

— THE —
NEW WORLD
OF FAITH

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tianity and to the Catholic Church as a young adult. Everything in my life since that time has confirmed the rightness of that decision. I hope that as many as possible may share with me the joy and excitement of the adventure of faith.

In order to avoid getting lost in scholarly references and debates, I have tried to write this book as much as possible in my own name, without reference to the many authors to whose thinking I am indebted. My aim is to reach a relatively large audience that extends beyond the limited circle of professional theologians.

My impulse to write this work came from the persistent invitation of Mr. Gregory Erlandson, editor in chief of Our Sunday Visitor Publishing. He conceived the idea that this book should be written and asked me to try to write it. He has been very patient with my delays and has offered excellent advice for the revision of my first draft. Among the many other persons who have assisted in bringing this work to completion, I should mention especially my assistant, Dr. Anne-Marie Kirmse, O.P., who has given much sage counsel at every stage of the way; my editor, Mr. Henry O'Brien, of Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, who has supervised the editorial process; and Emily Cardozo, who assisted me with the index.



The Present Situation of Faith

Within recent memory there was a time when most people professed the religious faith in which they had been raised. Having received the faith through their parents, they could be counted on to transmit it, in turn, to their children. But this transmission of religious faith from generation to generation has become increasingly difficult. We live in a time of rapid change and fragmentation, reinforced by rampant individualism, which Robert Bellah and others describe as America's dominant cultural orientation. The sociologist Robert Wuthnow, in a book entitled *Loose Connections* (1998), speaks of "porous institutions." People move easily in and out of jobs, careers, marriages, political parties, and, of course, churches.

Present Obstacles to Faith

The present situation creates special difficulties for the transmission of a highly structured, traditional, and cosmopolitan faith such as Catholic Christianity. For purposes of

illustration three impediments may here be mentioned: historical consciousness, pluralism, and the free-market mentality.

It is almost impossible not to be caught up in the historical consciousness that has emerged since the eighteenth century. We are acutely aware that the people of any given age have only limited access to the truth. Thanks to dramatic advances in science, many illusions from the past have been shattered. Deeply rooted convictions, taken for granted by our forebears, have been overturned.

Several examples readily come to mind. Until the seventeenth century, it was generally assumed that the earth stood at the center of the universe. But it has gradually become apparent that the earth is not the still point about which everything else revolves. Our planet rotates about the sun, which itself is by no means the center of the universe. In the seventeenth century, when the new astronomy asserted itself, many Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, considered that the geocentric view was a matter of faith. They even found passages in Scripture that seemed to presuppose that the sun revolved around the earth. But today that theory is universally rejected.

A second example is the application of historical criticism to the Scriptures. Until the middle of the nineteenth century it was easy to accept the creation stories in Genesis as literal accounts of the way the world came to be. But today most educated men and women in the world are convinced that the biblical creation narratives are largely mythological; that the world cannot have been created in the six days described in the Genesis, and that human beings probably descended from ape-like ancestors.

Historical criticism has made it very difficult to accept the literal accuracy of many biblical statements that earlier generations accepted without question. Stories such as the standing of the sun over Jericho and the survival of Jonah in the belly of the "great fish," which were sometimes taken as proofs of God's miraculous power, are today reinterpreted as poetic embellishment or edifying fiction.

These archaeological and scientific discoveries have an obviously negative impact on any Christian faith that is naïve or, as many express it, "fundamentalistic." Beyond this, historical consciousness can easily be turned into an argument for withholding any firm commitment of faith. Driven by the passion to be up to date, modern intellectuals adopt a critical posture to the past as a whole. As a consequence, even their present allegiances become tentative. Recalling that many venerable convictions of our ancestors have been shattered, they are understandably reluctant to commit themselves to any definite positions. Who knows what will be the next belief to fall beneath the relentless scythe of scientific criticism?

The second negative influence is the fact of pluralism. In the world of our day most people do not grow up in sheltered enclaves dominated by a single religion or a single set of social mores. They travel from place to place, and when at home they mingle with immigrants and visitors from other parts of the world. Inter marriage between people of different races, ethnic backgrounds, and religious affiliations is increasingly common. Through contemporary media of communication, we are thrust into contact with different clusters of ideas — religious, nonreligious, and even antireligious. It becomes obvious, therefore, that the faith of our own family and neighborhood is not self-evidently true. The realization that it is only one of many options makes any particular commitment more difficult if not weaker.

