

Crisis in Faith

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The problem of faith has long been considered a theoretical problem, the answer to which was to be found either in a good apologetic or in a sound theology. Consequently, conflicts between faith and science, technology, human values, reason or nature received much emphasis. Today, without losing sight of the importance of theoretical speculations, such problematic discussions are regarded as narrow and inefficient. The same can be said about the solutions of apologetics and theology.

It is true that in the last century a poor presentation of faith did in fact give rise to a conflict with reason, science, progress etc., but such theoretical conflicts have since been overcome. Nonetheless, these same conflicts, which have not changed in the least since Fontenelle and Voltaire, continue to arise no matter how often they are refuted.

We maintain that in such problematic discussions theoretical speculations are presented which are not the true cause of unbelief. The real reason of contemporary unbelief in most Catholic countries is not to be found in non-Christian philosophies. Faith is not usually abandoned because the person is convinced of the "truth" of Marxist philosophy or that of atheistic existentialism. Generally, it has been decided to give up the faith long before these philosophies are accepted as true. On the contrary, what usually happens is that an individual becomes a Marxist or something else to find a new system of life rather than to find truth. This explains why it is frequently useless to refute atheistic doctrines. The motives for unbelief are more profound, or at least more personal. Philosophies are façades which these individuals assume to safeguard outward appearances and a feeling of importance.

In an attempt to discover the underlying reasons for so much unbelief in traditionally Catholic countries, it is advisable not to take seriously the reasons given by the unbelievers themselves. They often color their arguments with much aggressiveness, personal apology and resentment in order to be believed. The situation of a non-believer in a Catholic environment is always complex and sentimental; it

carries within itself systems of defense or resentment. The unbeliever feels himself judged and severely condemned. We can suppose *a priori* that this or that unbeliever would be able to expose his reasons with due objectivity, but even when he assumes airs of calmness his is a forced serenity, something feigned. Such a person feels himself accused of not having his conscience at peace, so he becomes determined to prove that his conscience is at rest.

It is not certain, however, whether these unbelievers are always aware of the true and ultimate motives of their unbelief. That is why sociological polls on this matter must always be evaluated with great caution. Answers given in questionnaires must never be taken seriously for nothing can be concluded from them about the real psychological reasons for this unbelief. For instance, if fifty percent of the answers say that the motive of unbelief is an incompatibility between science and faith, it cannot therefore be concluded that this is, in fact, the reason for unbelief in fifty percent of the cases. All that can be inferred is that when persons were asked the reason for their unbelief, half of them responded that it is the incompatibility between science and religion. This does not shed any light on their true psychology, but only describes their behavior toward the people conducting the poll. To understand the unbeliever we cannot start with his declarations, much less with his public pronouncements.

Resentment of the Clergy

Let us begin by pointing out some current facts which can readily be observed by anyone. Whenever a crisis of faith arises, there is usually conflict with the ecclesiastical system, and especially with the clergy. This is natural enough in a country with a Catholic tradition where the clergy represents a social authority which is public and recognized by all. This is a case which calls for a systematic analysis of all the psychological components evolving from a milieu where such a visible spiritual paternity is imposed.

The fact that the clergy exists as a social body can in itself provoke many unconscious factors and confused resentments. The clergy represents a moral order in society. Hence a priest is often looked upon as a judge, a censor of moral weakness; he becomes an unconscious factor of moral oppression for those whose relations with him are more social and functional than human and personal.

We are not speaking here of the current objections against priests

who are avaricious, selfish, weak, exploiters, rich, friends of the rich etc.—the real resentment against the clergy has little to do with their true virtues. We should not pay too much importance to these objections; they are only conceptual reasons for justifying an unconscious resentment which in actuality is more profound and much more difficult to define. Even if the clergy were more virtuous they would probably still receive the same kind of objections. It is usually the poor priests who are accused of being rich and all the rest. In reality these objections are related to the essence of the clergy, or at least to their manner of presenting themselves socially.

Frequently, behind unbelief, there is a kind of unconscious rebellion against the paternity of the clergy which is felt as demanding, oppressive and abusive. In individual cases the persons affected need not have any conscious awareness of this rebellion they are nurturing within themselves and may even state the contrary if questioned about it. Thus a person may state that he has a great admiration for priests but that he has lost his faith. Such assertions should not be taken too literally. It is necessary to see what they hide in reality. The better members of the clergy sometimes incite the strongest unbelief. The crux of the problem is to know why.

