

The Apologetics of John Martignoni

There's one point I'd like to clarify right up front: this article is very critical of John Martignoni and his teaching style. There's simply no way to address this subject without it sounding (at least in part) like Mr. Martignoni is being attacked. I want to assure you that attacking him is not my intention. I realize that Christ died for John just as He died for me, and for everyone else. John is entitled to his opinion, and I believe he's doing what he thinks is right. I know from his writings and recordings that he prays for guidance from God just as I do, and he works hard to defend his faith. At the same time, I see glaring problems in his apologetics, and the teaching style and approach of John Martignoni. One can be sincere in one's beliefs, and still be sincerely wrong. It's because of this that this article has been written. Please don't take the observations and comments contained in this writing out of context. They're not intended as a personal attack on John Martignoni, or his ministry.

John has worked for several years as a Catholic apologist through his ministry, the Bible Christian Society. He appears dedicated to defending the Catholic religion, and the Catholic Church. To his credit, Martignoni has built quite a following, spreading his views on faith and truth to thousands by radio, audio productions, and print media. He's become a well-known defender of the Catholic faith, and there are thousands who listen to him everyday. It's a good bet that most of them believe what he teaches. Some of what Mr. Martignoni presents to his audience is the truth, but unfortunately, a lot of it is not. Martignoni is very often weak in his assessment of what truth really is, and his approach to the Scriptures is often lacking essential elements for a proper understanding of God's Word. It sometimes appears as if his ministry is built upon sound bites, and catch phrases he's heard along the way. I say this not only because I disagree with much of what he teaches, but also because I disagree with the way he teaches. I've come to question the strategies and techniques he uses to make his case for the Catholic religion, and what he calls his defense of the Catholic faith. I think it can be shown that since his teaching methods are faulty, and his approach is questionable, it then follows that what he's teaching is, at the very least, undependable.

John Martignoni tries to convince others that what he sets forth as being true about God and faith is not only true, but is also independently and verifiably true. This is commendable. Independent verification is a necessary

component for defending the faith, no matter who you are. While faith plays the leading role in the search for a real relationship with God, that faith can be weakened, undermined, and even destroyed if it's not supported by a strong, logical, and demonstrable foundation of truth. As defenders of our faith, blind faith is not appropriate, and won't make a convincing case to anyone.

In order to be an effective witness to the truth claims that are presented in the Bible or the Church (or anywhere else for that matter), one must be able to show that those claims, whatever they may be, stand outside of that particular person's or entity's opinion and influence. In other words, it's not enough to claim that something is true, and then try to mount a convincing case by shouting it's true because the Catholic Church says so, or it's true because the Bible says so! That approach often makes for lively argument, but rarely causes a person to dig further into the truth claims of God, and almost never convinces anyone of anything. In fact such an approach often drives seekers and non-believers alike in the opposite direction; leaving their questions at the feet of the one they consider being either "brainwashed" by their religion, or just plain crazy. I could claim the moon is indeed made of cheese, but unless I can demonstrate that fact empirically, or by way of overwhelming evidence that exists beyond my personal statement and opinion, my claim doesn't carry much weight. God is aware of this, and He has built into His word (the Bible) the necessary elements to verify its validity, and enforce its various truth claims regardless of how one might feel about those claims.

In today's spiritually bankrupt world, the Christian apologist faces the very real and difficult task of presenting the truth claims of God in a credible and authentic way. Today's culture is caught up in, and influenced by, strong and persistent attacks from the media, academia, cultural and sociological trends, and even some faith groups and once credible religions that have turned away from God. This is one of the areas where Martignoni fails in his apologetic defense of his faith. He often turns not to the Bible, but to the Catholic Catechism, or early church fathers, or opinions of contemporary Catholic teachers to make his case. While taking advantage of outside resources to prove a point may sometimes be appropriate, it never makes sense to use resources that claim their authority to be on par, or superior to the authority of the Scriptures, while having no way to objectively make that case. While it's obvious that Martignoni believes in the authority of his Church, others may not.