A third major source of difficulty, closely connected with pluralism, is the free market of ideas. In the realm of commerce new products are incessantly promoted by billboards, by mail, by television, and by the Internet. Our lives are caught up in cycles of production and consumption. Wordsworth's lament of almost two hundred years ago must also be our own: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Our attention is captured by new gadgets, amusements, and worldly satisfactions that would have eluded the most powerful and affluent monarchs of the past.

Many of us are so taken up with diet and food, sports

events, stylish clothes, new television sets, computers, and automobiles that little time is left over for consideration about the reasons why we exist at all. The pragmatic challenges of keeping our job, getting ahead in our profession, balancing our budget, maintaining our good health, and keeping up our family relations and social ties seem more pressing than seemingly impractical questions about God and religion.

In our pluralistic society the free-market mentality invades the sphere of ideas, including religious faith. Skilled recruiters, intent upon "church growth" and its secular analogues, are pressing us to join a multitude of vying movements and causes. Secular ideologies compete with religion, and the various religions are forced to compete among themselves. One possible result is the opinion that no one religion can be obligatory. The choice of a religion, like the choice of a brand of soup, is treated as a matter of individual taste. Religion is for people who are so inclined. If I happen to feel religious, I will buy into the religion that best suits my temperament. I will accept its tenets if I agree with them, and I will practice its rules as long as I find that they fulfill my spiritual needs.

The Persistence of Religion

Because of these three negative influences, and others that might no doubt be mentioned, religious faith ought by rights to be in decline. And in some places it is. But on the world scene the opposite appears to be the case. The great religions are enjoying a new lease on life. Hinduism in India, Buddhism in Southeast Asia, and Islam throughout the Middle East are flourishing. Christianity itself continues to expand, especially in parts of Asia and Africa. Notwithstanding the heavy inroads of secularism in Europe and North America, Christianity in these areas is experiencing dramatic renewals in small communities. The Roman Catholic Church, like some other groups, attracts a steady stream of converts. The prestige of the papacy was perhaps never so high. Pope John Paul II is widely regarded as the moral leader of the world. Here

and there one hears predictions that the twenty-first century will witness a great resurgence of religious faith.

How can this be? A partial explanation, I believe, can be found in the human heart. We were not made for this world alone or for this life alone, but for something higher, which we can only glimpse. Spontaneously we reach out in hope and aspiration to the eternal and the divine. The sense of God is implanted very deep in our nature. Some would say that we know God instinctively.

Seen in the light of our consistent drive toward ultimate truth and meaning, the three lines of objection stated at the beginning of this chapter can be taken in stride.

Our first set of difficulties arises out of the recent growth of historical consciousness — the realization that the ideas of any one historical epoch are culturally limited. In itself, historical consciousness is a great asset. It has taught us that there is progress and development in the understanding of religious faith. But progress in religion, as in science, occurs cumulatively, through building on the past. It is not an excuse for historical relativism. If previous achievements could not be successfully transmitted from one generation to another, we would always be beginning again, so that progress would be impossible. Even in scientific "revolutions" the valid elements in previous theories must be preserved lest the innovation prove to be a regression.

There is such a thing as permanent truth. Every true proposition, in fact, is eternally true. The principle of contradiction (namely, that two contradictories cannot both be true in the same respect) is as valid today as when Aristotle stated it. Even historical facts, mutable though they be, enjoy a kind of permanence, in the sense that if they ever occurred they will never cease to have occurred. The facts that Plato wrote the *Republic* and that Brutus assassinated Caesar are abidingly true. So likewise, if it was ever true that God had a Son and that the Son was to redeem the world, these truths can never become false.

The rapidity of change may be seen as contributing to

the importance of finding out what is abidingly true. Confused by the continual shifting of fashions and opinions, we find even stronger motives to seek out the truth that is eternal. The impact of "future shock" deepens our attachment to unchanging truths about human nature and destiny, the moral law, and the divine. The great religions hold special attraction insofar as they put their adherents in communion with the eternal power that undergirds all worldly process — a power that revealed religion discloses as eminently personal. As a result, believers can pray, in the words of Henry F. Lyte's well-known hymn:

*Change and decay in all around I see,
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

With respect to Scripture, historical criticism has been an immense benefit. We know better than our ancestors that not every narrative was intended to be historical, and that even the "historical" sections of Scripture do not necessarily contain the kind of history that we would find in a modern academic textbook. Once this is recognized, we can better distinguish the various literary genres in Scripture, and gain a deeper appreciation of the legendary and poetic passages, with their powerful symbolism. The truth of the gospel can be transmitted by many means other than factual historical reports.

