

Chapter 1

What Is Faith?

Reading the Catechism: Paragraphs 26-49; 142-197

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”

– Pope John Paul II, on Faith and Reason *Fides et Ratio*, 1

We begin our discussion of Catholic belief by first addressing the basic question of faith. What exactly is it, and what does it mean to have it?

Faith is our response to what God reveals. It is not merely the intellectual assent to a revealed truth, which we cannot fully understand; it is the full submission and surrendering of our whole self, our intellect *and* will, to all that he reveals to us.

This surrendering allows God to penetrate our life, our entire being, so that we may be transformed and become holy, allowing Christ to work in and through us so that we may share in his very life. “It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)

Faith is at the very foundation of the Christian life because it is our response to the invitation of our Creator to have communion with him. It is through faith that we completely open ourselves to him and come into relationship with him.

Man’s Search for God

Man is created by God in order to be in his presence and be filled with his life. When he created Adam, he “blew into his nostrils the breath of life.” (Gen 2:7) This breath of life is divine life, an intimate union and sharing in the life of God.

It is our very nature as human beings to desire God and to be in communion with him. This is what is meant when the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, *man is by nature a religious being*. (see CCC, 28) We all have a “God-sized” hole in our hearts which only he can fill. We long to answer the questions of life, and fill our emptiness with truth, to have fullness of life. St. Augustine realized this profound truth about human nature when he beautifully wrote, “You made me O God to live forever in your love; my heart will not rest until it rests in you.”

Throughout history, in every culture and in every time and place, evidence is found of man seeking the divine, that communion and relationship with God for which he was made. The examples of religious expression are numerous and are found in: the Greeks and Romans, the Egyptians and Babylonians, the Vikings and the Native Americans, and the various expressions of Eastern spirituality. These cultures had very little in common and little or no contact with each other, yet each had its own way of reaching out to know the divine. Even the great ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, through reason alone, came to the conclusion that there must be a transcendent supreme being.

Because man’s reason is darkened by sin, and because we are finite, physical creatures, we can come to know God only in a very limited sense and only through what he has created. This is why so many expressions of religious belief worshipped nature.

However, because God loved us so much and desired to once again have communion with us, he unfolded his loving plan of salvation in which he chose to reveal himself to man. He did this first, through his gradual **revelation** of himself to his chosen people as seen in the Old Testament, and then in the fullness of time, he completely revealed himself to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus came as both fully divine and fully human to make known not only who God our loving Father is, but to once again show us what it means to be fully human. His life demonstrated what it means to live with the Father in total communion and obedience and through that enjoy the fullness of life with him that is realized in the Resurrection. Jesus is the perfect man who completely reveals man to himself and once again offers to all people that union with God for which all men have been searching throughout history. That union with the transcendent, the divine, is what fulfills man’s nature and gives life its ultimate meaning. “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” (Jn 10:10)

Faith: Our Response to God

Faith is our response to this gift of revelation that God freely offers to us through Christ. It is not just a mere intellectual activity, or simply accepting something as true that cannot be “proven.” Rather, it is the *complete submission of our intellect and will* to God who reveals himself and offers salvation to us. It is an offering up to our Creator, a renting open of our hearts and minds to him so that we may fully receive all that he desires to give us. Our response to him in complete submission is called the “obedience of faith.” We hear and see what he has spoken to us, done for us and asks of us, and we accept it with our whole minds and hearts so that God’s salvation may be accomplished in us:

“The obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) “is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,” and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. (DV, 5)

Responding to faith does involve our intellect; it is the assenting of our minds to revealed truths that we cannot yet fully know in this life. But God does not just want us to know him intellectually, he wants us to live in him and know him intimately! Therefore, a complete response of faith also involves the submission of our wills, a surrendering of all that we are and all that we do. Through our obedience of faith, God can transform us, heal us, and use us as his instruments, so that we can fully experience and participate in his life.

Have you ever heard the expression “Actions speak louder than words?” This is true because *action follows from being*, that is, it is our actions that express the true disposition of our heart and mind. Thus, if we truly believe in God, then all that we are and all that we do will flow from that core belief and our desire to be in union with him. Our faith in him will affect every aspect of our life, not only what we think, but even more profoundly, what we do.

For example, is it enough to just simply know I love my wife, but do nothing else to show my love? Shouldn’t my actions, and the entire way I approach life, be a reflection of this love? As a matter of fact, aren’t my actions the most profound statement of my heart? In the same way, one could believe that he/she loves their spouse and even

state it for the world to hear, while gravely betraying that love through their actions.

