

## **Aim to Explain the Faith**

One very important part of being Catholic, and one that most of us are not very good at, is being able to explain and defend our faith. St. Peter gave us this very task when wrote: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear” (1 Pet. 3:15b-16a). As your priest and pastor, it is my particular duty to help all of you understand your faith better so that you can evangelize and catechize others better yourself. For myself, the best resource that taught me my faith when I was young was the *Baltimore Catechism* (BC), which was part of our homeschooling curriculum (we used the New St. Joseph Edition).

Here’s a little history on the BC (cf. “Baltimore Catechism” article, Wikipedia): In the nineteenth century, repeated efforts had been made in the United States towards an arrangement by which a uniform textbook

of Christian Doctrine might be used by all Catholics. As early as 1829, the bishops assembled in the First Provincial Council of Baltimore decreed: “A catechism shall be written which is better adapted to the circumstances of this Province” (Decr. xxxiii). The wish of the bishops was not carried out, and the First and Second Plenary Councils of Baltimore (1852 and 1866) repeated the decree of 1829. At last, in 1885, was issued “A Catechism of Christian Doctrine, Prepared and Enjoined by Order of the Third Council of Baltimore.” The so-called *Baltimore Catechism* was the *de facto* standard Catholic school text in the United States from 1885 to the late 1960s. While there are, of course, newer catechisms that have the benefit of incorporating the insights of the Second Vatican Council, I think the BC is the best resource to use in the context of bulletin articles. This is partially because the style of the BC is far simpler than the *United States Catechism for Adults*, which is written more as a chapter book than the typical catechism style of a reference book with short, topical paragraph. The BC is also simpler than the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and also covers its material in only 499 paragraphs versus the CCCs 2865 (wow, that would be a lot of bulletin articles!). But the best part of the BC is that it’s all question and answer. That makes it great for explaining the faith to other. Plus, they’re not hard to memorize. One of the great weaknesses of modern education (in my opinion) is the dying skill of memorization. I know that you could get your children to memorize one question a week if you were serious about it (and if you reviewed the past ones from time to time). If you’d like to find the whole BC (revised edition of 1941) in one place, you can find it free online at <http://www.catholicity.com/baltimore-catechism/>. So, my hope is to cover all the paragraphs in the BC before my time as your pastor is over. We’ll begin next Sunday!

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As I mentioned the other week, I want to try and go systematically through the *Baltimore Catechism* and refresh all of our memories on the most basic teachings of the Church. The better we understand our faith, the easier it will be to defend it from error and share it with others.

### **Q. 1. Who made us?**

A. God made us. *In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. (Genesis 1:1)*

This question may seem obvious, but we must remember how far-reaching the answer is. Many

people is today's world would not answer "God." A few might point to another "who," such as Scientologists and other fringe groups who believe that advanced aliens in some way developed the human race here on this planet. However, for most non-believers, the answer is: no one. No personal being created us; no intelligent design is evident in our bodies or minds. True, they will trace the chain of causality all the way back to the Big Bang for us—our parents made us, as their parents did them, and on backwards through the processes of organic, chemical, and atomic evolution, to that mathematically incalculable singularity from which the physical universe sprang (or banged). Of course, as Catholics, while we are not bound to accept the theories of empirical science as necessarily true, we also have no problem from a biblical or theological point of view in accepting this chain of causality that the sciences propose. But the problem for those who don't believe in an omnipotent God working through the laws of His creation is that there is no reason, no purpose, to our lives. The question becomes not "Who made us," but "What made us." And the answer is chance, probability, an accident. We might just as easily not exist, and no one would care if we didn't. This means, also, that there is no true goal that we as humans are trying to attain, and that our lives have no objective value, but only the subjective value that myself or others are willing to give me. The belief that God made us is so basic, and yet it is the great divider in the way that humans view the world. For us, the world is not wonderful and meaningless; rather, the world is intentional and rational (and wonderful!): an open book that points to a personal God Who is our Creator and to an individual destiny for each of us that can be reached when we live according to the design and plan of our Maker.

