

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
December 4, 2016
Spiritual Ponderings
Reflecting on the Gift of Faith

For the month of December, I would like to share with you some recent thoughts I had on faith being a gift and how we can best be prepared to receive it.

I have always been fascinated with the idea of why some people have a belief in God that is so strong that they are willing to die rather than deny God and at the same time there are many who live their lives in such a way that it appears that they never even think of God. Faith according to the Letter to the Hebrews is “the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith therefore is the belief in something that one cannot necessarily prove through reason.

There are many in our world today who try to convince us that to be a person of faith is to be irrational but I have found the opposite to be true. For example I have faith that Istanbul, Turkey exists because I have seen small dots on different maps labeled Istanbul. I have heard people talk about it as if it were a real place on the news. Finally I have met people who say that they are from there. All of this has been enough to convince me that Istanbul exists and is a real place despite the fact that I have never physically been there or saw it.

I have never seen God but I have heard people tell me stories about how God has worked in their life that has left me convinced that God does exist. The complexity of the universe leaves me to believe with relative certainty that there is some sort of divine architect behind it. To believe in the Big Bang Theory without a divine architect to me is similar to believing that some great building will emerge from a bucket of Lego bricks when they are tossed onto the floor.

The Catholic Church proclaims that faith, belief in God, is a gift. Faith is a gift that our God freely gives to everyone. The reason therefore that some people believe in God and others do not has more to do with our response to this gift from God than with anything else. I believe the following story from my childhood will help us understand and visualize the Church’s teaching on the gift of faith.

I don’t remember which birthday exactly growing up but it was something during my junior high years. I knew for my birthday that year I was going to receive my very own bicycle as my parents’ birthday gift to me. I remember what a great gift it was because I desired it so much. I was so excited as my family pulled into my grandmother’s driveway where my birthday party was going to take place. I still remembered fondly riding my blue and yellow BMX bicycle all afternoon around my grandmother’s cul-de-sac. I was truly in heaven.

As evening began to descend, I began to panic as I realized that there was no way that my brand new bicycle was going to fit into the car with all my brothers and sisters. Sadly, I also knew that my parents would not leave my siblings behind so that we could take my bicycle home. This was truly a moment in which I had received a gift but I was ill prepared to take full possession of it because I had no way of taking my bicycle home with me.

In the same way some people receive the gift of faith. As Catholics we believe that our God is always willing to give us the gift of faith. The question of unbelief therefore has more to do with are we prepared to take possession of the gift or not. The following are ten ways, habits to develop, thought patterns to cultivate, and choices to make that will allow us to be more open to receiving this great gift of faith.

As I conclude this week’s reflection on the gift of faith, I would like to share with you Thomas Merton’s Prayer of Abandonment.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road although I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
December 11, 2016
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Reflecting on the Gift of Faith

Being open to the gift of faith.

1. Keep It Simple – It is About Relationship

One afternoon I was having lunch with my niece who was in the third grade. I decided to have a little fun with her and so I asked her “what sound does a dog make?”

She gave me a look that let me know that she knew the answer to my question but at the same time did not quite trust me. She responded “woof,” and I congratulated her for getting the first question correct.

I then asked her what sound did a cat make and she responded “meow.” I again congratulated her for getting two questions right in a row.

I next asked her what sound did a duck make and she responded promptly “quack.”

Finally after another moment of congratulating her for getting three questions right in a row, I asked her to tell me what sound a mouse makes. Without hesitating my niece responded “squeak.” I then informed her that she was wrong and that a mouse does not say “squeak” but rather “click.” She paused for a moment and began to laugh as a look of comprehension came over her face. She realized that I went from talking about a “mouse” as an animal to talking about a “mouse” as a piece of computer hardware. I enjoyed watching my niece come to the understanding that I had shifted paradigms from animals to computer hardware.

