

### The one true God, known by faith and reason

Our survey of Catholic dogmas looked earlier at teachings of the First Vatican Council on the papacy (Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* (18 July 1870)). Vatican I issued one other dogmatic decree, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (24 April 1870), which gave teachings on God the Creator, on divine revelation, on the nature of faith, and on the relationship between faith and reason. John Paul II's encyclical on faith and reason *Fides et Ratio* (1998) referred repeatedly to *Dei Filius*, saying: 'The teaching contained in this document strongly and positively marked the philosophical research of many believers and remains today a standard reference-point for correct and coherent Christian thinking in this regard.' (52)

*Dei Filius* first proclaims the Church's faith in the One God, declaring: 'The holy, catholic, apostolic Roman Church believes and confesses there is one God, true and living, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in his intellect and will and in all perfection. As He is one, unique, and spiritual substance, entirely simple [*i.e. not divided into parts*] and unchangeable, we must proclaim him distinct from the world in existence and essence, all blissful in himself and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things that exist or can be conceived besides him.' (DS 3001; cf. Lateran IV (1215) DS 800)

Vatican I went on to affirm that 'this one and only true God' created all things 'out of nothing', 'by an act of will free from all necessity' – 'not for the increase of his own happiness or for the acquirement of his perfection, but in order to manifest his perfection through the benefits that he bestows on creatures'. 'The world was made for the glory of God.' (cf. DS 3002; 3025)

After Vatican II, Pope St Paul VI again solemnly professed the divine attributes in his *Credo of the People of God* (1968), integrating this with the Church's Trinitarian faith. He proclaimed: 'We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creator of things visible such as this world in which our brief life runs its course – and of things invisible – such as the pure spirits which are also called angels – and creator in each man of his spiritual and immortal soul.

'We believe that this only God is as absolutely one in his infinitely holy essence as in his other perfections: in his almighty power, his infinite knowledge, his providence, his will and his love. He is "He who is" as he revealed to Moses (cf. *Ex* 3:14); He is "Love", as the apostle John has taught us (cf. *1 Jn* 4:8); so that these two names, Being and Love, express ineffably the same divine essence of him who has wished to make himself manifest to us, and who, "dwelling in unapproachable light" (*1 Tim* 6:16), is in himself above every name and every created thing and every created intellect.

'God alone can give us right and full knowledge of himself, by revealing himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in whose eternal life we are by grace called to share, here on earth in the obscurity of faith and after death in eternal light. The mutual bonds which from all eternity constitute the three persons, each of whom is one and the same divine Being, constitute the blessed inmost life of the most holy God, infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand.'

Such then is the Church's faith in God, One and Three. Yet even before having faith, human beings can (in principle) already know that the one Creator God exists, just from their God-given reason. People might think they are being 'devout' by saying that God can only be known with certainty by faith, not by mere human reason. Actually, however, that is not devout but

heretical. Vatican I declared infallibly: ‘If anyone says that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known with certainty with the natural light of human reason through the things that are created, let him be anathema.’ (*Dei Filius* DS 3026; cf. DS 3004) Vatican II repeated the teaching (*Dei Verbum* (1965) 6 (DS 4206)); and Pius XII, while expanding on the *difficulty* that fallen human nature finds in reaching this knowledge, had taught the same: ‘Human reason by its own natural force and light can arrive at a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God, who by his providence watches over and governs the world, and also of the natural law, which the Creator has written in our hearts...’ (*Humani Generis* (1950) 2 (DS 3874))

This doctrine is from Scripture. St Paul wrote, ‘What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.’ (*Rom* 1:19-20; cf. *Wis* 13:1-9)

True, this knowledge of God possible to *natural reason* differs from the saving knowledge of *supernatural faith*. Faith gives total personal trust to God in his act of speaking to humanity, and is possible only by divine grace; it is the free choice to allow God to lift us to a new and steadfast certainty, beyond dependence on reason and motivated instead by God’s absolute truthfulness. But as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (35) explains, ‘the proofs of God’s existence...can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason.’

These are called proofs, the *Catechism* says, ‘not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of “converging and convincing arguments”, which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.’ (31) The proofs are not within the competence of observational and experimental ‘natural sciences’ like physics or astronomy, but in the more foundational rational fields of philosophy and logic. This does not reduce but rather solidifies their intrinsic certainty. John Paul II explained: ‘scientific proofs...are valid only for things perceptible to the senses’; ‘proofs of God’s existence...have been elaborated by thinkers under the form of philosophical demonstrations in the sense of rigorous logical deductions.’ (*Audience* 10/07/1985)

The Church’s greatest thinker, St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), famously set forth ‘five ways’ of proving God’s existence. (*ST* Ia, 2, 3) The *Catechism* encapsulates the core of his logic thus: ‘The world, and man, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end...the first cause and final end of all things, a reality that everyone calls God.’ (34)

Reflecting on the universe, its beauty and order; on the human person, the moral law, the voice of conscience; – we seek the deepest source of such realities. Above all, we perceive they need an explanation for their very existence. Everything we see might just as easily not have existed at all. But then, why is there something rather than nothing? What causes things to have being?

St Thomas reasons to a *First Cause*, which is not just another thing that ‘has’ being (that would need, for *its* explanation, to receive its being from yet another being). Rather, the First Cause *is* Being, pure and unlimited (who can thus give created things their own *limited share* of being). Thus God told Moses: ‘I Am Who Am’. His very nature is *to be*, uniting in himself all perfections of being. A bit like a square is unable not to have four sides, the One who is Being is *unable not to be*. He is the Necessary Being. (So asking ‘Who made God?’ makes no sense. It is asking, ‘Who *gave* being to the One who *is* Being?’ God doesn’t need anyone to do that, or need to *receive* existence at all.) Yet what it means to say ‘God is Being’ we hardly know. That is ultimate Mystery. To know this would be to ‘see the face’ of God – and that is heaven.