

Introduction

I post a warning here before you begin to consider this material: Thinking required!

This is a book especially for those who have questions about the Catholic faith—or about life—and who want answers. On the other hand, this book might raise some questions that you never thought about asking but (hopefully) will find interesting. Please note that this is not a complete catechism of Catholic beliefs; rather it discusses Catholic beliefs and teachings that are commonly misunderstood.¹

Socrates once said that an unexamined life is not worth living.² At some point you will begin to ask yourself (if you haven't already) why you are alive, what is worth living for, what you believe about God and what you want to do with your life. Now, some people avoid considering these realities, subduing inner questions with a din of constant activity and video and audio amusements. But it is good, healthy and even important to slow down, quiet down and take time to think about the really important questions of life—and about faith. My hope is that this book will help you do just that.

If you're the type who likes to pick up a book and plow through to the end, be warned that you might find it easier to do that with a novel than with this book. This material might be easier to digest if you read just a few questions at a time and then think about the answers.

I suggest you also pray about the things you read here. Ask God to send the Holy Spirit to help you understand what you read and find the answers you need for your life. God loves you and is with you. He never turns away or ignores anyone who seeks him with a sincere heart!

Chapter One

God and Man

One of life's basic questions is, how did I get here? Indeed, why does anything (or everything) exist?

One explanation is that there is a Creator who brought everything into being. How can we find out if this is true? And if there is a Creator, what is this Creator like, and what is this Creator's relationship to the creation—and to us as part of creation?

Let's begin by looking at how people who think there is a Creator arrived at this conclusion.

Is there a God?

The first thing Christians say in their creed (their summary of essential beliefs) is, "I believe [*credo*] in God" or "in one God [*unum Deum*]." ¹ Christians believe that God is the Supreme Being, the Creator of heaven and earth and everything that is. God does not make things out of something else, as a carpenter crafts a chair out of wood. God the Creator brings all things into being out of nothing. This is not magic. God simply is the Creator, and he has the power to do this. Jesus, the Son of God, demonstrated this same divine power when he fed five thousand people with a few fish and barley loaves (see Mark 6:30–44).

Is it reasonable to believe in God?

Some people think that those who have faith in God are irrational, accepting something that doesn't make sense. Or they think that those who believe in God are escaping reality by making up the existence of an invisible, spiritual world where God rules.

Belief in God is actually very reasonable, even if science can't prove it, because God's existence explains much about reality. If we ask one of the most basic questions, "Where did everything come from?" is it more reasonable to say, "Matter just appeared out of nowhere," or, "God—who is eternal, all-powerful and supremely intelligent—created the universe"?

Many philosophers, Saint Thomas Aquinas among them, have reasoned that there must be an original cause or source of the universe that produced matter, set everything in motion and ordered the universe according to so-called laws of nature, which are simply descriptions of the ways matter, energy, time, space and so forth act and interact. This first cause of all things and designer of the universe we call God.

Beyond this are invisible realities, such as love and goodness. Where does love come from—*love* meaning the desire to do good to others unselfishly? From where do we get the sense that love is good and noble if not from God, who is love (see 1 John 4:8)?

And what about the moral sense that humans have? We consider certain things to be fair or unfair in playing a game, and we assume that it is good to play fairly and wrong to break the rules of the game. Again, where does this sense of fairness come from if not from God?

A sign is something that points to something else. The

existence of an ordered universe, the laws of nature, a universal sense that there is right and wrong (like the “law of fair play”), the beauty of the world and so on are signs that point to the existence of an author, source and creator—that is, to God.

Why can't we see God?

There are those who say they can't believe in God because they can't see him, find him with their other four senses or run a scientific experiment to prove his existence. One of the first Russian cosmonauts proudly announced when he arrived in space that God and heaven were nowhere to be found.

J.B. Philips wrote a book called *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: MacMillan, 1967). His title is an apt commentary on this type of thinking. If God is the creator of all things, what makes anyone think that he is someone we can discern with any of our five senses or by means of scientific experiment?

God belongs to an entirely different order of reality that is not material and that is beyond space and time. The term Christians use for this different type or way of being is *spirit*. God is the one unlimited, eternal, all-powerful and supreme Spirit, the source of all other spirits (such as angels) and of the whole material universe. Everything that is not God is God's creation—creatures God has brought into existence.²

Perhaps you are wondering about where Christians get this idea of “spirit.” In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus explains to a Samaritan woman that “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Also, Saint Paul taught that although God is

the supreme spirit, he is not far away but is always present to us. Paul affirms what some Greek poets wrote: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

A second way to answer the question about where we can locate or find God is to consider another aspect of God—and a most important one: the fact that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). This means that God doesn’t just love: God *is* love. God is the source of all love, just as God is the source of everything good. (More on this later!)

Christians believe that God created all things out of love, and he loves the whole creation. God created human beings out of love, and because we are capable of love, God created us to love him in return and to love each other as he loves us. Our greatest fulfillment as human beings, what makes us most like God, is the ability to love.

If God is the source of all things, what about evil? How can a God who is all-powerful, loving and all good allow evil to exist?

Since it is evident that there is evil in the world, it can seem that either (1) God is not totally good, if he is the source or cause of this evil, or (2) God is not almighty and in control of everything. But there is another option: God is all good and almighty but allows evil to exist.

At this point someone might ask for a definition of *evil*. It is true that some things that seem evil are not really so. For instance, earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters that cause human suffering are not evil in themselves. Nonetheless, there are plenty of things that are plainly evil, such as the slaughter of the innocent in war and other sufferings unjustly imposed on innocent people.

Christianity and Judaism agree on the origin of evil.

Some of God's highest creatures—angels who possessed great intelligence, power and free will—abused their freedom, acting as if they were God by setting their own standards of right and wrong and choosing to serve and to honor themselves rather than the Creator. The irony is that this took place because of God's generosity. God blessed the highest creatures with attributes that reflect his image and likeness, such as power, intelligence and free choice. Yet this very freedom allowed these creatures to attempt to take the place of God and to rebel against his goodness and love. Pride was the root of their vice.

Jews and Christians call evil that comes from the choices of free and intelligent creatures against God—and against the order God created—by a particular name: sin. This rebellion against God and against the true meaning of right and wrong (God's moral law) is doomed to failure, because only God's truth and dominion will last. Only God, who created everything and holds it in being, is the "beginning and the end" (Revelation 21:6). Ultimately no creature, power or kingdom can stand against God, even though one of these may appear for a time to succeed or even to triumph.

How do we know that good will triumph over evil?

The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, gives us a glimpse of the final battle between the angels loyal to God and the angel who initially rebelled against God, who is referred to as a dragon:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was