Sources

There are normally two main sources John Martignoni uses to get his various points across to his listeners and readers. The first is the Roman Catholic Church itself. In the Catholic Church, we find the core of Martignoni's belief system. This is expected because, after all, John is a Roman Catholic. The other source of truth John turns to is the Bible, and rightfully so. If one is to be an effective Christian apologist, it stands to reason that the Bible would be key in forming a good Christian defense to any attack made against Christianity. The question then becomes – does either source trump the other, or are they on par with each other? In other words, where does Mr. Martignoni ultimately turn for his truth? If he claims that there is never any conflict between the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church, how can that be demonstrated effectively for the Catholic parishioner sitting in the pew during Sunday morning Mass, or the caller on his radio program who sees glaring contradictions between the Bible and the Catholic Catechism?

Martignoni's ministry is interesting in that he uses the Bible a bit more than others in his same position do. Traditionally, Catholic apologists who use Scripture have been hard to come by. Today's well-known defenders of the Catholic faith like Scott Hahn, and Jimmy Akin have similar ministries, but they too ultimately rely heavily on Catholic teaching to form their worldview, and make their defense of their faith. Again, this is fine, as long as the truth they attempt to pull out of other documents doesn't conflict with the Holy Scriptures. Most Catholic teaching is not independently verifiable, and thus should take a secondary stand the Scriptures. What I mean by "independently verifiable," is that there is no evidence that presents itself independently. For example, I'm not aware of any Catholic Pope in history that has uttered a prophecy that came true hundreds of years later. We do see in Scripture however many prophetic writings that have. We find over three hundred on the person of Jesus alone. We even see where God tells us that He will do just that so that we will believe. We have independent verification with Holy Scripture that is found in no other book or writings.

Mr. Martignoni has taken on a very difficult task by trying to form his apologetic defense for his faith around these two sources. The Bible and the Roman Catholic Catechism are often at odds with each other. It's likely John would deny this (in fact he does deny it in his # 96 issue of Apologetics for the Masses newsletter), because if he thought it were true, I'm sure he would never try to reconcile the two. However, it can be easily demonstrated that the Bible and the Catholic Catechism are often in disagreement. For instance, Catholics are taught that Mary was sinless all of her life. We find this teaching in the Catholic Catechism.¹ Yet we also see that

if we turn to the Bible, a much different story is portrayed. We find in the Bible the following statements:

All who have ever been born except Jesus Himself inherited sin and death.ⁱⁱ

All persons have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

No one is righteous, or understands, or seeks after God. All have turned aside.^{iv}

And Jesus Himself tells us “No one is good except God alone.”^v

According to the Bible, Mary (along with all of mankind) sinned and falls short of the glory of God. She was not *intrinsically* good. All of this is because the Bible views sin as a condition that has befallen mankind – all of it. Sin is not something that we can avoid; we all are affected by sin as an unavoidable condition. Let me make clear that I understand we are to respect Mary, love Mary, and know that she was blessed by God as He covered her with his grace. However it’s also clear from the Scriptures, in the actions of the Apostles, the behavior of Jesus, and the statements of Mary herself that she was not sinless. It’s clear that there were many who were extended God’s grace in the past, but none are given the honor that Mary is given by the Catholic Church. It should be noted that the Roman Catholic Church did not proclaim Mary’s alleged sinless state as dogma until A.D. 1547. For over 1500 years, Roman Catholics did not officially believe, nor were they taught that Mary was sinless. If Catholics living in that time knew of today’s Catholic teachings on Mary’s sinless life, they would most certainly be horrified.

This example is one of many that raise an extreme difficulty for John Martignoni and his apologetic teaching, because he must reconcile the differences between what the Catholic Church teaches, and what the Bible tells us. It's well known that the Catholic Church has come up with answers to problems such as the sinless life of Mary, but merely providing an answer isn't enough. It must be the right answer. This is where independent and objective study, by way of a sound Christian apologetic method pays off. For instance, if it can be shown from the pages of the Bible that Mary was sinless, and that she was thought of as sinless during her lifetime by Jesus and others, then that would be credible evidence for that claim. The problem of trying to reconcile many of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and the teachings found in the Bible surfaces time and again for Martignoni, and it's quite possibly the most serious obstacle to his ministry and teaching.

