

CHAPTER FIVE

FAITH

(Catechism nn. 142-197)

Faith

In Chapter One we outlined the argument that, if reality as we experience and know it is really intelligible, there must exist a Being ('God') that provides the ultimate explanation for why things in fact exist. Without God nothing we know could be. However, while we who pursue the logic of this argument can know that God exists, we have no unmediated experience of the Transcendent. How we think of God is a matter of belief born of love.

In its final introductory chapter, the Catechism looks at what we mean when we say 'I believe' (n. 142-184). The setting for its reflections is provided by the following quote from the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum* 2):

'The invisible God, from the fulness of his love addresses human beings as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and welcome them into his own company'(n. 142).

Opening our minds and hearts to welcome God's communication and loving invitation is what we mean by faith:

'Faith is a gift of God ... we must have the grace of God to move and assist us; we must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind'(n. 153).

In the opening chapters we reflected at some length on how God reveals God's Self to each and every person, and invites everyone to enjoy divine communion. Faith, then, is, before all else, a God-given capacity offered to each person to receive and welcome God's Self-gift.

We are not isolated individuals. God reveals God's Self through others. We have been reflecting on this in the previous two chapters. Christian revelation is handed on through Tradition, especially through the sacred Scriptures. In this sense, faith is a God-given capacity to receive, and welcome as true, matters that we have not personally investigated and established for ourselves on the evidence, but that we accept as true, thanks to the teaching of those who have gone before us in faith, with a special place for those who have the grace of authority to teach (the Church's magisterium).

We might reflect on the following statements from the Catechism:

'To live, grow, and persevere in faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; it must be "working through charity"(Galatians 5:6), abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church' (n.162).

'No one can believe alone ... I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith' (n. 166).

'The Christian community is our teacher in the faith' (n.169).

'No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother'(n. 181, a quote from Saint Cyprian *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, 6).

Whether we think of our response to God's self-communication and the invitation into communion that God gives to us directly and personally, or whether we think of our response to God's self-communication via the truths handed on to us in the Church, faith involves welcoming this revelation. It also involves a graced capacity to respond to God by savouring what we have received, reflecting upon it, integrating it into our lives, and living accordingly. The Psalmist invites us to 'taste and see the goodness of the Lord' (Psalm 34:8).

Speaking of the knowledge we receive through God's revelation, Saint Paul writes:

'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe, according to the working of God's great power' (Ephesians 1:17-19).

In his first post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, devoted to the topic of handing on the faith, Pope John-Paul II writes:

'The Spirit is promised to the Church and to each Christian as a Teacher within, who, in the secret of the conscience and the heart, makes us understand what we have heard but were not capable of grasping' (n. 72).

He goes on to quote Saint Augustine:

'Even now, the Holy Spirit teaches the faithful in accordance with each one's spiritual capacity. And the Holy Spirit sets their hearts aflame with greater desire according as each one progresses in the charity that makes him love what he already knows and desire what he has yet to know' (*Tract on the Gospel of John* 97.1).

On how this deeper knowledge affects the way we live, Saint Paul writes:

'We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God' (Colossians 1:9-10).

Welcoming God's invitation into a love-communion obviously affects our decisions. To be 'full of faith' we must be 'faithful'. We will return to the subject of conscience and the moral imperatives of faith in Chapter 29.

When it comes to our faith as Christians, we have the guarantee of Jesus that he would be with the community forever, we have his promise that he would guide the Church through the gift of his Spirit, and we have two thousand years of saintly and learned people who have lived beautiful lives because of what they accepted and handed on as true. Of course, not everything taught within the Christian community is of equal importance.

Believe in order to understand

We have already spoken of the ‘hierarchy of truths’, and will examine in a later chapter what is taught in theology about the levels of authority in teaching that is proposed, and about levels of acceptance required if we are to be faithful. For the moment it is sufficient to say that our acceptance is required by our faith only when we are dealing with truths that the community has accepted as truly inspired insights into God. When it comes to other matters presented for our acceptance, a humble recognition of the limits of our own knowledge may require that we accept them and act on them, but not faith.

An important principle in regard to the relationship of knowledge and faith is stated by Augustine:

‘Do not seek to understand that you may believe. Seek, rather, to believe so that you may understand’ (Sermon 118.1).

