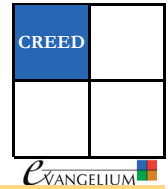


The Meaning of Life



PRESENTER'S GUIDE

Preparation

You may wish to read questions 1-5 of the *Compendium*. You can find additional information in the *Catechism* ccc. 27-43 covering: (i) the desire for God (ccc. 27-30); (ii) ways of coming to know God (ccc. 31-35); (iii) the knowledge of God according to the Church (ccc. 36-38); (iv) how we can speak about God (ccc. 39-43).

AIM To know what is meant by God as a 'First Cause' and the link between God and human happiness.

Presentation Part 1: Why?

Why? Explain to participants the significance of the opening image: the philosophers Plato and Aristotle asked the question 'why?' of many things, and these questions led them to infer the existence of God. Point out that what keeps many people from thinking about God or considering the claims of Christianity is not any kind of reasoned decision, but the habit of merely living without asking why. So encourage them to think often about the 'why' questions themselves, such as, "*Why are we here? What is the purpose of our lives?*" The truths of the Catholic faith can meet any challenge from the why's of philosophical inquiry.

What is the 'first be-cause'? Mention that many philosophers have given arguments for the existence of God. Nevertheless, few people come to believe in God by arguments alone. Ask someone to read the text of St Augustine (third slide) and explain that belief in a Creator comes more often from a sense of underlying order and beauty in creation (even if creation, in its present state, also contains some disorder and ugliness).

What is 'God'? Add that most of the greatest thinkers of philosophy, such as Plato and Aristotle, and most principal scientists of recent centuries, have inferred that there is a God. Sir Isaac Newton wrote, for example, "*It is allowed by all that the supreme God exists necessarily; and by the same necessity he exists always and everywhere.*" (*Principia Mathematica, General Scholium*). Point out, nevertheless, that it is hard to go beyond affirming God's existence by unaided human reason. It is hard, for example, to say much about what God is, how God is related to us and why God created us. Answering such questions adequately requires God's revelation.

What does creation teach us about God? Note that this section lists things that human reason *can* infer about God without God's special revelation: that God is one, distinct from creation, omnipotent and good.

Presentation Part 2: What are Human Beings?

What are Human Beings? Mention that there has been a great effort in recent years, in academia, the media and even the words of popular songs, to convince us that we are nothing but animals. Some rebuttals to this claim are given overleaf. Furthermore, the fact that we debate the nature of the human person also testifies to our uniqueness: non-human animals do not, apparently, debate whether they are different to us.

What do we want? Point out that the search for happiness is natural for human beings: advertising, for example, takes advantage of this desire. Ask them to think of some examples in which advertisers suggest – by names, phrases or images – that they can satisfy our desire for ultimate happiness. Ask them if they think such promises are credible. Ask them what they think happiness consists of. Be aware that, in responding to this question, most people cite goods linked to happiness, but have difficulty defining happiness itself.

Where is happiness found? Focus attention on the temporary and inadequate satisfactions of substitutes for happiness, such as money. Also point out that the desired goods of this life do not last long: we do not live happily ever after in this world, as reflected in these words from the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, "*Remember you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.*" Nevertheless, we can live with the hope of happiness from God.

What does God offer us? Ask them to consider this painting, *The Light of the World*, which also appears later in the course. In this painting, Jesus is depicted knocking at a door covered with weeds. Ask them what they think the door represents. The answer is the human soul, which can only be opened from within. The implication is that God offers us friendship and happiness, but we can choose whether or not to respond.

Questions on the Meaning of Life

QUESTION Can I ask difficult questions on issues regarding the Catholic faith?

Yes, it is good for both participants and teachers to ask all kinds of questions about the Catholic faith, as Jesus shows us in the Gospels, “*After three days they found him [Jesus] in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers*” (Lk 2:46-47). Questioning is important because, as Jesus tells us, “*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field*” (Mt 13:44). In other words, we have to work to uncover the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, a task which in practice involves questioning and thinking through the implications of what God has revealed to us in our faith.

QUESTION Why do many people believe that God does not exist?

There can be many reasons why some people do not believe that God exists, but it is important to be clear on the following points. First, while it is true that many people do not believe in God, most people do, in fact, believe in God. Indeed, the very fact that the word ‘God’ has some kind of meaning in every major human language is indirect evidence that belief in God is natural for human beings. Second, the existence of God is not, as is sometimes implied, a belief held exclusively by childish or uneducated persons. Among the great philosophers, scientists, writers and artists whose works and writings affirm some kind of belief in God, one can include Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Descartes, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Kant, Newton, Cauchy, Newman, Einstein and Mendel. This list includes some of the most subtle and creative thinkers in human history, including pioneers of entire disciplines of science and some of the greatest artists. Third, many philosophers, both ancient and modern, have offered arguments for the existence of God.

Furthermore, many people who claim to be atheists, rejecting belief in God, nevertheless still believe in some kind of ‘first cause’. Either they claim that the universe is its own cause or that the universe is generated by some automatic or random process from a larger, invisible reality, such as a *multiverse*. In other words, many atheists propose an impersonal *substitute* for God rather than simply rejecting the existence of God outright.

Finally, a person’s choice about belief in God often has a moral aspect. For example, the character of Ivan Karamazov, in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, contends that if there is no God, everything is permitted. Disbelief in God might therefore be preferable to those wishing to be free of certain moral constraints.

QUESTION Hasn’t modern science shown that human beings are simply clever animals?

Modern science has not shown that human beings are simply clever animals, if, by ‘clever’, we mean that all the intellectual abilities of human beings are found in other animals in less developed forms. Indeed, the very existence of science witnesses to the uniqueness of human beings, since other animals lack science at all. One could point to an almost infinite variety of other unique human activities, such as Sunday dinners, painting the Sistine Chapel or flying to the moon, to highlight the extraordinary uniqueness of human beings. The philosopher Wittgenstein expressed the difference as follows: a dog knows its master, but a dog cannot know that its master is coming home the day after tomorrow. In other words, other animals lack the ability to think of concepts like ‘the day after tomorrow’ or the meaning of numbers or any abstract ideas (including an ‘abstract idea’ itself). So non-human animals do not have philosophy, ethics, science, literature or art.

Furthermore, as G. K. Chesterton pointed out (*Everlasting Man*, 1.1), a bird can display great ingenuity in building a nest, but once the nest is built the bird is satisfied. The bird does not go on to develop architecture, art or to discuss the meaning of life. All non-human animals are satisfied to be what they are. The human person, by contrast, searches for ultimate happiness and remains discontent with any finite, created things alone.

Optional follow-up activities

You may wish to invite the participants to complete one or more of the following themselves: (1) Read some of the sections of the *Catechism* on knowing God, especially ccc. 31-35 on ways of coming to know God. (2) Write down the reasons why they believe in God and why they think human beings are unique. (3) Find, read and pray through Romans 1:16-25 and Wisdom 13:1-19, which are about the knowledge of God from creation and false hopes of happiness from other things.