

FAITH - REALITY AND MYSTERY

The second reading in this Sunday's Mass is taken from the letter to the Hebrews. The opening sentences of the eleventh chapter give a definition of faith and hope. It is interesting to note that the latest translations of these two definitions differs quite remarkably from the older definitions. Note the difference in these two versions:

Older Translation:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen.

Newer Translation:

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.

These two different translations involve the meanings of two Greek words used for "realization" and "evidence". The above two translations show the differences. I am not by any means a scripture scholar having been trained as a scientist (a chemist) but from a scientist's view there is quite a difference between assurance and realization in the older version and between conviction and evidence in the latest translation.

Hope would seem to infer an expectation of something happen-ing in the future and when this expectation occurs then that hope is realized and no longer exists as some future event. To say that a hope is realized means that it is no longer a hope and this seems to be totally logical. Therefore one can conclude that the latest version of this definition somehow waters down one's concept not only of hope but also of faith, since faith often refers to the future of one's existence and what this future really does hold for one. All this is based very deeply on Scripture and certainly on all that Christ taught during his public life.

As for the differences between conviction and evidence it would appear that these two concepts are entirely different. One has conviction once one sees the evidence. But conviction can also come from the one who gives the evidence if that person is known to be totally open, honest and trustworthy. From a scientist's view, evidence depends on facts, not on the reliability of a person or a witness which may be the case in a court-room.

Our faith as Catholics and Christians is based almost entirely on Jesus Christ, and then secondarily on the Scriptures. Christ during his three years of public life pointed to only one miracle which would prove that he was who he claimed to be and that all his teachings were true. He said to his disciples that just as Jonah was in the belly of a whale for three days and nights so the Son of Man would be in the bowels of the earth for three days and nights and then rise from the dead. And of course, that is precisely what happened; he did rise from the dead! It took a while for his Apostles to believe this but with his appearances to them in the flesh, they became his firm believers in him and all his teachings. But it was the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost who definitively put the Catholic Church into existence and which has continued to grow and function to the present day and will continue to do so until the end of time.

From the very beginning the faith of the Church began to grow and spread. From the beginning it was the teaching of Christ which inspired so many to come to believe and to follow the Lord. And then it was Paul with his numerous letters who began to form the theology of the Church's belief. Over the centuries this belief has grown, has been tested, has been more clearly defined, has helped change so many lives. And the faith of the Church has grown and become so vital in the lives of all who believe in and follow the Lord Jesus. It is this faith that has given all believers substance for their hope of eternal life and absolute assurance that what they hope for will be their Christian patrimony. And in like manner, it has given everyone a firm conviction about everything they believe in the Catholic Church.

As one's faith grows, one's faith becomes more and more certain without at the same time becoming set into one's own way of thinking rather than in the way the Church thinks and teaches or the way Christ taught and lived. One must always be on the alert to avoid slowly twisting the truth to fit their own plans, desires, and even hopes. That is why prayer then begins to become necessary for it is through prayer that one has access to the Lord and to God; is through prayer that one grows not only as a believer but also as a person. And it is through prayer that one becomes one through whom the Lord works to bring others into his fold.

The second reading from Hebrews goes on to give an example of faith, an extraordinary example. Abraham who lived some four thousand years ago was a great man. When he was almost ninety years old, he heard a voice call out to him. Abraham! Abraham! He answered: here I am! The voice told him that he and his wife Sarah, who was almost as old as Abraham, should go to another land hundreds of miles west. The voice then told him that Sarah would conceive and have a son, and that Abraham would become the father of a mighty nation, that his offspring would be greater than the stars in the sky or the grains of sand at the sea-shore. And Abraham believed! He had no evidence, only a promise from God. Abraham did as God asked and when he arrived at the new land, he and Sarah did have a son whom they named Isaac. And then God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son! Abraham obeyed, still believing in God, and at the last moment, God stayed his hand and told Abraham how proud he was of him for believing in him. Isaac then married and had a son Jacob, and Jacob married and had twelve sons. It would ultimately be from the line of Abraham that Jesus was to be born, God made man, and he it was who would give his life to save a fallen world.

All this happened because of faith. Each of the individuals involved believed with no evidence to back them up, only a conviction that God was telling the truth. That is the faith that God calls from each of us. Yet for most humans, this is a very difficult thing to do. How many have taken Christ at his word: "Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it will be opened for you." Great words! Great promises! Yet how often we have all felt left down! We have all tried as hard as we could to have as much faith as possible. Then nothing! So just what does a person do? Give up NO! Argue with God? YES! I know no other answer. But it is really this kind of honesty with ourselves and with God that brings one closer to our maker and God. Without being bitter, we grow in our trust and faith. Seems contradictory, yet it is what happens. How, we know not.

Only in the next life will he each find out just how God actually did answer our prayers, but definitely not in the way we expected, wanted, or even dreamed about. Just as with so many human friendships we go through periods of unsureness only to find out later just how strong the

friendship really was, and still is. God understands our deepest longings, our deepest fears, and above all, our capability of really becoming one of his best believers. While we are impatient, wanting results immediately, God always chooses the right time, and way.

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