

A MAN OF FAITH

A GUIDE TO A BETTER LIFE

by
Peter Kreeft

General Editor
Father John A. Farren, O.P.
Director of the Catholic Information Service
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Reverend Alfred McBride, O.Praem.

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Knights of Columbus Supreme Council
1 Columbus Plaza
New Haven CT 06510

www.fathersforgood.org
fatherhood@kofc.org

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Part I: What Catholics Believe (Theology)

Section 1: Faith

1. Why we need faith

We need faith because our world is full of death.

And so are we. Each one of us will die. So will each nation. Many individuals and nations will also kill. Our world has always been a world at war with itself, because it has been at war with God. "We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves. And we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God" (Thomas Merton).

Human nature does not change. Today we live in what the Vicar of Christ has called "the culture of death," a culture that kills children before birth and kills childhood after birth, kills innocence and faithfulness and families. What is the answer to this culture of death?

Faith. The Catholic Faith is the answer.

Faith in the God who has not left us in the dark but has revealed himself as our Creator; who, out of his love, designed us for a life of love, in this world and in the next.

Faith in the Gospel, the Good News of the man who said he was God come down from heaven to die on the Cross to save us from sin and to rise from the grave to save us from death.

Faith in the Church he left us as his visible body on earth, empowered by his Spirit, authorized to teach in his name, with his authority: to invite us to believe the truth of his Gospel, to live the life of his love, and to celebrate the sacraments of his presence.

This Church is our only sure and certain light in this beautiful but broken world.

Faith is the answer to fear. Deep down we are all afraid: of suffering, or of dying, or of God's judgment, or of the unknown, or of weakness, or of our lives' slipping out of our control, or of not being understood and loved. We sin because we fear. We bully because we are cowards.

Faith casts out fear, as light casts out darkness. God has shone his light into our world, and it is stronger than darkness (John 1:5).

That light is Jesus Christ.

2. The role of faith in religion

One of the explanations given of the word "religion" is that it comes from religare in Latin and means "relationship" – relationship with God.

All religions have three aspects: creed, cult, and code; words, worship, and works; theology, liturgy, and morality.

Thus there are three parts to this course in the Catholic religion: 1) what Catholics believe, 2) how Catholics pray, and 3) how Catholics live.

These are also the three concerns of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. (The Catechism divides the second concern into two: public worship and private prayer; thus it has four Parts.) The whole of religion stems from faith. Morality is living the faith. Liturgy is the celebration of the faith. Prayer is what faith does.

The Catholic Faith is summarized in the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed.

Catholic liturgy is summarized in the Mass and seven sacraments.

Catholic prayer is summarized in the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

Catholic morality is summarized in the Ten Commandments.

The Apostles' Creed is the teaching of Christ and his apostles. It specifies what we believe when we believe Christ's teachings.

The Ten Commandments specify the way to obey Christ's two great commandments: to love God and neighbor.

The Mass makes Christ really present and the sacraments are his actions.

The Lord's prayer is Christ's answer to his disciples' plea: "Teach us to pray."

So the whole Catholic Faith is summarized in Christ.

3. The act of faith and the object of faith

What do we mean by "faith"?

We must distinguish the human act of faith from the divine object of faith, our faith from The Faith, the act of believing from the truth believed.

The act of faith is ours. It is our choice to believe or not to believe.

To believe what? What God has revealed, divine revelation. That is the object of faith.

The act of faith is relative to its object. We don't "just believe," we believe God. And we don't just believe any god, we believe the true God, the Father of Jesus Christ, as revealed to us by the Church, her creeds, and her Bible.

The Catechism describes the act of faith this way: "Faith is a personal act – the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself" (CCC 166). Faith is a response to data, to what has been given (data means "things given") to us by God – that is, a response to divine revelation. Faith is not some feeling we work up within ourselves. Faith has data just as much as science does. But the data of faith are not the kind of thing the scientific method can discover, or prove, or comprehend. God does not fit into a test tube. He is not visible to the eye, only to the mind (when it is wise) and to the heart (when it is holy).

