

1. GOD AND I

Religion is a way of life for Catholics. It is not just a list of things we do and things we don't do; nor a list of things we are for and things we are against. It is a way of life based on love, God's love for us, and our love for God and for each other.

We try to show our love for God by doing the things that please him. We believe that God has communicated with man at various times and in a variety of ways, and that he has taught us how he wants us to live.

We know it is not always easy to live up to our convictions about what God is asking of us. We know that we often fail. Yet we are convinced that in the Catholic Church we can find the necessary help to live good lives.

We believe that Jesus Christ is God. As Catholics we try to follow his example and teachings in the community of the Church. All our worship and prayers and services are an effort to show our love for him in return for his love for us.

The aim of this course of lessons then will be to explain the things we believe and the reasons why we believe them. But it will do more than that. It will explain the practical ways in which we try to live out these beliefs in our daily lives, the way we try to respond to God's for us, and how and why we turn so confidently to God for forgiveness whenever we fail.

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The framework

A simple outline of the basic beliefs of Catholics may be a useful starting point. Later lessons will expand and explain these beliefs step by step. The reader will find it helpful to refer back to this outline often during the course, and see how the lessons are a development of it.

- 1. God is the Creator and Lord of all things. We are all completely dependent on him for life and health and happiness and for everything we possess.**
- 2. God loves all men. He made us all to know him and love him and in this life, and after having served him faithfully here, to be united with him forever in perfect happiness in a new and greater life after death.**
- 3. God has spoken to man at various times and in a variety of ways during the course of human history, gradually revealing his love to us and giving us deeper insights into the meaning and purpose of our own lives.**

4. **God's revelation of himself to man reached its climax in Jesus Christ, in whom he himself became man and lived among us in a human way.**
5. **In the One True God there is a trinity of Persons, the Father, the Son the Holy Spirit, No man fully understands how this can be so; we accept it on the word of Jesus Christ who is god.**
6. **Jesus died for all men and rose again from death as he had foretold. All who live and die in union with him will one day rise with him to a new and greater life.**
7. **Jesus authorized his twelve apostles to teach the Christian way of life to the whole world and to keep all his followers united in faith and worship in a visible community which he called his Church.**
8. **The Bishop of Rome (the Pope), holds the same supreme authority to teach in the Church to-day as that held by Peter. He is the final court of appeal on earth in all matters of Christian faith and morality.**
9. **The Ten Commandments are a summary of the law of God. They are bonds of love uniting Creator and creatures. The Church has authority from God to teach us what they mean.**
10. **Sin is any deliberate violation of the law of God. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven if the sinner repents and resolves to turn away from sin.**
11. **The Mass and the seven Sacraments were freely chosen by Jesus and given by him to his Church. They are the principal channels through which he continues to give his gifts to mankind.**
12. **The community of the Church reaches beyond earthly boundaries to the Angels and Saints with God in heaven. All who have died in the friendship of God continue to love and help us by their prayers. Chief among them is the Blessed Virgin Mary whom we invoke regularly in our prayers.**

Belief in God

From this brief outline it is obvious that the basis of the Christian Religion is belief in a loving God. Most people believe in a Supreme Being of some kind. Even the average school boy knows that if we could produce a complete vacuum, as the universe once was, not even the cleverest among us can make something out of that vacuum, ... not even . . . the tiny explosion of gases some scientists say was responsible for creation.

But relatively few of us find our belief in God in scientific experiments. We discover God in the whole experience of living. We see him more clearly, with all his love and compassion and mercy in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Maker of Heaven and Earth

The most common reason for belief in God is that there can be no adequate explanation of the universe without a Creator. A man sees how day follows night, the seasons follow each other in regular course, the tides ebb and flow, flowers bud and blossom, stars and planets swing in their orbits and the order of the universe is maintained. He asks himself, "Who began and who preserves this wonderful order?" Those who say it came about by chance, he thinks, are easily satisfied. So are they who say it all comes from blind evolution. It is possible that all Nature, including Man, has evolved and that all forms of life have come from more primitive forms. But if so, this has happened in a complex way far more wonderful than anything man could invent and has produced beings far more wonderful than anything man can make. The great scientist Darwin once studied the delicate shading on the wing-feathers of the Argus pheasant. To say that this happened by chance, he argued, was like saying a Madonna painted by Raphael had been formed by a long succession of artists, not one of whom intended to draw the human figure. There has to be an explanation for evolution.

