

GOD

IS NOT

NICE

DISCUSSION GUIDE

God Is Not Nice by Ulrich L. Lehner (Ave Maria Press, 2017), is © 2023 by Ave Maria Press.

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GETTING STARTED

Whether you are reading *God is Not Nice* by yourself or with a small group, this discussion guide is designed to help you to look deeper into divisions within the Church and to consider what you can do to help heal the rifts among God's people.

FOR FACILITATORS OF SMALL GROUPS

This discussion guide is designed to be completed during nine sessions of less than two hours each. You can adjust the schedule based on the needs of your group. Please use the following suggestions to help gatherings and dialogue go smoothly.

PREPARATION

- When inviting participants, be welcoming and encourage diversity by making sure it is clear that respect for each person and their individual viewpoints is most important.
- Ensure each participant has a copy of *God is Not Nice* and this discussion guide. Encourage them to use a notebook to take notes if they desire.
- The topics addressed in *God is Not Nice* can be sensitive. Prepare participants at the first meeting by assuring them that dialogue on these issues is important and that they are helping to heal the divisions within Catholic Church.
- Ensure everyone that confidentiality is essential—clarify that names should not be identified if they share discussions outside the group.
- Make your meeting space ready for prayer by including a Bible and Crucifix. May your discussions be fruitful and blessed by the Lord.

OPENING PRAYER

*Come, Holy Spirit, and enlighten us with your wisdom so that we together search for your truth.
Come, Holy Spirit, and set our hearts on fire so that we together bring your love to the world.
Come, Holy Spirit, and strengthen us so that we can be salt of the earth and light to the world.
Amen.*

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION: **FIRST MEETING**

1. What sort of background do you bring to these discussions that might be helpful for the group to know?

Think about strengths and positive points, but also about possible weaknesses and biases as well. For example, what role does truth play in your life? Do you think that sometimes our faith can appear boring to others, and if so, why do you think that?

2. A conventional faith is a bit like a habit. Why would such a faith look boring?

3. Have you ever encountered a moment when you thought “Wow—this God is wild, but good!”? Share the story of this experience.

4. What are your priorities in your faith life? How do you hope God might transform you? Is there an area of your life where you experienced such transformation, or wish you would have experienced it?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 1

1. Have you ever thought about the difference between “having” and “being” as Erich Fromm describes it? Why could his insight help us to bring us back to a healthy “realism”?
2. Seeing the world as a gift means also trying to encounter it as part of God’s creation. When was the last time you encountered your world as gift, as participation, or as surprise?
3. Sentimentalism is the opposite of realism. What are ways to rediscover the world through an outlook marked by realism?
4. Why do convictions such as being convinced of one’s faith need realism and truth?
5. Disagreeing with somebody’s truth claim does not have to be considered intolerant. Share an experience of meeting somebody who disagreed with you and made you rethink your claim.
6. Convictions need fortitude or bravery, but how can we be brave in the contexts of our families, the workplace, our parish? What does bravery look like in your life?

CONCLUDING PRAYER:

O Lord, support us all day long, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging and a holy rest, and peace at last. Amen.

—St. John Henry Newman

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 2

1. Have you ever heard people talk about the “usefulness” of religion? How did that conversation make you feel about your own life of faith?
2. Truth does not care about usefulness. But how do you encounter the adventurous truth of faith?
3. Real faith does not sugarcoat death or pain. Why is it therefore not a coping mechanism?
4. Why can religion not be just “glitter” on our lives or like “sprinkles” on a donut? Why does such a “use” of religion mistreat God?
5. Have you ever fallen into the “welcome trap” preferring a fiction to the truth of faith?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 3

1. Have you ever been tempted by the idea that good works can help us merit heaven?
When was the last time you received a gift—something undeserved that you could not repay?
2. God gave us free will. He cherishes it so much that he even permits evil. Yet, God still helps us with his divine providence. How can we perceive providence in our lives?
3. Grace is the life of God in us. It changes and transforms those who surrender. How could I surrender in my life to divine grace?
4. Have you ever thought that science is often used as a coping mechanism—that it can make us forget we are mortal?
5. Good feelings won't save us, and neither do a few good works. Yet why is the temptation so strong to give in to sentimentalism or Pelagianism?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 4

1. When was the last time you thought God had interrupted your plans? Have you ever been tempted to remove God so far from your life that he is no longer “interfering”?
2. Jesus teaches us about the real God. This real God, however, is not a “tame pet” but an awe-inspiring mystery. Why and where did we lose this insight?
3. Emotivism is the death trap of the modern Church. It means that our emotions make things true or false. Once we adopt it, we throw truth out, and with truth, God. How have you observed this emotivism in our country, in the workplace, in your family?
4. Holy Scripture is not a rule book of moral behavior alone—it is much more than that. It reveals the true God, the God of love. What do we lose if we treat the Bible only as a rule book and reduce our faith to “morality”?
5. The “Walmart Church” adapts Christ and Scripture to the emotions people want to feel. Why does this kill the faith in our kids?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 5