4. Faith and creeds

The Church has always summarized the object of faith (what she believes) in her creeds, especially the first and most basic one, the Apostles' Creed, which we recite at the beginning of each Rosary; and the Nicene Creed, which we recite in every Sunday Mass.

They are called "creeds" because they begin with "I believe," which in Latin is "credo."

The ultimate object of faith is not creeds, but God. Creeds define what we believe about God. (They do not define God himself. God cannot be defined. Only finite things can be defined.) The Catechism says: "We do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express..." (CCC 170). Saint Thomas Aquinas says: "The believer's act of faith does not terminate in propositions

but in realities.” Creeds are like accurate road maps; they are necessary but they are not sufficient. Looking at a road map is no substitute for taking the trip.

So “[f]aith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God” (CCC 150). But “[at] the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed” (CCC 150). We believe all the truths God has revealed to us (which are summarized in the creeds) because we believe God, “who can neither deceive nor be deceived.”

5. “The Deposit of Faith” and “Tradition”

What the Church teaches, and summarizes in her creeds, was not invented by the Church. It was handed down to her from Jesus Christ, God in the flesh. That is why it is called “Sacred Tradition” – “sacred” because it came from God, not mere man, and “tradition” because it was handed down (the word “tradition” means “handed down” in Latin).

“The apostles entrusted the ‘Sacred deposit’ of the faith (the depositum fidei),⁴⁵ contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church” (CCC 84).

The Church gives us her Tradition like a mother giving a child hand-me-down clothing that has already been worn by many older sisters and brothers.

But unlike any earthly clothing, this clothing is indestructible because it is not made of wool or cotton but of Truth. It was invented by God, not man. This “Tradition” (capital “T”) must be distinguished from all human traditions (small “t”).

The Church has always been, is, and must always be faithful to her Deposit of Faith. It is her data; she is not its author or editor but only its mail carrier. It is God’s mail. It is sacred. She does not have the authority to change or delete any part of it, no matter how unpopular it may become to any particular human society or individual. That is why she cannot approve things like fornication, divorce, contraception, or sodomy, even today.

That does not mean that the Faith cannot change. It constantly changes – but by growth from within, like a living plant, not by alteration or construction from without, like a machine or a factory – or a man-made ideology, philosophy, or political system. The Church can further explore and explain and interpret her original Deposit of Faith, drawing out more and more of its own inner meaning and applying it to changing times – and in that sense she “changes” it by enlarging it; but she cannot change it by shrinking it. She cannot conform it to demands from the secular world. She obeys a higher authority.

6. Faith and progress

The Catholic Faith constantly progresses, in the way explained above (growing like a plant). It needs no “push” to make it go, like a stalled car. To try to make the Faith more “progressive” is to assume it is a man-made artifact rather than a God-planted organism. Whenever the Church rejects a heresy, she rejects some external growth on this organism, like a parasite or a barnacle. When she defines her dogmas (articles of faith), she is only maturing and ripening her fruit. This “development of doctrine” (Cardinal John Henry Newman’s term) is both “conservative” and “progressive” at the same time and for the same reason (see Matthew 13:52). For her data, divine revelation, are both finished (thus she conserves them) and ongoing (thus she helps them to progress).

The development of doctrine is finished because the Deposit of Faith was completely given by Christ 2000 years ago. She has all her data. She will never have new data, for “Christ... is the Father’s one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no

other word than this one.” “...because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by...His Son.”²⁷ (CCC 65)

The development of doctrine is ongoing because the data are alive, and grow new fruits – not new in kind, like apple trees growing pears, but new in size and beauty, like bigger and better apples. “Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries” (CCC 66). For instance, the Church’s doctrine on the divine and human natures of Christ, on the Trinity, on the canon of Scripture (the list of books in the Bible), on the seven sacraments, on the nature of the Church, on the authority of the Pope, on Mary, and on social ethics have all developed in this way.

