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Faith Today

A bucketful at a time

By Theodore Hengesbach
NC News Service

The story is told of St. Augustine who, contemplating the mystery of the Trinity while walking along the beach, came upon a child playing. The child repeatedly carried a small bucket of water and emptied it into a hole he had dug in the sand.

"What are you doing?" Augustine asked kindly.

"I'm going to put the sea into this hole," was the reply.

With that the child disappeared, leaving Augustine to understand that it was as possible for the child to accomplish the task as it was for Augustine to understand the Trinity.

Is this not proof enough that the powers of the mind are useless when it comes to faith's great questions? Is this not proof enough that people of faith can leave the powers of reason behind?

I would answer, quite simply, no.

I remember the talk I had with a young couple several years ago in a parish following an evening for parents of children about to be baptized. Everyone else had gone home except this earnest young couple. They were intrigued by our discussion of original sin and the special gift of faith that the Christian community would share with their child.

Before that night, the couple had not given much thought to sin or grace or Christian life. They were, I guess, doubters.

But the evening's session had given them a chance to ask questions and to talk about serious matters. In this case, their questions actually awakened faith that had been dormant for years. Their minds had been stimulated. They were drawn back into an environment where faith could be nourished.

Similarly, I had a conversation recently with a 38-year-old man who had returned to a university for continuing education classes. He suddenly began to rhapsodize about how important school was for him. It was a place where he was bombarded with questions which led to new perspectives which in turn led to new questions. He felt the entire process helped bring his spirit to life.

As these examples suggest, the questions we raise about our faith need not destroy it or dampen enthusiasm for it. Quite the contrary.

When it comes to the great questions about faith, one question has a tendency to lead to another.

- Does suffering have meaning?
- Is there life after death — and what is it like?
- Does God exist?
- Does God really influence our world on a day-to-day basis? How? When? Why?

These are age-old questions. One naturally leads to another. And faith provides an answer so grand and sweeping — like the sea — that we can comprehend it only in drops, somewhat like the

child who grasped the sea a bucket at a time.

Is the power of the mind of no account, therefore, since one question leads to another and we can never get to the bottom of our faith anyway?

Faith provides the meaning. Our questions are the inroads into that meaning. Our questions goad us to understanding.

For example, we experience suffering and ask, "Can there be a God who permits suffering?" This is not doubt but a plea for understanding.

Or we are disappointed by moral weakness or failure in ourselves or another whom we admire. We ask if the Christian life is worth the effort.

We lose a job, or a child goes astray, or a marriage ends in divorce. "Is it all worth it? Where have we failed? Has God failed us?" we ask.

These are not doubts, but openings to meaning. They help keep faith fresh and alive. Reason, in fact, puts us in touch with God, like the young couple who had not thought seriously about God, church, Jesus, until their intellects were sparked by the give-and-take of discussion.

Without reason and its questions we run the risk of remaining utterly passive and are in danger of letting God and Christ pass us by with hardly a nod of recognition.

The use of our powers of reason points toward faith that is taken very seriously.

Augustine never stopped pondering the Trinity. The incident on the beach spurred him on in a renewed effort to grasp the magnificent reality of his faith.

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Are questions about faith dangerous? Quite the contrary, writes Theodore Hengesbach. He says that questions allow us to delve deeper into the wonder and mystery of creation.