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### **Q. 2. Who is God?**

A. God is the Supreme Being, infinitely perfect, who made all things and keeps them in existence. *In him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)*

Notice that this conception of God really does not depend on Divine Revelation. In fact, we might say that the question is really asking "What is God?" because for most of us "Who" implies our Christian understanding of the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. What is God? Our first knowledge of God comes from that fact that He is the Creator (and Sustainer) of everything. Using our reason, we can observe the natural world and logically conclude—apart from religious belief or practice—that there must be a God. In fact, that verse from Acts is actually St. Paul quoting a pagan poet. The ancient philosophers, especially Greeks like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, exercised their reason to the utmost and came to the conclusion—by philosophical investigation—that there must be one source of being and goodness and truth and beauty, which would be the only thing worthy of being called God. Aristotle spoke of God as the Unmoved Mover, giving voice to the idea that has been used to combat atheists ever since: that a contingent, changing world must have an unchanging, necessary Original Cause which not even the Big Bang Theory can explain away. (And not the television show...if that's

what came to your mind just now, you need to watch less TV.) In other words, from creation and from reason we know that God must be greater than all created beings, be the source of all perfection, and be the reason and power behind the world.

But it is worth putting in a little caveat here on the term “Supreme Being.” Fr. Robert Barron speaks very eloquently on this topic, using the insights of St. Thomas Aquinas. His point is that it is a little misleading to think of God as *a* being. It is not even true that God is the biggest, strongest, smartest being out there. In fact, it is not going too far to say that God is no thing—that He is nothing—because when we try to think of God, we reduce Him by our human conceptions of being and ‘thing-ness.’ (I know that sounds weird, but it’s actually part of the ancient practice called “negative theology,” where we think about what God is not.) Rather, God is *Being Itself*—the sheer act of existence, the ground of all other being, the only necessary Being (*ipsum esse subsistens* in Latin). This is why there is no contradiction between the findings of empirical science and our faith in God. God is an entirely different type of being than anything else. Again, He isn’t actually a “type” of being at all, but Being Itself. That is why we can be confident in our scientific observations about matter, space, and time, while still truly seeing the Hand of God at work in and through all things.

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### **Q. 3. Why did God make us?**

A. God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven. *Eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him. (1 Corinthians 2:9)*

This question is answered in a more iconic way by the fourth version of the Baltimore Catechism, intended for older students, which answers the question this way: “**A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.**” Both answers are insightful. First of all, how often do we think about the fact that God made us to show forth His goodness? My purpose is to show God’s goodness to the world! There is a famous quotation from one of the Early Church Fathers, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, who said, “*Gloria Dei est vivens homo;*” which means, “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Of course, St. Irenaeus goes on to say that being “fully alive” means focusing on God. That’s why the *BC #4* gives us some more detail on how we show forth God’s goodness, namely, by knowing, loving, and serving Him. Why this order? First of all, we cannot truly love what we do not know. Do you love Debbie Gerner? Almost certainly not: you don’t know who she is. I love her because I know who she is (she’s my Mom; Gerner was her maiden name). In the same way, the more we know about God, the more we are able to love Him. This is why it is so important for us to share our faith and spread the Good News about Who Jesus is, so that others may know Him better and love Him more. Now, God is so good that we might truly say that to know Him is to love Him. But what is love? Just a sentiment or an abstract idea—as when the

young ladies of my generation used to sit in front of the TV and say “I love you, Brad Pitt”? No, true love means taking action. And that is why we serve God: if we love Him, then we do His Will. If, therefore, we are faithful in this life in showing forth God’s goodness, then God is able to bring us to the happiness of Heaven. Two things here: first, God want’s us to be happy! We forget that a lot. God made us to be happy and does everything He can in this life to help us reach true happiness. On the other hand, the second point is: where does God want us to be happy? Here on earth? No—in Heaven. Why? Because God knows that we cannot be happy here on earth. He did not put us here to live as if this were our home. He put us in this life as in a kind of incubator, to help us grow up, to test us, and to see if we will truly be faithful to Him. Of course, He gives us lots of things in this life that make us a little happy, but total happiness is impossible in this world—we will never find the true happiness of our eternal home until we get to Heaven. Although these answers are still simplistic in the grand scheme of life, they are very important. We as Catholics know what we were made for, why we are here, what our purpose is in life. So many people struggle in life with that very question. How very blessed we are in Christ Jesus to have as complete an answer as can be had in this world, to know the meaning of our lives.

