We could take as the leitmotif for this evening those famous words of St Augustine: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. This evening we want to try and see what it means to desire God and how we can participate in His divine life; a subject that the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains to us in the sections 26-49.

You will already have seen the Catechism has four main sections which deal with the Profession of Faith as per the Creed, the celebrations of the Faith in the Sacraments; the living out of the faith according to the Commandments and lastly Christian Prayer. Our current Catechism is the largest Catechism the Church has ever produced and when we start to examine some of the issues in contemporary life and the response of the Faith to them, we quickly start to realise why this is the case. Even a cursory glance through the Subject Index gives us a good overview of the scope of the work: from Abortion to Worship; literally an A-Z of the Catholic Faith.

Before we can begin to unpack the articles of the Creed, we need to grasp the concept of what faith is, in itself; just as in the subsequent section we need to understand what liturgy is before we can speak of the Sacraments, what morality is before discussing specific moral act and how we live, and what prayer is, before going on to explain how we should pray.

One of the first things I remember about doing RE at school as a teenager was how the whole history of salvation is not so much us searching for God, but more our response to God calling us, inviting us into communion with Him. The Catechism highlights this by drawing on the story of creation. After the fall, after the Original Sin has been committed, God came looking for our first parents and called to them: Where are you? This reveals to us how, right form the very start of salvation history, God is seeking us, wishing us to be in communion with Him. The whole of the history of creation then, could be described as this hide-and-seek between God and his creatures.

If there exists within man a profound desire for God, as St Augustine expresses it, why isn’t everyone signed-up to participate in a School of Faith? We know that all those we encounter in life are somehow all looking for happiness and fulfilment, but why does this search for happiness not equate with a search God in everyone’s life? Is it simply that others are not looking for God in the right place? Or does God somehow only choose certain people that He wants to be in communion with? Why do some people declare that they are atheists or agnostics? And what is our obligation, given our knowledge and faith, to transmit what is essential to those we encounter in life. These are the questions the Church asks us to face given this Year of Faith which is the context for what we are doing here.
There is something important which firstly we have to apprehend. Although God wants to have perfect communion with every person He has created, God seems to give that capacity to individuals in differing ways. For example, I believe that God wants me to be the best possible priest; but I do not believe that he wants me to be like St John Vianney. I do not believe that God has given me those specific graces to be the Cure of Ars. We might all admire the life and virtues of St Therese of Lisieux, but that does not mean that we are going to be able replicate her life in all of the details of her perfection in the virtues. We might say this is like comparing ourselves before God as differing sized containers. A pint glass when it is full to the brim is full to its capacity; a half-pint glass filled to the top is also full; each are full to their specific capacity, which is why it isn’t always helpful to compare ourselves to others since, God wants our own particular holiness, according to the graces given to us, and that is our holiness. St Anselm expresses this in his famous dictum: *Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient.*

There is another important distinction too, which is often misunderstood or misrepresented that, before God we are all equal, that it doesn’t matter what we are or do before God. I think the danger of this kind of thinking is obvious. Whilst we can say that all of us are created with an equal dignity and love by God, all do not retain that dignity and love the same. We can lose and diminish that relationship by rejecting God in all the forms we know: through acts contrary to God; apostasy from the faith, individual and collective acts of sin. Through these acts we obscure the image of God that has been written within us. In this way, some stand before God closer, and others more distant; some in the grace and love of God, and others estranged from it. Our capacity for God is God-give, how we accept or reject that life and love is governed by ourselves.

One of the big challenges in recent years has been the rise of the new atheists, people like Richard Dawkins and the British Humanist Society. I am sure you remember the poster campaign three years ago, used on buses in London and other European cities: *There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.* (A couple of weeks later there was a Christian riposte got together and mounted a counter campaign with the words from Psalm 52 on the side of the buses: *The fool has said in his heart: there is no God!*)

But there was another poster that went on display too: which ran: *There definitely is a God.* The Advertising Standards Authority reported that as a result of that counter-attack, they received a record 30,000 complaints. Clearly the existence, or not, of God is a subject that gets a reaction.

If you visit atheist websites (something I do infrequently!) they give an apologia for why they wrote: *There’s probably no God.* As with the famous Carlsberg ads (*probably the best lager in the world*), the word ‘probably’ helps to ensure that their ads won’t breach any advertising codes. There’s another reason they say they’re keen on the "probably": it means the slogan is more accurate, as even though there's no scientific evidence at all for God's existence, it's also impossible to prove that God doesn't exist (or that anything doesn't). So basically, they can’t be sure. And we are well within our reason to say to our non-believing friends: if God doesn’t exist then I’ve lost nothing. But if God does exist, you’ve lost everything.
However, I am sure that even the atheists would agree that the very concept of God is something of a mystery (otherwise they would be able to prove He doesn’t exist) and the accepted definition of a mystery is: a hidden inexplicable matter; an impressive secret, a religious truth divinely revealed, especially beyond human reason. That is how the Oxford English Dictionary describes a mystery. The Catholic Catechism takes that one further by explaining that a mystery is: a truth above reason, but revealed by God.

