

## THE VICTORY WHICH OVERCOMETH THE WORLD

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TIME: a late summer afternoon of the year 63 A.D. Place: a small house in a secluded quarter of the teeming metropolis of Rome. In the rear of the house, a low-ceilinged, cell-like room, bare save for the narrow writing bench and squat stool whereon sits a gnarled, bent old man. His back is towards the single aperture in the opposite wall. A crude pen rests idly upon the parchment lying on the surface before him. Through the window a thin beam of warm sunlight streams and slants crosswise over the old man's shoulder, stopped by the table-top, pen, and half-filled sheet of parchment.

Now the man seizes his pen and works with passionate earnestness for several minutes without pausing. Again he puts it aside, folds his weathered hands together upon the table-top, and lifts his head in serene entreaty. His gaze seems to pierce ceiling and sky, and penetrate unconfined to a place whose beauty frees him from the squalor all around. The Apostle Paul, "prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the . . . Gentiles," fixes his mind's eye upon his envisioned Savior, "foundation of the apostles and prophets and chief cornerstone," and then he writes once more with sure stroke: "For by grace you have been saved *through faith*; and that not from yourselves, for *it is the gift of God*" (Eph. 2:9).

### PAUL'S INSPIRATION — OUR FAITH

When the Apostle Paul wrote what we now recognize as the word of God, he may not have been so consciously aware of the divine inspiration as such an imaginative portrayal would indicate. Yet the hesitancy and prayerfulness which are part of this picture are signs which help us understand the problem of man's communion with God by knowledge. St. Paul's was a problem of judgment. What, at this particular moment, did God want him to tell in writing about faith? The solution was easy and infallible. God merely asked that he keep his mind turned toward the divine light, that he be docile to the breath of the Holy Ghost, and then write *in his own way* the revelation transmitted to him, "that mystery which in other ages was not known to the sons of men, as now it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph. 3:5).

Today, readers of St. Paul's words face a problem of similar proportions, but it is a problem of *interpretation*. When he writes that faith is a gift of God, what does he signify? *How* is faith a divine gift? The solution of such a question must, of course, depend upon an authentic exposition of the inspired text. But this is easy and infallible too. Catholic theology, one of whose functions is to place the articles of faith in full view, can and does furnish a sufficient exposition. She affirms that faith is God's gift because He, and He alone, is capable of bringing the truths of faith to man's attention; and because only God can provide the necessary impetus which move a man to say, "I believe"; finally, because faith is His to adorn and perfect to that degree which makes it reach the threshold of vision.

#### FAITH OF THE TRUTH

To say that only God is able to bring the truths of faith to our attention, indeed, to speak at all of the "truths of faith," may seem to be an unjustified gloss upon St. Paul's thought, for this statement presupposes that between faith and truth there is real connection. Now admittedly within the Apostle's own writing, ample proof may be found to show that faith and truth are inseparable, or, in other words, that the faith he speaks of is a *dogmatic* faith;<sup>1</sup> but the role of the faith in the life of a Christian may serve equally as a convincing argument.

If the soul of a believing Christian be imagined as a ship seeking a far-off port, faith may well be designated by the wheel on the captain's bridge. Deep below in the bowels of the ship the engines throb and the propellor shaft spins. The vessel's prow slices cleanly each oncoming wave. All seems to be in perfect order; but if the wheel on the bridge is pointing the bow in a wrong direction, if the course is not just right, all the power of the engines, every thrust of the propeller is so much wasted energy.

