

# Answering Hard Questions

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In catechesis and in everyday life, we sometimes face tough questions. They are tough for a variety of reasons. We need to understand who is asking, why they are asking, why the question is tough, and some principles for answering questions. I will also suggest some resources that may help.

## What Questions?

The questions we are asked are diverse in their content, origin and motivation. We'll look first of all at the different types of content. (All of the example questions I will list in this part are ones I have actually been asked.)

### Religious

Some questions are questions regarding the content of the faith itself. Some examples of these questions:

- How can we believe in God when we know that the world came about through evolution?
- Does the devil really exist? If so, why did God make him?
- If God is good, why do innocent people suffer?
- If Mary is free from sin, wasn't it easier for her to be good?
- Why can't I say sorry to God in my own prayers rather than go to a priest?

### Moral

Moral questions often relate to the Church's teaching on marriage, the family and the sanctity of life. For example:

- If you really love someone, isn't it better to live together so that you can be sure you know each other before marriage?
- If we are against abortion isn't it better to encourage young people to be safe?
- Shouldn't abortion be allowed in cases of rape?

In addition, adults will sometimes ask questions related to co-operation in evil. These are some of the most technically difficult questions. For example:

- I am the editor of a scientific journal which publishes research on human embryos. Should I find another job?
- Can I go to the Baptism of a child who was conceived by IVF?
- Can I allow my unmarried daughter to share a room with her "partner" when she comes to visit?

### Topical

People will often ask questions related to things they have seen in the media. For example:

- Why is the Church against gay marriage?
- Shouldn't the Church promote condoms to stop HIV/AIDS in Africa?
- Why has the Church told the American nuns to stop helping the poor and teach doctrine instead?

### Personal

These questions are more commonly asked of priests, but if people trust you and respect you as a catechist, they may well ask you things such as:

- I get constantly distracted whereas I used to pray well. Does God not love me any more?
- How often should I go to confession?
- Should I buy the Big Issue?

### Who is Asking?

It is obvious that the questions I have listed come from a variety of people, asking for a variety of reasons. We need to consider the person and their particular concerns if we are to give an appropriate answer.

### Someone we are catechising

This is the principal focus for this session: we may have a group of children for first Communion (their questions can be the quite difficult), young people for Confirmation (their questions are more predictable), or adults for RCIA, Baptism or Marriage preparation (we can often relate more easily to questions from other adults, though they may seek information that we do not have to hand.)

### **A work colleague, family member or friend**

A person may be genuinely interested in our faith, perhaps saying “I wish I had a faith”, they may be hostile because of what they have seen on television or because they have rejected the faith themselves, or because they had a bad experience with a priest or a religious person.

These first two sources of questions are sometimes closely linked. Adults will bring questions that they have been asked at work, seeking an “expert” answer to help them. Teenagers and children may have been influenced by what they have seen on television.

### **A talk show host**

Most of you are not going to be involved in answering questions from a talk show host, but it is useful to remember that in some of our media companies there is a strong inbuilt bias against Catholicism, and that the presenter has to provide an entertaining programme.

Although we may not be called to do this work directly ourselves, we can learn much from those who do it well.

We do need people, especially young, media-presentable people to witness in this arena. *Catholic Voices* is an excellent idea which sets out to address this need.

### **Why is it a hard question?**

Questions are tough for various reasons. It is helpful for us to examine our own conscience to discern why we find some questions difficult.

### **Intellectually challenging**

It may be simply that the question is intellectually challenging – or more simply that we don’t know the answer because we lack information.

Some questions, such as the problem of evil, have always been found difficult. We should not despair if we find them difficult too.

### **Pre-packaged bias**

Often people come to us with opinions formed from what “everybody knows” (by watching the television) and we have to overcome prejudice about science and religion, the inquisition, the crusades, the “middle ages”, the necessity of contraception, bad Popes (especially the Borgias) and various other given axioms of secular culture.

### **Personal and emotional involvement**

Some questions are difficult to answer because a person is hurt by some personal experience and perceive the Church’s teaching difficult. We may need to discern between genuine hurt and manipulative tactics that abuse our kindness and charity.

## **Some Key Principles**

### **Truth and honesty**

It is absolutely fundamental that we answer truthfully and honestly. As catechists we must be faithful to the teaching of the Church in order to be authentic. For example, it is often a sensible and disarming tactic to admit quite openly the moral shortcomings of people in the Church either today or in the past, and then to talk about Our Lord’s promise to remain with the Church *despite* human failure.

“I don’t know” is an acceptable answer. “I will find out” is even better.

A banana skin is the question of authority. Sometimes people will allege that they were told simply that they should believe something “because I said so” or “because the Church teaches it.” (We need to be wary of generalisations about the “old days”.) Yet authority is relevant when we are talking about the authority of Jesus Christ and His teaching in the Church. It is just that we need to explain this first before it is convincing.

### **Answer according to the personal need of the questioner**

If someone asks “Why does God allow innocent people to suffer?” it make a big difference whether they are asking as a theoretical conundrum or whether they are troubled because they have recently suffered the loss of a child.

With pro-life questions, we need to consider not only whether the person has had an abortion, but also whether they have condoned or assisted a family member to have an abortion.

