



EASTER SUNDAY
March 31, 2013 C

- **Four types of faith**
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The great French writer, Blaise Pascal, once said:

“There is enough light for those who want to see and darkness enough for those who are otherwise inclined.”

Religious faith is a very precious gift. We who possess it or are possessed by it are very blessed. But we need to remember that it can be lost if not nurtured and cared for.

Four types of faith

Natural faith helps us to believe in and trust the word of another. We exercise this kind of faith daily. We cannot live without it. For example, we trust that the food we buy at 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 is a *supernatural* gift or inner sense that enables us to believe in the existence of God or a Higher Power. This faith enables us to believe that God or this 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 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 is the AA (Alcoholic Anonymous), a spiritually based program in which men and women addicted to alcohol come 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. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. We 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. A person with an active religious faith believes not only in the existence of God but that this Divine Presence can and will help transform his/her life. By contrast, a *practical atheist* is one who lives his life as if God didn't exist.

Christian faith enables us to believe in a triune God, in one God with three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christian faith enables one to develop a personal relationship with each of the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. Christian faith also has a *communal* dimension which moves us to join a community of Christian believers in worship, fellowship, learning and action. Christian faith enables us to believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and helps one to live one's life according to the word of God.

Catholic faith comprises 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, i.e.:

- The Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago (Mt 16:13-20) and he continues to guide and protect the Church from falling into error when it comes to the essentials of our faith (Mt 28:19-20). Catholics believe that the Pope is the successor of St. Peter and the head of the Church.
- Catholics believe in the *sacramental life* of the Church. When the Word became flesh, God walked in our midst in a *visible* way. Today, Catholics continue to encounter Christ in a *tangible* way in the celebration of the *seven sacraments*. For example, at Mass we believe that we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine (Jn 6:48-58, 1Cor 11:23-32). In the confessional, when the priest raises his hand and pronounces the words of absolution, we believe that Jesus, through the priest, forgives our sins in a visible and audible way (Jn

20:22-23).

- *Catholic faith* expresses itself in respect for *all human life, born and unborn*, in caring for the poor, and in following Jesus' Great Commandment of Love.
- Catholics venerate Mary and the Saints. We *do not worship* them but we do *honor* them and seek their intercession. In the Cana story (Jn 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 or not we are aware of it. In John 6:46, Jesus says: "*No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me.*" 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 environment that they were raised in. In time, 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 rather quickly or suddenly as a result of some crisis, a spiritual retreat or experience. (Acts 9:1-19 tells of Paul's *sudden* conversion to Christianity.) Or it may never happen. Sadly, many Christians and Catholics who had the benefit of a solid religious foundation at home never made an *adult commitment* to Christ and to the Church. They failed to "accept Jesus into their heart as their 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 my sins and I ask you to come into my life as Lord and Savior," have a 'born again' experience. For these people, 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 Jn 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, e.g., the good thief on the cross reaching out for Jesus (Lk 23:39-43).
- *Prayer and study*. Personal searching through prayer and study has led millions of people to religious faith,

Christian faith and/or Catholic faith. The best-selling 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 to embrace the Catholic faith against great odds through prayer and study. Such stories show 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 soul at Baptism. But this gift needs to be nurtured and developed if it is to have a tangible impact on our lives.
- We protect and nurture our faith by *practicing* it (the same is true with love). We practice our faith when we seek God's guidance on decisions, seek his strength in time of weakness and fear, seek his help in forgiving hurts. We nurture our faith by regularly participating in the Eucharist, sharing our financial resources with the poor and with our Church, and 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 join *Small Christian Communities* or home groups, which give them a chance to study together and share life, fellowship and prayer. At present, we have many such small Christian communities at Ascension Church.
- *Fidelity to personal prayer and spiritual reading*. If good communication is the key to a healthy relationship between two people, we can say that honest prayer is the key to a good relationship with God. Many also find spiritual reading to be an effective way to nurture their relationship with God.
- *Retreat experiences*. Just as a marriage enrichment retreat could strengthen a marriage, a personal spiritual retreat could help deepen our relationship with God. At Ascension, we offer four retreat weekends each year—two for men and two for women.

Four things that can weaken/destroy our faith

Relationships can be weakened by communication gap, by conflicts that do not get resolved, or by plain neglect. Below are four things that can weaken or even destroy our relationship with God.

- Failure to practice our faith. The old axiom, "If you don't use it, you lose it," certainly applies to one's faith life. Sadly, millions of Christians lose their faith

by failing to practice and nurture it.

- If our faith is not sufficiently developed, painful experiences may have a very destructive impact on our belief in God, e.g., death of a loved one for whom we prayed hard to God for healing; failure of our Church community to help us in time of great need.
- In Jesus' commentary on the *Parable of the Sower*, he speaks about 'Satan stealing the word' that was sown in our hearts. He warns 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.' (Mk 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 spiritual crisis

Just as two people's love for each other will be tested sooner or later, so will it be with our faith in God and Church. Situations can lead to spiritual crisis, e.g. unanswered prayers, bad things happening to us or to a loved one, unpleasant experiences with our Church, living in a secular atmosphere where God is absent and is looked upon as irrelevant. How we respond to spiritual crisis can either *deepen* or *weaken* our faith. Hopefully, a spiritual crisis will lead to a deepening of our faith if we seriously commit to undertaking the following:

- Availing ourselves of *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 to let go of some *childhood misunderstanding* of how God works. For example, we may have believed 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 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 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 went through such experiences.

Four characteristics of a strong, mature Christian faith

Sometimes we hear people say, "My grandmother was very religious. She had a very strong faith." What do we mean by a strong faith? The following are some characteristics of a strong Christian faith:

- *Faith that informs our decisions*. In John 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 sign of a mature faith.
- *Faith that helps us cope with the crosses of life*. When we see someone 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 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.
- *Faith that is able to forgive life's hurts and injustices*. The Amish community forgiving the gunman who killed five of their girls is an outstanding example of faith in action.
- *Faith that leads us to do works of charity*. In one of his letters, St. James tells us that faith that does not express itself in good deeds is dead (2:14-23).

Have a blessed Easter!

Le Sarah