So in human life, a man who is prepared by a good will to steer a course with the utmost sincerity, but whose *mind* does not tell him where to go, wastes all his sincerity. Here precisely

<sup>1</sup> E.g., I Cor. 13: 12-13, "We *see* now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face. Now I *know* in part, but then I shall know even as I have been known. So there abide *faith*, hope, and charity." The intellectual sight and knowledge spoken of here by St. Paul, which terminates in divine truth as its object, can only refer to faith. Hope and charity are not operations of the mind, but acts of the will. See also II Cor. 5: 6-8 and II Thess. 2: 13.

is where faith fits in. Faith gives a man direction by casting his mind in the mold of divine truth so that his will, the engine of the soul, may propel him toward the goal which faith points out. Faith, then, is not merely a blind surge toward the unknown; it is not even an act of trust in the mercy of God without any certitude about the designs of this infinite mercy. Rather it is an act of man's directive faculty, the mind, by which he gives assent under the impulse of the grace of God to a *truth* which will lead him to the goal of his life, eternal beatitude. This was how the Apostle Paul understood faith, as well as all Christian doctors. Finally the universal doctor, St. Thomas, summed up the teaching in this wise: "Belief is the intellect's assent to divine truth, proceeding from the command of a will moved by the grace of God" (II II, 2, 9, c.).

#### OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF MIND

Granted that faith or belief is an acceptance of the truth which God proposes, the question naturally arises, why is such revelation reserved to God alone? Indeed, do we not really depend on others beside God to receive these truths? Is it necessary for God to speak individually to every man in the depths of his heart, to reveal the truth that shall make him free?

The first of these questions may be answered simply and directly. The proposition of the truths of faith is reserved to God because these truths are revelations of the intimate Life of Him who is incomprehensible to every mind but His own. St. Paul's assertion that "faith is . . . the evidence of things that are not seen" (Hebr. 11:1) must be understood in this sense. For example, the existence of Three Persons in the sanctuary of the single Godhead, and the hypostatic union of the Word, Second Person of the Triune God, with the Sacred Humanity in Jesus Christ, the mystery of the Incarnation: these are truths that of themselves are out of the reach of all minds, save the mind of God Himself. Only God could possibly see these truths; and so He alone could judge that here and now others ought to participate in these secrets of His inner Life. Finally, only He could actually speak the ineffable. He has in fact done this through "His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph. 3:5).

Without the special aid of God the human mind is able to reach some knowledge of the divine: the existence of a Being who is Author of Nature and Changeless Governor of the universe, which in its splendor mirrors somewhat of His glory. But

between these truths and the revelation of His Inner Life, which is the proper sphere of faith or belief lies a vast difference. On the one hand, when a man perceives that without the unseen finger of the Divine Architect the splendid order of this universe could never be more than chaos, his assent to the existence of this God is solidly imbedded in the self-evident principle of causality. The spontaneous and natural reaction to such a perception is to give assent, and in doing so man does not in any way overreach the limits of his natural powers. In this vein St. Paul himself exclaims: "For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen—his everlasting power also and divinity—being understood through the things that are made" (Rom. 1:20). On the other hand, when the mind assents to a truth for which it sees no evidence, not even a vestige or a clue, its sole but sufficient support is the certainty that God has spoken. This type of assent reaches beyond the natural realm of cause and effect. The assent of Faith begins to be the guide when the footprints of God in the created world cease to be distinguishable, and it leads into the presence of a Divinity more sublime than anyone could imagine, exceeding by an infinity the grandeur and sublimity of His most perfect creature.

#### PROPHET — DISCIPLE

In the history of the world some men, called prophets, have received the knowledge of the hidden recesses of the Godhead, as it were, from God's own mouth. Here the word prophet includes not only the Old Testament visionaries who prepared Israel for the Messias to come, but rather designates all those official spokesmen of God who have, in the Old and New Testaments, publicly voiced the divine secrets whispered in their souls by the Holy Ghost. This initial transmission of the knowledge of God may, in a wide-sense, be called inspiration. A prophet does not shut up this inspired knowledge within his own breast, but becomes an instrument of God and announces the divine realities for the belief of all mankind. The dependence of other men upon the prophet is such that if he did not speak they could not know what God has said; yet the prophet is not the author of the truth which he has to set forth to be believed. "How are they to believe him whom they have not heard?" asks St. Paul. "And how are they to hear if no one preaches?" Here he affirms the dependence of all men upon God's messenger. But equally aware of the divine origin of the message, he writes: "We give thanks to God with-

out ceasing, because when you heard and received from us the word of God, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but, as it truly is, the word of God" (I Thess. 2:13). The prophet must be mute if God does not in turn speak to him and send him to speak to other men. In this way *our* faith remains *a gift of God*.

