

Why should I believe in Jesus? Why should anyone?

“The prime commitment of theology is the understanding of God’s *kenosis* [self-emptying], a grand and mysterious truth for the human mind, which finds it inconceivable that suffering and death can express a love which gives itself and seeks nothing in return.”

—Pope St. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*¹

What kind of question is this?

Before jumping into the question itself, I think it’s important to get a sense of the kind of question this is in the first place. What exactly are we asking here? What kind of question is: “Why do I believe in Jesus? Why should anyone?” What does it mean “to believe”?

Belief! What a curious little word. What does it mean to “believe” something? Today, the way we use the word “believe” typically means something like uncertain knowledge: “I *believe* it will rain tomorrow,” “Yes, I believe that happened on Tuesday, but I’d have to check,” and so on. Believe, here, means something like *perhaps*. But is that really what Christians mean when they say: “I believe in Jesus”? Do they mean “perhaps it’s true”?

Belief! What a pesky little word! So simple and yet so profound. The question here about belief (“Why should anyone believe in Jesus”?) is not about less certain truths or weak knowledge. It’s what I would like to call an ***eschatological question***. In the marketplace of life, we hear all sorts of claims about what life’s all about, about who we are, and what we should live for. Even the claim that we can’t know, and therefore, “to each their own” is a response to the questions, *what’s ultimately true? What should I live for?*, even if it’s a negative response to them. Believing in Jesus is a question about *the entirety of your life and the truth and ultimate meaning of all reality*. Is he the one in whom you can entrust yourself and all of reality? That’s what I mean by an “eschatological question.” “Eschata” means “ultimate” or “last things.” He is the ultimate word for me and for all reality? “Belief” here is not about “knowledge” or even “weak knowledge.” It’s about what can I give my *full self to*, and thus, it is a question that involves both knowledge and will, that is, the very gift of yourself, and thus it is something that has a knowing dimension but always exceeds knowing.

¹ This section of *Fides et Ratio* contains an important ‘program’ for theology: “The chief purpose of theology is to provide an understanding of Revelation and the content of faith. The very heart of theological enquiry will thus be the contemplation of the mystery of the Triune God. The approach to this mystery begins with reflection upon the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God: his coming as man, his going to his Passion and Death, a mystery issuing into his glorious Resurrection and Ascension to the right hand of the Father, whence he would send the Spirit of truth to bring his Church to birth and give her growth. From this vantage-point, the prime commitment of theology is seen to be the understanding of God’s *kenosis*, a grand and mysterious truth for the human mind, which finds it inconceivable that suffering and death can express a love which gives itself and seeks nothing in return. In this light, a careful analysis of texts emerges as a basic and urgent need: first the texts of Scripture, and then those which express the Church’s living Tradition.”

Even so, the ultimate reason why the word “belief” is used is because Jesus is not a system of knowledge, a philosophy, a claim or interpretation about truth, or an access point to truth, and so forth. Jesus is a person, one who looks us in this eyes, and poses a question to us. And thus, to say Yes to him, is to entrust yourself not to some idea or impersonal truth, but to a “Thou” – not an “it,” but a “*You*.” So the question here could be restated as: “Why do I entrust myself to Jesus? Why should anyone?”

Why do I entrust myself to Jesus? Why should anyone?

1. Because Jesus presents himself to you as God’s self-surrendering love poured out for you.

Love demands its own response. Love evokes love in the beloved. Love has its own persuasiveness, its own criteria for credibility. In Jesus Christ, God has loved me ‘to the end’ (Jn 13:1), laying down his life for me (Jn 10:11).

The persuasiveness of love! The way that it perks up our ears and makes our hearts throb. Look at him, yes, look at him: crucified, squandered away, this is for you. *You!* This is “trap” (*scandalum*) that God has set up for you, which is nothing other than God’s love, a love that runs after you, pulls you out of the pit, casts aside your chains and places you in the freedom of divine and now even human love. Every human being has some understanding of what love is, no matter how dim; it’s this “dim understanding” that makes a person prick up his ears at the sound of the message of absolute love and perceive the image to which this message points. Anyone who has ever loved knows that love is like a wound in the soul, an arrow that pierces the heart and makes its dwelling within. Love poured out invokes the response of the beloved.