Loving needs to be in accordance with reason, but it cannot be confined within the realms of logic. The experience of love always involves something of a leap in the dark, a going beyond the limits of reason and control. And love opens up whole areas of understanding that we were unaware of before we dared to love. It is the same with Christ-inspired love. On the same theme, Augustine says elsewhere (see Catechism n. 158):

‘I believe in order to understand. I understand the better to believe’ (Sermon 43,7,9).

As the Catechism says:

‘There can never be any discrepancy between faith and reason’ (n. 159).

What is faith?

Let us look now at the essence of faith, whether we are speaking of the personal insights into God that we experience in the intimacy of our conscience, or whether we are speaking of the humble and joyful acceptance of what is revealed to us through the teaching of the Church community.

As the word indicates, to ‘be-lieve’ is to ‘be-in-love’. To believe in God is to be in love-communion with God, welcoming grace and being open in mind, heart and will to God’s inspiration. As Paul says:

‘The only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6).

A key insight into Christian faith is that it is not a faith that we have to acquire by modelling ourselves on the faith of Jesus. We are not asked to imitate Jesus as it were from the outside. He did not say ‘I am a vine, and I want you to be a vine like me.’ He said:

‘I am the vine. You are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5).

We are not copying Jesus. We are called to be our unique selves, and Jesus offers us a share in his love to make this possible in the most beautiful way. Included in this is the gift of his faith, poured into our hearts by his Holy Spirit. Jesus’ disciples picked up something of his insight into and response to God, and this has been the experience of the Christian community ever since. Paul puts this well:

'It is no longer I who live. Christ lives in me. And the life I now live is by the faith of the Son of God who loves me and gives himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

The Letter to the Hebrews (12:2) speaks of Jesus as

'the champion and perfecter of our faith' (quoted Catechism n.147).

Through his gift to us of the Spirit of love that binds him in communion with God, Jesus offers us a share in his faith, and invites us to

'believe in God and believe in me' (John 14:1; quoted Catechism n.151).

To believe is to have 'the mind of Christ' (1Corinthians 2:16). Paul prays for the Christians in Philippi:

'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5).

To have Jesus' mind is to love with his love:

'Love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12).

The Catechism (n. 148-149) offers us the example of Mary, Jesus' mother. She is the disciple who is closest to his heart. Luke portrays Jesus being conceived in the womb of his mother as the fruit of the intimate love between God and Mary. She responds to God's invitation and love with the words:

'I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you have said' (Luke 1:37).

Having heard that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant, Mary hurries to her and is greeting with the words:

'Blessed is she who has believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord' (Luke 1:45).

The Catechism invites us:

'We must turn to the witnesses of faith ... to the Virgin Mary who, in her pilgrimage of faith walked into the night of faith in sharing the darkness of her Son's suffering and death' (n. 165).

We look to the saints, living and dead, as examples of faith. The hymn chosen in the Prayer of the Church to celebrate the feast of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne, picks up the theme of faith:

Lord God we give you thanks for all your saints
Who sought the trackless footprints of your feet,
Who took into their own a hand unseen
And heard a voice whose silence was complete.

Blest Trinity, may yours be endless praise
For all who lived so humbly in your sight.
Your holy ones who walked dark ways of faith
Now share the joy of your unfailing light.

Examples of faith

To help in our reflections on faith we go to two poems by the Australian lyric poet, James McAuley. The first is entitled *In a Late Hour*:

Though all men should desert you my faith shall not grow less,
but keep that single virtue of simple thankfulness.

Pursuit had closed around me, terrors had pressed me low;
you sought me and you found me, and I will not let you go.

The hearts of men grow colder, the final things draw near.
Forms vanish, kingdoms moulder, the antirealm is here

whose order is derangement: close-driven, yet alone,
men reach the last estrangement, the sense of nature gone.

Though the stars run distracted, and from wounds deep rancours flow,
while the mystery is enacted I will not let you go.

The second was composed within months of his death in 1976 from cancer. As the springs of his life were running dry he wrote:

I know that faith is like a root that's tough, inert and old;
Yet it can send up its green shoot and flower against the cold.

I know there is a grace that flows when all the springs run dry.
It wells up to renew the rose and lift the cedars high.

Finally, the Catechism underlines two important facts about faith.

