

Letter to Nereyda V

an even shorter introduction to Christian Materialism

By and Based on the Books of Robert J. Cormier (www.thefaithkit.org)
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Dear Nereyda,

When the subtitle of this latest letter to you calls this piece “an even shorter introduction to Christian Materialism,” it is comparing itself to the “short introduction” which was the subject of my first letter to you. (I hope you still have it!)

In the time that has gone by, however, I have recognized that I can and I should explain what Christian Materialism is all about in even fewer words and even more simply.

In short, Nereyda, you know that here in this world there are some people with lots of experience and education, and others with a lot less. These people “with a lot less” are not very “disciplined” in the way they decide what is true. In other words, they do not feel bound by the need to have good reasons to think what they think, much less to change their mind if they discover that the evidence is not on their side. Many have faith, but is a simple faith that has no problem with good spirits, evil spirits, and frequent miracles; and they do not ask very tough questions.

This is where most people were until just recently in human history.

Then things changed.

You know, Nereyda, that what we do here on earth is grow. We are born with almost nothing and, ideally, we become smarter and smarter, and more and more loving. Well, this is true, not just of us as individuals, but it is also true of us as a people. And, as we as a people grew and grew, eventually we grew into questions about faith, and knowledge of the world that inspired *more* questions about faith.

Up to now, faith, and the Church particularly, didn't do a very good job answering these questions. It didn't do a very good job because it didn't have very good answers.

They were very tough questions.

No longer able to accept the idea that paradise was lost—and billions made to suffer and die—because of a mistake by Adam or maybe Eve, disciplined thinkers needed to know, If we were made for life with God, why don't we have this life?

Seeing plainly that people are *to such a large extent* the product of their experience, something for which they are *not* ultimately responsible, they needed to know, How are we damnable for what we do?

Having a deeper idea of what love is all about, they also needed to know, How is an all-good God damning *anyone*?!

Seeing the laws of nature in the things that happen, and succeeding at making the world a better place more by working with these laws than by praying that God will break them, they started to wonder, Isn't faith just wishful thinking?

And why, anyway, would the great God require us to know Him by something like "faith"—basically believing what we choose to believe?! Isn't this something bad? Isn't this what we see in the countless disagreements among believers?

These were tough questions—and there were many others—and the Church did not have answers that made sense except to those who already, desperately wanted to believe.

But answers were out there. Instead of seeing modern thinking as the enemy, it proved possible to see modern thinking as a friend—a friend that could help faith create new concepts that could answer new questions (and old questions, too). Although this would mean that faith would have to explain many things differently—something which faith, which is so bound up with tradition, was sure to have a hard time doing—this is something faith *can* do.

Indeed, many of our new explanations of the most basic things make sense of the idea that the truth needs to grow up as we do, and the Church has a special role in making this happen.

Best of all, our new explanations of the most basic things make vastly MORE credible the MOST basic thing—our experience of a God who loves us, made us for life with Him, and has the best possible reason for everything that happens.

These new explanations are what Christian Materialism is all about, Nereyda, and they involve not just one revolutionary idea but seven, and here they are:

1. Your soul is not some purely spiritual thing flying around inside your body; it *is* your body, and especially your brain, being the fantastically complicated thing that it is. What makes everything what-it-is is matter—the complex organization of matter. This idea-of-everything leads to a definition of the soul that is “scientific,” and useful to Christian doctrine in ways which are easy to understand.

2. Faith is not believing; faith is seeing. Faith is seeing things more deeply than we do when we function merely at the lesser level of “reason.” Like reality generally which advances by levels as complex things are themselves organized into much more complex things, human knowing advances by levels. Reason is neither the first of these levels nor the last! Reason is seeing that reality is dependable. But it is human experience that, unless some obstacle intervenes, knowing moves on to see that reality is dependent—it proclaims its Creator.

3. We can answer the question, If we were made for life with God, why don't we have this life? The answer is not, “we had it but we lost it, and we must now try to get it back,” but rather, “we are here before heaven so that God could give us *more*, participation in our creation, to become our own person, because it is better for us if we are. This is us sharing in the self-sufficiency which is the essence of what it is to be God.

4. It is not freedom vs. determinism, or even free will vs. grace. It is God *and* us making us us. It is God and His plan sending us experiences knowing how we *as the persons we are* will respond and be changed. It is this that makes us people *we* made as *God* wants. But our new view also means that in the final analysis everything comes from God (wasn't this what faith is all about anyway?); people do the best they can with what they are given; no one is really evil; and no one need fear divine punishments or a bad deal in heaven.

5. Salvation is fundamentally a family business. In other words, we are going to share God's life as a family where all of us are going to be richer for holiness of each of us. This makes sense of the struggle of human history and everything else that happens according to God's plan—the death of a baby, for example—as nothing else can!

6. The mysteries of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the Eucharist can be explained so that they are no longer mysteries. The secret is to recognize that no-thing is not of God. In other words, nothing can exist here if it did not exist “in” God first; and nothing can exist if God does not sustain it with His love which is Himself.

7. The truth of tradition is determined only in retrospect. In other words, often we recognize the wisdom of God's plan only when we look back on what happened in the hindsight of what we know *now*, and this is true, too, of what God planned to be written in Scripture or taught by the Church. For example, it was only when people's idea of God's love had grown so much that they could not imagine Him condemning someone simply because he or she was not baptized that the Church looked back on the doctrine of baptism and saw within it the idea that a person could receive a “baptism by desire” *even if he or she did not know it!* But something that was once thought essential, baptism by water, was let go. For us today, this means that new ways to explain things should not be prevented solely because of what was once believed. It means that revolutionary ideas can be accepted by the Church.

I hope you will read *Christian Materialism*, Nereyda, and like it.

Dear reader,

If, perhaps, you might like to read the first, second, third, or fourth letters to Nereyda, just go to the Christian Materialism menu of www.thefaithkit.org/panorama2.