I couldn’t help think at the time, that the slogan on the London buses was read by parents who have sick children, by lonely people, the unemployed, refugees from war zones, people who have suffered grave injustices in life. Try to imagine their reaction to reading the words: There’s probably no God. Now enjoy your life! How?

I have often thought, perhaps naively, that Atheism is a luxury that only those with privileged lives can afford; those who have had everything, including the possibility to dedicate themselves to study and research: those souls who can answer the ‘how’ questions but not the ‘why’ questions; because the ‘why’ questions can’t be answered by the empirical sciences but only by the science of theology. That is why theology is called the Queen of the Sciences!

We should almost thank the people who promoted that advertising campaign; it has served God’s cause more than so many of our clever arguments for God’s existence. It has demonstrated the poverty of their reasons and has helped stir so many sleeping consciences.

But God has a different measure of justice than we do, and if he sees good faith, or inculpable ignorance, he even saves those who struggle in their lives to combat him. We believers should prepare ourselves for surprises in this regard. Quam multae oves foris, quam multi lupi intus...How many sheep are outside of the flock, exclaims St Augustine, and how many wolves inside!

God is capable of turning those who most persistently deny him into his most impassioned apostles. Thomas in the Gospel is the famous example: his doubting is turned into his being a strong witness to the Resurrection. Paul is another example of it. What had Saul of Tarsus done to merit that extraordinary encounter with Christ? What St Augustine said about every divine choice can be applied to him: Look for merit, look for justice, reflect and see if you find anything but grace. This is how Paul explains his own calling: I am not really fit to be called an apostle, because I had been persecuting the Church of God; but what I am now, I am through the grace of God.

On Good Friday, after we are invited to pray for those who do not believe in God, there follows a touching prayer which says:

Almighty ever-living God,
who created all people
to seek you always by desiring you
and, by finding you, come to rest,
grant, we pray,
that, despite every harmful obstacle,
all may recognize the signs of your fatherly love
and the witness of the good works
done by those who believe in you,
and so in gladness confess you,
the one true God and Father of our human race.

The Catechism explains to us that we can find evidence for God’s existence from both the material world and human existence. We believe it is possible for the unprejudiced human mind, even before the consideration of divine revelation, to come to a certain but obviously very limited knowledge of five points: the existence of Almighty God; His nature; the immortality of the human soul; the freedom of the human will; and our consequent responsibility. These five points are a brief summary of what is known as natural theology. We believe that man can come to certain knowledge - and in the course of history the overwhelming majority of mankind has come to this - conducting their lives in the belief that there is a Supreme Being, that He is a personal God, that we survive death, that we are free in our actions and that we are responsible for them.

The best classical presentation of these truths, which aren't actually specifically Christian, let alone exclusively Catholic, is in the Summa Theologica of St Thomas Aquinas. His approach to the existence of God is often spoken of as His five 'proofs'. It's significant, however, that he doesn't use the word 'proof' himself. He calls them his five ways which lead us to the knowledge of Almighty God. I think it is only necessary and possible to summarise them here. Each ‘way’ has a clear and similar structure:

I. The Argument from Motion. (Thomas argues that since everything that moves is moved by another, there must thereby exist an Unmoved Mover.)
II. The Argument from Efficient Cause. (The sequence of causes which make up this universe must have a First Cause.)
III. The Argument to Necessary Being. (Since all existent things depend upon other things for their existence, there must exist at least one thing that is not dependent and so is a Necessary Being.)
IV. The Argument from Gradation. (Since all existent things can be compared to such qualities as degrees of goodness, there must exist something that is an Absolutely Good Being.)
V. The Argument from Design. (Also named “The Teleological Argument”— The intricate design and order of existent things and natural processes imply that a Great Designer exists.)

So we can know God: the human person - with our openness to beauty, truth, a sense of moral goodness - all these faculties can express a longing for the goodness of God.

St Augustine writes in his Confessions: Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of the mountains, at he huge waves of the sea, at the vast compass of the oceans, at the long courses of the rivers, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by
Every human being is created with the spark of God’s divine life within them. Even before we are baptized a person can experience this sense of the divine within them. This is a truth that was succinctly expressed in the old Penny Catechism which many of you (above a certain age!) will remember from school days. To the question: Where am I most like unto God, came the answer: This likeness God is most seen in my soul. This is why the Church has constantly taught that anyone, even without the fullness of the truth of Christ can be saved, simply by following the dictates of their consciences; doing good and avoiding evil.

