



# LIGHT & LIFE

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## Curiosity Killed the Cat-holic

Let's take a quick look through Our Lady's apparitions and their messages: pray, pray... pray again.. repent... oh, here's something about penance, pray again, some penance, build a chapel here, go there, show this sign to others... back to prayer and penance for the conversion of sinners... Nope, nothing about scrolling on our phones. Okay, most of the apparitions really seem to be before the age of cell phones and the internet; but even before then, there were newspapers, radio, movies, television. St. Jean Marie Vianney, who overlapped some time with St. Bernadette Soubirous in France, famously spoke against dance halls. He wasn't necessarily against the movement of bodies, per se, but because of the *reason* people went there, which often ended up in avoiding Church on Sundays and holy days of obligation. Plus, of course, the temptations from lust (which many people went there to indulge in – the dance halls were a bit like browsing through some of the modern dating apps on your phone). And, inevitably when a lot of people get together like that, you end with with fighting and jealousy, and slander, rumor mongering, and just talking bad about others. It was a bit like the comments section on many websites and social media. Yes, there is nothing new under the sun, as Ecclesiastes so pointedly reminds us (Ecc 1:9b). Human nature is human nature is human nature, from pre-history until the end of all human history.

So, when St. Thomas Aquinas and other spiritual masters condemn curiosity, they are condemning more *this* than seeking after knowledge. We are made, by God, to seek the true and the good — so that in itself cannot be evil.

And curiosity, as it is understood in current usage, is not necessarily bad. Curiosity (or more accurately, perhaps, wonder) has led to many a scientific marvel or cure. God gave us two wings, faith and reason, or as Pope St. John Paul II once wrote, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves" (*Fides et Ratio*, preamble). Curiosity, properly speaking as a vice, is when it leads us away *from* the good and the true. It is a kind of intellectual sloth;



Iglesia del Perpetuo Socorro by pater Jesus Faus (1953 - 1959)

an avoidance of the greater or actual good in favor of some lesser good or evil, when we have a duty to study and learn the good. St. Thomas Aquinas, in the articles on curiosity (*Summa Theologiae*, Ila Ilae, q. 167) refers to St. Jerome, who condemned a priest who spent an excess of time "reading stage plays, and singing the love songs of pastoral idylls," the secular entertainment of their day, it seems. At best, the priests were avoiding the study of Scripture and wisdom, that they might help save souls, and at worst, they were deliberately and habitually seeking

entertainment that would lead to sin. It is, of course, forbidden to seek knowledge through evil in any way. The Church Fathers speak of seeking knowledge of the future through demons, but in our day, they may as well preach furiously against those who seek knowledge through the purposeful destruction of human embryos and the unborn to gain knowledge, for example.

Next, he speaks of trying to know the truth about creatures, without due regard for the true and proper end of such knowledge, that is, without reference to the Creator. Science and wonder can lead to the Creator God, but losing oneself only to remain in the smallness of the creature means losing sight of the infinite goodness of the Creator.

Finally, he speaks of seeking knowledge beyond our own capacity and intelligence, and engaging in idle speculations that lead us away from God. A little knowledge about anything can be a truly dangerous thing, if it is used for the

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# THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

## On God and His Perfections

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

We move on to Lesson 2 of the Baltimore Catechism, no. 4.

### Lesson 2 ON GOD AND HIS PERFECTIONS

A "perfection" means a good quality. We say a thing is perfect when it has all the good qualities it should have.

#### Nobody's Perfect?

Imagine an ideal human person. Whatever we are *supposed* to be, and whatever God made us to be, the Virgin Mary was from her beginning, and is. She is perfect, insofar as she *can* be, as a limited creature. In theology, we often consider sin not as a thing in itself, but as the absence of some good that should be there. She is truly, "full of grace." She is not 99.94% pure, like some products claim to be, but *actually* pure, that is, without spiritual blemish. She is not infinitely good, as that would make her God. As a creature she lacks those perfections of the good that are found only in God, but she is as good as she *can* be.