In a similar way Jesus Christ came to change the way we think about our relationship with God. Before the coming of Jesus religion and faith was about pleasing the gods and goddesses in order to keep them happy because if they were happy they might in return reward a person with what that person asked or begged for them to give that person. If a person did not do a good job in keeping the gods and goddesses happy then they might choose to leave that person or worse decide to punish a person. This is the basic plot behind most of the Heracles stories, the Odyssey, the Iliad, and other great works of Greek and Roman mythology. The gods and goddesses of the nations and cultures that surrounded the nation of Israel worked in a very similar fashion. If they were happy then a person might receive a blessing but heaven help a person if their gods and goddesses were not happy and decided to take their wrath out upon a person.

Jesus brings with Him a monumental paradigm shift that most people overlook. Our God, the one true God, is a loving Father who loves us and desires to be with us. We do not have to earn God’s love but instead Jesus tells us that we must remain in God’s love (John 8 and John 15:5). This is truly Good News because love that is earned is not love at all. We can thus refocus our energy and attention away from the idea of trying to get God to like us and instead focus on deepening our relationship with God.

How does one go about deepening one’s relationship with God? It is not as complicated as one might think. If you wanted to meet someone new, the first thing you might do is go up and talk to that person. The more you share and discuss things with the person the more you learn about him or her. The same is true about God but instead of talking with God we pray to God. The content is the same.

The second thing a person might do to get to know another person is to read a book about him or her. As Catholics we are blest to have the ultimate book about God the Sacred Scriptures a.k.a. the Bible. Catholics believe that God in an amazing way inspired the Bible to come into being. This was not done in Catholic opinion through divine dictation but rather through the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit over centuries. The Bible is in a sense a love letter from God to us His people. By learning more about God’s writings and what they contain we get to know about God’s personality, His likes and dislikes, etc.

The third thing we might do to get to know someone new is do an activity with that person. So what type of activities does God do? When John the Baptist was beginning to doubt whether Jesus was the messiah or not he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the messiah. Jesus’ response is not to simply say “yes” or “no” but rather He describes His daily routine to John’s disciples: “Jesus said to them in reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me” (Matthew 11:4b-6). So what is God doing all day? He is serving others and this is why service is always an important part of the Catholic Faith.

The next thing a person might do in order to get to know someone better is to have a meal with them and their family. God invites us to join Him for a family meal every week when He requests our presence each week at Sunday Mass. We can learn a lot about God by learning a lot about the different people that He calls family.

Faith therefore is about deepening our relationship with God through prayer, reading Scripture, acts of service and participating in God's family meals. If a person commits to doing the preceding four things one will discover him or herself to be well on their way to not only being open to receiving the gift of faith from God but also to nurturing that same gift.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
December 18, 2016
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Let us continue with our reflections on being open to receive the gift of faith.

2. God's Time

I am a big fan of shopping online. The only drawback as far as I am concerned is that I have to wait for the package to be delivered and the delivery driver will only tell me that he or she will be coming between this time to this time. Knowing this I must wait for the package to arrive to accept it or risk the delivery driver coming while I am not present and taking the package back with him or her. God in many ways is like the delivery driver, we only know that God promises to give us the gift of faith and so we must be ready at all times to receive the gift of faith and the graces He wishes to bestow upon us.

Jesus warns us that God will come when we least expect Him like a thief in the night (Luke 12:39) or a bridegroom coming when we least expect Him (Matthew 25). We must therefore behave as a person of faith in the morning, evening and night no matter what day of the week or month it is.

3. Be Authentic

In the Gospel of Luke when Peter meets Jesus for the first time, Jesus encourages Peter to put out into deep water and to lower his fishing nets one last time. Peter, reluctantly, lowers his fishing nets and catches a sizable load of fish. Peter, realizing that there is something more to the man standing in front of him than appears declared to Jesus that he, Peter, is a sinful person. Jesus does not respond by leaving Peter behind but rather Jesus invites Peter to be his coworker: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." (Luke 5:10b).

To be a person of faith in the Catholic faith starts off with not a proclamation of how great we are but rather with a declaration of our need for a savior. The Church in the Liturgy of the Hours begins her prayer with the acclamation "God come to my assistance. Lord, make haste to help me." We start our Eucharistic celebration by acknowledging our sinfulness and praising God for His mercy in the Penitential Rite. We have four Sacraments (Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick) that are focused on the forgiveness of our sins.

