

Supplemental Information for
Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism
The Profession of Faith: What We Believe
To group leaders of
Christ the King Parish, Springfield, Illinois

By Deacon Al Laabs
September/October, 2009

Session 1: "The Desire for God"

Preliminary notes for year two:

Welcome back to Why Catholic? Several items should be called to your attention regarding the revised book on "What We Believe." First, I would strongly encourage you as a group leader to read the introductory material. Second, there are a few changes in formatting such as "Reflection 1 & 2" replaces the "Exploring the Catechism" sections but the impact is the same. Also please note the suggestion, and I think it is an excellent one, to have available the United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (USCCA) together with the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) available. By now, group members have invested in the CCC and I would encourage investment in USCCA also. The revised text cites both often and the USCCA offers many times a fuller explanation of key points. Certainly as a group leader you will want the USCCA as part of your "environment." Also you should note that the text does not have bold letters indicating material almost directly from the CCC, but if you read carefully and compare you'll find the CCC there. Note also that some chapters have key ideas/concepts boxed with a heading "Spotlight on..." These are worth pointing out to your group and reviewing. Expected time frame is still 1.5 hours and you'll note a large number of references to the USCCA. One group last year told me nearly at the end that they "discovered" the really extensive subject index at the back of the CCC, and it turned out to be a good resource when slightly off the topic but relevant questions arose. Let's prayerfully ask for the Spirit's presence this year as we try to develop a deeper understanding of our faith.

Suggested Environment

Note that there is a recommendation for the USCCA to be a part of each table arrangement. Since one of the directions this first chapter takes is highlighting a sense of the divine or transcendent in human experience, you may want to include a small artistic picture, a picture that captures the beauty of nature, or even a picture of a mother and child (as an image of love expressed and felt), and refer to them as highlighting this almost universal desire we humans have for beauty, the good, and love.

Lifting Our Hearts

It would be good to welcome everyone back and maybe offer a spontaneous prayer for the success of the journey this year. Certainly introduce any new members of the group since there are additions to some groups. And maybe even include in your prayer introduction the idea of praying for all the Why Catholic groups meeting this year in the diocese.

Reflection One “Seeking God”

You’ll note that many of the reflections begin with a story in the revised edition and this one in particular may awaken similar experiences we all have had with the beauty of nature or just the sense that there is something more than my immediate experience. From my own past now thirty-five years ago, I recall looking at the face of our first born when I was able to hold her, [this was in the days when fathers were not allowed in the delivery room in the small rural hospital] and thinking to myself, “surely there is a God.” Others may have had experiences close to these and encourage sharing them.

In the grey shaded box on page 2, I would encourage underlining the words at the very end: “...one’s own longing for direction, meaning and hope.” This is a very universal sentiment that is historical and real which leads mankind to almost long for the reality of what we call God. Paragraph two speaks of this desire, common to humans, of being unsatisfied and unfulfilled by so much of what is sought after or pursued. Both CCC 27 and 28 really are important to acknowledge as highlighting the universality of human religious experience and that sense of God the creator.

I think it is important to tie together the sense of our created nature reflecting back to us what we acknowledge in CCC 27 that this sense, desire for God, seems to be written deeply into our hearts. You might even call it the finger print of our creator upon us, calling us back to our origin and final fulfillment. For those of you who would like a deeper reflection on this universal human desire for God, for Truth, let me suggest the introduction to Pope John Paul II’s encyclical “Fides et Ratio,” also known as “Faith and Reason.” It can be found through [this link](#). You’ll find the Pope mentioning the universal questions of meaning that have been asked for all time by human beings.

Scripture: Pondering the Word

I think it is worthwhile to tie together the reference to the Samaritan Woman in paragraph four of this section (John 4:15) who thirsts for “living water” as part of that universal experience or desire for direction, meaning, and hope with this similar search by the merchant for a pearl of great price. Note that when we identify what is priceless to us, we take action that moves us towards this source of great value.

Matthew 13: 45-46

45

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls.

46

When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.

This section of Matthew has the “Kingdom of Heaven is like” discourse that Jesus is sharing with his disciples. The point is that whether the object we seek is a treasure buried in a field or a pearl of great price, we have this human tendency to want to embrace or acquire that which we value.

Sharing Questions

You might consider also adding a question like, “Does the yearning for more “things” lead us to a sense of satisfaction?” There is quite a lot of evidence that just having a lot of things, a lot of “toys” or possessions still leaves in most human beings some sense of spiritual emptiness and it might be good if stories of this can be shared. I think it is important to make the tie between the “my yearning for God” in the second question and a sentence in the grey box to the left of the “Sharing Questions” segment. Note the following: “This is the Church’s invitation....Her invitation is rich....the Church offers Jesus Christ and His love, the fulfillment of hope.” USCCA, pp. 6-7. As Bishop Lucas was always quick to point out, we don’t seek answers in an equation but in a person and for Christians this person is Jesus Christ—who indeed is the pearl of great value.

Reflection Two: “How do we know God?”

