

Why accompaniment involves apologetics

I recently granted an interview to the National Catholic Reporter concerning the upcoming Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, to which I was elected a delegate. We discussed a number of topics, including the rise of the “nones,” the purpose of the Synod and creative ways of listening to the concerns of young people.

In the course of the conversation, I also stated that I would bring the issue of apologetics before the Synod, since so many young people have questions about, and objections to, the faith. But when the interview appeared, the author expressed her puzzlement that I would mention apologetics, though it is clear that the working document calls for “accompaniment” of young people.

It seems many think doing apologetics and accompaniment are mutually exclusive. To my mind, they’re mutually implicative. Of course, especially in our context today, a brow-beating, “I’ve got all the answers” approach is counter-indicated. But apologetics as such is needed more than ever—and more to the point, is perfectly congruent with Pope Francis’ insistence on walking with those who struggle with the faith.

I don’t know any better illustration of what this looks like than the account of Jesus’ conversation with two erstwhile disciples on the road to Emmaus. The story commences with the couple walking the wrong way. Everything in the Gospel of Luke moves toward Jerusalem, the city of the cross, the Resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, the birth of the Church. Thus, venturing away from the center, they are evocative of all of us sinners who, to varying degrees, wander on wrong paths. Suddenly, walking with them, though they are prevented from recognizing him, is the Lord Jesus. He does not announce himself; he does not launch into a discussion of theology; he does not tell them what to think or how to behave. He walks with them in easy fellowship, even though they are going the wrong way, and he gently asks what’s on their minds: “What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?”

All that the left quite rightly finds attractive in accompaniment is on display here: tolerance, the willingness to enter the psychological space of those who are lost, non-aggressiveness, listening, etc. And this patient approach indeed bears a good deal of evangelical fruit, for Jesus discovers that they know quite a bit about him: “A prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him....Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us...and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.” But it also reveals how much they didn’t know, and this invites a decisive turn; the patient, listening Christ becoming pretty directive: “Oh, how foolish you are, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets declared!” And with that, Jesus launches into a very rich apologetic, placing the events of the cross and Resurrection within the interpretive context of the Old Testament, taking the couple through a master class in Scripture and theology.

It shouldn’t be too difficult to see how this story provides a template for the evangelical accompaniment of young people today. Yes indeed, friendship and respectful listening are indispensable. Walking with even those who are alienated from the Church is always the right thing to do. Browbeating, moralizing, and haranguing are to be avoided. However, accompaniment does not simply mean wandering around with someone! As the Emmaus account clearly demonstrates, the gentle, invitational approach aroused questions that then called for answers. Jesus loved them, walked with them, elicited what they knew—and then he taught, with clarity, at length, and in depth. And so young people today (who, trust me, have myriad questions about religion) are hungry and thirsty—not just for friendly companions, but for a word from the Church.

The term “apologetics” is derived from the Greek *apologia*, which simply means “bringing a word to bear.” It implies, therefore, giving a reason, providing a context, putting things in perspective, offering direction. How wonderful that, recalling Jesus’ great apologetic intervention, the Emmaus disciples said, “Were not our hearts burning within us, while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening up the Scriptures to us?” Young people will feel the same way today if the Church both walks and talks with them.

As long as we're exploring etymology, it is instructive, by way of conclusion, to examine the roots of the word "accompaniment." It comes from the Latin cum pane (with bread). To accompany is not just to be with someone; rather, it is to share bread with that person, to give and to receive life. In the evangelical context, therefore, true accompaniment goes beyond fellowship. It has to do with offering the bread of life.