

Faith is the Subtle Chain

Faith is the central Christian requirement; it is the basis of our religion. Incidentally the Legion prayer is a petition for faith. Correctly so, for faith is the mainspring of all legionary work. Frequently this is a hit and run affair affording only the time for one stroke of the steel on the flint. It is by faith alone that the spark would issue and enkindle Catholic belief.

What is faith? It is essentially a gift of God. It is not a matter of logic or learning. Archbishop Williams said: 'It is caught not taught.' It seems to elude method. God gives it where he wills and subject to a law, which we cannot define. We can see some of his conditions: He ordinarily bestows it through baptism and through heredity; that is from parents to child. This seems to introduce a biological channel of faith independent of behaviour, quality, knowledge, and even of choice on the part of the recipient. It is given through worthless, unbelieving parents while withheld from multitudes who seem to be good.

Villains snatch it on the verge of death. People who have spent their lives crusading for atheism have become Catholics. Likewise leading Communists in various lands

have ended up as fervent Catholics. Henri Pranzini, the multi-murderer and hater of God, behaved on the scaffold in a way which convinced the Little Flower that he had accepted belief. Then, on the other hand, many whose sympathy lay with the Catholic Church in all its aspects and who really wanted to believe, just did not get that gift. Others, again, are paragons of worldly perfection but seem to be without any supernatural sense or instinct. It is reasonable to suppose that in them is an incapacity for God.

Furthermore, there is a whole side, which looks like the purely accidental. A missionary goes to a new territory, visits the chief and wins him to the Faith. The chief sees that his people turn up at the baptismal font and a Christian people is born.

Or a missionary is wrecked on some shore; he preaches to the people there and enlists them in the Church. And the place he was intended for is left without him and without Christianity!

Or one of you makes a contact in the street, which fructifies into membership of the Church. I have known people to be converted at the first word spoken to them.

Do all of those things represent the pure play of chance in regard to the possession of the faith? But this would be absurd. The question must be viewed from the aspect of the real nature of God, the incomprehensible, the omnipotent, who reconciles apparent opposites and combines a million seeming impossibilities in his every gesture. When thinking of God, we should not be troubled by problems, which even a computer could solve. God does a thing; therefore it is right and perfect. The word 'impossible' should not be used in connection with God. This takes in absolutely everything. Nothing is outside his

sweet providence. This applies to great things and small, and our act of faith must begin with the conviction that the design of God is brought to pass through all of them.

You remember the verse: 'for want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of the horse the battle was lost.' And because the battle was lost a country is gained or lost for the Faith! A fierce storm rises; the Armada is crushed and England is saved. Joan of Arc is born and France is saved. John Sobieski makes his act of faith and a prostrate Europe is preserved from Mohammedanism.

Now swing to the opposite extreme of providence. You are going on an excursion and you pray for a good day. It rains and your day is ruined. Has your prayer been refused? No, that would be impossible, for God says: 'Ask and you shall receive.' Therefore you must receive. You protest: 'I asked for a fine day and I did not get it.' Wait until you see fully in the next world. You will then admit that you got what you prayed for and that God was precisely true to his word.

I could give you a gigantic array of instances where persons were converted at a stroke by a chance act, and yet where the divine character of the proceeding was subsequently proved by their greatness in the Church.

Alphonse Ratisbonne was converted instantaneously in a visit to a church. Janet Erskine Stuart (mentioned in the handbook) was converted at a Quarant' Ore in a second. Our first Indoor Sister in the Regina Coeli was converted during Mass in the Brompton Oratory.

Faith is what theology calls it: a gift. It is not an irrational gift. It is based on a quality, which God sees in a soul. He gives it according to a set of rules of his own. These may not tally with our views of good procedure so that suggestions are heard that God is arbitrary, or cruel,

or unreasonable. Then because one cannot puzzle this out, one goes on to the further argument that our Faith, which is based on that sort of thing, must be wrong. That would indeed be childish, for our first realisation should be that God and his ways are analysable by us. We can only reason along certain guidelines, most of which are supplied by religion itself.

The fact is that God is infinite and we cannot even remotely imagine what that means. He holds things in existence by an act of his will and he maintains constantly every law governing man and nature.

People may think profoundly and imagine that they catch a glimpse of the infinity of God. But that would be a contradiction in terms. Of course they do not. My old comparison of the monkey surveying the man is applicable. We understand far less about God than that monkey does of our intellectual operations. We can proceed to the utmost and yet we do not even probe the approaches to infinity.