It would be foolish to fall into the trap of feeling bound to choose between science and faith. Since both are avenues to truth, they should be seen as allies. The same God who reveals himself in Christ is the author of human reason. God intends us to apply our intelligence to the data of faith. Every genuine advance in the realms of science and reason can be a positive contribution to the understanding of revelation. Nothing that science has established can contradict the truth of God's revealing word. Faith is not destroyed but refined and perfected by the exposure of the illusions that accompanied it when the disciplines of science and history were still in

their infancy. Further fruits may be expected from an ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue in which each party must be prepared to learn from the other.

With regard to pluralism, our second source of difficulty, it may be said that the consciousness of having to choose among different options can make for a more personal and explicit faith, and thus for a firmer commitment. We may note in addition that religious pluralism is nothing new. Biblical history makes it evident that faith in the true God of Israel was always struggling against rival faiths and simple unbelief. Worshipers of Baal and worshipers of Yahweh contended against each other, often to the advantage of the former.

Christianity was born in a situation of religious pluralism and had to assert itself against formidable opposition not only from Judaism but also from a variety of Roman and Greek religions and philosophical systems. Many believers were martyred because of their faith. Christianity refused to settle for the religious relativism that had been practiced in the Empire. While confessing Jesus as the "one Lord," it had to face the objection that ultimate truth could not be a monopoly of any one religion. The pagan rhetorician Symmachus, in his controversy with St. Ambrose, protested that the pagan temples should not be closed by Christians. As his reason he stated that the mystery of the divine was so great that it could not be reached by one road only.

While we are not entitled to suppress other beliefs by violence, we cannot responsibly settle for skepticism or syncretism. It would be lazy or cowardly to decide that because people disagree, we should cease to struggle for the truth. Truth is one; error is multiple. Truth is self-consistent; error, incoherent. We have been equipped with minds to see the difference between truth and error, and to make a choice between them.

There may indeed be elements of truth in many different religions and ideologies. Let us by all means try to find and appropriate them. But we cannot appropriate anything unless we have the courage to name something as true. As we

shall explain more fully in Chapter 8, interreligious dialogue can be profitable if those who engage in it are sincerely committed to different positions; but if the dialogue partners have no positions of their own, the discussion lacks interest.

The third line of objection calls attention to the distractions that preoccupy our minds and stand in the way of serious thinking about God and religion. The attractions of the senses have always been an impediment to religious commitment and fidelity. The Gospels are filled with warnings against letting the seed of God's word be "choked by the cares and pleasures of life" (Lk 8:14). Contemporary commercialism introduces no new problem; it simply takes advantage of weaknesses that have been present from time immemorial. Only a personal and explicit adherence to faith can protect us against being manipulated by persons who would play upon our weaknesses. To be wise, we must ponder on the origins, meaning, and goal of human existence.

The adoption of a faith, or adherence to the faith passed on to us, must, of course, be free. But if God is God, we cannot use him as a means of satisfying our whims. Our minds are made for truth, our wills for goodness, and our hearts for beauty. There can be no true fulfillment except in that which is really true, good, and beautiful. When we recognize it, it commands the full submission of our minds and wills. In this sense, religious affiliation can be obligatory.

What can reason accomplish in this area? A few centuries ago Christianity was confronted by militant rationalism. Philosophers were confident that reason alone could deduce all the really important truths of religion and morality from a few self-evident and indubitable axioms. They dismissed revelation as false or at least superfluous. But other philosophers, coming on the heels of the rationalists, punched holes in the alleged demonstrations, so that a wave of skepticism ensued. We still live in the shadow of this revolt against reason.

The great religions of the world have for the most part relied on revelation, but the majority of them, including Chris-

tianity, have not renounced the use of reason. Reason itself suggests the probability of revelation. If there is a God, and if he created the world, he will presumably interest himself in human affairs. People of nearly every race and culture have looked to God for help and salvation. The history of religion, therefore, cannot be adequately understood with the tools of psychology and sociology, as though God were inert or were a mere figment of human speculation. Knowing that God is real, we have to reckon with the likelihood that he might come to our aid and make himself known by revelation.

The religions of the Middle East and of the West are dominated by the conviction that God acts in history. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam agree in holding that God is one and is the lord of history; they believe, furthermore, that he is merciful and that he is pleased to come to the help of his needy creatures, especially those who turn to him in confidence. At privileged moments he breaks through the clouds of human ignorance and speaks to those who are prepared to listen to his voice. Faith arises not from merely human speculation but from attentive listening to the word of God, proclaimed by those whom God has chosen as his witnesses.

