# Catholicism 101

## Who is God?

No question is more basic or essential to understanding faith than who is God. For this reason I am devoting an entire part of this series to exploring and answering these questions: who is God? Who is Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit? What do we mean by the Trinity? Often some of our greatest struggles both in faith, in promoting the faith, or coming to understand our faith is God. Therefore, we need some time to understand what we can know about God and how we can know him.

What do we mean by "God"?

The word "god" is used in many different contexts with a variety of meanings. The primary way that the word "god" is used is to describe a being that is beyond our imagining and intellect – a supreme being. Even figures like the Greco-Roman deities were described by the word "god." In a more modern context the word "god" has broadened in meaning to express any figure or idea that is beyond the normal human experience. Hence we can say that the "god of money" controls our society. For us, God has a specific meaning. We use the term "god" to refer to a singular all powerful being. Thus we capitalize the word to indicate that it is a name not a quality.

**What can we know about God?**

Understanding God is one of the great struggles of anyone of faith. People often fall into two camps that complicate the matter. Some people believe that the supreme nature of God makes him unknowable. God is too big, too grand, too beyond us to be able to understand anything about him. This is called the negative way. We know God by what he is not. Many people believe that God is knowable to a degree. As God has revealed himself to us, so we can know him by his revelation to us. This is called that apophatic way or positive way. Yet, the best way to come to understand God is through his attributes. Each attribute lets us see God from a different angle like looking through a kaleidoscope so that by broadening our picture we get a better sense of the truth about God.

God as creator:

The easiest attribute to understand about God is God as creator. One of the most widely used and accepted proofs for the existence of God is God as creator of the universe. The universe didn't come from nothing nor does the laws that govern the universe happen by coincidence. Someone or something needed to create the universe to give it its order and structure. Hence, God is creator.

God as all-powerful:

If God created the universe, then God is clearly the most powerful being in the universe since nothing else can exist without God. Normally we speak of the "all-powerful" quality of God as though God can do anything. This statement is mostly true. Even though God is all-powerful, the fullness of God's power has some limitations. God cannot contradict himself. The ability to contradict himself makes a logical error thus causing God to become illogical and not bound by laws, the laws he created. These seeming limitations on God actually make him more powerful

not less. Imagine that a person could do absolutely anything. Would you trust that person? They could turn a lie into a truth, they could change the very fabric of the universe at a blink of an eye. This kind of power wouldn't make the person good but instead chaos. God as all-powerful means that he established the universe with all its laws, maintains the universe, and is himself consistent with the laws and structures that he created.

God as all-knowing:

As we would expect, if God is the creator of the universe and all-powerful, God would necessarily be all-knowing. God knows how the universe works, God understands each law, and God knows the past, present, and future. Although most of us agree that God must be all-knowing to be God, it poses several serious issues for us. The most notable issue is the challenge to free-will. If God knows everything, are we like computers programmed to do what God wants and have no freedom of our own? The source of this challenge is the conflict between eternity and time. We live in time with events happening one after the other like a movie. God doesn't experience time like we do. The eternity of God means that he sees the entirety of our lives as one event. Our pasts, presents, and futures are one image. Therefore God both sees our past, our present decision, and the effects of our decisions as one event. Since God is not bound by time, God can give us free choice while knowing everything that is.

God as eternal:

I mentioned this quality in the section on God as all-knowing. God is not bound by time. God existed before time began and will continue to exist after time ends. God is existence itself. God causes all things to exist and allows them to continue to exist. The only way for God to give everything its existence and be existence itself is for God to be eternal.

God as one and simple:

These two qualities work together but are different. The simplicity of God means that God is not a composite of many things. Unlike us who are a composite of cells, God is a singularity. If God were composed of parts, then if parts broke off or decayed, God would cease to be. God's quality as simple means that God is not bound by matter, thus outside of time, nor several parts degrading him to many parts of God but one. Thus God is also one and there is only one god. Think of it this way. If we had two beings who were both all-knowing, all-powerful, and eternal, one would have to be greater than the other and thus not all-powerful or both would not be all-powerful. Therefore, the only way to have an all-powerful god who is also eternal and all-present, there must be only one God.

God as existing:

St. Anselm of Canterbury best describes this quality in his famous proof for the existence of God: God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Our greatest challenge in coming to understand God is allowing God to be greater than we can think. Often we want to make God more tangible and relatable by reducing him to something we can relate to. St. Anselm challenges us to allow God to be greater than we can image and thus maintain his other qualities of all-powerful and all-knowing. But Anselm gives us another very important quality. Although we can mentally construct an idea of God that is beyond our imagining that does not mean that

God actually exists. What prevents God from being simply a social construct or a product of our willful imagination? The answer is simple: he exists. If we can experience God as something other than our imagination or hope for humanity, then God exists. Without God existing, nothing else makes sense.

