

“I Believe in You”: The Question of God in the Modern World

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CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE



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Scripture citations adapted from the
Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition
(San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994).

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August 21, 2012

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COVER IMAGE

Edith Stein, or St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, embraces the burning
bush in which God appeared to Moses in chapter 3 of the Book of Exodus.
The barbed wire of Auschwitz, where Edith Stein died, is visible amid the
flames. Detail from the *Wall of the Divinization of Humanity*, Redemptoris Mater
Chapel, Vatican City. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

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The God Question

In the end, man needs just one thing, in which everything else is included; but he must first delve beyond his superficial wishes and longings in order to learn to recognize what it is that he truly needs and truly wants. He needs God.

—Pope Benedict XVI¹

Jacques and Raïssa

Questions about God come to meet each human being in his or her own life, in one way or another. When they do, people often instinctively sense that such questions call *them* into question. After all, the question of God has to do with a person's ultimate reason for living. We see a particularly dramatic instance of this in the lives of two university students in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century: Jacques Maritain and Raïssa Oumansoff. Jacques and Raïssa sought desperately for something that would make life worth living in the mostly atheist intellectual circles in which they lived and studied. Raïssa described this time of searching, "We swam aimlessly in the waters of observation and experience like a fish in the depths of the sea.... And sadness pierced me, the bitter taste of the emptiness of a soul which saw the lights go out, one by one."² Raïssa,

like Jacques, instinctively rejected the dark abyss of a world without God, but still struggled to find God in her life.

In 1901, the young couple made a pact. If they did not find an answer to the apparent absurdity of life within a year, they would commit suicide together. During that year, a series of lectures by a renowned philosopher gave them the beginnings of what they sought. They began to suspect that there might be some meaning to existence – at least enough meaning that it was worth living long enough to seek it. As Jacques struggled and prayed, “My God, if you exist and if you are the truth, make me know it,”³ Raïssa wrestled with the question of how God could exist and still allow suffering.

Paradoxically, the pain of this struggle only deepened their “sense for the absolute.” Raïssa wrote, “What saved us then, what made our real despair still a conditional despair was precisely our suffering. That almost unconscious dignity of the mind ... which could not be reduced to the absurdity into which everything seemed to be trying to lead us.”⁴ Slowly, the “conditional despair” was transformed into a conditional, and then a firm hope. Within five years, the two were married and had been received into the Catholic Church, to whose intellectual life and life of faith they would make important, lifelong contributions.

Unlike the Maritains, some people believe in God their whole lives. However, even believers must confront the question of God personally, in the face of the doubt and darkness that seem to touch at least some moments of every human life. Many others go through life apparently indif-

ferent to the question of God. For some, this indifference is a mask covering the deep pain of uncertainty, but others have really in a sense forgotten about God. But even if we deny God or appear to forget that we need an ultimate reason for living, we still inevitably confront questions of humanity, of our own lives, and of meaning. Our rapidly changing world is filled with communication and crowds of digitally interconnected human beings. Yet, these crowds are often made up of islands of loneliness, facing the world with a sense of hopelessness not so different from that which nearly drove Jacques and Raïssa to despair.

So many today live in a “quiet desperation,” which seems gradually to drain away not merely belief in God, but the very capacity to believe – in love, in meaning, in humanity, in anything at all. These problems, too, relate to the God question. For as Jacques and Raïssa intuited even before they found faith, the question of God always affects our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. When we ask, “Who is God?” we also inevitably ask, “Who am I? What does it mean to be a human being? *What is man?*”

Edith

At almost the same time that Jacques and Raïssa Maritain struggled to find an answer to the apparent absurdity of existence, another young woman, a 14-year-old of remarkable intelligence, found that she could no longer believe. Born in 1891 into an observant Jewish German family, Edith Stein had come to a conclusion. There was no God. And if

he didn't exist, there was no point in speaking to him. "I consciously decided, of my own volition, to give up praying,"⁵ she wrote.

After a brief period as a nurse in a World War I field hospital, Edith began to study philosophy – the discipline that asks fundamental questions about the nature of reality and human existence. Her abilities and passionate pursuit of the truth soon attracted the attention of some outstanding German philosophers. Edith herself wanted to be a philosophy professor and was more than capable for the job, but she was also a woman and a Jew. In the Germany of Edith's time, this meant that her wish could not be fulfilled.

During her studies, Edith encountered a friend whose husband had just died. Edith, the atheist who could not stop tirelessly seeking the truth about the world and man, was struck by the "divine power" in this grieving woman, a power the cross "imparts to those who bear it.... It was the moment when my unbelief collapsed, and Christ began to shine his light on me – Christ in the mystery of his cross."

