
Life of Faith

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Sometimes people say that there are fewer miracles today. But maybe there are fewer people living a life of faith? God does not go back on his promise: "Ask of me. And I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the Earth your possession" (Ps 2:9). Our God is Truth, the basis of all existence; nothing is done against his almighty will.

"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end."¹ The Lord does not change. Having everything, he could not pursue anything that he might not have. He is all motion, all beauty, all grandeur, today as always. "The heavens will vanish like smoke, the Earth will wear out like a garment...; but my salvation will be for ever and my deliverance will never be ended" (Is 51:6).

In Jesus Christ God has established a new and everlasting alliance with mankind. He has pledged his omnipotence to the service of our salvation. When his creatures lose confidence, when they are afraid through lack of faith, we hear once again the voice of Isaiah speaking in the name of the Lord: "Is my hand shortened that I cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold: by my rebuke I dry up the sea; I make the rivers a desert. Their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst. I clothe the heavens with darkness and make sackcloth their covering" (Is 50:2-3).

Faith is a supernatural virtue that enables our intellect to accept revealed truths, to say "yes" to Christ, allowing us to understand fully the blessed Trinity's plan for our salvation. "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb 1:1-3).

By the pool of Siloam

I want Jesus himself to talk to us about faith, to give us lessons in faith. So let us open the New Testament and relive with him some of the incidents in his life. He did not disdain to teach his disciples, showing them, little by little, how to give themselves wholeheartedly to carrying out the will of his Father. He taught both by words and deeds.

Consider chapter nine of St. John's gospel. "As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" (Jn 9:1-2).

These men, even though they were so close to Christ, could still think badly about that poor blind man. So do not be surprised if, when serving the Church in your daily lives, you also come upon Christians behaving the same way to you or others. Don't worry and, like the blind man, pay no attention to it. Just put yourselves wholeheartedly in Christ's hands. He does not accuse, he pardons. He does not condemn, he forgives. Confronted with illness, he is not indifferent but with divine diligence finds the remedy.

Our Lord "spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him: 'Go and wash in the pool of Siloam (which means "Sent").' So he went and washed and came back seeing" (Jn 9:6-7).

This blind man gives us an example of positive faith, living faith, active faith! Do you behave like this when God commands, when you are so often blind, when your soul is darkened by personal worries? What power could there possibly be in the water that when applied to the eyes cured them? Surely some secret eye salve, some precious medicine prepared in a laboratory by some wise alchemist would have done better. But that man believed. God's word is his deed, and as a result the man's eyes are filled with brightness.

St. Augustine commenting on this passage writes: "It seems useful that the evangelist explained the significance of the name of the pool, saying that it meant 'Sent.' Now you understand who has been sent. If the Lord had not been sent to us, none of us would have been freed from sin."² We must have complete faith in him who saves us, in this divine doctor who was sent expressly to make us whole. And we must have faith to believe all the more when our illness is more serious or hopeless.

We must learn to acquire the divine measure of things, never losing sight of the supernatural world, and counting on the use that Jesus makes of our sufferings to reveal his glory. That is why, when your conscience feels the stirrings of self-love, of weariness, of discouragement, of the demands of your passions, you must react immediately and listen to the teachings of our Lord. You must not be frightened at the sad reality of what we all are. For as long as we live, our personal failings will always be with us.

This is the Christian's way. We have to pray for help all the time, with a faith both strong and humble. "Lord, put not your trust in me. But I put my trust in you." And as we sense the love, the compassion, the tenderness of Christ's gaze upon us—for he never abandons us—we shall better understand the deep meaning of the words of the Apostle: "...power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). With faith in our Lord, despite our wretchedness or rather because of our wretchedness, we shall be faithful to God our Father. His power will shine forth, sustaining us in our weakness.

The faith of Bartimeus

St. Mark tells us of the cure of another blind man. "As he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timeus, was sitting by the roadside" (Mk 10:46). When he heard the noise of the crowd the blind man asked, "What is happening?" and the

crowd answered, "It is Jesus of Nazareth." And then the blind man, his soul on fire with his belief in Christ, cried out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mk 10:47).

Doesn't this event make you want to cry out too, when you also have stopped by the side of the road, of that roadway of life that is so short; you who are so dim-sighted, you who require more grace before deciding on a life of holiness? Aren't you also inclined to cry out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me"? What a beautiful aspiration, a prayer to repeat again and again!

I recommend that you meditate slowly on the moments preceding this miracle, so as to keep this fundamental idea clearly engraved on your minds. There is a world of difference between our poor hearts and the compassionate heart of Jesus! It will always be there to sustain you, especially in the hour of trial and temptation and also when he asks you to make a generous response, in little things as well as on great occasions.

"And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent" (Mk 10:48)--just as people have done to you when you have sensed the presence of Jesus on your path. Your heart beat faster, and you too began to cry out from your troubled soul. But friends, customs, convenience, conventions, all advised: "Be silent, do not speak. Why must you cry out to Jesus? Leave him in peace!"

