

## Alpha – A Note for Catholics

(NG) = Text of Nicky Gumbel, either from the book 'Questions of Life' or from the downloadable talks on the internet <https://run.alpha.org.uk/preview-resources>  
In blue – commentary by Caroline Farey

### 1. Alpha teaching: Divine Truth - primarily as experienced

#### Catholic teaching: Divine Truth - primarily as received & believed

(NG – talk 1) 'Now, when Jesus said 'I am the truth', the Hebrew understanding of 'truth' was really not just intellectual truth, head knowledge, but heart knowledge. In other words, truth as experienced.'

Both 'head knowledge' and 'heart knowledge' are *necessary*; they are *different and linked*. Since Jesus is God and God is divine mystery, we cannot always 'experience' the great divine truths; that God is a Trinity of persons for example, or that Jesus is God from God, that he and the Father are one, that his food is to do the will of his Father, that he was born of the virgin Mary, that he rose again on the third day.

Our minds are made for truth, 'head knowledge'. Our minds are made by God, for knowledge of him so that we might come to him and experience him. Faith is firstly an act of the mind. It is important not to denigrate knowledge by the mind which we need for informing our hearts and our experiences. Without 'head knowledge' guiding us, we can be a slave to instincts, emotions, persuasions, whims and habits and we can misjudge our experiences.

### 2. Alpha teaching: Instant Justification from God happens when desired

#### Catholic teaching: Justification from God is through Christ's body, the Church when desired and acted upon (words and deeds)

(NG – talk 3) 'Justification. To use two theological words, justification happens instantly: you are put right with God, you're made righteous. There's no condemnation, no guilt.

Sanctification, which is becoming like Jesus, that's a lifelong process.'

There is no condemnation of any *person* by Christ. However, we need to be careful that people don't justify their *actions* themselves and simply believe this is also from God. We can justify anything we do, rightly or wrongly. In this sense our 'justification' of ourselves can happen instantly. We can always argue a way of seeing our actions as justified.

Justification before God is different and needs honesty and an act of restoration. Jesus, because he is God can do this. Nothing happens instantly simply by the sheer act of my mind believing it. I don't become right or wrong, forgiven or healed, good or bad simply by my own belief.

True justification is not a purely intellectual exercise that I can perform in my mind any time I have sinned. As though, once I have asked God for justification in prayer, I am thereby forgiven by God and the world. Jesus established a sacramental 'economy', that is, channels of his divine grace by which we may be justified and sanctified (brought into Christ's holiness). These 'channels', visible acts of Christ via his Church, are the sacraments.

### 3. Alpha teaching: 'Christian' by Faith not Baptism

#### Catholic Teaching: 'Christian' by Baptism and Faith

(NG – talk 4) ‘So what is a Christian? A Christian is a *Christ*-ian: someone who follows Jesus, someone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ. And, of course, how that happens varies enormously. For some people there’s a definite moment. For other people, they’d say:....’

It is important to be clear that the ‘definite moment’, according to the ancient and Catholic Tradition, is the moment of Baptism for each person. This is the act by which – by water and the Spirit – Jesus Christ heals a person from sin by his death, and raises a person to life in him. Full Christian initiation occurs by Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

The seed of Christ’s life is:

- sown (in the sacrament of Baptism),
- watered (by the Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation) and
- fed (at the sacrament of the Eucharist).

These actions of God do not depend on what people say or on their various experiences.

It is also true that, once baptised, many do not follow Jesus after all, nor put their faith in him. How they ‘wake up’ to him can vary enormously, slowly or suddenly.

(NG) ‘Some say: I couldn’t tell you exactly when it happened.’ That’s fine. C. S. Lewis used the analogy: if you’re on a train from Paris to Berlin, some people know the exact moment they cross the border. Other people might have been asleep ... what matters is that you know that you’re in Berlin. And what matters is that you know that you’re a Christian now, if that’s what you would like.’

