

DAY 1

Ask the Most Important Question

For I do not seek to understand in order to believe,
but I believe in order to understand.
For I know this: unless I believe I will not understand.

—*St. Anselm of Canterbury*

Read

It's all about Jesus.

Rebuilding your Catholic faith begins with that nagging, perhaps aching feeling in your heart for *more*: more connectedness, more community, more purpose. The rebuilding that those feelings can introduce ends with Jesus. That's our experience anyway.

If you're skeptical of the Church because you're mad at the Church or you've just grown bored with religion and its rules, we invite you to keep reading, because faith is not about the Church's missteps and it's not about religious rule keeping. It's about Jesus. He is the cornerstone of faith, the firm foundation of living and growing in faith.

And so, as we begin the process of rebuilding that this book proposes, we start with a question, a basic question, that comes in the Gospel of Matthew. Actually, that basic question is preceded by another question: "When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, 'Who do *people* say that the Son of Man is?'" (Matthew 16:13, emphasis added).

Apparently, *everyone* was talking about him, so the apostles had plenty of answers: “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matthew 16:14). Their answers reveal the conflict and confusion about the person and role of Jesus of Nazareth, as he knew it would. But all the noise sets the stage for that other question. It is the central question of this book. “[Jesus] said to them, ‘But who do *you* say that I am?’” (Matthew 16:15, emphasis added).

Who do you say Jesus is? In his book *Between Heaven and Hell*, author Peter Kreeft notes that every human being must fall into *two* of these four categories:

- people who claim to be God
- people who don't claim to be God
- sages
- non-sages

There are people who are *non-sages* and *don't claim to be God*. They are most of the people throughout human history. We assume just about everybody reading this book falls into this category. We definitely do. Then, there are the *non-sages who claim to be God*. These people are either not well or lying.

Next comes the category of the *sage*, a wise person. Historically, there have been many great and wise figures: Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and Oprah. Just kidding on Oprah, but here's the point: none of them *claimed to be God*.

Jesus is consistently recognized as a sage throughout the Common Era. Most would easily agree that he offers great, often unique, insight into living. But while other sages could say through study and discernment that they had found the *way*, come to recognize *truth*, or finally figured out *life*, only Jesus

said, “I *am* the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6, emphasis added).

Jesus was the Lord, a liar, or someone suffering from delusions. He didn’t leave any other options. So when Jesus asked his followers, “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter’s possible answers were limited, and he responded, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

It’s important to note that this is the first time any of the apostles made such a statement. They didn’t start out believing Jesus was the Son of God. They had to *come* to believe it. Peter was the first among them to embrace this belief, and Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father” (Matthew 16:17).

Jesus tells Simon Peter that he knows Peter has not arrived at his faith on his own; he’s just not smart enough. He had inspiration from God the Father. But the truth is that none of us is that smart. We all need help in coming to faith in Jesus. Faith is called a *theological virtue*, meaning it is a *gift* from God. We can choose whether or not to receive the gift, but it is a gift. That’s why it doesn’t make any sense for someone who has received faith in Jesus to judge those who haven’t.

Within the community of the Church, we have to answer the question of who Jesus is *objectively*, but that’s not enough. Jesus does not mean for the question to be an abstract one. It’s intended as a deeply personal and *subjective* one, and one we return to often. It is a question to be worked out in every area of our lives. So, as we begin this journey, ask the Father to help you draw closer to his Son and reveal who he is in your life. Then ask Jesus to help you follow him.

Reflect

How do you know someone is wise?

Who are people you respect for their wisdom?

Why does Jesus's wisdom stand out in human history?

Rebuild

God, our heavenly Father,
reveal to me the truth about your Son
who he is and who he can be in my life.
I want to get to know him better.
I desire a closer relationship with him.
During these forty days, strengthen my resolve,
and give me courage to believe.
I pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

[Jesus] said to them, "But who do you
say that I am?"

—Matthew 16:15

DAY 2

Ask the (Second) Most Important Question

You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.

—*St. Augustine*

Read

The most important question is “Who is Jesus in my life?” That bids the second most important question, “Is the effort to follow him worth it?”

We all follow something or someone in pursuit of wholeness and happiness. Some people make money and possessions the foundation of their lives. They focus most of their energy on building their net worth. Some people follow fame, achievement, and *success*. If they can gain celebrity as an actor or athlete, respect as a business leader, or influence as a political figure, then they believe they will be happy and find meaning. Some people set pleasure as their goal. They go from party to party, experience to experience, and relationship to relationship, believing that feeling good and having fun are worth giving their lives to. Some people are just addicted to power. And, of course, some people want it all.

Possessions, popularity, pleasure, power—they call us to follow, pursuing the happiness we all desire. But what they all reveal is actually a fundamental truth—that we instinctively know we

need something outside of ourselves to be satisfied, to feel complete. In that way, we are not unlike a man Jesus met on one of his journeys.

