

## THE VIRTUE OF FAITH

I. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Heb. 11:1.

A. The virtue of faith is the first of the supernatural virtues, which are above all: faith, hope, and charity. These virtues are supernatural both because they deal directly with our relationship with God, and because we can have them only by sanctifying grace. See CCC 153.

B. These virtues are given at baptism. Thus, even an infant can have these virtues, in the sense that, as his intellect, hopes, memory, and will develop, the practice of these virtues will grow with them. Because the development of intellect, hopes, memory, and will begin in infancy, although they are not fully exercised then, these virtues are important from that time onward.

C. There is a natural idea of faith as a part of human relationships.

1. In dealings with material things, as fields such as science, economics, and technology, a certain skepticism is a good thing. But even there, we must also be able to trust others, for otherwise each person would have to investigate everything himself, and thus not get very far. As Aristotle once said, "He who does not believe will never learn anything."
2. In deep human relationships (e.g., marriage, family, friendships), doubt is a limitation. It may be inevitable due to the fallibility of human nature, but we would rather it not be there. In these cases, there is faith, not only in the sense that one believes what the other person says, but one trusts the other person in himself and in relationship to him.
3. But God and His angels and saints are completely reliable, and thus this limitation due to doubt is not essential. Faith is that complete trust in God that both comes from and enhances our relationship with God and the angels and saints. Faith is not merely belief in propositions, but a deep trusting relationship with God Himself.
4. But we could not have that relationship without God revealing Himself to us. Thus, He inspired authors who wrote the Bible and guides the Church to reveal Him and His words to us. The faith is based upon our relationship with God,

who gives these sources their trustworthiness. Thus, as St. Thomas says, when we say we believe in the Bible or in the Catholic Church, we are implicitly saying that we believe in the Holy Spirit speaking through them. Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 1, article 9.

5. Our relationship with others around us, and with the angels and saints, is essential to our own faith. As the Catechism says, "Faith is a personal act. . . But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone." Catechism of the Catholic Church 166. But the virtue of faith, in the strict sense of the term, is in God alone and, by extension, in the Bible and doctrines that He has inspired and guided.

#### D. Faith is both believing and intelligent.

1. Faith does accept truths even though the human reason alone would not arrive at them, and even if human reason would argue against them. If one rejects something that is directly contrary to the Bible or the Catholic faith, one is placing final faith in some other standard (e.g., empirical science, popular opinion, or some philosophy.)

2. But faith, while it goes beyond reason, and may sometimes contradict what a person's reason says is more likely than not, is not at all contrary to reason. For it is a conclusion of reason that reason is limited in several ways.

a. An individual, in all honesty, must admit that his own ability to reason through a problem is limited and that his own conclusions of reason could be in error. One must admit that, due to both ignorance and the tendency to believe things that are convenient, an individual's reason cannot be infallible.

b. We know that every society in human history has had blind spots, some inevitable. It would be the height of arrogance to assume that modern culture has none.

c. Human reason itself is limited, especially with regard to spiritual things and things that are difficult to measure, such as love, freedom, duty, and immortal life. See St. Thomas, Summa Theologica II-II q.2 art. 3. Even in science, we can measure only what we can observe and observation has many limits.

3. It stands to reason that a God who cares about human beings would reveal Himself to us and make certain the matters necessary to our salvation. It therefore stands to reason that there is a revelation that God gives us to reveal His

saving plan for us. And, if the Bible is that revelation, it stands to reason that He would give an authority both to settle what is in the Bible and how it is to be interpreted.

4. Thus, if there is a loving God and if the Bible is His revelation, the Catholic faith is the reasonable conclusion. One may reason to the conclusion that those propositions are most likely, but it is only by the grace of God that one may come to the certainty of faith. Faith thus is consistent with reason, but brings us beyond it. As St. Thomas said, now with the Gospels, the simplest of handmaid can know more about God than the greatest of the pagan philosophers. St. Thomas, Exposition on the Apostles' Creed.

5. But even here, reason assists faith by drawing conclusions from the proposition of faith. Theology is, as St. Anselm put it, "Faith seeking understanding." Our intelligent understanding of faith should increase with our intellect generally. In addition, we should be ready with an answer to those who ask for it. 1 Peter 5:15.

6. There can never be any discrepancy between the certain conclusions of faith and the certain conclusions of reason, for God is the author of both. Catechism of the Catholic Church 159.