Catholics admit that we are not angels but at the same time we are not demons. We are a unique, strange, and mysterious being. We are creatures who strive to do the good but sometimes end up doing the wrong thing. We are creatures with bodies but we also have a soul and free will. Our God desires to be with us as we grow.

4. Understand the Goal of Faith

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:16-18). Jesus came to bring about salvation which might be better understood as developing proper or right relationship with God and others.

Our world today often presents the image of heaven to us as the fulfillment of our every material desire, like all the ice-cream we can eat without getting fat, all the praise and adulations that our egos can desire, and all of our physical pleasures lasting forever.

Heaven though is about being in a place where God receives His due for being God and each of us is loved by God and others for simply being ourselves. It is a place where we do not have to worry about whether or not we are

loved for we will know in a very real way that we are loved beyond measure. At the same time we will love others and ourselves with our whole being.

Catholics strive to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth by striving to fulfill the greatest commandment: "Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.'"

Another way of looking at the goal of our Catholic faith is through the eyes of St. Irenaeus of Lyon who declared: "The glory of God is the human person fully alive." As Catholics we believe that God did not have to create human beings but He chose to out of love. This means that our God wants what is best for us and what is best for us is that we reach our full potential. God is like a master artist and we are His works of art. When a person praises a painting or a sculpture that same person is ultimately praising the artist who painted the painting or who sculpted the sculptor. Our God has no desire to hold us back out of jealousy because creation cannot compete with God just as a piece of art cannot compete with the artist that created it. Heaven therefore can also be described as a place where everyone has reached their fulfillment.

5. Understand the Value of Community

Many Protestants ask the question "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" For Catholics there is a fundamental error in the logic of the preceding question. Instead of asking "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" Catholics should ask themselves "Have I accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior?" because Catholics believe that we are saved as a community as a Church.

One of the very first things Jesus did when He began His public ministry was call people to join Him as His disciples, in the midst of His ministry Jesus sent His disciples out two by two, and finally even the great missionary Apostle St. Paul did not go it alone. He began his ministry with Barnabas and eventually recruited others included Timothy, Titus, Luke, and others in his missionary ministry.

People who are most open to receiving the gift of faith are those who have good role models in the faith, mentors to walk with them on faith's journey or belong to a support group of some sort. It is similar to a child who receives a multi-person board game but has no one to play with it. They will eventually lose interest in the board game.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

December 25, 2016

Spiritual Ponderings

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Let us continue with our reflections on being open to receive the gift of faith.

6. Know the Difference between Magic and Miracle

One of the biggest mistakes that people who are trying to grow in faith often make is that they turn faith into witchcraft. Faith, as stated before, is about entering into a relationship with a Divine Being. Witchcraft or magic on the other hand is about controlling the divine. It has an internal logic that goes something like this: if I do "A", "B", and "C" then God will have to respond by doing "D". For example, a person may go to Mass each week, perform many hours of service, and other religious acts may believe that God must make their life easier or remove any hardship from their lives.

God, like any individual, cannot be controlled or manipulated. While God chooses to respect our free will, we as God's creatures can never put God in our debt. God never owes us. On the other hand our God is a loving God and He is never out done in generosity. Faith is more about trusting in God then it is about controlling God. A person can look at the story of the Israelites travel to the Promise Land after being freed from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites continuously forget what God has done for them and so instead of responding in gratitude and trust they begin to complain over and over again. Their lives would be so much better if instead of desiring to know the future if they would just remember all that God had done for them up until that point: He led them through the Red Sea, He defeated Pharaoh's Army for them, He gave the 10 Commandments, He gave the manna, and He even gave them water from the rock. Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament God proves Himself to be faithful again and again. A

person who wishes to be ready to receive the gift of faith needs to develop a sense of gratitude and come to the realization that everything we have is a gift from God especially the gift of life itself.

