

When Confronted or Questioned about the Faith

As one who is strong in your faith, you are likely to be in situations where people you know are looking for answers or struggling in their faith. It's only a matter of time until you run into a difficult question or a difficult person. How you respond, in that moment, will be crucial in the future faith of the person you encounter. After all, their encounter with you may be as close as they get to encountering Christ. Make it matter.

Here are a few steps to consider in difficult discussions about the faith, or when comments/questions like the following are surfaced:

- Why does God make bad things happen to good people?
- How can you be part of Church that sexually abuses children?
- You Catholics are all going to Hell as idol worshippers!
- Why don't Catholics believe in the Bible?

1. Assess the situation

- What is the tone they are using? Angry? Hurt? Lonely? Inquisitive? Frustrated? Challenging?
- How much time do you have to respond? Are you meeting in passing? Will you be together for a while?
- What is the environment you are in? Is there a lot of background noise? Are there other people around?
- Are there spectators? Are they making a comment to grandstand or be on a soapbox? Are their younger listeners? Is everyone watching you?

The situation determines your response. For example, you won't want to dive too deep if your time is limited.

2. Validate the comment/question

- Find a common value that is shared between you and the other person. There is always something.
- Examples:
 - Why does the Church hate gay people?
 - Shared value: The dignity of all people
 - All priests are pedophiles!
 - Shared value: protecting children from abuse
 - Mass is boring!
 - Shared value: finding an authentic experience of faith at my level
- By validating the comment/question you honor the other person and reduce any tension between you.
- This is a challenging step since we often want to react, rather than respond with patience, joy, and love.

3. Ask and Listen

- Try to get to the root of the question. There is usually something that lead someone to ask a question or make a comment. A person could be in the midst of a personal tragedy or could be a theology student. Those warrant different responses.
- Common follow-up questions include:
 - That's a great question. How did you come up with this question?
 - Great question! What do you think the answer is?
 - What happened in your life to make you curious about this?
- Research shows that most young adults who were raised Catholics are told what to believe, but are never asked what they believe. This is your opportunity to help them explore their own personal faith.

4. Use I-statements

- "People listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 41)
- A general distrust in institutions leads people to be more skeptical when saying things like:
 - "The Church teaches that..." or,
 - "The Catechism of the Catholic Church says..." or,
 - "The Bible says..."
- Instead, share your faith experiences and why the answer is important to you:
 - "I understand that it's hard to have faith in God sometimes. I doubt my faith a lot. Yet I feel that there is a God and I have to trust that He's there."
 - "I am really embarrassed by the priest sex abuse scandal. It's a horrible thing. But, most of the priests that I have worked with feel the same way. I have found that most priests are deeply prayerful and are wonderful men."
 - "I agree that some Church teachings are hard to accept. In my own life, though, I have felt greater peace when I do what the Church teaches then when I go against Church teachings."
- Allow yourself to be the subject of the sentence. Be prepared to share your own reasons for believing and acting the way you do. If you don't know an answer, be honest. They asked *you* these questions for a reason.

5. Coach to More

- The discussion needs to end sometime. Before letting them move on, come up with some resource, event, or thought-provoking question to leave them with.
- Consider inviting them to talk about this some other time.
- Consider inviting them to talk with your pastor or other Church staff who have inspired you.
- Consider referring to a book or resource (catechism, Scriptures, etc.) and offer to help meet with them to explore the topics together (accompaniment!)
- Reinforce how grateful you are for being invited into the privileged experience.

Some rules to live by:

1. People can't be what they can't imagine. Your example matters more than your words.
2. Faith Discussions are a privileged encounter.
3. Remember that you are merely a catalyst for conversion, not the cause. Trust the Spirit.
4. We only need to defend things that are weak. Don't let questions/comments offend you.
5. Evangelization takes a life time. Don't rush!
6. Don't try to be right, try to be useful.
7. Always speak out of love, as God loves you.