



**Catholic Belief
and
Practice**

John Ramsay

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

by Fr. John Ramsay

CHAPTER 1 – THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH IN REASON

This is the text of a series of talks on what we Catholics often call 'The Faith'. Talks on the doctrine and practices of the Catholic Church - what Catholics believe and do and why. This is not a series of disconnected statements of belief but rather a way of life. No picking and choosing is acceptable - all doctrines form part of the whole body of truth revealed to us by God through His Church. Some practices may be unpopular but they are accepted because of our belief that the church has the right to lay down laws.

Those over the age of fifty will recognise the framework I have used - it is drawn from the old 'penny' catechism and I have used it because it is both comprehensive and logical - it covers all the ground clearly. So we shall be talking about God - what He has revealed to us about Himself and His plans for us. His expectations - what He is asking of us and what our future destiny is if we accept His plans, - and if we don't.

First though - and this is essential - we must satisfy ourselves that God exists. We must have a firm foundation for our beliefs; and we believe such a foundation exists and that an unprejudiced mind CAN come to believe God exists:

- That He is almighty, and
- That He created us to share His life for ever

Having said that, most of us, indeed the vast majority of us, heard first of God from our mother. She told us quite simply about God, Jesus, Calvary - the basic beliefs. She taught us what God wanted and did not want - right and wrong. She taught us our first prayers - thus beginning our love relationship with God, and - let's be quite clear - she was RIGHT. Nevertheless, if I am to base my whole life on the belief that God exists, the FOUNDATION for that belief must be stronger than just the fact that my mother said so!

So we always start by satisfying ourselves in an adult, rational way that God exists. Some talk of 'proofs' which is unwise - I prefer 'reasons' or 'arguments' for believing or, and this is better, 'ways' of coming to a knowledge of God. 'Ways' was a word used by the great St. Thomas Aquinas and he used five. I am going to use two of them and the first one goes like this: nothing exists of itself- nothing caused itself. It was caused by something else. Take a table, for instance, it didn't produce itself. It was made by a joiner from wood. That wood came from a tree and that tree came from another tree which came from another tree which came from yet another tree and so on. Or take you and me -we didn't produce ourselves - our parents did. And who produced them? - their parents: and who produced them? - their parents and we are off on the roundabout again. Even the theory of EVOLUTION could only suggest HOW it all came about and not what caused it. The latest theory is that our world began with a big bang caused by exploding gases - perhaps it did but then who struck the match?. True science and true theology are not contradictory but complementary the first is saying HOW things happen and the other is saying WHO made it happen. Here, we are faced with an endless succession of causes and effects.

So we have a 'chicken and egg' situation - in other words, no satisfactory answer. Unless, that is we accept the existence of what I'll call 'SOMETHING OTHER'. 'Something other' that didn't start - didn't have to be caused by another. Something that WAS, IS AND ALWAYS WILL BE - something eternal. Something that always has existed and always will exist.

Revelation comes to our help here and I will give two examples, one from the Old Testament and one from the New. In the third chapter of the Book of Exodus we read how Moses saw a bush burning and, on approaching it, he hears the voice of God which tells him that he is to lead his people out of Egypt. He is hesitant: who will believe him? so he asks God to tell him His name and he receives the answer 'I AM WHO AM: tell them I AM sent you'. Then, in the 8th.chapter of St. John's Gospel there is an account of a confrontation between Our Lord and the Pharisees. Towards the end of it, Our Lord said, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to think that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews then answered, 'You are not fifty yet, and you have seen Abraham!' and Jesus replied, 'I tell you most solemnly, before Abraham ever was, I AM.' They knew quite well that he was telling them he was God for they attempted to stone him.

Hence it is that St. Thomas Aquinas described eternity as a 'PERPETUAL NOW'. To God, one million years ago and one million years from now are equally present. This 'SOMETHING OTHER' then did not have to begin, to be caused, indeed it caused or started everything else out of nothing. So now we are talking of a 'CREATOR' since creation is the production of something out of nothing. Now creation is limitless because if you don't need materials you can do anything. So the Creator is INFINITE and what is created is not self-supporting so the Creator also conserves or keeps in being, all that has been created. Now, let's take things a stage further: 'Space' is something, so SOMETHING OTHER made it and occupied it and is therefore OMNIPRESENT. 'Knowledge' is something, so 'Something Other' is OMNISCIENT: Power is something, so something other is OMNIPOTENT or ALMIGHTY.

Here we bring in the second of St. Thomas' five ways: Creation is not haphazard, a result of an accident. There is a plan or design here. A mind has conceived it, a will has put it into effect. Now we call a being with a mind and will a PERSON. So the 'Something Other' I've talked about is not just a blind force, but a person, an infinite being, a personal God. So what have we now got? A supreme being, infinite in every possible way - limitless in time, space, knowledge, power. A frightening thought! This is the picture held of Him by primitive people before He revealed Himself. Sadly some still have this picture even after revelation.

However, a little more brainwork on our part can produce a very different picture. Take something we all have experience of: LOVE – from or towards our parents, from or towards our children or friends - and that's just love of humans; then we can love scenery, clothes, sport, or food and drink. All these loves are 'things', they did not just happen, they were created. Their source is the same as all other 'things', GOD THE CREATOR. Put all these together and they make up all that is worthwhile in life. Recall the fact that you're not the only pebble on the beach. Millions of others have all these loves! Put all these loves together, they all come from the same one source and that source is limitless. They are but a drop in the ocean of love that we call God. No wonder St. John said "God is LOVE" Notice here he does not say 'loving' but LOVE - all there is of it..

Now let's get back to us! We are not just vegetables that can't respond at all, nor are we just dumb animals who can respond to love by instinct but are incapable of understanding and decision making. You haven't just heard me like, say, a dog hears a human voice. You recognised the words and I hope understood their meaning! You may even have made decisions to remember what was said and pass it on! That is, you have two faculties which set you immeasurably above animals. You have an intellect or mind which can grasp things, and you have a will which can choose and make decisions.

These two faculties which raise us so far above the animals make us like God. The first chapter of Genesis describes man as being made 'in the image and likeness of God'. and this is WHY - because, like God, we have an intellect and a will. These are spiritual faculties which have no parts and so cannot disintegrate (and that is what death is) so they are immortal. Man is made to live for ever! So our minds have grasped the fact that God IS, that He has made all things, above all US, out of nothing. We can therefore see that He must have a purpose and plan for us. We believe he has told us what it is. He has revealed His will to us.

But we have these two great faculties so we are able to UNDERSTAND His plan for us and we are able to CHOOSE what we are to do about it. We are thus responsible for our acts, free to accept or reject His will, responsible for our eternal destiny.

Now let's get back to God again. If this fabulous being exists and we believe He DOES; and if He is unbelievably good and loving and we believe He IS; and He has asked us to share His life and He HAS; what are we waiting for? We must respond all our lives with all our hearts and souls to the One who is LOVE ITSELF. Striving to increase our knowledge of Him so as to grow daily in love of Him.

Which will drive us to serve Him with all our hearts so that we may share his life of love for all eternity. This 'vertical' relationship between ourselves and God comes before our 'horizontal' relationship with our neighbour. The next world comes before the 'third world'. Indeed, the very quality of our love of our neighbour depends upon the degree of our love for God. And that love for God is the very purpose of our existence. As the Catechism says "Why did God make me? God made me to know Him, love Him and serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in the next".