It may be necessary that the clergy assume greater social discretion, some sort of hiddenness even in ecclesiastical institutions. Some sort of discretion that would affect not only the public image of the clergy but also their style, mode of speaking and writing, their manner of judgment; in other words, something which would affect the whole clerical heritage which has been received from the past as a power and a social paternity in countries with a Catholic tradition. These remarks are not intended as a definitive judgment but rather as an occasion for study and reflection.

The Rebellion of Youth

The second thing to be considered is that crises of faith and the adoption of unbelief usually occur in well-defined, concrete situations. In fact it can be shown that unbelief, in most cases, has its origin in situations such as the crisis of personality formation during adolescence, the working conditions of the laborer or of the intellectual and the initiation into matrimony. Outside of the situations just enumerated it is very unlikely that there can arise other problems with the faith. One will either keep his faith and adhere to his religious prac-

tices or remain in the state of unbelief. This leads us to think that we are not really dealing directly with a problem of faith in these cases but rather with a problem of life. Let us take a closer look at this.

In our society, adolescents are visibly abandoned to their own fate in resolving the problems of life. Their problem consists in establishing equilibrium in their personality, and integrating themselves into their own personal vocation and into society. Increasingly, the adolescent must resolve his own problems alone and is abandoned to himself. The authority of the father, teacher and society in general weakens day by day. In the sexual sphere the adolescent is abandoned just when his senses begin to make demands on him and he becomes sexually conscious. He is abandoned to the external solicitations of injurious advertising multiplied without restraint and inadequately checked by a social authority that has come to feel ashamed of itself.

Thus it is that adolescents find themselves confronted with a disproportionate task. How can they, practically without help (except in the uncommon case where there are responsible parents or youth movements), resolve the challenge of their sexual instincts and learn to order and moderate their sexual appetites? How can they prepare effectively for marriage? Confronted with such a difficult task it will frequently happen that they will rebel in the face of an impossible situation: they are called to be chaste in a world that excites them but does not help them. It is rebellion in the presence of this impossible task—vaguely felt or lived unconsciously as such—that ends in an attitude of refusing to believe. The adolescent scoffs at faith in God, in society and the whole moral order. The abandonment of faith is not merely a consequence of the abandonment of the moral order in which faith is presented; both are socially linked.

We do not believe that adolescents abandon their faith in order to sin more freely. This would be too simple. We do not think that adolescents, in general, would like to be impure. But they struggle in a fight that overcomes them and which they do not understand. They turn against the Church because it seems to them that she imposes upon them an impossible task. They defend themselves by assuming an air of skepticism, and each one looks for a *modus vivendi* made up of concessions to vice and of the last hopes for the ideal of purity.

The adolescent also knows the problem of choosing a vocation and

finding his place in society. Concretely this is the problem of one's profession. Here too the adolescent appears abandoned to himself. He feels weak and ill-prepared for a world whose law is: each one for himself and God for all; a world of competition where it is necessary to assert oneself, to fight and to defend oneself, where one must succeed if he is to survive. Often enough neither the family nor the society provides guarantees for the adolescent. He does not know what to do. He confronts life with the constant fear of failure, of being overcome. He lives in the anguish of examinations, of competition and of social barriers. The young person suffers the pressure of the group that impels him to gain as much as possible as fast as possible.



Very often the problem is difficult and appears insoluble; then the adolescent turns against a world too inhuman. This is the case of the young person who joins the working force too early in life. Here he comes face to face with the world of struggle, of competition, of social anarchy hidden under the guise of democracy. The adolescent rebels, falls into despair. Faith appears to him as something ludicrous. God, religion and the clergy seem to him to perpetuate this social disorder that is for him an inhuman disorder. So he thinks that he must harden and revolt in order to sustain himself in life. Moreover, humiliations and trials of every kind make him reaffirm more and more his ideas. Adolescents at their work are frequently the victims of the stronger and the more experienced; victims of unscrupulous employers who abandon them to their own fate, and of their families from whom they receive no help. Nor are they understood. The young person loses his faith because he is rebelling against a world that is

leaving him to mature by himself. To defend himself he becomes a skeptic.