The Catholic Church in the world today is a prophet, but in a different way. Her function is also to speak *to* men *for* and *of* God, with the divine guarantee of freedom from error. Now, however, the revelation to the holy apostles and prophets is completed and does not grow in extent. Yet the urgent necessity that the truths of faith be preached to *all* men remains, for upon this depends salvations. Thus God has left to mankind a reliable organ of divine truth, the Catholic Church, an infallible teaching authority, which has received and transmitted without omission or error the same gospel which "God . . . at sundry times and in diverse manners spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all in these days . . . by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Hebr. 1:1-3). As the prophet spoke of what he had heard and seen when influenced by divine inspiration, so the Church speaks of what has been committed to her by Jesus Christ, her Founder, who is, as St. Paul indicates, the summation of the prophets. So too, as the prophet's lips tell only those things which God vouchsafes to him, the Church can only speak from that divine authority which is her surety. Thus the faith of an individual Catholic remains *a gift of God*. He may express his faith by saying, "The Church teaches such and such"; but his certitude in believing this or that truth finds its ultimate support in the testimony of God Himself, who alone can know and tell about His inner Life.

#### THE IMPULSE TO BELIEVE

Once the absolute necessity of God's bringing the truths of faith to man, whether immediately or by means of a prophet, is settled upon, one naturally wonders how man, confronted with this truth, will react. Indeed, is it possible for him to act at all, to meet God halfway and to say, "I believe"; or at least, "Lord, help my unbelief"? Whence, in short, comes the *inner* light to believe what is *outwardly* proposed? Does the message of the Christian missionary bear its own illumining fire? Does a man perhaps enkindle a flame within his own heart which will cause him to see that the gospel is true and to love what he sees? Or is the *act* of faith, even in the innermost stirrings of the human soul, again a *gift of God*?



In truth several different but related forces act upon the human mind and heart, each of which exerts its own proper influence in the eliciting of the act of faith. In the time of St. Paul his hearers were, first of all, influenced by the Apostle's own words. We read that in Thessalonica "Paul . . . for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures; explaining and showing that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that this is the Christ, even Jesus. . . . And *some* of them believed" (Acts 17:2-4). Today, all over the world preachers of the Catholic faith make similar attempts by setting forth to all who will listen these very truths. But only *some* believe.

Often too, and especially in the early days of the Church, the word preached by the Apostles was buttressed by miracles, which were, and are, a reasonable confirmation of the truth of the preacher's message. During the missionary journeys of the Apostle of the Gentiles such signs of the Gospel were the rule. "Even handkerchiefs and aprons were carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. . . . Thus mightily did the word of the Lord spread and prevail" (Acts 19:12, 20). These days, with Christianity well established by comparison with the infant Church of the first century, miracles in connection with the preaching of the Gospel may be the exception, but the healing of the sick and even the casting out of evil spirits are by no means unheard of. Indeed the Church as she stands today, a beacon of light "without blemish in the midst of a depraved and perverse generation" (Philipp. 2:15), is herself a striking prodigy underlining the message she bears from God to men.

Still another important cause, however, must complement the persuasive words of the preacher and the miracles which may or may not accompany his witness to the truth. This is the free will of the believer. Enough has already been said about faith's object, sc., that it has to do properly with God's intimate life, to suggest the necessity of the will's coming into play. Man's mind in relation to this object is like the owl in bright sunlight. As knowable as the Divine Reality is, its brilliance blinds our weak intellect. Our mind is not in focus to receive, in the ordinary way, such a piercing ray of truth. And so, since the will is the only other force besides intrinsic evidence which can move our mind to assent, its power *must* be brought to bear. No preacher can by eloquence or subtle argument produce convincing evidence for the truth of his message. Miracles too remain but signs or sym-

bolts of the reality his words express so inadequately. Unctious as his preaching may be, overwhelmingly marvelous as are the wonders the missionary performs upon sick bodies or in possessed souls, the free choice remains: to believe or not to believe.

