



Second Sunday of Easter April 11, 2010 C

FAITH & DOUBT WHAT WEAKENS AND STRENGTHENS FAITH

Last Saturday, at the Easter Vigil, we started a new *liturgical season*, the Easter season, sometimes called the *Fifty Days of Easter*. During these Fifty Days, our Church family celebrates the Resurrection of Christ, his victory over evil, sin and death, and the promise it offers us—new life here and eternal life in the world to come.

If *repentance* was the focus of Lent, *new life* is the focus of the Easter season. In the sacrament of Baptism, each of us received the *new life* of Christ into our beings. It penetrates every fiber of our being, whether we think about it or not. Our lifelong challenge is to *become* what we are, namely, a *new creation* in Christ.

How do we allow the new life of Christ to grow in us? Mainly by *honest* and *open prayer*, as opposed to rote prayer that probably has little or no impact on our lives. Those of you who are married or have a deep friendship with someone know that honest and open communication is the key to growth in your relationship. If this is otherwise lacking, the relationship will diminish or be superficial, at best. So it is in our relationship with God. Being open and honest with God involves sharing with him our true feelings and thoughts, our fears, anxieties, doubts, disappointments (with him, ourselves or others), lusts, jealousies, our joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams, etc. If we are not used to sharing our thoughts and feelings with anyone, it is probably not going to be very easy or natural for us to do it with God.

The *new life* of Christ also grows in us when we try to fulfill his Great Commandment to love God, others and self.

Faith and doubt

A big challenge for the followers of Jesus was to believe that he was truly risen from the dead. Can you imagine how hard that must have been? Thomas was not the only one who doubted. All of them were slow to believe. Mark (16:14) says that Jesus "*upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.*"

What is so refreshing and good about Thomas' reaction to the news that Jesus was risen is that he was open and honest about his doubts. He didn't hide his doubt and lack of belief. Very often, such honesty about our doubt and disbelief is the stepping stone to a deeper faith.

When it comes to belief, it seems some people are very blessed while others are plagued with doubts. People may sometimes have doubts about the existence of God, doubt about the goodness of God, doubt about the divinity of Jesus, doubt about the existence of the next life, doubt about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, doubt that God has truly forgiven them their sins, doubt that they will be saved—even if they place their trust in Christ and try to live a good life. It may be consoling to know that some of the saints were plagued with the same doubts. St. Therese of Lisieux experienced serious doubts about God before she died at the age of 23.

How should we handle such doubts? *Three suggestions:* Continue to make acts of faith in God even if you *feel* nothing spiritual. Talk to a priest or an experienced spiritual guide. Surround yourself with people of faith who can pray for and with you. You should not be ashamed about having doubts, especially when you realize that some saints endured them. Doubts do not make us less of a believer.

Doubt may also be a part of the maturing process of a Catholic Christian. Questioning beliefs have led many a person, including myself, to a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith. As with sin, the devil wants to use doubt to diminish our faith in a good God. God wants to use it to lead us closer to him. Our task is to work with God and not with the devil.

Four things that can weaken our faith

There are several things that can weaken our faith, especially if it is fragile and without deep roots in Christ. Let me name four of them.

First, the poor example of some Catholics, especially among the clergy and other church leaders, can make people of fragile faith cynical and cause them to quit church. Other supposedly good Catholics (neighbors, parents, co-workers) can also scandalize those with weak faith by their poor example.

Unfortunately, any of us at some time in our lives could be a poor example to others. In 1 Corinthians 10:12, Paul writes: *"Therefore whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall."* It even happened to the Apostles. Judas betrayed Jesus; Peter denied him; all of them fled; and Paul had a big fight with Barnabas. If our faith is deeply rooted in Christ, the poor example of clergy, lay leaders and other Catholics may sadden us, surprise us, even shake us up a bit, but it will not cause us to leave the church because our faith is not in people, but in Christ.

Second, if we or family members get hit with a lot of bad stuff, our faith in a good and loving God may also be rattled. Some Catholics and other believers quit church and prayer when they encounter setbacks. They feel God has abandoned them and let them down. I think we can all identify with people who seem to get more than their share of adversities. It has to be a most difficult challenge to keep believing in a God of love when there is a lot of pain in our lives. But praise God, every parish has outstanding examples of people who have unwavering faith even when they are handed all kinds of bad stuff. We should be most grateful for the wonderful example of these people and perhaps ask them how they sustain such a deep faith.

Third, if we do not have a solid understanding of our *Catholic faith*, we may lose it when others question us and use scriptures to show us how "wrong" we are in our beliefs. This happens a lot to young Catholics after they leave home. And to others, too, who may not be well informed on the Catholic doctrine. If they face off with a non-Catholic who is well-versed in the Bible, they may well end up convinced that their Catholic beliefs are "mere human tradition." It would help one to talk to a priest and/or read the book *Surprised by Truth*, the story of some twelve fundamentalist Protestant ministers who believed that God called them to lead Catholics out of their 'wayward' church. But as they explored Catholicism, each of them was very *surprised by the truth of Catholicism* and ended up joining the Catholic Church. One could also join my *Catechism* classes on Tuesday evenings or Friday afternoons.

Fourth, if we practice our faith in a rote, mechanical way, we may also lose it just as couples who go through the motions of vapid communication often end up losing their marriage. Faith, like marriage, requires work. If we fail to work at deepening our faith in Christ and his Church, we may end up losing both.

Nurturing our faith

A fire not "fed" with wood gradually dies. A marriage relationship that is not nurtured eventually goes cold and breaks down. In like manner, faith that is not nurtured

weakens or fades. If we do not care for our faith, we will wake up one morning with little or no faith. This happens all the time. We see it especially with regard to the Eucharist. People at one stage in their lives may have a strong faith and love for the Eucharist. Then "stuff happens" and they stop going to church. It could be due to a stressful event or because they become too busy with other things that they neglect their spiritual life. As with a marriage relationship, a crisis can either lead to a stronger faith life or to a break with God and Church. On any given weekend, some people are returning to God and Church while others are consciously or unconsciously distancing themselves. The following are some concrete ways that can help us nurture our faith.

- Have a regular quiet time with God in prayer. But we must be *open and honest* with him about what is going on in our lives. Rote prayer causes faith to gradually die, just as rote conversation does nothing to nurture a relationship.
- Be around people of strong faith. Their example is contagious and can help to nurture and bolster our own faith when it is weak and faltering. Join one of our Small Christian Communities.
- Read good spiritual books and become better informed about our Catholic faith.
- Go to Mass regularly. In saying that, I am sure I am preaching to the choir.

DO YOU KNOW ME?

| am a little thing with a big meaning.
| help unlock doors, open hearts, dispel prejudice.
| create friendship and good will.
| inspire respect and admiration.
Everybody loves me. | bore nobody.
| violate no laws. | cost nothing.
Many have praised me, none have condemned me.
| am pleasing to those of high and low degree.
| am useful every moment of the day, in many ways.
| am called "COURTESY."

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran