The Situation on Sunday Morning

In an address written in 1922 on *The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching*, Karl Barth with his usual depth and humor examines the “situation on Sunday morning.” He writes:

The serious meaning of the situation in our churches is that the people want to hear the word, that is, the answer to the question by which, whether they know it or not, they are actually animated. Is it true?. . . If we do not understand this ultimate desire, if we do not take the people seriously (I repeat it, more seriously than they take themselves!) at the point of their life perplexity, we need not wonder if a majority of them, without becoming enemies of the Church, gradually learn to leave the Church to itself and us to the kind-hearted and timid. . . . Am I not at least partly right when I say that people, educated and uneducated alike, are simply disappointed in us, un-speakably disappointed? Have they been too often—perhaps for centuries—put off? Has the Church, in spite of its very best intentions to meet their needs, too often indulged in secondary utterances?

Of course one might say that the crisis of the Reformed Church in Europe during the twenties—the crisis Karl Barth was trying to counteract by reintroducing the sovereignty of the word of God in Jesus Christ in Protestant theology—is irrelevant for the situation of Catholicism in America in 1968. But this self-gratifying rejection could be, I suggest, hasty. For Karl Barth has a few words about the Catholic predicament.
How incomparably more securely, uninterruptedly, and confidently the other church [the Catholic] goes its way, having wisely left this dangerous principle of the Word undiscovered! . . . Even at the Mass the Bible is displayed; but how unimportant, how indifferent a matter is the delivery of the sermon based upon it—and yet again, how completely the poorest of sermonettes is transfigured by the saving radiance of the Eucharistic Miracle! For the sake of this miracle people actually come alone to church.²

The “situation on Sunday morning” that Karl Barth describes is very much our own. There is a crisis of faith coming up in America because more and more educated Catholics have acquired an inquiring, critical mind, evaluating revelation and faith and asking the question: Is it true? Disappointed Catholics are increasing rapidly. The most important answer to their question and their disappointment should be an inspired, learned and powerful preaching. Many priests have been inclined not to give to their preaching the attention, the study, the suffering and the agony it requires because of a rather legalistic interpretation of the “ex opere operato” of the Sacrament: “the saving radiance of the Eucharistic Miracle.” To be sure the Eucharist is a glorious reality of the Catholic faith, but too often the sacrament has been divorced from the word as if it could exist without it. How is the sacrament to be believed, how is it going to be meaningful, how is it going to be understood without the word which arouses faith in the sacrament, and is a part of the sacrament.

Actually the sacrament and the word are so united that the sacrament itself is a proclamation—a gospel, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Cor 11:26). The time between the first and the second coming of Christ is the time of the in-between, the time of the Church, the time of the proclamation; for the Church does not proclaim itself in “secondary utterances,” but proclaims the mystery of Christ and its consequences for man and the world.

The sacrament cannot have its effect without faith in the sacrament, and faith is generated by the word of God and the communication of the word of God in the preaching of the Church. The mutual dependence of kerygma and faith is strongly affirmed by St. Paul to the point that it is identical; it is to rhema tes pisteos, the word of faith. “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach)” (Rom 10:8). It is the action of the word in the heart, action in which the human preaching is taken as a mediation
which operates salvation. "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom 10:17). The believer is somebody who hears the word and lets his heart be taken by it. The word of the apostle, the word of faith and the word of Christ are somewhat identified. But how are men to believe if they do not hear; how are they to hear if the word is not spoken.

But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" (Rom 10:14-15).

In the genesis of faith God acts through the intermediary of preaching. "It pleased God, by the foolishness of our preaching, to save those who believe" (I Cor 1:21). Preaching is a foolishness, for how can a man utter the words of God. Nevertheless it is an element not merely accidental or peripheral but essential and central in the genesis of faith because it has intermediary function in the communication of the word of God.

