

#8 – On Questions Asked by a 15-Year Old Girl



Dear Peregrinus (Friday afternoon, 5:35 PM):

It was wonderful to enjoy the evening with you, though I am guessing that you found your food and wine not up to snuff. I would agree that my food lacked flavor; something a little flat in it. Yet, the space was cool and comfortable; it was not too crowded and noisy; and of course I got to share it with you. Thank you.

It was not until this morning that I saw your email, in which you sent the Questions asked you by a 15-year old girl – the daughter of an unnamed friend of yours, and so I am sorry that we did not get to a discussion of these during dinner.

I will attempt a few answers inside of the email that you sent me (my comments are placed underneath each question in turn). The “answers” I

give are really more an acknowledgment of the the importance of what she asks ... but also an invitation to begin to live in the mystery of Life itself. With mystery it is never about "having answers," because one does not "solve" a Mystery – one dwells within it, makes oneself available to be taught by it.

I am melting this afternoon in my overly warm office. I really don't think that I will be able to stay here much longer today! And then it will be the holiday weekend. Blessings to you and your family on this long weekend in the robust sunshine. May there be no forest fires that come visiting your neighborhood down there on this June weekend.

And now, to her Questions, and my replies:

A Comment

I am here trying to imagine a sophomore – a 15-year old – and how such a person asks such questions, and what kind of answers are proportionate to her capacity and interest. I want her to feel honored for having asked real questions, but I want her to be invited into a realm of Mystery where all adults dwell – where adults live the Mystery, live the great questions ... having learned how not to require answers for content beyond our grasp. What good is an answer one cannot yet understand?

Question #1 – If God had personally been through the pain of knowing what it's like to sacrifice his son for others, and our entire religion is based off of that one fact, how could he ask many of his followers throughout the ages after to go through the same pain?

My reply – Part of the **fact** of human beings is that we, like favorite dogs or cats of our family's history, get sick, get lost, get hurt, and die. God did not make any of us – humans or animals – to be free of these limitations. We cause hurt and anger and frustration in ourselves (God does not cause this in us) when we refuse to accept this fundamental limitation of all of us humans and animals. Instead, what God did was to demonstrate to us in

Christ that sickness or hurt or death is not the last word about human beings. Though we die – and even babies die – God loves us and “has” us, every one. The real pain we feel when we have to say goodbye too soon to people we love is NOT about the pain; rather the pain we feel has to do with the LOVE we feel for them. Sure, we feel pain and loss; but the experience is not ABOUT the pain and loss; it is about the LOVE and gratitude we feel ... and that we will miss him or her.

Question #2 – How does God expect those who are ignorant and have never heard of the Christian religion itself to believe in Him, in order for them achieve the afterlife?

My reply – Catholics, but not only us, recognize that **none of us**, even the greatest Saints, even those most profoundly knowledgeable about Jesus Christ, **earn** Heaven. It is not like a formula, such that one says, “If you know Christ, then you can achieve Heaven.” No. But why? Because the most important fact about Jesus Christ is NOT that **we** know Him (though it is a greatest privilege and a grace that changes everything for a person) ... **but that Jesus knows us!** If God did not know us, each one, then none of us could ever find Heaven. God knows us; that is by far the most important fact.

Question #3 – Is the reason that, biblically, God only demands that animals be sacrificed because they do not have the same comprehension as humans, and in terms of their inability to worship him? Do animals go to heaven?

My reply – First off, I will say, and with more personal force than theological force, that if my dog, Scout, is not in Heaven when I get there ... then, well, I will know that I ended up in the other place. So there.

But more theologically I say this: Jesus made it clear to us that LOVE is what always endures through Time, through even Death; it is our most consistent and daily experience of Heaven when we are loved, and when we love. Many of us, as families and individuals, have truly loved a companion animal. It is

not a different kind of love we give to animals; it is the same love that we show to other humans. The patterns of love are different, such that we cannot love a bunny rabbit in the same way as we love a sibling, but the love itself is the same love. And, from an other perspective, I felt that my dog Scout taught me through his life for me and my family a very great deal about how to love. In fact, I felt often that he was far more advanced in his understanding of love than I was. For this reason, it seems highly probable that Heaven will include the animals we have loved – and therefore our love for them fundamentally changed them – and which have loved us, been our companions and guardians. And how many animals that we never knew personally had their lives taken from them so that we humans could eat them and live? It seems somehow more like the way God loves that all of these animals would share in Heaven too.

Question #4 – And although we know the reasons for the wrong in the world are due to the broken covenant between God and Adam and Eve, and that although He is a loving God, He is also a just God and must come through with his punishment that was promised upon Adam and Eve. Are all of the world's wrongs just compensation for that one act?

My reply – I have heard wise people say, and I myself to some degree believe what they say, that our time on Earth, for people of good will, for people who are daily trying to be good persons, is what Purgatory is (where the Latin root of "purgatory" means "to be cleansed, purified"). The challenges and sufferings of this world change us, make us wise (or should make us wise), and purify our grasp of how the world works. I think that this girl's question is already on to this idea.

But I would never speak of God (as she does) as one who is into punishment. I truly think that this is an unhelpful way of trying to understand God, and a way proposed by people still too young to make the distinction between being punished for doing something harmful or unworthy and being responsible for our actions. God is absolutely about holding us responsible

for our actions ... so that we learn from our mistakes and work to repair what damage our mistakes cause others to have to accept. God is glorified when a sinner says, "I am she who did this. And I will accept responsibility for it, and I will do whatever I can to make things right again." God is made unworthy of Himself (!) when we humans assume that He punishes. No, it is humans who love, and far too much, to punish other human beings, and even animals; it is God who redeems ... and never for even a second fails to keep working for our redemption, making sure that we are responsible for our actions, helping us learn from our mistakes.

Yours sincerely in Christ the Pilgrim,

Padre