Let me state that the claim that there are disagreements found between the Bible and Catholic teaching are strongly denied by Martignoni. He claims there are explanations for these apparent disagreements. I agree that there are indeed explanations given by Martignoni, but are they good explanations? Are they true? One of the core foundations of credible Christian apologetics is that there is no need to twist and turn a Scripture that appears to be clear on its face. One must not bend Scripture to fit one's worldview. Usually the most obvious and plain answer is the right answer.

In a newsletter the Bible Christian Society released to the public (Apologetics for the Masses, Two Minute Apologetics), Martignoni states "There is nothing in the Bible contrary to the Catholic faith, and there is nothing in the Catholic faith contrary to anything in the Bible..." The upside to this statement is that he also commented "When I teach the word, I teach so that others will search it out for themselves... Even if all my teachings were right on, I would have then trained up people to not think for themselves, but to follow a man." I agree with John when he writes that it's not correct to follow a man, and that it's important to think for one's self. I disagree with him when he states that there's nothing in the Catholic faith that is contrary to what the Bible teaches. We've already seen that's not the case.

Evidence

We've looked at one of the root causes of the breakdown in Martignoni's teaching. While there are several reasons why his teaching is often unconvincing, the most obvious has to be his unwillingness to put his arguments to the test by way of objective and verifiable evidence; evidence that stands outside the claims of the

Church, and even the Bible. Simply saying “look what the Catechism says” isn’t good enough for most thinking people. We are given an example of this in the Bible when Paul realized this truth, and he commends the Bereans for testing everything he was teaching by opening the Scriptures and verifying his claims. Testing is good, and is not a sign of being unfaithful. God Himself encourages us to test all things to show ourselves that we are not following blindly. As stated, one form of evidence He has been so gracious to give us is predictive prophecy.

In the Catholic Bible (Douay-Rheims) we find “The things that were first, behold they are come: and new things do I declare: before they spring forth, I will make you head them.” (Isaiah 42:9). The same goes for the Catechism, and the documented teachings of the early church fathers. When we read the early writings from great thinkers like Aquinas, Luther, Augustine, and Clement (among others) we see the reflections and opinions of men. While these men may have had great perspective on God and His Church, they were still men; afflicted with sin, and subject to misunderstanding and mistakes, just as Moses, Abraham, David, and other great men of God were. The Bible is quite open with this fact, and documents how even some of the Apostles were given to misunderstanding. It’s recorded that after several years of walking personally with Jesus and studying His teachings, the Apostles were at a loss at the time of His death. They assumed He would rise up, and establish His kingdom right then. They appeared to be ignorant of the necessary sacrificial element contained in the crucifixion of Jesus, even though they walked with Him for years. While it’s often helpful to look to the early Church fathers for insight, it’s not good apologetics to allow their opinions and writings to “trump” Scripture. Unfortunately, all too often we see where Martignoni has ultimately turned to the teachings of the Church and early Church fathers, even when their opinions conflict with the Scriptures.

The Christian apologist should use objective evidence to add credibility to his or her truth claims. If one must turn to the teachings of the Catholic Church to provide the “final say” in matters of faith, that person may be merely stating that he or she believes in the teachings of the Catholic Church and nothing more. It must be understood that such an approach is not so much an effective defense for the truth claims of God, as it is a “this is what the Church believes, so I do too” approach. It assumes the Church is infallible in its teaching simply because it’s the Catholic Church. While this is a given for Martignoni and many Catholics, it’s not a given for the non-believer, the questioning Catholic, or the honest seeker. Martignoni’s selective “turning a blind eye” approach with regard to objective evidence places his apologetic ministry into question. If all he was trying to do was explain to the world what Catholics believe, this might be acceptable, but Martignoni claims that his mission

is to equip Catholics with the ability to defend and teach their faith using a good, sound, apologetic approach. The teachings of John Martignoni will leave the average Catholic defenseless against a well-informed Christian in any honest debate with a Christian who knows the Bible.