7. Faith and Scripture

The Catholic Church “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored...”⁴⁴ (CCC 82). Most Protestants reject all the Catholic doctrines they cannot find explicitly in Scripture – e.g., Mary’s Assumption into heaven – because they believe sola scriptura: that Scripture alone is infallible authority. This is the fundamental reason behind the differences between Protestant and Catholic theology.

There are at least six reasons for rejecting the idea of sola scriptura:

- 1) No Christian ever taught it for the first 16 Christian centuries, until Luther.
- 2) The first generation of Christians did not even have the New Testament.
- 3) Without the one Catholic (“catholic” means “universal”) Church to interpret Scripture authoritatively, Protestantism has divided into over 28,000 different “churches” or denominations.
- 4) If Scripture is infallible, as traditional Protestants believe, then the Church must be infallible too, for a fallible cause cannot produce an infallible effect, and the Church produced the Bible. The Church (the first bishops, the Apostles) wrote the New Testament, and the Church (later bishops) defined its canon.
- 5) Scripture itself calls the Church “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15).
- 6) And Scripture itself never teaches sola scriptura. Thus sola scriptura is self-contradictory. Yet the Church is the servant of Scripture, as a teacher is faithful to her textbook. Her Book comes alive when the Holy Spirit teaches through her, as a sword comes alive in the hands of a great swordsman (see Heb 4:12).

Some of the most important principles of interpreting Scripture are:

- 1) All Scripture is a word-picture of Christ. “The Word of God” in words (Scripture) is about “The Word of God” in flesh (Christ).
- 2) Therefore the Old Testament is to be interpreted in light of the New (and vice versa), for Christ “came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17).
- 3) Saints are the best interpreters of Scripture, because their hearts are closer to the heart of God, Scripture’s primary author. Christ said, “If your will [heart] were to do the will of my Father, you would understand my teaching” (John 7:17).
- 4) The Gospels are the heart of Scripture. The saints found no better material for meditation than these (CCC 125-27).
- 5) Interpret each passage in its context – both the immediate context of the passage and the overall context of the whole Bible in its unity, all the parts cohering together.

6) Scripture should be interpreted from within the living tradition of the Church. This is not narrow and limiting, but expansive and deep. It is also reasonable; for suppose a living author had written a book many years ago and had been teaching that book every day: who could interpret that book better than she?

8. Faith and Church authority

“The Church’s Magisterium [teaching authority] exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas...” (CCC 88). (Note that the Church defines dogmas, not invents them.)

These “dogmas,” or fundamental doctrines, are also called “mysteries” of the Faith. “There are natural mysteries (for instance, time, life, love), just as there are supernatural mysteries (for instance, Trinity, Incarnation, Transubstantiation). Natural mysteries are like the sun, which enables us to see during the day, while the supernatural mysteries of faith are like the stars, which enable us to see at night.... Although we do not see as well at night, nevertheless we can see much farther – into the very depths of outer space” (Scott Hahn, *Catholic for a Reason*). They are called “mysteries” because we could not have discovered them by our own reasoning (nor can we fully understand them), but God revealed them to us on a “need to know” basis, since they concern our ultimate destiny, our eternal salvation, and the way to it.

Because they are so necessary for us to know, God did not leave us only fallible and uncertain teachers. Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the living Magisterium of the Church when it defines dogma, are all infallible (preserved from error), certain (for God can neither deceive nor be deceived), and authoritative (binding in conscience).

The Church is our “Mother and Teacher” (*Mater et Magistra*). “Salvation comes from God alone [our Heavenly Father]; but because we receive the life of faith through the Church, she is our mother... Because she is our mother, she is also our teacher in the faith” (CCC 169). “As a mother who teaches her children to speak...the Church our Mother teaches us the language of faith...” (CCC 171).

We now turn from the object of faith (“The Faith”) to the act of faith.

9. Faith and freedom

“The act of faith is of its very nature a free act”³⁹ (CCC 160). Faith cannot be forced any more than love can be forced.

