

The Lamb of God Is Not Made of Cotton Balls

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“*Twelve years.* Twelve years in Catholic school, and my son thinks it is enough to be a ‘good person,’ and he doesn’t practice anymore.” That was the pained lament of one of my closest friends in the parish. In economics, they call that a negative return on investment. I would call it an expensive failed effort at catechesis; our local Catholic school ain’t cheap.

I have heard *lots* of stories like this by now. Let’s say I don’t have a whole lot of Millennial friends at church. Gen Z isn’t looking super-enthusiastic, either.

Her son, their sons, their daughters, the kids of my generation, went to our local Catholic school, one of the best in the entire country. At least, it’s one of the best in relation to the only relevant statistics: college entrance and standardized test scores. Everyone who goes there gets into college. A good college, even, most of the time. The school’s “focus” is on “preparing every student to succeed — and lead — in a dynamic, connected and competitive world.” Sounds good to me. Christ did command us to be leaders in a dynamic, competitive world, after all. Sure, the kids don’t practice Catholicism anymore, but they were super-duper-ready for college.

My Catholic cousins all went there; they got some sweet scholarships to college. They don’t practice anymore, either, but they do have fantastic jobs. Most of the (few) Millennial friends I have at church went there. One or two are active in the parish. And man, did they ever go to college, too.

They start them out really little at the school, to teach them all about religion, about being Catholic. Doing all kinds of things. Cute little crafts. They even make the “Lamb of God” out of cotton balls and glue them to a paper. Around Easter time. Cotton balls in the shape of a lamb. You get it. It’s all about Jesus. And college.

Now, don’t get me wrong: there is nothing wrong with college. I went to college. Of course I went to college. You have to go to college. Never mind that I was horrifyingly under-educated, regardless of all the AP courses and extracurriculars, but I did go to college. I always thought the Lamb of God was silly and dumb and cheesy and made out of cotton balls; that was probably a public school problem, though. But I did go to college.

And I grew up taking religion not so seriously, like most of us these days, even the ones who grew up in devout homes. The world disproves the necessity of a religious life in so many ways. I had a conversation with a relative of mine the other day. A believer. Not a Catholic (lest we begin to believe that apostasy is merely a Catholic problem), but someone who believes that Christ died for our sins. He doesn’t go to any sort of services anymore. Doesn’t pray. But he says he believes. I suggested to him that life should be oriented around and ordered toward God. He scoffed. “I have no intention of ordering my life around God.” He has a good job, though. A

career, even. He went to college. He might even go back to graduate school soon! And God won't keep him out of Heaven. He is a Good Person.

"How do we get to them? The youth? How do we keep them in the Church?" our parish youth group leader asked me. He and I pondered this at length a few weeks ago in a passionate, frustrated conversation. It is something both of us think about a lot. It is the question we all seem to be thinking about a lot as Catholics, as Christians in general. "We have to show them how to be truly Catholic, what it *actually means* to be Catholic," he said. "We have to teach them that the Lamb of God isn't just a bunch of cotton balls glued to a piece of construction paper!"

"I didn't even understand the Mass until a few years ago," a cradle Catholic woman, an older Gen-Xer, probably in her early fifties, confided in me. "You grow up Catholic, and this stuff *just is*." "Our parents just expect that we will understand it," another told me. Being a cradle Catholic shouldn't be a liability. Growing up in the Church should not inoculate us against her Truth because we have cheap, simplistic, unexamined ideas about what we believe and *why* we believe it.

The Lamb of God can be cute to a five year old. The Lamb of God should cease to be cute to a fifteen-year-old.

Herein lies the problem. Our kids don't understand Catholicism on any profound level. As far as I can tell, we seem to do an excellent job of teaching our children about Catholicism until a few years after the age of Confirmation, and then it stops because we think we have to focus on college and careers. All too often, our own theology and metaphysics never grew up. How can we expect anything more from them when we fail to understand it ourselves?

A Christian should, at various points growing up and throughout life, be completely baffled. A teenager should cease to be satisfied with the Catholicism of his youth. He should wrestle with his religion. The wanderings of an adolescent mind can be dangerous, but they should be a part of life and an opportunity for deeper faith. We have to harness and guide the restless mind and show our children that there is a *why* for everything in this Church and even more importantly, a *way* to live it as they grow up and have the capacity to comprehend the mysteries of our faith on a deeper level.

We begin to help them build a strong Catholic house, brick by brick, on a shaky, precarious, weak foundation. We need, at some point in their lives, to stop teaching them just about *what* we believe, but *why* we believe it and *how* it all fits together into an integrated Catholic worldview which is necessarily *centered* on God. Our kids are completely unprepared to critique the arguments against their belief system and they abandon Christianity, or any meaningful form of Christianity anyway, because they never comprehended the First Principles to begin with. The house that should shelter them from the wild winds of a sinful life collapses under the all-consuming guise of a carefree, enthralling, exciting secular world. It is hard to fight a battle when you never learned how to wield a sword.

We should be teaching them to argue for and about Christianity, not merely to accept it superficially. Christianity has failed to engage the imaginations of our youths because they have

failed to understand how completely epic it is that an immaterial, eternal, omnipotent God, the God who created everything, the Prime Mover, *became a man*. That He did it because He loved *us* is remarkable. That we should be witness to it at every sacrifice of the Mass should bring them to their knees. None of this should be easy to get your mind around. If it is, think harder.