Several years later, this "collapse" of her unbelief was sealed when she read St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography. Edith was baptized in 1922, an event she experienced as both the confirmation and the fulfillment of her Jewish identity. She continued to write philosophical works and to lecture, learning that she could pursue "scholarship as a service to God."

While Edith was discovering that the truth she so passionately sought was a Person to whom she wished to give everything in love, some of her countrymen were prepar-

ing a colossal rejection of God and of human dignity. Edith wrote, "I had heard of severe measures against Jews before. But now it dawned on me that ... the destiny of these people would also be mine." She was a Jewish Christian, and as such, she could not but stand with her suffering people.

As the situation in her country became ever more threatening, Edith understood that she had to give her life for her people, who were also God's people, and whom both she and he loved. What she had once said in the years before World War II, referring to her intellectual work, would become literal truth: "Every time I feel my powerlessness ... to influence people directly, I become more keenly aware of the necessity of my own holocaust."

Edith made herself a "holocaust," the Old Testament term for a sacrificial offering destined entirely for God and therefore consumed by fire. She entered a cloistered Carmelite convent as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. The beginnings of the systematic extermination of the Jews in Germany soon necessitated her escape to a convent in Holland, where she wrote, "I never knew people could be like this, neither did I know that my brothers and sisters would have to suffer like this.... I pray for them every hour."

Edith wrote a will, which read: "I ask the Lord to accept my life and my death ... so that his kingdom may come in glory," for the sake of the suffering Jewish people, and "for the peace of the world." When the borders fell and the Nazis invaded Holland, the soldiers finally came for her and her sister, who had also converted. Taking her older

sister Rosa by the hand, Edith said simply, “Come, we are going for our people.”

Edith Stein, or as we now know her, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, died at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. Her identification with her people and with her crucified Lord were so complete that Pope John Paul II could say at her beatification in 1987: “We bow down before the testimony of the life and death of Edith Stein ... a personality who united within her rich life a dramatic synthesis of our century. It was the synthesis of a history full of deep wounds ... and also the synthesis of the full truth about man.”

Edith, who as a teenager once asked “Does God really exist?” and decided that it wasn’t worth it to keep on praying, became the grown woman who realized that in Christ, she had come face to face with the God who had once appeared to Moses in fire (cf. Deuteronomy 3:1-14). God became a “You” for her, and she learned how to pray. In prayer, she didn’t merely come to understand what it means to be human; she came to understand the meaning of her individual life. The “You” in whom she came to believe so passionately and completely formed her into a witness – a witness to his presence in a world that had deliberately declared his absence, and a witness to the dignity of man.

Ourselves

More than a century has passed since the Maritains made their suicide pact and then found a reason to live, and more than six decades since Edith Stein and six million of her

Jewish brothers and sisters perished in the horror of the death camps. In our day, we face the basic questions of human existence in the context of unparalleled advancements in technology. On the one hand, things seem to be going very well: Man more than ever seems to be one who exercises control in the world.

Yet, this apparent control brings the God question into even sharper focus. Why doesn't our control of the material world satisfy us? Why doesn't it keep us from experiencing rejection and death? Why do our hearts still feel as restless as those of Jacques and Raïssa, who couldn't bear to continue living in a meaningless world, or of Edith in her determined pursuit of philosophical truth? In all of our feverish activity, what is it that we really seek?

Pope John Paul II observed that precisely in the context of new technological prowess we find not only new helps, but new threats to human happiness and even existence. We may not experience horrors as obvious as Auschwitz, but our societies have their own, more subtle threats. We can't seem to control industrial pollution, ceaseless wars, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The same technology that allows us to cure disease also allows us to manipulate, disfigure and destroy the very beginnings of human life. All of this points us to an enduring human need for something more: "The world of the previously unattained conquests of science and technology – is it not also the world 'groaning in travail' that 'waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God?'"⁶

Sometimes we catch a glimpse of hope, for example, when people instinctively come together to help those affected by a natural disaster. But most of the time, we seem to be living in a time of doubt, of an existential anxiety that is always present but seems ever more pressing in the modern context. We are so bombarded by stories of corruption, cruelty, injustice, and broken relationships that they almost fail to catch our attention – except to fill us with a vague uncertainty about the world and above all about the nature of man.

Questions of the meaning of humanity – *Who are we? What is man?* – thus hit home in our contemporary world no less concretely than they did for Jacques, Răissa and Edith. We continue to see enormous material and technical progress, but “the question keeps coming back with regard to what is most essential – whether in the context of this progress man, as man, is becoming truly better, that is to say, more mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of his humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and readier to give and to aid all.”⁷ This state of disquiet leads us back to fundamental questions about ourselves and the world – questions many of us perhaps find it convenient temporarily to forget.

