



The Narrow Way of the Catholic Writer

For the many who consider themselves a Catholic writer today, Catholic and writer is a duality when what is required is a unity. The Church and the world needs writers who make the great effort it takes to seek the spiritual unity pursued by the Church Fathers as described by Irénée Hausherr in his classic work *Penthos*: “As long as they had not arrived at total peace through unification of instincts with will, of imagination with mind, then of will and mind with the divine will and truth, they persisted in blaming themselves and feeling themselves far from the health at which they aimed.”¹ If you think this is only a path for clergy, religious, or monastics, consider also these words from Hausherr: “The monk . . . is not a special person. He merely claims to be taking Christianity seriously.”² The health of Catholic writing and writers will not be restored until writers take their Catholicism as seriously as Hausherr’s monk.

Most writers today, including many who call themselves Catholic, embrace the unhealthy ways of secularism. Yet I am convinced that the small remnant of writers who truly embrace the Catholic faith, like the remnant of the truly faithful that has made up the Church throughout history, can grow, and needs to grow. Such growth, however, will depend upon the willingness of those who call themselves Catholic writers to go beyond being Catholic writers in name only and instead to give their lives over to the Physician of souls, and to seek, promote, and help others experience the health and healing that He has given them.

While craft is important, putting your writing and craft before your faith is backwards. Craft should be placed in the service

of God. To be a Catholic writer, I believe, you must first be a Catholic who puts Christ and His Church above all else. Your writing must grow out of your faith—it must be an expression of your faith—and your faith must be completely aligned with the teachings of the Church. You must, as St. Ignatius of Loyola writes, “Think with the Church.” This means that your faith, and so your writing, must emerge from a heart that has been circumcised by the teaching of Jesus Christ and His one Church. Put

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your faith in Christ before all else and you will be among those whom God speaks of when He says, “I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.”³ You will be one of the few who will heed the Lord and “Enter by the narrow gate.”⁴

Although he does not speak specifically to the writer, Pope Benedict XVI’s remarks at Catholic University in Washington,

D.C., on April 17, 2008, provide a general roadmap for those who wish to grow as Catholic writers. The Catholic identity of the writer, as Benedict writes of the university or college, must be “a question of conviction—do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear. . . . Are we ready to commit our entire self—intellect and will, mind and heart—to God?” For the writer, like the college or university, “[t]his requires that public witness to the way of Christ, as found in the Gospel and upheld by the Church’s Magisterium, shapes all aspects of [your] life. . . . Divergence from this vision weakens Catholic identity and, far from advancing freedom, inevitably leads to confusion, whether moral, intellectual or spiritual.”

To be a Catholic writer, therefore, requires that the writer embrace the truths that the Church teaches, as well as its full tradition. Benedict, again, is instructive, since he devoted decades to helping others understand tradition.⁵ For Benedict, writing is part of the stream of tradition, not something separate. Any reform of the Church, he believes, requires a return to the Church’s tradition. Like Benedict, therefore, the Catholic writer must look to tradition for models to emulate. Catholic writers must look beyond the traditional canons of American, English, and Western literature that emerged from the academic world. A writer, like any well-educated person, needs to know the indisputable great books and writers of these canons: for example, Homer, Sophocles, Augustine, *Beowulf*, Dante, Shakespeare, Melville, Hawthorne, and Dostoyevsky. The Bible, thankfully,

also remains in the canon, but one can only wonder how long it will remain there. On the other hand, the Catholic writer, for the most part, must choose to ignore the writers in the canons that are being selected to supersede traditional canons, particularly those writers whose recognition depends primarily on their gender, ethnicity, race, or sexual politics. To study many of the writers on such lists is a waste of time, a distraction from truth.

Looking back to tradition, the Catholic writer, whether starting out or starting over, must start by gaining a deeper understanding of Sacred Scripture, which is central to the deposit of faith. There is no greater model. Better if you can learn Greek and Hebrew to read Scripture in original languages, but even without this knowledge the best translations will serve you well. Knowledge of Latin also would be useful in order to read the Vulgate and writers of the Church who wrote in Latin. Knowledge of Scripture also requires a firm knowledge of what the Church teaches about Scripture, from the canon of the Bible to the authoritative encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII, Benedict XV, and Pius XII and *Dei Verbum* and the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* of Benedict XVI.

