

Review of: "Catholicity in thirteen words"

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This short but potent paper represents a summation of Dr Blanco's response to the challenge of giving an introductory course on Christianity, by which he means Roman Catholic Christianity, to university students, a challenge he has been thinking about for several years. He does not say at what level the course was aimed but I assume first year undergraduates would have been in the class and perhaps students from later years. So it is an approach that needs to work for such students. I also assume that the work for each of the thirteen areas would occupy about a week (maybe a little less).

In my view, this is an admirable project for involving students in the main lineaments of Catholic theology, although his paper just provides a brief summary of what the sessions must have covered. I will move through his thirteen foci *seriatim* and although I will mainly take up areas that could be developed, aimed at the undergraduate level, this will be in part because it would be tedious to list all the areas where I agree with him.

1. Creation

Dr Blanco says 'The Big Bang theory or evolutionism must be compatible with the story contained in the first pages of the Bible.' This might be reworked. Genesis is not talking about science, so what does compatibility mean? The truth that God created the world and loves his creation is certainly present in Genesis and fundamental to all theology, but how that aligns with the Big Bang theory is an intensely interesting question. I hope that the positive recent statements of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis on evolution are brought into the course. And if the Church continues to leave accepting evolution open to the individual, should it not offer a critique of fundamentalist readings of Genesis in particular. Are they not simply a gross misreading of this religious and literary text and contradicted by the overwhelming findings of science (in the areas of palaeontology and radiocarbon dating, for example) whether the Big Bang or evolution are accepted or not? Should the Catholic Church, with the Vatican very properly operating its own astronomical observatory, not defend the evidence-based rationality of science *as part of the unity of truth*? This seems particularly relevant in light of the rise of anti-science conspiracy theories during the Covid pandemic which in many cases led to people who believed them dying of the disease.

2. Bible

I am not aware of anyone engaged in the task of which determining which biblical 'books are true and which are fake.' I would suggest provoking the students by alerting them to the pressures placed on use of the Bible by the Church on account of the rise of historical-critical method. In this process, stress should be placed on the ability of this method to

promote and enrich faith, rather than damage or destroy it. The question of what inspiration means if we take historical criticism of the Bible seriously is a deeply interesting one and should be introduced to the students. In such an investigation the balance between God's imparting important knowledge while establishing human freedom could be an interesting focus.

3. Covenant

The focus here is on Christianity and Judaism. The deep association between them could be introduced with respect to the superlative 2015 document *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable* by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations, which insists that the two groups are on a single path to salvation, not on parallel paths. The aim would be to bring Catholics and Jews together in common affection and joint action. Perhaps it would be also good to follow in the path of Vatican II and consider the position of other religions to ensure that issue was not forgotten.

4. The Incarnation

This is a very solid section on an essential topic. Perhaps its exposition might also move into areas of current experience that could be touched more by Incarnational theology than they are at present. I would suggest an interesting area would be to consider those Eastern Orthodox Churches that rejected Chalcedon (like Ethiopian Orthodoxy) and consider what is at stake in the different approaches and how that affects ecumenical relations.

5. The Trinity

Again, this is a solid approach to an essential topic. It may be instructive for the students in getting a deeper understanding of the Christian position if they were asked to consider why it is that Muslims cannot reconcile three persons with one God. That is, Islam's powerful monotheism could be an enlightening comparator with the Christian Trinity. I wonder if this area contains a sufficient treatment of the concept of person (see below on my proposed 14th section).

6. Passover

The revivification of Passover theology to explore the sacraments is an astute move, especially as it brings out the ties we have with our Jewish brothers and sisters. Clearly, though Passover is best suited to considering the Eucharist. As to the other sacraments, there is quite a lively discussion concerning them in reaches of Protestant theology at present and dialogue with those generating insights in that context might be quite enriching.

7. The Church

What is said is good and true (and no doubt Vatican II perspectives are part of the picture), but I would think the students would benefit from considering how ecclesiology meets contemporary reality. The Synod on the Family brought out important issues but the limited role of women in the Church is still very problematic for many. Can we avoid considering clerical abuse that has, for example, very negatively impacted the Church in Ireland and elsewhere? How best might we respond to *nostra ecclesia imperfecta*?

8. Glory

I admire the determination to have young adults at university give serious thought to *thenovissima*! The 1988 book by Cardinal Ratzinger (as he then was) *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* and Karl Rahner's essay 'Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?' are timeless classics worthy of recommendation to the students. In addition to focusing on high level systematic theology, it might be useful to introduce biblical perspectives (from both Testaments) where the End Time is not just about the demonstration of glory but the righting of injustice. This might be the place to consider dystopic construals of the end for humanity, including climate change and nuclear war, and how these possibilities could shape and temper our eschatology.

9. Grace

The biblical dimension here is very welcome (and John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* could be exposed to the students with great effect to introduce them to the richness of the Pauline teaching in this area).

10. Freedom

I would complement this excellent material with something on the question of determinism and how God has chosen a different path for the universe, where things can go wrong in nature and we must live with that. Is the tragedy of people dying in an earthquake, for example, a reflection of God's creation of cosmic and human freedom and how do we reconcile that with our understanding of the nature of God?

11. Truth

I would complement this general theology with a more focused look at how truth is got at in Catholic theology (see my new area 14 below).

12. Love

This is very sound (and it seems to be close to the vision of Pope Francis).

13. Prayer

This is all very true, but I would complement catechetical approaches with a more narrative approach that draws on Old and New Testament, and some of the saints, Augustine's *Confessions* especially.

And here is my proposed new area:

14. The Human Person and Natural Law

A distinctive feature of Catholicity is its careful positioning of a highly explicit and elaborated Tradition alongside of and together with Scripture. Central to that Tradition are ideas of Natural Law derived from Aquinas and other scholastic thinkers. Such ideas combine theology and the disciplined rational thinking about creation and humanity that draw on philosophy but are also open to other intellectual perspectives, including those of science. Natural law offers a means of

bringing such perspectives into the theological task of thinking about what it means to be a fully human person and the ethical demands of being so (for example, see Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*). In particular, it provides Catholicism with a unique resource for re-assessing its position on various challenging issues as they arise.