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Is There a God?

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Introduction

When someone in the Western world today asks how we can know God exists, he or she usually has in mind the God presented to us in the Bible. Christianity, together with Judaism and Islam, has so shaped our common religious thinking that we usually don't start to think, as the ancient pagans did, about a collection of lesser, competing gods. When we say *God*, we mean one, great, first and ultimate, overall God, a creator and overseer and guide for the whole orderly universe. When we ask, "Is there a God?" we don't usually mean, "Is there any god out of a whole bunch?" but, "Is *the one* God real?"

This booklet is about knowing God, and mainly about what we can know of him by human reason. It presents, from the point of view of the Catholic Church, a reply to the question, "How can I know God exists?" Below are brief discussions of faith and reason, of proofs for the existence of God, and of practical steps that can be taken by those who desire

to find God. A reading list to guide those interested in further study is included at the end of this booklet.

Catholicism and Proofs

Catholics believe that the most accurate, certain and intimate way to know God in this life is by faith in Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus, whom St. Paul calls the *image of the invisible God*,¹ is, in person, the full revelation of God to mankind. We know all this not by scientific proof or argument but by faith, a gift of knowledge from God.²

Catholics do not believe that faith is the *only* way to know about God. People can know something about God – starting with the fact that he really exists – even before they have faith. St. Paul writes about this in his letter to the Romans: *Ever since the creation of the world [God's] invisible nature, namely His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.*³ In principle, God's existence can be known with certainty by every reasoning person.

These two ways of knowing about God – the supernatural way of faith and the natural way of reasoning – are not in competition with each other. Faith harmonizes with sound reasoning,⁴ even while it goes beyond the range of natural human understanding. This does not mean we should simply bypass reason and jump ahead to faith. In the first place, since faith comes from God it is not ours for the taking. And for the sake of those without faith, men and women who nevertheless have the power of natural reasoning, it is important to see what kind of *natural* knowledge of God can be developed. This natural or rational discovery of God is implied in anyone's coming to faith, and is sometimes an

explicit step on the road to belief in the God who reveals himself.

In defending the ability of human reason to know God, the Church is expressing her confidence in the possibility of speaking about him to all men and with all men, and therefore of dialogue with other religions, with philosophy and science, as well as with unbelievers and atheists.⁵

Logical proofs for God's existence are like the medical principles of good nutrition: they are of daily, practical importance in everybody's life but not everybody needs to understand them scientifically. Likewise, a knowledge of the theory about God or nutrition is quite different from putting accurate knowledge into practice; and furthermore, people can know and do what is right without comprehending all the nitty-gritty details and distinctions of medicine or theology. As St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) wrote, God gives faith to lots of people because otherwise, if he left us all to our natural reason alone, the truth about him would be discovered by only a few people (those with the time and interest to explore the issues in depth), after a long time and with the admixture of many errors.⁶ Since God isn't interested merely in our having correct ideas about him, but in our coming to love and know him personally, it makes sense that he doesn't just let us all sit and think out theories about him. He distributes the gift of faith generously, so that the body of believers enjoys a supernatural appreciation of the faith. "[A]roused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the [Church's] sacred teaching authority... receives the *faith once for all delivered to the saints*."⁷

But what if God has not given someone the gift of faith? Honest people can be unsure whether God is real, and

whether he is “the answer” to the questions of human existence. For people who do not enjoy the grace of faith, natural reasoning is the only place to begin. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that, even before faith, those who seek God discover certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences but rather in the sense of “converging and convincing arguments,” which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.⁸

One reason these arguments are important is that they can remove intellectual prejudices we may have against belief,⁹ by showing that faith and reason complement one another.

Checking Our Expectations

The English Catholic author, John Henry Newman (1801-1890), once said, “There is no truth, however overpoweringly clear, but men may escape from it by shutting their eyes.”¹⁰ No logical argument, experiment, or demonstration can ever *force* us to embrace a conclusion. As we all know from our own practice, we can readily ignore the truth in favor of our own pride, fear, or any other passion, especially when no one is at hand to hold us accountable. It cannot be expected, then, that any logical argument for the existence of God be capable of compelling our assent. This is the case all the more if we are insensible to our personal weakness and inconstancy, since feelings of self-sufficiency may incline us to a false confidence in our own opinions. All the arguments in the world, however convincing, cannot move the man who chooses to ignore them. And even if we do not ignore a conclusion, there is still the easy option of accept-

ing it superficially. We can say, “Oh, yes, of course!,” but fail to put the truth into practice.

