

Why do we believe what we do?

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

From time to time each of us must step back from our everyday world and pose some basic questions about the meaning and direction of our lives and of human existence itself.

When we do that explicitly in the light of our Christian faith, we call that variable period of reflection a retreat, a day of recollection, or an act of meditation, however fleeting and unstructured it might be.

For a particular type of Catholic, this process of reflection may go something like this: "I am confident of whom I am and where I am going because I belong to a church that tells me so with certitude. Fortunately, I need never be in doubt about what the church teaches because there are not many voices in the church to which I must pay heed, but only one — the pope's. Papal teaching is for me the surest guide to, and guarantee of the truths that I need for correct belief and upright moral living in this life and for salvation in the next."

For a particular type of Protestant, Sacred Scripture replaces the church and, more particularly, the pope: "The Bible tells me so."

For Christians more attuned to "new age" rhythms, this process is lodged more in the heart than in the mind. What feels right — for me — is finally determinative, not what the church teaches or what the Bible says.

Most efforts at coming to terms



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with meaning and truth fall somewhere in between the two. While the Catholic tradition has always encompassed a whole gamut of approaches, its official teaching is closer to the middle.

The First Vatican Council (1869-70), for example, taught that faith illuminates reason, but that it is also consonant with reason.

In saying that faith illuminates reason the council stood firmly against a prevailing Rationalism, inside and outside the church, which held that the only truths worthy of belief are those that can be established by reason alone.

In saying that faith is consonant with reason, the council stood with equal firmness against a prevailing

Fideism within the church, which held that the truths of faith so far surpass human capabilities that reason can contribute nothing at all to our understanding of faith.

The balanced teaching of the First Vatican Council stimulated new approaches to apologetics, that is, the discipline which seeks to explain and defend the faith to outsiders and to assist the faithful to establish a solid basis for their own belief.

One of those new approaches was that of the French philosopher and theologian Maurice Blondel (1861-1949). He called it the "method of immanence," because its purpose was to show that faith is not unrelated to our ordinary, everyday world of human experience. On the contrary, it explains and enriches it.

Blondel's method was taken up and popularized more than 25 years ago by the Canadian theologian Gregory Baum of McGill University, Montreal, in a little book titled, "Faith and Doctrine" (Newman Press, 1969). It is probably long since out of print, but that's a pity. Its second chapter stands, even today, as one of the finest, most helpful presentations on apologetics that one could read.

Blondel directly challenged the view that the obedience of faith requires a sacrifice of one's intelligence. In other words, to be a believer means to accept the truth of an unlikely story about Jesus on the basis of some authority, be it the church or the Bible. Blondel called this a caricature

of revelation and of faith.

Against this view, Blondel argued that God is redemptively present to the whole of human life, and is involved where people are — in all of our most important as well as our most ordinary human experiences of love, joy, courage, and compassion, and of betrayal, sadness, sickness, and weakness.

Divine revelation in Jesus Christ is not the addition of some new knowledge to human life, introduced to us from another world. Rather, it clarifies, illuminates, and enriches what is already there.

"I do not think," Gregory Baum writes, "that people become or stay Christians because of the historical certainty established by scholars in regard to the origin of the Christian message and the foundation of the Church" (p.58).

Rather, people become and remain Christians because the Gospel of Jesus Christ "explains, purifies, and multiplies their depth-experiences" (p.68).

People become and remain Christians, in other words, because their faith gives meaning and direction to the special and ordinary events of their everyday lives and to human existence itself.

No theologian or biblical scholar can take away such faith, and no pope or Bible can supply it. In the end, faith is a matter of coming to terms with the truth that is already within us in light of the truth that comes to us from without.

Holy Ghost provides gust for the faithful

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-23; (R1) Acts 2:1-11; (R2) 1 Corinthians 11:2-7, 12-13.

This Sunday is Pentecost Sunday.

I have often asked people what is the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Seldom do I get the correct answer.

In the Old Testament, God gave His people the Ten Commandments. That was a great gift. In the New Testament, the Son of God gave us the Holy Spirit. That was a far greater gift.

Law, you see, is external, not touching the heart. It simply tells us what we are to do or not to do. But it does not give us the power to do what we know we ought to do or to avoid what we must avoid. That is why so many of God's people rejected the Messiah when He came.

In the New Testament, however, the Son of God gave us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is put into us; He changes our hearts, and thus empowers us to keep the Law. "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," said God through Jeremiah; "I will place



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my law within them, and write it upon their hearts" (31:33).

Ezekiel foretold the same thing: "I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts. I will put my spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees" (36:26-27). What was so hard to do in the Old Testament becomes very possible in the New through the

Holy Spirit's outpouring.

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was imaged as the "breath of God." The Hebrew word for "spirit" is *ruah*, which means "breath." The Latin word for "spirit" is *spiritus*, which also means "breath;" *spiritus* is the root of such words as inspiration, respiration.

There are three things about breath: it is a life force (if you stop breathing, you die); it enters into yourself by the double rhythm of inhaling and exhaling; and it is needed to speak — you can't speak if you are all out of breath.

St. Luke in Acts uses another image of the Spirit: wind ("suddenly from up in the sky there came a noise like a strong, driving wind...") In tornadoes and hurricanes, we can see the wind's mighty power. Even when there are no storms, the wind can drive clouds across the sky and boats across the waters. Wind is such an apt symbol of God's Spirit. For the Holy Spirit it is power: He can propel us to do God's mighty deeds and for God.

Recently, I was reading an article on the Holy Spirit, and I was delighted to discover an explanation of the word "ghost" in "Holy Ghost." I always thought that the word came from

the German word *geist*, meaning "spirit." In this article, however, it said that the word "ghost" could derive from the Anglo-Saxon word *gast*, which comes from the Old Norse word *gust*, which means "gust," the sudden movement of wind which sends earth behind the plow into a whirligig, lifts the hat, and blows the leaves around. So Holy Ghost meant the great gust of wind from heaven that rushed into the lives of Jesus's followers and empowered them to proclaim the good news as the Spirit prompted them.

You all know what an Aeolian harp is. It is a pendant made up of metal and glass, dangling from strings, which, when moved by the wind, produces sweet tinkling sounds. Aeolus was the god of the winds in Grecian mythology.

We, too, are Aeolian harps. Each differs from the other. Each has beautiful music to play in life's symphony — the gospel message. And we play it when God's Spirit blows upon our heart's strings. Parthians, Medes, Elamites — it matters not who we are — if we are moved by God's Spirit, we shall all speak the same language of love of God and neighbor.

Sister Patricia Schoelles' column on "The Moral Life" will run next week.

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