

RCIA CLASS 2 - 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 Catechism of the Catholic Church 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." See Bl. John Paul II, Fides et Ratio (Faith and Reason) 31 (1998.)

2. However, as Joseph Pieper points out in his book Faith, Hope and Charity, 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. 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. See St. Thomas Aquinas, 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, for faith does not grow with an individual alone. But each person must choose whether to accept and grow in the 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. Thus, if we are to know about supernatural things, trust in something above reason is essential.

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 Aquinas said, now with the Gospels, the simplest of handmaid can know more about God than the greatest of the pagan philosophers. St. Thomas Aquinas, 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. God invites us to the faith, and it is freely given in the sacrament. But a person can choose to accept it or not. If accepted, there exists and increases in the soul a divine light that gives certainty, although also a sense of a realm that is not seen. There is both a light and a darkness. God allows the mystery, the inability to perceive with certainty on earth that the faith may be our choice, and thus more meritorious. See John 20:29; Heb. 11.

II. Thus, God gives us both reason and faith, both the learning of the ages and Revelation, whose interpretation is guided by the Church.

A. We can come to a certain amount of knowledge of the good and of God and our eternal homeland, but this knowledge is limited.

1. God gave even pagans a knowledge of the good, which is written on every human heart. But, as St. Paul says, no one has been able completely to carry that desire for goodness out in practice. See, e.g., Rom. 1:19-23, 2:16-22, 3:9-20.

2. The vast majority of people throughout time and space have intuitively understood that there is a God (or gods) and that they offer Him (or them) worship. Even when wholly impractical, this worship is an essential part of human society. Even such an Enlightenment era figure as Benjamin Franklin said, "There is in all men something like a natural principle which inclines them to devotion or worship of some unseen Power." Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion (1728).

3. Likewise, the great philosophical traditions of East and West, as well as native religions have some consistent social ethics, which, while they differ, do indicate fundamental principles, such as justice, honesty, generosity, family, and reverence. See Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes 16 (1965.) C.S. Lewis gives a survey of such principles at the end of his book The Abolition of Man. The success of the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts throughout the world are a modern sign of this universal knowledge.

4. However, there are also some crucial variations on religion and morals. There is the worship of one God and many gods, and the notion of a loving but demanding God, a more abstract God (such as the Great Watchmaker of the Enlightenment), and even a God who does not seem to care what we do (such as the pagan gods or the modern New Age spirituality.) Without any revelation from God, it would be difficult to make one's way through the thicket of different beliefs.

5. It is critical to know about human nature in order for us to advance toward the good, the true, the beautiful, and the holy.

- We sometimes deceive ourselves because of self-interest and laziness. As Benjamin Franklin said in his Autobiography, "The wonderful thing about being a reasonable creature is that one can make or find a reason for anything one has a mind to do."

- Other ignorance may be blameless. But even innocent ignorance leads to error and thus damage to human nature as even innocent ignorance of medicine can lead people to damage the human body. Sin still causes death, even is a

person does not know the law that he is sinning against and is thus not personally guilty of it. See Rom. 5:12-14.

B. Thus, that we may know Him and His plan of salvation, God reveals Himself to us through writings, but also through a living tradition. This writing is the Bible and the living tradition of the Church is both Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium.

1. Without this Revelation, we could only know a limited amount about our eternal destiny, about the way and the end of the journey. And even what could be known by human reason would often be confused by the human tendency to error. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part I, question 1, article 1; John Paul II, Fides et Ratio (1998) 28.

2. Thus, God has revealed Himself to us through human history. Starting with Abraham, He formed the Chosen People of old to prepare the way for Christ. And then Jesus Christ came to earth, revealing God in Himself, and declaring Himself to be the way, the truth and the life. See, e.g., John 14:5-14; Pope John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor (1993) 2. But these revelations to specific people throughout time and space had to be handed on to others through visible and tangible means.

3. One of these means, which Catholics and Protestants agree on (as well as Jews for their portion of the Scriptures) is the written word, which we call the Bible. We maintain that the human authors, using their own talents, intelligence, efforts, and the like, were guided by the Holy Spirit to express the truths God wished to convey firmly, faithfully and without error. The written expression of the truth is contained in the Bible. See Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum (1965) 11; Catechism of the Catholic Church 105-107.