But poor Bartimeus would not listen to them and still cried out more: "Son of David, have mercy on me." Our Lord, who had heard him from the beginning, let him repeat his prayer. The same with us. Jesus, hearing the first cry from our souls, still waits. He wants us to be convinced that we need him. He wants us to beg him, to persist as the blind man did by the road from Jericho. "Let us make him our example. Even if God does not immediately give us what we ask, even if lots of people try to put us off from our prayers, let us still go on praying."³

"And Jesus stopped and said, 'Call him!'" And some of the better people in the crowd called the blind man saying: "Take heart; rise. He is calling you" (Mk 10:49). Here you have the Christian vocation. But God does not limit himself to calling us once. Our Lord is seeking us all the time. "Get up," he says, "rise from your sloth, your comfort, your petty selfishness, rise from your little insignificant problems." Take off from where you are, earthbound, flat, and shapeless. Acquire height, weight, and volume and a supernatural outlook.

That man "throwing off his cloak sprang up and came to Jesus" (Mk 10:50). Throwing off his cloak! I do not know whether you have ever been on a battlefield. Many years ago I had occasion to visit a battlefield shortly after an engagement, and there strewn on the ground were overcoats, water bottles, knapsacks stuffed with family souvenirs, letters, photographs of loved ones. And they belonged not to the defeated but to the winners. All their things had become burdensome as they charged forward to attack the enemy: like Bartimeus in his pursuit of Christ.

Never forget that to reach Christ there must be sacrifices. Throw away all that encumbers you—overcoat, knapsack, water bottle... And you must do the same in this battle for the glory of God, in our loving and peaceful struggle for the extension of Christ's kingdom. In the service of the Church and the pope and souls, you must be ready to dispense with everything superfluous; to have no coat to shelter

you from the bitter night cold; to keep no loving souvenirs of your family; to have no water to refresh you. This is the lesson taught us by faith and by love, for it is in this way that we must love Christ.

Faith with deeds

And now begins our dialogue with God, something wonderful that will move us, will set our hearts on fire. Let us be Bartimeus. Christ who is God is speaking and asks: "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man replies, "Lord, that I may see" (Mk 10:51). How reasonable! And you, too. Hasn't the same thing happened to you as to the blind man of Jericho? When meditating on this passage many years back and realizing that Jesus was expecting something of me, when I myself did not know what it was, I can never forget how I could only cry out in prayer: "Lord, what do you want? What do you ask from me?" I had a sense that he wanted me to take on something new. Bartimeus' cry, "Lord, that I may see!" suddenly moved me to beg Christ again and again: "Lord, whatever you want, let it be done."

Now pray with me: "Teach me to do thy will, for thou art my God!" (Ps 143:10). Our lips must express a real desire to correspond effectively to our Creator's invitation, trying to follow his plans with unflinching faith, with the knowledge that he can never err. If we thus love God's will, we shall come to understand what the value of faith is, not only in how clearly we can explain or define it, but in our determination to defend it by our deeds; and we shall act accordingly.

But, let us go back to that scene outside Jericho. Now Christ is talking to you. He asks you: "What do you want from me?" "That I may see, Lord; that I may see." And Jesus answers: "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way (Mk 10:52). To follow him on the way. You have understood what our Lord was asking of you and have decided to go along with him. You are trying to walk in his footsteps, to clothe yourself in Christ's clothing, to be Christ himself. In that case your faith, your belief in the light our Lord is giving you, must entail both work and sacrifice. Avoid wishful thinking or looking for new ways. Such is the faith he demands of us, and we must keep in step with it, working generously. At the same time we must tear up and discard anything that gets in the way.

Faith and humility

And now it is St. Matthew who tells us about a most touching event. "A woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment" (Mt 9:20). How great her humility! "For she said to herself, 'If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well'" (Mt 9:21). There are always sick people who, like Bartimeus, pray with great faith and have no qualms about confessing their faith at the tops of their voices. But notice that, among those whom Christ encounters, no two souls are alike. This woman too has great faith, but she does not yell. She comes close to Jesus without attracting any attention. It is enough just to touch his clothes, for she is certain she will be cured. She has hardly done so, when our Lord turns around and looks at her. He knows the

intimate feelings of her heart and has seen how sure she is: "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well" (Mt 9:22).

"She delicately touched the hem of the garment; she came up with faith, she believed, and she knew she had been cured. If we want to be saved, so should we touch the garment of Christ with faith."⁴ Do you see now how our faith must be? A humble faith. Who are you, and who am I, to deserve to be called by Christ? Who are we, to be so close to him? Like that poor woman in the crowd, we have been offered a chance. And not just a chance to touch his clothes, to feel for a moment the edge, the fringe of his cloak. We have him himself. He gives himself to us wholly, with his body, with his blood, with his soul, and with his divinity. He is our daily food; we can talk to him intimately, as to a father or a loved one. And this is the truth; this is no fantasy.