### **Aim to Explain the Faith**

We’ve been on break from my attempt to try and go systematically through the *Baltimore Catechism* because of our reflections on the Seven Penitential Psalms. Today we start back. I do want to take a short break this week from the *Baltimore Catechism #1*, which is the most basic version, and insert a few questions from the *BC #4*, designed for older students.

### **Q. What is man?**

A. Man is a creature composed of a body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God.

[Then God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Gen. 1:26)]

Having asked in our last article (a while ago now) what God is, we now consider what we are.

The *BC #4* adds some further explanation to the basic answer: “Man differs from anything else in creation. All things else are either entirely matter, or entirely spirit. An angel, for example, is all spirit, and a stone is all matter; but man is a combination of both spirit and matter—of soul and of body.” This is a hugely important point in understanding the human person, i.e., in anthropology. While even reason and science indicate that man is more than just the sum of his parts and cannot be reduced to his body, we are also told in the Bible’s account of Creation, “Then the LORD God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). What this means is that God made our body and soul to go together. I have heard it said that our body “embodies” our soul, and our soul “ensouls” our body. Christians are not like the Greek philosophers or other dualists that believe the body to be a prison for the soul. We know that even if we go to Heaven when we die, we will not be complete until our bodies are raised on the Day of Judgement, reunited with our souls, and glorified. This means, by the way, that it is not just our biology that determines our sexuality; we believe that a man has a masculine soul and a woman has a feminine soul. This is yet another reason why the Church—even while loving, including, and ministering to

homosexual people—refuses to legitimize or normalize the homosexual lifestyle. (An excellent literary account of this theology can be found in the first few chapters of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, where he gives an account of the creation of the Ainur [angels] for his fictional Middle Earth.) The *BC #4* continues:

**Q. Is this likeness in the body or in the soul?**

A. This likeness is chiefly in the soul.

Obviously, this is still Catholic teaching, as next week’s article will make clear. It is worth pointing out, however, that St. John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* has filled in a missing piece here. While our likeness to God is chiefly in the soul, our human bodies allow us to reflect God in a different way—particularly in the power a married couple has to express God’s fruitfulness in co-creating with God to bring children into the world. The family, a community of mutual love and relationship brought into being by the love between husband and wife, is a faint reflection of the Most Holy Trinity.

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We continue our short break this week from the *Baltimore Catechism #1*, which is the most basic version, and insert a few questions from the *BC #4*, designed for older students.

**Q. How is the soul like to God?**

A. The soul is like God because it is a spirit that will never die, and has understanding and free will.

The *BC* then expands upon these four characteristics of the soul that make us like God. 1.) Like God, the soul is a *spirit*, a purely invisible, non-physical, non-spatial type of being. “[N]o one denies the existence of the wind or of electricity on account of their being invisible. Why then should anyone say there are no spirits—no God, no angels, no souls—simply because they cannot be seen, when we have other proofs, stronger than the testimony of our sight, that they really and truly exist?” 2.) The soul is also *immortal*: “It will last as long as God Himself.” (By the way, don’t confuse this with “eternal.” Only God is eternal, meaning He has no beginning and no end. We are immortal—we will have no end, but we did have a beginning.) 3.) The soul has *understanding* or reason. “By reason [man] reflects upon the past, and judges what may happen in the future. He sees the consequences of his actions. He not only knows what he does, but why he does it.” The *BC* then compares mankind to animals to highlight the gift of reason. “Animals act at times as if they knew just why they were acting; but it is not so. It is we who reason upon their actions, and see why they do them; but they do not reason, they only follow their instinct.” Now, I’m sure that at this point the *BC* has all the parish animal-lovers upset. But let’s clarify for a second: none of us want to detract from the beauty and wonder of animals, or treat them poorly. Christians love animals, which were all made by God as gifts and companions for us (see Gen. 2:18-20), and which are good in themselves apart from us (see Gen. 1:20-25). Still, we must recognize that animals do not have reason as we do. The *BC* gives some good arguments: “If animals could reason, they ought to improve in their condition. Men become more civilized day by day. They invent many things that were unknown to their forefathers. [...] But, we never see anything of this kind in the actions of animals. [...]

