

Original Apologetics

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Abstract

It can be said that apologetics was superseded in and around the Second Vatican Council: the word, or any version of it, was not included in any of the sixteen documents. However, apologetics by the 20th century had become significantly different from the wide and general apologetics of the first century and a half of Christianity, and for the scriptural calls for it. This original apologetics, or Petrine apologetics, was replaced by a very specific approach which can be called Justinian apologetics. It was the latter that Vatican II more or less rejected, and 11 of the conciliar documents have either clear calls or content that seek a return to Petrine, that is, original apologetics. This is a call to be prepared, that is, through appropriate education, to respond to others who question or challenge Christianity, and to do so in an appropriate Christian manner, which in turn is a form of educating: removing obstacles to belief by explaining.

Keywords

apologetics; original apologetics; Petrine apologetics; Justinian apologetics; apologetical turn; apologetical calls; Second Vatican Council; ressourcement

Introduction

It is often understood that the demise of apologetics took place in the middle of the last century (Geffré in Dulles 2005, 326-7; Nicolson 2018, 416-7). Without any inclusion of the term ‘apologetics’ or similar in the Second Vatican Council documents, it seemingly was at an end. However, original apologetics, according to Scripture, especially the clear Petrine call for all the faithful to be prepared to respond to others’ questions and challenges in a Christian manner, was quite unlike the way apologetics later developed, which was far narrower: more elite, intellectual, and often clerical. Looking through this Petrine lens, calls for and content consistent with a return to original apologetics can be found in 11 of the Council documents: preparation, response, in a Christian manner, and particularly for all the faithful. The Council calls for this to be developed in Christian education of the person to enable the faithful to engage with society, which reiterates Peter’s original apologetical call.

Original Apologetics is Petrine Apologetics

The word *apologia* was used by Peter in 1Pt 3:15 and it is usually given as an ‘answer’ or ‘defence’ in biblical translations. In Greek legal terms, it was originally the response to an accusation, *kategoria*. A decade after Philo brought together Jewish spirituality and Greek philosophy and wrote of the *Logos* (Philo 1854, XXVIII), Peter used *apologia* – etymologically a ‘speaking out’, a word that goes out (cf. Is 55:11). Peter’s call in 1Pt 3 is to

^{15b} Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶ and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.¹

The Petrine call can be separated into three elements. This can be seen by dividing the sentence into three parts:

1. 'Always be prepared to make a defense',
2. 'make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you',
3. 'do it with gentleness and reverence'.

These can be abbreviated into a short form: preparation, response, and a Christian manner.

This developing of logos into Christians speaking out or responding to another was not Peter's alone: the theme is also found in Paul and Jude and was developed in the next generation, the Apostolic Fathers. Paul calls on the new bishop of Ephesus, Timothy, his mentee, to 'avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers' (2Tim 2:14), that is, to avoid pointless arguments and show a good Christian manner, then states that 'the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness' (2Tim 2:24-5). Later, he calls for engaging with others, including explaining and responding in a Christian manner:

preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths. (2Tim 4:2-4)

Paul reminds us that not all teachers are trustworthy regarding accuracy and quality of content. Earlier, regarding good learning, thus preparation, Paul calls Timothy to

continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2Tim 3:14-17)

Paul includes the three Petrine elements, developing them in Timothy's new context. He also makes a comparable call to the Church of Ephesus, suggesting apologetical concerns were developing in the Christian leadership: they should be

¹ All scriptural text in this paper is from the RSVCE Bible.

building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, (Eph 4:11-15)

Paul shows the value of learning the faith to avoid being deceived, and helping others do so. This is, fundamentally, education. Paul is also shown to be apologetical in his defences (Acts 22-26) and debates (e.g., Acts 17).

The short Letter of Jude is clearly apologetical. He is very concerned about faithful falling away due to the influence of ‘ungodly people’ (Jude 4) and calls on the faithful to ‘contend for the faith’ (Jude 3). Preparation is important: ‘building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit’ (Jude 20), and, by inference, the more prepared, thus educated well, the more able one is to meet the different degrees of challenges: ‘convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire; on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by the flesh.’ (Jude 22-3). Jude is brief, clear, and direct in his apologetical calls to the faithful.

The scriptural calls to apologetics are significantly consistent regarding the key elements of preparation, response, and a Christian manner. These are intended to remove obstacles from others having or developing faith. Peter’s call is clearest and most succinct. It is often referenced as the scriptural source of apologetics. As the chief Apostle, it conceivably carries more weight.² Therefore, it is apt and economical to refer to the original calls to apologetics as the Petrine call or to Petrine apologetics.

