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Catholics need a 'new apologetics' to defend faith

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service



Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, during the March 3 consecration Mass for the Chapel of Sts. Peter and Paul at Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Denton, Neb. (CNS)

VATICAN CITY -- The rise of "new atheism" and the popularity of books that distort church doctrines call for a "new apologetics" to explain and defend the Christian faith, said U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada.

Proclaiming the good news always involves explaining and defending the faith, tailored to the sensibilities of particular times and places, said the cardinal, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The cardinal spoke April 29 at a conference on "a new apologetics" at the Legionaries of Christ-run Pontifical Regina Apostolorum University in Rome.

The development and use of "apologetics" -- a system of explaining and defending the truths of faith -- largely went out of fashion with the Second Vatican Council, but is still needed today because Catholics in every age are called to explain the reasons for their faith and their hope, the cardinal said.

"If apologetics was criticized and largely abandoned in the wake of the Second Vatican Council for being too defensive or too aggressive, it is perhaps because the admonition to proceed with 'courtesy and respect' had too often been ignored," he said.

Today, with "the likes of Richard Dawkins and his fellow apostles of the so-called 'new' atheism addressing thousands on college campuses, with books caricaturing the doctrines and philosophy of the Christian tradition on the best-seller lists," the cardinal said, "how ripe are the times for a new apologetics!"

Defending the faith does not mean being defensive and, to be effective, it must be well thought out and based on "a renewed fundamental theology where faith and reason, credibility and truth are explored as necessary foundations of the Catholic Christian faith," he said.

He added that even the most convinced and clever arguments will not be an effective response to criticism of the Catholic faith unless they are accompanied by the personal witness of Catholics living holy lives and helping others.

The cardinal suggested an effective starting point would be to "focus on the beauty of God's creation."

"For this apologetic to be credible, we must pay greater attention to the mystery and the beauty of Catholic worship, of a sacramental vision of the world that lets us recognize and value the beauty of creation as a foreshadowing of the new heavens and the new earth," he said.

Sharing that vision with others, he said, requires working for justice, helping the poor and protecting the environment and not simply talking about the beauty of creation.

"At the same time, our ability to articulate the full vision of truth, justice and charity is essential to ensure that such witness and action is not just a passing phase, but can make a lasting contribution to the creation of civilization of love," he said.

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The cardinal also said the "new apologetics" must reflect the strides made in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue since the Second Vatican Council.

While there is need for a specifically Catholic apologetics, he said, "questions of spirit and faith engage all the great religious traditions and must be addressed with an openness to interfaith dialogue."

"The call for a new apologetics for the 21st century does not, in my view, amount to a 'mission impossible,'" he said.

"The spirit of contemporary society is skeptical of truth, of the claims to know the truth, even -- or especially -- of truth revealed by God," the cardinal said, which is why apologetics is a step-by-step process.

In the end, he said, the heart of Christian apologetics must be an attempt to help people experience the truth at the heart of the Christian faith: "that God is love and that our creation in God's image and likeness makes all humanity able to love God above all things and love our neighbors as ourselves."

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