

Faith's nitty-gritty

By David Gibson
NC News Service

Almost nothing is more frustrating than the awareness that someone you care about is locked into a downward spiral of self-destructive behavior: for example, drug addiction, alcoholism or the refusal to take any care of personal health through proper nutrition, rest and medical care.

When you try to respond to the needs of a friend or relative in such a situation, you may be left with feelings of helplessness and ineffectiveness. If you begin to feel that nothing you do for the troubled person makes any difference — at least not that you can identify yet — you may become angry. Or the situation may begin to make you ill yourself (which is why an organization like Al-Anon has come into existence for the families and friends of persons suffering from the illness of alcoholism).

Over a period of time, you may begin to feel overwhelmed by your troubled friend's behavior. You may throw your hands up in the air and exclaim, "It's hopeless."

This is the kind of hard problem that can leave you wondering where faith fits into real life. Does faith address painful situations like those that result from drug addiction or alcoholism?

A critic might charge that religious faith does one of two things in such situations: Either it makes you feel guilty for not be-

ing able to improve the situation through continued dedication and effort, or it finds a spiritual way for you to turn away from the problem and, in effect, wash your hands of it.

But is that all that can be said for faith when it comes to life's truly frustrating moments? St. Augustine would have urged Christians in these situations to pray as though everything depended on God and to act as though everything depended on them. For a person of faith, St. Augustine's suggestion makes sense.

Faith does not come up empty-handed in a situation that involves a destructive addiction such as alcoholism. For one thing, in the light of faith all human life is seen to have dignity and purpose — the life of the alcoholic, the lives of all affected by the alcoholic.

Thus, faith creates a context in which to approach this problem. A belief that all human life is created in God's image tends to guide one's thinking and one's hopes.

But people who have faith don't lay aside their human reason when it comes to coping with frustrating situations. In situations of alcoholism, for example, there are doctors and experts to consult, books to read, strategies for family members and friends to work on together — hoping that the addicted person, feeling their joint concern and love, will be stimulated to accept help.

The family members or friends must put their powers of reason to work to achieve some understanding of the illness of alcoholism and how it works. They need to think through their own attitudes toward the alcoholic.

And there is probably a need for all who hope to serve a person suffering from alcoholism to ponder their own human limitations. Otherwise, their sense of inadequacy for the task at hand might result in feelings of guilt over it; otherwise, the need to take care of themselves — to see to their own needs — during this difficult time might make them feel selfish.

There is no step-by-step recipe for how Christians should act in the frustrating situations that surround a person involved in self-destructive behavior — and these situations vary greatly. But in such situations, both faith and reason have important contributions to make to whatever action is taken.

rust" (5:36).

Like the woman, this man, too, must come to realize that faith involves more than just playing the odds. He has to go beyond the evidence of his senses and take faith's difficult leap into the dark. It is not that he simply discards intelligence. Rather he uses it as a starting point for knowing.

He, too, must commit himself completely to the person and power of Jesus.

Apparently he does so, for Jesus continues on to the house and restores his daughter. Mark tells us that "at this the family's astonishment knew no bounds."

People always seem to be amazed at what can happen if Jesus is taken at his word.

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FOOD...

...for thought

Science-fiction writers look out into a mysterious, darkened universe and compose vibrant, exciting stories about it.

Space exploration is still in its beginning phases. Nonetheless, these writers are full of suggestions about what things are like out there beyond the Milky Way.

Some science fiction may be far-fetched. But in their instincts, the writers may be more typical than they seem at first: They look into the universe around them, and they wonder just how fascinating it might be.

What is this mysterious universe like? they ask. In the end they may ask, What is the mystery behind this universe?

The mystery of the universe can never be comprehended fully. But that doesn't stop either the scientist or the theologian from trying to understand it:

- They may be motivated by pure curiosity.

- They may hope this understanding will help the human family to live happier lives.

- They may even be motivated by a religious belief. To help humanity exercise its God-given responsibility for creation, they pursue understanding of God's creation itself.

How worthwhile is scientific investigation into the workings of this world and the universe

for people of faith?

On numerous occasions, Pope John Paul II has discussed the value of scientific research. In a 1980 address in Cologne, Germany, the pope said that through research humanity "attains to truth — one of the most beautiful names God has given himself. This is why the church is convinced there can be no real contradiction between science and faith...The whole of reality ultimately comes from God the Creator."

In his speeches on science, the pope always encourages researchers to work on behalf of human needs. Scientific researchers should not work in a vacuum, giving no thought to human values, he thinks.

Nothing that deepens knowledge, the pope said in a 1983 speech to scientists, can leave us indifferent. All scientific research pursued with honesty, he added, "honors humanity and is a tribute to the Creator of all things."

Could it be that God, in giving humanity the power to reason, hoped we would keep struggling to understand the world and the universe?

Can it be a spiritual act and ultimately an act of faith when the human mind searches for this kind of understanding?

...for discussion

1. Theodore Hengesbach thinks that some questions that arise in the lives of people of faith are not doubts, but openings to meaning. The human reason can help put people in touch with God, he says. What do you think he means? Do you agree?

2. Joe Michael Feist suggests in his article that the Benedictine approach to hospitality — generosity toward others and concern for them — leads to learning, to understanding. Why would this be true? Why might this aspect of understanding be particularly important for Christians?

3. David Gibson says that when it comes to dealing with some of life's most frustrating problems, both faith and reason have contributions to make. In your view, what might faith have to offer in the sorts of difficult situations Gibson describes — dealing with someone addicted to alcohol or drugs?

SECOND HELPINGS

"To know who we are as human beings and as Christians, and to know what it means to live as Christians, we must know who Christ is and what meaning his life holds for us," writes Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in a new book titled "Christ Lives in Me." The cardinal says that knowledge about the meaning Jesus can have "does not come exclusively or even primarily from theology; its best sources are prayer, the sacramental life of the church and the practice of Christian piety. But theological reflection is also important in deepening and enriching our relationship with Christ." Without the personal relationship, says the Cardinal "we risk reducing our religion to a philosophy of life, a set of principles, a code of conduct — all of which we can master and manipulate." Christianity involves those things, but is "infinitely more." (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic St., Cincinnati, Ohio 45210. \$3.95)