How many leaves are there in the world? God not only holds each one of them in existence but he knows each one in far greater measure than the mother knows her child. He knows each vein in each leaf and each microscopic characteristic on each leaf. He knows this not as we might differentiate between the minor things that is by numbered labels, but by intimate discernment and appreciation. Says the scripture: 'He has numbered all the hairs of your head.' Note that the word 'numbered' is inadequate for the foregoing reason; because each single hair is an individual work of art to him. And what I have been saying of hairs and leaves applies to every other item in creation. Can I go further without confusing ourselves completely? Every proton, electron, neutron in each atom

is so to speak his child, known to him, responsive to him, an agency towards something.

Overwhelming though all that is, still it is only in the category of what we can glimpse; that is a multi-magnification of man's powers. For in a sense man can be said to be able to remember, identify, and recall everything – that is by counting all men together and including mechanical devices. After a fashion we can in imagination compress all that united capacity into a single man who – though stupefyingly immense, would still be finite – and thus *infinitely* removed from the capacity of God.

But then God goes on to degrees which man cannot imagine – not even in the wildest flight of thought. The lives of all men and angels of all time are in his hands in minute detail, all parts of an infinite plan. The thought of this carries us along to degrees utterly beyond our power even to imagine. Not that such thoughts are wasted; they represent a highly pious exercise for us. With scripture we exclaim: 'Oh, God, illuminate our darkness' (Psalm 17). Still our approaches to him must always be realistic and profoundly humble. For God's real life only begins where our thinking leaves off.

The bridge that covers that infinite abyss between him and ourselves is faith. Faith does not only establish a relation with God in point of some knowledge but also a relation of power. Faith behind a contact is the Holy Spirit at work. We have a part in God. He lifts us to the immensity, not of a full understanding of him, but of assenting to him without reservation.

What is the composition of faith? It is not something about which little or nothing need be done by us, as Luther and Calvin contended. Faith requires certain co-operating circumstances. The germ of faith which does

not receive these, would be in much the same position as the seed in the gospel parable which falls on unhospitable ground. Into this category falls our behaviour, which must correspond to a certain extent to the greatness of the gift.

Then a certain modicum of knowledge is necessary. Faith has to have something to believe in. But this would not be the same thing as a total dependency of faith on knowledge, or that the richness of faith depends on the degree of one's knowledge. Knowledge is not faith; it is one of its helping conditions. A grave error of this time is to equate faith and intellectualism, so that religion is almost deemed to be a matter of knowledge. Emphatically it is not that. A big proportion of our Catholic intellectuals today give the impression of want of faith.

How much knowledge is necessary to bring about conversion to the Faith? Well, the Church will receive a convert on a knowledge of the principal mysteries of religion, and sometimes even on less than that.

Here are some remarkable instances where knowledge appears to be excluded altogether. We read that five thousand onlookers were converted when the lions refused to touch St Januarius and his companions. The same sort of occurrence is repeated often enough in the early annals of the Church. For example, St Adauctus, the unknown Roman legionary who fell into the procession of those about to be martyred, so impressed was he by their behaviour; or that other Roman soldier who, affected by a vision of angels, added himself to the thirty nine who were about to die.

They had little knowledge but it was enough to indicate to them the true Faith. Their specially pure and heroic faith rested on a simple belief in Christ, which implicitly contained all doctrines even though not known. It is this

latter type of faith for which you must be on that alert: The sort that believers find almost at first sight and to which knowledge has to be added later.

Here are some cases in my own experience. A Jewish boy of about twelve years was brought into Benediction by his Catholic companions. He sustained a sort of shock which in the centre of his being amounted to faith in Catholicism. This persisted in him. As soon as he became a free agent, he entered the Church and then the Legion. In telling me his history when leaving Ireland, he mentioned that his two nieces, aged eight and ten, had recently dropped into a Quarant' Ore and had then told their mother quite simply that they would have to become Catholics when they grew up. What are we to think of this? A mere childish notion! Perhaps not. It would be interesting to know the after-history there.

Another case is that of a Jewish family which fled from Russia, father, mother, and little girl. They wandered through Europe, spending some time in different countries, then moving on. In one of those places the little girl became friendly with the Catholic children. It transpired that she was a Jew. This distressed the other children who spoke to her as to the need for believing in Jesus. She agreed and the little ones took her to the village pump and baptised her. She had sense enough to keep the transaction from the knowledge of her parents. Think it out and you will see that this is a highly significant circumstance. The pilgrimage of the family was subsequently renewed. During it the parents died. The girl came to England and then to Ireland as an adult. Here she was contacted as a Jewess by the Legion and brought on a retreat. The talks revived the memory of her baptism and she told the priest about it. The sequel was instruction

and reception into the Church. In these circumstances we must see the original baptism by the children as no accident but as an act determined by the Holy Spirit.

