

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

ADVENT 1976

Faith, A Search for an Authentic Life

Thirty-four years in the priesthood have given me a vantage point from which to review the passing parade of faith. I calmly accept the fact that more marchers these days are stepping to the rhythm of different drummers. This may say something about the spectator; this may say something about the participants. I am sure it says very much about the complex rhythm of contemporary life.



For some, faith still means a marching shoulder to shoulder in tune to the same beat — an unthinking conformity to an unchanging pattern. For others, faith is "a right face" on all questions, doubts, difficulties — a looking away from the crucial issues that lie ahead. For still others, faith represents a designated line of march where the patterns of belief and ethic are programmed and every marcher is outfitted in a uniform of one size, one shape, one shade.

In recent years I have come to see faith as a very complex process. Its stages — not necessarily in this order — include: doubt, crisis, fear, risk, pain, discovery, enthusiasm, choice, commitment. And all of these dynamics intersect at a deeper level: the search for an authentic life.

Advent 1976 is a God-given opportunity to reflect upon the three factors in that statement.

No one ever began a search without envisioning a moment of truth where pursuit becomes possession. Every search sets aside self-satisfaction: the already. Every search becomes a thrust into the future: the not yet. A passion for the possible, might be another way of putting it. In a word, a celebration of what God will do. For is not God the Lord of the impossible? "Nothing is impossible with God." Gabriel assured Mary (Lk 1:37).

Faith then is an open search for the really possible, at the call of God. Such a search is a pilgrimage: the surrender of security for the assurances He alone can give. The Letter to the

Hebrews provokes thought: "Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that at present remain unseen." (11:1) Every search, like every pilgrimage, is a confession of one's limitations, unsuspected learnings in changing circumstances, a sign of thanksgivings for unseen resources. For these reasons faith is both search and pilgrimage; readiness for the surprises of the Spirit, a psalm of praise along the way.

The second factor is authenticity. A few years ago this term enjoyed high currency among the young; in the more recent period it has slipped badly. The presence of faith gives life an authentic ring; its absence makes for counterfeit. Remove faith from the human experience, and it becomes a basic hypocrisy — a denial of what is real, genuine, true. Nothing is more eminently human than to believe, to want to be believed. Trust in others, confidence in others, reliance on others is authentically human. Nothing is more characteristically human than trust, confidence and reliance on the Wholly Other who is God.

The authenticity of the faith-search commits us to new perspectives. Louis Evely writes:

"Until the 20th Century, the dependence of people on nature served as a foundation and a structure for our dependence on God. God, the Father of Jesus Christ, was represented as sweet and humble of heart, in imitation of the God of nature, a God who threatens and terrifies, but whose good graces can be gained by prayers, offerings and appropriate sacrifices. The God of our fathers may be described as a god of thunder and storm, a god of rain and good weather, a god of fear and self-interest.

"But modern man has surpassed nature: he no longer stands in awe of it, he no longer flatters it; he has mastered it and, we dare to say, made it subject to him.

"This total change in our concept of nature brings with it an identical change in our concept of God; we no longer borrow our representations of God from nature (power, strength, majesty, fear, reward, punishment). We must now look for them in the Gospel in terms of poverty, love, weakness, humility, sweetness,

suffering, compassion, friendship, tenderness." (The Faith of a Modern Man, pp 13-14)

Faith is a restless search for authentic relations: with the God we serve and the community of faith we know. Faith and truth are inseparable. Indeed, faith and truth are often more valuable than life itself — this is why the form of witness we call martyrdom is so uniquely significant.

The final element in our equation is life. In the past, our Catholic tradition often saw theological faith as an intellectual action, an assent of the mind to a divine truth. In fact, faith is more than action — it belongs to the very experience of human life. To believe is to be self-transcendent — and this means to live in a frame of reference larger than self. Only when one gets beyond self does life begin to take on self-authenticating dimensions. Put simply, life is true and free when it breaks out of self-imprisonment.

Little wonder faith is the taproot of love. Both look for truth. Both embody trust. Both call for human commitment to another that is life-sharing.

It is indeed short-sighted to think of faith as a now-and-then action. Or to see faith in terms of anything less than an experience co-existent with life itself. Belief does not improve life — it makes it radically possible. We need no apologies for faith, any more than we need apologies for whatever is essential to human existence.