The world in which we experience these anxieties is, not coincidentally, a world in which human beings seem to find themselves alone in an unprecedented way. The materialist worldview that places such value on material and technological advancement also denies that man is more than just matter. It “radically *excludes* the presence and action of

God ... in the world and above all in man.”⁸ To the extent that God is allowed a place at all, it is as a God outside the world, unrelated to humanity.

It begins to seem to us as if God has nothing to do with real life. God is not truly *present*, even if, intellectually, we happen to believe he exists. But a God who can be restricted to our private sentiments and choices – a God who is not a “You” before whom we live – would be no God at all. If that is how we conceive of God, the 14-year-old Edith is right: It’s not worth believing in him. We are alone, after all. We are better off being honest about it and deciding no longer to pray.

“A Strange Forgetfulness of God”

Sometimes, we deliberately try to forget about God in order to be more at peace with ourselves in an anxiety-filled world. But, we discover, it is not so easy to live this way. The question of who we are and what we need – the question of God – arises again in us, even if only as a vague sense of discomfort. Pope Benedict XVI said in a homily to youth, “In vast areas of the world today there is a strange forgetfulness of God. It seems as if everything would be just the same even without him. But at the same time there is a feeling of frustration, a sense of dissatisfaction with everyone and everything. People tend to exclaim: ‘This cannot be what life is about!’”⁹

This loss of a sense of God in the world does not necessarily mean that people deny that God exists. It affects even

many who explicitly profess a belief in God. Such forgetfulness is in a way more extreme even than the explicit atheism that Jacques and Raïssa faced and that Edith adopted for a time. Whereas they *knew* they were restless and so sought meaning and truth, forgetfulness prevents a person even from responding to the question of God.

In such a situation of forgetfulness, God now appears to many of us as something unfamiliar, even dangerous. We are uncertain who God might be, afflicted by a “doubt which makes openness to God precarious and frightening for the men and women of our time.”¹⁰ We cast off the idea of a loving and generous God, because we are afraid of acknowledging our own existence and that of the world as a gift received from Someone greater than ourselves.

If we cast off this idea, we also cast off the idea that we are born into a world whose meaning from the beginning is love – or into a world that has any meaning at all. John Paul II described the mindset that surrounds and permeates us:

According to the Enlightenment mentality, the world does not need God’s love. *The world is self-sufficient.* And God, in turn, is not, above all, Love.... No one needs his intervention in the world ... that is transparent to human knowledge, that is ever more free of mysteries thanks to scientific research, that is ever more an inexhaustible mine of raw materials for man – the *demi-god* of modern technology. *This is the world that must make man happy.*¹¹

But can we really be happy in a world without love?

A World without God?

The premise of a self-sufficient world with no need for God's love has consequences. In excluding God from the world, we exclude the possibility that the world has any meaning other than what we choose to give it. It is no coincidence that a time in which humanity is losing a sense of God is also a time in which "man often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption."¹²

A meaningless world that is simply there to be used also changes our place in it: Human beings can also merely use, *and be used*, without regard for any given meaning. In other words, the reduction of the world to stuff devoid of any meaning cannot help but reduce man himself. Man becomes a meaningless, mechanical thing, part of a larger meaningless, mechanical universe. As we see so vividly in the Nazism that claimed Edith Stein's life, in Communism, and in Western consumerism, such an atheistic, materialist view of the world makes men slaves. As John Paul II, who experienced all three modern totalitarianisms, wrote:

Man cannot relinquish himself or the place in the visible world that belongs to him; he cannot become the slave of things, the slave of economic systems, the slave of production, the slave of

his own products. A civilization purely materialistic in outline condemns man to such slavery.¹³

In our contemporary civilization, we see the consequences of just such slavery. Whether in the random violence that is no longer confined to our inner cities, in the glorification of drugs, sex, or power, or in more hidden and personal betrayals of trust, we repeatedly see people seeking only their own gain. They take advantage of others on a massive scale, often without any clear consensus that this is wrong. We even find ourselves participating in this pursuit of self-interest through harm to others, perhaps not on such a large scale but nevertheless in smaller denials of meaning and human dignity. No matter who triumphs in these struggles for self-interest, humanity remains the victim.

This context leads us increasingly to doubt the intrinsic meaning and worth of the human person. It is not merely that the meaning of humanity changes in the absence of God. Rather, without a foundation beyond ourselves, there is nothing upon which we can affirm any real meaning or worth at all. It is no longer merely that at a particular moment we cannot see hope on the horizon. Rather, it sometimes seems as if there now *is no horizon*, no measure by which to affirm anything as good, and no sense of direction for humanity.

