



Confessions of a theologian

This article began as a question for Google: *What does it take to be a theologian?* Several weeks before, I had interviewed the subject of this article: one of West Michigan's most respected theologians, Robert Marko, Ph.D., Fulbright Scholar and chair of Aquinas College's Department of Theology.

>> Marko engages students in conversation about the day's liturgical texts during English summer school in 2007 in the village of Strilky, located in the Carpathian Mountains in the Ukraine, during his first visit there.



“ Love takes up where knowledge leaves off. ” – St. Thomas Aquinas

Now it was time to write; at 10:30 p.m. My yellow notepad was etched with scribbles only a pharmacist could appreciate. A morning deadline loomed.

I needed inspiration, so I turned to Google; up popped about 321,000 results in 0.21 seconds. The top three:

- *Harvard Theologian Discusses “Scandalous” New Take on Jesus*
- *What Does the Pope-Theologian Teach? First of All, the Truth*
- *Obama’s Theologian*

Put quote marks around the question and the field significantly narrows. *Crisis Theologian and Developing Theological Eyes*, to list a couple.

Either way, the search seemed...overwhelming. Whom do you trust for answers nowadays?

And then I wondered, somewhat guiltily: *Nowadays for answers (or inspiration), do we turn to Google more than to God?*

For those who haven't hopped online, Google is the ubiquitous and somewhat-addicting “search engine” that trolls the Internet for information at the biddings of its billions of users. Type in a word or phrase; it finds what you're looking for - sort of.

My question about “what does it take” wasn't about the kind of education required to become a theologian; rather, it was to satisfy a curiosity about what kind of chutzpah or humility would yield a “professional ponderer” of life's most compelling questions?

- *Who made us?*
- *Who is God?*
- *Why did God make us?*

To ask out loud what every human thinks – *What's the point?* – and to provide us with some answers. For those who haven't had the experience of Catholic life pre-Vatican II, those questions are straight from page one of the *Baltimore Catechism*, the standard for Catholic doctrine taught in Catholic schools across North America from the 1800s to the mid-1960s. If the name of the book isn't familiar, ask your parents about it, or your priest (or, gosh, Google it).

The quintessential professor

As I drove through Aquinas' gorgeous leafy campus to Holmdene Hall for that late spring interview, I anticipated brick walls and creaky wood floors; an office stuffed with books and papers and notepads and a warm and wise Harry Potter-ish professor with a white beard.

Check, check and check.

I loved the oldness of everything a venerable old building, musty old books, an old-fashioned in-person interview. You thought I was going to say "the crusty old professor"?! – Dr. Marko is anything but. In fact, I think his brain runs marathons. He honed in on my Dutch heritage about one second after I entered the room. Like a Google search engine, he had retrieved in 5.7 seconds, from a crammed bookshelf, a Dutch Catholic catechism. Actually, two catechisms: a Blue edition and a Red edition. "The Red one's spicier," he said.

Dr. Marko's heritage is part Irish – which accounts for the twinkle I caught when he said the Red was spicier – and part Slavic – which accounts, in part, for his interest in Eastern Christianity.

This interest led him to develop an expertise in all things Eastern. This expertise resulted in a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship in 2008 in Ukraine which is situated in the south eastern part of Central Europe. There, he served as a scholar in religious studies, researching the relationship of religion, ethics and society. He also taught Catholic Social Teaching: Eastern Christian Perspective for the Licentiate of Sacred Theology degree at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv.

Wow! A Westerner teaching Eastern Christian students about Eastern Christian social ethics. That's kind of like an English-speaking person teaching German to a German. And then I looked at it this way: It's not always about content – it's also about context.

"We each bring our own reality to share," Marko said. "The key is in how we share it."

This is, in some ways, how he views Catholicism.

"It's more than just a set of teachings; the church offers a way of seeing and experiencing reality – a way that can be counter-cultural," Marko said. "This is not to say we are better than those who are not Catholic – but it is our reality – and we should appreciate the genius of our faith. It is a gift from God."