Suppose, for example, that a man – let’s call him “Ralph” – is addicted to nicotine, and smokes 40 cigarettes a day. Ralph’s friends can sit him down and give him plenty of good reasons to quit smoking. They can even explain how cigarettes are bad for his lungs, promote cancer, and so on. If Ralph is stubborn, however, he doesn’t ever *have* to agree that smoking is bad for him, even though it really is. But suppose, on the other hand, that Ralph nods his head and agrees with his friends: does this mean he is going to try to stop smoking? Not at all! Ralph may never try to put his conclusion into practice. Even before we consider the habits and physical addiction Ralph has to confront, he may lack the simple *willingness* to change. Without this willingness to act on the known truth, Ralph is never going to improve his situation.

Altering our example, suppose that, instead of smoking, Ralph is a man who does not believe in God. He may come across various reasons for belief, but choose either to ignore them or to treat them as merely interesting ideas: whatever the arguments may be, it is up to Ralph to decide what he wants to do with their conclusions.

If someone is from the start unwilling to accept a certain conclusion or to begin to act on it, there is little reason to start arguing about the matter. Instead, it would make more sense to discuss the reasons for being closed (even before discussion) to the arguments, or for preferring to put God and religion out of our thoughts. To admit the reality of the God Christians believe in, after all, means a confrontation with Christianity’s radical call to self-surrender and

conversion of life. When we have not yet had a taste of the joy and peace that are natural to the Christian life, it can be extremely difficult to make the practical investment of changing our ways. (In fact, here we can begin to appreciate that the gift of faith, more than a merely mental modification, involves a security and willingness to act that also come from God: it is not in us to believe without this grace by which we assent to God's revelation of himself and act on it.)

“Proofs” or arguments for the existence of God, finally, are not meant to overcome every cause of unbelief. Their job is to show the objective thinker that belief is reasonable. If we are not peacefully open to the question, however, but are pushed around by desires, fears and prejudices about the matter, the best thing to do is to look beyond the question of proofs and into our own motives and the truth we already know.

What the Catholic Church offers everyone is a deeper view of human life and the possibility of true happiness and fulfillment. If we are not interested in great things – great joy, great goodness, great flourishing in knowledge and happiness and love – then the question of God's reality will probably not be an important one for us. If we think of ourselves as “just smarter animals,” then the Church invites us to discover the depth and greatness of human nature, which is the way to see the urgency and meaning of questions about God.

Is There Any Proof That God Exists?

The Catholic Church proposes no official “proof” for the existence of God, since her task is the open proclama-

tion of the Gospel. The job of making philosophical arguments belongs to individual thinkers. Arguments for God fall into three groups: *ontological* arguments (from the reality or definition or idea of God), *cosmological* arguments (from the physical world), and arguments from *human nature and experience*. Following the lead of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1998), we will take a brief look at examples of the arguments from the world and from human experience.¹¹ The ontological arguments, because they are both very controversial and very complicated, have been left out: good presentations of these arguments may be found in the books by Brian Davies and William Wainwright listed in this booklet's bibliography.

Particular Proofs

Knowing God from the Physical World

The oldest Christian “proofs” or arguments for the existence of God are part of what is called *natural theology*, the study or discussion of what we can know of God by our natural human powers. Traditionally, natural theology begins with cosmological arguments for the existence of God, arguments based on what we can all learn from the physical world. A cosmological argument takes some fact about the world and shows that that fact can only be accounted for by the existence of God. The Bible itself suggests to us the beginning of these sorts of arguments, e.g., in Psalm 19 where the heavens are said to “announce the glory of God” and the day and the night to “make known the message” of his glory. St. Augustine (354-430) took this psalm to mean that the heavenly bodies “spoke” of God by being the sorts of changing things that require an unchanging creator to

account for their existence,¹² which is the stand taken by later thinkers in more detailed arguments.

Case #1: Causes and Effects

The first “Case for God” is taken from St. Thomas Aquinas. It is the second of the five “ways” or proofs he proposed in his *Summa Theologiae* (I, 2, 3). St. Thomas did not write this argument to convert atheists, but to show the reasonableness of accepting God’s existence. (He also wanted to illustrate the scope of theology and human reason’s relation to faith.)

Looking around the world, we see causes and effects. The physical universe is full of things that influence each other. Children are caused by parents. Walls and beams cause the roofs of houses to stay up. Trains move because locomotives are pulling them. When we see changing things, or things that need not be, we naturally ask “Why?” We ask what *caused* them.

