

## **Dedicated Disciples: Learning . . . to Live the Faith**

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Knowledge is strange . . . it doesn't ever exhaust itself. Have you ever noticed that the more you learn about something so often the more you want to know. And when you have answered one question, three more present themselves. There really is no end to the mind's thirst for knowledge.

I sometimes think of learning like a gushing fire hydrant – we have so many opportunities to learn – to have that thirst for knowledge quenched, but just like the surge of water from a fire hydrant, we can't possibly utilize all the information, all knowledge . . . at least not at one time. But little by little over a lifetime, we can learn more . . .

It reminds me of that TV commercial from a few years ago that was advertising high speed internet . . . The internet was so fast that eventually the viewer reached the warning box on the computer that said: "You have seen everything on the internet; please go back."

But that's not how it works – knowledge can never be exhausted, especially the depth of our faith, of our religious tradition.

As the seminarians near ordination, they are asked to write a Master's thesis. The minimum requirement is 50 pages. They can pick any topic or question in theology. So often they think that is such a daunting task – so much research and so much writing. And they think they must choose a really broad topic like "St. Thomas Aquinas on Angels" or the "Theology of Marriage" . . . but as they get into a topic they realize just how much there is . . . how much has already been written . . . how many different angles there are . . . and usually they hone in on a particular question to research. And if they don't, if their topic is too general they end up writing not 50 pages but 80, 90, or 100.

Learning about God and His Church is like that . . . there is so much to learn. It can never be exhausted. Consider the tremendous patrimony of the Christian intellectual life – the Bible – God’s Word to us – but not just the Bible . . . the tradition of the Church that begins with the apostolic fathers – men like St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Polycarp—the first bishops who lived just a generation or two after Christ, who were literally taught the faith by the apostles themselves. Their writings, their letters survive and they are a wonderful inheritance of learning and faith.

And this is just the beginning . . . the medieval mystics – like Julian of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen – monastic women whose lives of prayer and study informed their own reflections which remain popular today. Not to mention – the scholastics – the great churchmen like St. Albert the Great, and St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas ... whose theology was so exhaustive that they are continually consulted and debated today even by modern theologians.

Our intellectual tradition is not just in the past . . . consider the theological contributions of St. John Paul II and Benedict the XVI, Bishop Robert Barron, and Dr. Brant Pitre – all who made or are making contributions to our tradition by making their own connections, providing a fresh explanation of the truths of the faith.

At this point you may be thinking, I am overwhelmed . . . and yes, you could spend a lifetime being immersed in Scripture, tradition, theology ancient and modern . . . some do. But that’s not the purpose of tonight. Tonight is a reminder of the depth of our tradition, why continuing to learn about the faith is important, and finally an invitation to explore some part of our faith that might interest you.

I. First, a word on the beauty and splendor of our tradition.

So often we don’t get the chance to go very deep with our knowledge of the faith. We may hear a homily that serves to teach us something . . . but that’s only a few minutes each week. We may view an article online or a video like the kind that DynamicCatholic develops during Lent.

But for many of us, we spend more time learning other kinds of things. We may choose to learn a language or how to play tennis or car repair, but we may not learn more about our faith...

We learn what piques our interest, what fascinates us . . . So we have to ask ourselves, Does Jesus and his Church awaken within us a desire ... desire to know Him, to serve Him . . .?

If you consider that God is our creator – that He made us and all that there is in this world then he should be the most interesting of all . . . more interesting than language and tennis and car repair.

In short, we can consider: Does God interest us? Do we have questions about God? Does the dynamic unfolding of the relationship between God and mankind, between the creator and the created stir us to wonder and excitement?

I remember the first time I was wowed by Catholic theology – I was 18 years old, a freshman at Xavier University and we had to read an encyclical letter by St. John Paul II. I remember thinking – amazing, deep – this really is Truth – Truth with a capital “T.” And I’ve had more moments of amazement during the last 15+ years of learning and teaching and more recently preaching . . . Like when I read St. Augustine’s Confessions for the first time . . . or heard John Paul II preach at a Mass at World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002. I thought, “This is truth!”

It was the same for St. Edith Stein – who as a young Jewish woman read the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila and exclaimed, “This is truth!” She converted and then like Teresa entered the Carmelite order and was martyred at Auschwitz during World War II.

I hope that if you haven’t had that “AHA” moment as a Catholic you will in the days ahead as you begin studying some aspect of our faith.

II. There is a lot to explore, but why should we make the choice to enter more deeply into the teachings of the Church?

You know for the first 1500 years of Christianity learning about the faith was not a formal undertaking . . . the people in the pews learned by praying and believing ... they listened to preaching at Mass and received the sacraments, but there were no catechisms, no religious education classes, no Bible studies . . .

But then came the Protestant Reformation and the faith was challenged (and this challenge coincided with the beginning of large scale printing of pamphlets and books) – and this changed the role and means of religious learning . . . in a short time there were CCD classes – yes, the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in which lay people would teach children the faith began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – and there were catechisms and devotional books and Bibles . . .