1. Holy Scripture is not a news source or a biology textbook. It is the Word of God for us. The Church fathers realized that our living faith determines how we understand the written word. Why is that important?
2. In the Enlightenment, everything miraculous was eliminated from Scripture. It was read like an ancient piece of literature that had nothing to say to the present. Why did this mean also the end of reading Scripture as an adventure with God?
3. How can we rekindle our passion for truth and the divine mystery? Why did Rudolph Otto think meeting God puts you in awe/enchantment and trembling?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 6

1. Love is not a feeling, but an act of the will. What does that mean? And how do we talk about love to our kids and relatives?
2. What's the difference between being nice and loving someone?
3. Love rejects death—but why?
4. If we are to love God, how do we do that? Do we treat God as a person who is loveable? Do we take this relationship seriously?
5. Love is not blind—but why?
6. Love takes sin seriously, and so does God. What conclusions does this lead you to as you reflect on your life?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 7

1. Intimacy and nakedness involves being vulnerable. Holy Scripture gives us images of how humans were before the fall—we were in a friendship with God in which we were totally vulnerable. How can we talk today about the “intimacy” God wants to spend with us? How can we speak with our children about it?
2. Being vulnerable also means admitting our sins. Why is the mystery of God's forgiveness so much more than a mere pardon, and how does our forgiving others make us more human?
4. True love is pro-creative, says Dorothy Sayers. How can parents grasp this insight? What about those without children? How can our love be pro-creative and imitate the love of the Triune God?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 8

1. The effects of original sin remain with us after baptism and are like a wound on our soul. Many turn to a cozy, self-made image of a controllable God who makes them feel good. But do we thereby not lose the mystery of God, which alone can console?
2. Following diversions that promise happiness can alienate from the truly important questions in life. What are diversions in my life that I have to keep at bay?
3. God is all-powerful but he permits evil because of higher goods. How does pain fit into God's plan of creation and into the quest for joy?
4. If God is all powerful, he will be the judge of everything and set things right. Thus, Christians can hope in his justice, which is inseparable from his love. Yet how do we live this hope in our lives?
5. Jesus' suffering during his Passion makes him able to forgive because he became the object of humanity's hatred. How can our forgiveness imitate that of Jesus?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 9

1. The Incarnation of the Son of God surprised the whole of creation. It also demonstrated that we should not focus on feelings or sentiments but on the reality of God in our lives. What does it mean that God loves us and why is that different from saying “God want us to be happy”?
2. God is so real that he is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Yet we tend to marginalize God in our lives. The so called “deists” made God a watchmaker who observes creation but is not involved. Why does such a view kill genuine Christian faith?
3. In our secular society many have replaced God with counterfeit deities they worship as highest goods, such as health or money. It is easy to fall into this temptation but how do we avoid it or recover from it?
4. God heals our wounds, but we have to verbalize them. That means that we take his presence in our lives seriously and do not use him as a “feel-good-machine.” How can our lives be witnesses to this reality? Can this insight help us to appreciate the sacrament of confession better?
5. G.K. Chesterton writes that for a split-second God became an “atheist” because he even experienced the dark moment of dying alone and in agony. How did Jesus share with us even more suffering than just the Passion?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 10

1. What is the difference between original sin and personal sin, and why is it important to always remember this distinction?
2. God gave us free will, because he wants us to know what true love is and what it means to be loved freely—it is a way he shares his goodness with all of creation. How often do we appreciate our freedom and are aware of it? How often do we reflect on our love as an act of freedom in the image of God?
3. Repentance is not a guilt complex, but a recovery of the past, freeing oneself from the burden of guilt. People in the secular world do not understand this dynamic, but by remembering the past in an act of repentance we redeem it. How often do we go to confession or make a really decisive act of repentance? How successful are we in accepting God's forgiveness?

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:

CHAPTER 11

1. “Aging is not for the faint of heart,” a movie star in her nineties once said. Neither is the real God, I would add. Faith is an adventure and not a boring convention. When, however, did we last think about the adventures God took us on?
2. In our modern world, we are often disengaged from the world around us. Things are just there instead of having a deeper meaning, speaking to us. For example, earlier generations of Catholics engaged with the images they saw in church, the songs they sang as symbols of a heavenly reality—they could see in the piece of toast we have for breakfast a reminder of the bread from heaven, and so forth. How can we re-enchant our world and teach our children this Catholic imagination?
3. Adventure means finding surprises. Do we really want God to be behind the steering wheel? Are we ready to engage with his surprises?
4. God gave us freedom to do good and to be shaped by the Good. Freedom of choice does not mean that I have to have a bad choice available or else I am not free. Have I perhaps sometimes felt I was bound but really was free, after reading what Thomas Aquinas wrote about it? Where in my life do I fail to be free?
5. Every new day promises to be an adventure of walking with God. It can be a day like Noah’s, when God interrupted his routine and asked him to build an ark, or like St. Joseph’s to marry a pregnant girl, or St. Mother Teresa’s to keep on going for two decades despite being spiritually burnt out. What are the adventures of my life that I seek God’s assistance for? How could we live this attitude in our parishes?

PROMPTS FOR DISCUSSION:
EPILOGUE

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.