We have a difficult time picturing this, I believe, because we have yet to observe such a creature in our daily experience. Certainly don't look at me! Even our own mothers, though we may be loathe to admit it, are not perfect — only the Blessed Mother is. In those occasions when we converse with a living saint or experience someone who is seemingly close to this spiritual perfection, and thus close to God in some way, we are naturally drawn to them and the goodness they show, or perhaps repulsed by fear, by fear of knowing that this is also our calling, our calling that we fail to live up to at times.

So this is not totally beyond our capacity to at least imagine or experience in a human person.

13 Q. What is God? A. God is a spirit infinitely perfect.

"A spirit" is a living, intelligent, invisible being. It really exists, though we cannot see it with the eyes of our body. It has intelligence and can therefore think, understand, etc. It is not because we cannot see it that we call it a spirit. To be invisible is only one of the qualities of a spirit. It is also indivisible, that is, it cannot be divided into parts. God is such a being. He is "infinitely perfect," that is, He has every perfection in the highest degree. "Infinite" means to have without limit. If there were any perfection God did not have, He would not be infinite. He is unlimited in wisdom, in power, in goodness, in beauty, etc. But you will tell me persons on earth and the angels and saints in Heaven have some wisdom and power and beauty, and therefore God cannot have all, since He has not the portion with which they are endowed. I still say He is infinite, because what the angels and others have belongs to God, and He only lends it to them. "Perfect" means to be without any defect or fault.

### A Finite Number of Ways to Get Confused About Infinity

I have spoken before about the perfections of God, but in summary, the perfections of God can be thought in terms of the infinite, that is, where there is no limit or end to something. There are several famous thought experiments that deal with the infinite in our world. One of the most famous is perhaps the ancient Zeno's Arrow Paradox, where a flying arrow, at any one instant, frozen in time, cannot be said to be moving. This is because, according to Zeno, the arrow "appears" to be flying through an infinite number of timeless points. Zeno, never being content with just one way of disturbing young students' minds, also gives us the Paradox of Place, where he says that if everything that exists must have a place, and place is a thing, then place will have a place, and so forth, to infinity.

Now, these have a solution in the mathematical world, namely calculus, and Zeno's assertions can be observed to not work in the real world, as Diogenes the Critic (there's always a critic), demonstrated the ridiculousness of the concept by getting up and walking. But it does show the mind-bending problems and possibilities that occur with infinity, as pictured in our imaginations. Mathematics as an abstract deals, in great part, with the infinite. Hermann Weyl, a 20th century mathematician, among many things, once wrote that "*Mathematics has been called the science of the infinite. Indeed, the mathematician invents finite constructions by which questions are decided that by their very nature refer to the infinite. This is his glory.*" Advanced mathematics and much of physical science fall apart if you do not deal with the infinite. Theology, even practical, "pastoral" theology, does likewise.

Let's return to the infinite, which is easy, since there is always room for more. David Hilbert in 1925 attempted to explain it thus:

Hilbert imagines a hypothetical hotel with rooms numbered 1, 2, 3, and so on with no upper limit. This is called a countably infinite number of rooms. Initially every room is occupied, and yet new visitors arrive, each expecting their own room. A normal, finite hotel could not accommodate new guests once every room is full. However, it can be shown that the existing guests and newcomers — even an infinite number of them — can each have their own room in the infinite hotel.

Finitely many new guests

With one additional guest, the hotel can accommodate them and the existing guests if infinitely many guests simultaneously move rooms. The guest currently in room 1 moves to room 2, the guest currently in room 2 to room 3, and so on, moving every guest from their current room  $n$  to room  $n+1$ . The infinite hotel has no final room, so every guest has a room to go to. After this, room 1 is empty and the new guest can be moved

into that room. By repeating this procedure, it is possible to make room for any finite number of new guests. In general, when  $k$  guests seek a room, the hotel can apply the same procedure and move every guest from room  $n$  to room  $n + k$ .

Infinitely many new guests

It is also possible to accommodate a countably infinite number of new guests: just move the person occupying room 1 to room 2, the guest occupying room 2 to room 4, and, in general, the guest occupying room  $n$  to room  $2n$  (2 times  $n$ ), and all the odd-numbered rooms (which are countably infinite) will be free for the new guests. (From Wikipedia, "Hilbert's paradox of the Grand Hotel")

If this boggles the mind too much, don't sweat it. It's his way of showing a way of how we can always "squeeze one more in," or even, how we can "squeeze *infinitely* more in," in infinity. Ok, but if God is infinite, then *how* does this affect us?

