News



Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron speaks at a session of the 51st International Eucharistic Congress in Cebu, Philippines, in 2016. (CNS/Katarzyna Artymiak)

by Don Clemmer

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When the U.S. bishops gather for their fall general meeting in Baltimore Nov. 11-13, they will hear from Bishop Robert Barron, who, as chair of the bishops'

evangelization committee, is expected to address why so many have left the church, especially younger Catholics. It is a speech Barron, an auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, has been preparing for much of his priesthood, spending decades building a brand and, in the process, becoming one of the most influential and visible voices in the U.S. Catholic Church.

His more recent offerings include a 12-part online course on St. John Henry Newman; a film series "The Sacraments" to be released next summer; and, in late September, his second AMA (Ask Me Anything) on the website Reddit, which was the second most commented-on AMA of the past year, behind Bill Gates and ahead of Bernie Sanders. That forum gravitated largely toward questions of God's existence, human suffering, why a person would choose one religion over another, and LGBTQ issues.

His previous work includes a 10-part 2011 documentary "Catholicism," and more than a dozen books and a library of video content, blog entries and other offerings through his Word on Fire Catholic Ministries.

Word on Fire, which was founded in 2000 as a way of sharing homilies online, today reaches millions each year, according to its website, offering blog posts, audio podcasts/radio shows, and hundreds of video commentaries by Barron. For the fiscal year ending in June 2018, Word on Fire reported $3.6 million in revenue (up from $1.4 million the previous year) and more than $8.6 million in assets.

Barron is a relatively new bishop, appointed just four years ago, and is young as bishops go, turning 60 the week after the bishops' meeting. While he's one of five active auxiliary bishops of the Los Angeles Archdiocese — and one of three appointed simultaneously in July 2015 — there is no other new bishop with a significant following of clergy and laypeople hailing him as the next Fulton Sheen.

"I'm always uneasy with the comparison, largely because our styles are rather different and I have nothing like his rhetorical skill," Barron told NCR via email of how he relates to the 20th-century archbishop and pioneering televangelist. "Fulton Sheen is certainly a hero, and I suppose I'm attempting to do what he did."

The last time Barron addressed the U.S. bishops on evangelization, in June of this year, he threw a wild pitch. Speaking as chair of the bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis and addressing strategies for connecting with religiously unaffiliated young people, he lifted up Canadian psychologist and social media personality Jordan Peterson as "the model."

The bishops themselves, a group largely unfamiliar with Peterson, didn't push back. But the backlash in social and traditional media — seeing a prominent bishop use his platform to elevate a figure associated with the alt-right — was formidable. Barron later clarified that he was not endorsing the content of Peterson's work, but his style of engagement.

"My greatest satisfaction has come from bringing the issue of the 'nones' or the religiously unaffiliated to the attention of the bishops," Barron said via email of the priority of this work. "After the sex abuse scandal, the massive attrition of the young is, I think, the most important issue facing the Church."

Others see Barron's invocation of Peterson as a strange alliance.

"Jordan Peterson traffics in a pseudo-intellectual gobbledygook" that mistakes "impenetrable phrases for profundity," said Michael Bayer, director of evangelization and adult formation at St. Clement Catholic Church in Chicago. "It plays into some of these dangerous mindsets and ideologies that have fomented on the web among young men, in particular among young white men."

Rebecca Bratten Weiss, manager of Patheos Catholic, called it "a slap in the face to all of us who have been concerned about Peterson's connections with the alt-right, his thinking that it's kind of funny to hobnob with anti-Semites, his complete lack of concern for social justice [and] the plight of women experiencing sexual assault." She said associating with such a figure turns the church into "yet another world in which white males dominate," instead of the Gospel message of good news for the poor and welcome of refugees.

Other observers see Barron as part of the long tradition of evangelists in the wide American religious marketplace.

"I see him as more of an American evangelizer than as necessarily a Catholic evangelizer, because his personality and his person are so much wrapped up in it," said Cathleen Kaveny, a theologian at Boston College.

Kaveny said Word on Fire has good content, albeit with some problematic aspects. She also raised that while Barron holds fast to the label of evangelization, what she sees is more about apologetics, defending the teachings of the faith through

arguments.