Objective evidence for the truth claims of Christianity is easily obtainable by any honest seeker of the truth. Evidence is found in the ancient manuscripts, in archeology, predictive prophecy, and in statistical analysis. All of these types of evidence are objective, verifiable, and available to Martignoni, and anyone else. I can't say that Martignoni has never made use of these types of evidences, but it's clear from his public teaching and the BCS website that these critical apologetic tools are rarely if ever used.

Christian Apologist, or Just Church Advocate?

It seems at times that John Martignoni, while claiming to be a teacher of the truth of the Catholic Church by way of a reasoned, objective apologetic defense, is really most often not much more than an advocate for Catholic Church doctrine. While there's nothing wrong with this, it's a little disappointing to find that the effectiveness of a good apologetic defense of Christian truth is rarely if ever given by him, even though he claims to be teaching Catholic/Christian apologetics. If you look at John's listing of debates on his website (<http://www.biblechristiansociety.com>), you'll see that most of his teaching is really no more than a sounding board for the Catholic Church. Rarely do we see a real argument backed by a solid Christian defense. Most Catholics can get that type of teaching at their local church, or from one or more of the millions of books and other published materials that can be found anywhere today. It's Martignoni's insistence that he's an apologist, or one that presents a reasoned defense for one's faith that is in question. As stated earlier, anyone can say "This is true because the Bible says so." or "The Catholic Catechism says it, I believe it, and so should you!" It takes more than that to make a convincing argument.

What we often see from Mr. Martignoni as he attempts to defend his faith in various debates and lectures is the assertion that his opponent (or anyone who disagrees with the doctrines and dogmas of the Catholic Church) simply doesn't understand what the Catholic Church really teaches^{vi}. While I'm sure that's true in some cases, it's unlikely that most of the worthy opponents John debates are completely ignorant of Catholic Church teaching. If that were the case, they would hardly be worth debating, and yet John does debate opponents he has qualified for serious interaction in front of his audiences. The "It's a simple case of ignorance on your part" defense weakens after time, and it might be one of the reasons John doesn't engage in debates with high-level Christian apologists like William Lane Craig, or Norman Geisler.

Consistency and Clarity = Credible Apologetics

It's often difficult to make a convincing argument, especially an argument that's designed to encourage thought in heartfelt theological ideas and beliefs, if the person making the argument comes across as unclear, or inconsistent. Unfortunately, this is often the case with John Martignoni. On his website, John makes a comparison between the words "literal", and "literalist" in his booklet *Catholics and the Bible*. He explains that the literal interpretation of the Bible is the method Catholics use to discern the truth of the Scriptures, as opposed to the "Literalist" view that he says "Fundamentalists and Evangelicals" use. He says that the word "literal" is used to describe how Catholics process the truth from Scripture by pulling from it the actual meaning of what the author was trying to convey. John explains that if one were to say, "It's raining cats and dogs outside" we're not to interpret that to mean that cats and dogs are actually falling from the sky, but only that it's raining hard. He then tells us that others (presumably the "Fundamentalists and Evangelicals" he mentions in the article) interpret Scripture wrongly because they interpret Scripture in a "Literalist" fashion. Here's where the confusion starts, so bear with me. The problem is that there is no distinction between the words. They mean the same thing. They are used to describe different aspects of the word literal. The word "literal" means taking something at face value, or with the strict meaning of the word. A "Literalist" is a person who does so. The word literal is an adjective, and the word "Literalist" is a noun, but they are not distinct in meaning in the way Martignoni describes them. They each describe different aspects of the same concept. If a person interprets a passage literally, they are, at that moment, a "Literalist." In other words, a Literalist is a person who adheres to the literal representation of a statement; a person who translates text literally. Martignoni makes a distinction between the

two words that is incorrect. If a Catholic interprets a passage literally, that person is a Literalist. The same goes for a Protestant, a Mormon, or a non-believer.

