BELIEVE IT... OR NOT?
AN ISSUE LIFE NIGHT ON
ATHEISM
LIFE NIGHT OUTLINE

GOAL
The goal of this Life Night is to have an open, honest discussion about atheism. The Life Night focuses on answering the common objections that Catholics hear about the existence of God and equips the teens with tips on how to enter into a conversation with our non-believing brothers and sisters.

ABOUT THIS LIFE NIGHT
The chances are good that many of our teens have a friend or family member that identifies as an atheist or that face challenges about their beliefs in school regarding the existence of God. This Life Night answers those objections and empowers the teens to respond to objections with courage and charity.

The Life Night begins with a fun icebreaker based on the game “Malarky” that will help lead into the teaching of the Life Night. The Proclaim teaching addresses certain objections teens might hear from our non-believing brothers and sisters. The Break is a small group discussion about where
teens are in their faith. It also addresses any doubts teens may have about our faith. The Send provides a recap of the Life Night and challenges the teens to reflect on the words of the Nicene Creed.

ENVIRONMENT
The environment for this Life Night is meant to provide imagery that contrasts various myths and realities in the world today. For example, have in your environment decorations of Santa Claus, and contrast them with images of St. Nicholas; for decorations of the Easter Bunny, contrast them with images of the Paschal Lamb. You can also include other pictures/decorations of popular mythological creatures, including the Tooth Fairy or Bigfoot. You may even want to include creatures that exist, but are quite odd (e.g. the blobfish, frilled shark or the giant osopod).

GATHER

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION
(5 min)

The Youth Minister welcomes everyone to the Life Night. Be sure to introduce any new teens, welcoming them and thanking them for spending their time with the youth group.

After your welcome and introductions, lead an opening prayer and transition into the Gather activity.

WHAT IS TRUTH?
(10 min)

Invite one member of each class (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior) to the front of the room for a competitive game.

Explain to the group that you will be asking a series of questions to the four students in the front of the room. After each student has given an answer to the question, the group will vote on who they think is correct.

PROCLAIM

TALK: GOD WHO?
(15 min)

Note: This talk is focused more on reaching minds than on reaching hearts. Be mindful of where your group is spiritually and take special caution to avoid creating an environment where any teen who is struggling with doubt feels unwelcome and alienated.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus approaches His disciples and asks them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” His disciples call out and respond to Him, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah and others say Jeremiah.” Jesus then turns to them again and says, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-15)

In the past decade, we’ve seen a great movement and surge in atheism. People make multiple objections against believers of all faiths, and we as Catholics are faced with a unique opportunity to defend our faith.

The question, “Who is God?” is an important one in this discussion. It is likely that you’ll find that many atheists reject the belief in God because of who they think God to be rather than who God is.
Atheism says, “There is no God.” Catholicism says, “There is a God.” Both claims cannot be true. One claim is right, and the other is wrong.

In the game, we saw that people could give answers that sounded convincing, but were not true. When it comes to atheism, we will hear a number of arguments that sound convincing, but when we look deeper and examine our faith, we find that those arguments fall short of reality.

Opposing Views, Searching Hearts
- Many of you probably have friends or family members who identify as atheists. In school, it’s likely that many of you are challenged about your belief in God in any one of your classes - whether it’s World History, Science, or English.

- Let’s take a quick look at common objections to the Catholic faith, specifically our belief in God, that you will encounter and how to answer them.

Science Rules
- A major “objection” that people offer against belief in God is that it is unscientific. They argue there is a gap between faith and science. The argument goes something like this: “Science has given us a way to explain every observable phenomenon in the created universe. Historically speaking we only used “God” as a way to explain away things that science couldn’t address at the time. But now that we know so much with science that the idea of God is superfluous. God is just a myth told to children, like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.”

- We first note that the Church is not opposed to science. In fact, we as Catholics believe that faith and science cannot contradict one another but that faith and science go hand-in-hand (CCC 159).

