

WHAT IS FAITH?

According to the old Baltimore Catechism, faith was defined as “[T]he virtue by which we firmly believe all the truths God has revealed, on the word of God revealing them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.” Those Catholics who studied their religion under the Baltimore Catechism can probably feel the words rolling off their tongues as they read them right now. Certainly this teaching has merit today as well. However, this answer to the question, what is faith, comes from the 1941 revised edition of the Baltimore Catechism. I’m not so sure every Catholic in the United States would agree with that definition today, especially when the Catholic Church has always taught that the Sunday obligation is a truth God has revealed in Sacred Scripture and in other ways. There are lots of teachings about morality, sexuality and other issues that the Church has always taught that most Catholics just do not agree with, despite the fact that God, who reveals all truths the Church teaches, would never deceive us, and so they must, in fact, be true.

The new Catechism of the Catholic Church defines faith in the glossary by saying it is “[B]oth a gift of God and a human act by which the believer gives personal adherence to God who invites his response, and freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed. It is this revelation of God which the Church proposes for our belief, and which we profess in the Creed, celebrate in the sacraments, live by right conduct that fulfills the twofold commandment of charity (as specified in the ten commandments), and respond to in our prayers of faith. Faith is both a theological virtue given by God as grace, and an obligation which flows from the first Commandment of God.”

So, faith is, first of all a gift of enlightenment. God reveals the truth of his love to us without explaining every mystery. We, on the other hand, have to make an ascent of the will; a human act that says even though we don’t understand everything there is to know about our faith, we will believe anyway. We freely choose what it is we believe; it is by faith that we are able to believe. What we believe is informed by the teachings of the Church; the creed we profess, the Sacred Scriptures and our celebrations of the sacraments. Our belief also informs our actions so that we conduct our lives according to what the Church teaches. The command to love says it all: you shall love the Lord your God with all your mind, all your heart, all your soul and all your strength and your neighbor as well as yourself (see Matthew 22:37-38). Faith enables us to make such a commitment even though we can’t fully comprehend the mysteries of our relationship with God.

We do know this about our relationship with God: he is the giver of the gift of faith and we receive it. The question is this: what do we do with this gift? Like with any gift we receive, the most important thing to do is to offer some expression of gratitude. Are we grateful for the gift of our faith, or is it a gift we tend to take for granted? When I went to college I was presented with an afghan my grandmother made for me. I used it all the time and still have it, but it is wrapped up in an air tight bag on a shelf in my closet. No moths are going to get in and destroy my afghan, but, sad to say, I am not using it. I am, of course, grateful that I have this gift, but it would have more value to me if I used it, especially now that winter is coming soon.

How often does the gift of faith become like my grandmother's afghan? Does it sometimes become like a gift that gathers dust somewhere in the darker recesses of our souls? The fact that so many people choose not to worship is a cultural indicator that the gift of faith is not always being used to bring people to God, at least not in the context of a worshiping community. The fact that our lives become so busy that we do not have time for prayer indicates that other priorities like jobs, the pressures of our lifestyles, and the roles we play become more important than the gift of faith, and the moral character of our society today bears this out.

What kind of value do we put on the gift of faith God has given to us? Faith is the kind of gift that grows in value the more it is used. Like a flame passed from candle to candle, the gift of faith multiplies the more it is given away. Faith is a very powerful gift because it illuminates our souls with the light of God's love. Faith informs our consciences so that we have the freedom to make the best moral decisions. Faith is a gift that enables us to identify who we are. We belong to families and our names indicate who our family members are. We are also members of the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and it is through our faith that we identify ourselves as Christians. Faith leads us to prayer; it shows us the way we are to walk in our spiritual journey to God's kingdom. Because of our faith we gather to worship God as a community of believers that loves God and each other. Faith empowers us to be merciful to those who sin. Faith inspires us to be charitable to the poor. Faith enables us to take up our crosses each day trusting that the way of Christ is the way to eternal life.

In order for the gift of faith to be shared, though, we often need to experience some kind of change in our lives. We experience our faith as an awakening process. People who are in the RCIA are often a source of inspiration for those of us who have been Catholic all our lives because we can see their faith coming to light in the conversion process. It is important for us to remember, though, that how we live our own faith is an example to catechumens and candidates of how they can live theirs. So the gift of faith is given away, it is not one we keep for ourselves. But the more we share our faith, the more rooted we become in our faith.

What a mystery! God gives us a precious gift that we are to use and share, and the more we do, the greater this gift becomes. Its value cannot be measured; it can only be experienced in our day to day lives. The more we use this gift the more grateful we are for it, and the more we give it away, the more of it we possess.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

What kind of value do we place on the gift of faith in our daily lives?

Who has been a source of inspiration to help me grow in my faith?