

Lesson nine: The Virtue of Faith
Or: God's Truth in Our Souls

Perhaps you remember how back when we were discussing the Cardinal Virtues, the first on the list was Prudence, because it was the virtue of knowledge, and knowledge must always come before all other activities. You have to know what to do before you can do it. The same is true on the supernatural level: you have to have a supernatural perspective before you can live a supernatural life. That supernatural perspective is faith.

Faith as Belief

The notion of faith is hard to get a handle on initially, so to start out with let's talk about a very closely related term, namely "belief." What is belief? Unfortunately, in popular usage today, the word "belief" is normally used to indicate an uncertain opinion. "Is it going to rain later on today?" "I'm not sure, but I believe so."

In the technical sense of the term, however, *belief is when you hold something to be true based on the testimony of another.* Belief happens when someone tells you something you couldn't know on your own, and you choose to accept it as accurate. Take the following example: Suppose I've had to leave my wife for a month to go on an extended business trip. Suppose further that while I am on a long-distance phone call to her, my wife informs me that she is pregnant with my baby, that we are expecting. Now of course, this is information that goes beyond my direct personal experience. I wasn't there when she took the pregnancy test, and I didn't see the test results. But my wife assures me we have a child together, and I decide, I *choose* to believe her. As a result of my belief, I have increased my own knowledge by sharing in hers; now I know what she knows. And this newly gained knowledge has a massive impact on my life; I have to start making the preparations for fatherhood.

This is the beautiful reality of personal communication. We all share knowledge with others, and we depend on them to share knowledge with us. But for this to happen, for communication to actually take place, the listener must make a choice to place his trust in the speaker's truthfulness. Imagine how narrow and dull life would be if we never believed anything anybody told us, or if the only knowledge we had came from our own direct personal experiences. Such a world is inconceivable; belief is absolutely necessary for society function.

Now faith is a very special kind of belief. *Faith is when you hold something to be true based on the testimony of God.* With this theological virtue, God tells the person something he couldn't have known on his own, and that person makes the decision to accept what God says as true. Faith is therefore the virtue that enables us to add heavenly information to our knowledge – we can know what God knows – and this information radically changes our lives.

Whom Do You Believe?

The first aspect of faith regards *Whom* you believe. Every act of belief is primarily an act of trust in the person speaking: it is placing your belief in someone, not just something. Return to the above example of my wife calling to tell me we're pregnant. If I respond to her, "You know, I don't think that's true. Despite what you've told me, I'm pretty sure what you've said isn't true," well then I'd better get ready for a

harsh reception upon my return home. She will be very angry (and rightly so), and will probably say in disbelief, “You don’t believe *me*?” The point is that belief and disbelief are always personal; it is an acceptance or rejection of the individual as well as the information.

But in the case of faith, it’s a matter of personally trusting God Himself. The fact is that *God has spoken to each of us*, and we have been given the option of accepting His testimony or rejecting it. Somehow or another, He has miraculously communicated to us a knowledge of supernatural things. How did this happen? When did this happen?

Well, it’s different for everyone, and for most it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly where God offered His Revelation. Usually, God uses some medium to communicate: parents, a friend, a book, a song, a priest’s homily. Perhaps your initial moment of faith came as one powerful, instantaneous experience, like when Our Lord called Matthew, and the latter instantly rose up and followed Him. Or maybe it took long years of seeking and listening for the ultimate truth of God, as was the case with St. Augustine. Or it could be that you were brought up in a very devout, Catholic family, which is what happened with St. Therese of Lisieux.

Regardless, what’s important is that in the act of faith, you believe not because of what your mother or father or friend or parish priest says, but because of what God says. After all, God’s the only one who would really know; He’s the only one who has first-hand knowledge about the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption of the world, and the beautiful family structure of His Church, and therefore only He can be the source of the Revelation to which we assent in the act of faith.

Our faith, then, rests exclusively on God’s authority. *We believe because God said so*. Practically, this means that if your parent or parish priest or confirmation sponsor – or whoever it is that you strongly associate with your faith – does something scandalous, or leaves the Church, it should make us sad, but it shouldn’t shake our faith. Our belief shouldn’t be based on their testimony, but on God’s. Remember the story of the Samaritan Woman, who ran off to tell all her friends about Jesus? She was the initial medium God used to spread the faith to the local villagers, but after they had heard Jesus directly, they said to the woman, “We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.”¹ That should be our attitude as well to the truths of the Church: God sends many messengers of His truth to us, but we know that that truth is founded on a greater source than the messenger.

At this stage it is helpful to consider the principle that *the certainty of your belief depends on the credibility of the witness*. So if somebody is a known liar, you’re not going to have a very firm belief in what they say, whereas belief in an honest person is much more secure. But if the person speaking to us is always, by His very nature, truthful – if He is Truth itself – then your belief in what He says can be absolutely certain. And this is, of course, the kind of Witness we’re talking about with faith. So it’s very erroneous to oppose faith to certain knowledge. Quite the contrary, faith is the most certain knowledge we can have, because it’s knowledge that comes from God.

Let’s say, for instance, that an archeologist, or a dozen archeologists, declared that they had found the body of Jesus Christ. They claim to have found proof that Our Lord didn’t rise on the third day after His death and then ascend into Heaven. Well, that’s

¹ Jn 4:42.

human testimony that goes directly contrary to divine testimony, which comes to us through the Bible and the Church. In such circumstances, the virtue of faith would recognize that God is more credible, more authoritative, than any or all human experts. So the person with faith would confidently know that – for whatever reason – the archeologists were mistaken. If people say things which contradict what God says, you know the former is wrong. This is the certainty that comes from basing one’s beliefs on divine testimony.

