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Dialogue in the church is better served with reason than 'because I said so'

Isabella R. Moyer | Dec. 12, 2012 NCR Today

I have a daughter who, from an early age, questioned everyone and everything. Never satisfied with a "because I told you so," she dragged you into her thought process so you would understand her reasoning. We called her tenacious. Some teachers called her disruptive and disrespectful. Yes, she often challenged our patience, but we knew this attribute would serve her well in life.

Today, this same tenacity has guided her through physical therapy studies, and now dental school. She is not satisfied with memorizing and regurgitating anatomical structures or physiological processes. It's never enough that her textbooks and professors tell her so. She spends hours outlining detailed diagrams and sequences to better understand how each tiny piece connects to the greater whole. Only then does she feel she has sufficiently comprehended a concept.

We need to actively engage with knowledge before we can fully embrace it. We have to turn it this way and that, to understand it from all angles. We have to ponder how it fits in with the greater picture. We have to discuss it, to challenge and be challenged to ensure that our reasoning is sound. Giving our full assent requires more intense work than simple rote memorization and regurgitation of facts. The same is true of our religious beliefs and teachings.

Last month, Religion and Ethics Newsweekly produced an interview [1] with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a Talmudic scholar. Rabbi Steinsaltz explained the tradition behind his studies: "The idea of the Talmud is that you are allowed to ask questions about anything, everything that can be done, encouraging you to ask questions, trying to find answers."

Listening to the rabbi speak, one senses that a lifetime devoted to questioning religious rules and laws has far from diminished his faith. He exudes a peaceful holiness and an unwavering optimism grounded in his trust of God. He also knows that faith goes beyond rules and laws: "The Lord says I made the world. It's pretty good, but there are all kinds of holes in it. You people go, and you make the amendments -- bigger ones, smaller ones. But you, that's your duty."

In Judaism, though, there is no single authority to decide how best to interpret the religious law. In the Catholic church, authority rests in the magisterium. This authority is increasingly making headlines around the world. Amid the doctrinal crackdowns, denouncements, censures and ecclesial punishments, we can't help but wonder what is happening to our freedom to question.

I was always taught that Catholics don't fear reason. This gave me immense pride as a Catholic. Understanding our faith was more than memorizing catechisms and repeating answers. It included engaging with the questions to seek deeper understanding.

Embracing the gift of reason requires us to do the hard work of questioning, studying, pondering and discussing.

It expects us to challenge and be challenged, to enter into a dialogue with our tradition, both past and present. And it calls us into dialogue with each other. This is not mere ranting from the gut on the latest issue of the moment. "Because I think so" is as inane an argument as "because I said so." Embracing reason is the natural process of actively engaging with a concept in order to give it our full and conscious assent.

Of course, assent is not always guaranteed. That is a risk we take. After all, God gave us the gift of free will along with reason.

"Because I said so" never convinced my daughter, and it never will. I respect her for that, for I know how hard she works to increase her knowing. We might not see eye to eye on every issue, but this would never be a reason to stop loving her, to reject her, or tell her she is no longer welcome in our family.

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[1] http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/april-27-2012/rabbi-adin-steinsaltz/10847/