Let Advent 1976 not lead us into delusion. As members of the People of God we really cannot pray for something that already is — the temporal birth of the Savior. But we can pray — indeed should pray — for what is not: the coming of the Savior in full and final glory.

Thus Advent 1976 summons us to incarnate faith in the search for an authentic faith. We ourselves will find way, truth and life in the measure that we search out the Way, the Truth and the Life which has no equal. Let the prayer and work of faith this Advent be a search for the authentic life: "Maranatha (Lord, come)." (1 Co 16:22)

Christ Is Our Radiant Center

The following is the text of the Holy Father's address during the course of the General Audience on Wednesday, Nov. 10.

The liturgical year will conclude in two weeks with the feast of Christ the King.

As the year draws to an end we are again attracted by the desire of summing it up, as is in the genius of the way of thinking of our time. We wish to gather round an idea the many things that have been the subject of our annual religious reflection. This year, after the Holy Year and still caught in the beam of light of the Council, what religious aspect seems to us to sum up our faith?

Without any doubt Christ. Christ is always the radiant center which absorbs our thought, which inspires our prayer, which guides our behavior, if we are faithful to that commitment of ours which defines us and makes us Christians. To be brief, we should ask ourselves who is Christ in Himself, and who is Christ for us?

We feel another inevitable question, also a formidable one, rise within us. It is this: what, in substance, does this teaching, which comes to me from Christ, what does it propose to me to believe, to know, to think? In other words: what does the Gospel, to which I have listened at Sunday Mass or elsewhere offer that is specific, fundamental, beautiful, not to be renounced?

It can happen that the word Christian can be used to mean lots of things, but in a purely

conventional, superficial and exterior way, without either studying its essential meaning or experiencing the interior vibration that the use of such a name should always bring forth.

However fruitful, indispensable and inexhaustible the impulse that Christianity confers on human advancement is and must be, it cannot be deliberately used in the service of conception of life — today, for example, people speak of "Christianity for Socialism" — which contradicts Christianity ideologically and practically. One could spend much time on this point, but let this mention be sufficient now.

It is urgent and sufficient for us now to define what is substantially that doctrine, which defines itself Christian, and which has been the subject of the religious and liturgical reflection of the year that is about to end. Adopting a way often used today to express the summary trends of spirituality, we, too, can classify Christian doctrine as being marked by a double direction, vertical and horizontal, that is, as addressed to the great mystery of God, and to the mystery, which, though infinitely smaller, is also an inexhaustible mystery, that of man.

The teaching of Christ, his Gospel, opens two windows for us, one looking onto heaven, the other onto the earth. Those present at the school of the divine Master will enjoy a knowledge, a wisdom, an incomparable and beatifying revelation about God, infinite and ineffable, transcendent and immanent. They will be authorized to call him with the name of the most august and most intimate family relationship. "Pray then like this, Christ teaches us: Our Father who are in heaven." This is a

marvellous theology, of which mankind will never be able to grow weary, and from which, once discovered, once experienced interiorly, will never be able to detach itself. Let human philosophy try to stammer some sublime words about the "unknown God" without letting itself be weakened by doubt and fear, and let it tell us if a more perfect and more reassuring vision has ever been offered to lips, to the human heart!

We do not wish to refuse to acknowledge the heights of human poetry, the speculations of the mystics of every religion and of every philosophy, the anxieties of so many spirits derived from the most delicate experiences of love and grief. But we cannot but thank Jesus, the divine Master, for having taught us his own insuperable prayer which is now ours also. This prayer flows from spirits that have become intrepid to accept the great and first commandment of love, which sums up the whole law and all the prophecies on human activity and bursts from childish lips educated to divine conversation. This is the vertical teaching.

And the horizontal teaching, the theology about man? We read it together with that of God, in the first place: "He who has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus admonishes the disciple Philip, who had dared to ask: "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." Jesus radiates a double vision, the divine one, infinite perfection; and the human one, in its multiple degradation. To put it in another way, in all human suffering there appears, for those who are able to discover it, the mystery of man, suffering and degraded, but no longer to be despised, but rather to be sought and loved, with a love which contains an added value, with religious love.

