

HIGHLIGHTS
of the
Catholic
FAITH

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CHAPTER 1

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

The overarching reason why theology is a science of unlimited scope rests on the reality that the infinite God is self-revealing. He desires to reveal himself to those he has lovingly created. By forming a people from which would come the divine Redeemer, God, amazingly, also created a means to communicate through the medium of human language—whether through his prophets or his own Son-made-man. Yet, throughout a major part of the history of humankind, divine self-disclosure has been consigned to the vast wonders of the created world.

God first reveals himself by leaving telltale signs of his presence in the grandeur of the universe. The created world serves as an information center about the attributes of God since the work performed communicates much about the worker. In this sense the created world presents a quest for God whereby human beings find signs of truth, goodness, and beauty, ultimately leading to an incomprehensible supreme being. The beauty, immensity, and rich variety of the universe have easily led many to the realization that God exists and that he created and governs the universe with care. Creation can be likened to a magnificent work of art that points to the presence of a loving, powerful God.

All of creation is stamped, as it were, with the signature of infinite intelligence. The well-choreographed ecosystems, with their intricate growth cycles and complex interdependence, point to a divine event planner. Such organization suggests an overarching intelligence that manifests itself through sophisticated, fine-tuned engineering laced with high-level mathematical logic. The harmonious order (on both an astronomical and subatomic level) reveals that there must be an infinite, all-perfect being responsible for everything that exists. Such order does not merely form out of chaos.

The fact that scientists can carry out highly specialized experiments and make stunning discoveries with logical explanations depends upon a universe run by predictable laws. This realization enables the human intellect to spontaneously perceive the virtual presence of an intelligent being behind it all. Everyone who engages

in any type of learning—whether the artificial intelligence of computer science or a simple study of gardening—is reminded that God has left a mark of his presence that is easily “picked up” by human reason.

The order and vast wonder of the universe coupled with the world’s beauty speak of an intelligence who arranged all things and presented them as a gift suited to the human person. The human person marvels at nature’s beauty and realizes that it must come from somewhere. The breathtaking splendor of snow-capped mountains complemented by a blanket of shimmering evergreens under a bright sun bespeaks a magnificently powerful divine artist. Considering both the beauty and the order of the universe—from the orbiting stars of a galaxy to the function of a single cell—the world can be likened to an elaborate, extensive symphony orchestra that plays exquisite music and requires a single conductor.

Based on the instinctive connection between the order, harmony, and beauty of the universe and the idea of divine intervention, the human person can rationally deduce God’s existence. Both ancient and Christian philosophers have come up with proofs of the existence of God through rational demonstration. It is in the realm of observation and common knowledge that every being finds the reason, or cause, of its existence in something else that already exists. For something to come into existence, there must be something else that precedes it that causes the existence of a new entity. A tomato plant exists because a previous tomato plant produced the tomato seeds. The string of causes cannot go back to an infinite number of causes because we would never get to the present being in question. It would be intellectually dishonest to simply refuse to try to rationally explain how things came into existence in the first place. The existence of the universe finds its ultimate explanation in a transcendent cause, or first mover, that enjoys infinite perfection. This infinite perfection must include an eternal existence, not caused by another, and limitless power, not gained from another. Both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas concluded that there must be a “prime mover” or an “uncaused cause,” a creator that is not himself created, whom we call God. As St. Paul wrote of the Gentiles, who did not know God’s self-Revelation to the Jewish people, “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.”¹

God’s existence can be proven not only in terms of cosmological phenomenon but also through the discovery of an objective moral law spiritually written on the human mind and heart. (The heart represents the innermost part of the human person.) St. Paul also wrote of the Gentiles that “what the law requires is written on their hearts” and that “their conscience also bears witness.”² The awareness of innate moral standards expressed in clear internal criteria points to a divine Lawgiver. It is of universal acceptance that it is wrong to kill, steal, lie, insult, etc. Love for family and friends and just, truthful dealing with others form part of the moral law that is written on the tablet of the human heart. If someone so much as accidentally steps on someone else’s toe, he or she is inspired to apologize. Done on purpose with no apology, it would cause a reaction, perhaps a violent or even a legal one. What causes such apologies, or defensive responses? Why do we all seek to make amends or feel justified to demand them? Why do we seek justice in the world for ourselves and for others? It is because every human person carries, within the recesses of his or her heart, objective standards of morality independent of nationality, age, or culture. St. Augustine states that this intuition of what is morally right and wrong proves the existence of God since that ability for moral discernment did not just appear out of nowhere. These interior, shared moral standards point to a divine legislator who universally issues the same principles of morality for everyone; therefore, the contents of the moral law found in the recesses of the human heart form part of God’s self-disclosure.

