Opinion
NCR Voices



Bishop Robert Barron is seen at St. John the Evangelist Co-Cathedral in Rochester, Minnesota, July 29, 2022, during his installation as bishop of the Winona-Rochester Diocese. (CNS/Courtesy of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries/Clare LoCoco)



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When Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, was interviewed by Colm Flynn, EWTN News' Vatican correspondent, during World Youth Day, the bishop said something that I predict will become a frequent refrain among those who criticize Pope Francis' magisterium generally and his call for a more synodal church specifically.

"Young people don't want an uncertain trumpet. They don't want a vacillating message. They want something clear. ... We've dumbed down the faith for way too long. My generation got a dumbed-down Catholicism and it's been a pastoral disaster," Barron said.

Later, he attributed a motive to the dumbing down: "We've dumbed down the faith in an attempt to make it relevant."

The idea that the faith has been dumbed down has been one of Barron's frequent complaints. Back in 2010, he trotted it out on one of his "Word on Fire" video presentations. He encouraged the audience not to be "incidentally Catholic" but to be "essentially Catholic."

Barron finished with a tale about visiting his brother's house and seeing the books his niece had in a pile. "Hamlet" was on top of the pile and Virgil's *Aeneid* was next. In Latin. And so on. But the religion book had "big print" and "lots of pictures." He called it "a comic book."

Barron says he went out and bought her some classics: Volume I of Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Bonaventure's *The Mind's Road to God*, Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. What a great uncle.

Barron insisted, "The Catholic tradition is a smart tradition. Intellectually profound, rich. We will not tell our own story effectively if we turn away from that richness. We

must stop dumbing down our tradition if we are going to make this story compelling."

I agree with everything that the bishop said about our wonderful intellectual tradition, but how many young Catholics in, say, 1950 were reading the *Summa Contra Gentiles* or the *Divine Comedy*?

At Mass before Vatican II, how many people had any idea what the priest was saying? I know Latin, but when I watch video of John F. Kennedy's funeral, I can't make out a word Cardinal Richard Cushing was saying as he confected the Eucharist. I do not know how many Catholics in that illustrious congregation understood the words of the eucharistic prayer either.

Is Barron unfamiliar with Msgr. John Tracy Ellis' famous 1955 address to the Catholic Commission on Cultural and Intellectual Affairs meeting at Maryville College in St. Louis, titled "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life"? Ellis decried the lack of American Catholics' contribution to the intellectual life commensurate with our numbers and influence. He acknowledged the challenges facing American Catholics but he did not let his coreligionists off the hook, complaining they were satisfied with mediocrity, including those engaged in higher education.

Our church in the 19th and early 20th centuries was built on the backs of mostly illiterate peasants fleeing poverty and famine in Europe and our early educational institutions in those years did not produce much in the way of scholarship. When, then, did this dumbing down occur?

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My parents' generation knew the Baltimore Catechism, which had been designed, and designed well, to answer the questions Catholics living in the urban ethnic ghetto would face when venturing out into the ambient Protestant culture. But as a matter of theology, it infantilized the laity. The Baltimore Catechism did nothing to prepare Catholics to face the questions posed by modern and postmodern culture.

Put differently, it was meant to help Catholics give an account, an apologia, for the faith they knew in the Catholic ghetto. It was not written to be a tool of evangelization.

This "dumbing down" meme is different from but is deployed in the same manner as George Weigel's complaints about "Catholic Lite." Weigel challenges those who seek to respond to the needs of others in a pastoral manner, those politicians whose politics differ from his, "a Church of open borders, unable or unwilling to define those ideas and actions by which full communion with the Mystical Body of Christ is broken."

He never manages to question the Catholic fervor of those plutocrats who follow the example of the rich young man who walks away sad after Jesus invites him to sell all he has and give it to the poor, and then to follow him.

No Catholic in the U.S. can fail to be concerned about the lukewarmness of the faith in our culture among so many of our coreligionists. I am willing to bet that if all of us did as Jesus asked, sold all our possessions, gave to the poor and followed him, our evangelical witness would be more successful. But it is the glory of Catholic ecclesiology that ours is *not* a faith reserved to those who can read Virgil in Latin, nor those who can unfalteringly adhere to our conservative sexual ethic, nor to those who do not wish to sell their homes and remove themselves from the world to follow Jesus. "Here comes everybody" is James Joyce's famous, and accurate, understanding of Catholic ecclesiology.

Barron is not really a culture warrior, but he seems to have gravitated to that camp. Instead of coming up with creative ways to evangelize our secular culture, he aligns himself with the likes of Jordan Peterson. In my newsletter yesterday, I cited last week's David Brooks' column in which he rightly noted, "Jordan Peterson and thousands of his lesser imitators ... feel beset by hidden forces trying to oppress them, by a culture that conspires to unman them, dark shadowy conspiracies all around." The defensive crouch is not a stance conducive to evangelization.

The conservative critique of the synod will traffic in these caricatures about "Catholic Lite" and "dumbed-down Catholicism," even though most people look at Francis and what most stands out is the power and sincerity of his evangelical witness, and powerful because of its sincerity. The conservative fear of synodality is a fear that the Christian trumpet will sound an unsure note. My fear is that, without synodality, the trumpet will not even be heard.

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