

## Faith, Hope & Love

*There are three things that last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love (1Cor 13 v13). The theological virtues of **faith, hope and charity(love)** are, the catechism says, *the foundation of Christian moral activity...they are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life.**

### Faith

We often use the words *belief* and *faith* interchangeably as if they mean the same thing. In some respects they can: my dictionary defines belief as *placing trust or confidence in a person or thing*, and faith as *a confident belief in the truth or trustworthiness of a person, idea or thing* – very similar. However with regard to faith, the dictionary offers a second definition which underscores the major difference between the two words when it says that faith is *belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence*. I believe that Australia exists, even though I have never been there, because I have seen pictures and I have met people who live there or have been there. On the other hand I have *faith* in the fact that Jesus Christ walked this earth even though there is no physical evidence, nor can it be proved by intellectual reasoning. I believe it to be true because God has said so. There may be various things that sustain my faith thereafter, but initially my faith is a leap in the dark – well, actually, a leap in the light.

The catechism offers the following thoughts: *To obey in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself. What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in light of our natural reason; we believe because of the authority of God himself who reveals them.* These statements presuppose belief in God, of course. If we don't believe in God, then we wouldn't have faith in the theological sense in which we use the word. For the sake of argument, and the pointlessness otherwise of going any further reading or writing this, let's say we do indeed believe in God – and, again, that involves *faith* rather than *belief*.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews (11 v 2) and St Paul in his letter to the Romans (8 v 24) say: *Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of the realities that at present remain unseen... Our salvation is not in sight, we should not have to be hoping for it if it were.* The point being made is that whereas faith sustains hope in something as yet unseen, we need neither hope nor belief if the object is staring us in the face. Faith goes beyond belief in as much as, as we just said, belief can be sustained by proof and logical argument, whereas faith involves things that we can't see, physically or logically.

As the catechism reminds us, faith is a gift from God – a grace he freely gives in order to help us in the limitations of our humanness. Again this emphasizes what we have just said, that we might believe something because we have worked it out for ourselves, proving it to our satisfaction, whereas the gift of faith helps us to accept things simply because God asks us to - whether they make sense to us or not. When we turn on a tap we believe water will come out because that's what always happens – we have “faith” that it will happen because it always has done in the past. What God can sometimes ask of us is that we believe that water will come out of a tap we can't even see. Through the gift of faith we trust not only that there is a tap, but that water will come out of it – because God has said so.

Sometimes people will get themselves in a state because they have found themselves questioning their faith. We probably need to understand the difference between “questioning” when it means working through things in our mind, and “questioning” when it means doubting or, worse still, refusing to believe. The former can be healthy as long as we are not putting our faith at risk – in a sense we are merely stretching our theological muscles and that's fine if it doesn't lead to a need for proofs or persuasion. This is very different from what the catechism refers to as *disregarding or refusing to hold as true what God has revealed and what the Church proposes for belief*. We are in fact required, it says, *to nourish and protect our faith with prudence and vigilance, and to reject everything opposed to it*. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

## Hope

In the ordinary circumstances of our lives we typically hope for all sorts of things for which there is no guarantee they will happen. Some of them will because they fall within our own ability to bring them about; others are things that are probably more dreams than hopes. We may hope to take a foreign holiday this year; we may also hope to win the lottery.

Hope, in the theological sense, is a little different. The catechism says: *Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the Kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Through the merits of Jesus Christ and of his Passion, God keeps us in the hope that does not disappoint. Hope is the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul... a weapon that protects us in the struggle of salvation. We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will.*

Through his death and resurrection we have been redeemed, Christ has “bought us back”, we are offered the opportunity for salvation. However salvation isn't automatic. We can't say that because Our Lord has died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins that we can now “eat, drink and be merry” because it is all

taken care of already. Nor can we say that because we believe in an all-loving Father, he will forgive us whatever we do. The catechism teaches that one of the sins against hope is *presuming upon God's almighty power or his mercy, hoping to obtain his forgiveness without conversion, and glory without merit.*

**W**e are only too well aware that in and of ourselves we would struggle to merit the salvation offered to us – that's where grace comes in. *Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity*, the catechism says, *we can merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.* By God's grace, anything is possible despite our personal faults and failings and limitations. No matter how much we may find ourselves struggling, there is always hope. No matter how many times we fall, hope helps us to our feet. There is always hope and hope offers encouragement.

*Christ has in fact been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep. Death came through one man and in the same way the resurrection of the dead has come through one man. Just as all men die in Adam, so all men will be brought to life in Christ (1Cor 15 v 20-22). I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die (Jn 11 v 25-26).* What greater hope could we have?

### **Charity(Love)**

*Charity*, the catechism says, *is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake (because he loves us) and our neighbour as ourselves for the love of God.* Our love of God is lived out in and through our love and service of neighbour. *A man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God whom he has never seen (1Jn 4 v20).* A constant call in the gospels and letters of the New Testament is to love of God and love of neighbour – the “new and greatest commandment”.

*The fruits of charity*, the catechism says, *are joy, peace and mercy; charity demands beneficence [charity or kindness] and fraternal correction; it is benevolence [goodwill or doing good]; it fosters reciprocity and remains disinterested and generous; it is friendship and communion.* Unfortunately, these days, the word “charity” is used more with reference to donations and hand-outs to the less fortunate than in the theological sense of *caritas* – Christian love of neighbour. It is in this latter sense that we must understand it. As followers of Christ, we are called to love our neighbour, even to love our enemies, but this isn't always easy. We may not always like certain people (indeed, they may make themselves un-likeable) but we do still have to love them – just as God may not always like us and the things we do and say, but he does still always love us. Perhaps, sometimes, the best we can do is to at least

not wish someone harm, to at least be charitable (without being self-righteous about it) and in the meantime look for ways to move the situation in a more positive direction.

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you* (Jn 15 v 12). Biblical commentators have suggested that when Jesus says to his disciples “follow me”, he doesn’t necessarily mean “follow where I go” but “follow my example” “do as I do”. Insofar, therefore, as he extends his unconditional love to all people, this is the example we must follow. An essential input here would be St Paul’s beautiful reflection on love in chapter thirteen of his first letter to the Corinthians. Perhaps it would be good to stop and read that now. *If I am without love(charity), then I am nothing at all.*

The catechism goes on to make a further important point. *The practice of the moral life animated by charity gives to the Christian the spiritual freedom of the children of God. We no longer stand before God as a slave, in servile fear...but as a son or daughter responding to the love of him who first loved us.* We don’t “love” God out of fear, we love God because he loves us, and in his great love for us he gives us the supreme gift of freedom, freedom of choice, freedom to choose to love him. With that freedom God takes the very real risk that we may in fact choose *not* to love him, but what would our love be if it was coerced?

As we then search for ways in which to show our love for God, “the God we cannot see”, one ever-present and practical way is through love and service of our neighbour, “whom we can see”, in and through whom we find God. They are loved by God and in loving them we love him. And if we ever find ourselves struggling to find God in them, remember that they may be able to say the same about us, and in that there’s a lesson about not being judgmental and the importance of reflecting faith, hope and love at all times and in all aspects of our life.

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