The Universal Aspect of Original Apologetics Applied to All

Not only is the Petrine call the most succinct to identify original apologetics but it was also addressed to all the faithful. The letter of Peter was written to all (1Pt 1:1³), therefore, in real terms, to all the faithful. It is a requirement of the Christian to respond, not to be silent or avoid engagement which includes a question or challenge to the faith. To do so presents a faith that is not understood or that has little value, or perhaps even that one is embarrassed about (cf. 1Pt 3:14, 16-17).

It is arguable that Paul’s call to the new bishop Timothy is to one with apostolic authority, which translates forwards into ecclesial or clerical authority. However, this was not Paul’s first apostolic letter to a Church or individual. It was becoming established that Christians would share the words of the apostles, so Paul must have been aware that the text would be disseminated; without any request to Timothy that the text be to him alone, Paul surely knew

² His granting of authority comes before the rest of the Twelve (Mt 16, 18) and he alone is given the Keys to the Kingdom (Mt 16:19, cf. Is 22:22).

³ Although specific provinces are named, it makes no sense to regard the addressees as exclusive to these, but that they are examples of locations.

his content would be understood as being inspirational for others, too. Later, by including the Letter in the scriptural Canon, the Church decided that the content, including apologetical calls, should be shared. Today, part of the Letter (2Tim 3:14-4:2) is the Second Reading on the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time in Cycle C in the Catholic Church, thus it is regarded as a call to all faithful.

Due to both canonical inclusion and being addressed ‘To those who have been called, who are loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ’, Jude should also be understood as a universal call to the faithful.

Therefore, it is evident that the Petrine call to original apologetics was to all the faithful. Peter and Jude addressed their letters to all faithful, and Paul to Timothy, the Ephesus Church, and widely shared amongst others, which Paul would surely have expected. Original apologetics was not for certain individuals, such as leaders and the well-educated.

However, in the second century, Justin Martyr, a lawyer and philosopher, wrote apologetics that was very lengthy, elite, and intellectual. This was certainly within the wide definition of Petrine apologetics. Many later apologists followed in his style and presented similar content. After Christianity was legalised, most of the Christian writings that survived did so due to inclusion in the library and writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, who had focused on collecting (thus preserving) intellectual Christian literature, therefore, any non-intellectual apologetics written down was now lost:⁴ absence of evidence is indeed not evidence of absence, but we will possibly never know whether there were more early, ordinary apologetics produced written texts.

As Peter shows in his to-the-point manner and call, preparation comes first in apologetics. It is the foundation, the necessary preparation that comes before performance, in this case, responding and explaining the faith to others who have questions and/or challenges. Preparation is key to good performance generally as a rule.

The development of the original idea of apologetics, that is, responding about the faith as a theme in the later Apostolic years, from around AD 60, indicates both that the Apostles were ‘passing on the baton’ to others regarding engaging with non-faithful about the faith, and also that there was more engagement taking place as Christianity spread. This particularly was the case, as per the addressees in 1Pt 1:1, because the Christian diaspora meant the faithful were increasingly in unstable situations, and that they should engage regarding the faith rather than hide it. To do so, they needed to be prepared, to ‘Always be ready...’ to speak out.

Preparation of the faithful was taking place, as evidenced by extant sources from the period. Significant parts of the *Didache* (ch 1-6) and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (ch 18-20) from the second Christian generation included the Two Ways code. This was a binary way of learning: good and evil, light and darkness, sheep and goats, etc. Originating as far back as Deuteronomy,

⁴ The *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus*, showing Christian apologetical engagement with a Jew, probably written by Aristo of Pella c. 140, was regarded to be of inferior quality by several Church Fathers and has survived only in fragments: see Bovon and Duffy 2012, 465.

it had been used also in Isaiah, Sirach, and the Gospels.⁵ It was used later⁶ also when a clear understanding and foundation of the faith needed to be developed, and is still presented in some Sunday Church readings today. Clayton Jefford regarded this as a kind of pre-apologetic (Jefford 2006, 88) because he does not recognise original apologetics, but it rather beginning properly with Justin.⁷ However, Jefford is really recognising the Two Ways as apologetical because this way of thinking about the faith underpins the development of Christian education and understanding, that there is a right and a wrong: God's way and the worldly way. In the first century, in the pluralism of pagan thinking, converts in particular needed to understand their new faith in simple terms, and in turn could explain this to others who questioned or challenged them. The Two Ways code is present also in the *Shepherd of Hermas* while problems in the young Churches also needed to be solved apologetically-pastorally, such as in the *Letter of Clement* to the Corinthian Church. Thus, apologetical preparation was embedded in what might be called catechesis, but it needed to enable the faithful to explain why it was important to believe, to follow Jesus Christ.

