



Text of Homily of S.E. Mons. Robert Barron

Notes for Homily on Justin Martyr

By Bishop Robert Barron

--What a grace that our time together falls on the feast of St. Justin Martyr, one of the earliest and most effective of the Church's apologists. I feel that an essential part of the new evangelization is a new apologetics. When I was coming of age, apologetics had something of a bad name. It was rationalistic; it was defensive; it was non-ecumenical, etc.

--But I'll tell you one thing: when the new atheists came roaring forth in the early part of the new century, Christians were often left in the dust. We had thrown away so many of our intellectual weapons that the new atheists often overwhelmed us. So what would a new apologetics look like? Justin Martyr can be extraordinarily helpful in answering this question.

--Justin was born in present-day Nablus, a Samaritan town at the time, around the year 100. His parents provided him a fine classical education, and he was possessed of a restless, searching mind, which led him in the direction of philosophy.

--He tried all of the major schools, including the Stoic, the Aristotelian, the Pythagorean, the Platonist. This last way he liked best of all. But his mind was still unsatisfied. One day, he fell into conversation with an old man who was a Christian. This man told him of these great figures, the prophets, who lived long before the philosophers and who possessed a superior wisdom.

--This led him into the world of the Bible—and he never looked back, convinced that he had found in its pages the “true philosophy.” We have just a few of Justin's works that have come down to us from across the ages, but they are precious gems.

--His life ended in the city of Rome in the year 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. We have the extraordinary account of his trial and execution at the hands of Rusticus, the local Roman official.

--I'd like to focus on just three lessons we can learn about apologetics from this great saint and martyr. **First, a healthy apologetics should be Biblical; second, a healthy apologetics should be smart; and third, a healthy apologetics should be deeply in touch with the culture.**

--Justin was a passionate philosopher, but he became convinced that the Bible provided a greater wisdom—and he was right. I love philosophy, and in many ways, philosophy opened the door to religion for me, but philosophy is not as important as revelation. Think of the difference between what you can know about someone based on your own research and observations and what you can know about someone who speaks from his heart to you.

--In the philosophical quest, the quester is always more or less in command of the situation. But in the attitude of faith, the Lord remains in command. We don't control the Bible; the Bible controls us. For it is not the story of our quest for God but of God's quest for us.

--And we must be unapologetically people of the Bible if we are going to evangelize. We have to know it, internalize its stories, ideas, rhythms and patterns of speech. The Bible must be our book and it must shape our imaginations.

--A second lesson from St. Justin is that our apologetics must be smart. He was a man of the mind of the schools and of books. I have been arguing for years that a dumbed-down Catholicism has been a pastoral disaster. Vatican II was produced by the cream of the intellectual crop of 20th century Catholicism, but an anti-intellectualism has held sway in much of the post-conciliar period.

--But would we accept this kind of dumbing-down in any other area of life that we consider important? The question answers itself. John Henry Newman said that one of the surest signs of a properly developing Christianity is that it stubbornly thinks about the data of revelation.

--But this tends not to be reflected in the way we educate our own children. Why are high school students, even at our Catholic schools, reading Shakespeare in English, Einstein in physics, Virgil in Latin—and comic books for religion? Why are so many of our youth programs very heavy on having a good time and very light on instruction?

--My story about the radio interview on Christopher Hitchens. We didn't need Hitchens to get us to think about these things for the first time!

--The third great lesson that we derive from Justin is that our apologetics ought to be one of the *logos spermatikos*. Justin was convinced that since Christ is the incarnation of the Logos of God, anywhere that logic or reason is on display, Christ is implicitly on display. This enabled him to use the achievements of Greek culture to find lots of points of contact with the Christian Gospel.

--So today, we have to look for seeds of the word in our time. Sokolowski's point about the scattered pieces of a once integrated Catholic culture. Any time that we see the good, the true, or the beautiful, we should seize upon it. This might appear in the high culture and it might appear in the popular culture. We've got to be ready to take it in.

--I would say that a very good model of solid apologetics is someone whom my generation largely overlooked but who was embraced by the present generation: Venerable Fulton Sheen. Take a good look at his talks and videos and retreats. They are unapologetically Biblical. In fact, Sheen identified "the Biblical" as the first mark of good preaching.

--Secondly, they are quite obviously smart. Sheen spoke to a wide audience, but he never talked down to it. He never condescended. His presentations are filled with references to philosophers, psychologists, scientists, theologians, cultural figures, etc. And he had the advanced degree from Louvain and taught for twenty years at Catholic University.

--And they were profoundly alert to changes, dynamics, tendencies within the mid-century culture.