Martignoni claims that Catholics should employ literal interpretation techniques, but says that means “taking into account the meaning that the author intended to convey.” Then, when explaining the doctrine of Transubstantiation (the Catholic belief that the body and blood of Jesus is actually, physically present in the Eucharist in the form of bread and wine) in the “Two Minute Apologetics” section of his website, Martignoni jumps to what he calls a Literalist position, forgetting his “interpretation to get real meaning from a passage” technique, and he then tells Catholics to do the same, in favor of the “Literalist” method he advises against in his other writings; disregarding his teaching that Catholics should interpret Scripture by taking into account what the author really meant, and admonishing them not to be what he calls a “Literalist” by taking what the Catholic Church teaches at face value. No interpretation, and no discussion, and no trying to understand what the author really meant; in other words no fanciful interpretation. He even goes as far as to say that he doesn’t know why Protestants don’t believe that Jesus’ flesh and blood are actually digested during the Eucharist. He complains that those who interpret the Bible in what he calls the “Literalist” sense interpret Scripture wrongly with a “that’s what it says, that’s what it means” perspective, but we see that the Catholic Church teaches that exact same view. Confusion pervades Martignoni’s teachings, and it makes it difficult, if not impossible to follow what he teaches.

The Explicit Requirement

One of Martignoni’s favorite tools to make a point is his instance on Scripture explicitly teaching a subject. He’s constantly insisting that in order for an idea or concept to be taught in the Bible, it must be explicitly stated. You see this approach used time and again in his writings, audio products, and in his lectures. He uses specific reference as some sort of yardstick to indicate truth. The problem of course is that there is no requirement for something to be explicitly stated in the Scriptures (or in any other document for that matter) for the subject to be taught or conveyed. For example, the word “Trinity” is never explicitly used in any Scripture verse, yet we see the concept of the Trinity clearly taught within the pages of the Bible. We also never see the Scriptures make reference to the word Bible, yet we know it exists, and we know the Scriptures teach the Word of God from its pages. It would be silly to suggest that we should not believe the Bible is real, because there’s no Scripture that explicitly says so. Yet this seems to be what Martignoni is suggesting. To go even further, we look

in vain to find a Scripture that even hints at venerating Mary. Never the less we see Martignoni defending the Catholic practice of venerating Mary as if there were Scriptures directed us to do so. Should Roman Catholics stop the practice of highly honoring Mary since we can find no Scripture that explicitly directs us to? I think John Martignoni would say no. Holding others to a standard you're not ready to adhere to yourself makes for a poor apologetic.

Beat 'em-up.

I think it's fair to say that of all the belief systems on earth, John Martignoni favors leaning on the Protestant faith the most. Possibly because he realizes that more and more Catholics are turning away from Catholicism in favor of Protestant and non-denominational churches. While this is his prerogative, John loses credibility when he singles out any one faith. This is because after a time, the point is made clear that John's motives are his own, and not God's. It's difficult enough to make one's opinions and arguments known on sensitive subjects like faith, religion, and God, but to exercise ad hominem attacks is just plain wrong and ineffective. While I respect John and his opinions, and I believe he has every right to challenge those who disagree with him, I also believe those who disagree have the right to do so, and should be able to do so free of personal attack. Examples of John's anti-Protestant tone can be found in many of his recordings on tape and CD.

We also see a type of "bullying" going on. His presentations are fraught with condescending comments, and innuendo. Even so, these tactics are fairly superficial, and shouldn't stop any well-equipped Christian apologist from defending the Christian faith. A far more subtle but effective tactic that is used by Martignoni is what I call the "overwhelm offense." This technique has been used time and again by John Martignoni as he debates and rebuts various persons through his newsletter emails. A particularly good example of this is in his Apologetics for the Masses newsletter series exchange with Pastor Matt Johnson. (Issues 32 – 38.) By the end of the series, Martignoni had successfully shutdown Johnson, not by using a good, sound argument based on a good Christian apologetic, but by insisting that Johnson answer 42 questions that Martignoni drummed up to make his point. He insisted that Mr. Johnson answer "yes or no" to each question first, along with Scriptural reference for the questions specific to Scripture, and then the other questions with simple "one or two" word answers should Mr. Johnson choose to expound. Incredible! We see that Martignoni first overwhelms Johnson with so much work, that no reasonable person would attempt such a silly assignment. Second, we see

Martignoni restrict Johnson's responses to such a degree that the questions simply can't be answered properly with "yes", or "no" answers – effectively setting Johnson up for failure. Because Martignoni has the pulpit, and he controls the forum, Johnson has no choice but to drop off and discontinue the exchange. It's almost certain that to many of Martignoni's followers, it looked like Martignoni won. However, a little reflection reveals that John's methods are nothing more than discrediting techniques designed to end the dialog, rather than continue it to reveal anything substantial. Martignoni has used this "beat-em-up" technique many times with a good deal of success. He's even tried it on me.