If God turns to us in revelation, we do not have the right to close our ears and to refuse assent. Our attitude should not be one of cold indifference or recalcitrance. On the contrary, the only appropriate attitude is one of eager expectation. It would be wrong simply to wait with folded arms, demanding that God should break down our resistance. If we listen to our hearts, we will often hear a gentle but persistent invitation to believe. In bringing us to faith, God draws us by the cords of love. If we are able to recognize a message as truly coming from God, we have no right to reject any part of it.

The New World of Faith

In the title of this book I maintain that Christian faith constitutes a new world. The gospel comes to us with the ring of novelty. Although in some respects it confirms what we

might be able to know without it, it also tells of things we would never have suspected. As Paul wrote, quoting from Isaiah, God has disclosed "what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived" (1 Cor 2:9). Who would have imagined that God is three coequal persons, one of whom became incarnate and died for our redemption? The Jews regarded this as weakness, the Greeks as folly. But, to quote Paul again, "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:25).

Newness is the very trademark of Christianity. It can never grow old. Christ establishes a new covenant. He makes us new creatures. He makes all things new, and will, at the end of time, usher in a new heaven and a new earth. Already by faith we inhabit this world that is in the making. We belong no longer to the old order, which is perishing, but to the new order that will be gloriously transformed in the final Kingdom.

To enter into this world is a decisive step. The transition is symbolized by baptism, in which we go down into the waters so as to die to sin, and we rise again to don the white vestments that symbolize the new life of grace. Baptism is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ the Lord. The sacrament is not complete until it has been ratified by a personal confession of faith, accomplished with the help of the divine grace that is assured by the sacrament itself. But the force of the sacrament does not absolve us from the need of making the personal commitment of saying "Yes" to the gift that God offers us when we consent to die to sin in order to live by the strength of the risen Christ.

By baptism we commit ourselves to the following of Christ. We make his values our own. We accept the Cross and embrace it as an ensign of victory. This step is a revolutionary one, especially when we consider the dominant values of the secular world, including perhaps especially the world of our own day. To live virtuously for the love and service of God demands a conversion — a radical change, of course, from our habitual self-centeredness. All baptized Christians are

called to be saints, that is to say, persons who have faithfully and consistently lived out their baptismal calling. Paul was able to say of himself: "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him" (Phil 3:7-9).

To attain a pure and generous love of God we need more than our own natural powers. God elicits our love for him by first demonstrating his surpassing love for us. "In this is love," writes St. John, "not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (1 Jn 4:10). Paul has a similar reflection: "While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man — though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:6-8). The Christian's love for God is an echo of God's prior gift of love.

Can we ever be truly at home in the new world of faith, so that it becomes not a realm that we ought to enter but our own world? This might not be possible if the call came only from outside us. But God gives us the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of Christ himself. "God's love," writes Paul, "has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). Elsewhere he points out the necessity of that gift: "The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

Paradoxically, we cannot find true happiness by seeking it for its own sake, but only by giving ourselves to what is worth all that we have. Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a pearl of great price and a hidden treasure for which a merchant joyfully pays his entire fortune. In the light of the Spirit it becomes evident that the following of Christ is not

impoverishment, slavery, or misery. Christ gives us inestimable riches, the fullness of truth, of wisdom, of beauty, and of love. He alone of all the human family could say of himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). His truth liberates us from the slavery of sin, from the fear of death, and from the darkness of ignorance about the true meaning of life. "Come unto me," he said, "and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). He does not compel us, but he invites us to embark on the glorious adventure of faith.

Christ's invitation still comes to all who wish to discover, or discover again, the inner joy of the Christian life. In order to meet the challenges of our time we must see the world of faith as a new and enduring order, established by God and capable of regenerating every human life and society. A vigorous and well-founded faith will not be constantly on the defensive. It will carry the gospel of Christ continually forward into areas where the darkness of skepticism and unbelief still reigns. Such a faith is conscious of being able to supply the divinely given remedy against the agnosticism, relativism, and hedonism that have always threatened to debase the human spirit, but are especially virulent in our own day for the reasons I have sought to explain.



Our Knowledge of God

Our age is marked by uncertainty about the meaning and purposes of life. Many do not know what to aim at, beyond the superficial goals of avoiding pain and "having a good time." But even while distracting themselves with amusements and sheer busy-ness, they can scarcely suppress their longing for a truth that endures and for a beauty that does not fade. In the depths of the human psyche is inscribed what some speak of as a nostalgia for God. On the part of reflective persons, this nostalgia gives rise to an earnest search. If God exists, he is to be loved, served, and adored in all that we do. But are there signs and evidences that God is more than a projection of the human mind? This pressing question can be answered because God has manifested himself in two different ways — directly by revelation and indirectly through the work of creation, as known to reason.

