

# Asking “Catholic Questions”

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*This brief article is meant to raise awareness regarding the importance of asking good questions and of being open to the asking of good questions. Far from indicating a lack of faith, the ability to ask good questions is a presupposition to the mature “digestion” of the mysteries Christians proclaim to believe in the Nicene Creed.*

*The “nones” referred to in this article, are defined as those with no religious affiliation.*

## **Steps Recognizing the Value of Questions**

One of the greatest anomalies that I face in the college classroom is the hardened unwillingness and inability of students to ask questions. My students have been so conditioned to be afraid of asking questions that they tend to think the BEST way to conclude any kind of reading is with “I don’t have any questions.” They think that to say this communicates that they have understood everything they read and that they are in good shape “for the test.”

We have become accustomed to thinking that questions reveal ignorance or stupidity. As a result, we have been conditioned to AVOID asking questions in favor of looking for the right answers. Contrary to this deeply ingrained conditioning, it is important that each one receive this message: **it is the inability to ask questions that reveals ignorance.** When a person concludes the reading of a difficult or complicated text with the statement that they have no questions, they reveal that they have NOT engaged the text at all. Rather, they have “merely read it”

and “consumed” what it had to say without digesting what it had to say. In other words, they reveal that they have learned nothing. They might have “consumed” bits of information that they can repeat, but what good do these bits of information do, even if they are the “right answers,” if they are asking the “wrong questions?”

## **Probing Dogmatic Mysteries**

Questions are to intellectual learning what chewing is to eating. We would never try to eat a steak or any other kind of food without chewing it first; and yet we habitually place ourselves before counter-intuitive truths (like the Incarnation, our Redemption by Jesus’ death and resurrection and the Trinity) without questions and then wonder at the consequent spiritual / intellectual indigestion. On the one hand, youth feel that it is “wrong” to ask questions about these counter-intuitive truths because somehow, they have absorbed the message that to ask a question means that they will be understood to be on the verge of rejecting the truth they are asking about. On the other hand,

no one, beginning with St. Paul and St. Augustine, has grown in any understanding of these counter-intuitive truths without having asked many questions about them. While it might be true that the Scholastic theological method is not as comprehensible as in the past because of its emphasis on definitions as points of departure, the *heart* of this method is the asking of questions, and *this* still speaks to the human person.

## **Marrying Faith and Reason**

The Catholic Church’s commitment to the marriage of faith and reason indicates that at the level of principle, the Catholic Church welcomes questions. However, how well do we welcome questions at the level of fact? Are we conscious that the basic truths of our faith are mysteries and, as such, remain counter-intuitive? Or have we become flippant and superficial regarding explanations of the mysteries we proclaim to believe in the Nicene Creed? Have we forgotten that the Incarnation spawned centuries of debate regarding how to speak about God in the flesh AND God three-and-one?



Have we forgotten the scandal that God-in-the-flesh (much less a crucified God) is to one looking in on this scene from the outside?

Many years ago, an extremely intelligent 6-year old Buddhist little girl reminded me of the counter-intuitive nature of all that I seemed to take for granted at the time. Her older sister was taking an AP biology class that met on Saturdays and I was the babysitter for her little sister on this particular day. In discussing many things about her family, I learned that she had grown up believing in “house gods” who kept her family safe. After quite a discourse on her family’s religion, she asked me if I could show her my God. Initially, I was shocked by the question. What could I show this little girl to give her an understanding of who “my God” was

as a Christian? As I bought time with my response, I remembered that around the corner there was a crucifix. Knowing that she was expecting to see something tangible, I led her around the corner and pointed up to the Crucifix and, after a moment, I said, “There. He is my God.” The little girl considered the image of Jesus Crucified and in total sincerity, said “You gotta be kidding!” Those four words from this intelligent little Buddhist girl opened a new door for me. Belief in a crucified God does not just “make sense” and until I wrestled with why this needed to be (at the level of historical, narrative, fact), I would not be able to effectively communicate the Gospel in the future. Being able to respond to her “You gotta be kidding” has, in a sense, become my life mission. Being able to respond to her (in

her simplicity and intelligence, her inquisitiveness, sincerity and candor) has become my life mission.

Youth (or “nones”) who ask questions regarding dogmatic mysteries of the faith reveal the desire to understand these mysteries inasmuch as they can be understood. In asking pointed questions about these mysteries in relationship to their experience, they reveal the inherent understanding that God wills that we use our intelligence to know him so that our act of faith might truly be a well calculated risk, to use the language of Bishop Robert Barron. It seems that convinced Christian believers are unable, at times, to appreciate the value of the questions asked by a “none” because the convinced Christian believer has absorbed a mentality that is *afraid* to ask questions. In



reality, the well-placed question asked by a “none” can, at times, be an extraordinarily good *entre* to introducing the mystery of Christ.

The “none” in the room might just be the person who is most “paying attention.” Can we honor this? Are we, as catechists and missionary disciples, able to respond to these existential questions that touch on the mysteries of our faith? Or has our task become that of dispensing answers that we have learned without reference to the living possibility of a relationship with Christ that a “none” might represent?

### ***Toward Pastoral Care of “Nones”***

One insight that we might take into account as we think about pastorally caring for “nones” is the recognition that their questions do not necessarily imply a rejection of Christian belief, but rather a desire to understand the mysteries of Christian belief.

In addition, if we are to proclaim the Gospel to those who claim to be “nones”, one skill that a missionary disciple might want to

learn is the skill of asking good questions so as to be able to recognize and respond to good questions posed by “nones”. This is a “philosophical” skill that is necessary in the “pre-evangelization” of “nones.” Learning the skill of asking good questions will help the missionary disciple nourish the same skill in those “nones” who take a materialist account of the world for granted. Only after the missionary disciple has learned to ask, “is it true?” (and come out peacefully on the other side of that question) will he or she be able to humbly lead the “none” to ask the same question of all that they might hold dear. One best practice for catechists and teachers in this would be the requirement that students arrive in class with written questions prepared on assigned reading. While students might not ask these questions out loud, the catechist or teacher can later answer each of these questions personally, opening a dialogue that would never have been possible in the classroom itself.

The Preparatory Document for the XV Synod of Bishops proposes that the Church “ask young people

to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today.”<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the document closes with a number of questions designed to help target ecclesial reality around the world. This way of proceeding might serve as a best practice model for the kinds of pastoral / practical questions we might need to ask in our parishes as we grow in our desire and ability to reach out to the “nones”. Are our parishes able to conduct a “fearless moral self-inventory” relative to our ability to communicate the Gospel with credibility?

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