St. Paul, as every other preacher of the faith, observed with anguish the reality of this freedom. Toward the end of his life, as a veteran missionary he had become all things to all men, pedagogue of the pagans in Asia Minor and instructor to the worldly-wise inhabitants of Athens; when, in a word, he had shed the light of the gospel wherever he could find a ready ear, he came to Rome, a prisoner, he says, of Jesus Christ. He had always harbored the desire to speak the words of life to his brethren in this, the capital of the civilized world. Upon his arrival the Jews quickly came together to hear the new message of peace. On the fixed day "very many came to him at his lodging; and to them he explained the matter, bearing witness to the kingdom of God and trying from morning till evening to convince them concerning Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. *And some believed what was said; and some disbelieved*" (Acts 28:23-24).

"And some disbelieved." In a cryptic three words the writer of the Acts tells us that all the favorable circumstances combined: a preacher all afire with the word of God, astounding miracles, an audience already disposed for the message of Christ by the Old Testament, as were the Jews, to assent freely by the act of faith, do not, *cannot* in fact, *of themselves* bring this act into being. Something is lacking; persuasion, miracles, and freedom to believe, taken separately or together, are somehow insufficient.

#### UNUM E PLURIBUS

At this point we may profitably return to St. Paul's cell, now somewhat darkened as the slanting shafts of sunlight grow weaker. The Apostle is still writing, and it is possible to picture him as stopping abruptly from time to time for silent moments of prayerful communion with the Source of his inspiration. This communion is necessary to St. Paul, for he is but an instrument in the mighty hand of God. To know, to have the will to communicate his knowledge, to write down his thought: all these belong to him only as a divine tool, for what he writes is the revelation of God. This necessity may help us grasp the reason why a man endowed with the power freely to believe, who hears the gospel message, and even sees it corroborated by signs, finds necessary a communion which will make *one* what is fragmentary,

and will give order to what is in disarray.

St. Paul's hand is poised in readiness; the truths of revelation are in his mind; he knows well their power. Yet to be certain that he is writing what the Holy Ghost wants written, to be absolutely sure that it is set down as the Spirit of God dictates, the Apostle needs a light that exceeds by an infinity in its brilliance the light of the Roman sun. So, too, in order that the act of faith be endowed with that certitude so characteristic of all that is divine, the mind of the potential believer needs a special light of divine grace, and his will needs a special impetus which will vitalize the truth proposed and make of it a truth to be believed.

Between St. Paul's act of writing the inspired word of God and the believer's assent to this word there is a striking coincidence. St. Paul by writing, the believer by assenting—both are performing works which exceed the powers of any man. Each, in his own order—St. Paul as an instrument of the Holy Ghost revealing, the believer as the possessor of the truth revealed—attain to that which belongs properly only to God. St. Paul *tells*, by the light of divine inspiration, what God alone knows; the believer *knows*, by the light of faith, something of what God *is*. St. Paul's *speech* is divine locution, and the faithful's belief is divine *knowledge*, for both reach a term or object which no man could reach by his own power. St. Paul is helpless in telling all Christians of the ages-to-come "that mystery which in other ages was not known to the sons of men" (Eph. 3:6), unless his mind receive that light of grace which can come from God alone. We are also helpless to embrace the truths St. Paul sets down if God does not enlighten us from within. From this, then, as from every other point of view, faith is a *gift of God*.

#### THEY SHALL GO FROM VIRTUE TO VIRTUE

Jesus Christ once addressed these words to His Father: "I praise thee Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and prudent and didst reveal them to little ones" (Matt. 11:25). The "little ones" Our Lord speaks of are, of course, those who believe in Him. A believer who is true to this divine adoptive childhood will act as any little one would toward his natural father.