E. Faith is both certain and free. Faith combines the certainty of things we see and feel, with the freedom to accept it or not. There is both a light and a darkness.

II. Faith is given in baptism and naturally leads especially to the practices of adoration, prayer and sacrifice.

A. Even before baptism, divine grace moves those who are open to the faith, especially catechumens. The gift of faith, that full relationship with God that leads to a complete trust in Him, however, comes only with baptism. People who worship some aspects of God, but without knowing Christ have the virtue of religion, but not faith.

B. Adoration is a lifting up of one's soul, mind and body to God; it flows naturally from a sense of the presence of God. St. Thomas lists it with the virtues of justice and religion, see Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 85 article 1, but the Catechism says it especially springs from faith. Catechism of the Catholic Church 2096.

C. While one can have a certain worship of God based upon a natural knowledge of God, to enter into full communication with God, one must know who He is and be near to Him. "If our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain."

Catechism of the Catholic Church 2562. By giving us His name, God allows us to enter fully into His presence and communicate with Him. See Matt 11:27, John 15:26, 16:7. Thus, we generally begin our prayers, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

D. Offering things, services and penances to God and His service as a sacrifice is natural to religions throughout time and space. See Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 85 article 1. However, with faith, we come into a relationship with God and therefore allow Him to make our sacrifices worthy. See Ps. 51; Heb. 13:12-16..

E. Faith, at the same time, increases one's fear of offending God, but also changes the fear from a vague, servile fear of offending an unknown God, or the troubling fear of death, to a filial desire not to offend the One who loves us so much and, completing this fear, the desire to love and serve Him.

III. Especially contrary to faith are various forms of superstition, idolatry, heresy, irreligion, voluntary doubt, and agnosticism.

A. Superstition can either take the form of flatly pagan practices (e.g., horoscopes or astrology) or pseudo-Christian practices (e.g., believing that praying a certain novena absolutely guarantees that a prayer request will be granted.)  
Catechism of the Catholic Church 2111.

- God may, by His grace, grant miracles or prophesy into future events, and prayers requesting miracles or other favors with the understanding that God may or may not grant the request are meritorious. However, any attempt to connect the use of spiritual powers over material things with mere words or actions alone or to predict the future based upon the mere performing of actions or, worse still, invoking spirits on any other terms is magic or sorcery and thus gravely contrary to faith and very dangerous.

B. Idolatry can include either a direct worship of false gods (e.g., various forms of Hinduism or nature worship) or valuing things of the world (e.g., money, power, pleasure, popularity) above God.

- The Vatican II council did say that Muslims do adore with us one, merciful God and that other religions, presumably including those that have many gods often "in shadows and images seek the unknown God." Lumen Gentium 16. However, only Christians can said to have the full virtue of faith in Christ, with faithful Jews having a certain preparatory faith in the true God and His promises.

C. The sin of heresy is the deliberate denial of an article of faith.

1. Material heresy is the accidental denial of an article of faith, generally based upon ignorance of the articles of faith, or perhaps ignorance of the implications of one's statement. It may be negligence but is generally not a mortal sin.
2. However, willfully denying an article of faith from the Bible or the Church implicitly means denying the divine inspiration of Scripture or guidance of the Church and therefore implicitly rejects the whole faith. ST II-II q. 5 art. 3.
3. The Church does teach some matters (e.g., social doctrines) authoritatively, but not infallibly. They are not as certain as matters of the faith, but the faithful should still adhere to them with religious assent of intellect and will. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 892; Lumen Gentium 25.

D. Irreligion is a practice that tends to insult and/or undermine the faith, such as tempting God (i.e., insisting that God prove Himself in certain ways), sacrilege, blasphemy, or simony (i.e., selling of sacred things.) See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2118-2122.

E. Atheism, the denial of the existence of God, is always an action of sin, although the atheist may not be at fault. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2125. Sometimes atheism may come from scandal caused by believers, but sometimes it comes from a desire that there be no God who makes moral demands on one. Cf. Summa Theologica Part II-II question 10, article 1 and question 15, article 1

F. Although a person searching for God may have doubts before having faith, and although involuntary doubts may affect even a believer, willfully creating such doubts, or failing to ask God to help resolve them, is sinful. Agnosticism, the view that truth about God and supernatural things cannot be known is frequently "a flight from the ultimate question of existence, and a sluggish moral conscience." Catechism of the Catholic Church 2128.