

BLACKFRIARS

Plain Talks on Fundamentals, IV

FAITH

FAITH is the subjective counterpart to objective Revelation: the human response to God's Self-showing; man's humble, worshipful assent to and acceptance of the words and the Word of God, itself a gift of God. To understand the nature and the necessity of Faith we must therefore recall and amplify what has already been said regarding Revelation.

Revelation means that *God has spoken*—has spoken to all men and so to *me*—through His appointed spokesmen, the prophets, and through His Son. He has told me things I could never have discovered for myself—things of the most vital and supreme importance to me for this life and hereafter. Revelation is essentially concerned with *Mystery*, with that which of its very nature is unknowable by man's unaided efforts. It is not enough for me to know that God exists, that there is an Infinite, an Absolute, an Ultimate Explanation, a First Cause, a Supreme Intelligence, a perfect Beauty, a final Value, an Object of all yearning, striving and desire. These truths which thought and philosophy can tell me are, in themselves, of relatively little practical importance if God is to remain the unattainable Infinite, remote, impersonal. Unless I know the will of God in *my* regard, unless I know whether He loves or hates or is indifferent to me, unless I know whether and how I am to attain His love, His favour, His grace, unless I know whether and how He will forgive me my transgressions of His will and His law which withhold me from Him; unless I can know all this, the knowledge of God which my own thought can give me is purely speculative, academic, incapable of governing my life and conduct. Rather does the natural, philosophical knowledge of God induce me to misery and despair; for the Infinite, the Absolute, is by definition that with which I am powerless to enter into personal contact and relationship, even were I not, as I know I am, a sinner.

The historic Revelation of God through His prophets and

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through His Son imparts to me information about God and God's will in my regard which, from the very nature of things, I could not acquire for myself. It is not primarily concerned to give me a purely speculative knowledge of God; to tell me what God is *like*. The Word of God is a *Verbum salutis*, a word of salvation; it is the Gospel, the Good News of the forgiveness of sin and of the love, the favour, the grace of God to me. If you tell me that the beauty of the sea or the mountains tells you more about what God is like than a tawdry Catholic church, I will not quarrel with you. Nor will I quarrel with you if you tell me that Shakespeare or Beethoven convey to you a clearer idea of God than do the Scriptures, the Catechism, or the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas. But I must tell you that the beauty of nature and art cannot tell you how to save your soul, how to attain forgiveness of sin and love of God; nor even whether God wills to forgive your sin, to give you His love and His favour, whether He wills to have personal communication with you, whether He wills that He should satisfy all your cravings with the possession of His own infinite Self. And that is what *matters* supremely to each one of us. And that is what neither nature and art nor any mortal man can tell us. For that God alone can know, and God alone can tell.¹

And we maintain that God *has* told us. That is the whole point and purpose of Revelation. It communicates to us essential mystery, what God alone can know and tell—it is the message of forgiveness and salvation. The prophet, the inspired spokesman of God, is not the man of genius who discovered or formulated a universal moral or religious idea. He communicates to me, not human knowledge however

¹ The truth expressed in this paragraph must not be given the sense attributed to it by some Protestant and Modernist writers who would restrict truths of divine faith to those which *directly* express the economy of salvation. But all revealed truths, according to St. Thomas, following St. Augustine and followed by the Councils of Trent, and Vatican, have some connexion with our salvation, and it is *for* our salvation that they are revealed. Even those revealed truths which would seem at first to be purely speculative (e.g. regarding the Trinity of Persons) have very considerable practical implications. (Cf. R. Schultes, O.P., *Introductio in Hist. Dogmatum*, pp. 14-15.)

profound, but divine truth, what God alone knows. He reveals the fact of the forgiveness of sin, of the love of God for me, of the divine scheme for the salvation of my soul. He tells me not only what I could, perhaps, have discovered for myself, but above all what I could not—that God is not only my Maker, but my Lord and my Lover, who forgives me and desires me, and asks the return of my love for His; who has so loved me as to have given His only-begotten Son that I may not perish but may have eternal life with Him; who has given me His Word and His Sacraments that through them I may attain His grace and favour and be vitalized by His indwelling Spirit. Revelation tells me that God is not just the philosophical Absolute, the remote end of a chain of causality, but that He is Our Father who loves us and desires us; desires to possess us and be possessed by us; to be His children called and chosen to be the inheritors of Himself.