Therefore the attempt to threaten or coerce anyone into believing is not only morally wrong but also psychologically foolish. For what can be coerced is fear, not faith. The Church condemns coercion in religion: “Nobody may be forced to act against his convictions, nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience in religious matters in private or in public...”³⁴ (CCC 2106). “Christ invited people to faith and conversion, but never coerced them” (CCC 160). “For he bore witness to the truth but refused to use force...”⁴¹ (CCC 160). Believing what God has revealed is submitting our mind to God’s mind. This submission is not contrary to human freedom or human dignity. “Even in human relations it is not contrary to our dignity to believe what other persons tell us about themselves and their intentions or to trust their promises (for example, when a man and a woman marry)...” (CCC 154).

Faith is our Yes to God’s proposal of spiritual marriage. This Yes is doubly free: it comes from our free choice and it leads us to our true freedom, for the God whose proposal we accept is Truth (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” – John 14:6), and “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

Only if we believe will we see “the splendor of truth” (Veritatis Splendor). For only when you marry someone do you fully know him or her, and only when we accept God’s proposal of spiritual marriage, by faith, will we know the ultimate truth, who is a Person, personally. But this Person is a gentleman. He will not compel us, but leaves us free to choose, Yes or No, for him or against him, and for his gift of eternal life with him.

10. Faith and feeling

Faith is not some state of feeling we get ourselves into. It is much simpler than that. It is simply believing in God and therefore believing everything he has revealed – no matter how we feel.

“God said it, so I believe it, and that settles it.”

Feelings are influenced by external things, like fashions and fads, wind and weather, diet and digestion. But when God gives us the gift of faith, he gives it from within, from within our own free will.

The Devil can influence our feelings, but he has no control over our faith.

We are not responsible for our (unfree) feelings, but we are responsible for our (free) faith.

Yet, though faith is not a feeling, it often produces feelings: of trust, peace, gratitude, and confidence, for instance. And faith can also be aided by feelings: for instance, when we feel trustful or grateful to someone, God or man, it is much easier for us to believe him than when we feel mistrustful or ungrateful.

But even when we don’t feel trustful or peaceful, we can still believe. Faith is not dependent on feelings. It is dependent on facts: divinely revealed facts.

There is a Chinese parable about faith and feeling. Fact, Faith, and Feeling are three men walking along the top of a wall. As long as Faith keeps his eyes on Fact, ahead of him, all three keep walking. But when Faith takes his eyes off Fact and turns around to worry about how Feeling is doing, both Faith and Feeling fall off the wall. (But Fact never does.)

Faith includes belief, but it is more than belief. Here are some of the differences:

Belief is an act of the mind; faith is also an act of the will.

Faith is an act by which one person says to another: “I choose to trust you and believe you.”

The object of belief is an idea; the object of faith is a person.

Belief alone is not something to die for. But faith is. Faith is also something to live every moment.

Belief alone is not enough to save us from sin and bring us to Heaven. “Do you believe that God is one? Good for you! The devils also believe, and tremble with fear” (James 2:19). But faith does save us. We are “justified by faith” (Romans 5:1), if it is a faith that is alive and thus produces good works (cf. James 2:17).

Non-Catholics who, through no fault of their own, do not believe that the Catholic Faith is true can still be saved, by the faith in their hearts that leads them to love and seek God. For Christ promised that “all who seek, will find” (Matthew 7:7). So while belief without faith cannot save anyone, faith without correct belief can.

12. Faith as a gift of God

The Catholic Faith comes to us from God through the Church, our mother and teacher (CCC 169). The Faith, summarized in the creeds of the Church, comes to us not from the Church but through the Church from God – just as our bodily life comes from God through our mothers.

The human act of faith also comes to us from God, through the Holy Spirit, who inspires it. It is a gift of God.

So the Faith comes to us from without, while the act of faith comes from within, but both are gifts from God.

God offers everyone the gift of faith, in both of these two senses. All have the free will to accept it or reject it, to the extent that they know it. No one can truly say, "I want to believe, but God just hasn't given me the gift of faith yet, so it's his fault, not mine, that I'm an unbeliever."

