I Believe... We Believe in God

CHAPTER 25

Moving Mountains

People of great faith really do move mountains. Such was the case of Mother Katharine Drexel. Born in 1858 to a wealthy Philadelphia banker, Katharine was trained to use money for the benefit of others. Her father left her a considerable inheritance for her use during her lifetime. In touring America she became aware of the needs of poor Native Americans and the sufferings of African Americans. She began to build schools for the children and paid for the teachers.

To advance her mission she founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament "to be the mother and servant of the Indian and Negro races." She used the income from her father's estate to build 60 schools in the rural south and west. She established Xavier University in New Orleans for African Americans. She donated over $21 million to these and similar causes.

While we list her amazing achievements we must never forget that she thought that it was her faith in God that gave her the energy, imagination, and courage to do great deeds for her beloved African American and Native Americans. Katharine loved adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. One of her favorite prayers was: "Help me each moment and always to communicate myself to you by doing your will. Let the doing of your will each moment be a spiritual communion. In it you will give me yourself. I will give you myself."

Pope St. John Paul II canonized her on October 1, 2000.

1. How does St. Paul describe faith?

Paul described faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). He also tells us, "For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" (Rom 10:10) and that the Lord's justice "has been disclosed" (Rom 3:21).

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*...

A Gift of God

A. What is the obedience of faith?

To obey (from the Latin *ob-audire*, to "hear or listen to") in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself. Abraham is the model of such obedience offered us by Sacred Scripture. The Virgin Mary is its most perfect embodiment.

The *Letter to the Hebrews*, in its great eulogy of the faith of Israel's ancestors, lays special emphasis on Abraham's faith: "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go."[1] (*Catechism*, 144-145)

B. Is faith a divine gift?

When St. Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus declared to him that this revelation did not come "from flesh and blood," but from "my Father who is in heaven."[2] *Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him.* (*Catechism*, 153)

C. Is faith a human act?

Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths he has revealed are contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason.

In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace: "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace."[3] (*Catechism*, 154-155)

[1] Heb 11:8; cf. Gen 12:1-4. / [2] Mt 16:17; cf. Gal 1:15; Mt 11:25. / [3] St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* II-II, 2, 9; cf. *Dei Filius* 3: DS 3010.

2. What conclusions can we draw about faith from these texts?

We can derive three insights from St. Paul's teachings. First, faith is an act of *trust,* a positive spiritual attitude toward life and God. Second, faith leads us to accept salvation, love, and forgiveness from God. And third, faith is a commitment to Christ, through whom salvation from God has been manifested and accomplished.

3. Does St. Paul teach religious truths?

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes, "If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed" (4:6).

4. Where may we find examples of faith in the Gospels?

In the Gospel of Mark, we find that from the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus preached, "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (1:15). In the story of the cure of the possessed boy, faith is described as the quality of having sufficient trust in Jesus' power to perform miracles. In this story, the boy's father exclaimed, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24).

John's Gospel often emphasized our need to surrender in faith to Jesus. "Believe in God, believe also in me" (14:1). In the Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63). Hearing Christ's words, Peter, speaking for the others, committed himself to the Lord, saying, "to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6:68).

5. How does the New Testament link faith to Christian behavior?

Jesus used the image of the vine and branches to tie faith to deeds. He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit" (Jn 15:5). Practical-minded St. James drew a vivid connection for us when he said, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead" (Jas 2:26).

The parable of the sower provides another good example for us to follow. "But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance" (Lk 8:15).

6. How does faith originate?

God has created us to be people of faith. He has put the potential for faith deep within each of us. We find ourselves driven to know and love without limits and to be known and loved. With this drive we search for the very infinite God. God gives us the gift of faith to make this possible.

St. Augustine speaks of this as our restless heart, which is not satisfied with anyone less than God. The Father is equally reaching out to us to fulfill the spiritual hunger and thirst he has given us. "I have loved you with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3). Just as a lover tries to evoke a response in his or her beloved, so does God seek to awaken us to respond to him.

7. What is revelation?

Revelation is the act of God that discloses his affectionate presence to us for the purpose of awakening our faith response. Grace is the name given to describe God's work of giving us the potential for faith and then prompting its actualization.

8. How does God reveal himself to us in Scripture?

God speaks to us through the Old Testament judges, kings, priests, prophets, sages, and biblical writers. We hear his voice as he speaks to Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, David, and many others. God inspired the biblical authors to record the words and deeds of his revelation.

The Father reaches out to us, above all, in his Son, Jesus Christ. "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). From the Word made flesh we hear the words of God, the message of salvation, and the call to faith. In Christ we experience revelation in its richest form and are summoned to respond in faith.

Scripture tells us that God will reserve the final revelation of himself to us for the end of time when "the Son of Man will appear in heaven...with power and great glory," to judge the living and the dead (Mt 24:30).

9. What form does our faith take in relation to nature?

God speaks to us through his providential presence in nature. "The heavens are telling the glory of God...Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge (of God)" (Ps 19:1-2). Nature is a window onto the sacred. It is filled with the mystery of God. Before industrialization, people lived on farms, dwelling in harmony with nature. People were in touch with the "secret ministry of the frost," as the author Coleridge tells us. With the development of cities people now live in a man-made environment. We are often out of touch with nature, and our *sense of wonder* is asleep.

