



# Faith: the Dawn of the Day of Salvation

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## The End and the Beginning

In many revival meetings, a scripture lesson is given, hymns are sung, the shaking and shouting preacher fires forth his sermon, and the rocking congregation receives his word and enthusiastically responds: *Amen! Amen!* This response, this confirmation links the hearer to the speaker. The congregation assents to what it has heard; it accepts the preacher's testimony and makes his words its incentive to bind its life to God and commit itself to His ways.

In contrast to this emotional worship, the people who participate in the Sacrifice of the Mass, upon hearing the priest's prayer to God also answer, *Amen!* They give their assent to the honor, thanksgiving, and petition made by the priest to God; they assert that they accept the word of God and pronounce their agreement: *Amen!* The whole Christian world, east and west, assents to the word of God by pronouncing, *Amen*: translated in Greek as *genoito* and in Latin as *fiat*, but transliterated in all languages as *Amen* from the Hebrew root *'mn*, to trust, to assent to, to have faith in.

In the first Book of *Kings*, in the first chapter, King David, having grown old and weak, summons Sadoc the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the soldier, and orders them to escort his son Solomon to Gihon and there to anoint him king of Israel and then bring him back to reign in his place. Benaiah shouts, *amen!* (v. 36). This short and simple word conveys an enormity of meaning. In effect, Benaiah says that he has understood what David has commanded, has given his assent to the command, is confident that God will crown the king, and commits himself to carry out the order.

In the first book of *Chronicles*, in the sixteenth chapter, David gives

Asaph and his brothers a lesson in liturgical worship; after singing a psalm of praise, David says, "Let all the people cry, *amen!*" (v. 36); let them say that they recognize the meaning of the psalm and commit their lives in understanding, love, and strength to their wonderful God.

The soldier with reference to his general, the worshiper with reference to his priest, and all people with reference to their God, when they receive a command, must proclaim that they recognize its significance, they understand that they are bound to fulfill it, they will strain every sinew to bring it to fulfillment; they all pronounce, *Amen!*, the external expression of their inner assent, their exterior confession of their interior Faith.

From *Amen*, the crowning expression of a person to a command of God, we come to *Faith*, the initial contact of that person to the loving overture of God. Faith is the beginning of a personal process in life, and it establishes a relationship between its possessor and its giver. This Faith-relationship is proclaimed by the *Amen of Faith*.

In this article I would like to trace, in order of time, two things: not only the growth of the concept of Faith but also the constancy of Faith's inner dynamism. You will find striking omissions and simplifications, but I trust that the bits of thought I have extracted from scriptural prophecies, Church teaching, and theological reflection will in some way indicate that Faith is not so much a problem as a mystery.

## Exile

Faith belongs to travelers, wayfarers, pilgrims. Both those who have reached their destination, who have found their home, who are finally given their rest in the object of their search (God Himself) and those who see no reason to search, travel, and play the pilgrim, who are content to stand still, *have not Faith*. The first group, i.e., the persons who find themselves in the naked embrace of God, have no need for Faith, no need for any more searching and cogitation; they have found their home and see their Father face to face. The second group are content with their own resources, rely on their own point of view, and trust in their own power. They see no need for Faith, for it is a burden to travel, to depend on another's power, and to accept another's point of view.

Faith belongs to those in exile; God wills to draw men to Himself and He calls them and gives them His Light-gift so that they may accept His word and assent to His Person.

The great prophet of Faith is Isaiah of the Exile. He is God's spokesman; he will rally God's people back to their homeland; he will be the

instrument of stirring up their Faith in God, their Belief that He is the Savior. Isaiah announces that the old days are over: the people's guilt has been pardoned; they must now make way for the Lord's coming. "Like a shepherd he tends them, gathers up the lambs and carries them in his bosom . . ." (Is. 40:11). Isaiah's proclamation and, correspondingly, the people's Faith has a triple reference in time—they recognize what God has done in the past: creation of the heavens and the earth, and pacts of friendship with the great patriarchs; they confidently expect God to continue His creation and friendship in the future; they promise to obey His commands in the present. The people rely on the testimony God has given them in the past, and they *believe*; they confidently await the fulfillment of God's promise in the future, and they *hope*; they set themselves to live to fulfill His commandments now, and they *love*.