Preparation for explaining the faith developed. Later in this generation, in the early second century, the Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, wrote seven letters along the way: to Churches, a young bishop, and to the Roman Church. He develops certain recurring themes in the letters, especially the importance of the faithful being united with their bishop, avoiding those who teach that Jesus was spirit only (Docetism), rejecting those who try to develop Christianity by returning to Jewish teachings, and why martyrdom is holy, not a curse (Louth 1987, 56-7). These themes and many others in the letters explain to the faithful important information about their faith, and in turn this is preparation for them explaining the faith to others who question or challenge it.

Ignatius wrote also to Polycarp, a young bishop, who later wrote to the Philippian Church. Again, apologetical content is included in both. And later, Polycarp's student Irenaeus wrote in the 180s a pastoral apologetics, *Against the Heresies*, explaining to his flock the many present temptations and why they were wrong, then explaining the faith to them at length. But before then, in 125, the Christian philosopher Aristides wrote an apologia to Emperor Hadrian, explaining why Christians should be tolerated, and even valued. Interestingly, he used an extended Two Ways style, with three 'bad' types (Barbarians, Greek/Egyptian pagans, Jews⁸) against the 'good' Christians; he was responding to Christians being maltreated and he sought to introduce the Roman leadership to the reasons for tolerating Christians, and did so by trying to educate using the foundational method of the Two Ways code.

⁵ For example, sheep and goats (Mt 25:31-46), those invited or not to the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14), the servants who make a return on the talents or not (Mt 25:14-30), or the servants waiting or not for the master or the maidens ready or not for the bridegroom (Lk 12: 35-40; Mt 25:1-13).

⁶ For example, by Augustine, in the Rule of Benedict, and since the High Mediaeval period when Confession was required annually by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215).

⁷ As do some others, including in many ways a key modern historian of apologetics, Avery Dulles (Dulles 2005, 27).

⁸ His main issue with Jews was an overly strong focus on angels and the lunar calendar.

The only direct report of actual ordinary apologetical activity in the second century is in Origen's later (intellectual) apologia *Contra Celsus*, which responded to Celsus's AD 178 accusations that Christians were engaging with uneducated people as they could not successfully do so with educated ones (Origen, 3.44, 3.55). Quite possibly polemically-skewed, Celsus at least showed some engagement taking place, which would have included responses to questions and challenges.

Early apologetical activity occurred to at least some extent, and preparation was presumably taking place as well as recorded in texts. The apologia to the emperor was the first recorded non-canonical apologetics, with a non-Christian addressee. A few decades later, the lawyer-philosopher Justin developed this approach and apologetics was narrowed, becoming elite, intellectual, and clerical. This Justinian apologetical turn meant that original apologetics, in the Petrine way for all faithful, had been superseded.

Vatican II Calls to Original Apologetics

It was only in the 1960s that there was a genuine call to return to original apologetics. At the Second Vatican Council it is fair to say that apologetics, as it had developed since Justin, was rejected. However, viewing with a Petrine lens, there are calls for a return to original apologetics, and content connected with this, in 11 of the 16 documents.

The general historical path of apologetics had followed Justin's approach – intellectual, elite, and addressed to non-Christians – often using direct apologias, which became the norm by the third century. Apologetics was now not for ordinary Christians. After Christianity was legalised, the faithful were generally catechised to follow liturgy and law: to be good faithful and good citizens. From Augustine, it was the norm that apologetics was for clergy. This redeveloped again after Rome fell by the High Mediaeval period, particularly supported by the advent of the universities. Although Lateran IV called for education of all, which might have developed into apologetical preparation, this was not sufficiently implemented (Wayno, 2018). Post-Reformation apologetics became increasingly academic and rarely was there evidence of it being used by ordinary faithful beyond problematic sectarian polemics. There was an organic development of apologetics in the English-speaking world in the first half of the twentieth century (Chesterton, Lewis, etc.) but this was overtaken by the idea that the Council had moved past apologetics. However, this regarded the Justinian apologetics that had replaced the wider Petrine form. In recent decades, a more organic development of apologetics (including New Apologetics; see especially Levada 2010; Nelson 2022) has taken place, particularly in America, which is a move towards more Petrine apologetics.

Ressourcement was a theme of the Council and there are two distinct calls to original apologetics in the Vatican II documents, with two and three of the elements evident, respectively. In *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 10: 'Everywhere on earth [all disciples of Christ] must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.(105)'. Footnote 105 reads 'Cf 1 Pt. 3:15', linking back to original, Petrine

apologetics. The term ‘bear witness’ denotes particularly the third element: a Christian manner. And a stronger-worded call is in *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH) 14:

The disciple has a grave obligation to Christ, his Master, to grow daily in his knowledge of the truth he has received from him, to be faithful in announcing it, and vigorous in defending it without having recourse to methods which are contrary to the spirit of the Gospel.

