

RCIA CLASS 2 – OUR LONGING FOR GOD AND THE VALUE OF FAITH AND REASON

I. Man is in the image and likeness of God and finds his fulfillment in reaching toward Him.

A. What is it that makes us more glorious, fundamentally different from animals, machines, and other things of this world? What gives us our infinite value?

1. The answer begins with the fact that we were created in God's image and likeness, and receive a dignity greater than all the universe. See, e.g., Gen. 1:27; Ps. 8:4-5. Because we are in His image and likeness, we are called to a destiny of being transformed fully to receive God's glory in all its majesty as nothing less than children of God forever. See 1 John 3:1-2.

2. When the Son of God became man, Jesus Christ, He not only offered restoration to our original dignity and glory, but also elevated human nature further by joining His nature to ours and sending the Holy Spirit to guide us. See John 1:12-13; Romans 8:14-17. As the 2nd century Church father St. Irenaeus said, "The Son of God became the Son of Man: so that, by entering into communion with the work and thus receiving divine sonship, we might become a son of God." Against Heresies, Book 3, Chapter 19:1.

B. This progress towards God means seeking and living out the good, the true, the beautiful, and the holy. The things of this world give us images of the greater calling and provide hints out the fulfillment our deepest longings, but the answer is not in the world. This deeper call for the greater realm distinguishes us from animals and even more so from machines.

1. As humans, we can love the good in God, in each other and in all creation. Seeking this goodness is at the essence of the call to love, which in turn is what gives freedom its final purpose.

a. We rightfully desire freedom, but we need to understand what it is and why it is important. As Dante wrote:

*The greatest gift that God of His largesse
Made in creation, perfect even as He
Most of His substance, and to Him most dear
He gave to the will, and it was liberty.*
Paradiso V:19-21

b. But why is freedom so important? It is important so that we can love, and thus participate in the very nature of God Himself. See, e.g., 1 John 4:7. For true love is, of its nature, a free gift, freely given and freely received. This ability to love, and thus to be like God, is so central to our destiny that the two greatest commandments taught by Christ are: first love of God, and second, love of neighbor. See, e.g., Matt. 22:34-40. As St. John Paul II said in his last book "freedom is for love." Memory and Identity (2005) ch. 8.

- c. This love is not mere sentimentality, but rather shows itself in sacrifice, such as the love of a husband working for his wife, the love of a mother sacrificing for her children, the love of a scholar in pursuit of the truth, the love of a soldier fighting for his country. These loves come to their height in the love God has for us, the love shown from the Cross, which we are meant to imitate. That sacrificial love, with faith and hope, alone leads us beyond death. See 1 Cor. 13:12-13. Thus, he who would save his life must lose it. See Mark 8:35.
2. Love, however, depends upon truth, for we cannot seek and love the good if we do not know what the good is. And we cannot desire and celebrate the good of God or another person without knowing who they really are and what that is good for them and for ourselves. As St. John Paul II went on to say in Memory and Identity, “There is no freedom without truth.”
 - a. Love of our mere opinions *about* others is, in the end, self-love. Truth brings real contact. Thus, we are endowed with an intellect to know the truth. All truth finds its source in God Himself, the source of all reality. And thus to live in the truth is to be guided by God Himself. See Prov. 4:18; John 1:4-5, 8:12.
 - b. Thus, love and truth go together. As Pope Emeritus Benedict points out in paragraph 3 of his 2009 encyclical letter Caritas in Veritate, “Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love.” Truth needs love, lest it become cold; love needs truth lest it become fake.
3. The good is naturally attractive, and true beauty reflects this natural attractiveness of the truth. There is a splendor to truth, which we as humans learn more and more to perceive and express. The Psalms express this beauty of the truth as created by God. E.g., Ps. 19:8-10, 27:4.
 - St. Pope John Paul II made this point in his 1999 letter to artists, saying “In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty.” He quotes Plato, “The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful.” Thus he entitled his 1993 encyclical letter on the moral law The Splendor of Truth.
 - In his commentaries on the Psalms, C.S. Lewis reflects upon the fact that the Jews considered the Law to be beautiful; he argued that this law encompassed the order of all things, the symmetry of reality that they admired. When we see this symmetry, this fittingness of the design of God, we see true beauty. See Reflections on the Psalms (1958) chapter 6.
 - But all true beauty on this earth points beyond itself to something