Every single man, woman and child has a sense, more-or-less developed, that our acts have consequences, and that some acts are good and some bad; some acts are moral and some immoral. Or put more basically, some acts are helpful and others are unhelpful or damaging to ourselves or to others. This sense within the human person – we call it conscience – allows us to perceive right from wrong and to differentiate between acts. Obviously with the light of faith and a proper intellectual and spiritual formation, this sense can be more finely tuned so that we are better informed to make the correct decisions for life. This also helps us to make sense of two essential doctrines of the Faith, two truths which have always to be held, but held in tension: on the one hand the truth expressed by St Cyprian: Outside of Christ, outside of the Church, there is no salvation and the teaching of Paul to Timothy: God wants all men to be saved.

The Catechism flags up the reality that given the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves man experiences many difficulties in coming to know God by the light of reason alone. Pope Pius XII in his monumental encyclical Humani Generis teaches: Though human reason is, strictly speaking, truly capable by its own natural power and light, of attaining to a true and certain knowledge of the one personal God….there are many obstacles which prevent reason from the effective and fruitful use of this inborn faculty….. the human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful (561).

This is why in addition, and most especially, we need the light of revelation, the light that God gives us by speaking directly to us. And we would need this revelation even if we had never sinned and if our intellects were not clouded by pride. In other words, there are many divine truths which are quite beyond our ability to grasp without the light and help God gives us. The essential truth of the Christian religion is that God has created us not to live merely human lives. We have been created to live on a higher plan; we are offered a supernatural life so that here and now we can participate in the life of God. But only God can reveal this to us, it is His free gift to us.

Perhaps this explains to some extent why some people go through the whole of their lives and evade the experience of God. This is expressed so well in the words of a
contemporary English writer, Julian Barnes, in his popular book: *Nothing To Be Afraid Of: I don’t believe in God but I miss him!*

There are many non-believers who would tell you a similar story. Why are some people given the gift of an unwavering faith and others struggle for their whole lives without coming to faith? The truth is that we all struggle with aspects of supernatural faith, and that is nothing new; even the Apostles felt this uncertainty at times about the person of Our Lord. I like he slightly irreverent expression of GK Chesterton that: *doubts are the ants in the pants of faith!* They keep us moving, searching, studying and so coming to deeper knowledge of the truth.

I would like to say something about how we can lose faith. Some of you may have come across a very saintly Jesuit who lived for years in this part of London, Fr Hugh Thwaites SJ, who died last year. He once wrote a little booklet entitled: *Our Glorious Catholic Faith, and How to lose it!* In it he talks about how precious the gift of faith is that has been given to us but how fragile it is. And he goes through figures in history who were outstanding Catholics, Henry VIII, Martin Luther, and how they lost their faith. Again the old Penny Catechism had some good advice about this. It said: *The sins against faith are all false religions, willful doubt, disbelief or denial of any article of Faith, and also culpable ignorance of the doctrines of the Church.* And in answer to: *How can I lose my Catholic Faith;* It told us: *We expose ourselves to the danger of losing our faith by neglecting our spiritual duties, reading bad books, going to non-Catholic Schools.* I have to say I went to a Catholic School; but many of my friends didn’t; most of them are still in the Church!

Whenever we start to speak about God there is inevitably the danger of going one way or the other. As with salvation, we have to keep two truths in tension: that God is Other, and that God is knowable. The Catechism emphasises at this point that although we can use words to speak of God, His attributes and existence, these words are ultimately inadequate to express in our purely human language the total otherness of God. So, on the one hand we must not think that we can never say anything relevant about Him, and at the same time believe that what we will say will always fall short of the reality. So the Church takes the middle way and teaches that while no words are fully adequate with regard to His reality, nonetheless some words are less inadequate than others.

St Thomas Aquinas says therefore, that it is better to say that, we know God by what he is not, rather than by what He is. This has become known as the *via negativa* or the negative way to God. By this approach we deny God of certain characteristics shared by some or all finite beings. So, God is not visible like an object or an animal, because we have no direct vision of Him, therefore our describing Him must always be negative in character. Learning about God is not being able to answers questions about Who or what he is, but more about getting more and more questions that we cannot answer. Theology is precisely the work of entering into a mystery which we can never grasp because it will always allude us in concept and in expression.