We are busy with many things, in all the myriad activities offered to us by a highly developed technological civilization. We can do whatever we wish with a universe of

superficial stuff, but we find ourselves increasingly left with no reason to do or not do anything. Nothing seems trustworthy. No matter what we do and how much control we seem to attain, we find ourselves still only wandering over the surface of life, without entering into its depths. Indeed, there is a terrifying void at the heart of existence that becomes darker the longer we live with it, because it seems that *there are no depths to human life*.

In such experiences we find that “the ideology of the ‘death of God’ easily demonstrates in its effects that ... it is the ideology of the ‘death of man.’”¹⁴ Jacques and Raïssa Maritain sensed this in their own lives. If “God is dead,” as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche claimed, why should a human being – or they themselves – live? A glance at the history of the 20th century, with its concentration camps, gulags, and dehumanizing relativism, makes this abundantly clear: If we believe that God does not affect the world, that very belief dramatically affects the world and ourselves.

Even a forgetfulness of God does not avoid the question but only responds to it silently. Thus, while we may often think of questions about God as something that we may think about at some times and not others, or not at all, there is a fundamental question about God at the heart of who we are. We cannot help but answer this question in some way not only in our thinking, but in our very lives.

We constantly experience that this world, and especially when it is understood as self-sufficient, *does not* make us happy. Like Jacques, Raïssa and Edith, we seek meaning and purpose in the midst of our dissatisfaction. We want to be

more than we are and to participate in something greater than the individual self. Above all, there remains in each of a deep, unsatisfied longing for love. John Paul II explained, “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”¹⁵

Proofs for the Existence of God

A Question of the Human Heart

Jacques and Raïssa Maritain loved one another enough that they did not want to live together in a world where their love, like their lives, would be meaningless and absurd. Edith loved her family, her people and the world enough that she wanted to understand them in the light of the truth. As all three of them began to understand, our basic longing to love and be loved leads us to a quest for meaning and transcendence: Why am I alive? What do I live for? Why do I love my fiancée or my family? Who are we, and what is the point of human existence on earth? This quest for meaning is inseparable from the God question, just as this question can never be separated from our basic human longing to love and be loved.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which humanity has approached the God question in history is through proofs for the existence of God. Such proofs have taken various forms, but all forms of these proofs must ultimately follow the same basic path – moving from the created world to affirming the Creator.

In following this path, such proofs do not proceed apart from our relation to other human beings. Our desire to love and be loved by other human persons is linked to the desire for God that leads to the search for proofs. Conversely, the God question radically affects how we understand ourselves in relation to others. The question of God as addressed by proofs, therefore, must remain not only “a question of the intellect,” but “also a question of the will, even a *question of the human heart*.”¹⁶

Now, since the God question is always also a question of the heart, proofs for the existence of God are never separate from our relationship, not just to other people we love, but to God himself. In the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, “To proclaim God is to introduce to the relation with God: to teach how to pray.... And only by experiencing life with God does the evidence of his existence appear.”¹⁷ Thus we could say that to *prove* the existence of God must be in some way to introduce a person to a living relationship with God. No proof, however reasonable, will be adequate apart from some human openness to such a relationship.

This is what Jacques sensed when he wrestled with the God question not just by studying and thinking, but by *praying*, “My God, if you exist and if you are the truth, make me know it.” Likewise, Edith Stein could sum up her passionate pursuit of the truth, which began while she was still an atheist, with the observation, “My longing for the truth was a single prayer.”¹⁸ Jacques prayed desperately to Someone he wasn’t even sure existed because, like Edith,

he intuited: If God is truly God, then we depend on him in everything, including evidence of his existence. Only God can give us a positive answer to the question of God.

To the Source that Is You

The personal and relational dimension of the proofs for God's existence means that these proofs cannot take the same form as proof within the experimental sciences. The latter deals with things that fall under human observation through the senses and that are to some extent under human control. Calling for this type of proof for God would show that we are already looking for something less than God. A God that we could grasp in the same way that we grasp the objects of material science would not be God.

This does not, of course, mean that empirical observations cannot or should not lead us to affirm the existence of God. Proofs for the existence of God always in a sense involve the observation of the created world. As John Paul II noted, our encounter with creation naturally leads us to *wonder*. We marvel that the world is beautiful, that it is so intricate, or that it exists at all, and we seek a cause for this existence: "Instinctively, when we witness certain happenings, we ask ourselves what caused them. How can we not but ask the same question in regard to the sum total of beings and phenomena which we discover in the world?"¹⁹

Questions about the exact physical nature of the beginnings of the universe, or of life, or of humanity, while certainly worthwhile in their own right, do not reach the

fundamental issue at stake here. Answers to these questions would not have satisfied, for example, the Maritains' anguished search for meaning and for love. What is involved, rather, is asking why there should *be anything* rather than nothing at all and allowing this question to lead us to a "You" – to an ultimate Source. "Without such a supreme Cause," John Paul II explained, "the world and every movement in it would remain 'unexplained' and 'inexplicable,' and our intelligence would not be satisfied."²⁰

Human reason naturally seeks meaning in things. We try to know the cause of all the effects we see. Something in us rebels when we try to adopt purely materialistic accounts of the world and of existence, which do not really explain *why* the world is. We sense that we are made for a deeper dimension of existence, in which we recognize order, cause, meaning and beauty in the universe.