This preaching is called logos (word), logos of God, logos of Christ, gospel, message, proclamation or kerygma. Human preaching is in continuity with the word of God himself.

Therefore to be authentic preaching depends on a mission, and this word must be taken here with the strength it is given to by the New Testament. "How are men to preach unless they be sent?" (Rom 10:14-15). To preach and to be sent by God are inseparable. Preaching therefore is not a human work, but scandal and foolishness from a mere human point of view; it is an inspired word, spoken, manifested and confirmed by the power of the Spirit. "Our gospel was not delivered to you in word only, but in power also, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much fullness" (I Thess 1:4). Thus the human word is made alive and effective by the presence of the Spirit. "Where 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, who works in you who have believed" (I Thess 2:13). The believer through and in the word of man encounters the wisdom of God which is God himself revealing himself. Thus the faithful lean finally on God and not on men. "My speech and my preaching were not in the persuasive words of wisdom but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might rest, not on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (I Cor 2:4-5).
Dominicana

Preaching is also related to witnessing in the twofold meaning of the word: to have been a witness and to give a witness. Preaching is a speech which is at the same time a witness. It is not an ordinary teaching which can be communicated and transmitted like natural evidence. It contains a mystery. It is the human and inspired act in which the word of God manifests itself and which calls above the wisdom of reason on the resources of faith. In other words, the human language is thus exalted to the dignity of a sign, a sacrament of God. Language in itself is always a sign; it might become a sign in the sphere of the sacred when the divine word comes and reflects itself in it. But in Christian revelation one passes to another level than that of natural religion and its expressions. In revelation the language becomes at the same time sign and cause, a little after the manner of a sacrament, because it is loaded with a divine efficiency.

The inclusion of preaching in the mystery of the revelation of God is not only true of the apostolic preaching of the first Christian generation but also of the preaching of the Church in the following centuries. The preaching and the sacraments of the Church belong to the mystery of faith because faith encounters in them the act of God and because it is the way God has chosen to act in communicating his mystery. If faith is normally generated through the preaching and the baptism of the Church, this does not mean that human means are endowed with a magic quality, or that men are raised to a sacrilegious divine equality, or that the Church is substituting for God; but, it means that the eternal and self-revealing act of God is not only an event of the past or an expectation for the future but an actual presence in time. Ultimately it is always God himself that the believer reaches and encounters, and it is in him that he rests his faith.

Faith is primarily that light which is given to us by the Holy Spirit. It is not simply a blind obedience to a commandment, though there is an obedience in faith, or the blind acceptance of a set of formulae though there is an obscurity in faith, but it is a participation in the knowledge that God has of himself, a divine illumination of the mind. The Holy Spirit bears witness to himself in the hearts of the faithful: “The Spirit bears witness that Christ is the truth... If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater for this is the testimony of God which is greater, that he has borne witness concerning his Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony of God in Himself” (I Jn 5:6-10; Jn 14:15-17). This is what we mean by
saying that faith is a grace of God. God does not curb us from outside to obey. He works from inside and in the inside of the soul.

The object of faith given in preaching

The object of faith is described by St. Paul in many different ways and in many various terms. The man of faith receives the apostolic preaching, the gospel, the truth (II Thess 2:2, 12,13; I Cor 15:1, 2; Rom 1:16-17; Rom 10:18). But the proclamation of the gospel always refers to the same center: the believers are those, like the Galatians, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ has been depicted crucified (Gal 3:1), and consequently in virtue of hearing and believing they have received the Spirit of God and Christ” (Gal 3:3-4). The heart of faith is the confession, attestation that “Jesus is the Lord . . . and God has raised him from the dead” (Rom 10:9). The whole Christian faith is often summed up in this definitive event (Rom 4:24; I Cor 15:14; II Cor 4:14; Col 2:12; I Thess 4:14). Into these formulae is compressed the central meaning of the pascal faith. Christ is the glorious Lord who has become the vivifying Spirit to be communicated to us in baptism so that we can die and rise with him. “For you were buried together with him in baptism, and in him also rose again through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12). In Christ faith discovers the working of God, his eternal merciful design for all men, “the mystery which has been hidden for ages and generations, but now is clearly shown to his saints” (Col 1:26). This mystery is “Christ in you, your hope of glory” (Col 1:27). Thus faith in Christ reaches God; it is at the same time Christocentric and theocentric. The first attitude and decision of faith is to turn to God from idols “to serve the living and true God” (I Thess 1:9). In his turning to God, the man of faith trusts the faithfulness and truthfulness of God manifested in the redemptory acts of Christ which achieve salvation. “I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20).