[Furthermore, when] man teaches an animal any action, it cannot teach the same to its young. It is clear, therefore, that animals cannot reason.” It is rather we, who as human beings have the gift of reason—it is we who must use that similarity with God to bring the world and all the other creatures in it closer to our common Creator. 4.) Finally, the soul has *free will*. “This is another grand gift of God, by which I am able to do or not do a thing, just as I please. I can even sin and refuse to obey God. [...] I may use this great gift either to benefit or injure myself. [...] I turn this freedom to my benefit if I do what God wishes when I could do the opposite”. What the *BC* is trying to capture here is the idea of “freedom for.” While it is true that God gave us free will, making it possible for us to do both good and evil, He did not give us free will *so that we might* do evil. Rather, we are free *so that we might* do what is good. Ironically, the more we use our freedom to do evil, the less free we become; as Jesus says, “everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin” (Jn. 8:34). Our freedom is not for evil (although we may use it for such); rather, our freedom is for good. It is in these four characteristics of the soul—as spiritual, as immortal, having understanding, and having free will—that we are most like God.

### **Aim to Explain the Faith**

Before we get entirely off of the topic of human beings and continue with the series of questions found in the *Baltimore Catechism #1*, I wanted to insert a few questions from the corresponding section of *BC #3* (hence the difference in numbering), which we haven’t encountered yet. These questions, designed for somewhat older students, are thought provoking for all of us.

#### **Q. 126. What do we mean by the “end of man”?**

A. By the “end of man” we mean the purpose for which he was created: namely, to know, love, and serve God.

This question reminds us of something we’ve covered already, namely, that we were intentionally created by a personal God, and so we have a reason, a goal, a purpose for existing. Our reason for existing is not found within ourselves (only God contains His own reason for existing), but is rather found outside of ourselves, in God. This is why we must search for happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment, which we can ultimately find in God alone.

#### **Q. 127. How do you know that man was created for God alone?**

A. I know that man was created for God alone because everything in the world was created for something more perfect than itself: but there is nothing in the world more perfect than man; therefore, he was created for something outside this world, and since he was not created for the Angels, he must have been created for God.

This question blew my mind the first time I read the answer. Everything is created for something else—how true, how beautiful, and yet how forgotten this insight is. Why do so many people talk on and on about environmentalism and harmony with nature? Because they have a sense of how connected and related everything is. But our job in this interconnected web of life is not try and keep our ‘harmful’ human influence away from pristine nature. Rather, we are to be stewards and shapers, harmonizing of all of creation into an offering to God. Also, how often do we hear that there is nothing in the world more perfect than man? And yet this is what our faith teaches us. Are we sinful and imperfect? Yes. But we are still the most glorious, powerful, and valuable creature in the physical world. And even though angels are superior to us in most ways, God did not make us to serve them. Rather, they serve us, and together we both find our only true end in God.

#### **Q. 128. In what respect are all men equal?**

A. All men are equal in whatever is necessary for their nature and end. They are all composed of a body and soul; they are all created to the image and likeness of God; they are all gifted with understanding and free will; and they have all been created for the same end—God.

I just want to point out, that these concepts of “nature” and “end” are often rejected and sneered at by modern society. They are the basis for many of the Church’s most unpopular teachings on how God wants us to live. And yet, for those familiar with the thousands-of-years-old philosophical and artistic traditions of the human race, human nature and the meaning of life (i.e., our end) are needed for the world to make any sense.