The same holds true with our faith in God. If we truly desire to know and love him, and to become a true follower of Christ, is it enough to just know him or just tell him we love him without it being reflected in our lives? No! If we truly love him, then our whole lives, everything that we say and do will reflect that love and show in our actions. This is exactly what St. James teaches us in his epistle:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says that he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (Jas 2:14-17)

It is vital for us to remember that faith is the full submission of ourselves to that which we believe. It goes beyond mere intellectual belief in the fact that it is an act of intellect *and* will, requiring our whole response, our heart, our thoughts and our actions.

Abraham and Mary: Examples of "The Obedience of Faith"

To further understand faith as a complete submission of intellect and will, let us look at two exceptional examples:

First, in the Old Testament of Scripture, we see the example of Abraham who was asked by God to sacrifice his own beloved son. Though he did not understand God's purpose, he was willing to be completely obedient. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his most precious child with a faith which strengthened him to follow God's will. Not only does this foreshadow God's own sacrifice of his Son, but it shows the faith of a man which extends far beyond a mere belief to the very core of his being. It shows a father, who is willing to sacrifice the child of his heart to be obedient to the God in whom he had put his trust. (Gen 22:1-18)

Then in the New Testament, we see the example of Jesus' mother, Mary. Her faith was truly tested when she was a young girl, around 13 years of age. She had lived her faith daily throughout her life, but this test of faith was one that would change the course of history. She was asked by a messenger from God to bear the Incarnation of God, the

Messiah, for whom she and her people had been waiting for several thousand years. She was asked to play a pivotal role in God's plan for the salvation of the world, and she did not turn away from the responsibility that was being placed before her. In complete trust, she accepted that her virgin body would bear God's Son, though she did not completely understand how it could be. She stepped into the unknown of God's plan humbly pledging to be the "handmaid of the Lord." In words that would echo in her own Son years later, she said, "Be it done unto me according to your word." (Lk 1:26-38)

In both of these examples, we see the profound leap of faith with which we are called to act in our own lives. Abraham and Mary, like us, were mere humans called into relationship with the Divine, the Creator of all things. A simple belief or acknowledgement of God was not enough. This communion with him requires the complete gift of ourselves, body and soul, intellect and will. We are called to step forward with that same spirit, into the unknown of God's plan for us, with a complete obedience of faith.

Essential Characteristics of Faith

Faith Is a Grace

Faith is both a gift and a grace of God. This is its first and most important characteristic. No one can have faith except through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why we say that grace precedes faith.

The reason that you are reading this book right now, the whole reason that you are desiring a deeper understanding and relationship with God, is because he has called you to this moment and has given you the grace to respond to his invitation through faith.

We must always recognize that our own faith is a gift from God and is totally dependent upon his grace. It is very humbling to realize that we cannot take one step closer towards him without his help. However, this reveals to us God's great love for us and that he is constantly drawing us closer to himself. He desires union with us and has reached down to give us a gift which would allow us to know him intimately despite our human limitations. As Christians, we must always thank God for the gift of faith and always pray for the grace to sustain our faith in this life, whatever may come our way.

Faith, by Its Nature, Must Be Free

Since faith is a human act, by its nature it must be a free act. No one can force another to have faith. Though it is true that God bestows this gift on us, we have the capability to respond to it and accept it, or to turn away and reject it. Even God, in his omnipotence, cannot force us to believe in him. Though he desires our union with him, he respects our free will and it is we who must choose to embrace his gift in order to receive it.

Moreover, faith in God and his revelation is the *realization of true freedom*. We can only experience true human freedom when we respond to the fullness of what it means to be human, when we find the truth for which we have been searching. (see CCC, 160)

Faith Is a Life-Long Journey

Faith is an ongoing process, not just a one-time event of “coming to faith” or receiving Christ for the first time. Our hearts and minds must be open to God and his salvation each and every day, so that he will be able to accomplish his work within us. Faith is the beginning of eternal life that will be fulfilled when we one day enjoy the fullness of God’s presence in heaven. This openness, this “obedience of faith” to all that God has revealed to us through Christ is the disposition we ought to have throughout our lives. Life, for man, is a journey of faith and ongoing **conversion** in which we turn away from sin and towards God. We come to know that transcendent God who draws us into relationship with himself through a continuous renting open of our hearts and minds to him and all that he desires for us and desires to give us.

Therefore, through the obedience of faith, the complete submission of our hearts and minds to God, we completely surrender and open ourselves to his revelation so that we may become holy and pleasing in his sight and accomplish his works. We give ourselves wholly and entirely to him. *It is a total submission; it is holding nothing back.* We give him, our reason, our intellect, our will, who we are, and what we do; and we allow him to guide us and to help us to live the way that he wants us to live. This surrendering of ourselves to God through faith is the complete gift of ourselves to him who has already pledged to us a total gift of himself to us through Christ Jesus.

Are Faith and Reason Compatible?