The Scriptures and the early Church make clear that to be a Christian one needs to be baptised. In the sacrament of Baptism, a person is baptised ‘into Christ’, and becomes united with the Son of God as children of God and therefore heirs with Christ.

One doesn’t become a Christian simply by deciding ‘now’ instantaneously, ‘if that’s what you would like’. For example, I cannot simply decide that I shall now be, and so I am, married, or the son or daughter of someone, or transformed.

One can certainly decide to follow Christ ‘now’, immediately, seek his ways, his Spirit, his grace and the new life he wants to give us, whether one is baptised into Christ already or not. This kind of decision of mine doesn’t make me a Christian, it draws me to Christ who makes me a Christian by giving me his life at Baptism.

#### **4. Alpha teaching: How do I know I am a Christian? The Bible**

#### **5. Catholic teaching: How do I know I am a Christian? Baptism into Christ’s body the Church**

(NG – talk 4) ‘..using this analogy of marriage, If you asked me how do I know I’m married, I can point you to this: this is our marriage certificate. This is a document that is evidence that we are married. If you asked me how I know I’m a Christian, I would point to a document: I would point to the word of God.’

The Church points to the baptismal record and the baptismal certificate just as it does for a marriage record and a marriage certificate. Many people read the bible without becoming

Christians or they may begin to be interested. The bible gives me knowledge of Christ, it doesn't make me a Christian. Baptism makes me know I am a Christian – that I have Christ's life in me.

## **6. Alpha teaching: The bible is the primary way God communicates with us**

**Catholic teaching: The Church, the body of Christ, is primary - and gives us the bible**  
(NG – talk 6) 'The bible is the primary way God communicates with us'

In fact, Jesus didn't write anything down. He lived and spoke with his disciples as the primary way he communicated. Then Jesus promised them the Spirit who would lead them into all the truth. Jesus' great commandment wasn't to write but to 'tell' and 'make disciples'. The Church did this and the first Christians after Pentecost devoted themselves to four dimensions of the Christian life: the teaching of the apostles, to fellowship, prayer and breaking of bread. Scripture therefore records these four primary ways that God is in communion with us. (Acts 2:42).

(NG. talk 6) ... how do we know about Jesus? We only know about Jesus because of this book. '

We know about Jesus through the Holy Spirit in the Church, that is, through members of the body of Christ speaking, listening, writing and reading. There are those who wrote some things down in the New Testament, and those who spoke, lived, worshipped and prayed in accordance with the 'traditions' that St Paul speaks about.

*"So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter." (2 Thes 2:15)*

(NG – talk 6) 'Science answers the 'how and when questions; the bible answers the who and why questions.'

The Church answers the who and why questions. The people of the body of Christ down through the ages who have pondered, prayed, lived and written. The Church is made up of people who have Christ's life poured into them by the Holy Spirit. The gospel writers, united to Christ in his Church, were inspired by the Holy Spirit before the texts.

*"the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, [is] the pillar and bulwark of the truth. (1 Tim. 15-16)*

## **7. Alpha teaching: Christian - by Faith**

**Catholic teaching: Christian - by Baptism**

(NG- talk 9) 'If people have the Spirit of God living within them, they are Christians' QL 122

Once one is baptised, then one has 'the spirit of God living within' and then one is a Christian, with the very life of Christ. One is part of Christ's own body, the Church. Meanwhile, the Spirit of God is always prompting each person at all times whether someone is baptised or not.

If being a Christian depended only on whether someone has the *personal conviction* that the Spirit of God is living within them or not, being a Christian can come and go as the convictions come and go. Does the Holy Spirit go away during those times when I am not

convinced any more or not feeling his presence anymore? This would mean that the Holy Spirit depends entirely on my whim, will, feelings, conviction and imagination as to whether he is present within me or not. The Holy Spirit is a divine person who is not dependent on my will, rather I am dependent on his, which is the will of God.

