

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
Why Faith?

The Book of Hebrews tells us, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6) Why is this? Is it unfair of God to demand that we have faith? Is it even rational to rely on faith? The modern world ridicules faith as mere wish fulfillment, a crutch for the psychologically immature. How should we respond?

This attitude fails to appreciate what Catholics mean by faith is. Faith is not a leap in the dark, or a decision to believe in spite of the evidence. Faith is a decision (with the help of grace) to entrust myself to one I have *reasons* to trust.

We can draw a helpful analogy to marriage. I can know a lot of things about my wife from reason. I can know that she exists, that she is a person of good character, and that she has made certain commitments to me. All of this constitutes sound, rational knowledge. But a good marriage requires that I do a lot more than *know* things about my wife. I must *entrust* myself to her. I make a decision to take her at her word.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church captures the richness of this understanding of faith. It is "the personal adherence of man to God." (CCC 150) But it does not take place in a vacuum. It is no "blind impulse," but a decision formed (with the help of grace) in a context of reason and evidence. (CCC 156)

There is a lot we can know about God and the Church from human reason. I can know that God exists, that morality requires a transcendent norm, that I have an immortal soul. I can also know that Jesus Christ lived and taught, that he founded a Church corresponding to Old Testament prophecy, and that reliable witnesses saw him raised from the dead. I can also see that this Church has spread marvelously through the world, accompanied by miracles, changed lives, and transcendent hope.

These "motives of credibility" give me sufficient reason to make the personal commitment of faith - to entrust myself to one who proclaims things I could not know apart from God's revelation. This act of faith, in no way contrary to reason, then opens me up to transcendent realities. As in marriage, the life of faith enriches my life in ways beyond imagining.

Faith actually puts me in a superior intellectual position to the modern atheist. The Catholic willingly accepts the difference between what he can know, and what constitutes mystery. But the modern atheist commits himself to the belief *that everything can in principle be explained in materialistic terms*. Never mind the fact that his own attempt to use logic involves him in a world of immaterial realities. Thus, modern atheism constitutes a kind of superstition: an irrational hope that because *some things* have a material cause, everything must. (For deeper study of this question, I recommend Edward Feser's book *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism*.)

Many people today become atheists because they are conditioned to it, unthinkingly, by their culture. Others choose it willingly because they don't want there to be a God. Atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel freely admits:

I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that." (*The Last Word*, Oxford University Press: 1997, p. 130)

The Second Vatican Council speaks of this dynamic. In the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Fathers laments that one form of atheism "stretches the desires for human independence to such a point that it poses difficulties against any kind of dependence on God." (GS 20)

Man can certainly live without faith, but only a truncated, desiccated sort of life. Again, I could live my married life by reason alone. I could know that my wife exists without having faith in her. But I want more from marriage than that, and to get the whole package, I have to have faith.

And now we can see why God asks us for faith. He would have us open up to a life of grace, and love, and mystery. Not because he would deny us our reason, but because he would fulfill it. Faith does not contradict reason, it expands it. Faith is a foretaste of heaven, a seed of eternal life. And Catholic faith, finally, is a gift - only possible by grace, and the help of the Holy Spirit. (CCC 154) In this "Year of Faith," rejoice in your faith! God has given you something wonderful.