But it wasn't just a change in how the faith could be passed down, but why. See knowing the faith took on new importance when fundamental aspects of the faith were challenged by the Protestant Reformers. Now, infant baptism and confession and the Eucharist were being seriously challenged. Learning the tradition helped to keep Catholics Catholic and win back former Catholics who had become Protestant . . .

And it is still the same today . . . how often has a skilled missionary – whether Protestant or Mormon or Jehovah's Witness tried to pin us down with a difficult question to answer . . . it's not the case of there not being a theological explanation, but we may not know it . . .

Before I was in seminary .... Used to visit a nursing home to bring communion each Sunday – an elderly African American lady – seemed very devout – she would prepare for my coming by donning a chapel veil and lighting a candle . . . I came week after week and noticed that her son was often visiting her when I was there – every week he would step outside the room and return when I had left.

One day I came with communion to her room and she said she could no longer receive. I was shocked and puzzled. She said she could no longer be a Catholic. Her son had convinced her of the errors of Catholicism – supposedly based on the Bible. For instance, as she told me, “It says in Scripture, call no man father and Catholic priests are called father.” The poor woman, perhaps in her 80s was no match for her fundamentalist son who chose to rob his mother of her faith . . .

It’s no simple as to say that if she knew her faith better she would have clung to it – no matter what. But there is no doubt that learning our faith helps us appreciate it more, helps us love Christ better and follow his example – and in a way it does inoculate us against threats to our faith, threats to our salvation.

I often think of that line from 1 Peter 3: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (15). We are called to be able to defend our faith – why we believe, why we practice . . . and today more than ever in our workplaces and neighborhoods and families we are being challenged.

But we know so well as Catholics that even though faith is a choice and each is asked to be able to make a proper defense of it, our faith is not a “Jesus and me” faith, but one that flows from and is lived in community. We are all in this together. So what we know about our faith doesn’t just affect us, it affects everyone around us.

We know that we can’t give what we don’t have . . . that is especially true for the priest or deacon, the teacher or catechist, the parent or grandparent . . . For so many of us, we learned the faith not from reading the Bible, maybe not from reading a catechism . . . we learned the faith from our parents . . . They were our first teachers in the faith.

And then it was up to religious education programs and Catholic schools to help prepare us for the sacraments and teach us the basics of the faith. And those programs were good and are good – and we as a church put a great emphasis on them. But they end, they aren’t forever . . . and somewhere between 12 and 16 years old many cease to attend formal “religion classes.”

We know that all the questions we have about faith and life aren't answered before you are 16. So often I encounter the parents of young adults who don't know how to answer their children's questions about the faith. If you are a parent I am certain you remember a time when your children brought homework home and they needed help – and you literally couldn't do it. It could have been 7<sup>th</sup> grade math or 9<sup>th</sup> grade science – but you couldn't help.

That's what can happen to us. After confirmation we may cease to emphasize learning about the faith and when questions arise, we don't know how to answer them.

I remember Archbishop Pilarczyk once saying that when he went to parishes for confirmation he liked to study the bookshelves of the pastor's office. He would look at the titles and by doing so see when the pastor had stopped studying, had stopped learning.

I am afraid we could do the same in our homes. When was the last time we purchased a book on spirituality? On religion? When was the last time we took advantage of DVD or an online resource about Catholicism?

By continuing to learn about the faith we can help ourselves and others get more out of the practice of our faith. At the most basic level we recognize that “we can't love what we don't know” . . . That is especially true of Christ and His Church.

People don't stop praying and going to Mass because they don't want to go to heaven, they don't stop because they don't want to be happy, but they do stop because they don't know Christ and His Church – yes, intellectually, but also experientially. And the one flows into the other . . . if we know our faith it will lead us to loving it and living it better.

I read a book once on religious illiteracy in our culture. It didn't focus on Catholicism, but instead on how often the average American does not know the very basics of the Judeo-Christian tradition. A few interesting examples -- Only half of Americans can name even one of the Gospel writers. Most Americans could not name "Genesis" when asked the first book of the Bible. When asked, Who delivered the Sermon on the Mount?, only 1/3 of Americans knew it was Jesus. And my personal favorite -- Who was Joan of Arc? 10% answered Noah's wife.

III. And that brings us to tonight's invitation . . . I am certain you are more "religiously literate" than the average American, but we can all grow in our knowledge of the faith. Tonight you have an opportunity to commit to a discipleship study topic or group. This isn't a one size fits all kind of thing . . . there are different topics and different ways of engaging these topics. [You'll be hearing more about that in a minute . . .]

May this evening be a challenge to become more "Dedicated Disciples" . . . may our dedication include a desire and a pledge to learn more about the faith and by this learning . . . may we better live it out and be evangelists of that faith to those the Lord has put into our lives.