very real covenant relationship between participants: the baptized enters a covenant life in Christ, the newly married couple into a covenant relationship with each other, a priest at ordination into his role as pastor and presider over the sacraments to his faith community, etc. The consequences of breaking a people's covenant with God as the author describes may be catastrophic, but again, it may be more productive to use positive examples as noted above. The reference to "liberation" at the end through Jesus requires considerable explanation to be meaningful in the context of this heading. Again, I refer here to the pitfalls of such a brief description. There are many topics to discuss under each of the thirteen words and each paragraph attempts to deal with too many to represent a sufficiently coherent explanation.

Incarnation: Christianity is an incarnational faith and as the author suggests, represents a worthy alternative to the material determinism that seems to dominate the secular society of today. I wonder if the discussion about sin might be better placed under the topic of "freedom". See also comments under the heading "Creation".

Person: I agree with the author's assertion that the mystery of the Trinity is foundational to Christianity. Again, I wonder if negative comparisons to other faiths might be better left out and the author's reference to diversity in unity and its implications to a pluralistic reality more helpful to his students. I would expect the class on this topic might prompt a better understanding of the relationship between Trinity, truth, and love.

Passover: I'm not sure I understand how the Passover represents the birth of the sacraments. Certainly, Jesus represents the sacrificial lamb as his condemnation, passion, and death occur during this Jewish feast. And I agree that this provides a renewed covenant between God and his people. Making the connections with First Testament stories is helpful for students to come to understand the full meaning of this event. As the author professes, the covenant does not end with the death of Jesus but in his resurrection which establishes the conquest over death and creation of everlasting life.

Church: I agree with the author that the church, as the community of faithful, represents the continuation of the salvific action of Jesus Christ and serves as a real and tangible way of making Jesus present in the world.

Glory: I agree with the author's description of glory and that a place I heaven is to be secured through love, both the love of Christ and how we choose to love in our earthly existence. This is perhaps one of the best exemplars of the thirteen descriptors in its consistency and coherence.

Grace: Although I agree with the author on this topic, I am wondering if the students would benefit from a more nuanced explanation of the nature of grace, how it is a gift given freely without having to deserve it. It would be interesting to compare this with the notion of luck and bad luck since even calamity for Christians can be seen as a grace filled opportunity.

Freedom: I am in general agreement with how the author has described the meaning of Freedom but also wonder if his class included a discussion about the nature of free will.

Truth: Freedom needs to be informed by truth and as Christians we believe that Christ is the truth. To be provocative, a student debate about the nature of truth and its origins might be interesting.

Love: Perhaps this is the most important word yet identified. Jesus's message is that love is what is most important...to love one's neighbour as oneself. I also agree that truth and love are inextricably linked, each needs to inform the other in order that they remain authentic to the gospel message. An entire class devoted to this topic would serve the students well.

Prayer: The author cites the Lord's prayer, taught to his people by Jesus himself as the appropriate ending of his thirteen descriptors for Christianity. I agree that prayer is important but also note that it is a common practice amongst all religions and not unique to Christianity.

The power of attempting to capture an entire religion in just 13 words lies in its ability to provoke dialogue as the author suggests. But at the same time, one wonders what other words might emerge in the conversation that could be added to this list. Universal, Passion, Sacrifice, Giving, Compassion, might be just some of the descriptors that form a second list and so on.

The course's ultimate value will be determined by how well the Professor can make Christianity relevant to the students in a secular age, how he can demonstrate that its cosmology, theology, and evolution over the past 2000 years have inspired incredible sacred art and architecture, and how Christianity has informed and influenced modern western thinking, its power structures, the dominant worldview, and ultimately much of what affects our lives today.