The impact of two Thomases

Some say that Barron has raised the level of Catholic popular discussion.

"Robert Barron has a certain respect among people who ask for more content in their religious discourses," said Bratten Weiss. "When I started following him, I was impressed with his take and his ability to connect ideas in the Catholic intellectual tradition with pop culture. I really liked something he'd written on *The Hunger Games* and tying that in with René Girard and scapegoating. And I was like, this is what we need."

This intersection of faith with culture has been a hallmark of Barron's ministry, dating back well before the Chicago native was ordained a priest of that archdiocese by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in 1986.

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"When I was a teenager, two Thomases had a huge impact on me: Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Merton. The first Thomas gave me a vivid sense of the reality of God, and the second Thomas introduced me to the world of spiritual experience," Barron said, adding that he also draws inspiration from literary and artistic figures, including Dante, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Bob Dylan.

Barron told John Allen in the 2017 book *To Light a Fire on the Earth* that he hailed from a "good, solid" Catholic family that modeled rock-solid Mass attendance and praying the rosary.

"I grew up in the period just after Vatican II, and the church I knew was one that was bickering with itself, largely over issues of sexuality and authority," Barron told NCR. He noted that while he believes these arguments involved people of goodwill, it was unattractive to the wider culture, and "while these debates were going on, a couple of generations came of age not knowing much about the fundamentals of Catholicism."

Barron discovered his vocation after a year at the University of Notre Dame and transferred to Chicago's Mundelein Seminary and, later, to the Catholic University of

America.

"When I was going through seminary, I read Karl Rahner with great enthusiasm, but in later years, I gravitated much more to Hans Urs von Balthasar," he said.

After ordination, he pursued graduate studies at the Institut Catholique de Paris, he told Allen, in part to deepen his connection to Aquinas, who had taught in the city.

Something seminarians could buy into

Fr. Thomas Baima, a priest of Chicago who has known Barron for 20 years, describes him as a man "with a pastoral concern for what theology has to do for ordinary people." Baima, who also serves as vicar for ecumenical and interreligious affairs for the Chicago Archdiocese, joined the faculty of the University of St. Mary of the Lake and Mundelein Seminary in 1999, when then-Fr. Barron was also on the faculty.

"He reads more and faster than any person I know. He's always thinking," Baima said of Barron.

Baima recalled that around the time of the release of *The Da Vinci Code*, he invited Barron as a guest on a radio show he hosted.



A fan holds up a face of then-Fr. Robert Barron, at the time rector/president of the University of St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois, as they cheer their team on during a basketball game. (CNS/Catholic New World/Karen Callaway)

"In just about 30 minutes, he managed to dissect the text, identify its problematic parts and then, with kind of an amazing clarity — which is one of the things that he has — he basically says, 'Here's the problem. Here's why it matters. And here's the solution from the great tradition of the Catholic Church,' " Baima said. "He was coming to understand that the laity had the capacity to engage these kinds of things. What they needed was a guide, and he was understanding how he could provide that particular service through Word on Fire."

The outgrowth into a new media ministry coincided with Barron's time at Mundelein, as professor of systematic theology (1992-2008), Francis Cardinal George Professor of Faith and Culture (2008-12) and as president-rector (2012-15). For Barron, Baima said, the movement into new media was made all the more potent by Barron's "evangelical vision of Catholicism" that translated into "something that seminarians could really buy into."

Barron taking on both media and seminary responsibilities was possible in large part because of the consistent support of Chicago's late Cardinal Francis George.

"Cardinal George knew ... that many of the young men discerning a vocation to priesthood had been strongly influenced by Father Barron's strong and clear articulation of Catholicism," Fr. Daniel Flens, director of liturgy and pastoral formation at St. Joseph College Seminary in Chicago, said via email.

Flens, who served as George's priest-secretary from 2003 till the cardinal's death in 2015, said of the relationship, "Cardinal George saw in Father Barron a kindred spirit, a priest who shared his own passion for evangelizing the culture."

As what Flens called a "spiritual father, advisor and sounding board" for Barron, George's support extended to inviting Barron to live for a time in the archbishop's residence. There, George and Barron could be found remaining at the dinner table long after the meal was over, discussing theology, philosophy, evangelization and other topics.