When we look at the Cross, we see God take the place of the death and forsakenness that was truly ours. “In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 9-10). For it is precisely here, in this deed, in God’s gift of his very life for us, that genuine divine love begins and ends, a love that overwhelms us and exceeds all capacity to think it—and thereby becomes completely evident *as* love. Ultimately, there can be absolute faith *only* in this deed, because only such a deed, *if* it should happen, is absolute love, love as *the* absolute, as the ungraspable epitome of the wholly-other God: ‘We believe the love God has for us’ (1 Jn 4:16).

If this is true, then ‘the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *me* and gave himself to *me*’ (Gal 2:20). Faith, in this case, means the fundamental response to the love that has offered itself up for me. A response that always comes too late because the deed God carried out in Christ, the bearing away of my sins, has already taken place, before any response was possible, before a response could even be considered. Occurring thus in pure gratuity, the deed demonstrates pure and absolute love: ‘God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. ... While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son’ (Rom 5:8, 10).” (100-101).

Who can explain away this mystery? The mystery of how God no longer sees my guilt in me, but only his beloved Son, who bears it for me; or how God sees this guilt transformed through the suffering of love and loves me because I am the one for whom his Son has suffered in love?

But what kind of God is this? What kind of God speaks this Word of Love, and speaks it in such a way that it is the final word about who I am, or the meaning of the world? Who is this God?

2. Because Christian love is not the word, even the ultimate word, that the world says about itself; but it is God's final word about himself and therefore also about the world.

In God's Word of Love to us, he reveals himself *as he is in truth*: as the God who in his love for the world goes to the uttermost end (Jn 13:7) and thus manifests himself as substantial love (1 Jn 4:16), so much so that he is not only such for himself but proves on the cross that he is such for the world and for its salvation. Apart from God's gift of *his very self* to us, we could never learn what the inner life of God is. Scripture says of man that he has never seen God, that God dwells in unapproachable light, that no created spirit can fathom his inner life. How then can we, who are created with an orientation towards God and constantly seeking him, begin to interpret him? Only God, who has the vision of his own wisdom, is able to reveal his wisdom (cf. Job 28:27 LXX). "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart who *exegetes him (auto exegetato)*" (1:18). The Son, turned towards the Father, has 'revealed or 'disclosed' the Father. The act of revelation is for John identical with its content: the Son as man discloses (through his being and doing) the essence of God the Father, so that he can say of himself: 'To have seen me (in that which I am to do) is to have seen the Father' (Jn 14:9).

2.1. The Meaning of "Revelation"

"Revelation" means "laying-bare" or "setting forth." It means the gift of God's interiority, his very self, to us, and thus is cannot be primarily a "knowledge" or "teaching," but must be first and foremost a deed. It is only in seeing what God does for us, his "laying himself bare" and "pouring himself out" that "revelation" means "rendering intelligible" or "interpreting." Jesus, as the interpreter, always actively reveals the Father. This is what theo-logy means: God enunciates himself in grace through his Logos. This laying-bare in the man Jesus can be—thanks to its intelligibility, but thanks also to the communication of divine grace (the Holy Spirit)—apprehended, followed, pondered, and grasped in human words and concepts. There are two analogies that are especially fruitful for understanding the relationship between Revelation and other kinds of knowledge.

2.1.1. Analogy 1: Interpersonal Knowledge

2.1.2. Aesthetic Unveiling

Excursus on a wrong approach to this mystery



Transition back to God's unveiling of himself in the gift of Jesus Christ:

Jesus as the Interpreter of the Father

How then does God reveal himself to us in Jesus Christ? We can summarize this in three main points:

- a. God reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ first through the Son's becoming and being a man. Jesus represents, in the whole of his action, the feeling heart of the Father. For this reason we come to see that the divine person of the Son is already from eternity the self-enunciation and self-revelation of the Father ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," Jn 1:1-2; and so forth). For this reason, Jesus does not in his human nature so much proclaim his own divine nature as he does the Father, to whom he continuously refers both as man and as God.
- b. Jesus becomes the explicit revealer in his public life as teacher (through word and wondrous deed) is shown secondary by all episodes in the Gospels. He teaches men how God really is and since he is, himself, a man, astonishingly he teaches them to imitate this God. In this way, Christ becomes not only the interpreter of God, but by the same stroke, the interpreter of man.
- c. The highest interpretation of the Father, takes place thirdly in the last stage of the earthly existence of Jesus. Although Jesus' life initially is presented as a life of teaching (i.e., parables, sermons, spiritual deeds) followed by a life of suffering and death, Jesus' life is only intelligible because his whole life points to the Cross. Both of these aspects of his life must be interpreted "in its relationship to 'the hour' that he awaits, to the 'baptism' he desires, to the event that opens up his prophetic mission, which is to bring the hold Jewish Covenant to completion in the new sacrificial Covenant, the new blood of the Covenant, the new Covenantal meal" (84). The teaching points to a self-surrender for 'one's friends' (Jn 15:13), for 'the many' (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45), for 'all' (Jn 12:32; 17:21); indeed, it points to the decisive form this self-surrender takes in Jesus. This self-surrender on the Cross is the final act of a life that spent itself in ever greater self-effacing service to all men (Lk 22:27; Jn 13:3-17) (85). Jesus proclaims himself with his teaching, he is essentially 'handed over' in it; without conditions and without

