

Is believing through others a blessing?

Theme: Act of Faith

‘To me, belief in God was so unreasonable that, by definition, no reasonable person could believe in such a thing’, said Jennifer Fulwiler, a former atheist who entered the Catholic Church in 2007. She grew up as an atheist, and was anti-Christian and particularly anti-Catholic. She said that she wouldn’t even have dated her husband had she known he believed in God. -‘So what was your reaction when you found out he believed?’ -‘It gave me pause. Joe is too smart – brilliant, really, with degrees from Yale, Columbia and Stanford – to believe in something nonsensical. I also met many of his friends. They, too, are highly intelligent and believed’. That was the beginning of her quest. At some point, she came to the realization that, since this universe is highly organized and contains complex information – DNA for example –, that information requires an intelligent source. She began to post tough questions in a blog she called ‘A reluctant atheist’. – ‘One matter stood out from the beginning: The best, most thoughtful responses came from Catholics... It intrigued me that Catholics could handle anything I threw at them. Also, their responses reflected such an eminently reasonable worldview that I kept asking myself: How is it that Catholics have so much of this all figured out?’

Of course, her own questions, her own reflection, were crucial in her quest. But what really made a difference was knowing people who were intelligent and believed. Believers who could articulate their faith and harmonize it with a consistent worldview. What struck her the most when she became Catholic? – Community!, she responded. ‘There is nothing like that in atheism.’ She believed through others, and she believes with others. This connects with our Gospel today.

Thomas believed because he saw the risen Christ. But Jesus said to him: ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed’. You are blessed because you believe, but you would have been even more blessed had you believed through the testimony of your brothers. Why does Jesus say this? How could an encounter with Him through the Church be a higher blessing than encountering Him directly?

Faith is basically an act of trust. If we believe the doctrines of the Eucharist, Baptism, original sin, redemption through Christ, grace, heaven, hell and purgatory, the Church, the priesthood, if we believe the Bible, it is not because they are self-evident or we can prove them true. We believe them as revealed by God. If God said so, that’s reliable, there is no need of further proof.

But the problem is that God didn’t speak directly to me or to you. Christ didn’t appear to any of us here saying: here are my hands and feet, here is my side... He appeared to some witnesses and we have believed through them. We have believed through the witness of the Catholic Church. Now how is that witness trustworthy? God entrusted his word and his sacraments to human beings who can fall into sin and make mistakes and be deceived... How can that testimony be reliable? There is one and only one possible response to that: He has provided those witnesses – the Church – with a special gift – the

Holy Spirit – so as not to fail in that mission of transmitting the faith. The salvation of mankind is too important, and what He has done to accomplish it too valuable to leave it unguided, unprotected.

But why? Why did God run that risk? Why would He choose to entrust weak and sinful humans with such a task? Because God doesn't want to declare us sound when we are really still sick. He doesn't want to declare us 'saints' when we are really sinners. He doesn't want us to be whitewashed tombs. He wants to save us for real or not at all. Let me give you an analogy of a false salvation: you go to a high security prison and say to everyone there: we are going to move you into this beautiful town and give each one of you a house, a car and a job. We declare you free! These people would automatically be in heaven, right? I don't think so. The problem is about to start, just get ready for fights, thefts, murder, gossip, betrayal, lies, deceit, complaints. That beautiful town will soon be like hell. In the same way, God will not move us into His Kingdom unchanged, just as we are, and say: enjoy! Because our unchanged hearts would soon turn that Kingdom into a hell-town. That's not the way God works: He has decided to redeem us, that is, to give each one of us a new heart and a new mind: the mind and the heart of His Son. Once that is accomplished, He doesn't need to move us anywhere, because we already are in heaven. The Kingdom of God is already within such a person.

In other words, God doesn't want us to be passive receivers of His grace, of this new life, but to assimilate it so deeply that we could become His active collaborators. He wants us to partner with Him in helping others to achieve the same salvation. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. It's as if we said to others: 'This is what Jesus, the Son of God, has told us and commanded us to teach. And this is what his saving power has done in us. He has made us turn from sadness to joy, from boredom to meaning, from loneliness to true and lasting relationships. And so, that's why you can trust our testimony. That's why God wanted you to receive His word through us: so that you can realize that 'it works'!' If we do not believe that God can transform a human being into someone good and trustworthy, in someone who can be both a messenger of God and an instrument of salvation for others, then we don't really trust God; we don't believe that His power can save us too. If God can't make the Church trustworthy, then He can't make each one of us trustworthy. And if He can't make each one of us trustworthy, then heaven cannot exist. Because heaven is that Kingdom where we can completely trust and love God and others. And that's why we are blessed if we can believe through the Church: we believe there is hope for mankind. We believe that God can really transform our hearts for good. We believe that a new heaven and a new earth are truly possible.

1. I invite you to reflect during this week in your own faith journey: Who has been a good witness to you? Why? What can make your own witness more trustworthy? What have been the blessings of believing? And, particularly, in what sense has believing through others and with others been a blessing to you? Why wouldn't it be such a full blessing to believe on your own?

2. Examine your faith in the Church: why is this faith so important? Undermining the faith in the Church is undermining our connection with God and our trust that we can really receive a new heart through the power of Christ.

The Eucharist leads us to encounter the risen Lord, and it makes all of us one in the body of Christ. May this communion with Jesus transform us in His image and likeness, so that we can become trustworthy witnesses, a holy people, 'until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ' (Eph 4, 13).