Bishop Barron goes to Hollywood

When Barron was appointed one of three new auxiliary bishops of the Los Angeles Archdiocese in the summer of 2015, the "Bishop Barron goes to Hollywood" takes wrote themselves. As a media star among U.S. clergy, he was parachuted into the center of production values and distribution deals.

In the Los Angeles Archdiocese — the largest local church in the country with more than 5 million Catholics — auxiliary bishops oversee massive regions. Barron was assigned to the more than a million Catholics in the Santa Barbara region.

That would be complicated enough without also having to relocate a multimillion-dollar media apostolate halfway across the country.

"I was deeply involved with Word on Fire during the years that I had a very full-time job as rector of Mundelein Seminary," Barron said via email about the relocation of Word on Fire to Santa Barbara. "So I had already learned how, with the enormous help of my Word on Fire staff, to balance these various responsibilities. Therefore, the transition to another very full-time job didn't pose insuperable difficulties."

Of his new assignment, Barron said, "I wouldn't really see this as a contrast with Chicago, but the Church in L.A. reveals how alive and how culturally rich the Church is."



Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, center, and Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron pose for a photo at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels with a group of World Youth Day pilgrims who received a send-off blessing July 17, 2016. (CNS/Victor Aleman)

Rather than seeing pews emptying out, he notes the majority-Hispanic (70%) nature of that local church and how he's become more aware of Hispanic Catholics as "more the subjects than the objects" of evangelization.

Meanwhile, Barron entered the U.S. episcopacy a known quantity among most bishops. In November 2016, the bishops chose Barron to head their evangelization committee. His term began the following year and will expire in 2020.

"I was very surprised to be elected chair of Evangelization and Catechesis," Barron said via email. "My plan had been to participate in a few committees and learn the ropes. But it's been more like a dive into the deep end of the pool."

That deep end included being part of a larger working group of chairmen in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops tasked with oversight of the bishops' latest revisions to their quadrennial statement "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," which addresses a consequential intersection of faith and culture: how Catholics vote. While Barron insists that his own role in the process is peripheral, the latest revision, which goes before the bishops this fall, will not entail further changes to the original 2007 text. The new version will include a rewritten introductory letter and supplemental materials, namely a series of videos.

The sheer volume of portfolios raises questions of priorities both at home and on the national stage. Anne Hansen, a writer and active Catholic in the Santa Barbara region, told NCR, "Bishop Barron, from my own experience, was not accessible to the people of the Santa Barbara region."

Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, said, "I hear from people I trust that he is more interested in selling the Word on Fire program than in hashing out the project of reaching young people on the ground through evangelization."

Baima, Barron's longtime colleague at Chicago's Mundelein Seminary, sees the coupling of Barron's responsibilities as bishop with his role at Word on Fire as natural for a Chicago priest. "You commit yourself to your local assignment, to your parishes, whatever it is, but you also engage in some other area of ministry that is addressing these bigger pictures. That's kind of a Chicago thing," Baima said.



Auxiliary Bishops Joseph Brennan and Robert Barron pray during their Sept. 8, 2015, episcopal ordination at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. Not pictured is Auxiliary Bishop David O'Connell, who was also ordained. (CNS/The Tidings/John Rueda)

Baima said his wish for Barron is that he emulate the role of George in the bishops' conference, that of a colleague who, whether the bishops agreed with him or not, "helped them think" and find ways forward on challenging issues. On this, Baima cites Barron's recent book, *Letter to a Suffering Church*, in which Barron takes on the clergy sexual abuse crisis.

"Everyone wants to find some group to blame. Whatever else you want to say about this awful issue, you should begin with the acknowledgment that it is 'our' problem and we have to solve it together," Barron said via email.

The approach he takes draws on Scripture.

"I felt that the problem had certainly been addressed from a forensic and legal standpoint as well as from a psychological point of view, but it had not yet been addressed sufficiently from a Biblical perspective," Barron explained. "To my mind, the most remarkable Biblical antecedent is the story of Hophni and Phinehas, wicked priests who were abusing their people sexually and financially. When the victims brought the concern to their father, Eli, the high priest, he responded with strong words but no action. The result was a disaster for Israel. You'd have to be blind not to see this as a distant mirror of our time."