A study of the created world can lead to not only God’s *existence* but also some of his *attributes*, including God’s love for humanity. Even without the explicit communication that marks Sacred Scripture, God reveals that he infinitely loves the human person. In the process of learning about the intricacies of one’s surroundings—the attraction of the world in its beauty; the power that the human person has to understand, dominate, and make use of the things of the earth; the special place of the human person within the world—a person begins to realize that the world was ordered for the well-being of humankind. The question that creation prompts

1. Rom 1:19–20.

2. Rom 2:15.

us to raise is, “How did all this happen?” These amenities did not appear spontaneously but have been provided by a divine and loving owner. God’s love can be discerned if one compares the world to a home left for a visitor who happens to find food in the cupboard and refrigerator, comfortable furniture, a nice bed, and a pleasant temperature. God arranged the world for the enjoyment and thriving of all people, who receive it as a pure gift.

This is not to reject the scientific theory of evolution or any other theory of how, historically speaking, such aspects of this glorious world came to be. Natural processes are always open to scientific inquiry. It is only to acknowledge that—however the world has historically been shaped over time—God is the source of being and the divine Planner. A theory of evolution that insists on random events sprung from chaos as the only explanation for this remarkably ordered universe may be incompatible with the existence of a divine Creator, but there is no reason why faith in God as the Architect must reject a scientific study of how things came to be. This has particular bearing on the dignity of the human person. As Pope Benedict XVI explained, “We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”³

There is also evidence of God’s existence in the fact that the human person is naturally a religious being. Throughout human history virtually every culture, whether intellectually sophisticated or not, has exhibited strong religious sentiments. In part, this is the result of the human response to the marvels of the natural world. It was common among ancient groups of people to worship created things such as the sun, earth, and water since the emergence and the sustenance of life was intimately linked to these elements. By reflecting on its own thought process and capacity to choose and love, the human mind also grows to understand that existence is not only limited to the material world but also embraces the mysterious world of the spirit. Though often born of much ignorance, and sometimes including outright immoral practices, ancient pagan religions demonstrate an acknowledgment of the need to be grateful for the goods of the earth, and they regard a world of the spirit as its source. In nearly every culture, religious ceremonies and customs accompany special times in a person’s life such as birth, marriage, and death.

3. Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily*, Mass to Inaugurate His Pontificate (April 24, 2005).

Spiritual practices are in many instances aimed to ward off evil and obtain blessings and protection. Even though most people of the ancient world engaged in idolatrous cults across many centuries, this still universally attests to the fact that an inherent part of the human condition is the exercise of some form of religion.

It is only in recent times that individual people have opted for an atheistic view regarding their origin and that of the world. They deny the existence of God, in many cases with a certain alacrity, as if this denial were itself a religious truth. In some academic circles a person might well be denigrated for associating God with any scientific finding. Once, in a lab where biological research was taking place, one of the scientists declared that the beauty of their fascinating discoveries pointed to the existence of God. Unfortunately, a colleague reacted by stating that any kind of religious comment or metaphysical conclusion had absolutely no place in that laboratory. It makes no reasonable sense to reject a priori the logical conclusion of divine intervention for the simple reason that the intervention is divine. It would certainly be within the realm of scientific integrity that knowledge of the scientific world would lead to an openness to the possibility of an intelligent creator.