We don't have to look at the Jews at the time of their Exile; we can look at ourselves and see the need for Faith. As youthful and vigorous as we would like to be, as stirring and enduring as we would have our strength, we all know only too well how weak and faulting life is, how faint and sluggish strength is. Nevertheless "those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength, like eagles new-fledged. . . . They will never grow weary and never weaken on the march" (Is. 40:31). Faith, then, belongs to the wayfarer: it is his acceptance of the testimony of God with a corresponding trust in His word.

### Acceptance of the Preaching

Faith for Paul is the acceptance of the *kerygma*. Faith comes from hearing, which in its turn comes from Christ's word. Faith is obedience to the good news received: not so much an obedience of the will to a command, but rather an obedience of the mind to a revelation. "How are they to call upon him [the Lord] until they have learned to believe in him? And how are they to believe in him until they listen to him? And how can they listen without a preacher to listen to?" (Rom. 10:14). The preacher has the message of Faith and his hearers are moved by God to accept this salvation-message. This acceptance is Faith. "You can find salvation if you will use your lips to confess that Jesus is the Lord and your heart to believe that God has raised him up from the dead. The heart has only to believe, if we are to be justified; the lips have only to make confession, if we are to be saved" (Rom. 10: 9, 10).

This act of acceptance of God's testimony is complex; it involves the interior act of believing (*pisteuein*) and the exterior act of confessing this

belief (*homologeïn*); the faithful man recognizes that Jesus is the Lord; he accepts as true the miracle of the resurrection. For Paul, Faith is not static. It is not the mere acceptance of another's matter-of-fact word; it is not the indifferent resignation to the authority of another by which a person learns cold facts. For Paul, Faith is dynamic; it is always *Faith in, Faith with a movement toward*: by Faith, the Christian accepts the good news and commits himself to the plan of salvation given him by God through Christ. The faithful person is given new knowledge, vital knowledge, not cold facts. He learns what God has revealed through His Son's preachers: the knowledge of salvation and the knowledge of himself as a new man. Here, in Paul, the Faith of Isaiah, which involved a predominance of trust, is deepened to an inner awareness of what God has said in His revelation and of what God has done, both by the sending of His Son and the giving of His grace.

To be a believer is to belong to the Lord; it is to receive the brand of Christ; it is to be marked in His service by the seal (*sphragis*) of Baptism. To be a believer is to think with the mind of God, to act with the strength of God, which, even though it be considered folly and weakness by the disbelievers, is nevertheless the seed of vision and the beginning of a full life.

### Living Light

For John as well as for Paul, Faith is a believing *in* and not a believing *that*, but what Paul has to say about the message preached and the preacher sent as distinct realities, John unites into the one Word, the Logos, the Son of God Himself. John unites the Word spoken and the Word speaking: Jesus is Himself the Word who speaks and who is spoken.

John has been made famous as the disciple of love, but his account of the good news of salvation is one which is accented by Faith. Those who hear this news hear the Word of God Himself. When they believe in this Word, being attracted to Him by the Father, they come to Him, welcome Him, and Love Him.

The Word of God Himself speaks:

I am the bread of life: let those who are hungry come to me (6:35). If a man is thirsty let him come to me and drink (7:37).

I am the door of the sheepfold: a man will find salvation if he makes his way in through me (10:9).

I am the true vine: if a man [the branch] lives in me and I in him he will bear abundant fruit (15: 1, 5).

I am the way.

I am the truth.

I am the life: nobody can come to the Father except through me (14:6).

I am the light of the world: those who are blind should see (9:6, 39).

I am the resurrection.

I am the life: he who believes in me, though he is dead, will live on (11:25).