Faith is the assent which Revelation demands; the acceptance of revealed truth which God asks of me and gives me. I assent, not because revealed truths are in themselves evident to me, for they are not so; but simply, solely and wholly because God has spoken. I may carefully examine the credentials of the appointed prophets, of Christ Himself, of the Church which preserves and applies the truths of Revelation; I may require a toilsome process of study and thought to convince myself that revealed truth is not contrary to reason and ascertainable fact. But in the last resort my assent and submission can be based solely on the authority of God to which I bow. The revealed word is valid and postulates unconditional assent because and in so far as it has the authority and the commission of God behind it. The prophet tells me what I am absolutely unable to discover for myself; what God alone knows and can tell. He tells me what it is impossible for me even to verify in such wise that my own verification compels me to assent. No amount of thought or study or argument can give me Faith; for Faith is essentially unconditioned assent to the word of God *because* it is the word of God; it is assent to essential mystery, unascertainable and unverifiable by purely natural means.

We may perhaps clarify our idea of this supernatural and

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divine Faith if we compare it with human faith. A great part of our stock of ordinary natural knowledge is due to human faith. Each one of us assents, with or without reflection on the fact, to a vast amount of information which we have not, in fact, acquired for ourselves but solely on the authority of others whom we regard worthy of credence. We assent, with greater or less conviction, to this or that statement of historical fact, to this or that scientific theory or formula, to this or that information supplied to us by our parents, our professor or tutor, even our newspaper, not because we have ourselves experienced or ascertained the truth of what has been told us, but because we have *faith* in our informant, his competence and his veracity. We "take his word for it." We have greater or lesser reason to assume that he knows what he is talking about, and that he is not deceiving us. If we reflect, we shall find that a great part, perhaps the greater part, of our stock of knowledge, of our convictions and opinions, is based, not so much on our own thought, experience or discovery, as on what has been told us by others, whether by word of mouth or in writing. In a word, it is based on some sort of *faith* or *belief*.

Consideration of this purely natural and human faith may help to give us an inkling of what is meant by supernatural and divine Faith, which is likewise assent based on the authority of another rather than on our own discovery. But it will give us no more than an inkling. For if the similarities between human and divine faith are striking, the dissimilarities and contrasts are still more so.

In the first place, there is the dissimilarity which arises from the very fact that, whereas human faith is faith in man, divine Faith is faith in God. The authority behind the latter surpasses the authority of the former literally infinitely. All purely human authority is, in the last analysis, fallible. Man can often be deceived, no matter how painstaking he may be in ascertaining the exact truth. Man, moreover, can not only be deceived, he can and does deceive. God is Truth itself; He can do neither. St. Thomas, following St. Augustine, describes divine Faith as adhesion to the First Truth, to Truth itself, to the absolute Mind from conformity

to which all truths are true. By Faith my mind is made one with the Mind which is the source of all truths; it is itself, in a sense, divinized. Truths which I accept on the authority of God are certain with an absolute certainty which I cannot attain elsewhere.

Then again, human faith is, in the last analysis, a purely natural, indeed often a purely rational, process. We quite naturally and spontaneously glean information from others on some subject concerning which they may be assumed to know better than ourselves. It is sheer commonsense to do so; it normally requires no act of will, there is no obligation upon us to do so; human faith as such is non-moral. My assent is due ultimately not to an act of will but to a process of reasoning. I argue, though it may be only implicitly and unconsciously in some such way as this: "So-and-so says such-and-such; but what so-and-so says about such-and-such is true; therefore I assent to such-and-such as true." My premisses can be proved or disproved with certainty. But in divine Faith such premisses themselves can be reached with certainty only through Faith. I may have my motives of credibility; but they cannot demonstrate with certainty the truth of my premiss, but only show that they are credible. That God has spoken, that He has said such-and-such, are premisses to which I can assent with certainty only by an act of Faith. Divine Faith, therefore, always involves something extrarational, a leap in the dark, a will to believe which, if it is valid, must itself be motivated by God. (Its nearest human counterpart is perhaps the "faith" demanded by human love, in which there is usually an element of blind, non-rational confidence and trust even though complete mutual understanding and comprehension be lacking.) Moreover, there is no moral obligation attaching to human Faith as such. The very fact of divine Revelation to which by Faith I give assent tells me of the moral obligation and necessity for me to believe. God has spoken—spoken to all mankind and so to me—*therefore* I *must* believe. When our assent is motivated by our own thought and experience it is said to rest on intrinsic evidence; when, by human faith, it rests on

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the authority of other finite beings deemed worthy of credence, it is said to rest on extrinsic evidence; when it rests on the Self-Revelation of God, though it may be supported by evidence of the credibility of His spokesmen, my assent as such rests on no evidence at all, but on a blind, mysterious act of my will, itself empowered to it by the grace and the power of God.²

But it is by reason of its *content* that the uniqueness of divine Faith is most apparent. Human faith is concerned only with the relatively mysterious; I obtain from others information which, absolutely speaking, I could obtain for myself if I took the trouble. The truths which it conveys to me are natural, humanly ascertainable truths. Divine Faith conveys to me absolute, essential mystery, what God alone can know, God's own knowledge of Himself and His will.