So can we say anything positive and meaningful about God? Well just as the human
soul bears the imprint of God - the divine spark of Him - so everything in creation
bears the mark of the Creator. All the beauty that we see in the world is a glimpse of
the Maker. The world in which we live though, is but a shadow of the reality, a
reflection, of the Goodness and Beauty that God is. This truth Blessed John Henry
Newman expressed by choosing for his epitaph: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in
veritatem*…..from shadows and images into the Truth. God is there, in the images
and shadows, he is hidden, but knowable, and one day we shall be brought into the
fullness of that revelation.

So we can say God is love, God is good, God is wise because we have an experiences
of these attributes in human life, even though they are imperfect expressions of
what is found perfectly in God. The Catechism reminds us of something the Fourth
Lateran Council says in 1215: that between God and his creatures there can be
expressed no *similarity* without implying a greater *dissimilarity*. And so when we say
these things of God, this is telling us something about God because there is a certain
similarity between human love, human goodness, human wisdom. But God’s love
and wisdom is also so much greater and wonderful than that found in us human
beings, so much so that, there is a greater *dissimilarity* than there is similarity.

In summary, our desire for God as human beings is something written in the human
heart, at the very core of our being, and is something natural to everyone on earth.
We are social beings, but most especially are we religious beings, since in the end
nothing satisfies us except God. There is no humanly perceived perfection that
comes anywhere near the perfection that is God and his desire for us.

If God has made us in His own image and likeness, then He has made it also possible
for us to know something about Him, and moreover to have a certainty about the
fact that He does exist. We can experience this in the material world, where we
know the *invisible* by seeing the visible, by the experience of all that is beauty. The
arguments of St Thomas and his different proofs help us here in showing that the
existence of God can be rationally demonstrated.

And we can see it reflected in the dignity of the human person, and in our awareness
of truth and beauty, our conscience and our free will. In fact, as soon as we think of
ourselves as more than just matter, we are drawn into thinking of the existence of
God who is all spirit.

But there is the need for revelation, since we want to know what truths exist beyond
our understanding (The Trinity is a good example of something we could never know
by our own unaided reason – God had to reveal that to us) and secondly because our
sinful condition obscures religious and moral truths from us, making it necessary for
God to *show us* some truths, so that we may know them with certainty. These are
the reasons why the Catechism teaches us that religion is not so much a matter of us
searching for God but rather our response to the fact that God has visited us and
saved us.

Our God-given capacity for Him is a life-long quest to fulfil. That is what eternal life
is. *For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but ruins His very soul?* Each of us is brought into existence to establish the kingdom of God in his or her soul. If we do that, we fulfill the whole purpose of our being. However, there is a temptation, and so much of what distracts us today gives the impression that, what we are here for is, to put the world right. But the primary province for each of us is our own hearts; our capacity for God. All of the activity of our lives and the Church will flow from that. Our holiness is the fulfillment of our vocation on this earth.

Perhaps some of you will be familiar with those words of Blessed John Henry Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* where he says he can never remember a time when there were not for him two, and two only, _absolute and luminously self-evident beings, himself and his Creator_. And the only criterion of success or failure in this human life is whether we have established that relationship rightly.

Standing in St Peter's Square this day last week, there was an artistically beautiful reminder of what we are trying to appreciate in these evenings. The two fountains on either side of the Piazza were installed to remind all pilgrims who visit the engine room of the Church, that our Faith has two mainstays: the Catechism, with the Scriptures, form the two pillars of our Faith: revelation and the lived reality of the faith God has given us handed down from the Apostles. The Catechism helps us to speak about revelation and about God and the truths of the faith in ways that the people of our times can comprehend; for this reason it is a wonderful tool the church offers us by which to make known the riches and wonders of God and His Church.

Finally, there is a story told of St Augustine found in book on his life by a thirteenth century Bishop of Genoa: Augustine was walking on the beach contemplating the mystery of the Trinity. Then he saw a boy in front of him who had dug a hole in the sand and was going out to the sea again and again and bringing some water to pour into the hole. St. Augustine asked him, *What are you doing?* I’m going to pour the entire ocean into this hole. That is impossible, the whole ocean will not fit in the hole you have made, said St. Augustine. The boy replied, *And you cannot fit the Trinity in your tiny little brain.* The story concludes by saying that the boy vanished because St. Augustine had been talking to an angel.

We all know that the mysteries of our Faith are beyond our explanation. But a mystery is a truth given to us by God in which he tells us something important about Himself. The fact that we can’t and won’t understand doesn’t stop God telling us. Just as in the same way a child can’t understand what it’s parent is saying; it doesn’t stop the parent talking to their child. One day it may be that the child will grow up and surpass their parents intelligence. In the things of God we never grow up but in doing theology, in studying our Faith we can come closer to the One who speaks and invites us into communion with Him. One day it will be clear, but for now, we dimly, as in a mirror. _You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you._