

World

## Making the old new: Vatican encourages a recovery of 'apologetics'

By Cindy Wooden

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- In the Catholic Church, it's true that everything old can be new again, and the Vatican wants one of those things to be the art of "apologetics" -- dusted off and updated to respond to new challenges, including those posed by militant atheists.

The term "apologetics" literally means "to answer, account for or defend," and through the 1950s even Catholic high school students were given specific training in responding to questions about Catholicism and challenges to church teaching.

At least in Northern Europe and North America, the effort mainly was a response to Protestantism. Today, while sects and fundamentalist groups challenge Catholics in many parts of the world, almost all Catholics face objections to the idea of belief in general, said Legionary of Christ Father Thomas D. Williams, a professor at Rome's Pontifical Regina Apostolorum University.

Father Williams is author of "Greater Than You Think: A Theologian Answers the Atheists About God," written in response to the late Christopher Hitchens' book, "God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything," and similar works.

Over the past 50 years, apologetics lost its general appeal because "it was considered proselytism," an aggressive attempt to win converts that was replaced by ecumenical dialogue, he said. It didn't help that many Catholics started seeing all religions as equally valid paths to salvation, so they thought it was best to encourage people to live their own faith as best they could without trying to encourage them to consider Christianity.

Among the Regina Apostolorum students, he said, there is a renewed interest in apologetics -- usually covered today under the heading of fundamental theology. "You can change the name, make it gentler and nicer, but you always have to give reasons for your hope and belief," he said.

While there have been scattered attempts to train Catholics to explain their faith to others since Vatican II, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has asked for a more widespread effort to get apologetic material into the hands of Catholics.

In early January, the congregation issued a note on preparing for the Year of Faith, which will begin in October. Addressing national bishops' conferences, the congregation said, "It would be useful to arrange for the preparation of pamphlets and leaflets of an apologetic nature" so that every Catholic could "respond better to the questions which arise in difficult contexts" from sects to moral relativism and from secularism to science and technology.

The congregation included a reference to the biblical admonition from the First Letter of Peter: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope."

The passage continues by saying responses should be given "with gentleness and reverence," which Jesuit Father Felix Korner said means taking the attitude that "the person talking to me has a real question; through the question I discover the deeper grounds of my hope and joy; I try to respond by making myself and our faith understood."

The Jesuit, a theology professor at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University and expert in Christian-Muslim relations, said, "Apologetics in the restricted, poor, primitive sense later became: 'I learn some answers, and I respond to any question as if it were an attack by refuting the other.'"

To make apologetics part of a true Christian witness, he said, involves "being interested in the newness of the question" posed and "challenged by its rationality, daring to explore deeper my own tradition and hope."

Pope Benedict XVI and the Pontifical Council for Culture have chosen the path of dialogue to explore the issues and objections to faith raised by some secular humanists, atheists and agnostics. The pope invited nonbelievers to his day of dialogue for peace in Assisi last October and the pontifical council has launched a dialogue project called "the Courtyard of the Gentiles" to explore issues raised by experts in the fields of politics, economics, law, literature and the arts.

An effort to combine dialogue and apologetics is found in Catholic Voices, an organization in the United Kingdom that compiles detailed responses to current questions and trains Catholics to present official church teaching civilly and clearly in the media when questions are raised on controversial topics.

The need for articulate Catholics who could remain calm under fire became evident after a 2009 formal debate in England in which Hitchens and the actor Stephen Fry faced off against Nigerian Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja and Ann Widdecombe, a Catholic member of Parliament. The crowd clearly was on the side of Hitchens and Fry, who argued against the motion that "the Catholic Church is a force for good."

Jack Valero, coordinator of Catholic Voices and U.K. press spokesman for Opus Dei, said the group began by trying to respond to objections raised by groups protesting Pope Benedict's 2010 visit to Scotland and England. The issues included homosexuality, contraception, assisted suicide, clerical sexual abuse, abortion, AIDS, same-sex marriage and women in the church.

"Once we had identified the issues, we studied how best to answer them and developed our apologetics materials," Valero said.

But having written responses isn't enough. "If somebody communicates aggressively, which is not a very Christian way to behave, then the message does not come across," he said.