Catholic Identity: Celebrate the Difference
Session 2
A Catholic Understanding of God

Pres-Session Assignment

Read Chapters 5 & 7 of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults.* An online version is available here: https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/uscca/files/assets/basic-html/page-1.html#

LECTURE 1: WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Discussion Question:
"The mystery of God is not a puzzle to be solved. It is a truth to be reverenced."

Knowing that God is rich in mercy and that he is love, how does this affect your attitude toward him? Toward your neighbor?

God's plan for our salvation is fully revealed in Christ Jesus. Knowing this, what role do His words and actions have in how you live as His disciple?

LECTURE 2: SOME BASIC DEFINITIONS

- ***Theism:*** Belief in God
- ***Polytheism:*** Belief in many gods; often the entities needed by people to sustain them (protection, fertility, harvest, etc.)
- ***Monotheism:*** Belief in the One God; introduced to the world by God Himself through the Jewish people.
- ***Agnosticism:*** Uncertainty about whether God exists, but if He does exist, He is far removed from human involvement and has no relationship with humanity. This is a place of doubt.
- ***Atheism:*** A complete rejection of the existence of God.
    - Historically atheism was not an all-out denial of God but a denial of the orthodox Judeo-Christian understanding of God in favor of something else.
    - The New Atheism of the 20th Century which began in the 1920s is an all-out denial of God's existence.
    - Existentialists like Jean-Paul Sarte admitted that the human person has a desire for God but since God does not exist, this desire makes life absurd.
    - More modern atheist see the concept of God interfering with our ability to have fun and do what we want in life. They believe that the things of this world – money, fame, sex, power – are what truly satisfies human desire. This is a complete rejection of the reality of the human person's deepest desires and longings, which are rooted in transcendental desires (perfect love, perfect beauty, perfect justice, perfect truth, etc.) that can only be fulfilled in a perfect being – God.
    - Modernist also view religion and God as limiting our freedom when in fact they actually set us free!

Discussion Questions:

What are some of the challenges you face in your role as a catechist regarding the effects of the new atheism on your students and their ultimate happiness?

How does the cultural influence of the new atheism impact your life?

Lecture 3: Do We All Believe in the Same God?

- **The Secular God** – the Feel God God/Santa Claus God/Aspirin God
- **The "Go-To" God** – God is only relevant when I need or want something. God is always nice and affirming.
- **The God of Islam** – a God of submission (Muslim means "one who submits to God.") God never reveals who he is only what he wants. One does not have a personal relationship or understanding of God. God is to be obeyed.
- **The God of Judaism** – God reveals himself as intimate and relational through creation, prophets, and his Word. This is the closest to the Catholic understanding of God but it is incomplete.
- **The God of Mainline Protestants** – Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Baptist, United Church of Christ, etc. all share in faith and belief in Jesus Christ, particularly the Word of God, but in the absence of any authority they tend to create God in their image and likeness through their acceptance of moral relativism.
- **The God of Evangelical Christians** – Fundamentalist, Pentecostals, non-denominational Churches all share similar beliefs with Catholics regarding social teaching, sexuality, respect for human life, but are radically different in their understanding of how God relates to his people. For the Evangelical, God relates with the individual alone, and not so much in relationship through the community of the Church.

Discussion Question:
What is one thing about your faith that you cherish or value the most?

Lecture 4: Catholic Belief About God

- **BELIEF #1:** We believe in a rational God with a loving plan for all of Humanity.
    - God is omniscient (all- knowing) & God is omnipotent (all-powerful); God is perfect goodness and desires to share Trinitarian Love through creation; particularly through the human person who is created in His image and likeness and shares in His grace.
    - Faith Seeks Understanding – Faith and Reason are two sides of the same coin. The relationship forms the foundation for all that we believe! *I believe that I may understand!* (St. Augustine)

- **BELIEF #2**: We believe in a God who desires a relationship with humanity (Jn 3:16).
    - God is always the initiator in our relationship. He comes to us first and we respond! Because of this unique relationship, God had a plan for the salvation of humanity when we wounded our relationship with Him through sin.
    - God is full of mercy and forgiveness; but has expectations of the Christian – we are called to live and act in a certain way.
- **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, disease, and natural disasters.
    - 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.
    - ***For us to be truly free to love God and others, that freedom must extend to all choices. When we abuse our gift of freedom, we sin. God permits this because we must be free to choose to accept the relationship he calls us to. When we abuse our free will and use it for sinful purposes, God in His divine providence can transform the evil we create and bring good from it.***

Discussion Questions:

What good has God brought from suffering in your life or the life of someone you know?

For those struggling to understand their suffering, what words of consolation might you offer to help them recognize God acting providentially in their life?

LECTURE 5

- **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. Etc.). Truth is Truth.
    - Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (during the Galileo Controversy*): 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 who lives in the present moment!
    - One God, Three Persons: A Community of Love; God is a Divine Being who can be known through His self-revelation. **God is a personal God** and we are His people.
    - The Holy Spirit: sent to make Jesus present and build the Kingdom of God – the Church
    - The Son: reveals the Father (CS Lewis – Jesus is either a liar, lunatic or Lord)
    - The Father: Our union with the Father and to be in relationship with Him 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 God's desire goes beyond the individual: God desires a family, the Church.
    - Created in God's image, 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 (e.g., the Tower of Babel).
    - If God initiates a union with the human family – success! (e.g., the Story of Pentecost)

Discussion Questions:

As the Great I Am, God lives in and exists in the present moment. He is not confined to the past nor distant in the future but is always present to His people. What are the implications of this belief for how you experience God in your daily life?

How might recognizing God's presence in the present moment affect the way you pray, face challenges, respond to uncertainty, or encounter others?

What obstacles keep you from being attentive to God's presence, and what practices help you become more aware of Him at work in your life today?

LECTURE 6: CLOSING QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

- There are many different understandings of God in the world; we seek to invite others to come into Full Communion with the Church.
- As Catholics we are a people of HOPE – what our hearts were made for can be ours (a relationship with God, happiness in this life, perfect happiness in heaven).
- Our learning about God, demands a response. God always wants a response.

REMINDERS

Prayer:

- Take additional time to contemplate and pray more fully on the reflection questions from the Lectio Divina handout for Session 1.
- Complete the *Living Word* activity during the week.

Action:

- Write a brief paragraph or two on what touched your heart the most from this week's presentation and why it affected you as it did? Come prepared to share your thoughts next week.

Prepare:

- Bring the handout and Lectio Divina for Session 3, and the *Catholic Catechism for Adults* to class next week. https://phillyocf.org/scf-course-materials/

CLOSING PRAYER



St. Ignatius of Loyola

Teach us, good Lord, to serve You as You deserve;
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labor and not ask for any reward,
Save that of knowing that we do Your will.
Receive, O Lord, our memories,
our will, our understanding, and entire liberty.
You have given us all we have,
and we surrender all to Your divine will,
that You may dispose of us as it shall please You.
Give us only Your love and Your grace,
and we shall be happy,
and have no more to ask.
Amen.