

The Virtue of Faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ~ Hebrews 11:1

GOD HAS REVEALED himself and the plan for our salvation in Jesus Christ. He has poured out the fullness of his love in order to draw us back to himself. As the Lord says in Scripture, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rv 3:20). God “desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). He has made the invitation; all we must do is respond in faith.

Response and Virtue of Faith

Faith is our response to God. To believe means to surrender to the will of God. Even though we are uncertain many times about the details of his intentions for us, we do know that he is Lord and we know he will not forget us (see Is 44:21). For this reason, the Lord himself taught us to say: “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven” (Mt 6:10). And so we can say: “I delight to do thy will, O my God; thy law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8).

To believe means to obey God. Faith requires a commitment of the whole self freely to God. Because we know who God is (Creator, Savior, Lord, Comforter, and Guide), and because we know what he wants (our eternal happiness), we can freely choose to obey him.

“The Christian life is really a school of faith.”



Stained glass window of St. Aloysius Gonzaga, 1568-1591

Faith is also a gift from God. Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn 6:44), so faith is essentially the work of God who sends the Holy Spirit to draw our hearts to the Father. Faith is infused as a theological virtue at Baptism, but already before Baptism, the person on the path of conversion is responding to the interior helps and graces of the Holy Spirit. Even though the Holy Spirit is prompting our hearts to respond in faith, the act of faith is still authentically human. God gives the grace to believe, and we have the freedom to cooperate with this grace.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that believing “is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace”¹ (CCC 155). God through Jesus Christ re-

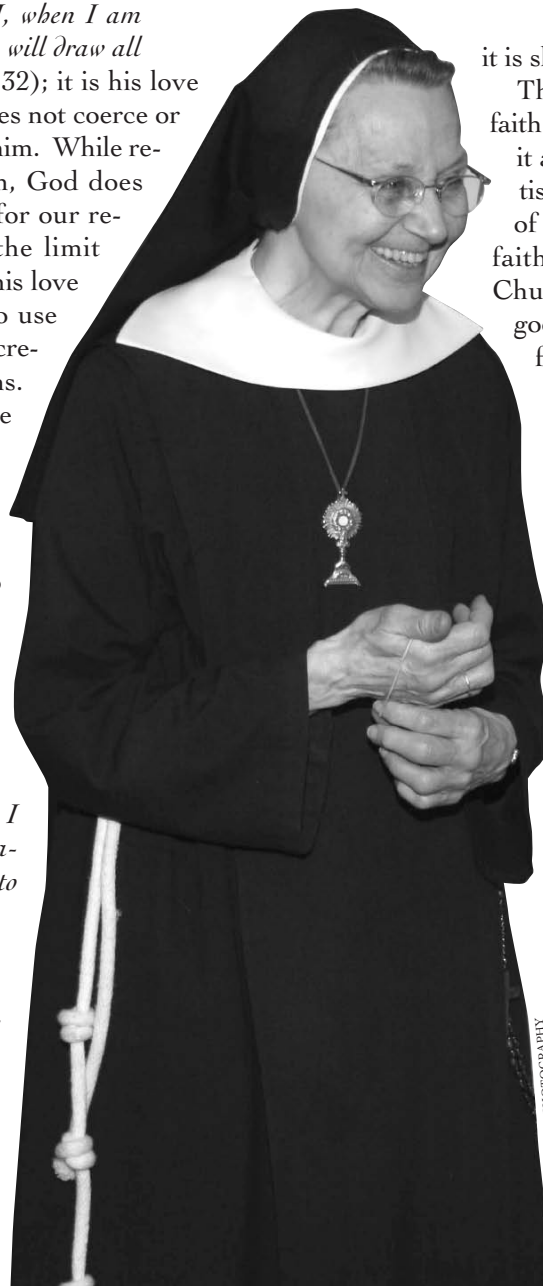
veals saving supernatural truths that, apart from the light of faith, we would not see (see 2 Cor 5:7). Although these truths are above our natural reasoning power (the intellect), once they have been revealed the Christian, with the help of faith, can reason about them and demonstrate their *reasonableness*. What is believed in faith is not irrational or illogical. Faith is by no means a blind assent to things that are utterly incomprehensible.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 2, 9; cf. Dei Filius 3 from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 3010 (1965)

While it is true that Revelation can seem obscure to the human mind and grasping it can be quite difficult, such obscurity and difficulty do not damage the certainty of faith. As the great English convert Ven. John Henry Newman once said, “[t]en thousand difficulties do not make one doubt”² (CCC 157). Faith is certain, but the human mind can spend a lifetime contemplating these revealed truths and never reach their full depth, because God is infinite.

The act of believing is a free act. God shows his profound love for us “in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus says, “[A]nd I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn 12:32); it is his love that draws us. He does not coerce or force us to believe in him. While respecting our freedom, God does not simply wait idly for our response but goes to the limit and beyond to show his love for us. He refuses to use force, because he has created us as free persons. It is only between free persons that true love and friendship exists. By reconciling us to God through his death, Jesus says to us what he said to his disciples: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15).