Makings of a theologian

Let's hop back across the Atlantic for a moment, back in time about 60 years, to the 1950s in Braddock, Pa., a steel town of about 20,000. This is the childhood home of Robert Marko. Dad works in the mills. Mom raises the kids. Either you're a Pittsburgh Steelers fan or not a fan at all. This is a town with heart and soul. But the town is on the brink of losing its heart and soul with the collapse of the U.S. steel industry in the decades to come.

Dr. Marko's favorite ...

- >> **Traditional theologians:** Desert Fathers and Mothers
- >> **Contemporary theologians:** Pope Benedict XVI, Vigen Guroian and Flannery O'Connor
- >> **Catholic hero:** Dorothy Day: "Feisty, loved the church, didn't pretend to be a saint, but paid a price for her faith."
- >> **Book currently reading:** *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* by Father Patrick Desbois



>> Marko with students in his classroom at Aquinas

Braddock ultimately would lose 90 percent of its population. Education was one way out of a town with diminishing returns.

Dr. Marko was raised Roman Catholic and schooled beginning at age 6 by the Dominican Sisters of St. Mary's of the Springs, Ohio (the sisters who founded Ohio Dominican University). These early underpinnings steered him toward his career as a Catholic theologian.

"I was very blessed that the church's school system educated me," he said. "Being an athlete or being educated was your ticket to a better life."

Like most Catholics raised in that era, he memorized all the questions and answers in the *Baltimore Catechism* – and he can still

recite them.

“The *Catechism* gave systematic theology – simple instruction – to an immigrant church in America,” Marko said.

He grew older and probed deeper into theology, history and the human experience. He earned a bachelor’s degree in history from Duquesne University, a master’s degree in history from the University of Pittsburgh and another master’s and then a doctorate from Duquesne, specializing in Roman Catholic systematics with emphasis in moral theology and Catholic social teaching.

“It wasn’t about a faith crisis,” Marko said. “I just wanted to learn more. I never intended to teach theology, as I was trained in history, but I had several minors (common at the time) in philosophy, theology and even French, although I could not order water in a French café.”

His first teaching job was at Bishop Boyle High School in Homestead, Pa. where he taught religion as a layman without any teaching certificate or a degree in the discipline.

“I learned theology because I had to teach it,” he said.

He earned a master’s degree in theology and then was encouraged by Sister Mary Evelyn Hannan, CSJ, of the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh to pursue a doctorate, as he was teaching both secondary students and catechists there.

“As a married layman, husband and father, I pursued a Ph.D. in theology as I taught full-time and also trained catechists. It was – as I probably was – insane. I could never do it again,” Marko said. “Recalling Henri Nouwen’s quotation, ‘my interruptions became my life.’”

Marko’s interests are quite eclectic. He has been a National Science Fellow in urban education, a Scaife-Mellon Fellow in international studies and a National Endowment for the

Humanities Fellow in justified war and nonviolence. He was chosen to be part of Calvin College’s Summer 2009 Christian Scholar Seminar on genocide and religion.

As part of his life journey, he met and married Faith Staymates. Together they have three children:

Jonathan, now clerk to Michigan Supreme Court Chief Justice Marilyn Kelly; and Joshua and Hannah, Aquinas College undergraduates.

He was introduced to his wife, who served as director of religious education for a Pittsburgh



>> The historic city of L’viv, in the Ukraine. The city celebrated its 750th anniversary in 2006.

parish, by his friend and Faith’s cousin, Father David Schorr, when he spoke on Catholics and military service to a youth group.

Marko began teaching at Aquinas in 1989 and became chair of the theology department in 2004. Along the way, he learned from those he taught. One student, in particular, would renew his interest in Eastern churches. The student had become a Ukrainian Greek Catholic deacon. Because of

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his student, Marko started attending services at St. Michael’s Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on Grand Rapids’ west side, in addition to Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, where he and his wife are parishioners.

“The East and West churches complement each other. The East has such a profound sense of liturgy and spirituality, less so a systematic theology; the West is about universality, inclusion. Both are needed,” he said.

He immersed himself in the Eastern Church, eventually becoming a passionate advocate for a deeper understanding of the riches of the Christian East by those in the West.