greater. All deep joy reflects a greater realm that is currently beyond us, as C.S. Lewis emphasized in the first chapter of his 1955 autobiographical book Surprised by Joy. As the twentieth century French philosopher Joseph Pieper pointed out in his book on Faith, Hope and Charity, one wants the loved beauty to last forever, but on earth it cannot; there is a calling to a greater realm.

4. This desire for a greater realm our calling to the holy, to that union with God in the celestial realms. St. Paul begins most of his letters by addressing them to “the holy ones” or “the ones called to be holy.” There is, as the Vatican II Council and the Catechism says, a universal call to holiness. See Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium, the Constitution on the Church (1965) 40; Catechism 2013.

- The delight at prayer, the call to a higher realm, the soaring of the spirit to God are part of this universal call to holiness. As St. Augustine wrote in his famous autobiography Confessions, “You made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

- All people naturally desire the mystical, something beyond this earth, for religion has been a regular aspect of civilization. As the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto wrote in his 1917 book The Idea of the Holy, the desire for and sense of the holy is at the essence of religions throughout the world. Along with love, it is the source of the greatest poetry, building, and self-sacrifice in humanity. This calling can, without guidance, go terribly astray, as religious violence and cults demonstrate. But it should not be denied either; and it cannot really be destroyed. Rather, it must be guided that we may soar to the heavens.

C. The modern world thus rightly values freedom, but does not understand it well. For people usually understand freedom as merely the ability to do what one wants. Simply following desires, however, is another form of slavery, a slavery to desire that ends in death.

1. Earthly desires, in the end, come from forces beyond ourselves, such as biology, chemistry, popular trends, advertisements, and the like. If we simply live in accordance with those desires, we are slaves to those tendencies.
2. When one sins, one is letting these desires get control. As Jesus says, “Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.” John 8:34.
3. Furthermore, all such desires if not redeemed, end in death, for death claims an end of human life. See Romans 6:12-14.

D. Freedom is valuable above all else because it is a participation in God’s creative goodness. As the Vatican II Council said, “Genuine freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in humanity. People gain such dignity when, freeing themselves of all

slavery to the passions, they press forward towards their goal by freely choosing what is good.” Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) (1965) 17.

II. In order for us to know how to live in this virtue, God gives us both reason and faith, both natural learning and Revelation, whose interpretation is guided by the Church. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Heb. 11:1.

A. The virtue of faith is the first of the supernatural virtues, the center of which are: faith, hope, and charity. These virtues are supernatural both because they deal directly with our relationship with God, and because we can have them fully only by sanctifying grace. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 153.

B. These virtues are given at baptism. Thus, even an infant can have these virtues, in the sense that, as his intellect, hopes, memory, and will develop, the practice of these virtues will grow with them. Because the development of intellect, hopes, memory, and will begin in infancy, although they are not fully exercised then, these virtues are important from that time onward. By analogy, even an infant intuitively senses his parents’ love, trusts them, enjoys their presence, and desires to be with them. In a similar way, even an infant can sense God’s love, trust Him, enjoy his presence and desire to be with Him.

C. In human relationships, a natural faith is essential for any real progress.

1. Thus, for example, in dealings with material things, as fields such as science, economics, and technology, a certain skepticism is a good thing. But even there, we must also be able to trust others. Otherwise each person would have to investigate everything himself, and thus not get very far. As Aristotle once said, “He who does not believe will never learn anything.” See St. Pope John Paul II, Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason) 31 (1998.)

2. However, as Joseph Pieper points out in his book Faith, Hope and Charity, in deep human relationships (e.g., marriage, family, friendships), doubt is a limitation. It may be inevitable due to the fallibility of human nature, but we would rather it not be there. In these cases, there must be a certain level of faith, not only in the sense that one believes what the other person says, but one trusts the other person in himself and in relationship to him. And the greater the faith, the greater the love can be.