We can arrive at this deeper dimension through the motion or activity of the universe, the order we see among creatures, their development towards a purpose, and particularly beauty, which in a sense brings all these aspects together. In recognizing God as Creator in all of these things, we accept God not only as a beginning point but also as the absolutely fundamental source, underlying, indwelling, and encompassing everything that exists. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

In him we *live*, and as Jacques, Raïssa and Edith all discovered, in him we *love*. The God question is not a purely intellectual question. Thus, as important as proofs for the existence of God are, they can only be part of responding

to the question of God at the heart of humanity. However logically proofs for God may proceed, such logic by itself does not satisfy human questions about God. Ultimately, the only adequate answer to the question of God is not a proof, but the Love that is God.



“When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, “Truly, this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). The Roman centurion who witnesses Christ’s crucifixion professes the creed on behalf of all non-believers who seek God and encounter him in the death of Christ.

Detail from the *Wall of the Incarnation of the Word*,
Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City.

God Reveals Himself as Love

In order to be ultimately satisfying, the response to the question of God must also address our profound need to love and be loved. It must respond not just to our need to know something about God, but to our need *for God*. As the Maritains would tell us, and as Edith Stein showed us by her life and her death, the human thirst for meaning and for love is fulfilled beyond all possible expectation. God himself fulfills it, in an act we read about in the Gospel of John: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

With this gift in mind, John Paul II began his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, with a bold claim: “The redeemer of man, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and of history.”²¹ If *God* gives himself definitively in love to all humanity for all time in this man, who is God himself incarnate, how could this not be the center of history? How could anything happen that is more earth-shattering or more personally relevant than this event at the heart of the Gospel? “*And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory ... full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14).

In this gift, God reveals in the fullest possible way the original truth that the world was created out of love.

Ultimately, the affirmation of a Creator who reveals himself to us is not something we come to as a neutral fact, to be accepted because it has been adequately proven. God's revelation is the truth about *Love* – the Love at the origin of the universe – and is addressed to us in love. We don't accept this truth with our intellect alone. Acceptance of the Gospel involves our whole capacity for love, our whole life. This could be frightening, were the truth of the Gospel not supremely a matter of joy:

The Gospel, above all else, is *the joy of creation*. God, who in creating saw that his creation was good (cf. Gn. 1:1-25), is the source of joy for all creatures, and above all for humankind. God the Creator seems to say of all creation: "It is good that you exist." And his joy spreads especially through the "good news," according to which *good is greater than all that is evil in the world*.²²

Of course, we are aware that there is evil in the world. We know that, tragically, it is even within ourselves. Sin damaged the link between the world and God the Creator. In fact, part of the way in which we concretely experience humanity's deep need for God is through our experience of the seemingly overwhelming reality of sin. However, for Christianity, awareness of sin is not a reason to despair. The Gospel is Good News. It is a message of mercy.

We recall that Edith's unbelief began to collapse when she encountered a grieving friend, in whom, she says, "Christ began to shine his light on me – Christ in the mystery of

the cross.”²³ Dimly, she began to understand that while man may try to abandon God in sin, God refuses to abandon man. Rather, when evil and suffering enter into us and the world, God reveals himself fully as the God of merciful love. Jesus Christ, who gave himself to save us from our sins, is the full revelation of “the God who is ... faithful to his love for man and the world, which he revealed on the day of creation.”²⁴

God’s ultimate act of love – the cross of Christ – is also the ultimate affirmation of the worth of every human being. John Paul II expresses this in words full of wonder: “How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he ‘gained so great a Redeemer,’ and if God ‘gave his only Son’ in order that man ‘should not perish but have eternal life.’ In reality, the name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity.”²⁵

Jesus Christ: God with Man

The Love that Is Faithful through Death

Christ comes to redeem humanity from sin. In being born as truly man, the son of Mary, he is the ultimate confirmation of the goodness of humanity and of the whole created world. However, the Son of God not only becomes man, he lives and *suffers* and *dies*. God gives himself “to the end” (John 13:1), to reveal that his love “is greater than sin, than weakness, than the ‘futility of creation,’ it is stronger than death; it is a love always ready to raise up and forgive, always ready to go to meet the prodigal son.... [I]n man’s history this revelation of love and mercy has taken a form and a name: that of Jesus Christ.”²⁶

In Christ, God goes as far as it is possible to go, indeed beyond where one might think it would be possible for God to go, in his love for all human beings. “In the redemption,” John Paul II explained, we can uncover the depth of that love which does not recoil before the extraordinary sacrifice of the Son, in order to satisfy the fidelity of the Creator and Father toward human beings.”²⁷ Even when we are unfaithful, God “remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). He remains faithful as far as the

cross, the sealed tomb, and the resurrection, for he cannot deny that he is the Love that is faithful through death.