In his argument, St. Thomas is thinking of something like a roof held up by walls, or like a stack of bricks. Nothing is necessarily moving or changing, but one thing relies on another for its state of being.

Sooner or later, our chain of causes and effects has to have a beginning. It cannot go backwards forever. To say it did go back forever would be ridiculous, like saying we could stack up an endless number of bricks without having one on the bottom to hold up the others. It would be like trying to hang up a long chain by adding links to the top: no matter how many links we added, we would need something more than a link (our hand, or a secure hook) to keep them up. In a world of things that rely on causes, there must be some

reality that is independent, that does not rely on anything else. This first reality is radically different from the rest. Something must be self-sufficient, independent, uncaused.

This uncaused being is the one Christians mean when they speak of the God who created and sustains all things. This argument does not demonstrate that the “uncaused cause” has all the characteristics Christians attribute to God: it doesn’t prove he is a person, good, just, or interested in us. All it says is that there is a being on whom others depend, who sustains and is the explanation for the world.

Case #2: The World’s Design

Another argument can be drawn from the observable order of the universe. We can see that plants, for instance, act for their own good. They turn their leaves to the sunlight, grow roots to reach water, drop seeds in the right season and shed their leaves for the winter. No one thinks that plants decide these things, or plan them: it’s just natural, we say. But how can something without the power of reasoning know what to do? How can it act for the sake of future benefits? How can it seek its own flourishing? How did it develop, adapt or evolve, so that it reproduces future generations by seeding?

For unintelligent things like plants or viruses to act for their own good, they must be appropriately formed by a designer with intelligence and foresight. The magnificent order and harmony of individual things (not to mention the balance and order of things working together) has no reasonable explanation except this. Not only the fact that things work well, and work together, but the fact that they act for

future goods tells us that they do not run by chance but by plan and intention.

In order to deny this, someone would have to take the stand of materialism and say that the whole world just happens to exist and to be as it is, and that no explanation is to be sought after. While some may consider this a viable possibility, it requires us to accept a fundamental frustration: we must agree not to ask what causes the existence of things, and we must take it on faith that *there is no cause we can know*. How anyone could be sure there is no cause for things is left unclear by materialism, which asks us simply to accept that the physical world is, for no reason, all there is.

Knowing God from Human Nature

Catholics hold that God's existence can be known not only from the physical world but from the nature and experience of the human person.¹³ This second kind of "proof" is more controversial than those that focus on the tangible cosmos. The difficulty lies in agreeing on how to describe and interpret the universal experiences of conscience, love, loneliness, intuition, and so on. Many people, after all, don't make anything of these at all, but take them for granted. Cosmological arguments, which require hardly any introspection or self-examination, are more "objective" and more easily verified by common sense.

Case #3: Conscience

John Henry Newman argued that conscience points to the existence of God. He notes that we mean two things by conscience: our power to judge prospective actions, and our feelings (once we do act) of being approved or blamed.

Newman argues that our sense of the rightness or wrongness of our deeds always includes a sense of obligation and responsibility to another, invisible, person.

When we have done right or wrong, we don't feel as we do about *ideas* of good and evil, or even as we do when we have done something (e.g., drawn a portrait) that meets or falls short of our sense of beauty or proportion. Instead, when we do what is good or evil we *feel* we have met and fulfilled (a "good conscience"), or neglected and betrayed (a "bad conscience"), a duty, a personal obligation and responsibility. We feel, by conscience, that someone else is involved in our moral life. This is true whether or not we actually see someone hurt, or witnessing our actions, or judging us. Here, says Newman, is why we call conscience a voice. "My conscience *tells* me..." "Do what your conscience *says* is right..." Newman writes:

If, as is the case, we feel responsibility, are ashamed, are frightened, at transgressing the voice of conscience, this implies that there is One to whom we are responsible, before whom we are ashamed, whose claims upon us we fear. If, on doing wrong, we feel the same tearful, broken-hearted sorrow which overwhelms us on hurting a mother; if on doing right we enjoy the same sunny serenity of mind, the same soothing, satisfactory delight which follows on our receiving praise from a father, we certainly have within us the image of some person, to whom our love and veneration look, in whose smile we find our happiness, for whom we yearn, towards whom we direct our pleadings, in whose anger we are troubled and waste away. The feelings within us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being: we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel

shame before a horse or a dog; we have no remorse or compunction upon breaking mere human law; yet, so it is, conscience excites all these painful emotions, confusion, foreboding, self-condemnation; and on the other hand it sheds upon us a deep peace, a sense of security, a resignation, and a hope, which there is no sensible, no earthly object to elicit. "The wicked flees, when no one pursueth;"¹⁴ then why does he flee? Whence his terror? Who is it that he sees in solitude, in darkness, in the hidden chambers of his heart? If the cause of these emotions does not belong to this visible world, the object to which his perception is directed must be supernatural and divine; and thus the phenomena of conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with a picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive, and is the creative principle of religion, as the Moral Sense is the principle of ethics.¹⁵

The case Newman presents rings true with many people, and helps show the reasonableness of acknowledging the existence of God. He does not mean for it to *prove* there is a God, but to show how our natural feelings and moral experience support and are finely fitted for the truth that there is a God, a God interested in our goodness.