We need to teach them what to do and where to go when their reason fails them, because it will. We need to teach them what to do and where to go when their spiritual lives seem dry and empty, because they will. We need to teach them what to do and where to go when their faith falters and they don't see a way to reconcile their beliefs with anything they see around them. When the world is just too hard and when holding strongly to the tenets of the religion is too difficult. Because all of those things will happen.

We need to teach them how God relates to science, how to find Truth in literature. How God has guided us through history. Why religious themes are so over-represented in art and how it can point us to the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. What is Eternal Truth, especially about our fallen human nature, and *why does it matter?* To study all of these things, not primarily to get into college, but because they lead us to God and to a deeper understanding of who and what we are.

The single most appealing thing to me about the Catholic Church, the reason I realized Catholicism was true, is that there is an answer for *everything*. G.K. Chesterton phrased it thus in his *Orthodoxy*:

But, oddly enough, there really is a sense in which a creed, if it is believed at all, can be believed more fixedly in a complex society than in a simple one[.] ... When once one believes in a creed, one is proud of its complexity, as scientists are proud of the complexity of science. It shows how rich it is in discoveries. If it is right at all, it is a compliment to say that it's elaborately right. A stick might fit a hole or a stone a hollow by accident. But a key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key.

Catholicism is the one belief system that was able to satisfy my incessantly, irritatingly rationalistic brain. Reason defends belief in God and in the Catholic Church. God will give your children the grace to develop the faith that reason struggles to substantiate. They need to grow up knowing that grace is real. They won't always feel it or understand how it works, and attaining any level of virtue is going to come only on God's terms, but you have to suffer and work for it.

If your kids have a difficult question and you don't know the answer, if you can't think of a good reason or a good argument, search for it. I promise you, it is there. When you belong to a 2,000-plus-year-old Church, you aren't the first person who has had that question, nor are you the smartest. Your kids aren't that brilliant, either. You aren't going to outthink the Fathers and Doctors of the Church or the classical philosophers upon whose works they built. You probably aren't Thomas Aquinas up in there. That's okay. Be humble. Admit that you don't know. Teach them to be humble and search before they quit. Help them search before they leave.

We also need to teach them that ceasing to believe in God is not a valid choice. You don't get to choose to believe a lie without dire consequences. And if there is a God, He is owed an

obligation — an obligation around which your life must revolve. Even if they aren't feeling it, they must pray. Even when they don't want to, they have a duty to go to Mass. "You Do You" is the *zeitgeist* circa 2019. "You Do You" is not a Christian virtue. They must internalize, profoundly, that objective morality is *real* and that there are practical implications as to what that means for their lives, and the positions they stake out, political and theological, *must* be based upon and guided by Natural Law and God's revealed Truth.

They must not learn from us that it is okay, at the end of the day, if they leave the Church. No, we won't stop loving them if they do. But they must be challenged. We cannot idly accept it as a reality of the modern times in which we live. I know so many people who justify their children's refusal of the faith by saying "They are happy, they are good people. I love them no matter what they decide is best for them." It isn't loving to indulge your child's wrong-headed delusions. You will, at some point, be held accountable if you sit back and do nothing to guide them back to the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Sometimes the answers are hard. Sometimes they are hard to find and they are hard to understand and they are hard to accept. Tradition can help us. Our priests can help us. The world is so incredibly full of distractions and sin, and our children *will* get sucked into the vast chasm of relativist, meaningless, wayward chaos without us to show them that they have another way. It is hard to grope your way to the Truth without a guide. *You* must be the Virgil to their Dante. Help them understand sin and how to navigate through it in these many circles of Hell on Earth.

It will probably take some reading; you will probably have to learn a lot more than you know now. It isn't going to be easy, nor should it be. Easy faith is all too often synonymous with cheap faith.

To be clear, I am not saying kids shouldn't go to college — far from it — or that they shouldn't go to Catholic school. My kids are starting Catholic school in the fall, at least for a few years. But we have made an idol of a university education at the expense of a truly Christian education. We are sending spiritually malformed young people into a hostile world, and losing your faith is all too easy if you don't understand why you believe what you believe. If you haven't been taught how to grow in virtue, let alone what the Christian virtues are, of course you are not going to have a chance at a virtuous life. We can't rely solely upon what they may have been taught in a religious education class or in a parochial school. We must teach them ourselves, and we must show them by example. The sanctuary of our homes should be their primary classroom.

Familiarize yourself with the ideas and concepts behind a Classical Christian education; it's crucial. As Catholics, we possess the most beautiful religious tradition in the history of the world. It must be integrated into our education. A Catholic should, *must* be well educated. The brightest should be educated to go to the best universities. But worldly success should not come at the expense of their eternal souls. A degree from Yale is not a trade-off for graduating from this life and landing straight in the fires of Hell. St. Peter isn't going to be checking your grades at the gates.

Christ, not college or our careers, is the *epic* struggle of our life. He is the Alpha and the Omega and *everything* in between. There is no point to learning if you aren't learning to live the Truth.

The path is narrow and the road is long, but conforming our souls and our lives to *Him* is our lifelong struggle. Growing in virtue. Doing *His* will. Loving our neighbor. Sacrificing everything for God. Living for God. Dying for God. Becoming a saint.

“Twelve years. Twelve years of Catholic school,” she said, “and then my daughter went on to college. She graduated and got married and is now living a Catholic life and raising her kids to be Catholics. They are active at church and in the community. They are happy.” Thanks be to God.

“Twelve years. Twelve years of Catholic school,” she said, “and my son became a priest.” And upon that altar, for the salvation of countless souls, he will sacrifice the Lamb of God. The Lamb of God, who is, most assuredly, not made out of cotton balls.