One of the books of the Bible, the book of Job, represents God as asking where Job was when the world was made. Was he at the making of it? Can he make animals like the whale in the sea, the eagle in the air? Does he even understand the ways of the beasts? In fact a man can spend his whole life studying Nature and still remain ignorant of a great deal of it. Even the accumulated knowledge of all the centuries has not solved all people's problems.

This argument appeals to the modern man as much as to the men of the time of Job. A builder's labourer once said, "You have only to see a lark rising from the long grass to know there is a God." The captain of a ship once waved his arm towards the sea, heaving in the moonlight, and said, "Any man, who can see that and say there is no god, is a fool." A factory worker said, "It takes hundreds of clever men to design an aircraft and thousands to make it. But it is not as wonderful as a bird in flight. It takes God to make a bird."

A young man who prided himself on being an atheist once came into the study of the famous 17th century astronomer, Kircher. He saw there a very fine working-model of the solar-system. By turning a handle the planets could be made to revolve in their respective orbits around the sun.

"Very ingenious indeed," the young man remarked. "Who made it?"

"Oh, no one made it," replied Kircher.

"Tell me, I want to know – who made it?"

"Nobody. It just happened."

The young man began to see the point and was annoyed "I see, you are trying to be funny."

"Isn't it rather you who are funny? You cannot believe that this little model just happened, and yet you can believe that the real sun and moon and stars, the whole vast universe in fact, came into existence somehow without any Maker!"

Common sense tells the average man that there is a God. The Bible says, "**The fool** says in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 14, 1).

Maker of Man

Zoology is the science which studies life in its origins. There are convinced Christians working in zoology in many of the world's universities. They are all strengthened in their belief in God by their scientific discoveries. The view of modern biologists is increasingly a religious view. They have found in the formation of man, in the development of the unborn child in the womb, and in a hundred other different things, an order and a mystery which fill them with awe and which persuade them that there is a Supreme Spirit, the designer of all. The same awe was felt by a young mother who gazed with shining eyes at the finger-nails of her new-born child and said, rather surprisingly, "I need no more proof than this that there is a God."

But if the human body is so wonderful, what of the human spirit? The biologists have noted that man alone of all the creatures on earth is capable not merely of knowing, but of understanding. He has an amazing capacity for using information from things around him, rejecting the false, accepting the true, and making a judgment. It is surely reasonable to conclude that this wonderful spirit within him was designed by a spirit with greater power than his. The average man concludes that this is the Supreme Spirit, maker of heaven and earth.

Knowledge of self

Many a man is strengthened in his belief in God by his knowledge of himself. He has experienced help from above on many occasions. He has been in danger, has prayed and has been comforted. He has needed something badly, has asked and received it. He has lifted up mind and heart in God and been filled with joy and comfort at the assurance that God is there and hears and helps him.

He feels guilty when he has done evil and satisfied when he has done good. He knows he will be punished for the evil done and rewarded for the good. Morality is not just a matter of free choice or mere custom. Moral goodness

suggests to a man that there is a God who is good and beautiful and it is because he is conscious of the goodness of God that he is ashamed of his own evil actions.

These, briefly, are but a few examples of the ways in which men who are not necessarily deep thinkers yet have sound common sense, use their reason to strengthen their belief, that there is a Supreme Spirit, the Creator of all things. No single logical argument convinces by itself, but the whole series of arguments does. Different arguments appeal to different men at different times, and as they reason they use their hearts as well as their heads.

The Mystery of God

God is the Supreme Spirit. Nobody made Him. He is **eternal**, that is, he always existed, there is no before and after with him, he did not begin and will never end, he does not increase or grow less. He is **infinite**, that is, he has all good qualities completely and all at once; he is all truth, all beauty, all goodness. He is the **Creator**, that is, he made all persons and things out of nothing and keeps them going.

He is not a vague, impersonal being with no interest in the universe that he made and supports. He knows all things and everyone and takes a vital and personal interest in all. Yet he will always remain a mystery to man because the human mind is too small and weak to be able to grasp fully the idea of him.

