

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – October 2, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 885 words

The main theme of our readings this week is faith – that is, an act that has to do with believing. The Church teaches us that “by faith”, we “completely [submit our] intellect and [our] will to God”.¹ The first reading said that the just person – in spite of the darkness he must endure in this world – “because of his faith, shall live”. And Christ in the gospel responds to the apostles’ request for an increase of faith, telling them effectively that with faith they can do even what seems impossible. When we have totally submitted our minds and hearts – intellect and will – to God, then, there we find true life and the ability to do all that God wills.

So we also must pray for an increase of faith; we must pray for it daily. But perhaps it might help us better to pray if we knew better what it was that we were seeking. For example, if you had to explain faith to a non-believer, what would you say? Faith has certain attributes that we need to know about; when we know about them, we can more effectively grow in faith ourselves and lead others to it as well.

The first attribute of faith is that it is a grace.² That is, it is a gift from God. When you meet someone who does not have faith, maybe the thing to do is not so much to try to win them over with arguments, but simply exhort them to pray for the gift of faith until they get it. That prayer might do more for them than an entire library of books. Once they have the gift of faith, only then will all of the content of what we believe be able to come alive and take root in their mind and heart.

And that leads to another attribute of faith: it seeks to understand. We believe in the content of the faith on the authority of God. But that does not mean that our belief is lacking in rational foundation. The Catechism puts it this way: “It is intrinsic to faith that a believer desires to know better the One in whom he has put his faith, and to understand better what He has revealed”.³ Faith is above reason, and there are truths of the faith – such as the dogma of the Holy Trinity – that reason alone cannot reach. But even the dogma of the Holy Trinity is reasonable; faith elevates our reason so that we can understand it and all the things of God. St. Augustine said, “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe”.⁴

Faith, then, is a grace, and it seeks understanding. But it is also necessary.⁵ In the Letter to the Hebrews we read that “without faith it is impossible to please [God]. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”⁶ Faith is necessary for salvation. This is another good reason to pray regularly for an increase of faith – and also to pray for perseverance in it,⁷ for it is a gift that can be lost. I’ve said on many occasions, and I’ll say it again now, that some people lose their faith because they never pray for it!

There is much more that we could say about faith, but I want to conclude by coming back to the darkness in the first reading. The prophet Habakkuk, faced with the evil in the world around him, cries out, “How long, O Lord?”. This cry may well be on our own lips in our time. These are challenging times even for people of faith! But “the just one, because of his faith, shall live”: we cry out for an increase of faith nevertheless. Faith, in fact, is often lived in a certain

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 143.

² Ibid., 153.

³ Ibid., 158.

⁴ Cited in Ibid., 158.

⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁶ Hebrews 11:6.

⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 162.

obscurity.⁸ St. Paul's famous line, "we walk by faith, not by sight",⁹ is as true today as it ever was. So how do we live with this darkness, with this obscurity?

It is here that the Catechism instructs us to turn to "witnesses of faith":¹⁰ those who have gone before us as models of faith in spite of the difficulties that they faced. Among these, the preeminent example is the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the woman of faith who stood at the foot of the Cross and watched her Son die, knowing of God's promise that he would rule for ever. Could her faith perhaps have been challenged in that moment? Well, perhaps she did not fully understand; it was certainly a moment of darkness. But she did not doubt. And the promise was fulfilled within three days, when her Son rose from the dead. There are the countless other saints as well, each one of whom has a great story of faith. When we get to know them, they pray for us and our faith, and we find the courage to go on.

Faith is a grace; it seeks understanding; it is necessary for salvation; and it is often lived in darkness. With these various attributes in mind, we take inventory of ourselves and make holy resolutions so that we might have a strong faith now and persevere in it until the very end. Lord Jesus, increase our faith!

⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:7

¹⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 165; see also Hebrews 12:1-2.