- If you look at Church history, you’ll see that many Catholics revolutionized certain sciences in their time. Gregor Mendel was an Augustinian friar and is the father of genetics; Fr. Georges Lemaître was a Jesuit priest and he proposed the Big Bang theory. If the Church was really against any scientific advancement, wouldn’t She have taken steps to silence these priests?

- We define science as something that utilizes the scientific method and seeks to prove (or disprove) a hypothesis by way of experimentation. The trouble with the empirical method is that it cannot be used to measure or test God because God is pure Spirit (John 4:24).

- “Proof” does not necessarily mean something tangible (physical, touchable, measurable). Proof can be conceptual as it is with mathematics and logic. For example, math uses conceptual propositions to reach a conclusion and can sometimes be expressed empirically: if I have two apples and I take two more apples from someone else, I have four apples. Thus, the principle of 2+2=4 is demonstrated.

- When we talk about “proving” the existence of God, we can talk about logical, philosophical principles. The most famous of these are called the “Five Ways” (see Summa Theologica, First Part, Question 2, Article 3 for a detailed look at these arguments). These five ways were put forth by St. Thomas Aquinas in the mid-thirteenth century. These five arguments provide a strong case for the existence of God.

- We don’t have time to go into all of the arguments here because they are very complex, but we will give you an example of the “Argument from Causality.”

- The Argument from Causality says that whatever comes into existence must have a cause and nothing can be the cause of itself. We know that the universe has come into existence; therefore the universe must have a cause. We need to admit a first efficient cause (an uncaused cause), and this is what we call God.

- When people ask for evidence of our arguments, we can point at the created universe and marvel at its complexity, and recognize that something needed to cause that complexity and creation.

Historical Hypocrisy (It’s Not God, It’s You)
- Many objections to the faith are not about theological issues. They revolve around the people in the Church rather than the Church itself. This objection typically leads to some historical arguments that mention the Crusades, Inquisitions, or other controversial topics the Church faced throughout history.
• This objection seems like a strong argument because it convicts us - it reminds us that we are not only representatives of the Catholic Faith, but of Christ, and we are far from perfect.

• The objection has many assumptions hidden in it, the first of which is an assumption that everyone in the Church must be perfect. But we do not believe this. In fact, if we listen to the words of Christ in the Gospels (Matthew 13:24-30; 47-50), we will expect the opposite. We know that the Church is not a museum of saints; it is a hospital for sinners. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Mark 2:17). We should expect the Church to be full of sinners and saints.

• A second assumption in this argument is the notion that you can judge the quality of religious principles based on the worst offenders of that religion. That some Catholics in history were some of the worst sinners in history does not disprove Catholicism in principle, just like bad mathematicians do not disprove arithmetic in principle.

• It simply shows that humanity’s bad judgment is not merely a religious problem; it is a human problem. It is certainly true that there were bad people in the Church’s history. We’re all sinners in need of forgiveness. Simply because some bad people did bad things in our history does not prove anything - it only demonstrates that Christ was right when He told us that it would happen!

The Heart of the Gospel
• When we read through the Gospels – when we read the very words of Christ, what do we notice about His teaching method?

• Does Jesus go out to the Pharisees and the Teachers and say, “Gather around, and let me provide logical arguments that prove the existence of God and my divinity”? No! Jesus was after hearts.

• We have to keep this in mind when approaching our non-believing brothers and sisters. Some people are going to be looking for a debate, some people are going to be arguing, but everyone you encounter is going to be searching for the Truth. Ultimately, we are not going to convert the masses by arguing with them and defeating their intellectual objections. We are going to convert people by engaging hearts and living the Gospel we have preached.

• Remember, you are the only Gospel some people will ever read. We must live the Gospel with our actions and our words, and introduce people to the God whom we love.

• Knowing the Truth is good. Knowing how to respond to atheist objections is great. But knowing Jesus Christ, the person, not the idea, is going to be what leads to our final beatitude in heaven.

The Fundamentalist Bible
• Many people will attack Christianity based on what they believe the Bible to be. They forget that the Bible is not just one book but also a collection of books. Some books are poetic and others are songs, philosophical musings, historical accounts, or literary pieces used to describe pre-history.