Non-Believers

There are many who say they do not believe in God. Some of these fix all their attention on work or money or pleasure and have neither time nor inclination to think about God. Some do think about him and reject the idea of him. These are sometimes men very learned in a particular subject, although they may not be well informed about spiritual things. Some of these refuse to believe because they are too fixed in their opinions to bow their minds down before a Supreme Being. Others reject not so much the idea of God as the false idea of him given to them in childhood and accepted by many so-called religious people. Yet in their search for truth and service of their fellow men they may in fact serve God well, although he is an unknown God to them. Many **refuse** to believe, in spite of the evidence, because they are not prepared to face up to the consequences of believing, which may entail a change in their way of life.

The Human Spirit

Having looked at the world around us, the sun, the stars, the plants, the trees, the birds etc. we begin to see the reasonableness of believing in God. Similarly we can look at ourselves thoughtfully and begin to see the reasonableness of believing that we have a soul, or spirit of life, which will live beyond mere physical

death. Dr. Norman Vincent Peals the great American preacher, and author of "The Power of Positive Thinking", has said, "We don't try to prove immortality because we want to believe it; we try to prove it because we can't help believing it".

Belief in the immortality of the human soul comes easy to Christians. We believe that Christ is God and that he has told us our souls are immortal, made by God to go on to a new and greater life after death. No further proof is necessary for any of us who believe in an all powerful God who has spoken to us in Christ. We simply accept it with absolute confidence on the word of Christ.

But, even before studying the life of Christ, (which we will do in the next lesson), we can see, simply by using our own common sense, that there are many good reasons for believing in a life after death.

New Human life

There is a story told of a young businessman who happened to sit down in a crowded restaurant at the same table as a priest.

After casual conversation the young man said –

"You know,, I had given up belief in God until the other day".

"Oh? What happened then?"

"My baby recognized me".

He looked up to see if he was being laughed at, but the priest was serious.

"Go on! I'm interested".

"Well, I can't describe it. She's my first baby, only five weeks old. I came in from work and spoke to her – the usual stupid baby-talk. She got excited. I took her from my wife and looked at her. She smiled at me. I could see from the light in her eyes that she'd recognized me".

He remained silent for a few moments.

"It was a tremendous thrill. It made me think a lot. There was something in the eyes of the baby that I and my wife had not put there. There's a power there. That's what makes a person. It seemed to shine out of her. This might seem all muddled to you, but it makes sense to me".

"It does make sense. That's common sense".

"It's a funny thing", said the young man, "in a flash I realized that my child had an intelligence of its own. At that moment I grew up. For I realized that the power of perception of a human being is something quite different to that of a dumb animal. Both gaze upon the same world, but only the rational human being has responsibility. He can reflect, reason and resolve".

Common sense

It would take more than that to convince many men that a child is spirit as well as flesh and blood. And in fact it took more than that to convince the young father. This experience was only one of many, each of which had made him think. That is how the ordinary man is convinced of things, not by a single logical argument, but by a whole series of arguments based on his own experience of life. He may feel that no single argument by itself convinces him, but altogether have great weight. On these occasions men use their heads as well as their hearts. The whole man enters into the problem of life and each part of him helps to let him know something of what life is all about.

Most men are convinced that they are not just chemical compounds or a special kind of machine, but are spiritual beings, able to think as well as see and touch. Men of all standards of education and intelligence and in all periods of history have been convinced that because they are spiritual they will not be snuffed out like a candle when they breathe their last. They know that their bodies will disintegrate, but they themselves will live on. They believe this for good reasons. Here are some of them. Different ones appeal to different people at different times. All of them carry weight and one of them tips the scales and brings conviction.

The Lover

The true lover knows that love is not merely an urge of the body, an animal instinct to find a mate. It is also a spiritual and uplifting experience which makes him glad and thankful. Many lovers want to write poetry, compose music, sing songs or just carve two names on a tree. The lover does not love only for what he can get out of it. In fact he is prepared to suffer and even die for the one he loves. He knows that such a power within him is spiritual.

He knows also that he loves a person not merely because of a beautiful face or figure. He loves for inner qualities more than physical ones. So the lover in the popular song says:

"She was lovely and fair as the rose of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone that won me.
Oh no 'twas the truth in her eyes ever-dawning
That made me love Mary the Rose of Tralee."

The same applies not only to the love of boy and girl, but also the love of husband for wife, parents for children, child for parents and friend for friend.

Men are also delighted by beautiful music, noble words of poet or speaker, paintings, scenery, beauty of line in boat, aeroplane or motorcar. They know it is not just the eye or the ear that is pleased, but a spiritual power within them.

