

Go your way; your faith has saved you.

—Mark 10:52

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Uncertainty: The Meaning of Faith

Before we approach the faith, it's probably wise to examine just what "faith" means—not specifically faith in God, or faith in a particular religion's unique insights into the nature and personality of God, just a better understanding of what the commitment designated by the word "faith" entails. So let's back off a while from what books like catechisms have to say about faith (which is often pretty heady and inaccessible) and, instead of considering faith "from the top down" the way theologians do, try to understand faith "from the bottom up," starting with acts of faith we're all familiar with. After all, God isn't the only object of faith.

We've all been through the process of forming friendships but have probably never stopped to realize that a friendship is a whole *process* of acts of faith. Think of your very best friend, someone to whom you could unburden anything, and who

you know without question would stick by you no matter what. Well at one time, that person was “way out there” in the almost endless sea of anonymous faces—along with old ladies in Manchuria, children in Africa, and the people who tend the heating system in your office building. How did your friend get from “way out there” into your innermost heart?

I’m not asking you to explain nuclear physics here, just to think about something we have all experienced but probably never examined. Maybe lay the book aside a few moments and try to figure out how that precious friendship happened.

The absolutely essential first step in making a friend is, of course, to *notice* that person. Without that, he or she will remain irretrievably “way out there.” After that, we usually assign the new face and body a name, and he or she becomes an *acquaintance*. “Oh, yeah. I know who she is.” Most of the people we know are acquaintances. But a few people push forward, impressing (or imposing) themselves, spending time with us, and talking so that they become *friends*. We often think of these people as “work” or “office” friends, even if we know them through some other life activity, such as our neighborhood association, charitable outreach, or a civic project. These are individuals we don’t mind sitting with at lunch.

Some people penetrate our defenses even further, offering not just shared time, conversation, and interests but mutual sacrifice in pursuit of a common purpose. That sacrifice tightens our relationship with them. They become real friends—people with whom we assume we’ll go to lunch, a movie, or a game. Still others work their way into our innermost hearts, usually because we’ve shared some truly daunting experience. These are our best friends. Those few become the people whom we trust implicitly—not blindly, but because of all that shared risk beforehand, *based on* all that previous experience. Those are the people we trust enough to cry with, and know

that the tears are not a threat but a kind of cement to the bond of friendship.

Marriage is also an act of faith. In fact, marriage is not just the dramatic commitment at the altar but also an uncountable *series* of acts of faith. It begins from the very first date, when he stares at the suddenly intimidating phone, wiping his palms on his pants, trying to get up the courage to call or text. He thinks to himself, “Oh, God, she won’t even remember who I am!” When he reaches her, she paces and thinks to herself, “He’s nice, but his friends are weird.” The acts of faith—and the related risks—multiply in number and escalate in intensity as the two date, get serious, announce their engagement, and on their wedding day vow to stay together forever. Even then they don’t *know* it’s going to work out; they’re *betting* it will. That is faith.

And that’s by no means the last of it. After the (more-or-less) blissful honeymoon period, when reality stops by in the form of bills, household chores, ingrained habits at cross purposes, career conflicts, and all the other frictions that naturally arise when two once-autonomous individuals try to form a partnership, spouses have to face the *real* act of faith. Now they need to keep loving one another without the constant supportive help of thumping hearts, lusty urges, and the “love potion” that once made her seem like Cinderella and him Prince Charming. That’s when romance can turn into love, which is considerably less dramatic than being in love. Married love becomes stirring-the-pasta-sauce love and letting-go-of-the-grudge love. In a very true sense, this maturing love with all its many acts of self-emptying is a more profound expression of genuine faith than was expressed on the wedding day.

Later comes the titanic act of faith required when having a child. Husband and wife commit themselves to raising another fragile human being for the next twenty-plus years and to raising at least a quarter of a million dollars to support that

child. All this they do—sight unseen and without any chance of an exchange! Day after day and week after week, there are acts of faith: investments, job changes, and school choices—*ad infinitum*. On the couple's thirtieth anniversary, they are a lot more married than they were on their wedding day because of all those acts of faith—trusting one another through thick and thin, titanic and trivial. Faith grows incrementally as each new act of faith is easier because of all the previous acts of faith that proved to be worth the risk.

