

Faith and Belief

During this Easter Season we hear the words *faith* and *belief* frequently. They are so familiar to us that we may overlook their meaning and importance to us as Christians. The dictionary, which gives us a secular perspective, tells us that faith and belief both suggest an “assent to the truth of something offered for acceptance.” In particular, they both express a “confidence in *the truth* or existence of something not susceptible to rigorous proof.”

Many in our enlightened, modern world are more comfortable with *factual* or *scientific* truth. The truth of faith is seen to be subjective and inferior to scientific truth. But the domain of science is limited to material things that can be measured with a yardstick, or weighed in a balance, or have its temperature taken. You cannot measure, for example, the love of another human being or the truth of our religious convictions with the tools of science. I have started with the secular perspective on faith and belief because its inherent skepticism tends to undercut the confidence with which we should hold our religious beliefs.

We learn much more about faith and belief when we turn to the Catechism (Sections 142-165). There we learn that faith is a gift from God. He reveals himself to us enabling us to believe in him. But faith also requires a response from us. Our intellect and will must cooperate with divine grace. The outcome of our response is summarized as follows:

By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer. Sacred Scripture calls this human response to God, the author of revelation, "the obedience of faith". (CCC143)

With obedience comes understanding as summarized by St. Augustine (Sermon 43):

“I believe, in order to understand;
and I understand, the better to believe.”

And with obedience and understanding comes certainty, as in the classic definition given in the Letter to the Hebrews 11:1:

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

The words *assurance* and *conviction* signal to us that the knowledge we hold by faith is just as valid and sure as scientific truth.

This definition in Hebrews is followed by a number of examples, from the Old Testament, of acts of faith in response to God’s initiatives on behalf of his chosen people. These were acts of faith in which God revealed himself and which led to his ultimate act of revelation, the sending of his Son.

An additional support for our faith is the acceptance of the witness of those who have preceded us in the faith. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith

In other words, we have the words of Sacred Scripture that go back to the original witnesses and that have been preserved by the Church for over 2,000 years. The Gospels witness how Jesus perfects our faith. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, we see the disciples struggling to understand who Jesus was and what he offered. Jesus offered the supreme example of obedience to God by his death on the Cross. As a result God raised him up and exalted him.

Of this the disciples were witnesses in two important ways: First, they encountered the risen Jesus and finally understood and *believed* who he was: the Son of God who reveals the will of the Father. Second, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit and proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ to all.

Their witness is our challenge, a challenge to believe without seeing as in Jesus' words to Thomas:

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (John 20:29)

Finally, I would point out that faith does not end with the "assent to a truth offered for acceptance." Belief results in *action*, just as it did with the first disciples.

The disciples suffered and died proclaiming their newly found faith. During this Easter Season, think about what your faith in Jesus means. Spend some time reflecting how your faith affects how you live. And consider what God has offered us as summarized in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

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