

BLACKFRIARS

FAITH AND DOUBT

FAITH is, both first and last, the gift of God. It comes of His grace and can come no other way. It cannot be earned or deserved.

So much I know. The Church teaches it, and if you consider what man is and what God must be it stands to reason.

But why, once given, should there ever be doubt any more? Why should I at recurring periods through all my life be assailed with horrid doubts and insidious questionings and little sneaking infidelities that come unasked and blow coldly, as it were like draughts, under the door and through the crannies of the windows of my soul? When I consider God's saints the chief note they seem to have in common is the note of Serenity. Were they all, I asked myself, untroubled by doubts, or did that serenity mask in all of them a continual conflict? And when I look abroad and consider all the millions of Catholics who have accepted the faith and seem to wear it like a familiar garment, to whom it seems as natural as the air they breathe, am I to suppose that everyone of them, too, is at some time or another racked with doubt or are some of them never uneasy while other sometimes cannot sleep? And if that be so, is it the fault of those whom doubts assail and, though they may say to themselves that it is by no will of theirs they come, yet may it not truly be because they have not that true humbleness and simplicity of soul which of all human virtues God most loves?

For it cannot be, I said to myself, though it might comfort me to think it so, that there can be no faith without doubt.

As I was thinking these things I happened to read, in a book of Mr. Belloc, a tale that he says Saint Louis of France loved to tell of a certain Master of Divinity who was much troubled by doubts, though he had before-time disputed for the faith, and he went in his distress to the Bishop of Paris of that day.

Now the point that the Bishop made was that these

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doubts, these winds of unbelief, came to this man not of his own will (else he would not be so distressed about them) but from outside, and therefore quite certainly from the enemy of mankind. 'Would you be pleased,' he asked him, 'that these doubts should conquer?' 'I would rather,' said the poor man, 'that my limbs should be torn from my body.'

Upon which the Bishop told him that he should think himself honoured of God, for that he was like a man given by his King a beleagured citadel to guard while he, the Bishop, had been given no such post of honour; 'for,' he said, 'I have never doubted at all. So where God gives me reward in one measure, He will give you four.'

Well, that was a pleasant story to hear and a heartening, and though I could not very well take it to myself—for that would be to imply that God had given me a particularly difficult citadel to guard, which: since I know myself, did not seem very likely—yet it sufficed to cheer me up.

And I could, at least, apply the moral of the tale which was that so long as I kept my will firmly set against these draughts of doubt, so long as I was honestly sure that I did not harbour them an inch, but vehemently hated them as the poor Master of Divinity did (even though if it came to the point I might not be brave enough to suffer my limbs to be torn from my body rather than admit them—but then I did not suppose I should be tried as far as that)—well, then, there was probably no great harm done. But I must be very sure about my will.

Then, somewhat comforted, I began to think again of the saints, and the first one I thought of was, naturally enough, St. Peter; and I remembered that though his first profession of faith was so absolute and sincere that it moved God to give him the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, yet that he suffered from doubt more than once afterwards.

So, after all, I thought what with a Doctor of Divinity of the thirteenth century, and the Prince of the Apostles, I am not in such bad company—and so thinking I turned over and went to sleep.

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