At least for me, this gives a more solid basis for understanding faith than the usual dictionary definition: "belief that is not based on proof." If you had proof, what need would there be for belief? Seeing isn't believing; seeing is *knowing*. It's also better than Saint Paul's definition of faith as "the realization of what is hoped for" (Hebrews 11:1). In my waning years, I think I have better insight into the difference between "faith" and "hope" than I did when I was younger. Hope is the gut urge to cling on even though all the evidence seems to *undercut* that option; faith is the gut urge to cling on even though the evidence for it is persuasive but not *compelling*.

A lifetime of belief has convinced me that real, genuine, and authentic faith still doubts. It *must* doubt. Otherwise it's not faith but witless conformity. When I ask people what faith means, almost without exception they say, "a blind leap in the dark." Just think for a minute what a "blind leap in the dark" really means. Putting your life's savings on a single lottery ticket is a blind leap. Buying land in Mexico sight unseen is a blind leap. "Hi, we've just met; let's get married" is a blind leap. And these are preposterous choices! If that's what most people think faith is—holding hands and jumping off a cliff—then it's not surprising that having faith is so difficult.

What's more, that "blind leap" business flies directly in the face of what we know from our own personal experience about those other acts of faith—friendship and marriage. Those acts

of faith are most often not arrived at logically, but neither are they completely impulsive. And though they may not be painstakingly rational, they are by no means *irrational*. At each stage of the journey of friendship and marriage, when the relationship calls for a deeper commitment and a more profound level of trust, the new commitment is not baseless (like a blind leap), but rather *based on* all the previous experiences the two people have had together. The same holds true with God.

At the other end of the spectrum from those who say faith is a totally irrational, baseless leap in the dark, there are those who say, "Okay, I'll believe if you give me scientific proof." They'll commit only when they have an ironclad guarantee, evidence so clear and distinct they can have no occasion whatever to doubt it, and certitudes as unarguable as water freezing at thirty-two degrees, objects released from a height going down, and the inevitability of death.

Just as the relativist, blind-leap people labor under a conviction about faith that's irrational, the rationalist certitude folks labor under a conviction about faith that's impossible. Even in the examples mentioned above, there is room for uncertainty. Someone might have dumped antifreeze into the water this time or the object that dropped from a great height might be jet-propelled. The only unquestionable certitude in life is death, and even that is wildly unpredictable.

In physics—the "hardest" of the hard sciences—we've known that nothing is certain since Werner Heisenberg won the Nobel Prize in 1932 for his Principle of Uncertainty that demonstrated how objects in the sub-atomic world simply don't yield to absolute certitude. You can tell where an electron is located at the moment, but you can't tell its velocity at the same time, because when you bounce a bundle of energy off it to tell where it is, you change its velocity and direction! Sometimes the electron acts like a pellet and sometimes like

a wave. Which is it at the moment? Well, uh, we don't know. That's not theology; that's the *best* of science.

This misconception of "scientific proof" comes, I believe, from the fact that most of us never took anything more than very rudimentary science classes. The "experiments" we did were not experiments at all in the real sense of that word: a tentative procedure to see if something works. The lab manuals were books of *recipes*: if you just don't mess up, this will come out exactly the same every time. Chemistry was cookbook science. When a real scientist goes into her lab, she doesn't expect to find the cure for the common cold by the time the bell rings, or by the end of the term, or even by the end of her career. Real scientists are content with knowing just a bit more, with pushing back the frontiers of knowledge just a bit more—*exactly* in the same way as people learning to become better friends and better marriage partners learn a bit more at a time. It's exactly like establishing faith in God.

Even science, then, is an act of faith! It begins with preparation in the rudiments of science. Then, given that knowledge, the scientist gets a hunch: "Maybe if we fiddled with this bread mold we might come up with a medicine; we'll call it penicillin. . . . Maybe if we fooled around with these silicon chips we might find a kind of conductor. . . ! Maybe out of this mountain of pitchblende we could get just a small vial of radium."

