

A detail from a classical painting, likely a fresco, depicting a bearded man with dark hair and a long beard, wearing a red robe. He is gesturing with his right hand towards the upper left. In the lower left, two smaller figures are partially visible, one appearing to be a child. The background is light and textured.

Topic 4: God's Nature and Action

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 199-231; 268-274.

Compendium, 36-43, 50

Synthesis of the Faith, Gathered from Scripture

- Very early on, the Church gathered the essential elements of faith into summaries, intended especially for candidates for Baptism
- This synthesis of faith gathered from the Scriptures what was of the greatest importance: to present the one teaching of the faith in its entirety.

Just as the mustard seed contains a great number of branches in a tiny grain, so too this summary of faith encompassed in a few words the whole knowledge of the true religion contained in the Old and the New Testaments. (St Cyril of Jerusalem)

‘Creed’: *Credo* (I believe)



The Creeds

- Communion in faith needs a common language of faith, normative for all & uniting all in the same confession of faith. To say the Credo with faith is to enter into communion with God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, & also with the whole Church
- The first "profession of faith" is made during Baptism.
- The Creed is divided into three parts:
 - i) the first divine Person & the work of creation
 - ii) the second Person & the mystery of redemption
 - iii) the third Person, the origin & source of our sanctification
- St. Ambrose divided the Creed into twelve articles of faith
- There are several formulations of the Creed, professing the same faith, composed in different times & places. Two Creeds occupy a special place:
 - **The Apostles' Creed:** a summary of the apostles' faith, "the Creed of the Roman Church, the See of Peter the first of the apostles, to which he brought the common faith".
 - **The Nicene Creed:** stems from the first two early ecumenical Councils (in 325 & 381). It is common to the Churches of East & West to this day.
- The Catechism follows the Apostles' Creed, drawing on the more detailed Nicene Creed.



This Creed is the spiritual seal, our heart's meditation and an ever-present guardian; it is, unquestionably, the treasure of our soul.

(St Ambrose)



St Ambrose, 5th century mosaic, Basilica Sant'Ambrogio, Milan

I Believe in
God



This is the first and most fundamental affirmation of the Apostles Creed.

The whole Creed speaks of God. When it speaks of man and the world it does so in relation to God.

The other articles of the Creed all depend on the first; they help us to know God better as he revealed himself progressively to men.
(CCC, 199)



What Does 'God' Mean?

Throughout human history, all cultures have given importance to God. What differs from civilization to civilization is the nature of the god(s) that are believed in.

In some religions, the forces of nature were adored as concrete manifestations of the sacred, giving rise to a plurality of gods ordered in a hierarchical manner (polytheism). These gods were not transcendent, eg the pantheon of gods of ancient Greece & the Norse gods.

In most ancient religions we find glimmers and signs of true religious devotion: adoration, sacrifice, priesthood, offering, prayer, thanksgiving, etc.



I BELIEVE IN ONE
GOD

"The supreme being must be unique, without equal. . . If God is not one, he is not God"
(Tertullian, Adv. Marc., 1, 3, 5: PL 2, 274).

What is God?



In Greece especially, reason attempted to purify religion, demonstrating that the supreme divinity had to be identified with the Good, the Beautiful, & with Being itself. God is the source of all that is good, all that is beautiful, & all that exists.

But this reasoning brought with it other problems. It led to the idea of a God who was so perfect that he ended up far removed from the life of mortals, isolated in a perfect independence. Even the possibility of establishing relations with human beings was seen as a sign of weakness, since it would imply some lack or deficiency on God's part.

Also there did not seem to be any way of accounting for the presence of evil, except to say that it somehow flowed necessarily from the divine through the mediation of a series of created beings.

Judeo-Christian Revelation: Who is God? God is One

This framework changes radically with Judeo-Christian revelation. God revealed Himself to Israel. He revealed that there is only one God.

I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me (Ex 20: 2-3).

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Dt 6: 4-5)

Monotheism is a defining characteristic of Judaism.

The Creed begins by confessing God's **oneness**, which is inseparable from the profession of God's existence.

The tefillin, worn by many Jews today, in which a small scroll of the Shema is placed. Jesus repeated the Shema when asked which was the greatest commandment (Mt 22: 37).



I Believe in One God

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt 6:45).

Through the prophets, God calls Israel & all nations to turn to him, the one & only God:

"Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other... To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear. 'Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength'" (Is 45:22-24).

Jesus affirms that God is "the one Lord" whom you must love "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk 12:29-30).