Two characteristics of the object of faith should be stressed: its unity and the different values of its expressions and representations. Too often the content of faith is represented as a multitude of unrelated affirmations, although actually we do not believe anything else than the unique divine reality in itself and for us. Everything depends and leads to the unique mystery of Christ in which the real destiny of all men is
involved. Furthermore we should be careful not to give to every part of the content of faith the same importance; the infallibility of the Pope is much less important than the Incarnation.

The preceding analysis of faith might seem very impractical. It is a very common mistake to believe that in order to act in a definite way we must have a multitude of concrete and down-to-earth rules. The conservatives want to stick to the old rules; the progressives think they should substitute new rules. But both are primarily concerned about rules of conduct. The renewal in the Church is already on its way to be thoroughly institutionalized and so maybe to be disposed of. Thus after a brief moment of searching crisis we will be able to relax again in a “renewed” church! This pragmatic approach, contrary to what is often thought by conservatives and progressives alike, has the effect of dispensing the individual of creative moral decision and responsibility. All the problems of faith today—and they certainly are numerous and very difficult—and all the individual problems we meet every day will have a chance to receive an answer if we first try to grasp the absolute unique character of faith in its mystery, in its totality and integrality. A doctrinal and theological awareness of the mystery of faith would enable us to discard false problems and enquire flexibly into real ones.

First of all the Biblical faith as it is revealed in the Old and the New Testament is absolutely unique. Such a relationship can only exist between a being like man and a wholly other being like God. Even the analogy of human belief in another person, which we are obliged to use to understand the psychological working of faith, is very misleading. I can believe in other persons, but I can only and exclusively have an absolute faith in God Himself in Himself. The traditional formulation, credere Deo, credere Deum, credere in Deum, is very accurate. An absolute commitment to the absolute, as Kierkegaard says, supposes that the absolute is at the same time the witness of that truth, the content of that truth, and the means or the way to reach that truth. Properly speaking there is only one witness, one subject, and one way or means of faith which is God Himself revealing Himself. For the same reason, we can only have absolute faith in a person who can communicate himself—not in a thing, a principle, or a proposition. Furthermore God reveals Himself not as a kind of logic or intellectual principle but as the whole-enveloping existence of my existence, as the eternal and subsisting love which is the term of my love. An absolute faith cannot be given to anyone or anything except to
God Himself. The actual vocabulary of “personal encounter” and “existential decision”, especially when it is used as a kind of incantation which dispenses from further thought, may be as inaccurate as the analogy of human belief.

Faith is an encounter with God brought about by God; it is a decision for God, and in God, and through God as the supreme and exclusive possibility of authentic existence. This last consequence should be stressed. So many people are convinced that faith is a destruction of human values, a negation of freedom, an infantile submission to ecclesiastical authorities that we should preach not only “a theology for man” but an “anthropology for God.” Properly understood, it is almost obvious that faith is the supreme liberation of man. In faith, if he is really living in faith and not in some adulterated substitutes like clerical infantilism or humanistic religiosity, man accomplishes all the dimensions of his being; he becomes a new being with unlimited possibilities, through the gift of God, in heaven and on earth.