Teaching of the Bible and the Church

Religious believers rely primarily on revelation for their knowledge of God. They know that God is, and to some extent

a terrible and bitter day, a day of wrath and retribution. For Christ's faithful, however, it is a day of joy and exultation. At every sign of Christ's approach, they raise up their heads with the realization that their redemption is close at hand. The earliest liturgical prayer of which we have record is the Aramaic *Maranatha*, which means "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor 16:22). In another form we have it in the concluding prayer of the Revelation of John: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20). It resonates with the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come." When we pray as Christians, we should do so with the realization that Christ, our Redeemer, has not abandoned us; we shall see him again, and when he returns he will bring his work of redemption to completion. "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come' " (Rev 22:17).



The New World and the Light of Faith

In previous chapters we have surveyed the contours of the new world of faith, beginning with the three-personed God, the author of all that faith adheres to, then examining his self-gift in Christ our Lord and the perpetuation of that gift in the Church with its hierarchical structures, its sacraments, its Scriptures, and its body of doctrine. We have also reflected on the ways in which Christians in the Catholic Church can best relate to other Christians, to other religions, and to the secular environment of home, business, and politics. Finally we have contemplated the shape of Christian hope regarding the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. By way of a summary, it may be appropriate to draw together some reflections on the "new world of faith," which has been the title and the underlying theme of all that precedes.

Faith's New World

In the first place, the new world of faith is a world. It is a vast universe having its own laws, its own geography, its own

chronology. In the Sermon on the Mount, and especially in the beatitudes, Jesus promulgated the charter of this new world. In his person and his career he exemplified the Kingdom in an unsurpassable way. The supreme law of Christ's Kingdom is the twofold precept of love for God and neighbor, the self-giving love that Paul extolled as the bond of all perfection (Col 3:14). Jesus imparted the radical character of his message by paradoxes. It is by losing our lives, he taught, that we find life (Mt 16:25); "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). The world disclosed to faith is immense. It opens up vistas that extend beyond the world of sense and into a realm not reached by telescopes and astronomical instruments, however powerful. Its landscape is marked by heights of ecstasy and mystical union and by depths of suffering and privation. Its population includes the living and the dead, saints and angels, and even, at its summit, the divine persons. The entire cosmos — insofar as it comes from God, stands under his dominion, and is destined to be transformed by God at the end of time — belongs to this new world. So do all men and women — not only Christian believers but also the vast multitudes who do not consciously enter this realm of grace; for they too are touched by God's love and called to respond to it.

This higher world has its own internal order and coherence. It is a cosmos, not a chaos, because Christian doctrine is an organic whole in which all the particular assertions refer to God himself or to creatures in relation to God. The truths of faith harmonize with, and cast light upon, one another. The world of faith has form and structure; it has a symmetry and variety capable of enchanting those who gaze upon it. That world is, in a sense, heliocentric, since its center is the Sun of Justice, Jesus Christ, who in his humanity reflects the glory of the eternal God and makes it shine in our hearts. All the redeemed are situated in relation to him and refract his light according to their own capacity, the munificence of God's gift, and the generosity of their response. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the supreme reflection, beautiful as the moon.

The world we have been describing has its own kind of

duration, different from earthly time. The redemptive act of Christ — his death and resurrection — constitutes the midpoint. Everything prior to the Incarnation points forward to Christ-event, and everything subsequent derives from it. The time line of salvation history, which originates with the promise of redemption extended to our first parents, was unrestricted before the time of Abraham. It achieved progressively greater intensity as God's election fell in a special way upon the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After being narrowed down to a faithful remnant of Israel, the stream of revelatory and redemptive history was funneled, as it were, into a single jet at the point where the Son of God became man, recapitulating the earlier stages of the process in his own person. After Christ's death and resurrection, salvation history spreads out once again as the gospel is propagated to the whole world. The Good News meets with acceptance by some and rejection by others, but an inherent necessity dictates that it be proclaimed to all without distinction. Eventually the time of salvation history flows into eternity, as the faithful are taken up into everlasting blessedness, so that they may share in the inner life of God himself.

The world of faith is, in the second place, new. Far from being a mere extension of what we know from human philosophy, it brings us into a realm beyond the most extravagant dreams of philosophy. The rulers of this world never suspected what God was doing in Christ. "If they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8). The very novelty of Christian faith makes it appear as weakness to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to those who are called, it is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24). To the eyes and ears of flesh and blood, it is a strange new world. It is alien to them, but only because they have already been alienated by sin.