### How Big is Big? Even Bigger.

One of the ways is by answering those who marvel at the incredible, almost unimaginable, size of our physical universe — the cosmos. Sceptics might say, "HA! See? How can you have a god that cares about you, when you're not even a speck in the universe." The Psalmist had already meditated on this, singing, "For I will behold your heavens, the works of your fingers: the moon and the stars, which you have founded. What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you visit him? You reduced him to a little less than the Angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, and you have set him over the works of your hands" (Ps 8:3-6).

First, if God is infinite, it really does not matter how big the universe is. That it IS big, we already knew that. Maybe we didn't always realize just *how* big, but we knew it was BIG. The universe can be infinitely big, and you can squeeze in *other* infinitely big universes in with ours, and still God can more than handle it.

Second, while yes, *physically* speaking, we are almost infinitely small in relation to the cosmos, (ridiculously so, with respect to God) we are also, then, essentially infinitely important. Yes, we are but dust, as we hear on Ash Wednesday; we knew that from Scripture, but even so, God made us from that same dust, and infused it with His own spirit. Physically speaking, we are as nothing. Spiritually speaking, we outshine every created thing, and you can squeeze an infinite number of galaxies together, they would still not outweigh the importance we have in God's eyes. Sure, we are but specks, but everything is a speck to God in relation.

Physically speaking, our good in itself is rather limited. We *participate* spiritually and physically in the goodness and being of God. Fr. W. Norris Clarke, SJ, a famous American philosopher, taught that participation, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, has a kind of structure:

(1) a source which possesses the perfection in question in a total and unrestricted manner; (2) a participant subject which possesses the same perfection in some partial or restricted way; and (3) which has received this perfection in some way from, or in dependence

on, the higher source. (W. Norris Clarke, SJ, "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas Aquinas," 1952, reprinted in "Explorations in Theology: Being – God – Person," 1994.)

This is a way of explaining, philosophically, those relations we have with God, not just personally speaking, but in the way we exist. We participate in some small part in the infinite being-ness of God, as part of the infinite goodness of God. Likewise, as souls, spiritual beings, we participate in the good that comes from God. This kind of participation is not the active sort we usually imagine, but as we see from the lives of the saints, the more we actively participate, mind, body and soul, in the life of the Trinity, in the life of God, the greater our metaphysical relationship with God "grows"; for we become more like Him who is infinite, even if so but in a finite way. This is why the *Shema*, from the Old Testament, is the greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Dt 6:5). Simply sharing in the goodness of God passively is not enough -- even cockroaches can participate in some way in the goodness of God simply by being, by existing.

As Our Lord tells those opposed to Him, "And do not choose to say within yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that God has the power to raise up sons to Abraham from these stones" (Mt 3:9). So when God says, "Be holy for I am holy" (cf. Lv 20, 21, Ex 19:6, 1 Pt 1:16), He is commanding us, as His special, chosen people, to truly participate more fully in His life. Stones participate in the goodness of God in some way, sharing in the act of being from God, but God did not create His saints to just sit around, but to be *true* children of Abraham, children of our Heavenly Father. Our Lord, in one of His prophetic signs, curses the fig tree, not because it is a fig tree, but because it did not produce fruit, that is, it did not do what fig trees were made to do (cf. Mt 21:18-22; Mk 11:12-25, Lk 13:6-9). It should humble us that the source of every goodness, then, is from God. Our charity, our kindness, our wisdom, whatever we can call good in some way, is always from God. It should inspire us that when we participate in the goodness of God, we are truly participating in that which is divine and infinitely beyond ourselves.

### The Vacancy Sign is Always Left On for You

Let's go back for a minute to Zeno's arrow for a second. Zeno's problem is that he takes the arrow at any one timeless instant, and from that instant, cannot claim to be able to say anything about neither the source nor the destiny of that arrow. We see how foolish this is in real life, but then why do we live as if this were the case? We do know that we are from God, and that we are to return to God. We do not live merely as some series of separate instances, but as continuum, hopefully always headed upward and onward. Yes, sin pushes us off-track, perhaps even mortally so, but we are still made to have that final destination in God, in the life to come. A life of prayer and the Sacraments helps us, draws us ever closer to our Heavenly target. Living always in the "now" alone means we really don't have any kind of meaningful direction. We pass through the now, but *toward* God.