Kierkegaard has very well shown that faith cannot be anything else except the highest act of freedom. It involves an element of risk and adventure because it involves a supreme trust and confidence in a word which escapes our usual means of verification. But without taking that leap man remains in bondage to sin, to himself, and to death. Faith does not deny all the ordinary freedoms of man and normally supposes them, but it reveals to man an ultimate possibility of freedom which only God can grant: the possibility to become a Son of God, to laugh at death and be divinized. The great principle of Thomas Aquinas is still true that grace supposes a full humanity and makes that humanity more human. One of the tasks of today’s preaching is to proclaim the fullest glory of man as grounded in the transcendent glory of God.

The insistence on the absolute character of faith makes some Catholics uneasy. They do not want, in the vocabulary of Kierkegaard, to be a modest “knight of faith” like Abraham, the prototype of faith, but to be a tragic hero. They want to stay in the stages of aesthetics and ethics and keep therefore the lack of certitude, the uncertainty of the modern tragic hero. It is an aesthetic temptation to play with faith, to dramatize it, to indulge in the charms and anxieties of being on the way without going anywhere, of searching for truth without ever finding it. It is a very common modern sophism that the quest is more important than the finding, that the “how” you believe is more important than the “what” you believe. Some of the Catholic advocates of doubt
and anxiety do not seem to be aware of this temptation to remain in the “stages” of aesthetics or ethics.

On the other hand there is a deeper aspect to the problem. Some Catholics resent the complacent, triumphalist attitudes of average Catholic preaching and teaching which claim to have certitudes about almost everything. In other words the question is what is the kind of certitude we have in faith; what is the relationship between faith and doubt? It is a Catholic mania to extend the certitude of faith to an infinite variety of questions, theological, philosophical, psychological or scientific which are not the matter of such a certitude. To that extent some Catholic critics are right when they insist that Catholic faith is much less certain about a number of things than it sometimes claims to be. But is there an uncertainty in faith itself? In a way, yes, in a way, no. If faith is not certain it would be simply a human opinion about a human truth. The certitude of faith is absolute without any reservation, condition, or wavering in so far as it is given by God in the very act in which God Himself reveals Himself and we adhere to Him. In so far as anything is taken in the Word of God Himself, there can be no hesitation or uncertainty to belief. Otherwise it would mean that God is not reliable. But this certainty is operative only at the point where the reality of the human being encounters the reality of the divine mystery. We cannot believe anything except in so far as it is taken into the reality of the divine mystery in itself and in its communication to us.

This gives to the Church as a community and to each individual believer the task to be completely faithful to the revelation of God. The Church does not and cannot properly reveal anything, but it has the eyes of faith to perceive what is included in the revelation of God.

This leads to two seemingly contradictory propositions for those who think that faith is primarily concerned with formulations, indispensable though they may be. The first is that one cannot believe in only a part of the divine mystery. This seems to be a temptation for some Catholics today. Faith is indivisible because its primary object, the unity of the divine mystery, is indivisible. On the other hand a person might be in relationship with this unique and indivisible mystery without having all the explicit formulations concerning it so that a professed atheist or a “death of God” theologian might have a more real relationship with God than some confirmed orthodox Christian who has never fought with the angel. There is no uncertainty in faith properly so called, but there is very much obscurity. Some people call uncertainty
the lack of intellectual evidence, the absence of demonstrative proofs of any kind which is in the very structure of faith. In that sense faith is not certain, in the sense that it does not provide any intellectual evidence. In that sense also there is something in faith similar to doubt, not because of a lack of certitude which rests ultimately on God alone, but because of a lack of vision.

**Faith Mediate Through Sacraments**

Faith does not only adhere to Christ as the Word of God but also as the creator of the sacraments and the giver of the Spirit. Faith is originated by the Spirit and baptism, by the Spirit given in baptism. The Spirit is the Spirit of the glorified and exalted Christ (Jn 7:39), the Spirit of truth who will teach the apostles “all the truths” (Jn 16:13). But this Spirit is inseparable from the water and the blood, baptism and Eucharist which are related to the passion of Christ. “There are three that bear witness: The Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three are one” (I Jn 5:8).