reservations, he aims at a point that lies ‘nowhere’ in the world, into which he casts the whole of his existence, body and soul. And by casting himself, in gratuitous freedom (Jn 10:18) into this unimaginable abyss (death as abandonment by God, Mt 27:46, or as followed by the underworld, Rev 6:8, 1:18, bereft of all hope), he makes himself into an indispensable sacrificial food for all (Jn 6:51: ‘My flesh for the life of the world’; Heb 13:10-12), not in the freedom of creative genius but in straightforward obedience (Jn 10:18).

Obediently identifying himself with his mission, he himself is his mission in person, and therefore, in his kenosis as the ‘servant of God,’ he becomes the manifestation of God’s eternal love for the world. But, for the same reason, he becomes the manifestation of his eternal majesty and kingship, which reveals itself most definitively in the servant’s ultimate humiliation (‘Yes, I am a king’ Jn 18:37). But if the kingship of the God who reveals himself as love comes to light precisely in the Son’s humble obedience to the Father, then it is clear that this obedience to the Father, then it is clear that this obedience is essentially love. It is certainly paradigmatic attitude of love the creature must have before God’s majesty, but far more than that, it is the radiant paradigm of divine love itself: precisely in—and *only* in—the kenosis of Christ, the *inner* mystery of God’s love comes to light, the mystery of the God who ‘is love’ (1 Jn 4:8) in himself and therefore is ‘triune.’

Where the words of Jesus, the man on the cross, trickled out alas fell silent, the Father speaks his loudest and most definitive word: “God has loved the world so much that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). A word which seen humanly is only silence and ruin becomes, as John shows, the final glorification of divine love. The cross alone is God’s final exegesis, who here proves himself once for all as love. In this way, the farthest depths of divine love, whose fountain-head is the Father, are plumbed through Jesus, the Son of the Father. In the heart pierced again in death, a wound is torn open, which, as Claudel says, plunges down to the center of the Trinity (‘Hymne du Sacre-Coeur’).

In these three ways, Jesus thereby draws us into this truth of God’s love: “God is love; the one who remains in love, remains in God and God remains in him” (1 Jn 4:16). To show that he is himself love, God must prove his love to the world. Through his complete revelation of the Father, Christ offers this proof.

The Spirit as Interpreter of the Son and the Father

But do we understand God's self-interpretation? Do we understand Jesus' interpretation of the Father by our own "eyes" and our own "strength"? Wouldn't that be to "trim" God to the proportions of my categories and fit him into the "cup" of my mind, limiting his self-gift to the amount that my mind can take? If this were true, then would God still be love? What Lover measures himself by the standard of his beloved? Does the Bridegroom say that his Spouse can only receive "this much" (her own measuring cup), and therefore, only give himself "that much"? If this were so, Christ would not have died for us, nor would we know God's inner life. Truly, God gave himself "to the very end," pouring himself out.

For this reason, the Gospel ceaselessly tells us that they will understand only after the Holy Spirit has been sent to them and has settled in their hearts. The Spirit is not a "second" interpretation of God, but the perfection of the first and only interpretation, "since he will not be speaking as from himself but will only say what he has learnt; and he will tell you of the things to come. He will glorify me, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine. Everything the Father has is mine; that is why I said: 'All the tells you will be taken from what is mine'" (Jn 16:13-15). The unity of the self-interpretation of God could not be more clearly expressed. It also comes to light when the Spirit sent into the hearts of the faithful cries out, "Abba, Father," uttering the call of the Son to the Father. It is the Spirit, dwelling in us, that tells us the "breadth and length and height and depth" of the love that has been given to us, so that, beyond our own capacity, we may "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19).

