

There's a reason Aquinas observed that faith is not affect, despite the common assumption that emotion is an inevitable accompaniment of faith — so much so that its presence is often taken as a sign of great faith while its absence is regrettably equated with faithlessness.

But it isn't so. While faith sometimes involves emotion — joy, consolation, serenity, etc. — the two are very different things, as today's Feast reminds us.

In recognition of this, there's a reason why the RCIA process through which adults are received into full Communion with the Catholic Church is a protracted process that can take months, or in some cases, years. Often people thinking of joining the Church come in a burst of emotion, convinced by reason of that emotion that they're called to the Church. Their emotion isn't a bad thing, necessarily. The problem, though, as the Church knows all too well after two millennia, is that one's initial burst of emotion will inevitably fade when the hard work of building and leading a Catholic life of faith begins after the splendor and intensity of the Easter Vigil begins to fade into memory.

It's not unlike a wedding in that regard. When couples walk back down the aisle after exchanging their vows, they're married. But that only means they've begun the first day of building a marriage, a lifetime's work, something very different from the wedding they've just experienced, as wonderful as conferring the Sacrament of Matrimony on each other is. A wedding is a Rite, a ceremony, a reception perhaps, and all the pomp and beauty and celebration that goes along with it. Being married, however, is a vocation, one really no different from how Paul described his own vocation to preach the Gospel. "You recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery, working night and day ..." ¹ Of course, there's hopefully much more to a marriage than that — lots of joy, too — but anyone who thinks they

¹ 1 Thes 2:9 (NAB)

can just coast through a marriage without working at it is in for a rude surprise. Part of the joy that's found in marriage involves working together to build it, to strengthen it, and to deepen it.

The same thing is true of faith, too. That's where St. Monica, whom we honor today, comes in.

You'll recall that St. Monica prayed for thirty years or more hoping for the conversion of her son, Augustine — to little avail, year after year, decade after decade. Augustine, who to say no more about it, led, shall we say, a colorful and dissolute personal life, so no wonder Monica was concerned. The question is: faced with years and years when her prayers were seemingly unanswered, how was Monica able to persevere in her prayer? What was her consolation during these decades?

If she had relied on emotion alone, what emotions must she have experienced? Disappointment? Despair? A feeling that God had either abandoned her or was at least disinterested in her petitions? I'd be shocked if she didn't experience all of these things and more. Who wouldn't? Yet she persevered. She persevered, apparently because in her experience faith had much to do with perseverance.

Why was that? We can't know for sure, but I suspect it was because her faith wasn't contingent on a particular outcome to her prayer — however much she desired Augustine's conversion. It wasn't the particular grace of his conversion on which her faith rested. It was instead on the giver of all grace, God, in whom she placed her faith — whether or not she understood why time passed with no apparent answer to her prayer and for whatever emotions His seeming absence evoked in her.

In this, she was much like another saint, Saint Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa). We know from Mother Teresa's diaries that she spent many years of her active ministry with no sense of God's presence in her life and no sense of consolation that she might have derived from that sense, had she experienced it. Yet, she persisted in prayer. She persisted in her

work of serving the poorest of the poor, all because, whether or not she sensed the presence of God in her own life, her faith in Him never wavered and she was at least able to see Christ in the men and women she fed, clothed, and served. For her, faith was work, the work of Christ.

Like the five wise virgins in today's Gospel, Sts. Monica and Teresa were called simply to wait with flasks of oil for their lamps until the day when the bridegroom came to them.² They didn't understand His timing, perhaps, and they must have grown tired of waiting. But they kept the lamps of their faith burning until when, in the time of His own choosing, Christ would appear to them once again.

We're all in that position, sometimes. Waiting is hard. It's hard, too, to accept that "[we] know neither the day nor the hour," as Jesus tells us. But we don't have to know. We don't have to know the day or the hour. We don't even have to know what an answer to our prayers may look like when it comes. We just need to know the bridegroom. We just need to know Christ.

One day, the bridegroom finally came to Augustine and Monica's prayers were answered at last. He'll come to us, too, however disappointed or uncomprehending we may be at times.

Wait for Him.

² Mt 25:1-13 (NAB)