Those who study the way the human brain works discover two quite different—but complementary—avenues to the truth, two mental functions isolated (more or less) to the left and right lobes. The *left brain* is analytical and takes things apart. It is rational, logical, organized, and works in definitions and formulas. The *right brain* is intuitive and sees things whole. It is insightful, engages in hunches, and operates in seeming "leaps." It works in symbols, pictures, and stories. Each function is vital for a fuller, richer, less simplistic view of what's really out there. In the cases just mentioned, the

scientist gets a right-brain “hunch” about the bread mold and silicon and pitchblende and then turns those intuitions over to the left brain to see if it does in fact work out rationally and physically. The two functions complement one another and work toward a unified understanding of reality.

If one were to work exclusively with the operations of the analytical left brain, for instance, there could be no such thing as friendship and love. Getting married and having children would be utterly foolish without guarantees. Integrity, patriotism, honesty, and humor simply wouldn’t compute. All judgments of human behavior would be unbending and merciless. Conversely, if one were to work exclusively with the operations of the intuitive right brain, any opinion would be self-justifying, without any need to back it up with evidence. Everybody would be going off haphazardly in all directions at once. All judgments of human behavior would be random, wishy-washy, and spineless.

The two lobes of the brain need one another to achieve a balanced look at the truth—no matter what the question. To neglect either the rational powers of the left brain or the intuitive powers of the right brain is to act half-wittedly. To say that faith requires absolute certitude or that it is a blind leap without any evidence at all is, well, half-witted.

An act of faith in anything is therefore neither a commitment based on certitude nor an irrational leap. Rather, it’s a bit of both: a calculated risk, an educated guess, and a well-reasoned hunch. Both elements are essential for a well-rounded opinion: the calculated-educated-reasoned part and the risk-guess-hunch part. You will almost never have certitude (about anything), but you come to a point where you have to make a commitment—to a college, a career, a spouse, a child, an investment, and to God. You gather all the evidence and advice you can (the calculation part) and then you come to a point where you have a hunch that it all just “feels right” (the risk

part). Then at least for a while you have to give yourself to the decision to find if it is, in fact, right.

In the case of friendship, one takes a greater risk at each stage of the relationship, often trusting the other before one is really certain the other is up to it. The same is true of marriage and the scientist in her lab: each act of trust fulfilled provides an even firmer basis from which to take the next leap. There is a risk, all right, just as there was for diver Greg Louganis when in 1988 at the Seoul Olympics he hit his head on the concrete high platform in the preliminaries. After he was patched up, he climbed the ladder and dove again with a concussion. It was a leap, all right, but it wasn't a *blind* leap. It was based on the advice of his coaches, the approval of his doctor, and the track record of those countless thousands of other successful dives. It was an act of faith: a calculated risk.

Most of us would like things clear: it's either this or it's that. But reality fails to conform to our desires (one more proof that *we* are not God). For example, philosophers have always neatly defined humans as "rational animals." But this is far too simplistic, too reductionist, leaving out evidence that is not only crucial but that definitively separates us from other animals. There are distinctively human activities that simply cannot be reduced to "rational" or to "animal," to body or brain, or to a combination of the two. Take for example displaying unselfish sacrifice even for people we dislike; acting with honor when we could easily get away with something; needing purpose and meaning; and using understanding, wisdom, or good humor in the middle of terror. All these constitutively human activities, which no other animal has, defy reduction to body or brain. They are solid evidence of a third human power: the soul. And that's where faith "happens."

The principle of *complementarity* requires a greater tolerance for ambiguity than many people are able to muster. They want clear simplicities. The action in Golding's classic novel

Lord of the Flies, for instance, demonstrates a belief of German sixteenth-century reformer, Martin Luther. Luther's idea is that human beings are basically savage beasts, held in control only by the structures and strictures of organized society. The first third of any tabloid newspaper gives ample evidence of that truth. Conversely, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* demonstrates eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's belief that human beings are angelic innocents corrupted by society. Stories of sublimely noble and rare humans such as Mother Teresa, Terry Anderson, Nelson Mandela, and Helen Keller give ample evidence for that truth, too. Year after year, my students say the two aforementioned novels really "tell it like it is"—even though the novels are completely at odds with one another. But the students are right because human beings are indeed both—angelic and bestial at once. This is complementarity. Even if the two assertions seem contradictory, you can understand human beings better if you allow them to be not either/or but both/and.