Summary

While it's apparent that John Martignoni means well, it seems clear that his teaching methods are not so much given to a well balanced defense of the Christian faith through independent reflection and objective evidence, as they are given to a dogmatic Catholic preaching approach. This is fine. Mr. Martignoni has every right to practice what he believes to be good, sound teaching practices, and to teach what he believes to be true. However, the Bible calls us to defend the faith, and to that end, the Bible itself provides us with the awesome tools to do so. We need go no further. In fact, to look elsewhere for ultimate truth is asking for problems.

Nowhere in the Roman Catholic Catechism, or in any other official documents of the Catholic Church do we find predicted future events that have played out exactly as written hundreds, if not thousands of years later. We find this apologetic tool within the pages of Scripture, not within the Catholic Church's documents. We essentially see God's fingerprint upon His work. God has put His authoritative stamp on the Holy Scriptures only. We find no supernatural stamp of authority on the Catholic Catechism, no such evidence on the official writings of the various Popes throughout history, and no such evidence on the rituals that have been instituted by the Roman Catholic Magisterium. What we do see is opinion of the Church on what the Bible actually says. This is not evidence - it's interpretation. One must first believe in the Catholic leadership for it to have any real meaning. Presenting it as evidence of truth makes for a poor apologetic when ministering to those who don't believe, or when witnessing to those who have never heard the gospel, and have no reason to take what the Catholic Church says as being true.

When defending the faith, we have at our disposal many tools and evidences that present the most reasonable and effective ways to engage in Christian apologetics. Manuscript evidence, archeological evidence, predictive prophecy, and statistical evidence can be easily found. There is no need to conflict with the Bible or

any of its teachings, and there's no need or warrant to use other sources of information over the Scriptures. If we do it's just bad apologetics, and it's not Biblical. There's no way to reconcile using any other source of ultimate truth other than the Bible.

When closely examined, John Martignoni's ministry is based not on objective evidence for the Christian faith, nor is it based entirely on the truth of the Word of God. It's based on heart condition. The problem he faces is not a problem of finding the truth by way of logical deduction or well-reasoned argument from the Scriptures, which God has encouraged us to engage in.^{vii} The problem is one of individual spiritual heart condition. This problem exists not only for John, but for the Jehovah's Witness, the Mormon, and other religions that insist on appealing to other writings besides the Bible for truth. I'm not equating the Catholic faith with the cults, or with any other religion, except for the one similarity of using another source of truth besides God's word. When we do that, we find often encounter friction. The Jehovah's Witnesses deal with the friction by re-writing Scripture. The Mormon's deal with the friction by creating completely new Scripture that they call the Book of Mormon, and Pearl of Great Price, and finally the Catholic Church (while being closer to the truth than the others) has offered the Roman Catholic Catechism as added truth to know God. Keep in mind that I'm not saying that truth can't be found elsewhere, but ultimate truth is found in the Bible alone, and if any other truth claim counters it, it should be dismissed as being false.

It's become clear to me over the years after conversing with many Catholics and debating them as well, that many don't know what a good apologetic defense of the faith looks like. The same can be said for many Protestants, and others who call themselves Christian. It's my opinion that John Martignoni is not helping in this regard. Giving Catholics recurring Catholic doctrine is fine, but it does little to equip them for the challenges and difficulties they will most certainly face when witnessing to non-Catholics.

- i *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*: 508
- ii *The Holy Bible*: Romans 5:12
- iii *The Holy Bible*: Romans 3:23
- iv *The Holy Bible*: Romans 3: 10-12
- v *The Holy Bible*: Luke 18:19
- vi *Apologetics for the Masses*: #17, #23, #28, #32
- vii *The Holy Bible*: Isaiah 1:18