

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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GAPS

You know, sometimes we try to fill in the gaps too quickly. Catholicism is a beautiful religion, with flaws of course, but the core of who we are, what we believe, our code of conduct and how we worship are intricate, gorgeous, inspiring mosaics of our relationship with God, with each other, and with our world.

But there is a danger in having everything so “buttoned up”. We have dogmas, doctrines, codes, policies and procedures to cover almost every conceivable situation. If you run into any experience in life, whether you’re young or old, remember what you have been taught or look up the dogma, doctrine, code, policy or procedure, and there is your answer! It is a full service answer system to everything we need. We may have difficulty applying the answers but the proper response is right there, spelled out in the Catholic Catechism.

Those of us who remember the Baltimore catechism know what I mean. Even though the fine city of Baltimore doesn’t get the credit anymore, the basic theme of “here are the answers” remains. We even teach our kids these answers, and expect them to know them at least for Confirmation.

Centuries of previous Catholics had all our experiences, discovered the correct responses to these experiences, and codified these answers for our benefit. Our role? Learn their answers and apply them to our lives. Answers for our head before life experiences.

Answers for everything. Answers for everyone. Answers. Answers. Answers.

Where is our mystery? Where is our spirituality? Where are our gaps?

Let’s be basic: is there a God? If so, what is God like? Quick now, what’s the answer? God is almighty, transcendent, beyond us. God is also imminent, within us, among us. God is Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Jesus is divine and human. Good answer. Next question?

The problem with this answer is that there is no personal, spiritual mystery. The gaps are ignored, unnamed, and underappreciated. File away your answers for future reference and try this: think about, pray, read, discuss, meditate on this one question, is there a God? for a year. Don’t go too fast; don’t go to your answer file. Wrestle with the question – for one year.

Then, move to the next question: is God transcendent, beyond me? Take another year on this one – it is that big. The next year, deal with the immanence of God, God within you, me, and the world. You better take the next three years on Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Follow that with the Jesus questions, which could easily be another five years.

Now you are ten years into your spiritual journey. That's about right. The next decade could focus on behavior: how do I live because of what I believe about God and Jesus? After that it could be another three to five years to consider how you worship in response to what you believe and how you behave. Maybe at this point, you could go back to your answer file and see how your 25 years of considering the one question about is there a God? measures up to the answer in the Catechism.

Too extreme, you say? Well, maybe. But you get the point: our answers come so quickly that we miss the mystery. We admit that there is a mystery but we still miss the mystery. Genuine spirituality may reside in the gaps between the questions and the answers. Or, another way to put it, being aware of the gaps between what we experience and what we can describe is a good way to depict spirituality.

It isn't that the catechism answers are wrong, even though many of them are shaped and nuanced by one specific theology. Knowing answers isn't living faith, hope, or love. Never was; never will be. Dogmas, doctrines, codes, policies and procedures are inevitable after 2000 years, but they don't touch the heart of the spiritual matter.

The gaps give us God.

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