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The Theological Virtue of Faith

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July 8, 2018 – Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings – Ezekiel 2.2-5; 2 Corinthians 12.7-10; Mark 6:1-6

Did you notice how today's gospel ends? *Jesus could not work many miracles in his hometown because of their lack of faith!* These words point to a broader truth: God wants to bless us, but to receive his blessings, we have to have faith.

Why does God insist on faith? Because the greatest blessing of all is to be in a personal relationship with him, and relationships require trust. We trust him when we exercise the theological virtue of faith, and we have that virtue when, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, "we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief."

Of course, God does not want us just to believe and then act however we please. He wants *living* faith. Faith that shapes our whole life. Faith that we would never act against. This is rightly called *saving* faith, for if we hold fast to it, we will remain in friendship with God and enjoy heavenly communion with him and all the faithful forever.

Faith and Reason

Fr. Bill, a missionary priest in Africa, tells us that in a song about their Catholic faith, his people fervently proclaim, "May we *die* in it!" We, too, recognize the importance of dying in the faith when we pray at Mass for "all who were pleasing to you at their passing from this life," including those whose faith is known to God alone.

The Lord invites us to heavenly communion by first offering us the gift of faith, but he does not, indeed cannot, force it on us. We have to freely accept it. Still, one might ask, "Is it reasonable for God to require faith? Shouldn't we insist on *evidence*, and not just have faith? After all, it was God who gave us the gift of reason, and surely he expects us to use it."

In requiring faith, the Lord by no means wants us to set aside our reason. Instead, as Pope Saint John Paul II explains in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth." Faith has nothing to fear from reason, and reason has nothing to fear from faith, for both are gifts of the God who never contradicts himself. In fact, if we exercise our reason properly, we will see that it is *unreasonable to refuse* the gift of faith!

A person could go through all of this in a systematic way. One could explain why it's reasonable to believe that there is a creator, that this creator is personal, and that this personal creator could reveal himself to his creatures and wish to come to their aid.

So too, we have reason to hope that the creator would do this, for we are faced with the twin problems of sin and death, problems we cannot overcome on our own. And we have reasons to believe – not least the many signs attested to by witnesses throughout the ages – that God has revealed himself through Jesus. We could even show that it is perfectly reasonable to believe – and unreasonable to refuse to believe – that Jesus overcame sin and death and makes

his teaching and saving grace perennially available through the Church he founded on the rock of Peter. We could also explain that science cannot disprove faith, and that faith is not mere wishful thinking that people came up with because they were unwilling to face reality.

It would be possible to explain all these things, but that is not our purpose here. We wish only to point out that God is not unreasonable in requiring faith. Quite the contrary: We are unreasonable when we refuse to believe what God has revealed. Modern atheists like to insist that they are being perfectly reasonable in refusing to believe, and they are fond of quoting Karl Marx’s claim, “Religion is the opiate of the people.” But one could just as easily say, as Dinesh D’Souza does in his book *What’s So Great about Christianity*, “atheism is the opiate of the morally corrupt.” In other words, people are often motivated to cast faith aside when they realize that there is a cost to discipleship.

Today’s Readings

This is what we see in today’s readings. In sending Ezekiel to proclaim the word of God to a hardhearted people, the Lord says, “whether they heed or resist . . . they shall know that a prophet has been among them.” Notice: if they know that Ezekiel really is a prophet, they have no excuse for rejecting his word. Their only “reason” is that the demands of the covenant are more than they are prepared to accept. They are not willing to give up their false gods. They do not want to conform their lives to the truth he proclaims. Instead, *they* want to be the arbiters of good and evil.

So, too, in the Gospel, Jesus’ townsfolk reject him not because they are being true to their reason and honestly cannot believe that he is the messiah. Instead, they ask, “Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands!” In other words, they reject Jesus despite knowing that he really is speaking words of wisdom and really has worked mighty deeds. To accept him would have required acknowledging that a man they thought they knew very well – a lowly carpenter they may have considered their inferior – was great beyond all reckoning. They reject him to avoid what faith requires, namely, dying to self and letting go of their worldly ways of thinking and acting.