Is an electron a pellet or a wave? Yes. Are humans beasts or angels? Yes. Are the operations of the left brain or right brain more important? Yes. Is God utterly otherworldly (transcendent) or utterly this-worldly (immanent)? Yes. Is God three or one? Yes. Was Jesus God or man? Yes. Are the eucharistic elements bread and wine or body and blood? Yes.

If you deal with God exclusively with your prove-it left brain or exclusively with your blind-leap right brain, you'll quite likely never find God, or at least the God most religions know.

This book attempts to lessen the precariousness of the commitment in faith to a person you cannot see and whom you cannot box into a definition or into a picture. We can and will explore the strictly rational evidence for and against a Mind behind It All: the calculation. But just as in the case of friendship and marriage, this calculation cannot compel assent. If God is going to "prove" himself, God can do that only in the

way your other friends prove themselves: noticing, sharing time and talk, sacrificing for one another, and trusting one another at rock bottom. This is the journey we begin.

Questions to Ponder and Discuss

- The late film critic Gene Siskel used to ask those he interviewed: “What are you sure of?” It’s a fine question. I’m sure I’m a flawed good man who tries his best. I’m sure I was born to be a teacher. I’m not at all sure of the causes of original sin, but I’m completely sure of its effects. I’m sure I will not convince all—or even many—to reject their self-absorption, fears, and shortcomings in order to become more fully alive *human* beings, much less Christians, much less Catholics. And I’m content with that. What are you sure of?
- You know that you are sure of certain truths about yourself and your life. For instance, you know that honor is more important than dishonor and kindness better than exploitation. Explore what brings you to these convictions. How did they evolve? Surely not overnight. Try to apply your insights into that process to what lies ahead in trying to become “sure” about God, about organized religion, about Christianity, and about the Catholic Church.
- Each of us holds certain values, without which we probably couldn’t get through life. Brainstorm and jot down the values you hold with greatest conviction: honesty? ambition? responsibility? security? dignity? creativity? Then try to put them in a rough order of priority for you personally. They tell a great deal about you and about the person you bring to God. Mull over the people, the crises, the challenges, and the unexpected opportunities

that have brought you to where you are as a person now. This process surely didn't happen completely by chance, nor did it come about from scrupulous planning. How does one come to know, trust, and respect one's own self?

- Some people are by nature or by upbringing shy, hesitant, and reserved. Others are outright paranoid, fearful of trusting anyone, anytime. Still others can confidently stride through the jaws of hell without batting an eye because they trust themselves and life itself. Where do you see yourself along the spectrum between those two extremes? How easy or difficult is trust for you? What are the obstacles to trusting others that are within you? What are the hesitations (and there surely must be some) in trusting God?
- Many people seem to have a quite satisfying relationship with God without recourse to any organized religion. What are the advantages and disadvantages of sharing a common belief in ritual and community rather than one-on-one, person-to-person with God? (Again, surely there are both pluses and minuses; surely a private connection to God and a common connection to God do not preclude one another.)
- If you are exploring these questions within a group, how are you being called to trust in the other members of the group? And to trust yourself?
- Thomas Aquinas, thirteenth-century philosopher, theologian, and saint defines faith as "an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will, moved by God through grace." Does this work for you? How would you change the definition to reflect your

own experience of faith in your friends, in your marriage, and in God?

- It's perfectly okay that you have hesitations about statements from the Fathers of the Church, the present-day administration of the Church, and even with Jesus himself—as long as you find some *honest* way to resolve these difficulties, a way which keeps in mind not only your discomforts with a particular thing that is said but also with the powerful source of what is said. If you feel such hesitations, raise them with a priest or other parish leader and try to make peace with them, rather than let them irritate you to the point of bitterness. Don't be afraid to ask questions. This is why God gave us minds.

For Further Exploration

Scripture: Genesis 22:1–13; Mark 9:14–29; John 6:66–69; Hebrews 11:1–40

Catechism of the Catholic Church: 199, 1816, 2087–89