When we are alive, however, to nature's hymn to the Creator, our faith takes the shape of wonder again. We are at home then with the words of the psalmist, who asked nature to "Praise him, sun and moon...all you shining stars! Praise him...mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds" (Ps 148:3-4, 9-10).

Thus, faith-wonder helps us to sense the holiness of creation. We reverence the environment and do not exploit it.

10. How should we receive the mystery of God through our faith experience?

When we are faced with the mystery of God, faith takes the form of awe. Biblical translations sometimes use the word fear, which has come to mean the paralyzing emotion that causes us to run away from God in terror. Awe, however, deals with sensitivity to the presence of the mystery of God and a reverence that results from an honest appreciation of oneself before the magnificent purity of God (cf. Isaiah 6).

The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe" (12:28).

11. What is there about the mystery of God that causes faith to become awe?

We can consider mystery under three aspects!

a) God's mystery is both *known* and *unknown*. Thomas Aquinas spoke of the darkness of God. He said that "since our mind is not proportionate to the divine substance, that which is the substance of God remains beyond our intellects and unknown to us. Hence, the supreme knowledge which man has of God is to know that he does not know God, in so far as he knows *what* God *is* surpasses all that we can understand of him."

   Nevertheless, God is also *light*. He chooses to give us knowledge of *who* he is in the Old and New Testaments, the Church and above all in Jesus Christ. This revelation helps us perceive his presence in acts of love and in the signs of the times. In this process, the mystery of God is an *unknown* that gradually comes to be *known*.

b) Mystery is a *universal* experience. We would be better able to appreciate the mystery of God if we were more attuned to the mystery of life and the universe itself. Even the storehouse of scientific knowledge obtained to date is not sufficient to grasp the facts of our surroundings. Only with faith and reverence for the environment can we perceive the mystery of life.

c) Mystery *reveals* and *conceals*. God does not remain in repose. Rather, he wishes to enter the lives of his people. The mystery moves toward disclosure. This is the rhythm of revealing and concealing. It keeps alive our pursuit of that which is yet to be known and experienced about God.

As we proceed through life we are given glimpses of glory and times of darkness. Faith and conviction move us onward to deeper appreciation of God's love. We cannot drink in the whole meaning of God all at once. It takes reflection and is a lifelong growth experience.

12. What role does faith awe play in our lives?

Faith awe is our spontaneous response to the mystery of God. It engenders in us the thirst for wisdom, which is less interested in the practical necessities of life and more concerned with the meaning and purpose of life.

Today, people with a scientific view of life think the meaning of life can only be acquired by one's own efforts. They tend to *make* meanings, whereas a person who has a sense of faith awe *receives* meanings as a grace from God.

There is no contradiction here, for God intends us to do both. He gave us intelligence to make sense out of our world and faith awe to discover meaning about the world that only he can reveal. When the two approaches are in harmony, wisdom is the result.

13. What does the Bible tell us about the glory of God?

Mystery emphasizes that aspect of God that is yet to be known and experienced. The glory of God comes through as light, warmth, guidance, love, affection, surprise, and self-discovery. His glory lights up our world and gives us guidance and meaning.

When Isaiah beheld the glory of God in the Temple (Isa 6), he experienced self-discovery and conversion. Moses received the same gift at the burning bush and Ezekiel rejoiced in this event at the Chebar River visions. God's glory was most completely manifested when Jesus walked on the earth. How strong Jesus' impact on the apostles, Mary Magdalen, and the centurion at the cross must have been! Christ's glory became most evident in his Easter appearances to the apostles and disciples. The divine glory speaks of the extraordinary intimacy by which God enters our inner life.

14. What implications does the glory of God have for our faith?

The theme of the divine glory reminds us that God is just as anxious to get in touch with us as we are to be in touch with him. The glory of God is his active presence, which strives to make itself felt in human beings.

Faith commitment is our response to the glory presence of God. John's Gospel emphasizes the theme of glory as identified with Jesus. All that Jesus does is a sign of the presence of God reaching out to his people. That is why Jesus asks Peter over and over again, "Do you love me?" (Jn 21:15, 16, 17). Jesus aches for that kind of faith commitment from Peter. And, praise the Lord, Peter gives that faith commitment that is to be our model.

Living this Message

Jesus provides us with the gift of faith so that we can know his loving plan to save us and have a relationship with him. Faith is first of all a "yes" to Christ, who asks us to be a friend of his. Secondly, faith is a "yes" to the meaning of Christ that is found in his message, which is explained throughout this book, *Invitation*.

When we fall in love with someone, we instinctively have faith and trust in that person. But we also want to know all about that person. Faith and reason are a pathway to that knowledge. At the divine level, faith helps us to know God's meaning for our lives. As we grow through our life-stages from early childhood, to the teen times, to young adulthood, to middle age, and to the final years, our faith must grow along with that development.

The two tracks are always there, growing in a personal relationship with Christ and growing in an ever-deeper knowledge about what he means. This is why adult faith formation is so important for Catholic maturity. While in the end we need to become again like a little child, we should not avoid growing up into a Catholic adult.

Discuss this Message

How have I grown in my faith since my childhood?

Read More about this Message

Catechism for Adults: Chapter 4, "Bring About the Obedience of Faith," pages 35 – 47.