Possible reasons for atheism in the face of cogent, compelling evidence for proof of the existence of God are complex and various. The presence of evil and its consequent tragic suffering cause some to reject explanations that include a benevolent God. How could an all-powerful and all-loving God allow such tragedies to occur? Though the reality of so much evil and human suffering will never be totally understood, the free will to reject God and his life-giving laws certainly plays a major role in producing so much anxiety and strife. The universe in its beauty *was* created by a loving God in an orderly way for the good of humanity, but since God has gifted the human person with the *freedom* to love him and obey his laws, there exists also the prospect of abusing that freedom through the rejection of God and his laws.

Another common reason given for atheism and agnosticism is the inordinate indulgence of sensual desires. A carnal life, focused entirely on physical pleasure, severely dulls the mind and heart's capacity for a spiritual life and the proper exercise of conscience. The human mind tends to rationalize and excuse personal wrongdoing by disagreeing with the tenets of the natural law or professing

that God does not even exist as a way of justifying an immoral or self-indulgent act or lifestyle. When the moral law loses its validity and force in one's personal conduct, God is often simply taken out of the equation. It is hard to accept the objective moral standards of the Ten Commandments—let alone that they are revealed by God—if a person feels that he or she can create a morality tailored to the passions. With so many violations of conscience, which is meant to be inspired by the natural law, it is not uncommon that God is considered totally irrelevant or, worse, his existence is called into question. Simply put, sinfulness without repentance calls for a self-rationalization that demands liberation from a guilty conscience, which ultimately leads to categorically denying God's existence.

God, however, never ceases to reach out to his people, to communicate his plan for a loving relationship with his children ordered toward their happiness and fulfillment.

DIVINE REVELATION

God reveals himself through the grandeur, beauty, and goodness of both the material world and the richness of the human spirit. This divine presence—whether seen from the vantage point of material creation, human experience, or the discovery of the moral law—is the fruit of natural reason. Natural reason, though, can only go so far in knowing about the inner life of God and his plan for humankind. A finite mind cannot find its own way up to the infinite; the infinite must come down to it. God in his infinite goodness and wisdom chose to reveal himself and his will directly through verbal communication. The contents of these Revelations span millennia, and they include truths both accessible to and beyond the capacity of human reason.

Much of the moral content of Divine Revelation can be discovered through the light of reason. For this reason, most cultures have devised similar codes of law and morality; however, the human mind and will are handicapped due to the effects of Original Sin. Human beings can, as noted above, perceive a common moral law, but sin clouds human judgment and hinders the ability to perceive what is good. For this reason, most cultures are also marked by gross violations of human dignity. Considering the inherent weakness of the human condition, God has spoken through his prophets and in a

spectacular way through his Son to ensure that there be no ambiguity regarding his will for humanity.

More than just the moral law or his very existence, God wanted to communicate his divine life with the intention of adopting every person as a child of God. In human relationships, one person comes to truly know another only by communicating and thereby revealing his or her own inner life. Through Divine Revelation God gives every human person knowledge of himself and the possibility for a personal relationship that goes beyond his or her natural capacity.

This work of supernatural self-communication was done gradually and in stages. God first made himself known when he created man and woman. He conveyed to them his will and blessed them with special graces and gifts. Though our first parents disobeyed God, by which sin was brought into the world, God continued to reveal himself through a series of covenants that would become more elaborate. God promised his blessings and protection for those who would stay faithful to his mandates. Some of the highlights of God's Revelation include his covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. He spared Noah and his family in the great Flood by commanding him to construct an Ark. After that catastrophe, God promised never to punish the world again in that sort of way on account of sin. Some years later God communicated with Abraham, choosing him to be the father of a chosen people. If they would remain faithful to God's will, God would make them a great nation. Once the chosen people were a significant population, Revelation in the Old Testament reached a high-water mark when God revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. Again, blessings would be bestowed on the chosen people if they would abide by the Mosaic Law, which is nothing more than the natural law inscribed in human nature. Divine Revelation reached its pinnacle when God the Father sent his own divine Son, speaking through the Word-made-flesh.

SACRED SCRIPTURE

Promised and predicted by the prophets and Psalms, Jesus Christ's life and teachings summarize the whole scope of Divine Revelation. Among the chosen people, God illuminated the minds of divinely selected people called to transmit truths and messages coming from God himself. God's Revelation in the Old Testament not only involved his plan for the chosen people of Israel but also