

A MATTER OF FAITH

Our Christian faith cannot be reduced to the profession of the Apostles' Creed. It has practical consequences and concrete demands. Some people take "bits and pieces" of the Church's teachings, picking the elements they like, while leaving behind what they find "unpalatable," much as they choose their favorite dish in a salad bar. Theirs is a private religion, a watered-down belief, tending to shed its institutional character.

The Christian faith requires effort, docility and loyalty. It calls for a life patterned after that of the only model: Jesus. It may not promise an earthly paradise, but in a sense it brings heaven to earth. The faith of every pilgrim (*viator*) in this world is, in fact, an anticipation of the life to come, a foretaste of the eternal beatitude, a prelude to a face to face vision of God (cf. 1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 3:2). Faith is necessary for you and me to attain salvation, for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb 11:6).

Some years back I bumped into a stocky fellow after a soccer match in the university. We talked about the sport, the upcoming World Cup, the latest in the European Cup. The conversation slowly shifted to more serious things in life. When I asked him what his religion was, he tersely said: "Oh, I don't believe in God; I believe in myself." I tried to find a little window in that wall of incredulity, but again all I got was a curt remark: "I'm sorry but to me it's foolish to believe in someone you can't even see." Our disagreement didn't shove me off, but I just felt so sorry for him. All I could do was pray and of course, meet up with him for more soccer games.

Do you remember the "doubting Thomas?" He had the same dilemma two thousand years ago. The first time the risen Christ appeared to his disciples, everyone was present except Thomas. Later, when told about the apparition of their Master, Thomas refused to believe until he could see and touch Jesus: "unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25).

Jesus wanted to help Thomas get out of his state of disbelief, if the latter was to be of any use, to be of service to the Church. So Christ appeared again eight days later, now in the presence of his incredulous friend, and at once singled him out: "put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (Jn 20:27). Confronted by undeniable evidence, Thomas made an act of faith: *Dominus meus, et Deus meus!* – "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28).

What makes us waver sometimes is the uncertainty of the future. Our inability to control events and foresee things unsettles us and we are gripped by the fear of losing our balance. The root of our anxiety is attachment to certain things, too much trust in ourselves and lack of abandonment in the Divine Providence. When we are assailed by doubts it is not the moment to abandon the fight and lower down our defenses. Perseverance is the name of the game, "for the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Mt 7:14). Precisely because we can lose our faith (cf. 1 Tim 1:18-19), we need to hold on to it until the end.

When a person sincerely seeks the truth, he or she will find it. God may seem elusive at times, but only to test the sincerity of our intention, the solidity of our decision. Read stories of conversion to Catholicism. Each account is somehow unique, but they have a common thread: almost all are invariably tales of fortitude amidst a hostile environment. A remarkable example is the conversion of Scott Hahn. Born into a Presbyterian family, he grew up to become a protestant pastor, spending the first twenty or so years of his active life trying to prove zealously the errors of Catholics – only to join their ranks in the end. He searched the Sacred Scriptures, devoured the writings of the Church Fathers, and debated with biblical experts. Unknowingly he was "swimming the Tiber." His marriage with Kimberly trembled. His friends began to keep

distance, if not ostracized him. But he could not ignore the Truth. On Easter Vigil of 1986, against all odds he happily “returned home.” Kimberly held on for a few more years, but she eventually followed suit on her own convictions.

Scott and Kimberly walked their way to Rome. But the invisible hands of God guided them in every stage of their spiritual journey, for Jesus assures us that “everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Mt 7:8).

If we were men and women of faith, we would be strong and serene even in the face of serious contradictions. When others begin to vacillate, we remain firm. When others fall into despair, we exude hope. We do not compromise our convictions and principles in favor of what is easy and convenient. We take risks with prudence. We are steady in the spiritual combat. We are able to inspire others and bring peace to agitated minds. Our faith makes things happen. We believe in the power of God’s grace. We see the hands of Our Lord behind everything that happens. Our vision transcends the material world. We know how to read the signs of the times. We deal with every person as a soul of Christ.

“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8). If he calls you now to his presence, will he find faith in you?