Sadly, their way of thinking is by no means alien to us. Instead of getting excited about the abundant life God has for us, we tend to focus on the difficulty of letting go of the life we think we need to find happiness. The *life to the full* that Jesus came to give includes unimpeded fulfillment in the whole range of human goods – the robust health of resurrection life, ever-deepening friendships with the saints, learning more and more about God’s good creation as we explore the new heavens and new earth – along with the unimaginable divine blessing of intimacy with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The *life we think we need* includes satisfactions here and now that can seem essential to our happiness but ultimately leave us empty. As a [*once-popular song*](#) has it, when we let ourselves be dazzled by the prospect of life’s pleasures, we all too easily fail to see “the waste and emptiness beyond.” When that happens, Church teaching on certain matters strikes us as a strange bit of bad news within the Good News, tempting us, like Ezekiel’s fellow Israelites and Jesus’ fellow Nazarenes, to harden our hearts to the Lord.

Seeing Reality through Eyes of Faith

But Jesus knows us. He understands our temptations and reaches out to us in compassion. He sends us the Holy Spirit from the Father to stir our consciences and help us *see* “the waste and emptiness beyond.” He even entices us to open our hearts to faith by giving us a foretaste of the abundant life he has planned for us. Many people have had such an experience of grace, but the one I (Fr. Ryan) know best is, unsurprisingly, my own. Allow me to share it with you.

During the summer between my junior and senior years, I experienced a profound spiritual awakening. Having imbibed far too much of the secular college culture, I found myself wondering, at a July 4th fireworks celebration, why I wasn’t making more of my life. I tried to turn my thoughts elsewhere, but I couldn’t ignore that distressing question. The striking beauty of the fireworks that night stood in stark contrast to the painful sadness gripping my heart.

I later understood my anguish to be caused by the Holy Spirit who, Saint Ignatius Loyola explains, stings with remorse the consciences of those going from bad to worse! My past experiences of failure in trying to change my life left me feeling powerless to do so. But before going to bed that night, I was moved to kneel down and pray, over and over, a desperate plea for help, one I had never prayed or even heard before: “Lord Jesus Christ, please invade me with your Holy Spirit!”

The next evening, without recalling that intense experience, I contacted a faith-filled young woman I wanted to ask out. Before I could do so, she invited me to a Catholic charismatic prayer meeting, and we went that very evening. I found myself torn. Though not used to such emotional expressiveness and therefore disinclined to be open to the experience, I was strongly attracted by the evident joy of the people I met who spoke so freely of the love of Jesus. They seemed to know him personally, and they conversed with him as with an intimate friend. Witnessing their vibrant, experiential faith was compelling and helped me overcome the fear of what I might have to give up to receive it.

At a certain point, when the praise – the “singing in tongues” – reached a crescendo, I had a profound experience of what Saint Ignatius describes as the Holy Spirit stirring up strength, consolation, and tranquility in those who are earnestly purging away their sins. It was then that I remembered the prayer I had so fervently prayed the evening before, and I simply could not deny that Jesus had graciously and promptly answered that prayer in a way I never could have anticipated. Although I have stumbled many times since then, he gave me the grace to let go of the life I thought I needed and to accept the far better and more abundant one that he was offering. This experience changed the whole trajectory of my life as I began to see reality more and more through the eyes of faith.

My story is but one among many. I share it in the hope of helping other sinners recognize how God is offering *them* the gift of life-transforming faith. As Paul and the other apostles well knew, faith requires us to step out of our comfort zone, even at times to let go of what we think we know and open ourselves to the surprising action of God. When we do this – when, as Saint Teresa of Calcutta urges us – we “give God permission,” God graciously responds. He enables us, like Saint Paul, to renounce our worldly way of thinking, find strength in weakness, and receive the life-changing power of his Holy Spirit.

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For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##1803-1845](#)

Fr. Maurice Emelu, ["How Faith Relates to Hope and Charity"](#)

Germain Grisez, *Living a Christian Life*, chapter 1, ["Faith, Religious Assent, and Reverence for God"](#)

St. John Paul II, [*Fides et Ratio*](#)

Chad Ripperger, F.S.S.P., ["The Role of the Theological Virtue of Faith in Scriptural Interpretation"](#)

In Short . . .

- *God does not want us just to believe and then act however we please; he wants living faith that shapes our whole life.*
- *In requiring faith, the Lord by no means wants us to set aside our reason.*
- *Faith has nothing to fear from reason, and reason has nothing to fear from faith, for both are gifts of the God who never contradicts himself.*
- *If we exercise our reason properly, we will see that it is unreasonable to refuse the gift of faith.*
- *People are often motivated to cast faith aside when they realize that there is a cost to discipleship.*
- *Jesus understands our temptations and reaches out to us in compassion, sending us the Holy Spirit from the Father to stir our consciences and help us.*