**The Testimony in its Subjective Aspect**

A variety of witnesses, internal and external, are directed and addressed to the believer. He must accept them and answer them by giving his faith. In so doing the faithful himself bears witness to the divine truth internally and externally, by having fellowship with God, and walking in light, and practising the truth (I Jn 1:5-7).

The immediate principles of the witness given by the faithful are indissolubly an assent, an act of love, and an entire commitment of life; or, more exactly, an assent given in an act of love inspiring the whole behavior of the person. “Every spirit that confirms that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is of God” (I Jn 4:2). “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (I Jn 4:7-8). He who believes possesses life; he who loves has passed from death to life. There is a complete interaction of believing and loving. Jean Mouroux remarks:

The words which designate possession and communion are applied to faith, and the words which indicate knowledge are applied to love. These equivalences show that faith and charity are implicated in one another. They are the two aspects of one unique grace, of one spiritual drive, of one personal act.
Nevertheless these two aspects are distinct: belief underlies the intellectual aspect; to love stresses the union aspect, but they are inseparable, “undissociate in the unity of one unique living tendency.”

“He who does the truth comes to the light” (Jn 3:20). There is a pragmatic aspect in faith. Faith is not a kind of pure theoretical knowledge which does not change the whole position in life of a human being. Not only has the vision of the man of faith changed but also his inward and outward behavior. Faith is not only the affirmation and the acceptance of a set of propositions but an adhesion to Christ himself in an interpersonal communication.⁴

Faith is also the appropriation of the eternal life. Faith introduces to life and gives life, a life which comes from Christ and the divine Persons and therefore is eternal.

“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; he who is unbelieving towards the Son shall not see life” (Jn 3:36). “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me even if he die shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

This is a mysterious and transcendent facet of faith. This is a real promise whose accomplishment has already begun and is not only eschatological. Faith introduces us already here and now, though in a hidden and obscure way in the life which is common to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; a life therefore which is divine and eternal and makes us immortal. The general resurrection will manifest gloriously a divine life whose seed is already and really deposited in the believer.⁵

The qualities of faith are first its purity and its authenticity. The purification of faith consists in the fact that it leans more and more not on human intermediaries but on God alone. This is effected very often through the diversities, difficulties, doubts, agonies we may have. Because faith is obscure, it includes an extreme trust and confidence in God alone so that it does not rest on our reason, our experience, our imagination or sensibility. We therefore have to get rid of ideas, fancies, or prejudices, or other human means in which faith is often mixed up. On one hand faith is trying to reach God through the light which comes from God and not through our own light, and on the other hand faith extends deeper roots in our hearts so that it becomes stronger and firmer; it reaches the hidden recesses of our mind and evangelizes our whole being.
This is beautifully confirmed in the example of Abraham. Abraham was the first to hear the call of God and to believe in its accomplishment despite the obscurities, the human impossibilities emphasized in the sterility of Sarah and the sacrifice of Isaac. Faith makes possible what is humanly unrealizable. The absolute confidence of Abraham is recorded in the Epistles to the Hebrews: “He went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8). Faith is the realization of what is humanly impossible because through faith the power of God itself is at work. Sarah received power for the conception of a child “because she believed that he who had given the promise was faithful” (Heb 11:11). Abraham when put to the test offered Isaac, “reasoning that God has power to raise up even from the dead” (Heb 11:18). Thus Abraham became the very type of faith and the father of the faithful: “Abraham believed the Lord, who credited the act to him as justice” (Gen 15:6). After Abraham all the great believers whom the Epistle to the Hebrews commemorates (Heb 11) are given to us as memorable examples and a “crowd of witnesses” who lead us towards “the author and finisher of faith, Jesus” (Heb 12:1-2). How shameful is the weakness of faith in the people of the New Testament who have received the most perfect gifts of God when the heroes of the first alliance were so firm, they who “died without receiving the promises but beholding them afar off” (Heb 11:13).