Because he suffered, died for us, and rose from the dead, we no longer live alone and anxious in a universe that feels like an enormous void. The God whom we might have been tempted to forget has shown himself to be a God who is *present* – so powerfully present that no rejection, not even death, can keep us from living before his face. He is a “You” for us – the definitive “You” in whom we live and move and have our being (cf. Acts 17:28). He is a “You” who has come close to us so that even when we are suffering most bitterly, we need not be afraid to pray.

As she grew into her newfound faith, Edith Stein came to understand ever more clearly what was contained in her first intuition of the “divine power” of the cross. In every joy and suffering, even in the deepest experience of abandonment we can go through, Jesus Christ is already there. He not only enables each of us to live a fully human life, but *joins* us in all of that life. He does this for humanity as a whole, and for each particular human being.

This profound union with God came about through the Incarnation, in which “the Son of God ... united himself with each man ... worked with human hands ... thought with a human mind,” and loved “with a human heart.”²⁸ Such union is meant not for certain strong or fortunate people, but for each one of us: the oppressed, the persecuted, the sinful, the weak and the troubled, since “every man without any exception ... has been redeemed by Christ,” who unites himself to us even when we are unaware of it.²⁹

By entering into the depths of the world and of humanity, Jesus Christ reveals to us the truth about who God is and who we are. Christ is God, but “not the Absolute that remains outside the world, indifferent to human suffering. He is ... a God who shares man’s lot and participates in his destiny.”³⁰ At the same time, “Christ is so human! Thanks to this, *the entire world of men, the entire history of humanity, finds in him its expression before God.*”³¹ Our destiny as human beings is thus “unbreakably linked” to the God-man who lived among us, suffered, died, and rose again; it is unbreakably linked to the love of God who pours himself out for us without end or limit.³²

The relentless love of God revealed in Jesus Christ draws us into God’s own life. In the light of this great, unique Christian hope, we glimpse something of every human being’s mysterious destiny:

Man as “willed” by God, as “chosen” by him from eternity and called, destined for grace and glory – this is ... man in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ, the mystery in which each one of the four thousand million human beings living on our planet has become a sharer from the moment he is conceived beneath the heart of his mother.³³

The Full Dignity of Man

Christ’s profound union with all human beings speaks in a special way to the seemingly massive scale of the world of our time. Individuals may seem now more than ever to be

reduced to pawns of huge historical processes or mere cogs within massive political and economic systems. In this context, in order to see humanity rightly we stand more than ever in need of the redeemer of man, who stands with *each particular person*. Christ comes to “walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.”³⁴

The “truth about man” that Christ reveals to us does not depend on our actions or abilities. We do not find our dignity through being stronger than others, just as weakness does not lessen our dignity. Rather, in him whose life and death was a supreme expression of love for us and for the Father, we finally begin to understand: “Man cannot be manifested in the full dignity of his nature without reference – not only on the level of concepts but also in an integrally existential way – to God.”³⁵

When we ask about the meaning of our lives, and so ask about God, God gives an answer beyond measure. He answers by uniting himself to man, inviting each one of us to share in his life. No answer could give humanity a higher meaning and destiny. John Paul II observes that in Christ, God has “definitively drawn close” to man; “at the same time, in Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness ... of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity.”³⁶

“But What Is Man...?”³⁷

Restless Hearts

John Paul II continually returns to a statement of the Second Vatican Council that can at first seem confusing: “Christ the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”³⁸ If we meditate on this statement long enough and begin to penetrate its meaning, we realize that in all its real profundity, it is really very simple: Jesus Christ reveals God. And in the light of God – and only in that light – we begin to understand the answer to the questions, “What does my life mean? What am I supposed to do? Who am I? *What is man?*” In Christ, we see who we are and what we are called to be.

The redeemer of man doesn’t just reveal the “surpassing worth” of humanity. He shows us what humanity is, and how life can be lived in a human way: “Through the Incarnation, God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning.”³⁹ This dimension is love – the Love that is God, and the Love that is the meaning of every human life. And love, of course, has concrete implications.

