



In our last article, we said that reason is something more than science.

Reason is the capacity for wisdom, and wisdom is an all-embracing account of reality as a whole in light of the highest end or purpose of things. On this account, in order for human beings to be fully rational, we must be receptive to reality in *all* of its aspects: the quantifiable and the non-quantifiable, the measurable and the immeasurable, the observable and the non-observable, the tangible and the intangible, the sensible and the intelligible.

The Church's account of faith begins from this understanding of reason as sapiential. When human reason is open to reality in all of its fullness, then reason questions and searches for Truth with a capital "T", *i.e.* the *meaning* of reality as a whole. When God comes to meet our questioning and searching for Truth, and to address His answers to us, then human beings are confronted with divine revelation and are called to faith.

In contemporary popular contexts, faith is understood in a bewildering variety of ways. Sometimes, the word faith is used to talk about a person's perspective on ultimate questions. At other times, the word faith is practically synonymous with one's "philosophy of life." Or faith can be used to talk about any cause that one really believes in and advocates. Because faith is used in such a vague and general way, it is common to hear people using expressions such as "the Buddhist faith" even though Buddhism is not at all a faith in the Christian sense of the term, and Buddhists (rightly) want to distinguish their religious views from being a faith in the Christian sense.

It was St. Augustine who gave to the Catholic Church an account of what faith is that has remained the standard up to our own day. St. Augustine, following both the New Testament as well as standard word meanings in ancient Greek and Latin, understood faith as *believing something on the word of a witness*. The New Testament is full of talk of testimony, of testifying, and of bearing witness to the truth of Christ's life, death, resur-

rection, grace, and presence. Faith is welcoming this testimony, accepting it, and believing it.

St. Augustine realized that when understood as believing something on the word of another's witness, faith in general is inherently reasonable. All human beings naturally live by faith in other human beings. It is quite impossible for anyone to go through life without any faith at all. For we all take many things on the word of other people, and we cannot but do so. Augustine realized that nearly all of his historical beliefs, including his belief about where he was born and who his father was, were matters of faith.

## What is Faith?

**Rev. James Brent, O.P.**

Contemporary epistemologists confirm Augustine's point, and point out how the majority of our daily beliefs are matters of faith in the sense of trusting someone else's say-so. How many people can really *prove* that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen? How many people can really *prove* that George Washington was the first president of the United States? Most people take it on faith based upon their teacher's say-so.

Even though faith in other human beings is natural and reasonable, Christian faith is something more than just natural, human faith. The same God who created human beings as rational beings in search of the meaning of reality as a whole, comes to meet the questioning of man by bearing witness to Himself and His plan for the world. God explains Himself to us. How? Through the words of the prophets, the words of Jesus of Nazareth, the words of the Apostles, and the words of the authors of sacred Scripture. All of these human words contain and communicate the Word of God. Or so Christians believe. Christian faith is a special gift of God to believe all of this testimony "not as the word of men, but for



what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13). In brief, faith is welcoming the Word.

How does one receive the gift of faith? The answer has three parts.

First, “faith comes from hearing” (Rom 10:17). Ever since the days of Jesus, the apostles, and the evangelists, the Church has gradually welcomed, received, and believed their words as the Word of God. The Church has assimilated the person and the message of Jesus, and in turn preaches and proclaims it: *Jesus is Lord!* The Church goes through history vouching for the truth of this word to all who will listen. What we hear are the words of human beings in the Church setting forth the person and message of Jesus as the Word of God.

Second, as the Church goes about preaching, “God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (Heb 2:4). God knows of our fear of deception. He knows of our need for confirmatory signs that what we are hearing from the Church is not simply the words

or ideas of human beings but is in fact the Word of God. The preaching of the Church is surrounded by and shot through with an abundance of signs and characteristics that distinguish it from all merely natural phenomena. Miracles, healings, and transformed lives are but one type of sign. The Church herself is a sign. The signs, in fact, are so many, so varied, and so numerous that an entire academic discipline is devoted to studying and setting forth the signs, namely, fundamental theology.

Third, “no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Even though a host of signs confirm the Church’s proclamation as the Word of God, people are not called to believe what they hear because of the signs. Rather, we are called to a free, simple, childlike faith in Jesus as risen Lord and Savior. It is not an inference from signs that moves us to believe what we hear, but an inward touch of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit inclines our hearts to trust God for the truth of what is set forth by the Church. Thanks to the inspiration of the Spirit, we give a simple assent to it all—a simple yes to the whole testimony of the Church without fear of falsehood or error. Signs are there for critical reflection upon our faith, not for the production of it.

A good and solid theology does not deny the truth of the human sciences, but takes into account all well-established truths from any discipline whatsoever. The Word of God illuminates all such truths in a higher light, in the light of God and His plan for the world. Such is our intention for this series of articles. Our hope is to show that the science of biology and the testimony of God together form a coherent and profound answer to the question of the human being, our life in this world, and the meaning of it all. 

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