Case #4: Human Restlessness

Another convincing case can be made for the existence of God from the fact of human restlessness and longing. This is not a deductive argument, with strict logical steps, but a line of thinking that shows how the human condition points out or suggests that there is a God.

At the very beginning of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine famously writes, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” This is a major theme of the whole book; if we know ourselves, we know that we are incomplete and restless. Our pleasures don’t last. We hope for perfect joy in something, and then it passes away or we get bored. We have an endless appetite for secure love, joy, peace, knowledge, personal communion, and nowhere in life do we see an infinite object to match our heart’s desire.

God, says St. Augustine together with the whole Catholic tradition, is our heart’s desire. It is God that we want, though we hardly know him. It is as if our hearts were locked up and God were the key, the missing part without which we drag along in incompleteness. No matter what we use to try filling the hole, nothing stays in place and gives us real satisfaction, real joy

Does there have to be a God, just because we have a deep desire for one? No, our desire could mean something else. It is like the case of physical thirst: if a man is thirsty, this does not strictly prove that there are things he can drink, or that he will find them. Still, both desires certainly suggest the possibility of satisfaction. Common sense says that desires somehow match reality (which is why no one really wakes up hungry for unicorn sandwiches). We may not get what we long for – perfect joy, peace, and so on – but there is something reasonable in saying that this universal human desire is good grounds for thinking that some reality corresponds to our restless longing.

In a book of meditations, Newman wrote:

What can give me happiness but Thou? If I had all the resources of time and sense about me, just as I have now, should I not in the course of ages, nay, of years, weary of them? Did this world last forever, would it ever be able to supply my soul with food? Is there any earthly thing which I do not weary of at length even now? Do old men love what young men love? Is there not constant change? I am sure then, my God, that the time would come, though it might be long in coming, when I should have exhausted all the enjoyment which the world could give. Thou alone, my dear Lord, art the food for all eternity, and Thou alone. Thou alone canst satisfy the soul of man.¹⁶

Sensitivity to our incompleteness and an awareness of our readiness for a good beyond “time and sense” does not instantly prove that there is a God, but, like Newman’s argument from conscience, points to a reasonable explanation: we long for rest and fulfillment in a divine good because such a thing is possible. Our restless longing is a symptom of our being at a distance from God, who made us for himself.

Steps Toward Knowing God

So far, we have seen something of how people can acquire some natural knowledge of God. What can be gained this way, however, is often not the kind of knowledge we are after. For one thing, it is very limited. The knowledge we can have of God by natural reasoning would be like knowing that your spouse exists, is conscious, and is really married to you: these are facts worth knowing, but they leave a lot to be desired! Our knowledge of God, like that of a spouse or friend, can be of a far more familiar, intimate kind. After all, we are not after true ideas merely, but after

intelligent contact with the living reality. The various “proofs” and arguments that can help us see the reasonableness and necessity of admitting the existence of God cannot finally satisfy our desire to know him.

Man’s faculties make him capable of coming to a knowledge of the existence of a personal God. But for man to be able to enter into real intimacy with him, God willed both to reveal himself to man and to give him the grace of being able to welcome this revelation in faith.¹⁷

The reason that proofs and arguments for God are not enough is that we require a day-to-day, living communion with the God who made us. Yet because he is God, and because he is the true God (not a puny pagan spirit), he is not ours to grab onto. Intimacy with God becomes possible only if God himself bridges the gap between himself and us. What Catholics confess is that God *has* bridged this gap by revealing himself, and most importantly by becoming one of us without ceasing to be God. We believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is the one in whom we know God and in whom we enter (especially through the sacraments) God’s own life. This is not something we try to prove or demonstrate by arguments, but it is what the Church knows, thanks to the self-revelation of God. Here we leave our discussion of natural knowledge, and offer an “inside” view (from inside the Church) dependent on faith.