The first is via a quotation from Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* II-II, 1, 2 ad 2):

‘The believer’s act of faith does not terminate in the propositions, but in the realities which they express’(n. 170).

Words are important. Theology is about clarifying and making more precise the words in which we express our faith. But the point being made here is that it is not the words that we believe, it is the reality that is expressed (and partly veiled) by the words. Our faith is in God, who is always beyond that which reveals God, however sublime the medium.

The second truth is also via a quotation, this time from Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies* V.20.1):

‘We guard with care the faith that we have received from the Church, for without ceasing, under the action of God’s Spirit, this deposit of great price, as if in an excellent vessel, is constantly being renewed and causes the vessel that contains it to be renewed’(n. 175).

Our faith is never static, for the God in whom we believe is a living God constantly acting in our lives, constantly being revealed to us in ways that are old and new.

In conclusion, let us follow the Catechism in placing the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed in parallel columns. The Catechism (n. 197 and 194) quotes Saint Ambrose, who states:

‘The Creed is the spiritual seal, our heart’s meditation and an ever-present guardian; it is, unquestionably, the treasure of our soul’ (*Expl. Symb.* 1).

Speaking of the Apostles’ Creed Ambrose writes:

‘It is the Creed of the Roman Church, the See of Peter, the first of the apostles, to which he brought the common faith’ (*Expl. Symb.* 7).

The Catechism basically follows the Apostles’ Creed. Its language is scriptural and simpler than the Nicene Creed. As a summary of the essentials of Christian faith it was, presumably, appropriate at the time it was composed, and there are advantages in a community using such an ancient and universally accepted summary as part of its liturgy.

The Nicene Creed was issued by the Council of Nicea (325AD), with additions from a creed current in the eastern Church at the time of the Council of Constantinople (381AD). Clearly the Christian community felt the need for a summary of its faith that was more relevant to the questions being asked in the fourth century. We will examine this Creed in Chapter 11. The existence of the Nicene Creed highlights the need for a Creed that speaks to us today in the twenty-first century. Pope Paul VI issued a document entitled “*The Credo of the People of God*” on June 30th 1968. However it was too long to be useful as a liturgical summary, with the result that in the liturgy the choice has remained between the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. The call for a new liturgical text of the Creed has yet to be heard. It would need to be the fruit of a truly ecumenical gathering for it to be accepted widely among the Christian Churches. Surrounded by my fellow Christians at Mass I would like to hear words such as the following.

‘I believe in God. With all-powerful love God pours God’s Self into creation, sustaining everything in existence. I believe that I am being drawn, together with the whole of creation, into an ever more intimate communion with the sacred Mystery we call ‘God’.

I believe in Jesus of Nazareth, who was so totally open to God that God was able to give God’s Self to Jesus so fully that Jesus could say: ‘I am in God and God is in me.’ It was from this communion that Jesus lived. It was the source of his love and his teaching. It sustained him through the joys and disappointments of his life, and through his dreadful passion and death.

I believe that God raised Jesus into the fulness of the risen life, and it is from this that Jesus pours the Spirit of his love out over the whole world, forgiving sin, healing hurt, and drawing everyone to share his communion with God, and so enjoy the fulness of life for which we are created.

I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the community of those who believe in Jesus, and who, in spite of their own divisions and sinfulness, are committed to keep alive for the world the memory of Jesus and what he reveals about God, about the meaning and goal of human existence, indeed, of the universe, the sacred place in which we live our lives.

I believe that a life lived well is a life in which we love others with the love Jesus has for us: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was sick and in prison and you visited me”.’

The Creeds

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father almighty
Creator of heaven and earth

and in Jesus Christ
his only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived
by the Holy Spirit
born of the virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell [Hades];

on the third day he rose again from the dead;

he ascended into heaven and is seated at
the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come
to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic Church
the communion of saints
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Al-
mighty maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God, eternally
begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
one in Being with the Father;
Through whom all things were made.
For us and for our salvation,
he came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit
he was born of the virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake
he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried,

On the third day he rose again
in fulfilment of the Scriptures;

He ascended into heaven and is seated
at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit,

*[The Nicene Creed ends here. The rest was
added from an Eastern Creed]*

the Lord, the Giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
who, with the Father and Son
is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

And in one, holy, catholic,
and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.