Along with this work, the Catholic writer must gain a firm knowledge of the Church Fathers. While there are exceptional scholarly editions and works for general readers available, I see four books by Pope Benedict XVI as essential because they offer a foundational understanding of Church liturgy, history, dogma, and prayer. Three of the books collect Benedict's general audiences delivered from March 2006 through December 2009: *Jesus, The Apostles, and the Early Church*; *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine*; and *Church Fathers and Teachers: From Saint Leo the Great to Peter Lombard*.⁶ The fourth, *A School of Prayer: The Saints Show Us How to Pray*, collects audiences delivered between May 2011 and October 2012. Together, they give the reader a unified and systematic understanding of what the Church teaches and how this truth has been handed down through the ages. They also

demonstrate the Church's cultural pluralism, as Benedict calls it, and so include Greek, Latin, and Syriac representatives.

Well-schooled Catholic writers will surely have a good understanding of the writers from the traditional canons that I mentioned above. They will also probably know the works of writers on the cusp of these canons, and sometimes included, such as Chesterton, Newman, Tolkien, Claudel, Flannery O'Connor, and Solzhenitsyn. They most likely will be less familiar, or not familiar at all, with Catholic writers from the Eastern churches and writers and works in Latin from the medieval period. Yet, I believe, these are writers and works they especially need to study and know. The creation of literary canons, unlike the teachings of the Catholic Church, is not guided by the Holy Spirit. Literary canons are developed by human beings, usually with an underlying philosophical or political agenda. In the case of literature, that outlook has been increasingly secular, often Marxist, and atheistic. Racial or ethnic and sexual politics that are anti-Catholic and anti-Christian dominate the academic world and the revision of literary canons, and this has seeped into popular culture.

In his audiences, Benedict illuminates the way the Catholic writer must take. In introducing St. Romanus the Melodist, who was born at the end of the fifth century in Syria, Benedict states that "he belonged to the great ranks of theologians who transformed theology into poetry".⁷ Among the writers he adds to this list are Saints Ephrem, Ambrose, Thomas Aquinas, and John of the Cross.⁸ He could have added as well St. Gregory Nazianzen, whom he calls "a distinguished theologian, orator, and champion of the Christian faith in the fourth century . . . famous for his eloquence, and as a poet".⁹ If Catholic poetry and writing is to matter for the ages, the path taken by these great writers of the Church is the one a Catholic writer today must also follow. While each of these writers is interesting as a model for Catholic writers, and the writing of each is available in accessible translations that deserve a

greater audience, four strike me as especially suffering from neglect: Gregory Nazianzen, Ephrem the Syrian, Romanus the Melodist, and Ambrose. Not one is included in any canon of Western Literature I have seen.

Gregory of Nazianzen, who wrote in the fourth century, is mainly known as the Theologian because of his great orations. Although he surely is not known by most writers today he was considered one of the "great stylists of classical poetry and prose",¹⁰ and his theological works were "deliberately constructed as works of art".¹¹ Gregory wrote both long and short poems that elucidate Scripture, are prayers, and speak about his life. Gregory's advice to the writers of his time in "On His Own Verses", an apology of more than one hundred lines, speaks to the literary and poetic situation today. Writing poetry, Gregory tells us, is a noble path, and his poetry teaches us what it means to be a Catholic poet and writer.

Ephrem the Syrian, also of the fourth century, is a voice from outside the Greek and Latin traditions of the Church and, Benedict states, "Christianity's most important Syriac-speaking representative". Ephrem, he says further, "uniquely succeeded in reconciling the vocation of theologian and poet".¹² For Ephrem, "Poetry enabled him to deepen his theological reflection through paradoxes and images" that allowed him to convey more fully "the mystery of God".¹³ Reading Ephrem's poetry, even in translation, takes the reader on the path the poet has taken deep into this mystery and will be far more rewarding for the Catholic poet and writer than the reading of poets such as Blake, Rumi, or Kabir, who are championed by secularists.

