



FAITH - THE PRECIOUS GIFT THAT ENABLES US TO BELIEVE IN GOD AND FOLLOW HIS WAYS

"In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadow to blind those who don't."
Blaise Pascal

Speaking about the resurrection, St. Paul writes:

"If Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain and we are still in our sins." What is this most precious gift that we call *faith*? In this column, I will look at:

- *Four types of faith*
- *How one comes to believe in God*
- *Four ways to protect and nurture our faith*
- *Four things that can weaken and /or destroy faith*
- *Suggestions for dealing with a crisis of faith.*
- *Characteristics of a strong faith.*

Four types of faith

We will look briefly at four types of faith.

Natural Faith. Natural faith is the faith that helps me to believe in and trust the word of another. We exercise this kind of faith daily. We couldn't live without it. For example, we trust that the food we buy in the store is okay to eat and will not poison us. We trust that the buildings we live and work in will not collapse on us. When couples on their wedding day promise to love each other in good times and in bad, they place their faith in the word of each other.

Religious Faith. Religious faith is a *supernatural* gift or inner sense that enables us to believe in the existence of God or a Higher Power. This same faith enables us to believe that God or our Higher Power is kindly disposed towards us and that we can enter into a personal relationship with him. Furthermore, religious faith enables us to believe that God forgives us our faults and failings when we express sorrow for them and that he can help us overcome attitudes and behaviors that can be very destructive to us and our relationships. One of the best-known examples of this is found in the AA (Alcoholic Anonymous) program. This is a spiritual program in which men and women addicted to alcohol gather together to help each other overcome their addiction. The first three steps of AA state:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we *understood Him*.

Since the beginning of the AA movement in 1935 in Ohio, millions of people have experienced a divine presence, which helped them to transform their lives. So a person with an active religious faith believes not only in the existence of God but that this Divine Presence can and will help to transform their lives. On the other hand, a *practical atheist* is one who lives his life as if God didn't exist.

Christian Faith. A Christian faith is one that enables us to believe in the person of Jesus Christ and that he is the divine Son of God who lived in our midst 2,000 years ago in human form. A Christian faith enables us to develop a personal relationship with Christ, to give intellectual assent to his teachings and allow them to guide the way we live. A Christian faith also has a *communal* dimension, which leads us to join a community of Christian believers in worship, fellowship, learning and action. A Christian faith enables us to believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Catholic Faith. A Catholic faith includes all of the above and in addition leads us to accept as true all that the Catholic Church believes and teaches to be revealed by God. This includes our belief:

- That the Catholic church was founded by Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago (see Matt 16:13-20) and that he continues to guide and protect the church from falling into error concerning the essentials of our faith (Matt 28:19-20). Catholics also believe that the Pope is the successor of St. Peter and the head of the church.
- A *Catholic faith* enables one to believe in the *sacramental life* of the church. When the Word became flesh, God walked in our midst in a *visible* way. Catholics believe that we continue to encounter Christ in a *tangible* way in the celebration of the *seven sacraments* of our church. For example, when we receive the bread and wine at Mass, we are receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. He is now present in the form of bread and wine. (See John 6:48-58, 1 Cor 11:23-32) When the priest raises his hand in the confessional and pronounces the words of absolution, Catholics believe that Jesus, through the priest, is forgiving sins in a visible and audible way. (John 20:22-23)

- A *Catholic faith* expresses itself in *respect for all human life born and unborn*, and by caring for the poor and following Jesus' Great Commandment of Love.
- A *Catholic faith* includes devotion to Mary and the Saints. *We don't worship* them but we *honor* them and at times seek their intercession. In the Cana story, John 2:1-2, we see the power of Mary's intercession with Jesus.

How Does One Come to Believe in God?

In the spiritual realm, Catholic Christians often use the phrase "all is grace". By this we mean that any movement towards *God*, Jesus or the church is the result of God drawing us to himself whether we are aware of it or not. In John 6:46, Jesus says: "*No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me.*" Having said that, we know that God uses many instruments or tools to draw us to him, to faith in Jesus and to his church.

