

My Appetite for Information is Endless: Is Curiosity Bad?

[ROMAN CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL DIRECTION](#)



Dear Father John, Many spiritual writers and saints have cautioned against excessive [curiosity](#). Why is this? Curiosity leads to knowledge and knowledge is a virtue. So how can curiosity be bad? I am very curious and love to learn about anything and everything. God's great universe is endlessly fascinating and the more I learn and experience, the more reverence I have for God the Creator. So... is

curiosity only bad when it is curiosity about the private lives of others? Or when it distracts us from serious prayer? Or when it makes us proud of the knowledge it leads us to? Is it wrong to want to know everything and experience everything? (even though it is impossible due to limited time)

Your question raises a crucial issue for spiritual growth in general, and especially for spiritual growth in the digital world.

As we all know, the digital revolution has also spawned an information revolution. Today, our fingertips have immediate access to more information than world scholars could have gathered in an entire lifetime just a couple hundred years ago. As with all technological advancements, the digital revolution is morally neutral. Our increased access to information can either aid our pursuit of holiness, or hinder it. It makes the virtue of learning easier to develop, but it also makes the vice of curiosity easier to fall in to. That's the key distinction for answering your question: learning vs. **curiosity**.

The Virtue of "Studiositas"

Learning involves all the good things that you describe above. We cannot love what we do not know. Studying God's creation can help us know God better, just as studying the works of an artist can help know an artist better, and by knowing God better we can love him better – which is the purpose of our existence. Our intelligence is meant for this, in fact. That's why the Christian spiritual tradition catalogues studiositas as a virtue – the virtue of study, of applying our minds to studying and learning, so that we can grow in knowledge and understanding of the world, ourselves, and God.

In modern times, we tend to use the word “study” to refer strictly to academic activity, with an unpleasant connotation. But the traditional virtue of studiositas is broader. It refers to the effort and the zeal required to really learn, to make an effort to understand things, to apply one’s mind to the task of growing in knowledge and wisdom. Learning may be a better modern equivalent of the Latin studiositas in this context.

The Vice of “Curiositas”

But like every power of the human soul, this capacity to learn can be de-formed. Instead of applying ourselves to develop the virtue of study, we can fall into the vice of curiositas, or curiosity. In the Christian spiritual tradition, this word, like studiositas, has a technical meaning. The vice of curiosity refers to the superficial gathering of information, the thirst to imbibe the latest headline or rumor just because it’s new. **Curiosity** stops where learning begins. It’s like the butterfly that flits from flower to flower without gathering any nectar, whereas the bee will settle into a flower and drink up, taking time to gather all that the flower has to offer. Curiosity is often associated with other vices – gossip especially, inordinate attachment to fads and fashions, wasting time, and tale-bearing – vying to be the first to pass on juicy rumors.

Curiosity in this sense of superficial thirst for new and titillating information impedes spiritual growth. God is always speaking to us, but if we are constantly bopping around and chatter-boxing, we make it hard for ourselves to hear him. We tend not to take the necessary time for reflection and self-analysis. We are so caught up in the exterior aspect of events, whether those in our own lives or in the world around us, that we rarely pause to consider the interior aspects: causes and consequences, meanings and implications.

God rarely shouts. He loves us too much to force us to hear him. Jesus refused to jump off the pinnacle of the Temple to get people's attention, even though that certainly would have made the headlines. He addresses us more intimately, more quietly, more personally. The vice of curiosity, or superficiality, makes our souls hard and impenetrable to his advances, like the hardened dirt path where some of the seed fell in the parable of the sower, so that his words don't penetrate and take root. Instead, the birds (the devil) come and snatch them away by keeping us "distracted from distractions by distractions," as T.S. Eliot once put it.

Intellectual Greed

Another vice can deform our God-given capacity to learn: greed. Usually we associate greed with money. But we can also be greedy when it comes to knowledge. Greed is an inordinate desire for possessions, and knowledge is a spiritual possession. Intellectual greediness differs from curiosity in the sense that it usually involves deeper knowledge. But it also impedes our spiritual growth.

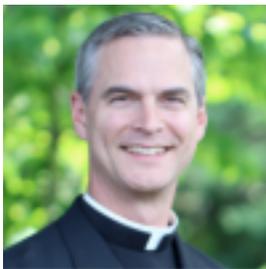
On the one hand, as we grow in knowledge, we can become snobbish, looking down at others for not knowing as much as we do. This is a direct affront to Christian charity. On the other hand, it also can keep us distracted. In this case, the thirst to have new experiences and develop new areas of expertise is inordinate, out of proportion to our mission in life. The enjoyment of acquiring new knowledge, which is legitimate in itself, becomes so all-consuming that the duties of one's state in life are neglected. I have known more than one marriage that crashed because a scholar-spouse became as overly-obsessed with research as greedy businessmen do with making money.

This can even happen with knowledge of spiritual things. Growing in the knowledge of God and his plan for our lives should never disconnect a man from his wife and children, for example. Knowledge is meant to be at the service of love, and in the end we will be judged on how we loved God by fulfilling his will, not on how much we knew about Church teaching and the lives of the saints.

And that can be your own yardstick. Clearly you are someone God has gifted with an active intelligence and a broad capacity for wonder. Continue to develop those gifts in the way that you describe. But at the same time, check every day to make sure that you are not fleeing from the crosses God sends you, and that you are actively putting your gifts at the service of his Kingdom, not just enjoying them all by yourself. And in a strange and delightful twist, you will find that by loving God and neighbor more fully you will unleash the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and your knowledge of all things will actually increase, both in breadth and in depth.



Art for this post on curiosity: *Saint Augustine*, Philippe de Champaigne, between circa 1645 and circa 1650, PD-US author's life plus 100 years or less, Wikimedia Commons.



About [Fr. John Bartunek, LC](#)

Fr. John Bartunek, LC, S.Th.D, received his BA in History from Stanford University in 1990. He comes from an

evangelical Christian background and became a member of the Catholic Church in 1991. After college, he worked as a high school history teacher, drama director, and baseball coach. He then spent a year as a professional actor in Chicago before entering the religious Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ in 1993. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 2003 and earned his doctorate in moral theology in 2010. He provided spiritual support on the set of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" while researching the 2005 Catholic best seller, ["Inside the Passion"](#)—the only authorized, behind-the-scene explanation of the film. Fr. John has contributed news commentary regarding religious issues on NBC, CNN, Fox, and the BBC. He also served as the English-language press liaison for the Vatican's 2005 Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist. His most widely known book is called: ["The Better Part: A Christ-Centered Resource for Personal Prayer"](#). His most recent books are ["Spring Meditations"](#), ["Seeking First the Kingdom: 30 Meditations on How to Love God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength"](#), and ["Answers: Catholic Advice for Your Spiritual Questions"](#). Fr. John currently splits his time between Michigan (where he continues his writing apostolate and serves as a confessor and spiritual director at the Queen of the Family Retreat Center) and Rome, where he teaches theology at Regina Apostolorum. His online, do-it-yourself retreats are available at [RCSpirituality.org](#), and he answers questions about the spiritual life at [SpiritualDirection.com](#).