Jesus doesn't want people to believe mistakenly in the external show of his power ["unless you see wonders and prodigies, you refuse to believe" (4:48)]; Jesus wants them to believe in Him, in his very Person. The man who so believes "gives his Faith wholly to Jesus" (4:53). Faith, then, for John is the acceptance, the welcoming of the gift of Jesus Himself. It is the reception of real food and drink, of genuine truth and brilliant light, of life itself. When Christ is received and welcomed and loved, all falsity gives way to truth, darkness is filled up with light, and the ephemeral figure becomes a clear reality.

### Understanding

Augustine was fascinated with a triple way of considering Belief: a *believing*, a *believing that*, and a *believing in*. With reference to the object of Belief, a man could believe that God is (*credere Deum*) or believe that what God has said is true (*credere Deo*) or believe in God (*credere in Deum*). If a man believes *In God*, as the object of his mental unrest yet of firm assent, then he must also believe that God is and God is true. Then and only then can a man begin to understand. Augustine counsels, "Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand." He then asks what it is to believe in God: "it is believing to love, by believing to prize, by believing to cling to Him and to be incorporated into His members" (Homily 29 on S. John).

### Firm Assent and Restlessness

Aquinas, who has been dubbed the angel of the schools, is more appropriately called the ox of theology. For he has threshed the grain of truth for all men. Thomas has examined the inner dynamism of Faith; he has meditated on its structure, not to free himself from dependence, but to understand better that dependence; he is not afraid to seek reasons, for he is not making a world of his own, but is deepening the world he really

belongs to. Thomas analyzes the act of Faith with its double relation to the mind and the will of man. Belief (the act of Faith) is "pondering with assent" (2-2, 2, 1). The believer firmly assents, for his mind is influenced by the will to take a positive stand. Yet the mind is restless and ever cogitates its unseen object. The decisive factor for Belief is he whose word is assented to. Assent is made because of the trust in a person, the personal God.

### **Definitive Declarations**

To an age which chained the will and denied its freedom, the Council of Trent declared:

"They [adults] are disposed to that justice when, aroused and aided by divine grace, receiving faith by hearing, they are moved freely toward God, believing to be true what has been divinely revealed and promised . . . (Session 6, chapter 6).

"Faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God, and to come to the fellowship of His sons" (Sess. 6, chap. 8).

To an age which blinded the mind and chained its probing, the First Vatican Council declared:

"Faith is a supernatural virtue by which we, with the aid and inspiration of the grace of God, believe that the things revealed by Him are true, not because the intrinsic truth of the revealed things has been perceived by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God Himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.

"Moreover, although the assent of faith is by no means a blind movement of the intellect nevertheless, no one can assent to the preaching of the Gospel . . . without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Faith itself in itself . . . is a gift of God and its act is a work pertaining to salvation by which man offers obedience to God Himself by agreeing to and cooperating with His grace, which he could resist" (Sess. 3, chap. 3).

### **The Beginning and the End**

Here we stand in this age with a wealth of teaching on Faith before us. We have only to examine this tradition to realize how much Faith has meant to and done for those in the past. But more important still, we realize that our lives both in their striking individuality and in their demanding community have an enormous exigency for this thing called Faith. Our lifetime for all its advances and perfections is still throbbing for satis-

faction and peace, is still longing for home. By retrospection, we should see the relevance of every other age in our own. The great prophet Isaiah tells us to cease our clamor and renew our strength by looking to God and believing in Him. The lion-hearted Paul hands down the preaching of the Lord to this missionary age. The eagle-winged John tells us to reject the apparent realities and grasp the basic reality of God Himself. Augustine, who stresses the prime-place of Faith and Aquinas, who teaches the inner-construct of Faith, support our very basic need to meditate on who we are and where we are going. The Councils of the past teach us in this conciliar century their magnificent insights of God's way with man and man's way to God.

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*"The message which we have heard from him and announce to you is this: God is light. . . . If we walk in the light as he also is in the light, we have fellowship with one another" (I John 1: 5, 7).*

*Honor and Glory be to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Amen.*