The thinker

When a man thinks deeply about himself he realizes that he is spiritual. He thinks for instance how at the age of thirty he can remember things he said and did at the age of twenty and ten. He knows he is responsible for all those actions. The same "I" acts at all stages of his life. Science tells him that his whole body has changed, yet he knows there is something which remains the same. A man talks about the thoughts, memories and actions of the distant past as **his**. He knows he can be proud of the good actions and should be ashamed of the bad. There is something responsible for them all which remains the same while the body changes, and will remain when the body ceases to function.

He knows he can think of things without shape, weight or size, which cannot be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched. He sees a beautiful woman, hears a beautiful song, smells a beautiful perfume, tastes a beautiful meal, touches a beautiful cloth. He takes out, or "abstracts", from these the idea which they all have in common, namely beauty. This is called an "abstract" idea, that is, something spiritual, existing outside the material thing to which the word is applied. Some philosophers define beauty as "the splendour of order." This is a spiritual idea and can only come from a spiritual power.

Man can also turn inwards on himself, turn back, or reflect, on his own thoughts. He can think of himself thinking. He can think of his thought. He not only knows He knows that he knows.

The inventor

Never in the history of the world has a dog made a dog chain or a horse a horse-shoe. Man is constantly discovering new wonders and putting together information in order to make things which help him to extend his knowledge and his command over Nature. He has extended his knowledge inwards into the nature of things. He has discovered that matter is made up of millions of atoms, each atom of hundred of tiny forces and particles, which again he may go on indefinitely dividing. He has split the atom and harnessed terrific power. He has extended his knowledge outwards, has circled the earth with ship, train, telegraph, radio, television and made contact with the planets through man-made satellites. He is scarcely six feet tall, physically weak, living only for about seventy years, yet he has conquered mountains and seas and millions of miles of space. This is because he has a spiritual power within him which enables him to harness Nature and use it for his own purposes. So the thinker argues that the power which is capable of such spiritual activity must itself be spiritual, that is, without

parts. Since it is without parts, it cannot be broken up, cannot be destroyed. Hence it must last forever. It is indestructible.

The young businessman in the restaurant was convinced that his child had an immortal spirit because he saw the evidence of the life of that spirit shining from the eyes of the child. No doubt his will to believe was moved by his love. As well as using his intelligence, a man must use his will. He has to want to believe.

The Problem of Evil

Many ask the question. "How can there be a good and loving God if such terrible things as wars, disease and suffering can happen?" It is quite true that our limited human minds cannot fully explain the presence of evil and suffering in the world. But it is also true that evil and suffering can be explained much more satisfactorily by those who believe in God than by those who don't. The more correct way to state the problem therefore, would be to say, "There is obviously a God, but why does he permit evil and suffering in the world?"

None of us can ever fully answer that question because none of us is capable of fully understanding the mind of God. Nor is there any logical reason why we should be able to do so. The human mind is very limited indeed, when compared with the mind of God. However, we can go part of the way towards understanding these things. Man himself, by abusing the freedom God has given to him, is responsible for much of the suffering and sin in the world.

God could certainly prevent people from sinning if he wanted to, but that would mean taking away the greatest natural gift which he has given to man, namely freedom of choice. It is man's freedom of choice that makes him different from the animals and enables him to serve God freely, lovingly and even heroically. But it also enables him to choose to disobey God, to do wrong, to commit sin. Sin then is simply man's abuse of the gift of freedom. We know that some people do in fact abuse their freedom and commit sin. As a result, they often cause suffering to others as well as themselves, even to the extent of the terrible ravages of war. This, however, is no reflection on the power or goodness of God but rather a consequence of man's abuse of God's gift.

There are other forms of suffering and misery too which come, not directly from the sins of any individual, but from famines, diseases, earthquakes and the like. Our finite and limited minds cannot always understand the pattern of God's purpose in allowing these things, but we can go some way towards understanding it, particularly when we come to look on this life in the light of the next. It is not surprising that even the greatest human minds fall far short of a complete understanding of the mind of God. St. Paul expressed this thought in the eleventh chapter of his letter to the Romans:

“O, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his way!” (Rom. 11, 33).

The other side of the picture – all the good, the joy, the love, the happiness, the heroism, the virtue in the world assure us of the love and goodness of God. To say that God does not exist just because we cannot always see his purpose in allowing great disasters or sufferings would be as unreasonable as for the astronomer to say that the planet Mars does not exist just because he cannot understand some particular point about it.