There is an even more difficult situation which confronts the adolescent: the problem of forming a conception, a goal, a system of values, an ideal of life. In this respect he finds himself even more abandoned to himself. Very often the parents fail to provide their teen-agers with an ideal, a goal. Fathers often lack confidence in their authority or in their own set of values, and refuse to bring up their children authoritatively in any preconceived ideal way of life.

The young are left to themselves in a world where everything is matter for discussion, where ideas clash among each other, where points of view are multiplied endlessly, where the most diverse systems offer diverse degrees of attractiveness. How is one to choose, to find one's bearings, to know?

Facing this anarchy of ideas, the youth of today feels tempted to react with skepticism, thus manifesting his unbelief. There is also rebellion against an absurd situation, one in which a young person must, all alone, construct for himself a vision of the world, know how to separate the true from the false, the authentic from the illusory.

Adolescents rebel against the faith because it is not imposed upon them with greater firmness. They hope someone will guide them, orient them, show them the way among complex and divergent systems of ideas. It is unlikely that a youth trained by a dedicated and clear-sighted priest will become an unbeliever, but how is he to find this kind of support?

The absurdity of life, the disorder or anarchy in society, the anonymity of the collective life are the impressions of the contemporary adolescent because today's youth has been left alone, abandoned to himself to make his way in life. This is what constitutes an inhuman situation. It is not the world that is absurd; it is the authority of the educator that has failed.

The crisis could be called a metaphysical one. It occurs frequently when entering a secular college or one skeptical and irreligious in tone, or when beginning one's work in life, i.e., whenever the adolescent is abandoned to the market of ideas without a guide. The danger does not come from the ideas themselves nor from the objections to the faith, it comes from the situation of anguish and despair into which youths are thrown without an adviser in problems that surpass their capabilities.

As for young women—at least for those who do not work in a very harsh environment—it is during the first years of their married life that they fall into disbelief. Before marriage, theirs is only a romantic conception of life; they hope for the happiness of a miracle instead of developing their feminine virtues. Once married they become disillusioned for with it comes the problem of the husband's character and how to adapt to it, the problems connected with childbirth and all the moral implications connected with it. Incompetent to conquer these difficulties many young women feel fainthearted and discouraged by their first failures. No one ever pointed out to them the obstacles to expect and how to surmount them. They too rebel against the faith because they rebel against a life that appears unjust to them.

The Crisis of Integration

In all of these cases the problem of faith is really a problem of integration. In the concrete situation moral loneliness is the real problem of the contemporary adolescent. He rebels against the faith because faith appears to him divisive, ridiculous and incapable of guiding him in his personal crisis. But it is not faith itself that fails him; it is the lack of a guide capable of giving concrete solutions to difficult situations. It is not argumentation that is lacking in the theoretical aspect but persons with authority and tact capable of helping the adolescent find his place in the world.

Conflict with the Church comes about because she has the appearance of an established power; she is sure of herself. The clergy appears to have no problems. The conviction, security and the ease of the Church in the world become an offense to those who struggle in confusion. It seems that men in crisis do not know exactly what happens to them. In order to express their resentment they will adopt the first objections that their surroundings present. There is always the newspaper, the friend or the propaganda pamphlet to provide them with elements to support their animosity.

The crisis assumes dramatic proportions when it affects a social class in its entirety. Thousands of people live side by side, in the same milieu, sharing the same crisis of integration which they must bear with the same sense of abandonment and confusion. Then the conscience of the "abandoned of earth" is formed. This is true in the case of the working class whose formation begins with the helpless peasant. All the problems are present at once: finding a job, choosing

a vocation, finding values among the clashing ideologies that circulate in the city.

These problems often go on for a long time without any solution; society seems indifferent to them. Whole social classes live through an adolescent crisis and resolve it with rebellion. The rebellion against the faith is only one aspect of rebellion against society. In these social classes religion appears as something artificial, a theory without any real value, without application, a mockery of human misery, an offense to those that struggle—as those statues of the Virgin that maintain an inert smile over a people that suffers and moans.

Antireligious Forces Capitalize on Resentment

The working class is not the only one that is caught up in this impossible situation. In Latin America, for example, these problems are felt even more strongly by the middle class on account of their better education and greater social consciousness. Their situation frequently becomes unbearable, especially for the lesser intellectuals or the poor students. The latter provide the best militants for the revolutionary parties.