At the same time Jesus gives us to understand that he himself is "the Lord" (cf. Mk 12:35-37). To confess that Jesus is Lord is distinctive of Christian faith. This is not contrary to belief in the One God. Nor does believing in the Holy Spirit introduce any division into the One God.

We firmly believe and confess without reservation that there is only one true God, eternal, infinite (*immensus*) and unchangeable, incomprehensible, almighty and ineffable, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; three persons indeed, but one essence, substance or nature entirely simple. (CCC, 202)



The Living God: God Reveals His Name

God has a name which He revealed to his people Israel. He is not an anonymous force.

A name expresses a person's essence and identity and the meaning of this person's life.

To disclose one's name is to *make oneself known* to others; becoming accessible, capable of being known more intimately and addressed personally. (CCC, 203)

God revealed himself progressively and under different names to his people, but the revelation that proved to be the fundamental one for both the Old and the New Covenants was the revelation of the divine name to Moses in burning bush, on the threshold of the Exodus and of the covenant on Sinai. (CCC, 204)



God Reveals His Name

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." (Ex 3: 13-14)

In revealing his mysterious name, YHWH, God says *who he is* & by what name he is to be called.

This divine name is *mysterious*. It is at once a name revealed & something like the refusal of a name, & so it better expresses God as what he is, infinitely above everything that we can understand or say. He is the "hidden God", his name is ineffable. He is the God who makes himself close to men. (CCC, 206)

The name refers to existence itself. God is *eternal*. He does not depend on anyone or anything for His existence. Everything else depends on Him.

God is the *fullness of Being and of every perfection*, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is. (CCC, 213)



The Living God

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, & the God of Jacob."

By revealing his name God also reveals his *everlasting faithfulness*, valid for the past ("I am the God of your father") & for the future ("I will be with you"). God reveals himself as always there, present to his people in order to save them. (CCC, 207)

God is the God of the fathers, the One who had called and guided the patriarchs in their wanderings. He is the *faithful & compassionate* God who remembers them and his promises. He comes to free their descendants from slavery. He is the God who, from beyond space and time, can do this and wills to do it, the God who will put his almighty power to work for this plan. (CCC, 205)



"I Am who I Am"

Faced with God's mysterious presence, man discovers his own insignificance. Before the burning bush, Moses takes off his sandals & covers his face. Before the glory of God, Isaiah cries out: "Woe is me! I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips." Before the divine signs wrought by Jesus, Peter exclaims: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." But because God is holy, he can forgive the man who realizes that he is a sinner. St John says:

"We shall. . . reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, & he knows everything."

Out of respect for God's holiness, the Jewish people do not pronounce his name. In the reading of Sacred Scripture, the revealed name (YHWH) is replaced by "LORD" (in Hebrew Adonai, in Greek Kyrios). It is under this title that the divinity of Jesus will be acclaimed: "Jesus is LORD." (CCC, 208-209)



Merciful & Forgiving

In the face of God's greatness & holiness we must acknowledge our littleness. But God is characterized by pardon & mercy.

When the people of Israel sinned, turning away from God to worship the golden calf, God hears Moses' prayer of intercession & agrees to walk in the midst of an unfaithful people, thus demonstrating his love.

When Moses asks to see his glory, God responds "I will make all my goodness pass before you & will proclaim before you my name "the LORD" [YHWH]." The LORD proclaims Himself,

"YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"

Moses then confesses that the LORD is a forgiving God.

God reveals that he is rich in mercy, even to giving His own Son for our redemption. Jesus reveals that he himself bears the divine name: "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will realize that "I AM". "

God reveals his fatherly omnipotence by the way he takes care of our needs; by the filial adoption that he gives us ("I will be a father to you, & you shall be my sons & daughters.



Return of the Prodigal Son, Murillo, 1667-1770.

God Alone Is

Over the centuries, Israel's faith deepened its realization of the riches contained in the revelation of the divine name.

- God is *unique* (no other gods besides him). (CCC, 212)
- God *transcends* the world & history. He made heaven & earth.
- God is *immutable* (in God "there is no variation or shadow due to change.")
- God is *eternal* (without beginning or end)
- God is *perfect, complete, possessing* all his attributes to an infinite degree, lacking nothing. Eg, he possesses the perfection of love & so God *is* love.
- God is *pure spirit*
- God is *Good*
- God is *Love*
- God is *omniscient* (all-knowing)
- God is *omnipotent* (all-powerful/almighty)
- God is *omnipresent* (everywhere)

The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and following it, the Church's Tradition, understand the divine name in this sense:

God is the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from him; but he alone is his very being, and he is of himself everything that he is. (CCC, 213)

*"If you understood him, it
would not be God"*

(St. Augustine, *Sermon 52, 6, 16*).