Preparation is clearly called for in ‘grow daily’, the Christian manner is unambiguous at the end, and the ‘vigorous in defending [the truth]’ is strong. Moreover, this is no request but a ‘grave obligation’. Regarding to whom it is addressed, the ‘disciple(s)’ refers not to an elite like Jesus’ Twelve but is ‘one who follows another for the purpose of learning ... from the Latin *discipulus*, “pupil, student, follower”’ (Harper, n.d.). It is addressed to the faithful, the Christian, that is, all Christians. Furthermore, in *Dei Verbum* (DV) 8, the Council calls ‘the faithful [...] to fight in defense of the faith handed on once and for all (see Jude 1:3)’. The Jude reference and addressing ‘the faithful’ again indicate a call to return to original apologetics.

Elsewhere, these calls to original apologetics are consistent with content regarding bishops (CD 13), priests (OT 4; PO 4, 9, 19), missions (AG 39-40, etc.), inter-faith dialogue (NA 2-3), and theologians in academia (GS 62). Each of these are consistent with original apologetics, that is, the three element call to all of preparation, response, in a Christian manner.

Notably, *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE) ‘calls on the person to develop through education to become an active Christian who grows in his relationship with God while reaching out to others in this world’ (Nicolson 2022, 37) and GE 2 calls for the faithful to be educated in their faith. Titled ‘Christian Education’, GE 2 covers both children and adults learning their faith. It brings together theology and anthropology within the education of the person, to become able to ‘help in the Christian formation of the world that takes place when natural powers viewed in the full consideration of man redeemed by Christ contribute to the good of the whole society’ (GE 2). Especially regarding original apologetics, this is possible by learning ‘how to bear witness to the hope that is in them (cf. Peter3:15⁹)’, which again links ‘bear witness’ to apologetics.

The laity are particularly called to develop and participate in original apologetics in *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA), with the term ‘bear witness’, established in LG 10 and GE 2 as including apologetics, used several times. Lay activity ‘at the very beginning of the Church’ (AA 1) is recalled and AA 2 describes how ‘their temporal activity openly bears witness to Christ and promotes the salvation of men’. The document thus begins with ‘original’ and ‘apologetics’ coming together, here connected with evangelisation, with which apologetics is often connected (cf. LeJeune). Peter called the faithful to engage, and AA 14 calls the faithful to do so in society because ‘in a worthy manner they can both further the common good and at the same time prepare the way for the Gospel’. This requires preparation through a ‘diversified and thorough formation’ and the ‘continuous spiritual and doctrinal progress of the lay person’

⁹ This typo in the English translation should read ‘1Peter’, not ‘Peter’.

(both AA 28). The preparation should not be a standard achievable only by some but ‘In addition to spiritual formation, a solid doctrinal instruction in theology, ethics, and philosophy adjusted to differences of age, status, and natural talents, is required.’ (AA 28) This theme continues in AA 29. Therefore, all the laity are called through preparation to maximise their apologetical capability, that is, for all to be able to respond to others appropriately to the best of their ability. This then becomes cyclical and spreads organically as the fruits of preparation are communicated and spread when the faithful speak out; this in turn becomes the preparation of the faithful who hear it, or seeds sown in non-faithful. Thus, the goal of apologetics is to remove obstacles to believing as well as doubts from others (and ourselves), thus to help develop the faith in them.

Through a Petrine lens, many Vatican II documents call for or refer to preparation, response, in a Christian manner, regarding all the faithful. It is clear that the Council calls for a return to original apologetics, and learning effectively about the faith is key in this.

Conclusion

Original apologetics, called for in Scripture by the Apostles, is consistent with the Petrine call to all faithful to be prepared, to respond, in a Christian manner, to those who question or challenge the faith. It is evident that this was being developed in the earliest Church by preparing the faithful using the Two Ways code – foundational Christian understanding – and then with content that was specific to the questions and challenges regarding the faith at the time. However, Justin Martyr’s legal and philosophical style became the norm as apologetics was narrowed to intellectual arguments and increasingly was reserved for clerics. This meant ordinary Christians were generally not being educated effectively on how to respond to others, which helps remove a lack of understanding about the Christian faith. This continued up to the Second Vatican Council, which called for a return to original apologetics, citing Peter’s call and reiterating the three elements being developed in the faithful’s activity. Christian education – here, preparation for responding – is recognised by the Council as key in a number of documents.

This return to original apologetics calls for the development of preparation of and engagement by all faithful, which requires the development of ‘ordinary’ apologetics. It is itself a form of education as understanding organically develops, obstacles to the faith are removed, and Christians bear witness to the hope that is in them.

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