

**CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE**

by Fr. John Ramsay

**CHAPTER 2 – DIVINE REVELATION**

In the last chapter we talked about the foundation for our belief in God. We saw that even before we examine what God has revealed to us about Himself and His plans for us, we can arrive at the conclusion that He exists by reasoning it out for ourselves from the evidence in nature.

So we reasoned that God exists, that He is limitless in every way and that He gave us two faculties which make us like Him. The faculty to know and the faculty to decide - and these faculties show that we have an eternal destiny and that we are responsible for our acts. From that we saw the need to respond and indeed that this was the very purpose in being at all - to know, love and serve God. This 'vertical' relationship between each one of us and God is what gives meaning and power to our 'horizontal' relationship with others.

Now we take things a stage further. What we have worked out for ourselves is, of course, very limited. After all it is only what the mind can deduce from the evidence in creation. What has been revealed, however, goes far beyond what we can work out for ourselves. Indeed it goes beyond what we can even understand since it deals with the mystery of God.

This is not something against reason but something far above and beyond its capacity to grasp. Thus reason tells us there is a God; faith tells us that there are three persons in one God. Clearly therefore we need help - that help, 'faith', is a free gift from God. Now faith or belief in someone is something that we are quite familiar with. We frequently accept as truth things that others tell us. We don't demand proof, we accept what they say. Experience tells us it is safe to believe since people are usually truthful. When the matter is more important however, we tend to seek expert opinion. For example, if our health is not good we seek a doctor. In this case we accept what is said because we trust their specialist knowledge. Notice, however, that our acceptance of the information is based on our good opinion of the informant. Now, when we are dealing with God we are dealing with Truth itself so we not only can but must believe everything He says, because of what we know Him to be. However hard it is to believe, or even understand, it must be so because He says so. Nevertheless we clearly need help, and God Himself offers it to us as a free gift.

In fact He gives us three special gifts: Faith, Hope and Charity - the 'theological virtues' as they are called. The word 'virtue' comes from a Latin noun meaning 'power' - the virtues then are powers given us by God to enable us to do what He asks. Here we are concerned with faith. The Catechism calls faith a "supernatural gift from God which enables us to believe, without doubting, whatever God has revealed". Notice it is a 'gift' freely given, but it also has to be accepted. We can refuse to accept the gift of faith and remain an unbeliever.

Sadly, many do refuse, some through pride since they cannot accept there is anything vastly superior to man. For others the presence of evil in the world presents a stumbling block. While others again (agnostics) will not accept anything that is not subject to proof. Now, as we've seen, we base our belief on the authority or reputation of our informant or revealer. When however the informant is God we cannot pick and choose what we believe. "I believe this but I can't believe that." We believe the lot because He says so. This will involve us in lots of things we don't like because the vehicle for God's revelation is the Catholic Church which is made up of human beings, and human beings can be tiresome!

The Catholic Church then, teaches what has been revealed but that teaching is not just sterile repetition, it is very much alive. Over the centuries the Church has reflected upon the truths entrusted to Her to pass on... That reflection produced deeper knowledge ... More accurate knowledge of what was revealed, but never different. This is called the 'development of doctrine', what is revealed in changeless truth, but there is more of it ... and it becomes clearer. So, my reason for believing is God Himself - TRUTH ITSELF. As the Catechism puts it "I must believe what God has revealed because God is the very truth and can neither deceive nor be deceived".

My guide as to what I believe is the Catholic Church founded for that purpose by Our Lord and commissioned to teach in His name. The authority for that Church to teach what I must believe comes of course from Christ Himself who said: “Going therefore, teach ye all nations . . . . And behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world” (Mathew 28: 19,20) and “He that heareth you, heareth me” (Luke 10: 16). Now the Church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12: 27) and Christ is THE REVELATION - all God has to say. And, as we’ve seen, the Church is continuously reflecting on what has been entrusted to Her.

Confirmation of the truth of revelation comes from Scriptures, archaeology and history. But the reason for believing is God Himself, THE TRUTH, who gave authority to His Church to teach all that He had revealed. The Catechism puts it this way: “I am to know what God has revealed by the testimony, teaching and authority of the Catholic Church”. So what must I believe? God’s revelation is summarised in the Apostles’ Creed. Now faith remains a free act depending on the decision of the will to seek and accept God’s grace. Remember the epileptic’s father: “I do believe, Lord – help my unbelief.” (Mark 9: 23) This act involves humility and trust because we are accepting what we cannot prove and may quite possibly not even understand, purely because of our belief in the trustworthiness of the One revealing it to us - God.

So I came to believe in the existence of God by the light of reason. I didn’t require any revelation on God’s part or gift of faith at that stage. God has provided enough evidence in nature for an unbiased mind to accept the fact He exists of Himself, entirely independent of all else, that He created out of nothing all other things. That He is limitless in every way - time, space, knowledge, power and love. That He created human beings superior to all other visible forms of life; and what made them superior to all else and like Him were the two spiritual faculties of mind and will. Which two same faculties show us we are destined to live for ever and are responsible for our acts. But that knowledge is still limited, so God has revealed all we need to know. What He reveals goes far above and beyond what I can grasp unaided. So He gives me help in a gift. The help he gives is the virtue of faith enabling me to believe all that He has revealed. Moreover He founded a Church to tell us just what has been revealed. Remember, I am used to taking people at their word though I go to an expert for special knowledge.

Since my informant in revelation is God, I must accept all He reveals with the help of faith which enables me to do so. Remember the Catechism definition of faith. Nevertheless faith is a gift so I am not forced to believe. Indeed I can refuse to believe but I am to some extent responsible. Since it is God revealing I cannot pick and choose, believe this... and not believe that. I make one act of belief in all that God has revealed through His Church. This revelation is not something sterile but alive - a living message constantly reflected upon by the Church which is responsible for delivering it, never changed but re-expressed more profoundly and more clearly. The whole truth will of course only be revealed in eternity by THE TRUTH - God Himself.

Meantime, however, I have more than enough to keep me happy. Happy enough to make me want to share with others what I possess myself. For that, remember, is what I’m expected to do. Not just to keep the Faith, but also to spread it. Christ’s command “Going therefore, teach ye all nations...” was addressed to all of us who are members of His Church and share in that teaching role. One last word: we are all naturally attracted to good. The more we see of it the greater the attraction so the greater our knowledge of God, who is goodness itself, the greater will be our love for Him, and the greater the desire to share the good. Put quite simply, the better I know my faith the more I’ll love it. The more I love it the more I’ll want to pass it on.