3. God and His angels and saints are completely reliable, and thus this limitation due to doubt and fallibility need not, and should not, be there. Faith is that complete trust in God that both comes from and enhances our relationship with God, and the angels and saints as well. Faith is not merely belief in propositions, but a deep trusting relationship with God Himself.

4. But we cannot have that relationship with God unless He reveals Himself to us. For we could not know what He is saying to us unless He reveals it in a clear way. Thus, He inspired authors who wrote the Bible and He guides the Church to

reveal Him and His words to us. The faith is based upon our relationship with God, who gives these sources their trustworthiness. Thus, as St. Thomas says, when we say we believe in the Bible or in the Catholic Church, we are implicitly saying that we believe in the Holy Spirit speaking through them. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 1, article 9.

5. Our relationship with others around us, and with the angels and saints, is essential to our own faith, for faith does not grow as individuals alone. But each person must still choose whether to accept and grow in the faith. As the Catechism says, "Faith is a personal act. . . . But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone." Catechism of the Catholic Church 166. The virtue of faith, in the strict sense of the term, is in God alone and, by extension, in the Bible and doctrines that He has inspired and guided. But it is lived in the context of society.

D. Faith is both certain and free. Faith combines the certainty of things we see and feel, or things we know with certainty by logic, with the freedom to accept it or not. God invites us to the faith, and it is freely given and increased through the sacraments. But a person can choose to accept it or not. See Catechism 160. If one accepts this grace, there exists and increases in the soul a divine light that gives certainty, although also a sense of wonder and mystery at entering a realm that is not seen. See Catechism 158. There is thus both a light and a darkness. God allows the mystery, the inability to perceive with complete clarity on earth, so that the faith may be our choice, and thus more meritorious. See John 20:29; Heb. 11.

E. Faith is both believing and intelligent.

1. Faith does accept truths even though the human reason alone would not arrive at them, and even if *our own exercise of* human reason would argue against them. If one rejects something that is clearly affirmed by the Bible or the Catholic faith, one is placing final faith in some other standard (e.g., empirical science, popular opinion, or some philosophy) as the final authority instead. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 5, article 3.

2. But faith, while it goes beyond reason, and may sometimes contradict what a person's reason says is more likely than not, is not at all contrary to reason. And in fact it is a conclusion of reason that reason is limited in several ways.

a. An individual, in all honesty, must admit that his own ability to reason through a problem is limited and that his own conclusions of reason could be in error. One must admit that, due to both ignorance and the tendency to believe things that are convenient, an individual's reason cannot be infallible.

b. We know that every society in human history has had blind spots, some of which are inevitable. It would be the height of arrogance to assume that modern culture has none.

c. Human reason itself is limited, especially with regard to spiritual things and things that are difficult to measure, such as love, freedom, duty, and immortal life. See St. Thomas, Summa Theologica II-II question 2 article

d. Even in science, we can measure only what we can observe and observation has many limits. Thus, if we are to know about supernatural things, trust in something above reason is essential.

3. It stands to reason, therefore, that a God who cares about human beings would reveal Himself to us and make us certain about the matters necessary to our salvation. It thus stands to reason that there is a revelation that God gives us to reveal His saving plan for us. And, if the Bible is part of that revelation, it stands to reason that He would give an authority both to settle what is in the Bible and how it is to be interpreted. Thus, in the Church, we believe in Revelation (both the Bible and Sacred Tradition from the early days) and in the Magisterium of the Church that guides interpretation of that Revelation.

- The highest level of Church teachings take the form of infallible dogmas proclaimed in one of three ways: (1) by the Popes and bishops throughout time and space; (2) by an ecumenical Church council; or (3) by the Pope defining a dogma ex cathedra, by means of papal infallibility. The first means of proclaiming teachings, called the ordinary magisterium, is the most common and preferred. Examples of such infallible dogmas are: (1) the basic teachings about the Trinity and Jesus Christ; (2) the list of books in the Bible and the inspiration of Scriptures; (3) the seven sacraments; and (4) basic moral teachings such as the affirmation of purity, the requirement of charity, and the prohibition on murder, suicide, abortion and the like.

