

Homily for Easter III, 2018

April 15, 2018

To respond effectively to Jesus' command to spread His message, every age has to know what particular obstacles it faces. There was some research published recently about why young people raised Catholic abandon their faith that goes to the heart of that question for us. Simply put, a prime reason young no-longer-Catholics give for their loss of faith is that they believe Christian belief contradicts what they're learning in science classes.

That's wrong, but it's understandable. And to help young people to overcome this mistaken notion, we have to understand why that happens. So let me talk about this for a bit. It's exactly in line with what we see Jesus do in today's Gospel, when he helps the disciples to believe by removing the obstacles to their faith.

We have to admit, sadly, that most young people learn "what Christians believe" from the secular media and from their friends more than they do from their churches. And the story of what "Christians believe" is being told, in American culture, largely by strands of Christianity that are non-Catholic and even anti-Catholic. The cultural image of "what Christians believe" is largely shaped by ideas arising from the Fundamentalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – a sincere attempt by some Protestant thinkers to define and defend the "fundamentals" of Christian faith against what they thought were attacks by then-contemporary scientific thinking.

Unfortunately for us Catholics, they got the "fundamentals" wrong in key ways.

One of those wrong ways was their emphasis on the literal truth of the Bible. Now we Catholics believe the Bible is true, even without error – but we don't believe that every detail is true, as fundamentalist thinking claims. And this fundamentalist thinking leads to conflicts with science in two key areas: the age of the earth, and human evolution.

If you go to Kentucky you can visit the "Creation Museum," opened in 2007 at a cost of \$27 million, and see depictions of children playing with dinosaurs nearby. This reflects the Fundamentalist interpretation of the Book of Genesis called "Young-earth Creationism," which claims that the universe was created about 6,000 years ago. Do some Christians sincerely believe that? Yes. (According to Gallup, the percentage of Americans who believe in young-earth creationism is 38%.) Do Catholics believe it? Probably some do. But does the Catholic Church teach it? No.

You can similarly find (at the museum and more widely in fundamentalist leaning churches) the claim that evolution isn't true and that human beings were created directly by God. Do some Christians sincerely believe that? Yes. Does the Catholic Church teach that? No. The Catholic Church has no problem with evolutionary theory. (In fact a Catholic priest, Gregor Mendel, is often called the father of evolutionary genetics.)

It's vital that we help young Catholics to understand that the cultural images and stories of "what Christians believe" aren't necessarily accurate, and that the Catholic tradition has no problem with scientific discoveries. (Galileo admittedly got himself into trouble with the Inquisition; but scholars believe his problems stemmed more from his philosophy and his abrasive personality than from his science.) But simply saying that Catholics are ok with scientific thinking, even supportive of it, isn't enough; we may have to look at some bad habits from our own past and overcome them if we're to be helpful.

Catholics my age (and some a lot younger) were commonly met, when we asked questions about the faith while growing up, with resistance: from “It’s a mystery” to “Questions are dangerous” to “The Church says so.” Those non-answers no longer work (if they ever did), and even if well-intentioned they will drive young people away from belief. Notice in the Gospel that Jesus doesn’t do that with his disciples’ doubts; instead He offers them what they need in order to answer their questions.

Now what I’m saying doesn’t mean that, if you’re a senior citizen long out of school who hated science class and still has scars from it, you have to become an expert on evolution or on the age of the universe or on the Bible. Attitude and perspective are what matter; you don’t need answers. You do, however, need these three things:

First, every Catholic needs an attitude that questions are a good thing when exploring what to believe, and that shutting-down questions is harmful.

Second, every Catholic needs the perspective that Catholic Christianity differs in key ways from other expressions of Christianity in our culture, and that the Catholic Church doesn’t hold the wrong positions that some Christians may sincerely hold about scientific matters.

Together, this attitude and this perspective can help us to grow in our faith as well. It saddens me to hear people confess as a sin that they have doubts about their faith. There’s no need to fear, or to feel guilty about, questions and doubts; they’re invitations from God to come to know Him and His ways better. God gives us the intelligence to seek answers, and as we seek them our faith in God grows stronger.

If your own background was one in which questions were swatted down, or you learned that questions and doubts were dangerous, this is a time for a reality-check. That won’t work anymore. To help young people, every Catholic will have to welcome questions, to provide perspective, and (here’s number three) to be able to point the way to people who seek good answers.

Where to go? That’s too big a topic for a homily, so I’ll just say this: The best source for a genuine Catholic perspective is a well-informed Catholic teacher – they will not have the answers to young people’s questions themselves, but they’ll be likely to know good resources for helping a person find the answer. Absent that, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a good source, as is the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. A quick web-search will go to either one. (Web-resources in general have to be carefully-used; again because of the confusion between culturally-“Christian” perspectives and Catholic ones, be sure any internet source is a sound, Catholic one.)

The Risen Christ who comes to us in the Eucharist wants to meet our needs – not just for spiritual sustenance and for emotional support, but for intelligent understanding as well. Young people need to appreciate that, and to learn it from us how and where Christ offers it. Jesus does it for his disciples in today’s Gospel, both for their sake and in order to teach us to do the same.