This new world may be called a higher world, but it does not remain aloft, hovering over the realities of this earth. Because God created this world out of love, he cares for it and never leaves it unattended. Such is the extravagance of God's

love for the world that he plunges into its very midst and descends to its depths by dying ignominiously on the Cross. By so doing, God the Creator claims the whole world by a new title, that of its Redeemer.

The old world of nature and the new world of grace exist concurrently. The protagonists of each are locked in a fearful duel, as the Church sings in the Easter sequence *Victimae paschali laudes*:

Mors et vita duello confluxere mirando:

Dux vitae mortuus, regnat vivus.

When in strange and awful strife

Met together death and life;

The prince of life for us did die,

And now he reigns in majesty.

The old world is subject to corruption. Eventually everything in it dies and recedes toward the formless state from which it had emerged. But the new world of faith is always new, because Christ says of himself: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21:5). The Spirit of Christ, infused into it, renews the face of the earth (Ps 104:30). All of us who enter that world of grace live by new commandments (Jn 13:34), adhere to a new covenant (2 Cor 3:6), and eagerly await "new heavens and a new earth" (2 Pt 3:13; cf. Rev 21:1). We ourselves are a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day" as it tends toward the glory that is to come (2 Cor 4:16).

The forms and expressions of faith imbedded in history grow old. They must sometimes be changed like a vesture in order to show forth the unceasing novelty of faith itself, which is abreast of every time, pointing forward to the ultimate future that is the goal of all creation.

Faith and Its Growth

The new world is, finally, an arena of faith. We cannot even sketch it, still less enter it, unless we receive and accept

God's loving revelation. Reasoning may tell us why we ought to believe, but it cannot propel us into that higher realm. The contents of faith cannot be judged by the standards of the old world, which it challenges and, in part, rejects. Without reliance on the word of God, we are doomed to be strangers to the world of faith. To those who timidly cling to the old world with its familiar landmarks, the new world remains closed and inaccessible.

If we do enter that world, then, it is by making a fresh beginning, an act of faith whereby we acknowledge the relativity of merely human criteria and begin to contemplate reality through the eyes of Christ the Revealer. With the new eyes of faith we see all that we saw before, and we see it more clearly because it is lighted up by the lantern of faith, which suffices for believers until the bright day of eternity dawns in their hearts.

Faith, then, is a matter of opening ourselves to God as he speaks to us through his witnesses, especially Jesus Christ, the faithful witness (Rev 1:5), who gave his testimony before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim 6:13). Faith is a leap accomplished in trust and love. We renounce the right to judge by what we would have thought if we lacked the guidance of divine revelation. We accept new standards as well as new content. The standard is the Cross of Jesus Christ, by which we are crucified to the world and the world is crucified to us (Gal 6:14). What we counted as gain before we believed is henceforth reckoned as loss (Phil 3:7). All our values are transvalued.

From one point of view, faith is a kind of spiritual poverty. We turn to God as beggars, having nothing of our own on which to rely. In our very poverty we are made rich with the wealth bestowed on us by God. From another perspective, faith is a spiritual childhood. We come to Jesus as little children, asking him to teach us and clothe us with his wisdom. We adhere to him because in him God reveals the deep secrets that we need to know.

Faith is often, and rightly, called a submission to au-

thority — that of the revealing God. God's authority is not just an extrinsic seal placed on something other than itself. It is the quality of the very person who speaks to us and comes in his word. God does not so much demand submission as gently evoke our assent by powerfully moving us from within. The Spirit of Christ enables us to adhere to his word with joy and ease.

Christ continues to make himself accessible today through the witnesses he has appointed and sent forth to speak in his name. The revelation is entrusted to the community of faith, and in accepting it we join that community. To become a believer is, in this perspective, a process of being socialized into a new community. We have to learn its language, familiarize ourselves with its symbols, and become at home with its furniture, its landmarks.

Catechesis, then, is a progressive induction into the community of faith. It is formation as well as information. Its goal is communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ. The result of the process is a kind of wisdom, especially if that word is understood as a translation of the Latin term *sapientia*, which connotes a taste (*sapor*) for the things of God. Thanks to the indwelling Spirit, the believer has an affinity with the divine and begins, as it were, to savor it. The theological tradition speaks in this connection of "connaturality" with the God of grace.

Prebaptismal catechesis terminates in two acts, which blend into one: the transmission of the creed and baptism. The candidate for baptism is expected to "render the creed" and in the course of making a profession of faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, is plunged three times into the waters of regeneration. The newly baptized put on white robes to signify the purity of their new life in Christ.