It might be helpful in this section to distinguish between the sense of “General Revelation” which comes through creation and the human person as next to that often called “Special Revelation” which we find in scripture. I would suggest that between the design and magnificence we humans find in our created universe and the mystery and innate qualities we possess that lead us to love and search for the infinite, beauty, and happiness that lasts, we come to appreciate a spiritual, soulful dimension in our lives that begs for something large, magnificent, and permanent that transcends our sense of mortality. George Lucas made a fortune out of a thinly veiled “theology” he created by labeling this existence the “force.”

While the Church holds we can arrive at knowledge of God through the use of human reason, I would point out that this approach has to be seen within the limitations of our language since all descriptions of God are always somewhat analogies. If we dwell too much in the anthropomorphic descriptions of God (making God in simply an exalted human image), we truly run into the challenges to faith highlighted at the bottom of page 5, namely, pain and suffering and especially that of the weak and innocent.

I only mention this because it highlights the unique nature of that “Special Revelation” we Christians are blessed with as people of the Book, people to whom this transcendent is known because our God has revealed Himself to us as personal and loving. And of course the true revelation of God and of his plan for his creation comes only through the person of his Son, Jesus Christ (CCC 50).

I think it is important to also be aware that for the last several years there has been a movement in this country, in part spurred on by fundamentalist, to have something called intelligent design taught in the schools. You have read about efforts through state boards of education to get the science curriculum in those states amended to require texts that discuss or mention the concept. This really does tie in with the very first part of this reflection in that the order and design of this complex universe seems to point to a “designer.” If the Bible isn’t welcome in the classroom, maybe the designer is in a way. This isn’t integral to this reflection but if it does come up here’s a [good link to the issue](#). While this may be or seem a bit of a tangent, it gets into what all too many people see as a fundamental conflict between faith and reason. More needs to be said about that in the section on the mystery of creation [Session Five].

Finally, from this “sense of God” or yearning of the human heart (reflecting I believe the fingerprint of our creator), I think should come a reasonableness of the testimony from creation, from our human experience, and from this gratuitous self-revealing of our God that can serve as an adequate response to the very human longing for direction, meaning, and hope (See USCCA, p. 6). Perhaps to paraphrase the “Spotlight on the Catechism” on page five, there are converging and convincing arguments that can be made from the universality of our human experience; arguments that point to how all races over recorded history seem to share a common imprint, a created template at the core of our humanity (conscience or the ability to love); arguments that stem from the way billions of human beings have lived their lives over two thousand years of history; and finally arguments that have allowed those same billions to live with a certainty that their lives have had direction, meaning, and hope, not just in this life but in something to come.

Sharing Our Faith

All of the questions in this section are worth discussing but I caution you as a group leader that the word “Tradition” has been thrown into this first session and never defined. So even though many cradle Catholics has somewhat a sense in general of what Tradition means, that first question may prompt a question in itself. Maybe the path to take would be to just focus on the three major areas, such as the created world, our innate human longings, or encounters we may have had through reading or hearing scripture.

It is also probably a given that you may have individuals, perhaps yourselves, who will talk about how their faith has gone through periods of waxing and waning, in other words, times when they were close to the practice of their faith and other times when they were a bit more distant. I have encountered this particularly with young parents who are bringing their first child in for baptism and have said things like, “Well, we need to return, rediscover, reclaim, get serious, and the list could go on. Others individuals from a time frame often in college and for some years thereafter just wander from the practice of faith. If anyone talks about this rediscovery of the “pearl of great price” later in life, it might be nice to get them to talk about what or “Who” it was changed their direction.

Living the Good News

It certainly seems that this particular opening session would point toward a much more personal, rather than group, response to highlighting or more fully appreciating or understanding the presence of this desire for God in our hearts. To that end perhaps suggesting carving out some contemplative time to explore the idea of what it is that makes me really happy would make sense. What is it that I am looking for and where do I spend my time that satisfies me? Perhaps just sitting and flicking through dozens of channels on cable with a channel changer in hand is a sign of restlessness [maybe the modern paradigm of yearning for meaning?] that begs for some contemplative self-examination.

Just a note on the prayer/mantra: the most famous Catholic mantra is probably the Jesus Prayer, also known as the Prayer of the Heart, which is of Eastern Orthodox origin. It goes “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have pity on me, a sinner.” It is mantra in form because the goal is to say this almost constantly during the day to the extent that it becomes almost a subliminal orientation. This has never been as accepted in the Western Church as it has been in the Eastern while those in the Eastern Church have often looked upon the Rosary as the Western mantra because it has some of the same characteristics; i.e. repetitive prayer while focusing on another thought—the mysteries of the Rosary.

Lifting our Hearts

You will find me encouraging each group to open up the closing to spontaneous prayer for all the variety of intentions that we always do carry in our hearts so suggest going around the room/group to ask each person present to pray for a specific intention. Be a good example and start using our CTK format: EG; For the Spirit’s presence with us this year to open our hearts to understanding and growth, let us pray to the Lord. Group response: Lord, hear our prayer.

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to allaabs@comcast.net