Resentment is the strongest bond uniting the classes in a moment of crisis. It is natural that leaders of political parties and of other influential groups lean on resentment in order to promote their cause. This is how anticlerical and antireligious factions develop. As these parties take form, they tend to channel this resentment in the medium in which they operate. Thus it becomes impossible to maintain a Christian faith without the heroism of constant struggle.

It is probable that Communism relies more on this resentment against society and the Church than on anything else. From this it is clear that it is not sufficient to show that Communism is anti-Christian in order to fight it. It is possible that it is attractive precisely because it is anti-Christian. It gives expression to the latent rebellion against the faith and against the Church. The most anticlerical party could be the one which obtains the support of these forces. In such conditions talk about principles is of little use—the constant stability of the Church offends and provokes resentment. These principles are precisely what seems to ridicule the concrete difficulties of the people.

In order that faith be possible it is necessary that Christians as

persons show to the masses, in their state of crisis, the path toward a solution. They are the ones who must be able to guide social evolution, to find a conception of life, a metaphysics, along with suitable employment and the means for a full human life. If faith does not consider this aspect of concrete and dynamic assistance, it will never be able to stop stirring up hostilities no matter how objectively virtuous its representatives may be.

We are not considering here the problem of evangelization. There are social groups which are collectively unbelieving simply because they have never received the good news of the Gospel, or because the Church is not found among them in an active form. But these are not problems of faith; the people do not refuse to believe. They know nothing. Here the problem does not consist in overcoming their disbelief but in bringing the faith to them. This is the case of transplanted peoples whom the Church did not follow in their displacement. This is also the case of those peasants who move to the cities, forming new *barrios* where there is no parish or mission church to establish a new contact with the Church. We find ourselves in a situation of faith rather than in a condition of unbelief. But there is also an intermediate state between the two aforementioned. There are masses in a state of crisis which are not entirely deprived of contact with the Church but which are insufficiently instructed.

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that the solution to contemporary problems of faith are to be found, not in theology, but in a more perfect understanding of those confronted with the difficulties of life. It is necessary to know how to choose the evangelical and dogmatic themes that harmonize with the situation in which those questioning the faith are found. We should not intend to teach the whole catechism when they are not disposed to receive it. It is important, before anything else, to present them with a vision of Christianity that goes beyond the letter and allows them to perceive its spirit. This not only presupposes the knowledge of theology and its sources, not only the knowledge of men and their problems, but also a considerable experience with the affinities that exist between different Christian themes and personal situations. Furthermore, there must be the awareness that catechesis is shallow and inefficient if it is not presented

in a human context, in a more complete manner, framed in a reference of sympathy that leads to action and discreet collaboration.

It is possible to present the Gospel to social classes in a state of crisis, but this must be done within the framework of a social movement which involves the sensibilities, aspirations, anxieties and actions of man. It is even more necessary that this movement manifests the greatest degree of interest and sincere dedication to the service of liberation of all anxieties. Whether it be the working class or the middle class that is in a difficult situation, the peasants in rebellion or the students, the principle is equally valid, though the movement will be different. In every case, the conversion of the workers, of the students, of the small bourgeois proletariat or the peasants on the move, religious formation cannot be achieved except where there is ample human collaboration with their social movements. This of course does not mean to say that it must be realized in a framework of confessional social movements.

When talking about the problem of faith among the students, especially among adolescents, experience indicates that in modern urban surroundings those adolescents persevere in the faith who, in one way or another, join a Catholic youth movement. Religion is transmitted and strengthened in that human framework and in the context which offers them the answer to their adolescent problems.

Neither the family, nor catechesis, nor the parish can guarantee that the youth will persevere. Youth movements can take on different forms, be more or less restrained or public, but they are nevertheless indispensable. Youth makes the discovery of faith in the struggle of giving themselves a reason for life, a goal in life, a job adapted to their capabilities and a moral equilibrium. If frequently enough the problem of faith is, in concrete cases, a problem of life, the solution will also be for concrete cases, a concrete idea, a conception of life as it is actually lived by men that already have found faith in equilibrium and equilibrium in faith.