

What Does the Church Believe?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

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LET ME BEGIN with an incident which took place soon after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The Council had opened for the Church and for theology large areas for dialogue, particularly by its *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, but also by its decrees on ecumenism, the missions, non-Christian religions, and religious freedom. New areas arose, and new methods became necessary. For a theologian eager to keep up with the times and have an accurate view of his mandate, it seemed necessary to put aside themes of the past in order to concentrate on issues of the moment that were coming at him from all sides. I had at that time sent a small work to [the Swiss theologian] Hans Urs von Balthasar who, as always, immediately sent me a word of thanks, adding a sentence so exactly right that I never forgot it: “Do not presuppose the faith; propose it.” I was struck by this directive. The movement into new domains was good and necessary, but only in so far as it arose out of a presupposition which itself comes from the central light of faith and is transmitted in that light.

Faith is not something static. One can never presuppose that it is already accomplished. It must be continually re-lived. And, because it is an act that embraces all the dimensions of our existence, it must always be rethought and always witnessed to afresh. That is why the great themes of the faith—God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, grace and sin, the sacraments and the Church, death and eternal life—are never old. These themes always touch us profoundly. As they are at the centre of proclamation, so they ought also to be at the centre of theological thinking. The bishops of the 1985 synod, in asking for a general catechism for the whole Church, truly knew what Balthasar had earlier expressed to me. Pastoral experience had shown them that many new activities had no firm basis because they were not the effulgence and the application of the message of the faith. Faith cannot be

presupposed; it must be proposed. That is the ultimate reason for the *Catechism*: to propose the faith in its fullness and its richness, but also in its unity and simplicity.

What does the Church believe? This question includes others: who believes and how? The *Catechism* treats these two fundamental questions of the faith, the what and the who, as an interior unity. That is to say, it demonstrates that the act of faith and the content of the faith are inseparable. Lest this statement seem abstract, let us seek to develop a little what one understands by it. In professions of faith one finds “I believe” as well as “we believe.” We speak of the faith of the Church, we speak of the personal character of faith, and we speak, finally, of faith as a gift of God, as a “theological act” according to current theological usage. What does all this signify? That faith is an orientation of our existence taken in its entirety. It is a profound decision which affects all the areas of our existence and which realizes itself only when it is supported at every level of our being.

Faith is not a process of the intellect, nor of the will; nor is it simply emotional. It is all these at once. It is an act of all of me, of my whole person taken in its unity. In this sense, faith is defined by the Bible as an act of the “heart” (Rom 10.9). It is a supremely personal action. But it is precisely for this reason that it goes beyond the ego, the limits of the individual. “Nothing pertains to us less than our ego,” as Saint Augustine said. Where the human being is fully engaged he goes beyond himself, for an act of my entire self will always be an opening up to others, an act of “being with.” There is more. An act is not fully realized until we touch our deepest essence, the living God, present in the depths of our existence, which he sustains. This indicates that, in such an act, the purely personal domain is transcended. A human being, precisely as created, is at his most profound level when he is not only acting but is also acted upon, not only a being that gives but also a being that receives. The *Catechism* expresses it thus: “No one can believe all alone any more than anyone can live all alone. No one gives himself the faith just as no one gave himself existence” (§166). Saint Paul expressed this radical character of faith when he described his experience of conversion and baptism with the formula, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20). Faith, as the disappearance of the mere me, is a resurgence of the true me, a becoming myself across a liberation of the mere me for that communion with God which comes only through communion with Christ.

I have thus far tried to analyze in light of the *Catechism* “who” believes, and thus to discern the structure of the act of faith. But in so doing I have already been led to sketch the essential content of the faith. Christian

faith is, in its essence, a meeting with the living God. God is the true and ultimate content of our faith. In this sense, the content of the faith is very simple: I believe in God. But the simplest reality will always be the most profound reality that embraces all things. We can believe in God because God touches us, because he is in us, but also because he approaches us from without. We can believe in him because there is one whom he has sent: “he has seen the Father” (Jn 6.46) says the *Catechism*. He is the only one who knows God and who can reveal him (§151). We can say that faith is a participation in Jesus’s seeing the Father. In faith we are allowed to see with him what he has seen. The divinity of Jesus is included in this statement, and so is his humanity. Because he is the Son, he continually sees the Father. Because he is man, we can look at the Father with him. Because he is at once God and man, he is never a person of the past, and he is never outside time and only in eternity; he is always at the centre of time, always living, always present. Thus we come to the mystery of the Trinity. The Lord becomes present for us by the Holy Spirit. Let us turn again to the *Catechism*: “One cannot believe in Jesus Christ if one has no share in his Spirit. . . . God alone completely knows God. We believe in the Holy Spirit because he is God” (§152).

When anyone seriously considers the act of believing, he will soon recognize that this very act determines what is believed. God becomes concrete for us in Christ. Thus is the mystery of the Trinity revealed, and precisely at the point in history that the Son became man and sent us the Spirit from the Father. The Incarnation contains equally the mystery of the Church since Christ truly came to “gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (Jn 11.52): the “we” of the Church is the new, vast community into which Christ draws us (cf. Jn 12.32). The Church is thus implicit in the first beginnings of the act of faith. The Church cannot believe simply as an institution that attaches itself to the faith from outside by creating a functional framework for the common activities of the faithful. No, she belongs to the act of faith itself. The “I believe” is always also “we believe,” as the *Catechism* states: “‘I believe’: it is also the Church, our mother, who responds to God by her faith and who teaches us to say ‘I believe,’ ‘we believe’” (§167).