Giovanni Bonati, *Saint Augustine and The Child on The Seashore*

God is Eternal

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (Rev 22: 12)

- God has no beginning and no end.
- God's existence does not depend on any other being. He is the Uncreated Creator. His eternal nature is reflected in His name "I am who I am".
- God created time. Time is subject to Him; He is not subject to it.





GOD IS GOOD

No one is good but God alone. (Lk 18:19)

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. (Gen 1: 31)

O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. (Ps 136:2)

Evil = absence of good. God is perfect, there is no evil in him. He is all good. As creator, he shares his goodness with creatures. Creation is a reflection of his goodness.

God is Immutable (Unchanging)

'For I, the Lord, do not change.' (Mal 3: 6)

- God has always existed. He did not come into being, nor does he change.
- Potential for change means that a thing is not perfect. If something is perfect it is impossible to improve. If it can get worse, then it is not perfect.
- Perfection is not possible in the material universe. God is pure spirit, perfect and infinite.



God is Truth

"God is light and in him there is no darkness"

"The sum of your word is truth; and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever."(Ps 119:160).

God's promises always come true. God is Truth, His words cannot deceive. This is why one can abandon oneself in full trust to the truth & faithfulness of his word in all things. The beginning of sin & of man's fall was due to a lie of the tempter who induced doubt of God's word, kindness & faithfulness.

God's truth is his wisdom, which commands the whole created order and governs the world.

God is also truthful when he reveals himself - the teaching that comes from God is "true instruction". When he sends his Son into the world it will be "to bear witness to the truth".