A sister of the Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration (PCPA), a contemplative order founded in France in 1854, part of the Franciscan family of religious orders stemming from the 15th century



“Suffering and trials are to be expected because, through them, God brings our faith to perfection.”

Faith and the Church

The Christian life is really a school of faith. We begin with the seed of faith firmly planted in us at Baptism; in time, this seed grows through the reception of the other sacraments, through prayer, and through our study of the revealed Word. It is important to understand that a person does not believe alone. The role of the Church in spreading faith is essential. Each of us has received the faith from others, and all Christians are connected to each other by their common profession of faith. In fact, the very nature of faith is that it grows both in its strength and understanding when

it is shared.

The Church, then, is the household of faith. She is also its first recipient and guards it as her greatest treasure. Through Baptism, she brings the Christian into the life of faith. God alone is the source of our faith, but it is through the ministry of the Church that we receive this faith. Like a good mother, “she is also our teacher in the faith” (CCC 169).

Interaction Between the Deposit of Faith and the Virtue of Faith

The deposit of faith entrusted to the Church is that same Word of God revealed to the apostles. Scripture admonishes that “you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you have heard” (Col 1:23). We believe in this saving deposit of his Word because God himself stands behind it. It is this deposit of faith that is the sure foundation for our faith. These two realities of faith (the content of what we believe and the virtue by which we believe) are the key elements for the Christian life. Faith is a lived reality, so St. Paul exhorts, “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Col 2:6-7).

² John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Longman, 1878), 239

Faith and Suffering

Faith also grows through suffering and trials. Scripture says, “[F]or you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Jas 1:3-4). Suffering and trials are to be expected in the Christian life because, through them, God brings our faith to perfection. When we grow weary in our struggles, Scripture reminds us to consider “him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb 12:3), and instructs us that “the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6).

Suffering is difficult, but with God’s abundant grace we can persevere. Furthermore, St. Paul, who endured many hardships and eventually martyrdom, wrote: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed” (Rom 8:18). It is a glory that far outweighs our present sufferings, because the wonders and joys of Heaven exceed our wildest imagination: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

Trials of Faith

Trials of faith can come from a variety of sources. Today skepticism is an attractive alternative to faith for many, and its effects are pervasive. It usually enters through a kind of mental “back door” by convincing one that the best method of inquiry is to begin with doubt. While such a method of thinking has merit in the sciences, where theories concerning the natural world are constantly changing in light of new evidence, it is a method that is completely out of place with regard to God’s revealed Word. His Word contains the fullness of Revelation; there can be no “new evidence” that would render it false.

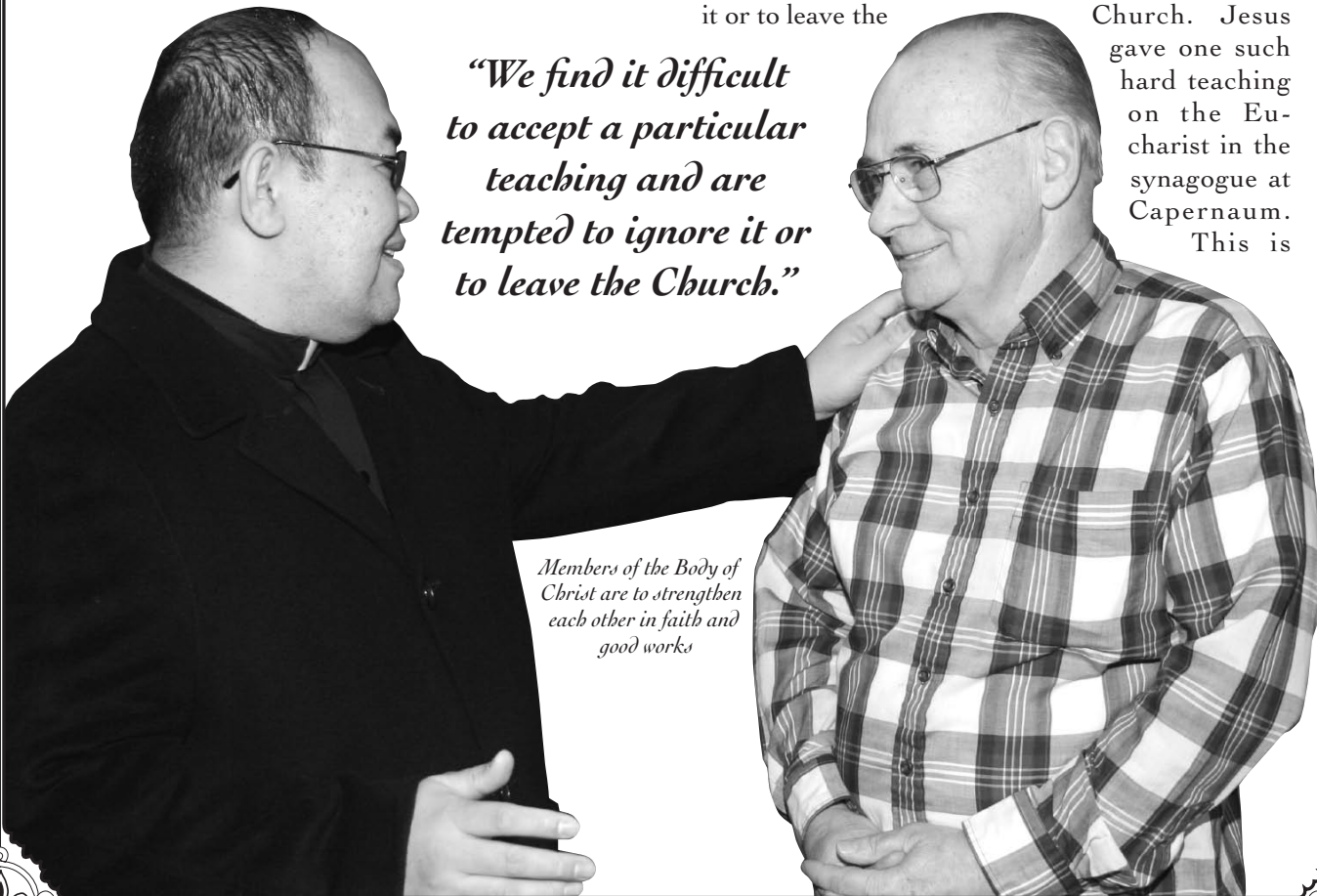
That being said, the reality of many Christians is that they find themselves assailed by doubt. Sometimes doubts come when the Lord is calling us. Like Peter, we make it out of the boat and onto the water but “when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me.’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘O man of little faith, why did you doubt?’” (Mt 14:30-31). Such an experience makes us realize how little we trust Jesus with our lives and inspires us toward greater faith.

