

ALLOCUTIO, LEGION OF MARY MELBOURNE SENATUS, 7 AUGUST 2016

In our spiritual reading we heard Mary's word of faith and obedience at the Annunciation: the simple, 'Yes, let it be done.' I wanted today to reflect on some important aspects of the foundational 'Act of Faith' we all make in obedience to God's word – aspects presently at some risk of becoming confused.

Faith, at its heart, is indeed something simple. All sorts of complicated thoughts and events can *lead* someone towards faith, but the final act of faith isn't complicated. And, there might be all sorts of temptations against faith, things we don't understand, confused emotions, times of darkness. But amidst all this, lifted by God's grace faith itself can still shine through – in the simple choice and will, to believe and to trust: 'My God, you have said all these things. Therefore I believe them. What you have said is the truth.' No qualifications.

Faith is trust in the word of Another, personal relationship with Supreme Truth himself – quite different from a system of thought of our own invention. That's why we can't introduce 'qualifications' or 'exceptions' into faith. Any 'conditions' placed on faith would mean we were setting up for our minds something even more absolute than God, something we would supposedly use to make our final judgement which parts of his word we would fully accept.

Pope Francis reminds us that, on the contrary: 'All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith.' (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* 36) 'Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity. Precisely because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole.' (Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei* 48)

It's good to be aware of false ideas that can subtly poison our faith commitment. For example, one currently finds even in some Catholic circles a persistent attack on the *certainty* of faith. Doubt is romanticised, and fully certain trust in God's word is derided as somehow less spiritual – rigid, arrogant, lacking nuance. It's presented as more 'mature' to maintain a critical distance from the teachings of faith, 'questioning' them – in the sense of opening oneself to the possibility of their falsity.

This is actually quite deadly to genuine faith. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that obstinate doubt of any truth of divine and catholic faith is the sin of heresy (n. 2089). If consented to with full deliberation and knowledge, this is in fact a mortal sin that kills the supernatural virtue of faith, and indeed by current Church law, incurs automatic excommunication (unless certain mitigating factors are present). (Code of Canon Law n. 1364.) In truth, far from being a more 'mature' faith, doubt is regression, from faith in all its joy and freedom backwards to fallible human opinion.

The *Catechism* (n. 157) again gives the actual Catholic position: 'Faith is certain. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie. To be sure, revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but "the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives." (St Thomas Aquinas) "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt." (Blessed John Henry Newman)'

Along the same lines, Pope St John Paul II taught that 'Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith; it is here that freedom reaches the

certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth.....There comes for everyone the moment when personal existence must be anchored to a truth recognized as final, a truth which confers a certitude no longer open to doubt.....The human being...can find fulfilment only in choosing to enter the truth, to make a home under the shade of Wisdom and dwell there.’ (Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* 13; 27; 107)

There is no arrogance in the certainty of faith, since it is based on the total humility of fully submitting our own minds to God’s mind. Neither should we be swayed by the ambiguous labels thrown around, such as that certainty is ‘rigid’ and doubt is ‘open-minded’. Thinking in labels in this way isn’t a good guide to truth. In fact, whether ‘openness’ is good and ‘rigidity’ bad depends on what we’re talking about.

Really, any truth shining with clear light, the healthy mind rightly holds to with certainty. So in moral matters, we don’t ‘open ourselves’ to the possible goodness of racism or oppression of the poor. Likewise for truths of reason more generally – to take a simple example, we are ‘rigidly’ certain that $2 + 2$ equals 4, and not ‘open’ to $2 + 2$ equalling 5. But above all, all this is so for truths of faith, lit by divine light. We don’t ‘open ourselves’ to the possibility that God has deceived us.

True, on our pilgrim journey God does lead us on (as individuals and as the whole Church) to ever new understandings – but never so as to contradict what he’s said before, truths that we already believe with certainty. Thus St John Paul II spoke of the obligation of the believing community ‘to proclaim the certitudes arrived at, albeit with a sense that every truth attained is but a step towards that fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God.’ (*Fides et Ratio* 2)

So there is a duality: we never let go of the certitudes of faith once attained, yet we never imagine we’ve learnt all there is to know. And we don’t set those two aspects in opposition. Pope Francis expressed these same aspects in one of his daily meditations: ‘God is always new; He never denies himself, He never says that something He had said was a mistake, never; but He always surprises...When one is on a journey one always finds new things, things one does not know...A journey is not absolute in itself, it is a journey toward an end point: toward the definitive manifestation of the Lord.’ (*Meditation*, 13 October 2014)

So in faith, we rejoice to commit ourselves without reservation to live and die in the certainty of the truth God has spoken, and we rejoice as he leads us ever on to new insights into the fullness of truth he revealed once for all in Christ his Son.