Sometimes, we face questions from someone who wants to be smart and show that they know something. A good approach is to help them sympathetically to know something else that they didn’t know before. A good example is when people ask about the inquisition, to point out that common criminals were known to blaspheme at their investigation so that they could have a fairer

and more comfortable treatment at the hands of the Church.

### **Not about winning an argument**

The Catholic Evidence Guild used to say to their trainees “Win an argument, lose a soul.” If a questioner is aggressive, we need to resist the temptation simply to win an argument and always keep in view the good of that person. We need to win them for Christ, not beat them in debate.

A possible exception to this is the television discussion when it may be helpful for a well-informed and skilful apologist to demonstrate publicly that the portrayal of the Catholic faith is dishonest, prejudiced or malicious. Even so, the reasonable apologist who is genuinely filled with Christian joy will usually have a greater impact than an angry defender.

### **Impact on others**

Even if we are finding it difficult to answer a particular aggressive questioner, our own patience and simplicity will be of influence to others who are listening. This is important in the case of someone speaking in a discussion on television, but it can also be important in a Confirmation class. The manner in which we answer questions from the awkward class member will affect the others who are embarrassed by the disruption.

### **Open horizons with new information**

We have a great opportunity to open new horizons for people who have learnt about the Catholic faith from the media. The *Catholics Come Home* video is a good simple example, pointing out that the Catholic Church is the largest healthcare provider in the world, that it founded the university and college system and so on.

For young people, the lives of the saints are great examples which help to make concrete the possibility of living the faith with heroism.

## **Resources**

### **Know your faith**

As catechists we constantly need to learn more about our faith. We have a vast and rich literature at every level of understanding that can keep us surprised.

Naturally the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a primary resource. So are older and shorter catechisms. The faith does not change, only the way of presenting it. We can learn a lot from previous generations and it is striking to see how

often they came across the kind of questions we face.

Nowadays it is easy to obtain documents published by the Vatican, whether papal teaching, documents from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the documents of Vatican II or the actual text of documents misrepresented in the media. A good example of this is the current misrepresentation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which said in its Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious:

The Holy See acknowledges with gratitude the great contribution of women Religious to the Church in the United States as seen particularly in the many schools, hospitals, and institutions of support for the poor which have been founded and staffed by Religious over the years.

Despite this, it has become a commonplace on television to say that the CDF has told the sisters to stop working with the poor and concentrate on doctrine.

### **Use the internet**

As with any technological advance, the internet can be used for great evil. We should not forget that it is a tool that can also be used, and is being used, for great good.

Despite fears about uncensored comment by anyone in the world, the internet has shown the power of co-operative projects. An early example was the publishing, free of charge, of the whole Catholic Encyclopaedia. Fr Zuhlsdorf talks of a “Reverse Greshams Law” where good information drives out bad. We have a means of answering the lies and misinformation put out about the Church.

### **Learn from Apologists**

A good example is the Canadian broadcaster Michael Coren. His two recent books have titles that might seem brash to us (he is selling primarily to the North American market) but they are very helpful: *Why Catholics are Right* and *Heresy* are easily readable answers to many of the hot-button issues with which Catholics are faced today.

If you have time to participate in forums (I do not!) then Catholic Answers is a good place to ask questions and engage in discussion.

There are millions of other good Catholics writing on the internet for the love of God and the Church. If you are faced with difficult questions, there is a lot of help out there.

## Some Random References

I will not give long links to these resources. Most of them can be found by a quick google search. I will also put links to them on my own blog “The Hermeneutic of Continuity”

<http://the-hermeneutic-of-continuity.blogspot.co.uk/>

which can itself be found easily by googling “Finigan blog” ☺

[*UPDATE: they are all there now. If you have found this some time after the date of delivery, go to the blog and search for “Answering Hard Questions.”*]

**The Catechism of the Catholic Church** (the go-to source for an authoritative explanation of the doctrines of the faith.)

**News.va** (get the texts, not the reportage)

**Catholic Answers website** (with apologetical materials and a good forum)

**Michael Coren’s books** “Why Catholics are Right” and “Heresy”

**Pam Stenzl** (A woman who was conceived after her mother was raped, and gives classes to teenagers on chastity)

**Janet Smith** (A moral philosopher who speaks engagingly on the question of the family and particularly on *Humanae Vitae* and natural fertility.)

**Regine Pernoud** “The Terrible Middle Ages” (an amusing and scholarly answer to the prejudice common about the middle ages and particularly the Church.)

**Peter Kreeft** (a Catholic philosopher who makes sound philosophy accessible and addresses many aspects of confused thinking we may be faced with.)

**Dawn Eden** “The Thrill of the Chaste” (a woman who converted from an immoral lifestyle and does great work speaking courageously to the general public about chastity.)

**Fr Robert Barron** “Catholicism” (a great resource for catechists and for parish programmes. Fr Barron also delivers regular short sermons posted on YouTube.)

**Fr Andrew Pinsent and Fr Marcus Holden** “Apologia” (A lengthy CTS pamphlet which deals expertly with many questions posed about religion in general and the Catholic faith in particular. This is an invaluable apologetical resource for us because it comes from a British, rather than a North American perspective.)

These are only a few resources, almost at random. The internet also gives us access to many fine books that are now out of copyright. We are no longer helpless simply because we do not have access to a Catholic library. For example, the works of GK Chesterton, Blessed John Henry Newman and others can be downloaded, put on a Kindle, quoted and read from your desktop (or iPad.)