For example:

- Most believers come to faith in God in and through their *parents* and the religious atmosphere that they were raised in. In time of course, children will have to affirm and own in a *personal* way the faith of their childhood. This may happen gradually over a period of time or it may happen rather quickly or suddenly as a result of some crisis, retreat or spiritual experience (Acts 9:1-19 tells the story of Paul's *sudden* conversion to Christianity). Or it may never happen. Unfortunately, there are many Christians and Catholics who received a solid religious foundation at home who never made an *adult commitment* to Christ and to the church. Many Christian churches call this step: "accepting Jesus into one's heart as one's Lord and Savior" (Rom 10:9-10). Many are reluctant to take this step because they do not want to give control of their lives to anyone – not even to God or Jesus. Others are afraid of where such a step may lead them – just as some people are afraid to enter into the commitment of marriage. But millions of others who *sincerely* say "Jesus, I am sorry for all of my sins and ask you to come into my life as Lord and Savior", have a 'born again' experience. For millions this *faith step* is a huge turning point in their lives.
- God frequently uses the *witness of other believers* to draw us to him and to his church. (See John 4:27-42 for an example of a non-believer coming to faith and in turn leading others to Christ.)
- God sometimes uses a *personal crisis* to draw us to him. The good thief on the cross reaching out for Jesus is an example of this. (Lk 23:39-43).
- *Prayer and study*. Personal searching through prayer and study has led millions of people to religious faith, to Christian faith and/or to a Catholic faith. The bestselling book, *Surprised by the Truth*, edited by

Patrick Madrid, tells the story of how eleven Protestant ministers, most of whom were raised in an anti-Catholic atmosphere, came through prayer and study to embrace the Catholic faith against great odds. Such stories are an example of the power of God's grace at work in the hearts and minds of his people.

Four Ways to Protect and Nurture our Faith

Catholics believe that the gift of faith is planted in our being at baptism. But, it needs to be nurtured and developed if it is going to have a tangible impact on the way we *see* and *live* our lives.

- We protect and nurture our faith most of all through *practicing* it. (It is the same with love.) We practice our faith when seek God's guidance with decisions, seek his strength in time of weakness and fear, seek his help to forgive hurts, regular participation in the Eucharist, sharing our financial resources with our church and the poor, sharing our faith with others. Every time we *witness* to our faith we strengthen it.
- We protect and nurture our faith by *belonging to a community of believers* who will support us and help us grow in faith. In many churches today, especially in large parishes, members belong to *Small Christian Communities* or to home groups, which give them a chance to have fellowship, prayer, share life and study together. At Ascension church we have *Small Christian Communities*.
- *Fidelity to personal prayer and spiritual reading*. If good communication is the key to a healthy relationship, we can say that honest prayer is the key to a good relationship with God. Many also find spiritual reading is to be an effective way to nurture our relationship with God.
- *Retreat Experiences*. Just as marriage enrichment retreats strengthens a marriage, a spiritual retreat experience will usually deepen our relationship with God. At Ascension we offer four retreat weekends each year—two for men and two for women.

Four Things That May Weaken Our Faith

What weakens our relationship with another? Failure to communicate, conflicts that do not get resolved, neglect of the relationship. The following four things that will usually weaken or destroy our relationship with God.

- Failure to practice one's faith. The old axiom, "if you don't use it you will lose it", certainly applies to one's faith life. Sadly millions of Christians lose their faith out of failure to practice it and nurture it.
- If our faith is not sufficiently developed, negative religious experiences may have a very destructive impact on our belief in God e.g., we prayed for a sick loved one to get better, but he/she died, church leaders or members failed us in time of great need.
- In Jesus' commentary on the *parable of the Sower*, he speaks about 'Satan stealing the word' that was the

sown in our hearts. He also says that the seed of faith may not grow in us because of our preoccupation with ‘the worries of this world’, ‘the lure of riches’ and ‘other passions’. (Mark 4:13-20). Today, many baptized Christians are so caught up in a secularist, materialistic lifestyle that God is given little or no room in their lives.