The transmission of the faith does not terminate with baptism. Having entered the new world by the passport of faith, the Christian uses faith as the compass by which to steer and as the motor by which to advance. The whole Christian life is a continual process of further immersion in faith,

so that it more and more becomes the air we breathe and the instinctive rule of our thought and action.

We live in a day when the reception of faith by osmosis from the culture or by casual religious instruction can no longer be adequate. In many formerly Christian but now dechristianized countries, only a small percentage of the youth actually practice their faith. The mentality of the young is shaped for the most part, under peer pressure, by the secular culture of advertising, consumerism, and the mass media of communication.

Because the secular world is preponderantly antithetical to Christian revelation, faith requires for its growth an alternative environment, under the guidance of masters who are well grounded in Christian doctrine and exemplary in conduct. In his own day Jesus provided for this need by forming a group of disciples under his personal direction. He taught them to deny themselves, to take up their cross, and to submit to the baptism with which he himself was to be baptized. So too, in our day, the neophyte must willingly submit to education within the community of faith, under the supervision of tested leaders. This strenuous type of catechesis is needed not only for adult converts but for children baptized in infancy.

Prayer and worship are integral to formation in the faith. What we believe in theory and in principle must find expression in our converse with God. We speak to him as our loving Redeemer, thanking him for his gifts, entrusting ourselves to his protection, imploring his forgiveness, and consecrating ourselves to his honor and service. The official worship of the Church has an educative aspect; it is intended to shape the imagination and form the sentiments of believers so that they will better appreciate the teachings of faith and more faithfully adhere to Christian behavioral norms. By active participation in the Eucharist and other sacramental rites we obtain a certain experiential knowledge of the mysteries of faith. By Holy Communion the faithful "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8). They enter into

deeper union with Christ the Head and with the whole mystical Body.

The validity of the gospel is confirmed by its fruits in those who embrace it. Their good works proclaim its truth. In another way it receives confirmation from the degeneration that follows from its rejection. The lives of unbelievers become directionless and erratic. Seeking freedom from God's law, they fall into a state of servitude. And like the Prodigal Son in the parable, they often begin to pine for the blessings of their Father's house, and perchance find their way back to it.

This experience of false freedom is replicated in the lives of whole nations. Some, tiring of the religion of the past, place their hopes in the sheer power of technology, which then begins to enslave its makers. On the global scale, our world is increasingly marked by division, violence, and fear. Whole continents are racked by misery and hover on the brink of despair. To all such people Christians can be heralds of hope if they live by the gospel and proclaim it. Assisted by the Lord of life, they can be apostles of human dignity and catalysts of renewal in forging a civilization of love.

The Dynamism of Faith

Authentic faith can never be sterile. Faith has a dynamism of its own whereby it takes hold of believers and transforms them into witnesses. The inchoative faith that moves believers to submit to instruction gives rise subsequently to an impulse to go forth and make disciples of others. Believers whose faith has matured through confirmation and catechesis are inwardly impelled to proclaim by word and example. The word of God within them presses insistently for expression. Recognizing this connection, religious education should aim not only to form and inform those being instructed but also to motivate them for the task of propagating the faith that is theirs. Catechesis can in this way serve as a link in the great chain of evangelization.

The transmission of faith requires in every generation an

active body of committed witnesses. Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ (Rom 10:17). Faith, then, is not possible without persons who testify. Believers submit to the word of Christ as it comes to them in the words of qualified human witnesses, those of the past enshrined in writing and those of today, some of whom we hear in person. If younger generations do not accept God's word, it is perhaps because no one has seriously challenged them to believe. We cannot expect them to believe unless the extraordinary Good News has been proposed to them with some of the urgency that moved the first witnesses to become martyrs. We must never allow ourselves to forget that the witness par excellence is the martyr.

In recent centuries the Church has been predominantly on the defensive, intent on shielding the faith of its members by staving off modern objections. To show that Christian doctrine is impervious to rational refutation is always possible and sometimes necessary, but much more is demanded for a firm and radiant faith. In the judgment of recent popes, the entire Church must today commit itself to the project of a new evangelization, new in ardor, methods, and expression.

The great mass of humanity lacks any strong conviction about the ultimate purpose of life on earth and any clear rationale for a viable moral and social order. Great masses of humanity groan under the yoke of oppression, violence, and grinding poverty. Christianity has come into the world not just to save a select few from the general conflagration but to save the world itself. We who are privileged to believe have an inalienable responsibility to spread the truth to all who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. According to the precept of Jesus, we are to be, as he himself was, the light of the world.

