

## Impressions of the journey to belief

By Joe Michael Feist  
NC News Service

Fresh out of high school and in his first year of college, the young man started to stay away from Sunday liturgies more and more often. Soon he ceased to attend Mass at all and the sacraments just didn't seem to matter. This pattern continued after he joined the Army and served in Europe.

He would later say that he didn't stop believing in God. It was, as he described it, a "crisis of faith," a period of doubting and searching that lasted for about three years.

Then one day in Salt Lake City, the young man was drawn, almost inexplicably, to the cathedral. The bishop's homily had such an impact that the man's crisis ended. He returned to the church of his youth.

The young man, who had struggled with his faith, eventually entered the seminary and was ordained. Today he is Bishop Rene Gracida of Corpus Christi, Texas.

According to Father Joseph Kenna, stories such as Bishop Gracida's are quite common. Father Kenna is the representative for Campus and Young Adult Ministry in the Education Department of the U.S. Catholic Conference in Washington, D.C.

The skepticism experienced by so many young people, said Father Kenna, is "rejecting, of cleaning house, and then pulling things back in that fit."

In fact, such people can be on a "profound spiritual journey," said Kenna, who served as a campus minister in the state of Washington for 14 years. After a few years, many young adults tend to come back to the faith of their childhood. But, they come back as adults, not children.

The particular role of young adult ministry "is to welcome young people back and listen to what they've found on their journey," suggested Father Kenna.

"In colleges," he noted, "you meet people living extremely positive lives fundamentally, yet who say they are atheists. On the other hand, some people who say they believe in God are very selfish. They are the center of their universe. In a Kenna, the latter



group is atheistic."

Father Kenna discussed how Christians should react when someone they know seemingly rejects God.

When people express disbelief, he said, a common reaction is to treat them in a condescending manner. But that approach is not Good News, he said. "Our job is to announce the Good News. The worst thing is to say or somehow imply that the person is bad as a person." Of course, the priest said, believers don't compromise or hide their own belief in God.

First of all, advised Father Kenna, we must be willing to listen to stories of disbelief. We must be non-judgmental and sensitive.

"It can be a compliment when someone tells you he is an atheist," the priest said. "He's revealing something very personal and deep."

There is also the question of what the "atheist" is really discarding.

"Very often, they're just rejecting religious symbols or some image of God that is deficient. So you must listen closely to what they really are saying," Father Kenna said.

What is most important is being able and willing to witness to our faith, he added. It must be apparent that belief in God makes some difference in our lives.

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)

## FOOD...

### ...for thought

Atheism was a topic explored by the Second Vatican Council. In its 1965 document, the "Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," the ecumenical council explained that the word "atheism" refers to complex situations. It is used "to signify things that differ considerably from one another."

—Some people expressly deny God's existence.

—Some maintain that humanity has nothing to say about God.

—Some are more prone to affirm humanity than to deny God.

—Still others have a faulty notion of God. What they disown is not the God of the Gospels.

In light of this last point, atheism exerts a kind of pressure on the church's people, the council suggested. It is a pressure to become clearer about who God is, so that others can see the God of the Gospels in the lives of Christians. Here is what the council said about this:

Believers often share some responsibility for atheism. "To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion."

The council said atheism teaching and through the example of people's lives.

What does most to show others God's presence, the council said, is the visible love of the church's people. It is the task of the church to manifest God, and this is done chiefly by the witness of faith that is alive and mature.

Some atheists are concerned that belief in God robs human beings of their freedom and dignity. Others think believers will not take life in this world as seriously as it needs to be taken. Both of these concerns were addressed by the council.

The church holds that to acknowledge God is in no way to oppose the dignity of humanity, said the council. For this dignity is grounded and brought to perfection in God, who created the human person as an intelligent and free being.

Furthermore, the council stated, the church teaches that hope in life after death does not take away from the importance of tasks that need to be done in this world, but adds to their importance. (Council quotes from "The Documents of Vatican II," Austin P. Flannery, ed.; Eerdmans.)

### ...for discussion

1. What did the Second Vatican Council mean when it said that believers sometimes have "more than a little to do with the rise of atheism" or that they sometimes "conceal, rather than reveal, the true nature of God"?

2. Have you ever had a discussion with someone who denied God's existence? Did you feel that the God the person denied was very much like the God of your faith?

3. What did the Second Vatican Council mean when it said that what does most to show God's presence clearly is the love expressed among the faithful?

4. Do you really think that others can discover God through your actions or the actions of the Christian community?

5. In Katharine Bird's article, what is one image of God that theologian Father Roger McGrath sees atheists rejecting?

### SECOND HELPINGS

"Impaired Children: Who is on Their Side?" by Linda Clark. The author of this article describes how caring for profoundly disabled children at a nursing home altered her image of God. At first, she says she kept asking herself, "How could God permit such children to exist?" Her views changed after watching another assistant care lovingly for a 3-year-old as he slowly died following an accident. She says: "At last, I saw clearly that there are serious gaps in human wholeness that can only be bridged by God's love for us and our own love for each other. The love God shows to these children the world considers distorted images of humanity reminds us of the saving grace love really is." (St. Anthony Messenger, January 1984, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, Ohio, 45210. Single issue, \$1.25.)