

## **You Gotta Have Faith!**

Why do we need faith? We need faith because our world is full of death. And so are we. Each one of us will die. So will each nation. Also we need faith because there is no peace. We cannot find peace in our own hearts or with each other. Neither can nations find peace with each other.

Faith in God is what we need to find an answer to life and death. In God we can also find our peace.

Faith in the God who has not left us in the dark but has revealed Himself as our Creator; who designed us to know and serve Him in this life and be with Him forever in the next.

Faith in Jesus Christ, who came down from heaven to reveal God's love, to die on the Cross to save us from sin, and to rise from the grave to save us from death.

Faith in the Church that Christ left us as His visible body on earth, empowered by His Spirit, authorized to teach in His name with His authority: to invite us to believe the truth of His Gospel, to live the life of His love, and to celebrate the sacraments of His presence.

Faith is the answer to fear. Deep down we are all afraid: of suffering, or of dying, or of God's judgment, or of the unknown, or of our lives' slipping out of our control, or of not being understood and loved.

Faith casts out fear, as light casts out darkness. God has shone his light into our world, and it is stronger than darkness (Jn 1:5).

One of the explanations given of the word "religion" is that it comes from *religare* in Latin and means "relationship" – relationship with God.

The whole of religion stems from faith:

- Morality is living the faith.
- Liturgy is the celebration of the faith.
- Prayer is what faith does.

What do we mean by “faith”? We must distinguish the human act of faith from the divine object of faith. The act of faith is ours. It is our choice to believe or not to believe. To believe what? What God has revealed, divine revelation. That is the object of faith: God and His revelation.

Faith is our response to divine revelation. Faith is not some feeling we work up within ourselves. Faith has data which we are called to believe in. This data comes from God’s revelation. The Church summarizes this data in her creeds (the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed). They are called “creeds” because they begin with “I believe,” which in Latin is *credo*.

But the ultimate object of faith is not creeds but God. Creeds define what we believe about God but it is God in whom we actually have faith. The creeds simply point toward God.

What the Church teaches and summarizes in her creeds was not invented by the Church. It was handed down to her from Jesus Christ. That is why it is called “Sacred Tradition” – “sacred” because it came from God, not mere man, and “tradition” because it was handed down (*tradition* in Latin means handed over or down).

A great part of the Church’s Sacred Tradition is recorded in the Bible but the Bible is not the only source. Sacred Tradition was also passed on orally in the teachings of the early Church.

The Church has always been and must always be faithful to the Truths passed on to her. She is not their author. God is the Author. The Church does not have the authority to change or delete any part of it, no matter how unpopular it may become to any particular human society or individual.

That does not mean that the Faith cannot change. It constantly changes – but by growth from within, like a living plant – maturing and drawing out more and more of its own inner meaning and applying it to changing times.

The original doctrine remains the same, given in its entirety 2000 years ago by Christ. But the development of these doctrines is ongoing because the doctrines are alive and grow. While revelation “is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 66).

The Church is the living teacher of the living Faith. We call the Church’s teaching authority the “Magisterium of the Church.”

“Salvation comes from God alone but because we receive the life of faith through the Church she is our mother.” (CCC, 169).

Faith cannot be forced any more than love can be forced. Therefore the attempt to threaten or coerce anyone into believing is not only morally wrong but also psychologically foolish. For what can be coerced is fear, not faith. As the saying goes, “A man convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still.”

Faith is not some state of feeling we get ourselves into. It is simply believing in God and therefore believing everything He has revealed – no matter how we feel. Feelings are influenced by external things, like fads and friends, even by weather. But when God gives us the gift of faith, He gives it from within our own free will.

Though faith is not a feeling it often produces feelings; of trust, peace, gratitude, and confidence, for instance. And faith can also be aided by feelings. For instance, when we feel trustful or grateful to God it is much easier for us to believe Him than when we feel mistrustful or ungrateful.

But even when we don't feel trustful or peaceful, we can still believe. Faith is not dependent on feelings. It is dependent on facts, divinely revealed facts.

Faith includes belief, but it is more than belief. Belief is an act of the mind; faith is also an act of the will. The object of belief is an idea; the object of faith is a Person.

Non-Catholics who, through no fault of their own, do not believe that the Catholic Faith is true can still be saved, by the faith in their hearts that leads them to love, seek, and serve God as best they know. For Christ promised that "all who seek, will find" (Mt 7:7). So while belief without faith cannot save anyone, faith without correct belief can.

The act of faith comes to us from God, through the Holy Spirit, who inspires it. And so faith is a free gift of God.