As we see in the lives of the Maritains, God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ wouldn't satisfy our deep need for meaning and for love if it simply informed us how to think about humanity in God's light. The young couple's questions had to do with more than just ideas; they wanted to know how they should love and why they should live. Once they found what would finally fulfill them, they gave what was for them the obvious response. They gave their lives completely – to one another in marriage, and to God.

When Jesus Christ reveals God in his life, death and resurrection, he reveals that God addresses man personally. He calls man, and this calling is part of man's unfathomable dignity. In Christ, who is fully God and *fully man*, God calls us to live human life in its perfection, as the images of God that we are. In him, we glimpse our mysterious destiny: "as the 'image and likeness' of his Creator," man "is called to participate in truth and love. This participation means a life in union with God."⁴⁰

If this sharing in God's life is our destiny and the deepest meaning of our lives, then this destiny and meaning must form from the beginning, and at every moment, the way we relate to every other human person who is also called to share in God's life. In other words, we who have been loved, have to love. We have to participate in the God who is Love, and who gives himself to and for man.

Witnessing the terrible suffering of her Jewish brothers and sisters, Edith Stein understood very well: In Jesus Christ, who died for love of us, God calls man to pour himself out in a love for God and his neighbor that is willing to

go to the end. What is true of God applies also to the love to which God calls every member of the human race. “For he who loves desires to give himself.”⁴¹ Edith knew that she had been loved, and so she had to give herself completely in love. A prayer card distributed at her perpetual profession included a quote from St. John of the Cross: “Henceforth my only vocation is to love.”⁴² Edith did love – with the love of the Lord who led her, with himself, to and through death.

This remarkable woman, like the Maritains in their dramatic search for meaning, is a striking example of the restlessness for God in the human heart, which St. Augustine expressed when he said, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” John Paul II comments on Augustine’s oft-quoted phrase, “In this creative restlessness beats and pulsates what is most deeply human – the search for truth, the insatiable need for the good, hunger for freedom, nostalgia for the beautiful, and the voice of conscience.”⁴³

We cannot quiet the question about God in our hearts. We cannot rid ourselves of an insatiable need to love and be loved. We cannot deny that there is something in us that wants us to be human in the most profound sense – to seek truth, to be free, to encounter the beautiful, to be true to our conscience, to *love*. As Edith, Jacques and Raïssa each learned, Christ makes this possible. He, true God and true man, makes us truly human. In him, we are finally able to love, not only God, but *our neighbor* with God’s love.

A Radical Answer to the Question about Man

When the Church calls us to reject violence and to treat others with charity, this is not just a desire to avoid conflict, but a Christian necessity, something essential to Christ's mission. John Paul II exhorted, "The Church ... does not cease ... to beg everybody in the name of God and in the name of man: Do not kill! Do not prepare destruction and extermination for men! Think of your brothers and sisters who are suffering hunger and misery! Respect each one's dignity and freedom!"⁴⁴ This call is a continual reminder that Christ's radical response to the God question is also the answer to the question about man.

Union with God implies that the Christian be united with his brothers and sisters and continue "struggling with unwearied perseverance for the dignity that each human being has reached and can continually reach in Christ."⁴⁵ This is the solidarity Edith understood in a radical sense, offering her prayer and her life for her suffering brothers and sisters.

Such love and respect for our neighbor is not always easy. However much we may long to live in this way, our longings also make clear the wrongs around us and even within ourselves. Nevertheless, the path that the Church and each person follows is one on which we are never alone. God's love and mercy in Christ, not sin, have the last word about humanity.

Following this path does not so much require heroic strength on our part, but humble *acceptance* of a God who

is radically present. Christ gives us the truth of God – a truth that is himself – and this truth is so wondrous as to be almost shocking: God is Love, and God is *here*. He is here with us from the beginning and faithful to the end. The revelation that God is united to humanity and involved in the world calls us to receive him as the foundation of our existence and to allow him inside every aspect of our life.

The more we do accept our relationship with God, the more we understand that his answer is bigger than our questions. God himself became man to forgive and love us through everything. Such forgiveness may at times seem unbelievable to us, but this is what the human quest for God truly seeks – not merely the existence of God, but love from God and love for God.

We seek the One who Is, the One in whom we finally find a response to the question of man. But we cannot give him to ourselves. As Jacques Maritain intuited, God reveals himself to us above all in a conversation of love. “*Through prayer,*” John Paul II writes, “*God reveals Himself above all else as Mercy – that is, Love that goes out to those who are suffering, Love that sustains, uplifts, and invites us to trust.*”⁴⁶

“Open Wide the Doors”

“Be not Afraid!”

