

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – July 8, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 775 words

“He was amazed at their lack of faith”. Faith is the key to our Lord’s heart. With faith – he tells us in the gospels – we can move mountains;¹ in other words, we can obtain even those things that for us mere mortals are ordinarily impossible – those things that we could never secure through our own efforts and from our own resources. But, as we see today, in the face of a lack of faith, the manifestation of Christ’s divine power is greatly restrained. Lord, increase our faith! May we never lack it! But perhaps we also need to review what faith is.

Many people today think that faith requires understanding; therefore, if I don’t understand some proposition of divine revelation, I might not accept it. But faith does not require understanding. It desires it, but it does not require it. The Catechism teaches us that faith is submission of our intellects and wills to what God has revealed, because he cannot deceive.² In other words, faith involves accepting God’s revelation on his authority – not because of convincing arguments. God cannot tell a lie and everything he reveals is for our good.

Faith, therefore, engages with all of who we are as persons made in the image and likeness of God. Remember what I preached on recently: namely, how the image of God is most found in our intellect and will – in that rational part of our being. Our emotions are thus not the primary place where faith unfolds; again, we err if we allow ourselves to be guided by feelings in our relationship with the Lord. No, faith is an assent of the intellect and will – and that means that we must strive to bring our emotions in line with that assent.

To assent is to make a free act.³ We could call it a meeting of persons: God reaches out to us, and we respond in love by submitting ourselves to him. We do so with the conviction that God cannot tell a lie and does not will our misfortune;⁴ much to the contrary, he wishes to deliver us from it – he wishes to save us. But there is another important element to faith, and that is that it is a gift from God:⁵ we do not arrive at assent – the submission of our entire being to him – through a process of reasoning. No, he enables that assent in us through a supernatural gift.

Now because faith does not rely on understanding but is instead rooted in a supernatural gift and rests on God’s authority, that means that we often experience it as enshrouded in a certain obscurity. St. Paul experienced this lack of clarity with the proverbial thorn in his flesh from which three times he begged deliverance of the Lord. Whatever that “thorn” actually was for St. Paul, it was not God’s will for him to understand it precisely; rather, to assent to it – to be obedient – and to trust that Christ’s grace would be enough. And it was.

Faith does, as I said, desire to understand.⁶ St. Augustine is famous for saying, “believe, that you may understand”.⁷ If we assent to all that God has revealed and his Church teaches – bringing our intellects, wills, and our emotions in line with that – we may not fully grasp it all. Some of it may, in fact, be quite difficult. But God cannot lie! He does not desire our misfortune! And he will lead us to a deeper understanding. Often, he will do so through our efforts to learn the “why” of what we believe. Lifelong education is the task of every Christian.

But sometimes that assent is just so difficult. Remember: faith is a gift. We need to ask God for it. Lord, increase my faith! Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!⁸ Some people take their

¹ See Matthew 17:20.

² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 142-144 and following.

³ See CCC, nos. 154-155.

⁴ See Jeremiah 29:11.

⁵ See CCC, no. 153.

⁶ See CCC, nos. 156-159.

⁷ *Crede, ut intelligas*. See St. Augustine of Hippo, *Tractatus in Evangelium Joannis*, 29, 6.

⁸ See Mark 9:24.

faith for granted – but they end up losing it. It is a precious gift from God that we must nurture and grow. When people struggle with faith I often recommend that they pray the traditional Act of Faith prayer, which I'm sure some of you memorized as children. I will conclude with that prayer now, as we all ask God for a deep and abiding faith.

“O my God, I firmly believe that you are one God in three divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins, and that he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the holy Catholic Church teaches, because you have revealed them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Amen.”⁹

⁹ I highly recommend the *Handbook of Prayers: Student Edition* published by Midwest Theological Forum. More information at https://www.theologicalforum.org/Category/104/Product/429/Handbook_of_Prayers_Student_Edition – and it may also be purchased from Amazon.com at this link: <https://amzn.to/2tXLPBt>.