4. However, the words of Scripture are not the only means of teaching. God also provided for a living tradition of the Church that expresses God's truth through living practices, and in particular the consistent traditions that the Church has maintained from the beginning. The list of books in the Bible, the structure of the Mass, and the roles of the hierarchy are examples of things known through the Sacred Tradition of the Church. See Dei Verbum 9.

5. But there are also ambiguities in both the Bible and Sacred Tradition. And so God also gives His Church the authority to interpret authentically what the Bible and Tradition mean, the truths they contain and how God wants us to live. The Church first did so at the Council of Jerusalem, when the Apostles decided that the Jewish ritual law did not bind Christians, especially those who had never been Jews. See Acts of the Apostles 15. And, for the sake of clarifying matters that would otherwise be ambiguous, God gave the Church through the Pope and the bishops, the successors to the

Apostles, the Magisterium, the ability to define truths of the faith. See Dei Verbum 10; Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 1, article 9. Scripture expresses the truths of God in a flowing literary fashion, and Sacred Tradition through the practices of the early Church. The Magisterium of the Church, which is exercised with great care, expresses the truths in a more systematic, catechetical style. All three sources of truth work together to help us understand more about God and our callings.

C. Faith does not eliminate the need for reason, but rather is joined with it. Faith and reason should work together to help us advance in the truth. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth." Fides et Ratio (1998) 1.

1. Reason can tell us certain things about God, such as His existence, His eternity, and His orderliness. But we can only get so far with reason alone.

- Thus, we need revelation to guide us to a level that we need, but that reason cannot bring us. Reason itself tells us that it is limited and thus points the way to faith.

2. But reason also brings out more about our faith. For the Church, in reflecting upon Scripture and Tradition, with the assistance of reason, has defined truths about the faith, such as the fact that God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the fact that the Eucharist is the essence of Christ, with the accidents (or physical attributes) of bread and wine, and the fact that a sacrament is a symbol given by Jesus to the Church that confers the specific grace it signifies. Such understandings are examples of St. Anselm's definition of theology, "Faith seeking understanding."

III. Faith is given by grace, especially in baptism, and naturally leads especially to the practices of prayer, sacrifice, and a loving desire to please Him by a holy life.

A. Even before baptism, divine grace moves those who are open to the faith, especially catechumans, i.e., people who are seeking baptism. 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. This trusting belief in God naturally leads us to wish to pray, i.e., to be in conversation with Him, for His is the goal of all of our lives, and indeed of all of the universe. As St. Augustine so famously said at the beginning of his Confessions, "You encourage

man to delight in Your praise, for You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until we rest in You." Prayer is a lifting up of one's soul, mind and body to God; it flows naturally from a sense of the presence of God.

1. Most people, Christian or not, intuitively sense a desire and obligation to pray. The Catechism, adopting St. Thomas Aquinas' view, calls this instinct the virtue of religion, which he allies with justice. See Catechism of the Catholic Church 2096; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 85 article 1

2. However, our prayer can only get so far without the infusion of God's grace and the knowledge that comes from faith, for our limitations prevent us from accessing the greater realm on our own. Thus, God gives the faith and allows us into union with Him. See Matt 11:25-30, John 16:12-15; Eph. 2:19. And prayer becomes both the result of our faith, and deepens the trusting relationship with God that is faith. By giving us His name, God allows us to enter fully into His presence and communicate with Him. Thus, we generally begin our prayers, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." See Matt. 28:19. And thus a literal interpretation of the Creed we recite at Mass would be "I believe into one God."

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. 51:15-19; Heb. 13:11-16.

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. Without this desire to serve God, faith eventually dies. See, e.g., Matt. 7:24-27; James 2:26

IV. 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 psuedo-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 paganism 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 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 grave 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. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 5 art. 3.

3. The Church does teach some matters (e.g., social doctrines regarding just wages or responsibility for religious education) 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. Most statements by popes or even Church councils are explanations of the faith, but are not themselves official teachings of the Church. Such statements (e.g., a homily by the Pope or a decree of a Vatican congregation) are due respect, but are not of themselves teachings of the faith.

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

E. 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.