Romanus the Melodist, who wrote in the sixth century, is credited with perfecting the chanted verse form called the *kontakion*, which was later modified and in its modification continues to be used in Byzantine liturgy today.¹⁴ Romanus is a story teller,¹⁵ who, Benedict tells us, avoided the Greek of the Byzantine court. Instead, he wrote a "simple Greek that was close to the language of the people" and wrote about Jesus

in “a lively and personal manner”. In Benedict’s verse translation of *The Presentation or Feast of Encounter*, Romanus uses the image of a lamp for Christ: “I long to hold you in my hand like a lamp; indeed, anyone who carries an oil lamp among men and women is illuminated without being burned. Illuminate me, then, you who are the light that never burns out.” Benedict also offers these lines from *Mission of the Apostles*, noting too that the life and words of Romanus were consistent: “Make my language clear, my Savior, open my mouth and, after filling it, penetrate my heart so that my acts correspond to my words.”¹⁶

While each of these writers is part of the legacy of the Catholic Church, they emerge from traditions outside that of Rome.¹⁷ The Roman Catholic Church, however, is equally blessed with great hymnographers, poets, who can be emulated. Ambrose, who learned from the East the writing of hymns “for antiphonal singing”, is “the great pioneer in Latin hymnody”. Imitated for centuries, he wrote hymns “for singing at specific hours of the day, and others for feast days”.¹⁸ Well-structured lyric poems whose influence goes far deeper than most suppose, his hymns are in need of a revival, both in the liturgy of the Catholic Church and for private reading.

In “O radiance of the Father’s glory”, Ambrose is inebriated with God’s light in the opening stanza and puts repetition to good use:

O radiance of the Father’s glory
from his light light engendering,
the light of light and fount of light,
the day that lends your light to days . . .

Toward the end of the hymn, he states:

Then let Christ be our sustenance,
and let faith be the drink we seek;
so may we joyfully imbibe
the Spirit’s sober drunkenness.¹⁹

Today we are in great need of Catholic writers and poets who are drunk with the faith expressed by Ambrose.

Some art, Benedict writes, “resembles a door open onto the infinite, onto a beauty and truth that can go beyond the daily routine. And a work of art can open the eyes of the mind and of the heart, impelling us upward.” Another type of art, such as a Gothic cathedral, a Romanesque church, a great piece of sacred music, leads us even higher. “Some artistic expressions”, Benedict says, “are real highways to God, the supreme Beauty; indeed, they help us grow in our relationship with him, in prayer. These are works that were born from faith and express faith.”²⁰ Each of the great saints discussed in this essay have left us such work.

The Church needs poets and writers who understand the necessity of being both writer and theologian. Such writers will take as their guides the great writers of the Church who have reconciled these practices, and so will also learn to reconcile them. Without the foundation of Catholic theology, and a full embracing of this knowledge and an expression of this knowledge that demonstrates that the writer is one who thinks with the Church, the writer is nothing more than another secular voice. The world is filled with secular writers and Catholic writers in name only who are secularists at heart. Our Lord calls the Catholic writer, like all Christians, to a change of heart, and with that new heart to take a different path that leads through the narrow gate.

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
3. Ezekial 11:19.

4. Matthew 7:13.

5. Maximilian Heinrich Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), pp. 464–65.

6. All are published by Ignatius Press.

7. Pope Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers and Teachers: From Saint Leo the Great to Peter Lombard*, trans. L’Osservatore Romano (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), p. 31.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

10. Brian E. Daley, S.J., *Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 2.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

12. Pope Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers: From Clement of Rome to Augustine*, trans. L’Osservatore Romano (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), p. 31.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 150, 151.

14. Andrew Louth, “An Invitation to the Christian Mystery,” in St. Romanos, *On the Life of Christ, Kontakia: Chanted Sermons by the Great Sixth-Century Poet and Singer*, trans. Archimandrite Ephrem Lash (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. xv.

15. Andrew Louth, “An Invitation to the Christian Mystery,” p. xxii.

16. Pope Benedict XVI, *Church Fathers and Teachers: From Saint Leo the Great to Peter Lombard*, p. 34.

17. Each was part of the undivided Church in union with Rome. The Orthodox today also claim them.

18. Peter G. Walsh, with Christopher Husch, edit. and trans., *One Hundred Latin Hymns: Ambrose to Aquinas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, Harvard University Press, 2012), p. viii.

19. St. Ambrose, “Eternal founder of the world,” stanzas 6–7, *One Hundred Latin Hymns*, p. 7.

20. Pope Benedict XVI, “Art and Prayer”, in *A School of Prayer: The Saints Show Us How to Pray*, trans. L’Osservatore Romano (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), p. 65.