Again, human faith is commonly concerned with purely extraneous information of diverse degrees of importance or unimportance. Divine Faith is concerned with personal information of the most vital and intimate importance: for Revelation tells me how I stand with God, and it tells me of God's will and pleasure for me. All the truths of Revelation are so many messages of God's love for man, for me. His choice of and dealings with Israel, the Incarnation, the Passion and Resurrection, the sending of the Holy Ghost, the Motherhood and preservation from sin of Mary, the Church, the Primacy and Infallibility of Peter and his successors: all these are constitutives of God's wooing of man, His scheme for our salvation.

Divine Faith is, or should be, all-transforming. It takes me out of the realm of the merely human and the merely natural and introduces me to a realm which is super-human and super-natural; it takes me out of myself and above myself by disclosing to me my own place in the Mind and the Love of God, and in so doing discloses to me the place He

² It is true that St. Thomas in the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa* appears to regard motivation by the will as of the essence of faith in general (cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *De Revelatione*, I, p. 433 sqq.), thus giving "faith" and "belief" a more restricted sense than that which we have here given it in accordance with present usage.

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must occupy in my own mind and my own love and life. A non-Catholic divine has recently expressed this transforming effect of Faith very finely: "God's Revelation, the invasion into my egoistic thinking in which I am always the centre, is the event in which God drives me out of the centre, in which I cease to be master, and receive a master—the only one whom I can receive, the one who is the Lord. God in His Revelation does not let Himself be made an object, but remains a subject over against me, and I become an object, and therefore in this act my existence is transformed, and from being lord of my own being, the autonomous self, I become a servant of God. And thus, just as that which I know in the Revelation is not 'something' but the Lord, so also this act of knowing is another kind of knowing, not an act of mastery that assigns its object a place in my world, but an act of obedience, whereby I am assigned in my own place. Not a fitting in, but a being fitted in. . . . Revelation is God's self-communication. God *gives Himself* in Revelation. It is not primarily as one who makes a claim that He addresses me, but as one who gives—as one who, in giving Himself to me, gives me life. It is true that He reveals Himself as the Lord who lays claim to me, but He claims me for Himself. His demand and His grace are one. He demands nothing else than that I should become wholly His, that I should unconditionally acknowledge Him as the giver of my life, that I should trust Him. His grace consists in His claiming me wholly for Himself. . . . God's grace permeates my decision, and the obedient decision of faith is the transformation which God Himself effects in my life."³

Even humanly speaking we all need *some* kind of faith if we are going to lead a rounded, complete, integral—let alone a heroic—human existence. A life which is based solely on our own reasoning and individual experience will be a stunted life, and it will achieve little. If we examine any of the great lives of history or of our own acquaintance, the lives which have been truly heroic and worthwhile, we shall find invariably that they have been lives of faith. The great

³ Emil Brunner, *God and Man*. (S.C.M. Press)

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achievements of reason itself, of philosophy and science, have been due to a faith in reason and science. If our lives seem futile, bored, uncreative, unvital; it may be because we lack faith. Our age is one which is beginning to reappraise the necessity and the power of faith. Faith, any faith so long as it be sincere and ardent, and no matter how false and even foolish, can move mountains. We have seen in our own day how faith in Communism, in a *Duce*, a *Führer*, can work something like miracles. Is the Faith of Christians—Faith in God—to be less vital and powerful?

But we believe, not because Faith *works*, or because some sort of faith is a psychological, humanistic, social or political desideratum, but because God has spoken to us and requires our assent; because without Faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. xi, 6). For without Faith it is impossible to learn of God's pleasure in our regard; and unless we know that and how we are to conform with His will for us and obtain and conserve His love and grace, the whole purpose of our existence will be frustrated. God has spoken; and our response must be: *Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth: Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief* (I Kings iii, 9; Mark ix, 24).

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