God as all-loving:

No quality of God has been more popularized and misunderstood than God as love. For the most part people take this quality and use it to support the idea that God allows us to do anything we want, that God will forgive anything, or that God simply wants us to be happy. All of these ideas have some level of truth to them. The quality of God as love tells us more about God's action towards us than our relationship to God. God as love means that God is willing to sacrifice, God is willing to challenge, and that God has a plan for us. God's love is a product of God's devotion to us and God's desire to bring us into his life.

God as all-good:

The challenge with understanding the goodness of God is that we usually limit goodness to our concept of goodness. Goodness is a quality that shapes the universe and everything around it. Those things that are good lead to truth and unity. People who work for good build relationships, support people and communities, and strive for wholeness in their lives. Goodness is more than a sense of happiness or well-being. God's goodness reminds us of God's wholeness and holiness, shows that everything that God does works for unity and truth, and that all things that are good tend to work together and form into a unity. God's goodness is an expression of his oneness, God as love, and God as truth.

God as holy:

We use the word "holy" to denote something divine, special, or bright. The word holy has a great range of meaning from separated from the world, complete, entire, whole, divine, special, greater than the things of the world, and awesome. All of these words begin to paint the picture of God as holy. On the first level God as holy means that God is complete, entire, and whole. God doesn't need to change. On the second level holiness denotes that God is greater or separated from the rest of creation; God is not like the rest of creation. On the final level holiness denotes that God is special or divine (godly, although this is a tautology). The quality of God as holy propels us into a mystery that should cause us to pause and wonder about holiness.

God as male:

Too often we collapse God's relationship to us to a gender. God is the fullness of both masculinity and femininity. God is not bound by any specific gender nor is he limited to only one gender. God can be both and express the fullness of both. Then why do we call God a "he"? The answer is simple: God wants to relate to us as a male: as a father, as a husband, as a man. The quality of God as male helps us to understand God and his role in our lives. It doesn't limit him or elevate him to a gender but gives us a way of relating to him. God chose to relate as male, therefore we use the pronoun "he."

**Can we know God?**

Absolutely! But, we have only come to know God because he first revealed himself to us. The life of faith begins by God's invitation. I know, this is strange. If God didn't want us to know of his existence, we would be stuck with the intellectual answer of "god exists" and nothing more; no relationship with God. Conversely, God came to meet us. He wanted to know us. He is in love with his creation and wants to show that love. We will talk more about God as love much later. This process of God coming to meet us and we encountering God is called faith. As the Book of Genesis states: "Abram believed in the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). We can know of God but not completely since he is beyond our imagining.

**How do we come to know God?**

The starting point for a life of faith is always strange to many people. The journey has technically already begun. Remember: God wants to meet you and he wants you to know him. God has already initiated the relationship whether we know it or not. The all-present, all-knowing, greatest being in the universe has already encountered us. For most of us we have yet to realize what this encounter means. Am I waiting for a thunderbolt, or an earthquake, or another cataclysmic event? Or am I waiting to hear God's voice, see God's face, or encounter God as I am out-and-about? The main question that all people expect an answer to is, how do I encounter God? The challenge is that God will meet us when we are ready to understand him and return to meet him. We can expedite this process slightly in a few different ways. The primary way we begin to encounter God is by recognizing those times in our lives where it was clearly not I who was the doing the action. Something other than I was responsible. This too is very complicated. The Bible is a great starting point for hearing the stories of people who encountered God and their experiences. These experiences help us to understand the manifold ways in which God comes to meet his people. Prayer is the most important avenue. Through prayer we actively seek God and seek a relationship with him. Prayer is not necessarily as simple as beginning a conversation since prayer is rooted in faith.

How do we gain faith?

The disciples of Jesus wanted the same thing: "Lord, increase our faith." Although we need faith to encounter God and to understand his ways, we must remember that we all have faith. Or at least we have faith in something. We have faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, that our friends and family care about us, that our retirement funds will be sufficient. All of these things prove my point: we all have faith. Faith is built from a relationship of trust; the recognition that these things will work and will continue to provide for my needs. The same works for God. We all start with the notion of faith and then decide what to place our faith in. Once we decide, we continue to develop and cultivate that relationship until we trust that in which we placed our faith. This is a lifetime goal. The journey begins by opening oneself to the possibility of God.