

QUESTIONS VERSUS ANSWERS

6th Core Principle: Life is about discovering the right questions more than having the right answers. (primacy of discernment)

I know this clever concept of “having the right questions” is often quoted, but I must admit that it always sounds to me like fuzzy idealism or a line from a graduation address. We all got to that graduation by giving back clear *answers* to happy professors, strangely enough. There are times when only answers are helpful, not more questions. Obviously we need truthful answers to technical, mathematical, practical and logistical questions. I surely do not like to be slowed down by someone opening flood gates of questions, philosophical musings, and relativistic ramblings when there is a need for clarity, speed, or closure. Perhaps this aphorism is just an excuse for people who like open-endedness and lightweight thinking?

Yet we made this one of our core principles here at the CAC: “Life is about discovering the right questions more than having the right answers.” We think that this keeps us on the path of ongoing discernment, which is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:10). The key concepts here are actually the words “discovering” versus “having.” A discerning and inquiring spirit will make us a *discoverer* in touch with our deeper unconscious and the deeper truth; whereas a glib “I have the answers” spirit makes us into a protector of clichés. Surely answers are wonderful when they are true and keep us on the human and spiritual path. But answers are not wonderful when they become something we *have* as an ego possession, allowing us to be arrogant, falsely self-assured, and closed down as a person. In other words, answers are a plus in the technical and practical world, but a liability in the world of philosophy, art, poetry, invention, enterprise, and the mysterious ways of the Spirit.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways...As high as the heavens are from the earth so are my thoughts above your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). This depth and mystery to God leaves all of us as perpetual searchers and seekers, always novices and beginners. It is the narrow and dark way of faith. “Search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you,” says Jesus (Luke 11:9). There is something inherently valuable about an attitude of spiritual curiosity and persistent “knocking.” It creates in us what the Greek philosophers and St. Thomas Aquinas call the “cardinal” virtues: *prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice*. These were considered the “hinge” virtues (*cardo*) on which all the other moral virtues hang and depend. If you study each of these four central virtues, you will see that they each require an ongoing broadening, discerning, balancing, and discovery of God’s will and God’s ways. They are never virtues that you ever fully possess or have, but they are always dependent on time, discernment, prayer, and listening to others beyond your self. They demand gradual discovery and humility, and they refuse to be “had”!

There is never any one who can say he is perfectly prudent, always courageous and persistent, consistently moderate and balanced, or equally just in regard to others’ rights. So we instead prefer virtues that allow our egos an immediate sense of superiority and settledness, issues that close down any necessity for ongoing prayer, struggle, or ambiguity (read “faith”). Remember, the ego demands satisfaction. It is a “hungry ghost” as the Buddhists say. Most people would actually prefer “satisfying untruth” to “unsatisfying truth.” And maybe Big Truth is always a bit unsatisfying to the little human ego. The ego ghost is fragile and needy, and requires constant food to satisfy its emptiness. If you doubt that, watch the red button issues in both politics and religion. They are invariably body-based issues about which you have no doubt whether or not you did it. Issues like abortion, homosexuality, contraception, extramarital sex, attending Mass every Sunday, etc. allow immediate determination of guilt and ability to impute shame. Jesus did not emphasize these things because they tend to create righteousness systems. The hungry ghost is quickly satisfied here, whereas discerning whether you are really a just person could and should go on forever. It is very hard to shame anyone in regard to prudence, fortitude, justice, or moderation; and after thirty-five years as a confessor, I can tell you that these are *never* the issues that people mention as sinful. The real vices are well hidden; the real virtues are largely not sought. As Jesus put it, “You strain out gnats and swallow camels” (Matthew 23:24). The cardinal virtues do not appear to be our hinges at all, which might explain the superficiality of our morals.

The ego is formed by contraction. The soul is formed by expansion. The ego *pulls itself into itself* by comparing, competing, and separating itself from others: “I am not like that,” it says. The soul, however, does exactly the opposite: “I *am* that” (*Tat Tvam Asi*, as the Hindus say). It sees itself in God, the other, the flower and tree, the animal, and even the enemy: similarity instead of separateness. It participates in the human dilemma instead of placing itself above and beyond all tensions. But this is a long journey of transformation, which leads you to ever new questions about your own goodness, and where goodness really lies, your own evil, and where evil really lies. It is humiliating. Instead of a hungry ghost that demands answers/satisfaction/closure, we become Spirit led persons who come to see “how wrong the world is about sin, how wrong it is about who was in the right, and how wrong it is about judgment” (John 16:8). Only those led by the Spirit into ever deeper seeing, hearing, and surrendering—spiritual seekers and self questioners—will fall into the hands of the living God. This will always be “a narrow gate and a hard road” that “only a few will walk on” (Matthew 7:14).

So we want to encourage those few, and invite the many. We want to encourage our friends on a journey of seeking God, the quest for the Holy Grail. The title of the classic *Quest for the Holy Grail* came from Parsifal’s endless search for—and forgetting of—“the question” (“Whom does the Grail serve?”). It took his whole life and journey to remember the question at all, and eventually to understand it. It was holding onto the right question that kept him on his quest!

St. Benedict said that the only requirement for the admission of a monk is that s/he is “seeking the Lord.” Not religious careerism, not security, not status, not roles and titles, not vestments and habits, not a portfolio of answers, but simple and humble seeking of God. Spiritual seeking will make him or her a perpetual and humble student instead of a contented careerist, a quester rather than a squatter, an always impatient, yearning and desirous lover. I will bet on such a spiritual seeker any day. They are on the real and only quest.

Boxed-in section:

Jesus is asked 183 questions directly or indirectly in the four Gospels. Do you know that he only answered 3 of them forthrightly? The others he either ignored, kept silent about, responded with a question, changed the subject, told a story or gave an audio visual aid to make *his* point, told them it was the wrong question, revealed their insincerity or hypocrisy, made the exact opposite point, or redirected the question elsewhere! Check it out for yourself. He himself asks 307 questions, which would seem to set a pattern for imitation. Considering this, it is really rather amazing that the church became an official answering machine and a very self-assured program for “sin management.” Many, if not most, of Jesus’ teaching would never pass contemporary orthodoxy tests in either the Roman Office or the Southern Baptist Convention. Most of his statements are so open to misinterpretation that should he teach today, he would probably be called a “relativist” in almost all areas except one: his insistence upon the goodness and reliability of God. That was his only consistent absolute.

Scholars tell me that it is these three questions that Jesus answers directly:

“So you are a king, then?” said Pilate. ‘Yes, I am a king. I was born for this’” (John 18:37). Yet even this is said after first clarifying what king and kingdom mean. Rather relativistic.

“Lord, teach us how to pray, just as John taught his disciples. He said to them, ‘This is how you pray,’” and he taught them the Our Father (Luke 11:1-4), which is really more of a request.

“To disconcert him, one of the Pharisees put to him a question, ‘Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?’ Jesus said, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul... And the second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:35-39). This one question he surely answered directly and forthrightly.