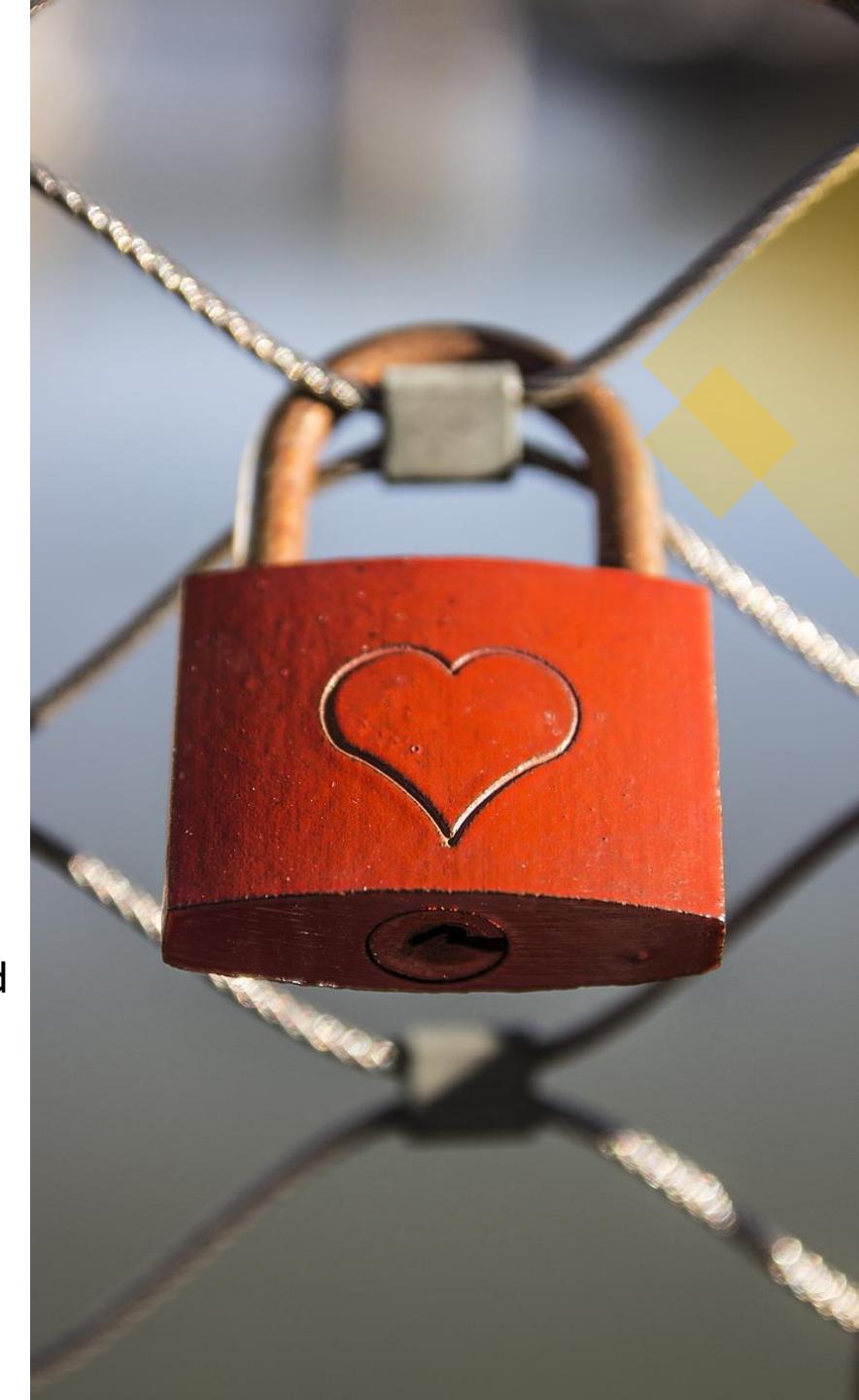
God is Love

'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8)

- Sacred Scripture shows God's love is the motive of his actions. God had only one reason to reveal himself to Israel, a single motive for choosing them from among all peoples as his special possession: his sheer gratuitous love. (CCC, 218)
- Through the prophets Israel understood that it was out of love that God never stopped saving them & pardoning their unfaithfulness.
- God's love for Israel is compared to a father's love for his son. His love for his people is stronger than a mother's for her children. God loves his people more than a bridegroom his beloved; his love will be victorious over even the worst infidelities & will extend to his most precious gift:

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.'

- God's love is "everlasting" (Is 54:8). "The mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you." Through Jeremiah, God declares to his people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." (CCC, 220)
- St. John says "God is love": His very being is love. By sending his only Son & the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, & he has destined us to share in that exchange. (CCC, 221)





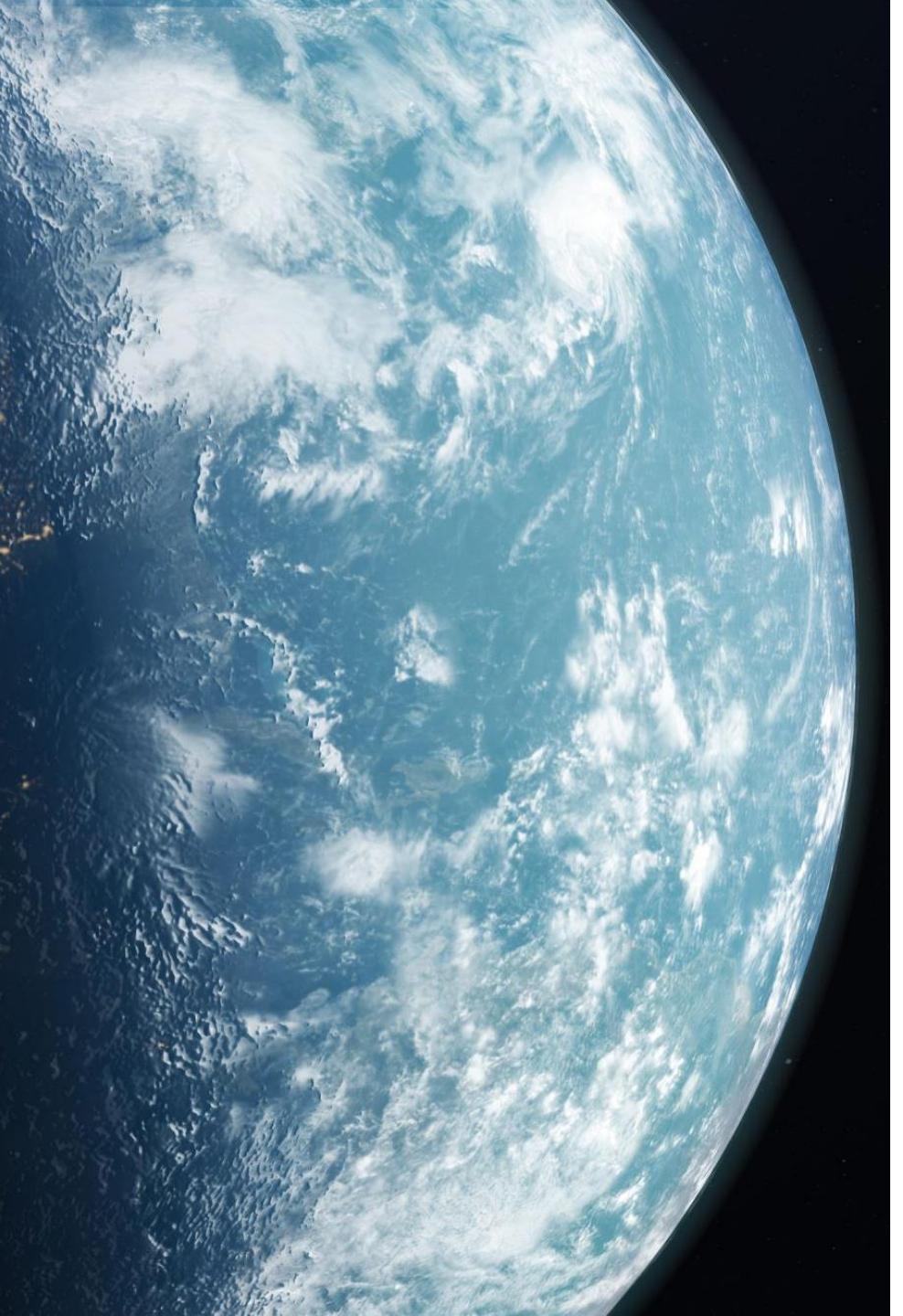
God is Omniscient (All-Knowing)