**Q. 129. Do not men differ in many things?**

A. Men differ in many things, such as learning, wealth, power, etc.; but these things belong to the world and not man’s nature. He came into this world without them and he will leave it without them. Only the consequences of good or evil done in this world will accompany men to the next.

**Aim to Explain the Faith**

We return today to the series of questions found in the *Baltimore Catechism #1*. May this review help us to be knowledgeable of our own faith and more prepared to give an account of our hope to others.

**Q. 4. What must we do to gain the happiness of heaven?**

A. To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love, and serve God in this world.

*Lay not up to yourselves treasures on earth; where the rust and moth consume and where thieves break through and steal. But lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven; where neither the rust nor moth doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. (Matthew 6:19-20)*

This question brings to mind an important distinction in Catholic theology, namely, the distinction between justification and salvation, also known as the distinction between faith and works. Unfortunately, it is an arguing point between Catholics and many flavors of Protestants. St. Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). At the same time, St. James writes, “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. [...] For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:24, 26). Are these statements contradictory? No. Faith is always the primary thing necessary to get to Heaven because the grace of salvation is a free gift of God in Jesus Christ. “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). However, as question 4 of the *BC* is pointing out, faith is necessary but not sufficient. True, works (i.e., our response to God) are secondary to faith in getting to Heaven, but they are still indispensable. If we do not—to the degree our circumstances allow—know, love, and serve God in this world, then our faith is dead and we will never get to Heaven. As St. James also says, “You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble” (Jas. 2:19).

**Aim to Explain the Faith**

We return today to the series of questions found in the *Baltimore Catechism (BC) #1*. May this review help us to be knowledgeable of our own faith and more prepared to give an account of our hope to others.

**Q. 5. From whom do we learn to know, love, and serve God?**

A. We learn to know, love, and serve God from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who teaches us through the Catholic Church.

*I have come a light into the world that whoever believes in Me may not remain in darkness.*  
(John 12:46)

The answer to this question is structured in an important way. The most basic answer is “Jesus Christ.” It is He Who teaches us to know, love, and serve God. He did this by His teaching and example when He lived His earthly life here among us 2000 years ago. Much of this teaching and example is preserved in the four canonical Gospels, and a few other parts, along with lots of applications and explanations of Jesus’ words and life, are contained in the rest of the New Testament. But, it is not just the historical data, so to speak, that we have to teach us. We have Jesus Himself, Who says, “I am with you always, even until the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). He teaches us through His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son, Who actually dwells in our hearts (when they are pure) and illuminates our minds (when they are open). “But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth” (Jn. 16:13). Jesus, the Good Shepherd, teaches each and every one of us, individually and personally, how to live our lives and get to Heaven.

Nevertheless, the *BC* does not end the answer with just “Jesus,” but continues on to say, “who teaches us through the Catholic Church.” We will talk more next time about what it practically means for Jesus to teach us through the Church. But why would Jesus use the Catholic Church when He could just teach us directly? The answer is because we are not usually good enough listeners to be led all of the time by just our judgments of conscience and the movements of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Nor are we always clear on what exactly the Holy Spirit is telling us. If you asked 10 Catholics to pray over some serious moral dilemma that they were all facing—the same dilemma for each, mind you—I tend to think that you’d get 10 different solutions. Even if you didn’t, you’d probably get more than 1. Even the greatest Saints and mystics submitted their desires and plans to the authority of the Church because they knew that I, as a human person, am always fallible. Along with all of this, the Church is more than just a sounding board for orthodoxy; she is the Body of Christ. Why should Jesus teach us through the Catholic Church? Because He is in her and she is in Him (cf. Jn. 17:21). Learning how to know, love, and serve God through the Church is not different from learning through Jesus Himself because, in a sense, they are the same. The same Divine Spirit that manifested over Jesus at His Baptism flows through the Church and directs her—in her individual members, yes, but more reliably in her communal and hierarchical realities. And so, we may and should truly profess that we have but one Teacher, one Master, the Christ (cf. Matt. 23:8, 10).