Other times our faith is tested by a hard teaching of the Church. We find it difficult to accept a particular teaching and are tempted to ignore it or to leave the Church.

Jesus gave one such hard teaching on the Eucharist in the synagogue at Capernaum. This is

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Members of the Body of Christ are to strengthen each other in faith and good works



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

what followed: *“Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’... After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”* (Jn 6:60, 66-68).

When Jesus turned to the apostles, his question went right to the heart of the matter. Our faith is in Jesus because only he has the words of eternal life. The Scripture does not say whether they fully understood Jesus’ hard saying, but because they believed Jesus is who he says he is, *“the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Mt 16:16), then faith in him is the only proper response. The understanding of the “hard teaching” will come later, but only for those who seek in faith. Scripture says, *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind”* (Jas 1:5-6). While the Church respects the dignity of the human conscience and never coerces a person to believe, the proper response to a difficulty with its teachings is to submit oneself to prayer and study, asking the Lord for understanding, and to listen intently to the Church, because only it has been entrusted with the authority to authentically interpret God’s Word. Sometimes the difficulty is based on our own ignorance and is quickly dissolved once we learn the truth. Other times, the difficulty is more complex and requires greater patience and humility.

The Vigilance of Faith

Living out the virtue of faith is a far cry from the first acceptance of the Word of God. Perseverance through suffering and trials is a consequence of our cooperation with the grace of the virtue. It is possible to lose our faith, and only ongoing prayer and vigilance can prevent this. *“Be sober; be watchful. Your*

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Women at the open tomb on Easter morning, late 19th century lithograph

adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pt 5:8-9). In all our trials and sufferings it is important to remember that the devil is present, always trying to disrupt our faith and make us turn away from God. Like Jesus’ temptation in the desert, we should fill our minds with Scripture and rely on the power of God’s Word (see Lk 4:1-13), *“taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one”* (Eph 6:16). The goal is to end our lives with our eyes on Heaven: *“Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses”* (1 Tm 6:12) and, with St. Paul, to be able to say, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept*

the faith” (2 Tm 4:7). *“As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls”* (1 Pt 1:9; see also Hb 2:4).

Prayer to Obtain Faith

Lord, I believe; I wish to believe in you.
 Lord, let my faith be full and unreserved, let it penetrate my thought, my way of judging all things.
 Lord, let my faith be free, having my personal grasp of it reflect my entire self and your personal love for me.
 Lord, let my faith be certain, after having appropriate proofs give your blessed assurance which is beyond all proofs.
 Lord, let my faith be strong, eager, and not fearful of questioning, attack, rejection, or denial.
 Let it be strengthened daily by my prayer, study, and fellowship.
 Lord, let my faith be joyful and give peace and gladness to my spirit, encouragement and hope to all, and testimony to your steadfast love and astounding mercy. Amen.
 (CCC 26, 142-169, 2087-2089, 2656)