Faith puts us in a disturbing way in a new sphere of existence which demands an overwhelming re-arrangement of our whole life. This situation is not founded any longer on natural evidence but on the power and the fidelity of God. The surrender of our whole life is manifested in an absolute certainty that nothing can shake. Even when the events seem contradictory to God’s design, even when we perceive acutely our sins, failures and weaknesses, even when the soul is living in a dark night, “God is trustworthy” (I Cor 1:9). We must not believe too easily that we are in a dark night of the soul: weakness of faith or its lack of dynamism in the whole personality and one’s whole activity is not “a dark night”; but, there is a good example of the purification of the faith in St. Therese of Lisieux when, at the end of her life, she said that the thought of heaven which had been so comforting before had become for her as if she were “before a wall.”

The power of faith is strongly emphasized in the New Testament. “Whoever... does not waver in his heart, but believes that whatever he says will be done, it shall be done for him” (Mk 11:22-24). This faith or this trust is an absolute acceptance of the divine intervention realized
in the mystery of Christ. Therefore, the power which flows from that attitude may remove mountains (Mt 18:18-19; Mk 11:22-24), accomplish all sorts of wonders (Mk 16:17-18). “All things are possible to him who believes” (Mk 9:23). All things are possible to God and to the believer who has been seized by the power of God acting in him and through him in spite of his own personal helplessness. In a similar way St. Paul says, “Christ Jesus has laid hold of me” (Phil 3:12). It is therefore no wonder that the very prayer of faith is the prayer said by the father of the sick boy: “The father of the boy cried out, and said with tears, ‘I do believe; help my unbelief’” (Mk 9:23).

**Obscurity and Mystical Character of Faith**

Faith in this life, though being absolutely certain, remains necessarily obscure because it cannot be a clear vision. “We see now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face” (I Cor 13:12). Tradition has gone back again and again to the verse of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen” (11:1). Also “while we are in the body we are exiled from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not be sight” (II Cor 6:5-7). According to some exegetes these texts do not express two states of religious knowledge or a contrariety between faith and vision, but simply an opposition between our present and our future condition because it is exceptional that Paul gives a vision as the object of the eschatological hope. This is not convincing. It seems, on the contrary, that one element at least of the two stages of our divine “transmutation,” the present and the future, is the difference between an imperfect and perfect knowledge. The “face to face” or the “sight” seem at least one of the characteristics of the realization of the eschatological hope.

Nevertheless even now faith may grow and be developed in a “gnosis” and a “super-gnosis” (epignosis). Faith and love are the conditions of a profound knowledge which is eminently desirable and the achievement of Christian perfection. Paul prays “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may grant you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in deep knowledge of him: the eyes of your mind being enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints” (Eph 1:17-18). Here as elsewhere (Rom 3:26; Eph 3:12) we touch the personal, deep, intimate, and mystical character of faith.
Faith is the complete and total surrender of man to God, the surrender of his mind, his heart, and his activity so that the Christian desires to abdicate his own life to fuse himself into an alien life, ideal and real at the same time, which is the source of his life, his perfect model, and his inward law. “It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). It is because faith is obscure and necessarily expressed in an inadequate, “rudimentary” (St. Thomas), and fragmented language that it aspires to go, not beyond faith, but beyond the imperfect apprehensions it has at its disposal, into mystical experience, the wisdom of the mature and spiritual man (1 Cor 2:6-16).

FOOTNOTES

2 Ibid., pp. 112-113.
3 J. Bonsirven, l’Evangile de Paul, p. 182, n. 3.
5 C. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, Cambridge University Press, 1958, Ch. 2 Eternal Life.
7 Tobrae, Justification, p. 218.