

Why Are We Here?

By Bishop Victor Galeone

Travelers on a journey: Destination?

Pretend that one evening you retire in your own bed as usual. But on awakening, you find yourself traveling in a train compartment with four other passengers who are strangers. Your first reaction is that you must be dreaming. But on realizing that what you're experiencing is reality, you inquire of the other passengers, "How did I get here? And where's this train heading?" Your question is met with jovial laughter: "What difference does it make? Sit back, relax and enjoy the beautiful scenery out there."

Even though not a dream, such a scenario would be tantamount to a nightmare. Yet that's precisely how countless millions of people spend their entire lives. They have no idea where they came from, where they're heading or why they even exist. And they could care less.

From atheist to believer

The example of Ignace Lepp is illuminating for our topic. After 10 years of intense Communist activity, he gave up that cause disillusioned. He writes: "What could I do with a life that was no longer animated by an ideal? Spontaneously, I followed the Pascalian recipe of distraction. But the pleasures I discovered gave me no real happiness. More than once I asked myself, 'Rather than continue a meaningless life indefinitely, would it not be better to end it all?'

"Neither the hereafter nor my own immortality concerned me ...More and more frequently, however, I questioned myself about the meaning of this life. It did not seem logical that beings endowed with the capacity for thinking and loving could be thrown into an absurd universe, where there was nothing to think, nothing to love, nothing to hope for.

"It was with these psychological dispositions that I encountered the Christian message." Lepp became a Catholic and was ultimately ordained a priest.

Why were we created?

A moment's reflection underscores the fact that everything we do in life, we do for a purpose. And that includes all our decisions, whether it's selecting a cereal for breakfast or a spouse for marriage.

God, too, made every creature for a set purpose. In the material world - mineral, vegetable and animal - God himself inscribed that purpose in the very makeup of the creature. These creatures operate by natural inclination or instinct. Since they lack free will, they have no choice, and consequently, are not accountable for their actions. A horse cannot go on a hunger strike, nor can a dog control himself when the female is in heat.

Not so with man or angels. We have been endowed with free will, and accordingly we are accountable for our actions. By doing good and avoiding evil, we fulfill the purpose for which we were created, and thus we can achieve happiness.

In Part II of his Summa, St. Thomas Aquinas shows that the final purpose of our human existence is happiness. God wants us to be happy. That's why he made us. In every choice that we make, we are looking for happiness. Even the poor fellow who blows his brains out is searching for happiness. He reasons, "If there is something beyond the grave, it can't be as bad as the hell I'm experiencing now. So I'll just put an end to all this misery."

Our ultimate happiness lies in God

After discarding the possibility that we can find our ultimate happiness in wealth, or honor, or power, or pleasure, St. Thomas goes on to show that the only one who can satisfy our deepest desire for happiness is God. And Bertrand Russell, an atheist, said basically the same thing: "Unless you assume there is a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless."

God created us with a God-shaped void in our hearts, which only he can fill. Too often, we go through life trying to fill that void with illicit pleasure, or greed, or pride. By enthroning a creature in place of the Creator, we end up feeling miserable.

St. Augustine expressed the same thought in his Confessions, "Our hearts were made for you, O Lord, and they can never rest until they rest in you."

I was fortunate to learn the purpose of life when I was in the second grade. It happened the day that our class learned the answer to the catechism question, Why did God make me? "God made me to know him, to love him, and to serve him in this world, so that I could be happy with him forever in the next."

I would like to close with a challenge: Begin every day with this simple prayer: "Lord Jesus, I love you. Come into my heart, and stay with me all day long."