7. Be Aware of the Just World Theory

Some people have problems being open to the gift of faith because on some level of their consciousness they hold onto an idea that psychologists call the “Just world theory.” It is the idea that a good person will only receive good things in his or her life and a bad person will ultimately end up with bad things happening to him or her. The idea of the “just world” harkens back in many ways to people’s desire to be in control. Personally this was a big obstacle to my being open to receiving the gift of faith because I would often think of God punishing me for the bad I did and allowing others to get off scot-free which led to me having a lot of bitterness in my heart directed toward God.

Now instead of seeing the bad things that happen to me as a punishment from God, I now realize that God does not directly cause these bad things. God allows bad things to happen because He respects human beings free will and in order to do that God must allow people to choose, the wrong, or the lesser good resulting in evil in the world. God gave human beings the gift of freewill because freewill is a key ingredient in the ability that allows human beings to love. Love would not exist if there was no free will. My faith teaches me that God though can use these negative things to mold and shape me like gold is refined fire (Isaiah 48:10). The Book of Job reminds us that even though we do understand why bad things happen to us and to our love ones God ultimately does.

8. Be Clear on Your Motives

Jesus makes it very clear throughout the Gospels that being a follower of Jesus means that we need to daily pick up our cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23). He also warns His followers on multiple occasions that if people persecuted Him they will persecute us (John 15:20). This is perhaps why it is so sad to see people who were once very active in the faith fall away when the going gets tough.

Good people of faith know that there will be good time and there will be bad times. The important thing is to remain faithful to God at all times and not to be fair-weather friends.

9. Remember the Church is a Hospital for Sinners

There are many excuses given by people for leaving the Catholic Faith and most of time these excuses have nothing to do with dogma, doctrine, or Church practice but with the other people in the Church. For example people say, “I used to be Catholic but I did not like what the bishop said about this or that,” or “I used to be Catholic but the nuns used to hit me with a ruler,” or “I don’t go to Church anymore because all the old ladies in the first pew are nothing but hypocrites.” It is at these moments that make the mistake of giving other people too much power over us. St. Augustine once declared that “The Church was a hospital for sinners and not a hotel for saints.” It is important to remember that by necessity we are going to run into imperfect people in the Church and thank God for if only people could come to Church many of us would not allow to be a part of the Church. Another famous Catholic saying is “The saints are just the sinners who fall down and get back up again.”

In Saint Mark’s Gospel Jesus encounters His first demoniac (person possessed by an evil spirit) in a synagogue – a local parish community (Mark 1:21-28). For many years, when I read, reflected, and prayed over this story from Mark, I began to realize that I was assuming that the person possessed by a demon dressed or acted in such a way that would make him stand out but Mark does not give us any clues to what the demoniac looked like. The man possessed by the demon could have been the rabbi, the person who had read from the Hebrew Scriptures, or another respected elder of the community. The important thing to realize is that we are all called to come to Church precisely because we are sinners in need of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

10. Realize that God is more than you can imagine

Finally the last thought process or difficulty that might need to be overcome in order to be ready to receive the gift of faith that God wishes to bestow upon us is that sometimes we limit God to human constructs. Many psychologists suggest that in childhood as we grow we develop an image of God that is helpful for us during our childhood years. The image might be that of God as a judge, a score keeper with a clip board, an old man on a throne, etc. This image we develop can be helpful for us in our childhood, however when we reach our adolescent and adult years we have to shed these images of God and come to realize that God is more than we could ever imagine, envision, or conceive.

There are many people who refuse the gift of faith because they see God as a judge that has set the bar too high and thus why bother to even try to live a moral or holy life. There are others who put limits on God's mercy by thinking that God can forgive everyone's sins but their own. Somehow their sins are just too immense for God to forgive. Many others see God as a score keeper who carries with Him a giant clipboard and they erroneously believe that in order to make God love them that they have to accomplish so many good deeds. Jesus through His teaching, death, and resurrection ultimately teaches us that God is at His heart a loving Father like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son. God is a divine being who loves us and desires to spend eternal life with us.

Let us open our hearts so that we can prepare to receive the gift of faith and to take ownership of it.