Faith Seeking Understanding

The great early church Father, St. Augustine, defined theology, the study or science of God, as “faith seeking understanding.” This is how we come to know God and ultimately how we come to share in his life. Faith prompts us to seek to know more deeply who God is and what his plan and will is for us.

Mary’s example at the Annunciation shows great faith, but a faith that was seeking understanding. When the angel told her that she was going to conceive a child, she accepted with faith what God was telling her through the angel. She clung to his words; she believed them because they came from God, even though she did not fully understand them. But Mary’s faith did not stop there. She sought to more deeply understand what God’s word meant so that she could more deeply know and love him and also better serve him. So she pondered his word in her heart and mind and asked questions. “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” (Lk 1:34) *Asking questions is not doubting!* Mary’s question does not show doubt, but rather shows that she believes God’s revelation but desires to know his will even more profoundly so that she will be able to more perfectly cooperate with his plan.

Our relationship with God is like any relationship. Whether it be a spouse or a friend, we seek to know ever more deeply who they are, and the more we come to truly know them, the more we can grow in love and friendship with them. The same applies with our faith in God and our relationship with him. We certainly do not know everything about him, but that does not mean we stop seeking.

If sometimes his revelation is difficult to understand or difficult to live or is very counter-cultural, that does not mean we just reject it or give up. It is in those times that, like Mary, we cling with faith to what God has revealed to us, we surrender our intellect and will to what he has made known. But then we ponder it, we ask questions, we read the Scriptures, we pray about it. What if Mary did not understand at first what the angel was telling her and she just thought it was too hard to accept or live out? What if she did not ponder God’s word in her heart and ask questions? What if she did not pray for the grace to live faithfully according to his will?

Our faith in God requires that we always seek to more deeply understand his revelation so that we may more deeply love and serve him.

Faith and Reason

One of the most common charges against faith in our modern culture is that it contradicts reason, or that the things that we believe are unreasonable. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Not only does faith not contradict reason, but it actually builds upon and perfects it. It takes what we can know through our limited human reason and enables us to understand the truths about God and ourselves on a completely new level.

We see this with Mary during the Annunciation. It seems “unreasonable” that she could be with child since she had never had relations with a man. However, because of her faith and her desire to further understand God’s revelation and plan, God reveals to her that her child is not conceived through a man, but rather through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is no way that Mary could have come to know this through her reason alone. But through her faith in God’s revelation she comes to know that her Son will be conceived through the Holy Spirit.

Is this unreasonable or is God’s plan simply *beyond Mary’s natural reason*? This is the crucial point. We use the term “mysteries” to describe the truths about God that we do not understand, because they are beyond the capacity of our reason that is currently bound by space and time and darkened by sin. This does not make them unreasonable or any less true.

For example, if I ask my four year-old what eight times eight is, he would have no idea. It is simply beyond his reason at this point in his human existence. Does that mean that $8 \times 8 = 64$ is not true? Of course not! It just means that this truth is simply beyond his reason, not contrary to it or non-existent.

How many complex truths are out there that many of us are unable to understand at this moment? That does not mean they are false, or non-existent, or contrary to reason. The same applies to the mysteries of God. We know they are true because he has revealed them to us, but many of them are beyond our reason which is limited in many ways while we are in this world. We can even come to a limited and imperfect understanding of them through our reason alone. However, through God’s revelation and our faith seeking understanding, we can

continue to ponder these truths, to come to comprehend them more deeply, until in the fullness of time, when we see God face to face, we will then be able to grasp and have full understanding of the mysteries of the Almighty.

By adhering to God's revelation and seeking to more deeply understand it, our faith builds upon our reason and makes it more perfect. It allows us to know and understand things that we would not have been able to know through our reason by itself. This dual and inseparable relationship of faith and reason are the two irreplaceable and indispensable means through which we come to know God. It allows us to enter into the profound depths of his mystery and also come to know who we are as children of God created in his image and likeness.

From the Catechism: Key Words to Know

REVELATION: God's communication of himself, by which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan, a gift of self-communication which is realized by deeds and words over time, and most fully by sending us his own divine Son, Jesus Christ (50).

FAITH: Both a gift of God and a human act by which the believer gives personal adherence to God who invites his response, and freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed. It is this revelation of God which the Church proposes for our belief, and which we profess in the Creed, celebrate in the sacraments, live by right conduct that fulfills the twofold commandment of charity (as specified in the ten commandments), and respond to in our prayer of faith. Faith is both a theological virtue given by God as grace, and an obligation which flows from the first commandment of God (26, 142, 150, 1814, 2087).

CONVERSION: A radical reorientation of the whole life away from sin and evil, and toward God. This change of heart or conversion is a central element of Christ's preaching, of the Church's ministry of evangelization, and of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation (1427, 1431, 1423; cf. 821).