- The Church teaches some matters (e.g., social doctrines regarding just wages or responsibility for religious education) authoritatively, but not infallibly. These doctrines are not as certain as matters of the faith, and could in principle be reformed, but the faithful should still adhere to them with religious assent of intellect and will. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 892; Lumen Gentium 25.

- The large majority of statements by popes or even Church councils are explanations of the faith, but are not themselves so much official teachings of the Church as applications of them. Such statements (e.g., a homily by the Pope or a decree of a Vatican congregation) are due respect, but are not of themselves teachings of the faith.

5. Thus, if there is a loving God and if the Bible is His revelation, the Catholic faith is thus a reasonable conclusion. One may reason to the conclusion that those propositions are most likely, but it is only by the grace of God that one

may come to the certainty of faith.

6. Faith thus is consistent with reason, but brings us beyond it. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, now with the Gospels, the simplest of handmaids can know more about God than the greatest of the pagan philosophers. St. Thomas Aquinas, Exposition on the Apostles' Creed.

7. But even here, reason assists faith by drawing conclusions from the proposition of faith. Theology is, as St. Anselm put it, "Faith seeking understanding." Our intelligent understanding of faith should increase with our intellect generally. In addition, we should be ready with an answer to those who ask for it. 1 Peter 3:15.

8. There can never be any discrepancy between the certain conclusions of faith and the certain conclusions of reason, for God is the author of both. Catechism of the Catholic Church 159.

III. Faith is given by grace, especially in baptism, and naturally leads especially to the practices of prayer, sacrifice, and a loving desire to please Him by a holy life.

A. Even before baptism, divine grace moves those who are open to the faith, especially catechumens, i.e., people who are seeking baptism. The full gift and virtue of faith, that profound relationship with God that makes us His sons and daughters and leads to a complete trust in Him, however, comes only with baptism. People who worship some aspects of God, but without knowing Christ, have the virtue of religion and a certain natural faith, but do not have not the full supernatural virtue faith. See Vatican II, Council, Nostra Aetate (Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions) (1965) 2.

B. This trusting belief in God naturally leads us to wish to pray, i.e., to be in conversation with Him, for His is the goal of all of our lives, and indeed of all of the universe. As St. Augustine so famously said at the beginning of his Confessions, "You encourage man to delight in Your praise, for You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until we rest in You." Prayer is a lifting up of one's soul, mind and body to God; it flows naturally from a sense of the presence of God.

1. Most people, Christian or not, intuitively sense a desire and obligation to pray. The Catechism, and before that, St. Thomas Aquinas, calls this instinct a part of the virtue of religion, which he allies with justice. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2096; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 85 article 1.

2. However, our prayer can only get so far without the infusion of God's grace and the knowledge that comes from faith, for our limitations prevent us from accessing the greater realm on our own.

a. Thus, God gives the faith and allows us into a prayerful union with Him. See Matt 11:25-30, John 16:12-15; Eph. 2:17-18. Prayer is thus the result of our faith and source of deeper faith; we pray because we believe

and we believe with greater fervor because we pray.

b. By giving us His name, God allows us to enter fully into His presence and communicate with Him. Thus, we generally begin our prayers, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” See Matt. 28:19.

c. Thus faith guides us so that we can enter into a relationship with the Almighty God and with His people. That guidance is one reason why the Creed we recite at Mass would begin with a Latin phrase that would literally be translated, “I believe into one God.”

C. Offering things, services and penances to God and His service as a sacrifice is natural to religions throughout time and space. See Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 85 article 1. However, with faith, we come into a relationship with God and therefore allow Him to make our sacrifices more worthy. See Ps. 51:15-19; Heb. 13:11-16.

D. Faith, at the same time, increases one’s fear of offending God, but also transforms that fear into a deep and supernatural reverence.