As we have just said, an analysis of the act of faith immediately shows its essential content: faith responds to the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can now add that the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, his human-divine mystery, and indeed all of salvation history are contained in the act of faith; it therefore becomes evident that the People of God, the Church as the human basis for the history of salvation, is implicit in the very

act of believing. It would be easy to demonstrate in the same way that the entire content of the faith is the necessary development of the fundamental and unique act of our meeting with the living God. A relationship with God is, by its nature, suggestive of eternal life in that it transcends the merely human. God would not really be God if he were not Lord of all things. Thus creation, the history of salvation, and eternal life are themes which flow immediately from the question of God. Similarly, in speaking of the history of God with mankind, one approaches the question of sin and of grace. It is the same with the question of our manner of meeting God, and thus of the liturgy, the sacraments, prayer, morality. I am not going to develop these particular aspects here; what I desire is to consider the interior unity of faith, not as an accumulation of propositions but as a single, intense act in the simplicity of which are contained the depths and the range of existence. Who speaks of God speaks of all things; he learns to distinguish what is essential from what is not; and he discovers something of the interior logic of the unity of all reality, even if he must always do so by fragments and enigmas (1 Cor 13.12) in this temporal realm where faith has not yet become vision.

To close, I would touch simply upon question raised at the beginning of our reflection: the “how” of faith. About this, one finds a remarkably helpful phrase in Saint Paul. He says that faith is obedience from the heart to the standard of teaching to which we have been committed (Rom 6.17). The sacramental character of the act of faith, i.e., the intimate link between our profession of faith and the sacraments, is here expressed as a principle. There is, says the Apostle, a “standard of teaching” proper to the faith. It is not our invention but, in a certain way, a word of the Word. We are committed to this word that indicates new ways of thinking and gives form to our lives. This “being committed” to a word before us is made real through the symbolic death of our immersion in the baptismal font, which recalls the sentence cited above: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”; it also reminds me that the act of faith accomplishes my death and restoration. The symbol of death in baptism unites our restoration to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To be committed to the word that teaches draws us back to being committed to Christ. But we cannot receive his word as we receive some theory, mathematical formula, or philosophical opinion. We can grasp it only to the extent that we accept a common destiny with Christ, and we can attain the word only where it is linked in a permanent fashion to people who share a common destiny in the Church. In the Church we call this manner of being committed “sacrament.” The act of faith is unthinkable without the sacraments.

From this starting point, we can understand the arrangement of the

Catechism. Faith, we have said, consists of being committed to a standard of teaching. In another passage, Paul identifies this standard of teaching as the profession of faith (Rom 10.9). Emerging here is another aspect of the faith event: faith that comes to us as word ought to be re-expressed as our new life expresses itself, for to believe also signifies to profess. Faith is therefore not private but public and communal. From word it becomes concept, and then moves on to become word and action.

The *Catechism* draws upon diverse statements of belief found in the Church: baptismal professions of faith, professions of faith formulated by councils, professions of faith formulated by popes (§192). Each of these professions has its specific setting, but the archetype on which they are all based is the baptismal profession of faith. In discussing the *Catechism*—an introduction to the faith and to a life of communion in the Church—one must start with the baptismal profession of faith, as has been done from apostolic times. This is the only path open to the *Catechism*, which unfolds the faith starting with the baptismal profession. The manner it wishes to teach is thus clear: catechisis and catechumenate. Envisaged is not some class in religion, but the giving of oneself and the letting go of oneself in surrender to the word of faith in a common destiny with Jesus Christ. An interior journey toward God is the characteristic mark of catechesis. As Saint Irenaeus said, we ought to accommodate ourselves to God since God has accommodated himself to us in the Incarnation. We have to familiarize ourselves with the divine method in order to learn to bear his presence in ourselves. In theological terms: the image of Good in us must be liberated to render us capable of a communion of life with him. A traditional image is that of a sculptor who, with his chisel, chips away at the stone until he makes visible the form he had imagined.

Catechisis simply must be a process by which we assimilate ourselves to God, since we can only recognize those things that correspond to something within us. “If the eyes were not somehow solar, it could not recognize the sun,” wrote Goethe, commenting on Plotinus. The vital process of acquaintance is really a process of assimilation. The “we,” the “what,” and the “how” of faith are tightly tied together. The moral dimension of the act of faith, too, becomes visible because the act implies a type of human existence that we do not make up for ourselves but which we learn slowly by immersing ourselves in our condition of being baptized. The sacrament of penance is also a sign of this baptismal immersion renewed as God continually draws us to himself. Morality is part of Christianity, but it is a morality that participates in the sacramental process of becoming Christians. In it we are not primarily actors but receivers by a reception that

points to transformation.

It is therefore not a fixation on the past that leads the *Catechism* to develop the content of the faith starting from the baptismal profession of the Church at Rome, i.e., from the Apostles' Creed. In it is manifested the true nature of the act of faith and thus the true nature of catechesis as a training in existing with God. In the same way it is apparent that the *Catechism* is shaped by the principle of the hierarchy of truths as taught by Vatican II. Consequently, as we have said, the Creed is before all else a profession of faith in the triune God developed in the baptismal formula and tied to it. All the "truths of faith" are the developments of the unique truth that we discover in this single one. It is God we are concerned with. He alone can be the pearl for which we sell everything else: *God alone suffices*. Who finds God has found all. But we can find him only because he has first sought us out and found us. It is in the first instance he who acts, and that is why faith in God is inseparable from the mystery of the Incarnation, of the Church, of sacrament. Everything said in the *Catechism* is the development of the sole truth, which is God himself, "the love which moves the sun and the stars" (Dante, *Paradiso*, 33.145). ❧