Perhaps such a person misunderstands what faith is, and thinks of it as some irresistible mystical experience, or some sudden, undeniable light of certitude. Instead, it is like pledging your loyalty to a king, or a friend, or a spouse: it is a choice.

13. The effect of faith

What does faith do? What is its power, its result, its effect?

The result of sexual intercourse is (often) a new physical life in the woman's body. The result of faith is (always) a new spiritual life in the believer's soul: the life of God himself. This is why Christ came to earth: "that they may have life [zoe, supernatural life], and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). "As many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believed on his name" (John 1:12). Many different expressions are used for this result of faith: "salvation," "eternal life," "supernatural life," "regeneration," "sanctifying grace," "justification," "sanctification," or "being born again."

The principle is often repeated in the New Testament that if we believe, we will be saved; if not, not (for instance, John 3:36). Faith is necessary for salvation – not because God arbitrarily decreed this but because of what faith is and what salvation is. If we let God into our souls (that is what faith is), then we will have God in our souls (that is what salvation is); if we don't, we won't (for God respects our free will). Faith is more like opening a faucet than passing a test. If you don't open the faucet of faith, you won't receive the water of salvation.

After death, those who have God's life in their souls will live in Heaven in union with him forever, and those who have deliberately refused will be barren of his life forever. This is the essence of Hell: to be without God, the source of all good and all joy. The Biblical imagery of fire and torture is probably not meant to be taken literally, but it is certainly meant to be taken seriously. For what could ever be more serious than the loss of God forever?

Thus, there is simply nothing that makes a greater difference than faith.

14. Faith and love

This new life of God in our souls is like a plant. It has three parts. Faith is its root, its beginning. Hope is its stem, growing upwards into the sky. Love is its fruit, or its flower, the best and most beautiful part of all. "Now abide faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Faith is invisible. Only God can see it. The works of love make our faith visible to others, as the fruits of a plant show what kind of plant it is. "By their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:20).

"Faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). If we have living faith, we will love, and if we love God, we will obey him. "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Faith's natural effect is obedience. "By faith, Abraham obeyed" (Hebrews 11:8). "Abraham is the model of such obedience offered us by Sacred Scripture. The Virgin Mary is its most perfect embodiment" (CCC 144) – because she spoke her Yes to God with all her being (Luke 1:38).

Good works – the works of love – are a requirement for salvation just as much as faith is, as roses are a requirement for a rose bush. Faith alone is not salvation, as roots alone are not a plant.

15. Faith and works

Most Protestants, following Lutheran writings, believe that faith alone is sufficient for salvation. The Catholic Church, following the New Testament (Matthew 25; James 2), teaches that good works are also required. This was the single most important issue of the Protestant Reformation, a tragic division in the history of the Church.

But both Protestants and Catholics are beginning to see that their two apparently contradictory positions may have been saying the same essential thing in different words, words that seemed contradictory but perhaps were not. Returning to the common data – Scripture – reveals that both key words, “faith” and “salvation,” are used in two senses: sometimes more narrowly and sometimes more broadly:

1) In Romans and Galatians, for example, Saint Paul uses “faith” broadly, to mean acceptance of God and his offer of salvation in Christ. This is the free choice of the will that saves us. But in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul uses “faith” in a narrower sense in distinguishing faith from hope and love, and says love is greater. And Saint James uses faith in a narrower sense when he says that faith alone does not save us. That is, intellectual belief alone does not save us.

2) Scripture also uses “salvation” in two senses, broad and narrow. “Salvation” in the broad sense includes “sanctification,” being-made-saintly, being-made-holy; and this is a process that requires not faith alone but also good works. “Salvation” in the narrower sense means just being accepted by God, or “justified,” forgiven for sin, being in a “state of grace.” Catholics agree with Protestants that in this narrower sense of “salvation” we can be saved by faith alone – that is, by “faith” in the broader sense, faith as a choice of the will, not just a belief of the intellect. Faith is what lets the life of God into our soul. The thief on the cross (Luke 23:33-43) had no time for good works, but he was saved by his faith.