Now a respectful child will rely with utter simplicity on his father's experience. A young boy, for example, accepts without hesitation his dad's witness to the wisdom of being prepared to defend one's convictions manfully. But this ready acceptance



does not prevent the boy afterwards from investigating for himself the meaning and the possible application of the virtue simply brought to his attention by his father. As the years progress he begins to experience for himself the goodness of firmly standing up for the truths he holds dear. This personal experience engenders in his heart love for a virtue which in the beginning was little more than a fiction. No father takes offence at the eagerness his child shows to understand such realities more fully. Rather, he is willing to go to great lengths in helping him to satisfy the hunger for more knowledge. This is his part in sowing the seed of love for the good and virtuous life. At the same time he is strengthening the bond of the loving dependence already in existence between himself and his son.

Thus with his own natural endowments nurtured by the solicitous care of a loving father, a young man is able to grow in knowledge of the good and the beautiful. This intellectual growth will be the basis for solid ties of affection, which in turn will give his life a fulness, a maturity which is a prerequisite for happiness in this life.

The parallel between this natural child and the supernatural child of God, though not perfect, is remarkable. The fact of the matter is that faith, sublime as it is in lifting our minds above the earthly to heavenly realities, needs to be perfected, just as does the initial witness about a virtuous life, which is passed from father to son. Also, as the natural child cannot really love the object of this paternal witness until he begins to penetrate into its reality and experience the goodness of it, similarly the supernatural child of God, his mind endowed with the truths of faith, cannot begin to love this object of belief until his mind is allowed to penetrate further and experience that it is *good* to believe. Here, it must be noted, is the weak point of the comparison. While in the natural order the mind both puts its faith in human witness and attains a penetration of the object of testimony by its own power, under the impetus of its own inquisitiveness; in the supernatural order, the mind is as helpless to penetrate by itself the object of faith as it was incapable of believing by itself. Nevertheless, penetrate it must, in order that faith may bear fruit in love. "In faith," says John of St. Thomas, the sixteenth century commentator on the thought of the Angelic Doctor, "realities and essences remain clouded, since faith is founded on extrinsic testimony. . . . The soul suffers a great thirst for the understanding and penetrating of the object in all its aspects.

... Faith ... proceeds ... from the naked testimony of the witness. For this reason, faith may be found in sinners who are without grace."<sup>2</sup>

By affirming the native inability of the human mind to penetrate the object of faith, and yet postulating such a penetration in order that love or divine charity may be brought forth, we have both implicitly asked how it is to be effected, and at the same time intimated that God Himself will do this work. ... He is certainly never found wanting when it is a matter of supplying a need, especially for His adopted children. But before determining the precise manner in which He accomplishes this perfection and crowning of the gift of faith, we must understand the distinction which underlies this question: the difference between the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost.

The nature of the virtues which are infused or poured into the human soul at baptism is not so difficult to understand, because we can easily compare them with the natural virtues, those habits of mind, will, and sensitive appetite which give us a permanent facility in acting as mature men and women, and which result from repeated action. In the supernatural order, with a new and higher object, the same faculties are endowed by God with a lasting ease, promptness, and even delight in the activities which are centered around God: *knowing* Him with our mind by faith; *hoping* in Him and *loving* Him with our will. He even grants virtues which enable us to be supernaturally prudent, just, firm and temperate in our daily life. These virtues are given to us, however, as our own, and thus they are clothed in human attire. Faith, for example, though concerned with an object that human reason could never reach by itself, handles this object in a *human* manner. Our intellect, perfected by faith, must still express the divine mysteries in terms drawn from human experience. These mysteries are utterly simple in themselves, for they *are* God. Yet they are proposed by our mind as complex, by means of a subject and a predicate, such as: God is love. Actually God and Love are one; but we must first separate these ideas and consider them apart. Then only can we join them by the affirmation of their unity. In scrutinizing these mysteries the mind is fit only to progress step by step, and this with extreme caution. Thus St. Thomas says that the virtues are perfective of man insofar as "*his*

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<sup>2</sup> *The Gifts of the Holy Ghost*, translated by D. Hughes, O.P., New York, Sheed and Ward, 1951, pp. 102-103.

reason moves him in the things he does, inwardly and outwardly" (I-II, 68, 1). God gives these perfections in order that man can move himself, under the influence of grace, in the way that is his by nature.