Here is how the encounter went: “Now someone approached him and said, ‘Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?’” (Matthew 19:16).

We know from the other gospel accounts of the same story that this guy wasn’t exactly lacking in worldly ways. Luke tells us he was a “ruler,” a person of position and power over others. Mark’s gospel includes the details that he was rich and young. In other words, he has it all: possessions, popularity, pleasure, and power. And yet, apparently, it isn’t enough. It doesn’t fulfill him.

We’ve all been let down by someone, or something, probably lots of things. And when that person or that thing fails to deliver on our expectations, we lie to ourselves that it is only a question of a little bit more: another new shiny object, a longer vacation, a girlfriend who really understands me, a husband who actually listens, and then we’ll be happy. Howard Hughes, an American business mogul and film producer, was asked how much money it takes to make a man happy, and he answered, “Just a little bit more.”

The young man calls Jesus “Teacher” because he believes Jesus has something to teach him about life, and not just *this* life but *eternal* life. And his question is a pretty important one, isn’t it? If you believe in heaven, you very much want to know what you have to do, what good deeds must be undertaken, to get in. However, that’s only one part of the question. Hearing the phrase “eternal life,” we tend to think of what happens *after* death. But when the gospels refer to eternal life, it is a reference to *quality of life* that can be experienced right now, as well as the life to come.

And Jesus replied, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). This is an entirely predictable, completely pedestrian answer, just what you would expect. And the text doesn’t say this, but perhaps Jesus started to walk

away and move on with his journey, so unimportant, so insignificant seemed the exchange. Besides, certainly there were other people seeking his attention and other questions being asked. Just as if you were out walking or on a run and someone asked you for directions, you probably would answer as you go.

But this guy would not give up: “He asked him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus replied, “‘You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother’; and “‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 19:18–19).

The man wants additional details, specific instructions. Is he living out all the commandments that will get him happiness here as well as get him home to heaven? So Jesus recites the basic ones. It is still an entirely shallow answer, really basic stuff that any school child could have repeated. It didn’t take any spiritual insight to know that you need to avoid murder. In fact, Jesus’s answer seems cliché, rather weak coming from someone who is supposed to be a great teacher. However, far from shallow, Jesus shrewdly leads this man deeper into the discussion. Does he really want to lean into the question of what *he* needs to do to find the life he’s looking for? And, it turns out, he does. He presses Jesus, “All these I have observed; what do I still lack?” (Matthew 19:20).

This young man acknowledges he’s done everything religious law dictates and has found it unsatisfying. Just as his wealth has failed to fulfill him, he knows there has to be more than following the rules and staying out of trouble, as these too have failed to fulfill him. His heart aches to experience something of the eternal that has up to this point eluded him.

Maybe, like this rich young ruler, you’ve tried the kind of religion that is all about religious rule keeping. Perhaps you’ve associated Catholicism with just keeping your nose clean, obeying the commandments, and checking the proper boxes. You fulfilled your obligations, but like this man, you have come to

understand there has to be more to faith than legalism. Maybe you walked away from church because the whole exercise just felt rote, shallow, and irrelevant to your life.

Like you, this guy is looking for more, and Jesus gives it to him. Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21).

The Gospel of Mark includes the telling detail that before Jesus told this man to give away his possessions, he looked at him and loved him (Mark 10:21a). Jesus loves the guy and loves that he is in search of the more his heart aches for. And he loves him enough to pause in his journey and tell this guy the truth: “If you want to find the fulfillment you seek, you’ve got to follow me, and for *you*, following me means giving up your wealth.” However, this passage is not about money; it’s about the man. And in *his* case, following Jesus also meant parting with his wealth.

“When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions” (Matthew 19:22). Notice the guy does not leave happy. He doesn’t go skipping merrily back to embrace his possessions. He goes away sad because he knows exactly what he will be going back to: more of the unsatisfying sameness of his life. He goes away sad because he does not want to do what is most *needed* to achieve what is most *desired*.

Can we do what is most needed to achieve what is most desired? And why should we? Is it worth it?

Reflect

What have you pursued over and over again, thinking that it would fill the ache in your heart for happiness but instead has consistently left you unfulfilled?

What have you invested in heavily—an opportunity, a relationship, or an ongoing activity—that ultimately disappointed?

If you say that Jesus is Lord, how can you show in your actions, pursuits, or decisions that he really can fulfill your longing for more?

Rebuild

Oh God, you know my mind and my heart.
Send your Holy Spirit to enlighten me
about the choices I make and the values I hold.
Awaken within me the desire for eternity that you have
placed in my heart. I pray through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

When the young man heard this statement,
he went away sad,
for he had many possessions.

—Matthew 19:22