To summarize, then:

- 1) we are neither justified (forgiven) nor sanctified (made holy) by intellectual faith alone (belief);
- 2) we are justified by will-faith, or heart-faith alone;
- 3) but this faith will necessarily produce good works; and
- 4) we are not sanctified by faith alone in either sense, but only by faith plus good works.

An analogy: a woman is made pregnant by her faith in a man, by letting him impregnate her. She is not made pregnant merely by right intellectual beliefs about him. This faith, or trust, is sufficient to begin her pregnancy, but she must choose to do the deeds that nourish and complete it (e.g., eating the right foods).

The Protestant doctrine of “justification by faith alone” contradicts Scripture. Saint Paul never says we are justified by faith alone, and Saint James explicitly says we are not justified by faith alone (James 2:24).

But Protestants can remind us of an infinitely important truth that we often forget: that we are not saved by good works alone; that we cannot buy our way into Heaven with “enough” good deeds; that none of us can deserve Heaven; and therefore if you were to die tonight and meet God, and God were to ask you why he should let you into Heaven, if you are a Christian your answer should not begin with the word “I,” but with the word “Christ.”

16. Faith and reason

Faith can never contradict reason, when reason is properly used, though faith goes beyond reason. As a revelation from God, the Catholic Faith tells us many things human reason could

never have discovered by itself. But faith and reason are both roads to truth, and truth never contradicts truth.

There is one God who is the source of all truth, whether that truth is known by faith or reason; and God never contradicts himself. God is like a teacher who wrote two books and teaches from them: natural reason and supernatural revelation. There are no contradictions between the two books because they both come from the same author.

It follows that every argument against the true Faith, every objection to the Faith, makes some mistake in the use of reason. It either misunderstands the meaning of some terms, or assumes some false premise, or makes some mistake in reasoning, some logical error.

Faith cannot contradict science (CCC 159). There are thousands of truths that make up the Catholic Faith, and billions of truths that the sciences have discovered; yet there is not a single real contradiction between any two of them.

When there seems to be such a contradiction – for instance, between Creation and Evolution – it always turns out to be no real contradiction at all. One or both has been misunderstood. For instance, the doctrine of Creation does not say just how or when God made man’s body “from the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7); and the Theory of Evolution (which is a theory, not a dogma!) does not say how souls were made, only bodies (souls leave no fossils!). Nor does Evolution say where the very first matter that began to evolve came from.

Not only does faith not contradict reason, but reason leads to faith, discovers clues to faith, good reasons for faith. These include:

1) the power of the Gospels, and of the figure of Christ met there, to move readers’ souls;

2) Christ’s miracles, which continue today in various places throughout the world;

3) fulfilled prophecies (Christ in the Gospels fulfilled hundreds of different, specific Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah);

4) the history of the Church:

a) her faithfulness to her doctrine, never abandoning or contradicting any point of it, despite many pressures to do so both from without and from within, and despite the intellectual and moral weakness of her human teachers;

b) her survival for 2000 years, despite persecutions without and sins and follies within;

c) her growth, her liveliness, her eternal youth, her production of new saints for every age; and

d) the winsomeness and joy of her saints. If the Catholic Faith is not supernatural truth, how could it have produced such supernatural goodness? Can Truth and Goodness contradict each other? How could humanity’s two most perfect and absolute ideals lead in opposite directions? Could the human heart be so badly designed as that?

17. Faith as certainty yet mystery

Faith is not simply bright and clear, like the noonday sun. Nor is it simply dark, like an underground pit. It is like a sky full of stars on a clear night, or like a bright beam of light surrounded by darkness. Faith is certain, but it is also mysterious.

The Catholic Faith is certain. “It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God, who cannot lie” (CCC 157). The objective (in-itself) certainty of God’s revelation does not depend on the subjective (in-our-minds) certitude of our feelings or reasons. The object of faith is not anything in ourselves; it is God. Our faith is not in our faith, but in our Creator. We are certain not of our minds, but of God’s mind.