In our day we have many half-convinced or halfhearted Christians, reluctant to bear witness to their faith. They wait for inquirers to come to them and, when inquirers do come, all too often express their incompetence to give answers. Faith, to be sure, should be forced on no one. But it should be made

as widely available as possible. If we have been brought into that life-giving communion with Christ that is the proper fruit of faith, we shall be intensely grateful; we shall be eager to understand what we believe and to share it with others. Indeed, we have no right to deny it to them.

The Excellence of Faith

Our readiness to spread the gospel cannot be a matter of perfunctory obedience. It must spring from appreciation of how much we have received and how much we have to give. In our faith we have a pledge and foretaste of the eternal blessedness of the saints. Its incomparable value may be summarized under three headings: truth, goodness, and beauty. These are the gifts that the human spirit ineluctably desires, and without which it starves and goes awry. In the new world of faith, all three are offered in abundance.

The wisdom of God, the eternal Word, has come into the midst of our human situation and has spoken the truth that can only come from God. Alone among the human family Jesus Christ could say, "I am . . . the truth" (Jn 14:6). He has bestowed the charism of truth upon his Church, "the pillar and the bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). By his revelation we know whence we come and whither we are bound; we know also the Way, for he has disclosed it by his person, his action, and his words.

The mysteries of Christian faith open up a new world of truth, beyond the deepest speculations of the philosophers, but capable of sustaining the philosophic quest and bringing it to heights not otherwise attainable. Faith in no way diminishes the power of the mind to wonder, to reason, and to know. It stimulates our mind to go forward and supports its faltering steps in advancing toward the fullness of truth.

The spirit also thirsts for goodness. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the human heart is restless until it finds some absolute and total good to which it can give itself without restriction. God, who alone is that unlimited good, has given us in Christ a demonstration of goodness beyond the fondest

dreams of the poets. Jesus represents in his life and teaching a spendthrift charity that is properly divine, as he sacrifices himself out of love for the sinners he came to redeem. He invites us to participate in his own divine goodness by obeying his new commandment of love and embracing the beatitudes. By following the "law of the gift" we experience that it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive. Our faith holds us to a far higher standard of conduct than we could achieve without it. The examples of Christ and the saints beckon us to rise to a new level of being and doing.

But neither truth nor goodness will fully satisfy us without beauty. Beauty has been aptly called the splendor of truth and the radiance of the good. Through beauty the intrinsic worth of that which is excellent in itself becomes a source of joy and delight. God as Creator is the author of all beauty and is himself more beautiful than all beautiful things. The glories of nature and of the starry skies point to him as their source. Those who discover God by ascending the ladder of creatures are moved to exclaim, as did Augustine, "Late have I loved thee, O beauty ever ancient and ever new!" (*Confessions*, 10:27).

In the Uncreated Word we have a perfect reflection of the Father's glory, and in the face of Jesus the incarnate Word the glory of God shines forth in unimaginable splendor (cf. 2 Cor 4:6). The Gospels do not tell us whether Jesus was handsome, but at least we know that in his Transfiguration, his face shone with a brilliance that anticipated the glory of his risen life. In his Passion, when his body was disfigured by the blows of his tormentors, his spiritual beauty shines more brilliantly than ever before. He glows with a new kind of beauty, that of generous love and unswerving fidelity — qualities that are distinctive to the new world of faith.

Throughout the centuries the story of God's self-manifestation in salvation history, and especially in the gospel story, has been celebrated in poetry, music, and the visual arts. The mosaics and icons of Eastern Christianity are so translucent to the divine that they seem to pulse with the breath of

sanctity. In the monasteries and cathedrals of the West, the sufferings and death of Jesus, although lacking every trace of human prettiness, found expression in superlative works of art. The figure of the Crucified, with his grotesquely contorted limbs, can become, through the magic brushstrokes of a Grünewald, an object of arresting beauty, calling us to adoration and communion with the divine.

In his novel *The Idiot*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky has the hero proclaim, "Beauty will save the world." Pope John Paul II, among others, accepts that utterance as prophetic. Without beauty the truth would be unattractive, and goodness would seem harsh and forbidding. But truth and goodness enchant us when they are found to be beautiful. This combination is exquisitely realized in the new world of faith, in which God offers us a foretaste of his glory. In that world, not made by human hands, we can find our true and lasting home. Having entered the outer courts of God's dwelling by faith, we hope and pray that we may live forever in the sanctuary of his love.

How lovely is thy dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, yea, faints
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

— Ps 84:1-2

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