## **8. Alpha teaching: Born Again - by personal desire**

### **Catholic teaching: Born again - by Baptism and personal desire**

(NG) 'In the spiritual realm, when the spirit of God and the spirit of a man or woman come together, a new spiritual being is created.' (QL p113). This is what born again means!

(NG – talk 9) 'We need to be born again by the Spirit. This is what happens when we become Christians. ... We may not be able to put our finger on the exact moment it occurred ....'

Neither the early Church nor the Catholic Church would say that 'a new spiritual being is created' but that the human being, who is both body and spiritual soul, is transformed by the Holy Spirit and becomes 'a new creation' without ceasing to be the same human person who was conceived, already, in the image of God.

It is not simply the 'spirit of a man or woman' that 'comes together' with the Holy Spirit but the whole human person, body and soul.

Being born again happens firstly in the waters of Baptism. Once the Spirit of the living God has been poured into our hearts at Baptism, we are free to respond, or not, to the divine gifts given to us. What can happen is that the divine life within remains dormant, is not fed or watered, and withers.

## **9. Alpha teaching: Becoming a Christian involves 3 separate actions**

### **Catholic teaching: Becoming a Christian is by Baptism: which is the action of God, the receptivity of the person and the action of the Church together.**

(NG – talk 15) 'Becoming a Christian involves 3 things. First of all something God does: God gives you the Holy Spirit. Secondly something you do: you repent and believe. And thirdly, something the Church does: and that's to baptise.'

The ancient and Catholic Tradition is that:

God the Father gives us his Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit *in Baptism*.

God gives us the grace to repent and believe so that we may be baptised.

God forgives our sins through Jesus' death and resurrection in Baptism.

Baptism is the action of God, in and through the Church, not an action of the Church without God.

## **10. Alpha teaching: Baptism is only symbolical**

### **Catholic Teaching: Baptism is a real divine action**

(NG – talk 15) 'Baptism is the mark of being a member of the Church and it symbolises washing, being cleansed ...it symbolises the Holy Spirit.'

Baptism is a sacrament. In the Catholic Church a sacrament is the invisible action of God made visible by the actions of the Church. The sacramental work of God, in and through his Church is not just human and symbolical but divine and real. Baptism is more than symbol, it is an entering into divine mystery, into the action of God in and through the Church, the action of spiritual washing and cleansing by Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

### **11. Alpha teaching: Prayer is not repetition of religious jargon**

#### **Catholic Teaching: Prayer can be by repetition and can use religious language**

(NG – talk 5) Prayer 'is not a torrent of mechanical and mindless words'.

God does not want us to repeat meaningless words or religious jargon' QL68.

- Words normally have meaning. To what, then, is N. Gumbel referring? Words for which we do not know the meaning could be, for example, praying in tongues and NG is not against this.
- Another example is Latin, which can have profound meaning; it is the language of the body of Christ for 1500 years and therefore not contrary to the life of the body of Christ today. We might not know what all the words mean, but we can know that they are the psalms or other prayers of the Church that we pray with trust and discernment.
- The rosary could be observed as 'a torrent of mechanical and mindless words', learnt by heart and repeated often. In fact, frequent repetition is a good way to remember valued prayers. Set prayers, such as the 'Our Father' are necessary for praying out-loud and together – as the one body of Christ. We know too that, even when the mind is tired or not concentrating, repeating words that we know are good and meaningful, are a great source of spiritual comfort, and the rosary a very powerful prayer.
- What is 'Religious jargon'? There are words that the Church has maintained, either because they are scriptural or because of their accuracy. For example, redemption, justification, salvation, hierarchy, catechesis, transubstantiation, Trinity, paraclete. If we know these words and use them to communicate with God it is certainly prayer.
- 'Do not babble as the pagans do' is a reference to praying as though prayer is magic – a set of words that 'does the trick' and gains the request whatever it is. Prayer is rather, speaking with real persons in heaven about real concerns in our life. Prayers that make requests that are not good for us, that go against God's divine love, will not be answered in the way we expect. Prayer is always answered by God with love even when we don't see it.