In later lessons, when we look into the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, we will be able to see a little deeper into God’s reasons for all these things. We will be able to see something of the greater good that God draws from human suffering, to see how man’s life on earth is meant to be but a few short years of preparation for an eternity of happiness in the life after death, to see sometimes how human suffering or sickness or poverty can be the very thing that protects a person from a life of sin which would end in eternal remorse, to see how by suffering with Christ we will rise in glory with him. Even when we cannot understand why God allows suffering and misfortune in every particular case we can be sure that he has his own good reasons for doing so.

This brings us to the question – what is religion?

The Fall

There was some terrible tragedy in the beginning of the human race when man rebelled against God. It is very mysterious and we understand little about it. In some way man refused to serve, and cut himself off from God’s favour. The account of this tragedy is given in the Bible as a simple yet dramatic story told in highly figurative language. It tells how Adam and Eve, the first parents of the human race, were tempted by the Evil One in the form of a serpent. They ate the fruit forbidden by God and were driven out of the garden of happiness called Paradise. This is known as “the Fall”.

As a result of it man sank deeper and deeper into evil and unhappiness and was unable to lift himself out of his degradation. God therefore reached down to help him. First he inspired chosen leaders to teach men about God and how they ought to live. But when the time was ripe God-the-Son became man. He took human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Jesus Christ was God-made-man. He became a member of the human race, underwent all possible humiliation and suffering and died and was buried. But he rose again from the dead in order to lift men up with himself out of their degradation. This will be explained later.

Religion then is the action of God reaching down to man to lift him up, and man reaching up to God for help. **The Christian religion means doing this in and through the person of Jesus Christ.**

It is the purpose of these pages to give an account of this action of God and how he invites man to respond. But it is also their purpose to help the reader to join in the action. At the end of each lesson ways in which he can do so will be suggested.

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There is nothing more important in life than these two facts, "God and I". There are some people for whom they have been very real all their lives. John Henry Newman, the great light of the Church of England and of Oxford University in the 19th Century, who became a Catholic priest, said that for him there had always been two "Luminous realities," God and his soul. But there are others for whom these realities are very dim.

All men and women must face the great question of their attitude to God. Each day man should lift up mind and heart to God in praise. Those who believe should earnestly pray that their faith may be strengthened. Those who do not believe should desire the joy of believing and ask god's help to do so. It is possible for the man who does not believe fully in God to pray. The famous, French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, when still an unbeliever, used to pray, "My God, if you exist, and if you are the truth, make me know it."

The words of the eighth psalm will help to strengthen faith and raise up mind and heart to God in praise.

**O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth ! . . .**

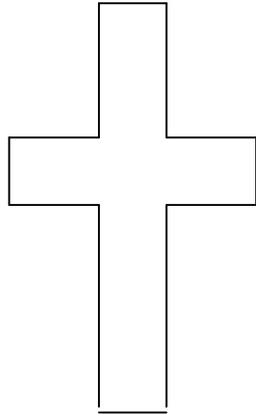
When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?

Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour

Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen,

And also the beasts of the fields, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

**O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!**



COME HOLY SPIRIT

This is the emblem of the Catholic enquiry Centre. The cross superimposed on the world expresses the truth that Christ died on the cross to bring the grace of salvation to all men. Early explorers called Australia "The Southern Land of the Holy Spirit".

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

If you study the lessons with a friend, or friends a discussion of the points suggested at the end of each lesson will help you to grasp the subject more fully. Points suggested for discussion are covered in the lesson to which they refer.

Even if you study alone, an effort to think out some comments on each point will deepen your grasp of the subject. Read the lesson again if you find you cannot comment meaningfully on the points suggested. There is no need to send us your comments.

- 1. The order of the universe is the most common reason for believing in God. Give some examples of this order.**
- 2. What practical reason did the astronomer Kircher give the young atheist for believing in God? Give similar stories from your own experience.**
- 3. How would a better understanding of myself help me gain a deeper understanding of God?**
- 4. How would you answer the objection: if there is a loving God why is there so much evil and suffering in the world.**
- 5. A variety of personal experiences in life help man realize that he has an immortal soul. Recount your own strongest experience in this connection. What is your own strongest reason for believing you have an immortal soul.**
- 6. Compose a short personal prayer in your own words that you would say before beginning to study your weekly lesson on religion.**