The virtues are, however, only part of the supernatural organism which is man's endowment at baptism. Besides these new powers God gives to the soul habitual dispositions designated properly as gifts, the gifts of the Holy Ghost. These are no less permanent than are the virtues, but their nature is more difficult to grasp. Perhaps the best expression of what they really are is in terms of the comparison St. Thomas himself uses. In describing them he sets up this proportion: as the moral virtues are related to reason as their motive principle, so the gifts are related to the movement of the Holy Ghost. He says: "The moral virtues are certain habits, by which the appetitive powers are disposed so as promptly to obey reason. Thus the gifts of the Holy Ghost are *habits* by which a man is given the perfection of being promptly obedient to the Holy Ghost" (I-II, 68, 3). Now since the Holy Ghost's motion, which a man obeys under the influence of the gifts, is properly divine, the activity of a man moved through them will no longer have the human mode or limitation which it must have when the virtues are the motive power. To sum up: the infused virtues, although divine insofar as God is their author and their object, directly or indirectly, operate, nevertheless, according to the mode of their subject, man himself. But the gifts of the Holy Ghost are divine from every aspect, even as to their mode of activity. A man who acts under their influence is *completely* a child of God, easily moved by the impulse not of his own reason, but of the Wisdom of God.

With this distinction in mind we may see how through a gift of the Holy Ghost faith is adorned with its final perfection. Here John of St. Thomas again expresses the Thomistic doctrine with clarity: "It is the proper province of the *gift of understanding* to illumine the mind to make a correct estimate of the ultimate end. . . . Faith assents to truth by believing . . . the gift of understanding not formally by believing, but by experiencing at least what these truths are not, and how distant they are from sensible things."<sup>3</sup>

The essential characteristics of the gift of understanding relative to faith are evident from these statements. First of all, the gift makes us recognize the object of faith as a good or end,

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<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 100-101.

eminently worthy of love (cf. II-II, 8, 5: "Unless the human intellect is moved to this degree by the Holy Ghost that it have a correct estimate of the end, it has not yet attained the gift of understanding."). Then, the gift makes the knowledge of this divine object something sweet, an *experience* of divine things. "When the Holy Ghost begins to breathe upon the soul, and to melt the frozen waters with His Spirit, through the gift of understanding, He lays open the hidden meaning of things. Through the breath of His charity, which He places in the soul, there is an interior sense and taste of the sweetness of the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

With faith crowned by the gift of understanding the fulness of the Christian life, divine charity, is possible. The divine realities are laid out before the human mind by faith, which cleaves to the infallible authority of the Divine Revealer. By the gift of understanding these realities are transformed into something sweet, an object to be loved. And then, with the freedom which is only possible to a son of God, love blossoms forth, and, please God, fructifies too by a growth in ardor. Thus is the gift of God enhanced and brought to its maturity.

#### CHRISTMAS GIFT

This doctrine of faith in its generation and growth to perfection is not a sterile truth. Although verified in the life of every Christian who gives himself to grace, it is most of all able to be seen in action in the lives of those closest to Jesus Christ. Thus when at Christmastide we kneel reverently in spirit upon the hay-strewn floor of the Bethlehem stable, we may grasp the unity of this manifold concept of faith as *a gift of God*; for in this room Pure Spirit is Incarnated and is observable even to the eye of sense. Here "the object of faith" is not a cold abstraction, but a little Babe whose Heart beats with the pulse of Infinite Supernatural Love. Here faith is newly engendered in souls where perhaps it had not yet found a place. The angels, heavenly prophets, preach the "glad tidings." The star too miraculously announces that the finger of God is pointed toward the cave in the Judean hillside. But God alone places faith's fire in the hearts of the humble shepherds. To see, however, the perfection of faith already possessed in its fulness, and crowned by the gift of understanding, our gaze must be fixed upon the Mother, who "pondered all these things in her heart." "For a Child is born to us, and a son is *given* to us" (Is. 9:6). *He is the gift of God!*

<sup>4</sup> John of St. Thomas, *ibid.*