What does faith do? The result of faith is a new spiritual life in the believer's soul: the life of God himself. Faith is necessary for salvation – not because God arbitrarily decreed this but because of what faith is and what salvation is. If we let God into our souls (that is what faith is) we will have a new life in God (what salvation is).

Faith is more like opening a faucet than passing a test. If you don't open the faucet of faith, you won't receive the water of salvation.

Faith can never contradict reason, when reason is properly used, though faith goes beyond reason. As a revelation from God, the Catholic Faith tells us many things human reason could never have discovered by itself. But faith and reason are both roads to truth, and truth never contradicts truth. There is one God who is the source of all truth, whether that truth is known by faith or reason; and God never contradicts Himself.

God is like a teacher who wrote two books and teaches from them: the book of natural reason and the book of supernatural revelation.

There are no contradictions between the two books because they both come from the same Author.

Faith is certain, but it is also mysterious. "It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God, who cannot lie" (CCC no. 157). But faith is also mysterious, for the very same reason: because its object is God. God is infinite, and our understanding is finite.

Faith is like a bright light surrounded by darkness, a light that keeps growing and illuminating new areas of the darkness.

No one "loses" his faith, as he loses his watch. Faith is never lost against our will, any more than it is chosen against our will. We choose to believe and we choose not to believe.

Here are some of the main causes for the choice not to believe:

- 1) revolt against evil in the world, and against the God who does not act as quickly to defeat evil as we would wish;
- 2) ignorance or misunderstanding of the Faith;
- 3) indifference or laziness;
- 4) the cares of the world, "having no time for religion" (that is, making no time for God);
- 5) preoccupation with riches and the things money can buy, "serving the creature more than the Creator" (Rom 1:25);
- 6) the scandal of bad example on the part of believers;
- 7) the unfashionableness of religion in a secular society;
- 8) the refusal to repent and give up some cherished sin;
- 9) fear of the unknown, fear of letting go and trusting completely in God; fear of suffering rejection or reprisals from family, friends, or secular authorities;
- 11) pride, the demand to "play God," to be in control, to have our own way; and
- 12) the difficulty in trusting God as Father if we have experienced broken families and absent or unloving human fathers.

Here are faith's answers to those choices:

- 1) Faith's one-word answer to the problem of evil is: Wait. God will conquer all evil, in time, in the end. But we have to go through the middle of the story to get to the end.
- 2) Diligent study of sound books and other materials on the Catholic Faith (including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*), or a wise teacher can usually clear up misunderstandings.
- 3) If we knew God as His closest friends, the saints, do, we could never be bored or indifferent to Him. If we are bored with Catholic theology, morality, or liturgy, that's because we do not realize that they are the truth about God, the good will of this God, and the celebration of the presence of God.
- 4) If it is foolish to refuse to give up ten dollars to win a million, it is even more foolish to refuse to give up a little time to win eternity.
- 5) Everything we seek, desire, love, and enjoy in the things of this world, the things we hope money can buy – pleasure, beauty, freedom, power, peace, excitement, happiness – is to be found in God, multiplied to infinity.
- 6) Do we refuse to love because there are some bad lovers? Do we refuse to marry because there are some bad husbands and wives?
- 7) If you must choose between the two, which is better: to be accepted by God forever and be rejected by some men for a little time, or to be accepted by some men for a little time but rejected by God forever?
- 8) We are all sinners, sin addicts, sinaholics. We all find it hard to give up cherished sins, even after we believe (though it is much easier and happier then). But the question is not whether we can, but whether we will, whether we are willing to let God do it in us.
- 9) Being born, falling in love, marrying, or traveling to a new place are all experiences of the unknown. All the greatest joys in life come from letting go.
- 10) Jesus promised us: "Every one who has forsaken houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or

lands for My name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit eternal life" (Mt 19:29).

11) Pride was the first sin, the sin of Satan, who resented being Number Two to God. He would not obey God's will, only his own. ("Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven" Satan proclaims in *Paradise Lost*). This is also a selfish, spoiled baby's philosophy of life: "I want what I want when I want it." Two rather unwise models to live by, don't you think?

12) You know from past bitter experience that where there is no faith and trust there can be no joy. You know the past but you do not know the future. You do know that your only hope, your only chance at joy, on earth and in Heaven forever, is to trust and to love. If our trust is betrayed by men, that is all the more reason to trust God.

The Catholic Faith has one answer, ultimately, to all these problems, in fact, one answer to all problems: Jesus Christ, the one answer God provided. "God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19).

*This essay is a condensed and modified version of the first chapter, "Faith," in Peter Kreeft's Catholic Christianity (Ignatius Press, 2001).*