- d. The affirmation by being integrated by the *Criteria* which alone exceeds all measure: seeing God, absolute Being, as Love, I cast down to adoration by the splendor of God's Glory as Love**

After a mother has smiled at her child for many days and weeks, she finally receives her child's smile in response. She has awakened love in the heart of her child, and as the child awakens to love, it also awakens to knowledge: the initially empty-sense impressions gather meaningfully around the core of the Thou. Knowledge (with its whole complex of intuition and concept) comes into play, because the play of love has already begun beforehand, initiated by the mother, the transcendent. God interprets himself to man as love in the same way: he radiates love, which kindles the light of love in the heart of man, and it is precisely this light that allows man to perceive this, the absolute Love: 'For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,'

who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). In this face, the primal foundation of being smiles at us as a mother and as a father. Insofar as we are his creatures, the seed of love lies dormant within us as the image of God (*imago*). But just as no child can be awakened to love without being loved, so too no human heart can come to an understanding of God without the free gift of his grace—in the image of his Son" (76).

John especially, but also the others, never tire of describing in ever new ways how Jesus' figure stands out in his encounters and conversations; how, as the contours of his uniqueness emerge, suddenly and in an indescribable manner the ray of the Unconditional breaks through, casting a person down to adoration and transforming him into a believer and a follower. It is this kind of vision that led Paul to sell all else for the sake of the one pearl—to sell all worldly and divine wisdom, all privileges within God's Holy People—in order to perform his ministry with joy as a 'poor man of Yahweh.' For, Christians know what they have seen, and they care not one farthing what people may say. They suffer because of their love, and it is only the fact that they have been inflamed by the most sublime of beauties—a beauty crowned with thorns and crucified—that justifies their sharing in that suffering.²

3. Because when I see what true love is—absolute love—I realize that I do not possess true love.

[Note: Love as revelation is closely connected with conversion]

When we encounter the love of God in Christ, not only does we experience what genuine love is, but we are also confronted with the undeniable fact that we, selfish sinners, does not ourselves possess true love. We experiences two things at once: the finitude of our creaturely love and its sinful frigidity. To be sure, we possess something of an 'anticipation' of what love is; if we did not, we would not be able to make any sense of the sign of Jesus Christ. ... All the same, we cannot come to a recognition of this sign on the basis of his 'anticipation' without a radical conversion—a conversion not only of the heart, which must in the face of this love confess that it has failed to love until now, but also a conversion of thought, which must relearn what love after all really is.

Even though human beings, at a deeper level, are aware of our heart's paralysis, fallenness, and frigidity, it is only when we look the Crucified One in the eye that we recognize the abyss of selfishness—even of that which we are accustomed to call love. When the question is most seriously put to us, we say No where Christ, out of love, said Yes, and in our nonlover, we say Yes without a second thought to Jesus' bearing of our sins: How can we have a problem with it, if it is something he wants to do? But this is precisely why God does not ask the sinner to agree to the Cross; he seeks consent to the most terrible death of the beloved only from those that love

² In the Old Testament, this glory (*kabod*) is the presence of Yahweh's radiant majesty; in the New Testament, this sublime glory presents itself as the love of God that descends 'to the end' of the might of death in Christ. This extremity...—which could never have been anticipated from what we know of the world or man—can be welcomed and perceived in its truth only as 'Wholly-Other.'

(Jn 12:7; cf. Lk. 1:38; Jn. 20:17). The event of the Passion exposes the truth of humanity As the mask is mercilessly torn away, ‘every mouth falls silent,’ and ‘every man’ who speaks of love provides himself ‘a liar’: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; ... all have turned aside, no one seeks for God, ... the way of peace they do not know, there is no fear of God before their eyes (Rom 3:4-19, *passim*).

Concluding Note

Jesus has no need of anyone’s “apologetics.” His persuasiveness is intrinsic to his very form as the revelation of the Majesty of Absolute Love. Our task is to *let him shine through*, and thus to be vessels of that love. He shines upon everyone who comes into the world (Jn 1:9) and does not deliberately look away. The Church should not pursue any apologetics *for herself*, but should instead endeavor to make her Lord visible; and since the Church joins the gospel so closely to Jesus, she will succeed in this endeavor only by striving to reach the point where she will herself shine through. This is more difficult because the Church is composed of so many, all of whom are sinners and therefore find it difficult to get along together. But they are gathered together in the name of him who is their light and for the sake of his ever-present mission; so it should not be all too difficult, enlightened and empowered by him, to be in some degree the ‘light of the world’ (Mt 5:14): in other words, to make visible him who wants to form a single light together with those who are his own. (*Elucidations*, 19).