1. With faith, the vague, often servile, fear of offending an unknown God, or the troubling fear of death becomes instead to a filial desire not to offend the One who loves us so much and a desire to love and serve Him. See, e.g., Psalm 128:1; Is. 6:5; Acts 9:31; Luke 5:1-11. Thus, the Book of Sirach describes the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom and even as source of excitement and delight in God’s eyes, for it gives us a desire to serve the God of all glory and wonder. See Sir. 1:11-14.

2. Faith thus leads us to desire avoiding sin, but we still must choose to act upon this desire. For if we ignore the words of Christ, faith eventually dies. See, e.g., Matt. 7:24-27; James 2:26

IV. Contrary to the virtue of faith are various forms of superstition, idolatry, heresy, irreligion, voluntary doubt, and agnosticism.

A. Superstition can either take the form of flatly pagan practices (e.g., horoscopes or astrology) or pseudo-Christian practices (e.g., believing that praying a certain novena absolutely guarantees that a prayer request will be granted.) Catechism 2111.

- God may, by His grace, grant miracles or prophecies into future events. And prayers requesting miracles or other favors are meritorious, with the understanding that God may or may not grant the request. However, any attempt to connect the use of spiritual powers over material things with mere words or actions alone, to predict the future based upon the mere performing of actions or, worse still, invoking spirits on any other terms is magic or sorcery and thus gravely contrary to faith and very dangerous.

B. Idolatry can include either a direct worship of false gods (e.g., various forms of paganism or nature worship) or valuing things of the world (e.g., money, power, pleasure, popularity) above God. See Catechism 2112-2113.

- The Church does have a respect for other faiths that recognize God and His law. Thus, the Vatican II council did say that Muslims do adore with us one, merciful God and that other religions, presumably including those that have many gods often “in shadows and images seek the unknown God.” Lumen Gentium 16; see also Nostra Aetate 2-3. They do not yet have the full virtue of faith in Christ, but they have a preliminary desire open to faith; and devout Jews do have a certain preparatory faith in the true God and His promises. Through the Christian and Catholic faith, God fulfills these longings expressed in other religions. Until a person comes to this full faith, other faiths can be helpful. But once one recognizes the full truth, one should adhere to it.

C. Heresy is the deliberate denial of an article of faith.

1. Material heresy is the accidental denial of an article of faith, generally based upon ignorance of the articles of faith, or perhaps ignorance of the implications of one’s statement. It may be due to negligence or may be inculpable.

2. However, deliberately and knowingly denying an article of faith from the Bible or the Church implicitly means denying the divine inspiration of Scripture or guidance of the Church; it is, therefore, implicitly a rejection of the basis for the whole faith. See Summa Theologica II-II question 5, article 3.

D. Irreligion is a practice that tends to insult and/or undermine the faith, such as tempting God (i.e., insisting that God prove Himself in certain ways), sacrilege, blasphemy, or simony (i.e., selling of sacred things.) See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2118-2122.

E. Atheism, the denial of the existence of God, is always an error, although the atheist may not be at fault. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2125. Sometimes atheism may come from scandal caused by believers, but sometimes it comes from a desire that there be no God who makes moral demands on one. See Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes (1965) 19; Summa Theologica Part II-II question 10, article 1 and question 15, article 1. With individuals, we listen to them and in charity try to give the benefit of the doubt. But we still make clear the obligation to follow the truth, and the truth that finds its fulfillment in God.

F. Agnosticism, the view that truth about God and supernatural things cannot be known, may be simply the result of confusion but could also be “a flight from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 2128. Once again, there is a respect for the individual, but also a recognition that agnosticism keeps people from the truth.

G. A person searching for God may have doubts before having faith, and involuntary

doubts may affect even a believer, but one should not willfully create such doubts, or fail to ask God to help resolve them. See Catechism 2088. Wondering how something could be true is not the same as doubting it, for as great nineteenth century British theologian Blessed John Henry Newman wrote in his autobiography Apologia Pro Vita Sua, “Ten thousand difficulties does not make one doubt.” See Catechism 157.

H. In general, there is always a duty care about the truth, to seek the truth, and to live consistently with the truth once it is found. See Vatican II Council, Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration on Religious Liberty (1965) 1. And as Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set your free.” John 8:32