It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will.¹⁸ His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature.... The

most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.¹⁹

God... provides men with constant evidence of himself in created realities.²⁰ And furthermore, wishing to open up the way to heavenly salvation, he manifested himself to our first parents [to Abraham and the patriarchs, and to Moses and the prophets].... And so, throughout the ages he prepared the way for the Gospel.²¹

After God had spoken many times and in various ways through the prophets, “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.”²² For he sent his Son, the eternal Word who enlightens all men, to dwell among men and to tell them of the inner life of God. Hence, Jesus Christ sent as a man among men, “speaks the words of God,”²³ and accomplishes the saving work which the Father gave him to do.²⁴ As a result, he himself – to see whom is to see the Father²⁵ – completed and perfected revelation and confirmed it with divine guarantees. He did this by the total fact of his presence and self-manifestation – by words and works, signs and miracles, but above all by his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending the Spirit of truth. He revealed that God was with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life.²⁶

Although the Church never claims that any of this can be proven by natural speculation, the Gospel’s logic – or, we could say, a glimmer of the Wisdom of God – stands out when we consider the idea of a God who completely transcends the created world but is nevertheless intent on bring-

ing to himself creatures capable of being joined to him. As persons, we are the kind of beings, with powers of love and understanding, that can have something to do with God. But since God is fundamentally different from us and beyond us, and since it is not in our power suddenly to become like him, it remains for God – without ceasing to be God – to come down to us and to join us to himself by means suited to us.

There are two practical ways for people who wish to know this God, the God who reveals himself, to go after him. Both take acts of faith. Both require our willingness to make a kind of investment, without tangible (or, we might say, scientific) certainty of a return. God does not *owe* us anything or make himself subject to our manipulation, but he does voluntarily promise a reward to those who seek him in faith.

The principal means by which people are called to seek God is prayer.

In the act of creation, God calls every being from nothingness into existence.... Even after losing through his sin his likeness to God, man remains an image of his Creator, and retains the desire for the one who calls him into existence. All religions bear witness to men's essential search for God.²⁷

Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response.²⁸

Turning to God in prayer is not easy, especially if it is new to us, if we are in the habit of ignoring our conscience, or if we are unsure whether God is real or not. Perhaps the best advice to be given is: *try to pray*. We may have to approach God in doubt and uncertainty, but it is more important that we make some honest, unpretending effort than that we do nothing. We can pray for God to let us know him, we can pray for guidance. We can pray for the desire to pray. We may even, if we are full of doubts, have to pray conditionally, and make a brief prayer to the God we are not sure is listening: “Lord God, if you are there listening, come and help me, since alone I cannot find you.” To some this will seem foolish but anyone seeking God has probably already begun this kind of prayer, at least on the grounds that it can do no harm and might do some good.²⁹

It will probably occur to anyone who tries to pray and is wondering about the truth of the Catholic faith that the second practical step to be taken is to find out what the Church professes. For some, this will mean beginning formal instruction, and perhaps even taking the steps toward Baptism and the Church’s other sacraments of initiation. For others, thoughts of embracing the faith of the Church may be far off, but further reading or a conversation with a priest or other believer may be appropriate. While not everyone will feel very sure about taking both of these serious steps, those who want to know if God is real will be on their way to knowing him better if they attempt to pray and to take a closer look at the Gospel professed and preached by the Catholic Church.

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¹ Col 1:15. See also 1 Cor 11:7 and 2 Cor 4:4.

² See Heb 11:1.

³ Rom 1:20.

⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 156, 159.

⁵ *Catechism*, 39.

⁶ See *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 1.

⁷ *Catechism*, 92f. See Jude 3 and *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

⁸ *Catechism*, 31.

⁹ *Catechism*, 35.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, "The Ventures of Faith," *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. IV, sermon 20.

¹¹ *Catechism*, 31.

¹² See St. Augustine's *Confessions*, 11.4.

¹³ *Catechism*, 31.

¹⁴ See Prv 28:1.

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame 1979), 101.

¹⁶ John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, 3.1.2.

- ¹⁷ *Catechism*, 35.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Eph 1:9.
- ¹⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, 2. Cf. Mt 11:27; Jn 1:14 and 17; 14:6; 17:1-3; 2 Cor 3:16 and 4:6; Eph 1:3-14.
- ²⁰ Cf. Rom 1:19-20.
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- ²² Heb 1:1f.
- ²³ Jn 3:34.
- ²⁴ Cf. Jn 5:36; 17:4.
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- ²⁷ *Catechism*, 2566.
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- ²⁹ On prayer, see the *Catechism*, 2725ff.

