
America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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To the Ends of the Earth

Robert Barron's 'Catholicism'

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Even by the standards set by Ken Burns, 10 hours is a hefty length for a documentary. Then again, the series under review is not telling the story of baseball or the Civil War but of Catholicism, an enormously rich tradition that, 10 years into a career in the Catholic press, I am still learning about. When you consider that *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* clocks in at 12,000 pages, 10 hours seems almost slight.

Produced by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, **Catholicism** is written and hosted by the Rev. Robert Barron, a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago who teaches at Mundelein Seminary. Father Barron is best known (at least until now) for Web videos in which he engages with various cultural trends, from the new atheism to the theology of “The Dark Knight.” He is both a genial host and a stout defender of the church, who is not afraid to acknowledge its failings.

“Catholicism” is a media project far beyond anything Father Barron has done before. In addition to its impressive length, the documentary boasts exquisite cinematography and enormous range. Teaming up with Matt Leonard of “The Today Show,” Father Barron set out to convey the universal nature of the church. The film hops from Mexico City to Israel to Uganda to Rome to the Philippines and a handful of other destinations, with a not unexpected stop in John Paul II’s Krakow along the way. More than once, I was put in mind of Niall Ferguson striding across Europe to explain

World War II or international monetary policy. (At times, the production can play like “Where in the World is Father Barron?”)

Father Barron has a talent for television: He speaks confidently and cogently on camera. (And shots of him gazing contemplatively into the distance are thankfully few.) He is an engaging conversation partner, though not one with whom everyone will always agree. Students of Ignatian spirituality, the Second Vatican Council or contemporary theology, for example, may find his treatment of the faith incomplete. Of course, no documentary, even of this length, could touch upon every tradition within the church. Yet with such a grand title, “Catholicism” invites some argument about what should be included.

A shortened version of “Catholicism” aired on several PBS affiliates in October, though at least one station declined to show it because of its explicitly Christian content. And this documentary is, indeed, a work of apologetics. It may look like your standard slice of public television, but Father Barron is not interested in an objective, clinical examination of the faith. He wants you to, as he says several times in the film, “fall in love with Christ.” And few media projects can claim they came about thanks to the intercession of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. (Watch the final credits.)

The series, then, is an exercise in evangelization as much as education, and one of its chief accomplishments is that it is, in the words of George Weigel, “rooted in friendship with Jesus Christ.” Every element of this story, from the Annunciation and the conversion of St. Paul to an examination of the Eucharist and the history of the saints, is refracted through that lens. At a time when the church sometimes seems as polarized as the political culture, “Catholicism” is an essential reminder that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

From a production standpoint, “Catholicism” is nearly flawless. The Parthenon, St. John Lateran in Rome, Lourdes, the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lough Derg—these are just some of the sites the production team visits. (No green screen for Father Barron.) The documentary is a little heavy on European cathedrals, though the team does visit the United States, with a particularly moving visit to the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville, Ky., to discuss the spirituality of Thomas Merton. Father Barron also tells the American stories of Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day and St. Katharine Drexel.

Individual believers play a large role in “Catholicism.” This is not a documentary about councils and papal encyclicals but about men and women who sought to follow Christ in the unique circumstances of their times. The project’s patron saints, if they may be so called, are Thérèse of Lisieux and Thomas Aquinas, doctors of the church whose paths to God could not have been more different. Pope John Paul II also plays a leading role, not only in the story of his own life but also in the spirit of heady evangelization that infuses the series. Father Barron is not interested in dwelling on the problems facing the church. There is nothing here on the priest shortage and only passing mention of the clergy sexual

abuse scandal. Instead, he focuses his energy and obvious passion on the graces the church provides. His discussion of the Eucharist is especially affecting, the only time I noticed that his voice cracked with emotion. How appropriate.

“Catholicism” is likely to find its way into parish halls across the country. It is being heavily marketed in the Catholic press, and the filmmakers clearly hope it will be used as a catechetical tool. Some of the episodes will work nicely in that regard. In particular, the introduction to Sts. Peter and Paul and the theological explanation of the liturgy are superb. Other episodes, like “Ineffable Mystery of God,” may require a bit more background in the Catholic tradition. The soul-searing images of Catholic art and architecture might even prompt some viewers to consider conversion, just as, for centuries, a trip to Europe often awakened searchers to the beauty of the Catholic tradition.

One virtue of Father Barron’s easygoing style is that it invites conversation, even disagreement. After spending 10 hours with him, I am comfortable enough to mount a few friendly arguments. I was puzzled, for one thing, by his decision to highlight the church’s teachings on angels and devils. Are these essential to our faith? Including them seems like a deliberate move to emphasize the “otherness” of Catholicism. In discussing the doctrine of purgatory, Father Barron visits Lough Derg in Ireland and commends the spiritual athleticism of the pilgrims who walk without shoes on the island’s harsh terrain and stay awake for days as a form of penance. Yet why feature Lough Derg and not any other retreat house or movement, unless to reassert the value of a certain pre-Vatican II Catholicism?

The Catholic Church presented in “Catholicism” comes across as a bit old-fashioned. Consider the art and music. After 10 hours of stained glass windows and Gregorian chant, I found myself yearning for kitschy church mosaics and the strains of the St. Louis Jesuits. The cathedrals of Europe are awe-inspiring, but they can seem far removed from the reality of parish worship today. It is wonderful to contemplate that we share a faith with the men who crafted the rose windows at Notre Dame and the African martyrs who died in Uganda. And “Catholicism” is a valuable reminder of this rich patrimony. Yet in general the film fails to convey that the church is a living tradition, one that continues to inspire artists, musicians and writers, as well as young theologians and lay ministers. Shots of worshippers in Mexico and the Philippines are not enough to capture the vitality of the church today.

At several points, Father Barron argues for the importance of spiritual heroism; he believes that Catholics should actively seek to be saints. He is right that out of false humility, we often shy away from seeking spiritual greatness. Sometimes in his telling, however, spiritual heroism is presented as a kind of warfare against the world. In explaining Jesus as the “Davidic warrior,” Father Barron argues that Jesus went *mano a mano* with the powers of his day and won. Later he cites the Egyptian obelisk in St. Peter’s Square—probably the last thing Peter saw before he was crucified—as a “gentle, in-your-face” reminder that Christianity prevailed over its enemies. Setting aside the question of whether the hedonist spirit of early Rome is really dead, this portrayal has the unfortunate effect of presenting Christianity as fundamentally in opposition to the world.

Of course, there are times when the church must take a stand against the culture; but the world is full of riches, too. In his commentaries for “Word on Fire,” Father Barron deftly engages with that world, offering incisive cultural analysis of books, journalism and film. Yet “Catholicism” offers little indication that its heroes found wisdom outside of the tradition—that Thomas Merton, for example, was studying Eastern religions when he died. Nor does it give much sense that sometimes the church itself stood in opposition to its most fervent believers. These details make for a messier story, but they also show how truly alive Catholicism is.

Like the church itself, “Catholicism” is sometimes a source of frustration; but it is also a testament to the beauty at the heart of the tradition.

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