- Having professors at school that skillfully poke holes in our religious beliefs.

Suggestions for dealing with a spiritual crisis

Just as two peoples love for each other will be tested sooner or later, so will it be with our faith in God and church. Some of the things mentioned above can lead to a spiritual crisis: unanswered prayer, bad things happening to us or to a loved ones, bad experiences with church, living in a secular atmosphere where God is absent and is looked upon as irrelevant. How we respond to a spiritual crisis can either *deepen* or *weaken* our faith. Invariably, a spiritual crisis will lead to a deepening of our faith:

- If we have available to us *an experienced spiritual guide* who will respect our experiences, questions and doubts and at the same time help us to come to a deeper and more mature adult faith. We may need to learn how to let go of some *childhood understanding* of how God works to make way for a more *adult* and *mature* understanding. For example, we may believe that if we say our prayers, go to church and try to live good lives, God will not allow bad things to happen to us. Obviously, bad things can and do happen to very good faith filled people. Such bad things can be a ‘faith-tester’ or worse still a ‘faith-buster’. A good spiritual guide can help us to negotiate our way through bad experiences that shake our faith.
- Having faith *friends* who will support us through the tough times.
- *Fidelity to honest prayer*. The *worst thing* we can do when a spiritual crisis comes our way is to quit praying. Yet this is exactly what many people do. The *best thing* we can do is to hang in there with God and tell him exactly how we feel. We may find ourselves getting mad with God for the first time in our lives. This is very good. In truth, learning to express our disappointment or anger with God is a major step in our spiritual development – just as learning how to deal with conflict is a major step in a human relationship.
- *Reading inspiring stories* of other believers who had bad things happen to them and who not only survived the crisis but also grew stronger through it. *Amazing Grace for Those Who Suffer* is a book of stories about people who survived and grew through horrible things happening in their lives.

Four Characteristics of a Strong, Mature Christian Faith

Sometimes we will hear people say “my grandmother was very religious. She had a very strong faith.” What do we mean when we say people have a strong faith? The following are some characteristics of a strong Christian faith:

- *A faith that informs our decisions*. In Jn 4:34, Jesus says: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.” In the journey of life to what extent is God my co-pilot? Seeking God’s guidance with decisions is a tangible sign of a mature faith.
- *A faith that helps us cope with the crosses of life*. When we see people courageously coping with the painful experiences of life – we know we are in the presence of a person with a strong faith. Faith can help us to find *meaning* and even a *gift* in the difficult experiences of life. This is one good reason why we should do everything we can to develop a strong faith.
- *A faith that is able to forgive life’s hurts and injustices*. The Amish community forgiving the gunman who killed five of their girls was an outstanding example of faith in action.
- *A faith that leads us to do works of charity and help the poor*. In his letter, St. James tells us that a faith that does not express in good deeds itself is dead (2:14-23).

AN EASTER HOUSE BLESSING

It is an excellent idea to bless your home even if it has been officially blessed before. We cannot ask God and his angels often enough to bless and protect our home and all who live in it. You can pray the following prayer before you share your Easter dinner or pray it at any other suitable time. Gather those present together and pray the following blessing.

Lord,
We rejoice in the victory of your Son over death:
by rising from the tomb to new life
He gives us new hope and promise.
Bless all the members of this household
and surround us with your protection,
that we may find comfort and peace
in Jesus Christ, the paschal lamb,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, for ever and ever. Amen

Now sprinkle the rooms of the house with holy water and then say:

**Let this water call to mind our baptism in Christ,
who by his death and resurrection has redeemed us.**

Have a blessed Easter,

Le Saran