

Faith and Certainty

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*

- Hebrews 11:1

Nothing validates our opinion more than someone agreeing with us and nothing makes us feel more confident than clear-cut black and white answers. This attitude can be a real problem when applied to our faith which is rooted in mystery and involves the conviction of things *not seen* with perfect clarity. But it is encouraged by the Internet and its unlimited number of Catholic websites and Catholic viewpoints. Often these websites present Catholic news and doctrine from a particular and narrow point of view.

Consider the National Catholic Register, the National Catholic Reporter, EWTN, the Roman Theological Forum, Catholic Culture, or America Magazine online. We label our favorite sites “reliable” and “authentic.” We label the others as too “progressive,” “radical,” “liberal,” “conservative,” “reactionary,” “heretical,” or “lunatic fringe,” depending on our point of view.

A consequence of a narrow viewpoint is that it suggests that clear simple answers can be provided for all questions of faith, even the complex ones that theologians and the Magisterium struggle with. It also suggests that those with an alternative point of view or a different emphasis are less Catholic. We feel that we must focus on social issues *or* moral issues *or* personal spirituality *or* ritual *or* the miraculous. This tends to polarize Catholic opinion in the same unhealthy way that our politics have been polarized.

Pope Francis addressed this issue in his recent interview with America Magazine:

“[I]n this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble.”

The certain knowledge of some of these websites results in the quick labeling, in the mind of the reader, of who God likes and who God does not like. That is not our mission. Christ ate with sinners while they were still sinners, in order to save them. Pope Francis puts it this way:

“The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all.

Our faith is based on relationships not rules. Our relationship with God is more important than our ability to explain him. Our relationship with our neighbor is more important than an identification of his shortcomings. Pope Francis tells us:

“The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church’s pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus.”

Let us get out of the comfort zone of engaging only those who believe exactly what we believe. Let us engage Catholics and examine Catholic websites that express a different viewpoint and find out what is important to them. We do not have to compromise our beliefs to broaden them. This will also help us engage those who have left the Church, who we also need to listen to.

The Pharisees of Jesus’s time were happy to judge and write off those who they saw as less devout, just as, in our times, some are content to see the Church get smaller and presumably more devout. But Jesus praises instead the shepherd who goes in search of a single lost sheep and who rejoices when it is found.

This is the message of Pope Francis and the New Evangelization. The certainty of our faith does not lie in our ability to judge our brother’s orthodoxy, but in our conviction of God’s steadfast love and mercy for all of us. Our mission is to convey the “good news,” the gospel. All of our doctrines and all of our rules are a grateful response to that love and mercy.