

THE GIFT OF FAITH

We have considered God's revelation to us in our heart's desires, in creation and in His revealed word. By revelation God addresses us as his friends and moves among us in order to invite and receive us into his own company. Today we discuss the appropriate response to this invitation: faith.

What is Faith?

We might begin by asking what it means to have faith. Sometimes the quality of having faith gets turned into merely an intellectual notion; as though faith was only about agreeing to certain stated truths or teachings. For example you could agree to the statement that God exists and that he is all powerful but is this all that it means to have faith? As you might guess, faith is about a lot more than merely agreeing to certain teachings. Granted, assenting to the revealed truths of our faith is an essential part of faith but it is only one part. Faith involves the mind but to be authentic it must also engage the heart and affect the whole person. *By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer. Sacred Scripture calls this human response to God, "the obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5). To obey in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God (Catechism 143-144).*

Thus faith is directly linked to obedience because it always has a direct impact on our behavior and the choices we make. By faith we not only acknowledge what God has said, we base our whole life upon it. This is also why trust is a very important component of faith. We base our life upon what God has revealed because we trust in his goodness, his truthfulness, his wisdom and his power. God cannot deceive nor can he be deceived. Therefore what he says is reliable and true and we do well to trust and obey. If we do so, blessings follow.

Abraham

Consider the example of Abraham and the radical call to faith he received. He was called by God to leave the land and the people he knew and to set out for a

promised land he would inherit. But God did not tell him where this land was. He was merely told to set out and to trust that God would show him the way (*cf* Gn 12:1-4; Heb 11:8). Abraham did not just intellectually assent to these promises. He had to gather his family pack his bags and set out. And God did lead him into the



promised land of Canaan. His trust and obedience brought him home. Later in life Abraham was asked to trust God again when a seemingly impossible promise was made to him. Though both Abraham and his wife Sarah were in their nineties, God promised them a son, and descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky or the sand of sea! (Gn 15:5) Since nothing is impossible with God who can make a way out of no way, Sarah conceived a son, Isaac. But God tested Abraham's faith by demanding the sacrifice of Isaac. Remember, Isaac was the only son Abraham and Sarah had. This demand of God that Isaac be sacrificed must have seemed a grave obstacle to the promise that they would have innumerable descendants. But Abraham obeyed God who, seeing Abraham's faith, halted the sacrifice. Thus Abraham received Isaac back and, considering the countless descendants of Abraham today, we can say that God's promise to

Abraham is more than fulfilled.

Yet note how Abraham's blessings of land and family came as the fruit of the obedience of faith. Abraham based his life on what God had revealed and through his trusting faith received what was promised. See then how important trust and obedience are to faith. Faith is the key to God's blessings and to the eternal life he promises (*cf* Jn 6:40). Understanding the importance of faith we now proceed to examine the teachings of the scriptures and of the catechism regarding faith.

Teachings on Faith

Faith is a Grace. To say that something is a grace is first to say that it is a gift. Faith, as a gift, is not something that we do by our own power but something that we receive. *When St. Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus declared to him that this revelation did not come "from flesh and blood", but from "my Father who is in heaven". [Matt 16:17] Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him. Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he 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 and 'makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth. (Catechism # 153). Thus faith is not a human achievement that earns us God's favor but a gift of God that is a fruit of his favor.*

Faith is a human act. *Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act...In faith, the human intellect and will co-operate with divine grace: "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace (Catechism, 154-155). In receiving the gift of faith then we are not merely like robots or purely passive recipients. God engages our mind and heart. He elicits our free response. He enables us to respond but he does not destroy our freedom.*

The Motive of our belief. When

describing the gift of faith we do not mean that we believe the truths God has revealed simply because they make sense to us or because God has "proved" the truth of his teachings. The gift of faith is the gift that enables us to accept and agree to the truth of God's teachings merely because he has revealed them. God can neither deceive nor be deceived. Therefore we can confidently accept as true whatever he reveals. It is the gift of faith that enables us to make this decision confidently to accept as absolutely true whatever God reveals. (cf Catechism, 156). However, even though faith does not rest on proofs, God who is merciful does offer great evidence which serves to confirm and encourage the believer. *So that the submission of our faith might nevertheless be in accordance with reason, God willed that external proofs of his Revelation should be joined to the internal helps of the Holy Spirit. Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all; they are "motives of credibility", which show that the assent of faith is by no means a blind impulse of the mind* (Catechism, 156).

Faith is certain. - The knowledge that we receive through faith is *more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie. To be sure, revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but "the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.* (Catechism, 157)

Faith must be a free response. *The act of faith is of its very nature a free act. God calls men to serve him in spirit and in truth. Consequently they are bound to him in conscience, but not coerced.* (Catechism 160)

Faith grows. *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"* (Luke 17:5) Faith is not something we merely have or don't have. Once we have faith we can and must grow in it. In the first place we must seek to trust God more and more each day. Further, we must seek to grow

in our knowledge and understanding of the faith through study and prayerful reflection. God will increase our gift of faith if we but seek his grace.

Faith is necessary for salvation. Believing in Jesus Christ and in the Father who sent him is necessary for obtaining that salvation. This is taught clearly in the scriptures. Jesus for example declares himself to be the only way to the Father: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me* (Jn 14:6) Later he told his disciples of the obligation to preach his gospel and of the necessity of faith, *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.* (Mk 16:15-16 cf also Jn 3:36). Scripture also says, *Without faith it is impossible to please to God* (Heb 11:6). (It remains true that some, through no fault of their own, do not fully understand the obligation to faith in Jesus. Nevertheless they are called to faith and will be held responsible for what they could have reasonably known and believed).

It is necessary to persevere in faith. Faith can be lost. This is because faith is not a one time act that we make but an on-going disposition in which we must remain. *Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man. We can lose this priceless gift, as St. Paul indicated to St. Timothy: "Wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith."* [1 Tim 1:18-19] *To live, grow and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith;* [Mk 9:24] (Catechism, 162)

Faith is a personal but linked to community. *Faith is a personal act - the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself. But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith as you have not given yourself life. The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others. Our love for Jesus and for our neighbor impels us to speak to others about our faith. Each*

believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith. (Catechism, 166) This teaching is an important one today when many think of their faith a purely private matter. Others are like lone rangers who have no relationship to the Church and see only the Bible as a necessary truth. But it remains true that there would be no Bible without the Church. As we discussed last week, God saw fit to bring forth His scriptures in and through the Church. For this and other reasons we must respect the communal nature of faith.

The role of the Church. *The Church, "the pillar and bulwark of the truth", faithfully guards "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints". She guards the memory of Christ's words; it is she who from generation to generation hands on the apostles' confession of faith. [cf 1 Tim 3:15, Jude 3] As a mother who teaches her children to speak and so to understand and communicate, the Church our Mother teaches us the language of faith in order to introduce us to the understanding and the life of faith.* (Catechism, 171) The Church has carefully preserved the faith over the centuries by collecting the scriptures under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Likewise the creeds, catechism and prayers are other ways the Church teaches her children. We shall examine all these sources in the weeks ahead as we seek to grow in faith.

The power of faith. Perhaps the best place to conclude to acknowledge the power of relying on God through trusting faith. Jesus teaches, *All things are possible to him who believes.* (Mk 9:23) He likewise teaches that even a little faith goes a long way: *If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you* (Lk 17:6). Do you have even mustard seed faith? The gift of faith joins us to God. And here is the power of faith, for with God all things are possible!