• Most people think that all of the books in Scripture should be read the same way, with a very literal interpretation attached to them. The Catholic Church offers a lot of guidance on how to read Scripture and how to interpret Scripture (see CCC 101-119).

• Often you will hear the objection, “Evolution disproves the Bible.” It is important to note that the Catholic Church teaches there is no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of our Faith (see John Paul II's October 22, 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences). In fact, the Church recognizes that the beginning of the Book of Genesis is not understood as a historical narrative that scientifically explains the creation of the earth. The first few chapters of Genesis are meant to illustrate a creation narrative that depicts God as the source of all being, the fall of man, and the promise of salvation (CCC 282-289).
BREAK

SMALL GROUPS
(35 min)

Divide the teenagers into small groups of six to eight teens with one Core Member in each group. Explain to the teens that small groups will focus on having an honest discussion about faith, doubt, and objections we face to our belief in God.

Begin small group in prayer before moving into a discussion. Core Members that are facilitating a discussion must be aware of where their small group is in their faith journey. Use these questions as guidelines to get a discussion going, and not as questions to get through as quickly as possible. Take some time to see how the members of the group respond to these questions and offer your input when necessary.

• What are some objections you have heard about the existence of God? What objections have you heard to the Catholic Faith?

• Have you ever been stumped on a question about God or the Catholic Faith? What’s one of the most difficult questions to answer as a Catholic today?

• Have you ever been able to share your faith in a respectful way with your friends or classmates? What are some ways we can have a respectful conversation with those who do not share our beliefs?

• What are some ways we can grow in our faith together? As a small group? As a youth group?

SEND

NICENE CREED REFLECTION
(15 min)

Gather everyone back together in the main meeting room. Set the tone of the room for prayer and reflection. The youth minister recaps teaching from the Life Night, making sure to emphasize the point that, as Catholics, we ultimately want to change hearts and not minds. To do so, we must know God and know what we believe.

Print copies of the Nicene Creed for everyone in your youth group and hand them out. Have the teens reflect on the Creed and ask them to think and pray about the areas they need to grow in their faith.

After a period of reflection, invite everyone to stand and make a profession of faith as you all pray through the Nicene Creed together. As your group prepares to depart, challenge them to reflect and pray on the meaning of the words of the Nicene Creed:

We say the Nicene Creed every weekend at Mass, but often we do not think about what we are saying. These words are a profession of our faith. We boldly state our belief. Do you take the time to reflect on these words and pray them in honesty? Know that if you have any doubts, or if you are struggling with your faith, we are here for you to help you. Please do not be afraid to seek answers.

Challenge the teens to hang their copy of the Nicene Creed someplace where they will see it every day. Close by asking for the intercession of Mary for strength to be courageous witnesses to the faith, especially in the face of questions and objections.

ADAPTING THE LIFE NIGHT

• If your group is more inclined to discussing apologetics on proving the existence of God, consider inviting your pastor to the night. Instead of doing small groups, have a large group Question-and-Answer with your pastor about any questions of the Catholic Faith.

• At the end of small groups, ask each member of the group to write down between 1-3 questions they have about God or their Catholic Faith. When you evaluate your Life Night, go through the questions and examine the needs of your youth group, and consider doing a large-group question-and-answer with those questions in the coming weeks.
RESOURCES

• You may wish to pair this Life Night with the 2007 Life Night, “Prove It” (part of the first iteration of the “Person of Christ” curriculum) or the 2010 Life Night, “The Anti-Graduation” (part of the second iteration of the “Person of Christ” curriculum) to allow for another apologetic night on the existence of God.

• For a philosophical take on proving the existence of God, familiarize yourself with the Quinque Viae (Five Ways) of St. Thomas Aquinas. These are in the Summa Theologica, available for free online at newadvent.org.

• The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss by David Bentley Hart examines how the typical discussion about God often begins and ends with undefined assumptions about who God is and, because of such things, the two people discussing God will often talk around one another. You may also listen to Hart’s talk on the subject, available for free on YouTube: http://youtu.be/mt9HSQZMQYM