Faith is also mysterious, for the very same reason: because its object is God. God is infinite, and our understanding is finite. As Saint Augustine said, we could more easily put all the ocean into a thimble than put all of God into our mind.

But faith naturally seeks understanding. (“Faith seeking understanding” was the definition of Christian wisdom for medieval philosophers.) If we love and trust a person – man or God – we want to know him better. A faith without curiosity is like a seed that does not grow. Indifference is farther from faith than doubt or rebellion.

Faith is like a bright light (certainty) surrounded by darkness (mystery), a light that keeps growing and illuminating new areas of the darkness.

18. Faith and beauty

Throughout history, the Catholic Faith has produced great works of beauty, as naturally as the sun produces reflections on the water: in music, poetry, painting, sculpture, dance, plays, novels, and architecture. For instance, those medieval Gothic cathedrals that look like stone turned into angels ready to take flight from earth into heaven – they were built by faith: faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They were built to house the celebration of the Eucharist, to glorify Christ’s presence there.

The Catholic Faith naturally produces beauty because the God who is both the object of this faith and its author is the ultimate source and inventor of all beauty, both in nature and in the mind of the human artist.

The greatest beauty produced by faith is holiness. The most beautiful thing we will ever see in this life is the character and life of a saint, because nothing more closely resembles God. The most beautiful sight that ever appeared on this earth was Jesus Christ, divine beauty in human flesh, “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14) – like the “grace” of a great dancer or football player. His “moves” were perfect! The Gospels are the most beautiful of all works of art because they are portraits in man’s words of the Word of God, the God-man, the Author who became a character in his own story.

Yet the divine Inventor of all earthly beauty, when he became a man, “had no form or beauty that we could desire” (Isaiah 53:2). A man tortured and dying on a cross does not look beautiful. Yet this is the most beautiful thing that ever happened: God dying for us, for our sins, out of incomprehensible, infinite love. The Cross is supremely beautiful because it was the supreme work of love, and love is the supreme beauty.

19. Faith and trials

God tests our faith by allowing us to suffer. He does not make us suffer, but he allows it. He does not miraculously shield us from suffering, though he could. He does this so that we learn to trust him more; he does it to mature and strengthen our souls, and thus to increase our ultimate happiness.

God also tests our faith by remaining invisible, so that we must believe him instead of seeing him. He could manifest himself in constant miraculous displays, but does not do so, for our sake. For more “blessed are those who have not seen, yet have believed” (John 20:29).

He tests our faith to make it stronger, as a gardener prunes a plant, or a blacksmith forges iron in the fire, or an athlete trains his muscles by exercise.

This is why he holds back and lets himself be forgotten, or ignored, or even rejected. If we couldn’t refuse him, our faith couldn’t be a free choice. It’s “the Godfather” who makes you “an offer you can’t refuse,” not God the Father.

We do not need to have faith in the moon: we can see it. We do not need to have faith in an equation: we can prove it. But we need to have faith in the goodness of our friends, our parents, our spouse. God is more like a friend, a father, or a husband, than like the moon or an equation.

20. "Losing your faith"

No one "loses" his faith, as he loses his watch. Faith is never lost against our will, any more than it is chosen against our will. We choose to believe and we choose not to believe.

Some of the main causes for the choice not to believe are the following (see CCC 29):

1) revolt against evil in the world, and against the God who does not act as quickly to defeat evil as we would wish;

2) ignorance or misunderstanding of the Faith;

3) indifference or laziness;

4) the cares of the world, "having no time for religion" (that is, making no time for God);

5) greed for riches and the things money can buy, "serving the creature more than the Creator" (Romans 1:25);

6) the scandal of bad example on the part of believers;

7) the unfashionableness of religion in a secular society;

8) the refusal to repent and give up some cherished sin;

9) fear of the unknown, fear of letting go and giving God a "blank check," fear of trusting him;

10) fear of suffering rejection or reprisals from family, friends, or secular authorities;

11) pride, the demand to "play God," to be in control, to have our own way; and

12) the difficulty in trusting God as Father if we have experienced broken families and absent or unloving human fathers.