Many Catholics often confuse Eastern Christianity with Eastern Orthodoxy. Here is how Marko explains it:

“There is one church currently in schism because different parts of that one church split from communion with each other in 431, 451 and 1054. The Eastern Catholic Churches refer, in almost all cases, to those who restored communion with the Bishop of Rome. The full restoration of communion between Rome and the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Assyrian Churches of the



>> Statue of Blessed Virgin Mary in the center city of L’viv. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Western Ukrainians ripped down statues of Lenin and put up statues of Mary.

Online resources on Eastern Catholicism:

>> The homepage of CNEWA, a papal agency for pastoral and humanitarian support, provides a link to resources,

including the magazine ONE and the full text of Paulist Father Ronald Roberson's outstanding *Eastern Christian Churches: A Brief Survey*. Go to cnewa.org/home-us.aspx.

>> The Vatican Web site provides a link to Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter on the Eastern Catholic Churches, *Oriente Lumen*; Vatican II's decree on Eastern Catholic Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*; and other

official texts. Go to vatican.va and type in: 'Eastern Catholic.'

>> An unofficial Web site of the Byzantine Catholic Church provides access to all Eastern Churches. Go to byzcath.org/

>> For some useful personal resources, such as books, music and video, visit stjosaphateparchy.org/Store.html

East never occurred. Unfortunately, after failed attempts at reconciliation, only parts of those rich churches returned to communion with Rome. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the largest of the Eastern Catholic Churches, with more than 5 million members, restored full communion in 1596 at the Union of Brest."

Marko's Slavic heritage and fascination with the Eastern Church and its culture pulled him to Ukraine in the summer of 2007, where he volunteered as an English language instructor. While there, he met the well-known historian Jaroslav Hrytsak, who suggested that he apply for a Fulbright Scholarship. Established in 1946, the Fulbright Program aims to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries through the exchange of persons, knowledge and skills (per the official Web site). Marko applied and was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship that winter. It was no small feat. The Fulbright Program is one of the most prestigious awards worldwide and counts Nobel Prize winners among its alumni.

"I must confess that I was humbled, with good reason, to receive a Fulbright. As a history student, I recalled the old line of President Truman calling Senator J. William Fulbright, for whom the award is named, 'Senator Half Bright,' and thus I qualified," he quipped.

To die for one's faith

Most of Marko's five months in the Ukraine involved teaching and research. He also served as the "house father" of a group of students. He learned more of the Ukrainian language and enjoyed the "less is more" way of life of his students.

One of his most profound experiences occurred on a pilgrimage to the burial site of martyrs who had died for their faith as recently as the 1940s.

"I felt a sense of awe, a sense of what is important," Marko said. "These martyrs were faithful to the Gospel and the church, not to the Soviet state and a godless culture."

Another profound experience was visiting the city of Sumy on the Russian Federation border where, accompanied by one of his housemates, Volodymyr Kolotovchenko, he stayed with a family of Russian, Ukrainian and African orphans and volunteered at a soup kitchen run by the local Roman Catholic Church.

"We lived social doctrine experience in the Roman Catholic parish where the priest celebrated liturgy in

Polish, Ukrainian and Russian, and Nigerian graduate students read the Gospel in English," he said. "It affirmed for me the importance of the universality of the church to which the See of Peter witnesses. The oneness of the Catholic Church enriches the particular Eastern Churches



>> Marko speaking to students on the theology campus stairway at Aquinas in Fall 2008.

that gift us with their enculturation of the Gospel."

This experience and his study of Eastern Christianity affirmed a long-held belief – a plea to not splinter spirituality, doctrine, liturgy and ethics.

I asked him to explain what he meant by this.

He said, "I can't think theologically unless I live ethically. I can't live ethically unless I live spiritually. I can't live spiritually unless I pray. The Eastern Church defines a theologian as 'one who prays.' I agree with this. I can't understand God, know him, without having a relationship with him. That relationship comes through prayer. It comes through participation in the liturgy, which helps us to further understand and experience our faith. You can't 'think' yourself into having faith. It is a gift – a gift, to be sure, you can pray for."

I had my answer to *What does it take to be a theologian?* The courage to simply ask God for the grace of faith. That's a search Google can't deliver. Grace.

Everything else falls into place. ☩