At this point, it is clear that the human person’s relation to God in Christ is not just something extra added on to humanity, which we can take or leave without fundamentally affecting who we are. Christ is the full revelation of God, and the revelation that it is God who makes us truly human. As John Paul II said:

This Revelation is *definitive*; one can only accept it or reject it. One can accept it, professing belief in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, the Son, of the same substance as the Father, and the Holy Spirit, who is Lord and the Giver of life. Or one can reject all of this, writing in capital letters: “God does not have a Son”; “Jesus Christ is not the Son of God ... he is only a man.”⁴⁷

This yes or no to the revelation of Christ conditions what we can mean by the world, humanity and love.

The One who is the full revelation of God and of man is also God’s response to our fears. The pain so often contained in our questions about God, and thus about ourselves – the pain that almost drove Jacques and Raïssa to suicide – is not a pain Christ ignores. Nor is the suffering of people who are victims of sometimes terrifying cruelty

at the hands of their fellow men. Jesus embraced all this for us on the cross.

In the Gospels, we often hear Jesus saying to those he encountered, “Be not afraid.” He knows that “our hearts are anxious.” In fact, as John Paul II reminds us, he who was betrayed, cried out his abandonment, and died our death “knows our anguish best of all.”⁴⁸ When he tells us not to be afraid, Christ – the risen Lord – is saying that despite all the evils that seem to infect the world, God is *present* with us. The ultimate meaning of existence is given by a God who has overcome death and who is infinitely generous and merciful Love.

The One who is greater than us is not someone who might rob us of our freedom, and thus someone to be feared. Rather, God irrevocably joins himself to humanity and constantly seeks to lift up each human being. The question of God is always a radical question, and Christ is a radical answer. We cannot receive this answer without opening every area of life to him.

In other words, our world doesn’t become what it was meant to be – it doesn’t become a fully *human* world – if we confine Jesus Christ to a private section of our lives that we set aside for “religion.” Jesus Christ grounds our humanity and every aspect of life in the world. Indeed, as the early Church Fathers wrote of the crucified Christ, his arms outstretched between heaven and earth, he grounds the whole universe.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is humble and is Love. Without him, we cannot be what we are. This is what John

Paul II cried out to the world in his first homily as pope: “Open wide the doors to Christ! To his saving power open the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows ‘what is in man.’ He alone knows it.”⁴⁹

Love

In Christ, the revelation of the God who loves us “to the end” and who enables us to love, we see that we are not really the source of the God question. God’s love for us is at the root of our search for God. We could not even begin to formulate a question to which God is the answer if God had not already formed us for himself and prepared the answer to this question: his Son Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the ultimate revelation of the God who is Love.

After asking the God question in one of the most dramatic ways possible, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain discovered that it is, after all, meaningful to live. They learned that it is only through the revelation of Christ the Redeemer that there can be a full “Yes” to human existence, to their own lives, and to the world.

Similarly, after denying God’s existence, Edith embarked on a single-minded quest for the truth of man and the world. John Paul II commented at her beatification that what she found in the last night of her unbelief was in fact what she had sought with such honesty from the beginning: “the truth,” but not an abstract, philosophical truth.

She found “the truth in Person, the living ‘You’ of God.”⁵⁰ As so many other believers have learned before and after these three witnesses, there is no other ground of meaning that can correspond to the desires of the human heart.

In Christ, we see that the ultimate reality underlying existence and human life is not only God, but a God who is Love:

*Someone exists who holds in His hands the destiny of this passing world;
Someone who holds the keys to death and the netherworld (cf. Rev 1:18);
Someone who is the Alpha and the Omega of human history (cf. Rev 12:13)
– be it the individual or collective history. And this Someone is
Love (cf. I Jn 4:8, 16) – Love that became man, Love crucified and
risen, Love unceasingly present among men.*⁵¹

We see that when human beings seek to know the truth of God and about humanity, and seek above all to love and be loved, we only find what we seek in this “Someone,” who is God’s humble and total self-revelation.

As John Paul II expresses in the opening words of *Redemptor Hominis*, God’s revelation is a *Person* who loves man, and who reveals a Love that is the meaning of every individual human being. Along with the Father who sends him and the Spirit he pours out over the earth, he is the “You” in whom we believe.

As Jacques and Raïssa discovered in their anguished quest for the meaning of life, this Redeemer who loves us “to the end” (John 13:1) contains every reason to live. As Edith found, he even contains every reason to die in trust and in love, knowing that he holds the meaning of our lives and our deaths in his hands.

He, the “center of the universe and history,”⁵² is the super-abundant answer and joyous goal of every human being’s search for God.

Prayer of St. Augustine of Hippo

Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you.... You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.⁵³

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until it rests in you.”*

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