Opinion
NCR Voices



Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, speaks at a National Gathering for U.S. pilgrims, at Quintas das Conchas e dos Lilases Park Aug. 2 in Lisbon, Portugal, during World Youth Day. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Recently, I criticized comments made by Bishop Robert Barron, known for his "Word on Fire" ministry and the bishop of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, in which he complained about the Catholic faith being "dumbed down." I found his comments ahistorical and thought they suggested that only very smart, well-informed and well-read Catholics could qualify as good Catholics.

Now Barron has launched a criticism of British author and papal biographer Austen Ivereigh. Specifically, Barron charged that Ivereigh had made conversion a "dirty word," shunned evangelization properly understood and that the disagreement was essentially terminological.

"What Ivereigh is calling 'evangelization' is, in point of fact, 'pre-evangelization.' One can indeed prepare the ground for Christ in a thousand different ways: through invitation, conversation, debate, argument, the establishment of friendship, etc.," Barron writes. "One might legitimately say, at this stage of the process, that one is not pressing the matter of conversion, but one is most definitely paving the way for it. Unless it conduces toward real evangelization, pre-evangelization is an absurdity."

It is hard not to conclude that Barron's real target is not the biographer, Ivereigh, but the biographee, Pope Francis.



Pope Francis meets author Austen Ivereigh at the Vatican in October 2019. The pope collaborated with Ivereigh on the book, *Let Us Dream: The Path to A Better Future*. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Ivereigh has, in turn, responded at the website Where Peter Is. He writes:

> Francis is clear, then, what evangelization is: witness through open-hearted hospitality, service of the poor, a life lived according to the Beatitudes. But he is also clear when this becomes proselytism, and here's the challenging part. The witness can be in tension with, even contradicted by, our attempt to evangelize by means of persuasion, strategies, theological explanations, and apologetics programs. Why? Because in so far as these lead us to put our faith in our *own* powers, they suffocate the "meekness of the Spirit in the conversion."

That is, there is something semi-Pelagian in Barron's approach. In fact, the principal agent of evangelization is the Holy Spirit, not the intelligent bishop.

But there is a related concern here to which Ivereigh alludes, a concern I voiced back in 2019. There is something a little manipulative about Barron's approach. Back then, I noticed it in the way he discussed the insights of Hans Urs von Balthasar about beauty as an attribute of God, insights that have played a prominent role in the thinking of Popes Francis, Benedict XVI and John Paul II. For them, beauty is itself a kind of witness, but for Barron, beauty always seems like it is part of a marketing strategy. He dazzles the putative convert with it. There is little sense of the person to be evangelized as a subject, a person of dignity and freedom. They are an object, someone to be instructed, and Barron is the instructor.

You see this in the quote above, when Barron writes that "one is not pressing the matter of conversion, but one is most definitely paving the way for it." If you are calculating how and when to press, it is pretty certain what you are not doing is engaging the person as every bit as mysterious, noble and sinful as oneself, someone in whom God is already at work in ways hidden to either or both of you. Where Balthasar was always suspicious of the Enlightenment, of the Cartesian *cogito* and all that followed, Barron is a man of his age, an age of marketing and consumerism.

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In his column criticizing Ivereigh, Barron also trots out, as he often does, his exegesis of the Gospel account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He writes:

> Jesus walks with and carefully listens to his erstwhile disciples, even as they move in the wrong direction. All of Pope Francis's teaching on listening and accompaniment is beautifully congruent with the opening of this narrative. It was a necessary propaedeutic, but what emerges from this, if I might put it this way, pre-evangelistic conversation is a relatively superficial and disjointed understanding of the Lord: they have many of the facts right, but they don't see the pattern. It was indeed an encounter with Christ, but no careful reader of the story would conclude that it rendered anything close to an adequate understanding of Jesus.
>
> After listening for some time, Jesus speaks and does so definitively: "How foolish you are; how slow to understand."

Compare that with this reflection on the same text offered by Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley at the funeral of his dear friend, Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete:

> To me, one of the most fascinating lines in this Gospel is where Luke records that Jesus "gave the impression that He was going on farther." At that moment the disciples might have said: "great talking to you. So long. See you around." This Gospel would never have been written if they had not invited Jesus to stay with them. Christ wants to be invited. At supper, Jesus shares with them His identity and allows them to recognize Him in His self giving in the breaking of the bread.

You can spot the difference immediately. For Barron, the encounter is about the teachings of Jesus and for O'Malley the encounter is about the relationship with Jesus.

Barron is not wrong that our Catholic faith bestows a rich intellectual tradition on all who find a home within her. There is something Kantian about his fixation on ideas, and on his ideas to the exclusion of other ideas and approaches. There is one way, and it is always his way, even when an alternate way is proposed by the pope!

Barron is not sinister, and he is immensely talented too, but his blinders are more and more apparent every time he takes on someone aligned with Pope Francis.