

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Lent  
February 28, 2016

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In some remote part of the world it is just possible you could meet a man who had never seen or heard of an automobile. And if it were easy to show him your car he would ask “What is this?” You would reply, “It’s a car.” And the man would have some information. But he would have no *experience*. And so you would proceed to open the doors, lift the hood and pop the trunk. The man now has more information. If he continued to want still more information you could give him a tool kit and let him take your car apart. Think of his spreading out the parts in an orderly way on a huge canvas drop cloth. He would then see a car is made up of steel, plastic, oil, and rubber. He would see that some parts move when connected to each other. Now the man had a tremendous amount of information about an automobile (and you hope he can use it to reassemble your car!) But he would still have no experience. Then you give him the ignition key so he can start the engine and make the car move. The man has to experience driving if his information about the car is going to amount to anything. A car is more than the sum of its parts.

What is true about automobiles is also true of human beings. The experience I have of you only begins with mere information. And I am not satisfied if your knowledge of me is limited to an abstract set of vital statistics: height, weight, and blood type. In the Gospel Our Lord Jesus says knowing God also means more than having information about Him. Doctrine is necessary. Doctrine guides us towards knowledge. Knowing God means being involved with a Being. “God is spirit”, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, and we must worship Him in spirit and truth.

It is remarkable that apart from the apostles, the first two people in the world to whom Our Lord Jesus revealed His messiah ship were both outcasts: the Jewish man born blind, and this Samaritan woman at the well. In fact the Lord revealed to her far more Divine Truth than He had made known to a whole crowd in the Sermon on the Mount. “God is Spirit.” In God no material thing can modify or change in any way the absolute and infinite perfection of His Nature. Jesus isn’t dispensing textbook learning here. He is saying the Samaritan woman, and you and I, must approach Almighty God purified from all clinging to material things and filled as far as possible for us with true worship and love.

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It is important to understand the word knowledge when used in a spiritual context. Ordinarily knowledge is synonymous with information. Religious doctrine is the Church's responsibility and it is in her gift to translate for us higher realities into informational terms we can use. During Lent men and women, boys and girls, are preparing for confirmation or reception. During Eastertide there are many services of first communion and confirmation scheduled throughout the Catholic Church. These Christians, or soon-to-be Christians, are undergoing a period of intellectual preparation. But this information about sacred doctrine, is not an end in itself. It is the means to spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge does not end with communicated ideas but with experience of God Himself.

You could give someone every tool necessary to take a car apart. But until you gave him the ultimate tool, the ignition key, and let him drive it, he would never experience what a car is all about. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well "I am the key to God. Until you have Me you won't know Who God is." With the Beloved Son we enter kinship with the Heavenly Father. "I am the Way" said Jesus in another place. Christianity was first called "*The Way*." Without that Way God remains impersonal and remote in spite of all the information we may collect from prophets and scribes and *The Catechism*. In fact the *Catechism*, and the entire apparatus of the Catholic Church, (yes, even her Code of Canon Law!), exists *for one purpose* only, to encourage and effect our conformation to Jesus Christ until He is formed in us. And it is Christ Jesus in us Who brings us to the Father.