The Lord, God of Gods! He knows. (Jos 22:22)

You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. (Ps 139: 2-3).

You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. (Lk 6:15)

God created all things and is the cause of all things. He is outside time. God knows all things and has fullness of wisdom.



God is Omnipresent (Everywhere)

'Am I a God at hand', says the Lord, 'and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?' says the Lord. 'Do I not fill heaven and earth?' says the Lord (Jer 23: 23-24).

We enter history at a particular point in time, and we move through time toward our end. We are in a particular place at a particular time, and are limited by the physical dimensions of our body.

As pure spirit, God is not limited by space or time.

God's omnipresence is at three levels:

By his presence: everything is before God's eyes

By his power: his power & providence extend to all creatures

By his essence: God is in all things, giving them being

Because he surpasses every limit, he is Transcendent.

What Does it mean to call God 'Almighty'? (CCC, 268-274)

Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? (Job 11:7)

- God's omnipotence is named in the Creed. It has great bearing on our lives.
- God who created everything also rules everything and can do everything. God's power is loving, for he is our Father, and mysterious, for only faith can discern it when it "is made perfect in weakness".
- He is the Lord of the universe, whose order he established and which remains wholly subject to him and at his disposal. He is master of history, governing hearts and events in keeping with his will.
- Nothing is impossible with God.



The mystery of God's apparent powerlessness

Faith in God can be put to the test by the experience of evil & suffering. God can sometimes seem absent & incapable of stopping evil. But in the most mysterious way God the Father has revealed his almighty power in the voluntary humiliation & Resurrection of his Son, by which he conquered evil. Christ crucified is:

the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Faith can embrace the mysterious ways of God's almighty power. Nothing confirms our faith & hope more than recalling that nothing is impossible with God. Once reason has grasped the idea of God's almighty power, it will easily & without hesitation admit everything in the Creed, even if it be above the ordinary laws of nature.

God's power is so great that he wants to maintain his relationship with his creatures, including saving them if, because of their freedom, they distance themselves from their Creator. Therefore, in the context of Christian revelation, one sees that the origin of evil is not to be found in matter (as in some of the ancient philosophers and religions) but rather in the mistaken use of freedom on the part of angels and mankind, the fall of the first man and woman being narrated in *Genesis*.

The Virgin Mary is the supreme model of this faith, for she believed that "nothing will be impossible with God".



Allegory of Creation, Jacopo Zucchi, 1585.



THE IMPLICATIONS OF FAITH IN ONE GOD

Believing in God, the only One, & loving him with all our being has enormous consequences for our whole life. It means:

- *Acknowledging & adoring God's greatness & majesty, serving God first.*
- *Living in thanksgiving:* "What have you that you did not receive?" "What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me?"
- *Asking for God's mercy & trusting in His Goodness & power in every circumstance, even in adversity*
- *Listening to the word of Truth, contemplating God in creation.*
- *Knowing the dignity of each person:* everyone is made in the image & likeness of God.
- *Making good use of created things:* faith in God leads us to use things only insofar as they brings us closer to him, & detach ourselves from them insofar as they turn us away from him.
- *Reflecting the truth & unity of God by living with integrity*

A prayer of St. Teresa of Jesus wonderfully expresses trust in God:

*Let nothing trouble you
Let nothing frighten you
Everything passes
God never changes
Patience
Obtains all
Whoever has God
Wants for nothing
God alone is enough.*

(Poem 30)



Sainte Thérèse, François Gérard, 1827. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.