

COURSE OUTLINE: Catholic Identity: Celebrate the Difference

Presented by Father Christopher M. Walsh

Session Two: A Catholic Understanding of God

Song of Praise: How Great Thou Art (Stuart Hine Trust, 1953)

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed;

Refrain: *Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze; *Refrain*

And when I think that God his son not sparing,
Sent him to die - I scarce can take it in,
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin: *Refrain*

A Reading from Sacred Scripture: John 1, 1-5

Moment of Quiet Reflection

Recite the Gloria: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people of good will. We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your great glory, Lord God, heavenly King, O God, almighty Father. Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son, Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; you take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer; you are seated at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Review and Discussion of Pre-Reading Material

- US Catholic Catechism for Adults: Chapters 5 & 7
- # 1 & 2 on page 61: Knowing that God is rich in mercy and that he is love, how does this affect your attitude toward Him and toward your neighbor? How did God progressively reveal his mystery as a unity of persons? How would you teach this doctrine about God to others?
- #1 on page 85: Why is it important to appreciate the truth that the person, words and deeds of Jesus as seen in the Gospel accounts are mysteries revealing to us the hidden plan of God for our salvation? What might happen when this is forgotten?

Lecture

- Review of some Basic Definitions:
 - Theism: Belief in God
 - Polytheism: Belief in many gods; the gods needed people to sustain them
 - Monotheism: There is one God; introduced to the world by God through the Jewish people.
 - Agnosticism: I cannot be sure if there is a God so I remain in this place of doubt.
 - Atheism: I do not believe in God.
 - “Historic” Atheism was not an all-out denial of God but a denial of the Judeo-Christian (commonly called “orthodox”) understanding of God in favor of something else.
 - The New Atheism which has developed since the 1920s is the all-out denial of God’s existence.
 - Began in the 1920’s with Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre who admitted that the human person has a desire for God – but since God does not exist – Life is absurd! (not a very inspiring message)
 - For more “modern” atheists, God interferes with our having fun and with our doing what we want. They believe that the things of this world – money, fame, sex, power – are what satisfy us. These folks are ignoring the reality of the human person’s deepest desires and longings, which are really a desire for God.
 - Faith in God does not limit us in any way – in fact, it sets us free!
 - Do we all believe in the same God?
 - The “Secular God”
 - (“Feel Good God”/”Santa Claus God”/“Aspirin God”)
 - To whom I go when I need something, is always “nice” to me and affirming of what I want and gives me what I need
 - The “God of Islam” reveals what He wants
 - Submission -- Muslim literally means “one who submits to God” -- but God never reveals who He is. There is no relationship or understanding; God is totally “other”.
 - The “God of Judaism”
 - Perhaps the closest to our Catholic understanding of God, yet an incomplete understanding of God, who revealed much about Himself after the Prophets (the other persons of the Blessed Trinity, the intimacy of Abba, a life of grace, freedom from the law)
 - The “God of Mainline Protestants”
 - Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, United Church of Christ
 - With an emphasis on pluralism, the power and authority of God’s Word seems to get lost in favor of the “norm” in society at a given moment.
 - The “God of Evangelical Christians”
 - Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Non-Denominational Churches
 - Catholics have much in common with this group of Christians on social teachings re: sexuality and respect for human life. However there is a radical difference in the way we understand God’s desire to relate with his people. For the Evangelical, God relates with the individual alone – it is all about God and me (my “personal relationship with Christ”). It seems to

ignore the reality that while God does relate with the individual and desires a relationship with each person - God does this in and through the community of the Church.

- So what do we as Catholics Believe about God?
 - BELIEF #1: We believe in a Rational God with a Loving Plan for all of Humanity.
 - God is Intelligent & God is Free
 - God – who is pure goodness – desires to enlarge his circle of love through creation. God wants to share goodness and so creates human persons. He now has someone with whom he can share this goodness
 - Faith seeks Understanding
 - BELIEF #2: We believe in a God who desires a Relationship with Humanity.
 - God initiated the relationship; God comes to us first!
 - God has clearly revealed his plan for the human person.
 - Yet, we are so blessed because our God is merciful. When we realize our sin and turn back, he forgives us and welcomes us.
 - BELIEF #3: We believe in a God of Providence
 - How can a good God allow evil to exist in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? Evil – that which causes suffering – does not originate with God. Evil happens sometimes because of the choice of other people **or** because we live in a world that is finite and imperfect so there will be imperfect things like sickness and death.
 - God’s “Permissive Will” – God never wants people to be hurt or suffer, but he allows it because he can’t take away our freedom **and** in His Providence is able to bring good from it.

(10-minute discussion plus 15 minutes for sharing and break)

- BELIEF #4: Our Faith in God is not Incompatible with Science.
 - There is ONE Truth: there are many ways for us to come to an understanding of this truth (scripture, prayer, Church Teaching, Biology, Chemistry, Astronomy). Truth is Truth.
 - Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (during the Galileo Contraversy): It is the mission of theology to teach us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go! If there seems to be a conflict between science and the Bible, then we have misunderstood the Bible.
- BELIEF # 5: We believe in a God who is a Trinity of Persons.
 - One God, Three Persons: A Community of Love; God is a person. God has the ability to recognize, the ability to love. He is someone who can speak and someone who can listen. **God is a personal God.**
 - The Holy Spirit of God: sent to make Jesus present
 - The Son, Jesus Christ: reveals the Father (CS Lewis – Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic or the Lord)

- Father: Our union with the Father, the relationship with our Father God is the goal – a relationship with him in this life that will lead to an eternal relationship in the next life!
- BELIEF # 6: We believe that our God's desire goes beyond the individual – God desires a family, a family we call the Church.
 - The human person desires community; how do we get that community?
 - If humanity initiates the plan, it is a disaster that leads to further confusion and division.
 - If God initiates a union with the human family – success!

Discussion Questions

- How has your own understanding of God developed over time?
- Name two insights you have gained from this presentation that you will bring into your classroom.
- What do you need clarified?

Closing Comments and Prayer

- There are many different understandings of God in the world; we seek to stand with other people of faith.
- As Catholics we are a people of HOPE – what we desire can be ours (a relationship with God, happiness in this life, perfect happiness in heaven).
- Our learning about God, as we have done in this session, demands a response. God always wants a response. God says – “This is who I am, what do you think?”... we respond with the Creed as we pray together...

The Nicene-Constantinople Creed

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, *(All bow during these three lines)* and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Prayer and Blessing