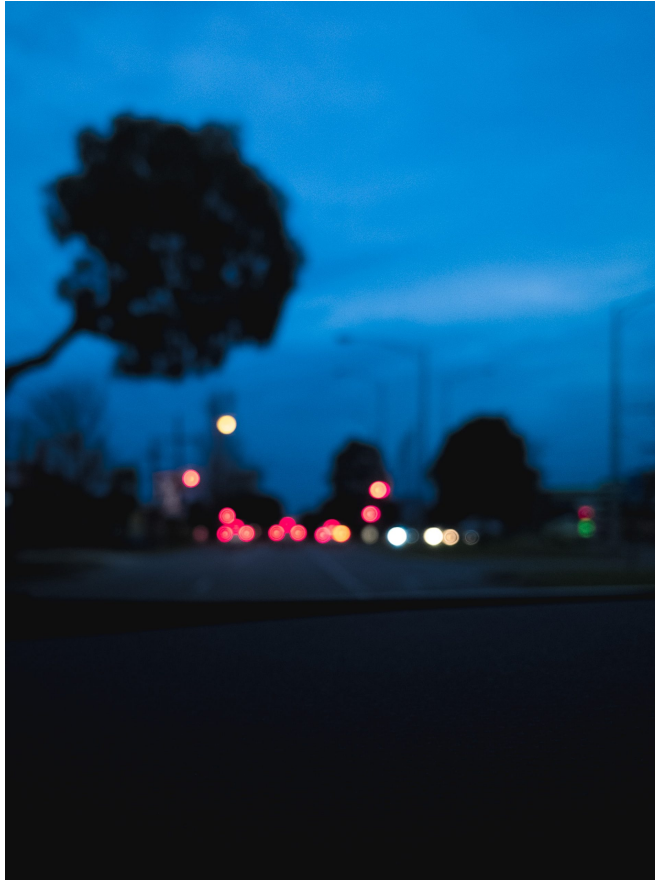


Faith is more than just agreeing with God and the church

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Q: I have a friend with whom I am trying to share the Gospel. He has great questions, and I like trying to offer intelligent and rational answers, but I'm not sure if he has faith yet. What should I do?

A: This is a fantastic question. And I am so grateful that you are willing to respond to the Great Commission that Jesus has issued to every disciple to spread the Good News. I am also grateful that you value your friend's questions. Too often, Catholics can be accused of not wanting to engage in reasonable and rational argument. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. There is an incredible intellectual pedigree that has been given to us over the last 2,000 years that we must not take for granted.

At the same time, what you described is something that I have been thinking about for quite some time. What I mean is the difference between agreement and faith. At first glance, it might seem that these two terms mean the same thing. And I would grant that that might sometimes be the case. But there is something about a living faith that goes beyond mere agreement.

I want to reaffirm that questions are good. Questions like “What does the church teach?” or “Why does the church teach this?” are very good questions. But at some point we recognize that faith might ask the question “why?” less and less.

Consider this: How many times in the Bible is there a person whom God asks to do something and that person asks God, “Why?” I don’t know that I can think of a single time. There is a depth of relationship between the person and God that is built on trust. And it is this trust that we must have whenever we approach God, or whenever we approach his commandments.

For myself, I can think of many times in my life when I have wanted to know the reason why the church taught this or that. I have asked that question of intelligent and faithful Catholics, and they have been able to give me a very good reason. This has been incredibly helpful for me.

However, if I have a question about an article of the faith, and someone gives me a reason that is well articulated, and I assent to the proposition, that is me merely agreeing. It is not necessarily faith. For example, if I have a question about just war theory, or the church’s teaching on sexual ethics, and a well-informed Catholic gives me a reasonable explanation that I find valuable, that is simply agreeing with the proposition and the rationale behind the proposition. And please don’t get me wrong: It remains good to ask questions and remains worthwhile to know the reasons why.

But if my faith does not go any deeper than that, my agreement is merely conditional. It is based off of a condition: “If you can give me a good reason, and explain it well, then I will check that box that says I agree with this proposition.”

In fact, this might be what many of us do on Sunday morning when we stand up and profess the Nicene creed. It may be that all we are doing is saying, “I agree with all of these propositions about God.” Is that faith? Well, not really. It might be the beginning of faith. It might be a part of faith. But faith is much more.

Faith is when I submit my intellect and will to God as he has revealed himself. One of the things that this means is that God (or the Catholic Church) doesn’t have to constantly convince me that a proposition is true. Consider what a “faith” like that would look like. Every next step, or every new thing that God wanted to invite me into or reveal about himself, would need to be proven. I would not be willing to act until God or the church gave me a reason why.

God has already given us a reason why. If I answer the big questions — questions like “Is Jesus God?” “Did Jesus found the Catholic Church?” “Did Jesus promise to lead the church into all truth?” — then I no longer require that. God convinced me of his reasons why when I am presented with any new proposition.

God does not merely desire our agreement. God desires a relationship with us. And this relationship is built on trust. Yes, we get to ask questions. But there is a big difference between needing to be convinced of the reason why first and the way in which St. Anselm defined theology as “faith seeking understanding.”

Faithful people will ask the big questions. Faithful people will ask hard questions. But not so that they can end up agreeing with God. Rather, the faithful person asks the questions so that they can trust even more deeply.

So, after all of that, are you trying to help your friend become a person who merely agrees with the propositions of the Catholic faith? Or do you want to help him have a real relationship with God of trust and faith?