

# Retronym

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*Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born anew"—Jn 3:7*

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What do regular coffee, acoustic guitars, and black-and-white television have in common? All are what a New York Times journalist in the 1980's calls "retronyms." A retronym is words or phrases created because a familiar word must be renamed after something similar but newer has come into being.

For example, not too long ago all coffee was regular. But now we have decaf, lattes, Frappuccino's so you have to say regular coffee. For a few thousand years, all guitars were acoustic, until less than 100 years ago, so that now we have electric guitars and acoustic guitars instead of just guitars. And of course, all TVs were black and white until about the 1950s, when color technology was born. So as society progresses, we come up with a growing list of these retronyms, renaming something when something similar but newer has come into being.

This perhaps isn't surprising in a society rapidly changing through modern technology and science, but we might be surprised to observe the same process in our understanding of God through history, the scriptures and the church. In today's assigned reading, Nicodemus reveals how Jesus was the ultimate "retronym" in the history of mankind. Before Jesus' coming to Earth, God was simply God. After Jesus, however, God had to be referred to with new terms. What do you mean God? Do you mean God the Father, God the Son or God the Holy Spirit? Do you mean God the Father who created all things under heaven and earth for us, or God the Son who became man to live, die and save us, or God the Spirit who now dwells within us, inspiring us with sacred breath? The familiar understanding of who God was had to be renamed to encompass something new that was revealed to humanity.

Jesus was not only a "retronym" so that God would forever be 'renamed.' All of creation and life on Earth thereafter needed renaming; we his creatures were no longer simply creatures, and our life on earth wasn't all of life. This revolution in what our life is since the coming of Jesus, is amazingly captured in today's Gospel reading, the famous dialogue between Jesus and an inquiring man named Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you," says Jesus, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew." (Jn 3:3)

Nicodemus, like any of us, was not able to grasp the concept of a second birth, a new life in Christ. He is understandably stuck on the fact that you are born once and you live once, what is this guy talking about? "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asks Jesus. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (v.4). Jesus further explained the difference between being born of the flesh and being born of the Spirit, then concluded, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew'" (v.7).

Nicodemus, a teacher of the old covenant could never have imagined God's new plan in Christ. Much as someone picking coffee off a tree in Northern Africa in the 12th century could have imagined Starbucks. Like no one playing the lute in Ancient Greece could have ever imagined Jimmy Hendrix on electric guitar. Like no one watching gladiators in a Roman coliseum would imagine a 60 inch screen broadcasting their sport in their home. These are amazing things, yet these are simply human innovations. Imagine the astonishment when God innovates! And this is exactly what Jesus tells Nicodemus next. "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe," says Jesus, "how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if being born again and having new life in Christ seems hard to grasp, then you have much company. It has been so since the beginning with Nicodemus and will remain so as long as the old world endures. But for 2000 years now, what was once just God in the heavens, became the God who walks alongside us in all of our humanity. Jesus, the ultimate retronym, who was like God, was God, but for mankind was and remains totally new. To know him we also must be born anew, setting aside our old words and old ways, to be taken up into the miracle of abundant life which beckons to us in this season of Jesus Easter Resurrection; now and always-amen.