What Do You Believe?

Although faith demands placing one’s trust in the Persons of the Trinity, that isn’t all there is to it. There is an actual *content* of belief, actual things that we must hold to be true. Let’s go back yet again to the original example of my wife calling to let me know we’re pregnant. Imagine that, after she has announced this wonderful and exiting news, I respond by saying, “Dear, I totally believe you, but I don’t think we’re having a baby. You’re either lying or mistaken and what you have said is untrue. But I totally believe you.” Well, of course, such a response would be pure nonsense. My wife (who seems to get angry with me in a lot of these scenarios), would exclaim, “What do you mean you believe me?! How can you pretend to believe me while disbelieving what I’m saying?!”

She would be quite right. If you really trust the speaker, then you accept what the speaker says as true. This is equally required for the theological virtue of faith. Many people try to reduce faith to a mere feeling, a “sense of some ultimate out there.” Such a feeling is irrelevant and meaningless on its own; faith remains insignificant unless there actual propositions are held as true on God’s authority.

The question is, where do we find this content of faith, these propositions which must be believed? Where are they contained? Actually, one of the best places to find the truths of faith is the Nicene Creed, which we Catholics say at every Sunday mass. It is called “Our Profession of Faith.” In the Creed we declare our belief in the Trinity, in God’s becoming man at the Incarnation, Christ’s Redemption of humanity through His Death and Resurrection, the Catholic Church, and the Sacraments. This is a good general outline of what God has told us and what we are to hold as true on His authority. A more detailed presentation of the truths of our faith is given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In that text one can discover all the essential propositions faith accepts.

Now, we *believe* these propositions are true, we have *certain knowledge* that these propositions are true, but we *can’t prove* that they’re true. Because we didn’t experience these things directly. We didn’t see Christ rising from the dead, and we haven’t yet come face-to-face with the Trinity. Nor can we invent an argument that will logically prove these facts. That’s what makes faith so meritorious, so noble: “Blessed are those who have not seen, but believe.”²

However, although we cannot prove our faith, we can still demonstrate its *credibility*, that is to say we can show how sensible it is, how beautiful, and even how probable. Further, we can defend our faith from attack, show that it isn’t silly or absurd. In a way, the virtue of faith in God’s supernatural revelation is somewhat similar to belief in the events of the American Revolution. Both make sense and are eminently believable, both have a great many documents which bear witness to their truth, and yet

² Jn 20:29

we don't have direct experience of either of them, nor can we logically prove them to be factual.

This means that if you're dealing with someone who demands a perfect logical argument for the acceptance of the truths of faith, you'll never be able to convince them. Instead, the best thing to say to someone like that is, "Please just pray to God to reveal Himself and His truth to you fully. Open yourself up to what He's trying to say to you. I can't show you the truth of the Faith; He's got to do it. So come and see. But you have to be open."

A very common issue, when dealing with faith, is that people want to know whether they have to believe *all* of the propositions of the faith. Does real faith demand that you believe everything the Bible and Church teach? Many people think, "Well, what if I believe ninety-nine percent of what the Church teaches, or even ninety-five percent? What if I just reject a *few* of the Church's teachings? I may not get an A+, but I'll probably get an A, and that's plenty good enough.

But the thing is, it's not good enough, because what such a person is really doing is rejecting truth that comes from God, and effectively saying, "God, I accept some of what You say, but not all of it. On these points, I think You're wrong." When a person says that, he replaces God and His Book and His Church as the ultimate standard for what is true and false, and substitutes himself. It's like going to see a doctor, hearing the diagnosis, and saying, "Yeah, the first half of that's right, but not the second half." The Doctor would be quite offended, and would most likely answer, "How would you know? Did you go to medical school? Besides, why'd you even come here and ask my opinion if you were going to be the ultimate judge? What do you need me for?"

It's the same thing with belief. When a person picks and chooses what he'll believe, he is breaking the bond of trust with God, His Word, and His Church. Besides, what arrogance! We weren't there when God made the world, when He sent His Son, when He made us and His plan for us. So it is outrageous for us to act as though our knowledge of these matters is equal to His. This doesn't mean we can't try to understand these things more fully and more deeply, but we should never make our own personal level of comprehension the measure of truth. That prerogative is reserved to the Divine Truth Himself.

Our faith must have an effect on our lives if it's to be of any value at all. Recall that when we discussed the virtue of prudence, we pointed out that a person knows the right thing to do, but doesn't do it, they lack the virtue. The same holds for faith. If what we hold to be true doesn't somehow change how we behave, then it has no ultimate worth. As St. James pointed out, faith without works is dead.³ Every now and then one hears extremely odd things to the effect that if you just believe certain things to be true, you don't need to actually *do* anything. This is an extremely odd standpoint, and one which is totally foreign both to Scripture and Magisterial doctrine.

On the contrary, the greatest example of the virtue of faith, the Father of Faith, proved his faith by his action. Abraham actively lived out his faith by showing his willingness to obey the divine command to sacrifice what was most dear in his life. This is our call as well: to believe God, to believe what He says in His revelation to us, and then to courageously *act* on that information, regardless of the cost.

³ Ja 2:17.