

Father Barron's 'Catholicism'

In the fall of 1972, a group of us, philosophy majors all, approached our dean of studies, Father Bob Evers, with a request: Under the supervision of a faculty member, could we build a two-credit senior seminar in our last college semester around Kenneth Clark's BBC series, "Civilization," which had been shown on American public television. Father Evers agreed, and we had a ball. "Civilization" was the perfect way to finish a serious undergraduate liberal arts education; it brought together ideas, art, architecture and history in a visually compelling synthesis of the history of western culture that respected Catholicism's role in shaping the West.

Over the next four decades, I wondered whether someone, somewhere, at some point, would do a "Civilization"-like series on Catholicism itself: a Grand Tour of the Catholic world that explored the Church as a culture through its teaching, its art, its music, its architecture –and above all, through the lives it shaped. That has now happened. The result is the most important media initiative in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States.

The man responsible for this feat is Father Robert Barron, a priest of the archdiocese of Chicago and a faculty member at Mundelein Seminary. Father Barron is an old friend (and a colleague on NBC's Vatican coverage), but I'll risk the charge of special pleading by stating unequivocally that Father Barron's "Catholicism," a series that premiered Sept. 22 on Maryland Public Television, is a master work by a master teacher. In 10 episodes that take the viewer around the Catholic world, from Chartres to the slums of Calcutta and dozens of points in between, Father Barron lays out the Catholic proposal in a visually stunning and engaging series of presentations that invites everyone into the heart of the faith, which is friendship with Jesus Christ.

Having talked with Father Barron and his colleagues at Word on Fire, his media ministry, throughout the production of "Catholicism," I can testify that this was a great labor of love: love for the Lord, love for the church and love for the truths it teaches. Yet there is nothing saccharine here, nothing cheesy, nothing pop-trendy. It's Catholic Classic, not Catholic Lite, but John Cummings' cinematography is so

beautiful, Steve Mullen's original score is so fetching (drawing on ancient chants in a thoroughly contemporary way), and Father Barron's narration is so deft – the man has a genius for the telling example or analogy – that even the most difficult facets of Catholic belief and practice come alive in a completely accessible way.

At the center of it all is Jesus of Nazareth, posing that unavoidable and disturbing question: “Who do you say that I am?” Viewers of “Catholicism” will get to know many of the great minds and spirits who wrestled with that question over two millennia – Peter and Paul; Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Dante; Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross; Edith Stein and Katherine Drexel. But throughout the series, the focus keeps coming back to the Lord Jesus. “Catholicism” is built on the firm convictions that it is his church and that it is his truth that measures all truth. Father Barron understands that post-modern culture poses special challenges for the proclamation of the Gospel. That's why this committed believer, who is also a fine theologian, can sympathetically but forcefully invite his viewers into a thorough exploration of the Creed (an exploration deepened in the series' companion book, “Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith” (Doubleday).

There is no dithering about the bad news, either: Father Barron knows that the Catholic Church is a community of sinners whose infidelities have often marred the face of the Lord. At the same time, Father Barron's series displays the innumerable ways that the Catholic Church has been and remains a force for truth, decency, compassion and sanity in an often-cruel world.

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