And what about Hilbert's Grand Hotel? Heaven is the perfect example of this thought experiment in action. The problem is not the lack of capacity or available rooms in Heaven – God can *always* squeeze more in; the problem, rather, is that so many look at Heaven, and figure, “Well, *that* place is not for me,” which is easy to do if we only remain in the mundane and worldly. Heaven has room for all of us, even more than all of us; it can squeeze in our infinite God without a problem — and His infinite goodness. We might look at even the most luxurious hotel in our world and think, “I couldn't live there forever. I'd just get bored.” Heaven is not a harp recital. Heaven is never exhausting the good – but experiencing the abyss of the infinite goodness of God, and sharing in the joy of all His creation. Boredom, jealousy, pettiness... all these are obliterated by infinite joy and goodness in God.



Gustave Dore, “Celestial Rose.”  
Illustration of Canto 31 of Dante’s Paradiso

This infinity, like calculus, has some good practical applications in real life, though like calculus, we don't always understand it.

First, what is sin? Sin is a turning away from God, sure. It is participating less in the life of God. It is “less” God. But just as in the Grand Hotel there was always room for one, or even infinitely more, removing one or even infinitely more guests does not really make a difference, at least not to the hotel (although the guests who were kicked out might be disappointed). The hotel itself (God) is infinite, and there's always more where that came from, as far as the hotel is concerned.

In a similar way, think of your sin. Think of your worst, most horrifying sin. The greatest evil cannot possibly compete with an infinite good. The evil of the Passion of Our Lord, the crucifixion of the Infinitely Just and Innocent One, can be lost in the face of the infinite goodness of God.

Evil is always limited, for it *is* limitation itself, a withdrawal from the infinite goodness of God. Now, throw that into the infinite hotel that is God's mercy. There is still infinite God, infinite goodness, and infinite mercy. Sin thus cannot “hurt” God – you can never take anything away *from* God anything that would make a difference in God Himself. What you *can* do is hurt yourself infinitely by pulling away from participating in that infinite goodness that is God. No one is forced to check in to Hotel Heaven. The Evil One *might* try to book as many souls as he can into Motel 666, but in the end, he can never compete.

Is all this a bit much? Well, yes, it is. I am reminded of the story of Saint Augustine, who was walking by the sea, meditating on the mysteries of the Holy Trinity. He happened upon a child trying to fill a hole in the sand with the waters of the sea. Saint Augustine asked the child what he was doing, to which the child replied that he was trying to put all the sea into that little hole. Of course, the saint told the child this was impossible. Exactly, the child replies, like trying to fit the infinite mysteries of an infinite God into our little human minds.

In the next issue, we'll skip to the questions of the omnipresence and how we see God and God sees us.

Curiosity Killed the Cat-holic

(Continued from page 1)

wrong purposes. Even pursuing a Doctorate in some kind of sacred science can lead us away from God, if our purpose is to delight in being called “Doctor” rather than in helping others, whether body or soul.

In the second article on curiosity, St. Thomas Aquinas engages with the idea of seeking knowledge of the things of the flesh, that is, seeking to know how “something feels,” if we know that a particular experiential knowledge can be sinful. A modern example might be experimenting with illicit drugs or pornography. This is where many a young person ends up losing himself. Here, they wish to engage in their curiosity, not in order to fall into a trap or vice, but in order to “know,” or at least, that's what many of us tell ourselves.

The opposite virtue to the vice of curiosity is *not* ignorance, however, but studiousness, that is, engaging in study and learning for the sake of the good and the true, and above all, for the One who created all things. This is one reason why good spiritual reading has been so highly recommended by the saints throughout the ages. We should always be engaged, in some way, with Scripture, saintly wisdom, or even secular knowledge, especially if it helps us or others. A little purely pleasure reading is not in itself bad, either. We all need a little rest and relaxation, but never let that be an excuse to ignore the things of God and love of God and neighbor.

So brothers and sisters, then, let us use the time that God has given us to do good, to be good, and to seek the good!

This is the way of the saints.