But all these "reasons" not to believe can be answered.

21. Faith's answers

1) Faith's one-word answer to the problem of evil is: Wait. God will conquer all evil, in time, in the end. But we have to go through the middle of the story to get to the end.

2) A course or a booklet like this one, or the Catechism, or a wise and good priest, can usually clear up misunderstandings.

3) If we knew God as his closest friends, the saints, do, we could never be bored or indifferent to him. If we are bored with Catholic theology, morality, or liturgy, that's because we do not realize that they are the truth about this God, the good will of this God, and the celebration of the presence of this God.

4) If it is foolish to refuse to give up ten dollars to win a million, it is even more foolish to refuse to give up a little time to win eternity.

5) Everything we seek, desire, love, and enjoy in the things of this world, the things we hope money can buy – pleasure, beauty, freedom, power, peace, excitement, happiness – is to be found in God, multiplied to infinity. As Saint Augustine says, "Seek what you seek, but it is not where you seek it."

6) Do we refuse to love because there are some bad lovers? Do we refuse to marry because there are some bad husbands and wives?

7) If you must choose between the two, which is better? – to be accepted by God forever and be rejected by some men for a little time, or to be accepted by some men for a little time but rejected by God forever?

8) We are all sinners, sin addicts, sinaholics. We all find it hard to give up cherished sins, even after we believe (though it is much easier and happier then). But the question is not whether we can, but whether we will, whether we are willing to let God do it in us. We can't, but he can, and will, if we let him. And all who have done that say the same thing: that it is joyful liberation, like being freed from a drug habit.

9) Being born, falling in love, marrying, or traveling to a new place are all experiences of the unknown. All the greatest joys in life come from letting go.

10) Jesus promised us: "Every one who has forsaken houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for my name's sake shall receive a hundredfold and shall inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29).

11) Pride was the first sin, the sin of Satan, who resented being Number Two to God. He would not obey God's will, only his own. ("Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" – Milton). This is also a selfish, spoiled baby's philosophy of life: "I want what I want when I want it." Two rather unwise models to live by, don't you think?

12) You know, from past bitter experience, that where there is no faith and trust there can be no joy. You know the past; but you do not know the future. You don't know whether your trust will be disappointed again, by God, as it was by man. But you do know that your only hope, your only chance at joy, on earth and in Heaven forever, is to trust and to love. If our trust is betrayed by men, that is all the more reason to trust God. It is not reasonable to refuse the only lifeboat that can save you when all the other boats have sunk.

22. Faith and Christ

The Catholic Faith has one answer, ultimately, to all 12 of these problems, in fact, one answer to all problems: Jesus Christ, the one answer God provided. "God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Every Catholic home and every Catholic believer should have a crucifix. For the answer to all doubts, temptations, and trials is there. (In the reality it pictures, not just in the picture of it.) For instance, the problem of suffering and injustice. God's answer is not an explanation, but a deed: he did not hover above it like a bird but came down and shared it as a man, as a victim. Instead of telling us why not to weep, he wept with us (John 11:12). Christ is God's tears. And Christ is the conqueror of tears, and of death.

That is our faith. That is "the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection."

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

2 Jn 1:12; 1 Jn 3:1.

3 2 Pt 1:4.

4 Phil 1:27.

15 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops 1985, Final Report II B a, 4.

45 DV 10 § 1; cf. 1 Tm 6:20; 2 Tm 1:12-14 (Vulg.)

27 St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 22, 3-5, in *The Collected Works*, tr. K. Kavanaugh, OCD, and O. Rodriguez, OCD (Washington DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), 179-80: LH, OR Advent, wk 2, Mon.

44 DV 9.

39 DH 10; cf. CIC, can. 748 § 2.

34 DH 2 § 1.

41 DH 11; cf. Jn 18:37; 12:32.