I think that somehow or other there is a centre point in Faith which is utterly simple and which is built into elemental knowledge. It remains dominant like a fort in the midst of whatever knowledge is added to it, and everything depends on that fort. In the cases of those individuals of great knowledge who have left the Church, that fort had collapsed even though the surrounding knowledge was intact. That fort is the supernatural item; the knowledge is the natural one. The centre can remain firm without any learning. And it often remains intact in spite of ourselves, so to speak.

There is another strange circumstance about faith. I would say that no matter what is done to confirm a person in faith, God always leaves a loophole through which the reluctant believers can escape. Nothing, it would seem, in the way of natural addition can block that loophole. The person whose essential faith is flawed will not be moved by a set of proofs, which might seem to be adequate. The great French writer, Zola, who was an atheist, went to Lourdes to investigate it. God accepted the challenge and worked two first-class miracles before his eyes. Zola's tragic answer was: 'Yes, I see, but still I do not believe.' An obscure circumstance is that those miracles were worked at all. For Zola proved to be impervious.

In regard to the things of God, people are found professing a shallowness of thought, which would never proceed from them in worldly matters. Cheap thinking looking out through blind eyes! They gulp down without an effort the scientific marvels of the day. But what a scepticism they display in regard to the matters of the

spirit. How childlike are the arguments which rule and form people's opinions. Here are a few of them:

- Jesus cannot be in two places at the same time. Therefore the Eucharist is an absurdity.
- God cannot be seen or touched. Therefore he does not exist.
- God and Hell are manifestly irreconcilable ideas. Therefore either God or Hell or both do not exist.
- Catholics believe that souls are saved by the Mass. But the Mass is bought for money. So salvation is only a matter of money.
- You surely do not claim that the destiny of a soul hinges on a superstitious gesture such as the giving of a medal.
- The resurrection of the body is obviously impossible; how could an original body be re-assembled which had first been reduced to dust, and then milled by nature through its unending transmutations? Relate this objection to God, who can disentangle every human thought, and how crude it becomes!
- And you will remember the quite serious suggestion made at the time of the first Russian astronauts, that they had debunked the existence of the angels having encountered none in their flight.

And so on with the shallow litany, each item of which shows how little idea the objector has of God. Plainly they have no higher conception of God than that he is a much-magnified man.

Perhaps now I may switch back to what is probably the most reasonable and possibly the most deadly argument against the Church and against any one true religion. It is that one in regard to religion being a mere matter of

heredity. I ask you to examine this now in the light of all that we have been saying about God.

Mr Quintin Hogg, speaking recently, said that if his father had been a Catholic he, too, would have been one – probably a staunch one. This purely human statement of things would find an echo in many minds and would unquestionably create doubts in regard to the value of faith. The inference would be that it was a matter of upbringing only and based on the accident of birth. Many persons would look no further than this and would adopt a cynical attitude towards the difference between religions. I have heard this Quintin Hogg argument so often that I really believe it to be the most effective of all the arguments against the Church. Of course the moment Catholicism has been reduced to pure heredity or any accidental dimension, a fatal blow would have been dealt to it in the minds of those whose valuation of God and his ways does not rise about the human level.

Do such persons never reflect that when God is creating a soul, he also possesses the lesser power to cause it to be born where and in what circumstances he likes. If he sees among souls whom he is going to bring into the world certain ones whom he thinks worthy of that gift of faith, he has broadly speaking two means of operating. Either he could proceed completely by way of conversion, that is allowing people to be born without religion or in local religions, then providing channels of conversion. But there would be so much machinery required for that complicated process, i.e. in the interesting and then instructing of people on an individual basis, as to be humanly speaking unworkable as a normal basis for the Church. In some places the very pastoral machinery for all this would not exist.

Or, to our human view it would be a way out of the difficulty for God to proceed normally on the basis of causing those chosen souls to be born into Catholic communities where they can then be dealt with on bulk arrangements.

But then why does he allow the principle of conversion to operate in addition to the bulk method? Again speaking in a purely human way, God has to do this because otherwise the possession of the Faith would bear the complexion of a heredity transaction. Therefore, and on as large a scale as possible, the principle of conversion must proceed in action. Another reason for this is that examples and means of conversion must be visible. Otherwise no one would be converted. It would come to be held that one had to be born a Catholic.

So God balances, as he alone can, the working out of these different systems of bestowing his gift on souls.

There is a further ingredient, which has to enter into Faith. It is the intervention of Mary. This is sometimes unseen at the moment, but always there by divine requirement – just as at the first she received by her faith the Saviour and gave him to all men. If her influence can be discerned in your lead up to a soul, become alert at once; she is a shortcut as well as being a signpost. Trained in these ideas, the legionary shares in Mary's prerogative of conveying the divine magnetism to souls.