Barron doesn't view himself as a creature of the ideological right, nor does his criticism come exclusively from the left.

'Happy that both extremes go after me'

"I'm happy that both extremes go after me. It shows, I think, I'm in the relatively right position," Barron said, noting, "The extreme right is unhappy with me for two reasons: my conviction that we may hope that all people might be saved and, relatedly, my contention that non-Catholics can find salvation."

He added, "To my mind, neither of these is a radical position, which is why I've always been more than a bit puzzled by the vehemence of the reaction from the right. I do think that, behind all of this, is a deep suspicion of Vatican II in general on the part of some on the extreme right."

A flashpoint of division in the U.S. church in recent years has taken the form of opposition to Pope Francis and his program. Barron's perception of opposition to Francis by U.S. Catholics is that some are engaged in loyal opposition and questioning, which the pope himself says he welcomes, but that "there are a handful on the extreme Catholic right who question the legitimacy of Francis's election and probably wish to replace him. They are noisy but small in number."



Pope Francis talks with Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles after a session of the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment, at the Vatican Oct. 26, 2018. Also pictured are Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia, Byzantine Catholic Archbishop William Skurla of Pittsburgh, Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles and Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago. (CNS/Vatican Media)

He added that to characterize them as a vast conspiracy, however, "is to take the extremist right *way* too seriously."

"I particularly love the Pope's insistence that we go out from the sacristies and to the margins," Barron said. "With the rise of the 'nones,' the church should not be preoccupied primarily with parish-based programs. The young unaffiliated aren't coming readily to our churches and parishes."

Rather, he said, "we should find ways to move into the world where young people actually live. This is where I would put a special stress on the new media."

Baima sees Barron tracking with Francis in both viewing the church as not primarily institutional but as "the prolongation of the Incarnation."

"They both independently have used that phrase," Baima said. "Jesus Christ can be the answer to the world's problems because, by uniting us to himself, he also unites us to each other and to God the Father in the Holy Spirit. And that's 'Doctrine of God,' the main course that Bishop Barron taught [at Mundelein] for two decades."

So going into his speech at the bishops' general meeting in Baltimore, Barron occupies a visible place of tension.

"Bishop Barron is a natural and is able to adapt so well, is so well read and experienced," Boston Auxiliary Bishop Robert Reed said via email.



Bishop Robert Barron, chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, attends a news conference Nov. 13, 2018, at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

Reed, who became a bishop about a year after Barron, following a similar media trajectory via Boston's Catholic TV, added, "I really admire him and his varied skills,

and I would guess that most of the bishops share my admiration. In more subtle ways this manifests itself in his occasional and insightful interventions in general assembly."

Barron's critics affirm what they see as his intelligence, the formative impact he's having on young people and Catholics in general, and the essential nature of the projects he's undertaking when it comes to evangelizing the culture.

"I feel that Bishop Barron's approach is more triumphalistic and presents the church in something of an idealized way," Bayer of St. Clement in Chicago said.

"I would like to see more religious leaders use media in a way that doesn't look like they're just advertising stuff to make money — to use it in a more radical way," Bratten Weiss noted. "We need to have more than neatly packaged takes."

"I don't know that a lot of us changed our minds exactly," Bratten Weiss said of her shifting views on Barron. "Part of it has to do with the particular time period we're living in, which is kind of a crucible time."

She added, "We're expecting religious leaders to take certain stands and say you can't do this — you can't put children in cages, you can't be partial to genocide, you can't support war criminals — and they don't do it."

Kaveny of Boston College noted that "it's not the poor church of Pope Francis" when she watches Barron's videos and that arguments designed to keep uncertainty at bay are not how people form belief. "I think it's something that you might find attractive at a certain stage in your life," she said.

Barron himself recognizes the fullness of tradition and the multitude of witnesses necessary at the end of the day — or the epoch.

"People always want a univocal answer to the question regarding the church in relation to the culture," he said. "Different times call for different charisms and different kinds of people. Thomas Aquinas was the right man to engage the culture of his time with great optimism and openness; Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the right man to engage the culture of his time with fierce prophetic resistance. There is never one strategy or one type of personality."

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