Let us try to strengthen our humility. For only a truly humble faith will allow us to see the supernatural world. There is no alternative. There are only two ways of living on this Earth: either we live a supernatural life or an animal one. And you and I can only live the life of God, a supernatural life. "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Mt 16:26). What use to man is everything on Earth, all that our mind and desire can aspire to? What use is this, if it is all to end and sink out of sight, if all the riches of the world are just theatrical scenery, if after all this there is still eternity for ever, for ever, for ever?

This expression "for ever" made St. Teresa of Avila great. One day, as a child, she set out with her brother Rodrigo through the Adaja gate in the city walls of Avila, to seek out the land of the Moors where they would have their heads cut off for Christ. As they walked along, she cheered up her slow brother saying: "For ever, for ever, for ever."⁵

Men lie when they say "for ever" about temporal things. The only true, totally true, "for ever" is when we shall be face to face with God. You must live your life with a faith that will help you understand the unspeakable sweetness of Heaven as you look for the eternity which is truly "for ever."

Contemplation for every day

Let us go back to the Gospels and consider for a while what St. Matthew tells us in chapter 21. He describes how Jesus "returning to the city was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it" (Mt 21:18). It makes us happy to see you hungry Lord! To see you thirsty too beside the well of Sychar (cf. Jn 4:7). There we can see you, perfectus Deus, perfectus homo,⁶ truly God yet truly man, with flesh like our flesh. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil 2:7), so that we should never have any doubt that he understands us and loves us.

"He was hungry." When we grow tired, in our work, in our studies, in our apostolate, when our horizon is darkened by lowering clouds, let us look at Christ, the good Jesus who is also tired, who is also hungry and thirsty. Lord, you make yourself clear! You show yourself to be just like us, in everything except sin so we can feel that with you we can conquer all our bad inclinations, overcome all our faults. For neither fatigue nor hunger matters, nor thirst, nor sorrow. Christ also got tired, was hun-

gry, was thirsty, cried. What matters is our struggle—a cheerful struggle, for our Lord is always at our side—to carry out the will of God our Father who is in Heaven (cf. Jn 4:34).

He goes to the fig tree. He comes also to you; he comes to me. Jesus is hungry and thirsty for souls. From the cross he cried out, "I thirst!" (Jn 19:28). Thirsty for us, for our love, for our souls, and for all those souls which we must bring to him, by the way of the cross which is the way to immortality and heavenly glory.

He came up to the fig tree "and found nothing on it but only leaves" (Mt 21:19). How disappointing! But does the same thing happen in our lives? Do we, sadly, lack faith and humility? Don't we have any sacrifices, any good works to offer him? Are we only Christian in appearances, with nothing real inside? This would be terrible, for Jesus then commanded: "May no fruit ever come from you again" (Mt 21:19). This Gospel passage makes us feel sorry; yet at the same time it encourages us to strengthen our faith, to live by faith, so that Christ may always receive some profit from us.

Let us not deceive ourselves. Our Lord does not depend on our human undertakings; our most ambitious projects are for him little more than child's play. What he wants are souls; he wants love. He wants everybody to come and enjoy his kingdom for eternity. We have to work a lot on this Earth and we must do our work well, for it is our daily obligations that we have to sanctify. But let us never forget to do everything for his sake. If we were to do our work for ourselves, out of pride, we would produce mere foliage. And in such a leafy tree neither God nor man would find any sweetness.

Then, looking at the withered tree, "the disciples marveled saying: `How did the fig tree wither at once?'" (Mt 21:20). The first twelve, who had seen so many of Christ's miracles, are amazed again. Their faith was not yet a flaming faith. So our Lord assured them: "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done" (Mt 21:21). Christ lays down for us this condition, that we should live by faith, and then we can move mountains. And there are so many things to be moved away...in the world and, first of all, from our hearts. So many obstacles to grace! Let us then have faith, faith with deeds, faith with sacrifice, faith with humility. For it is faith that makes us capable of anything: "and whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Mt 21:22).

The man of faith can truly assess worldly values. He knows that this life on Earth is, in St. Teresa's phrase, just a single night in a bad inn.⁷ Such vision renews his conviction that our time on Earth is a time of work and struggle, a time of purification, to repay the debt owed to divine justice for our sins. He knows too that worldly possessions are but means, and so uses them generously, even heroically.

Faith is not only to be preached. Above all it is to be practiced. Maybe we are often too weak. When this happens—I am turning again to the Gospels—let us behave like the father of the lunatic boy. He wanted his son to be cured, he hoped Christ would cure him, but he could not bring himself to believe that such happiness was possible. And Jesus, who always demands faith, knowing what was troubling his soul, steps in to help him. "Everything is possible for him who believes" (Mk 9:23). Everything is possible. We are omnipotent! But only with faith. That man feels his faith is weak, he is afraid that his

lack of faith is preventing his son from being cured, and he weeps. Let us not be ashamed of tears—they are the fruit of our love for God, of contrite prayer, of true humility. "And the father of the child cried out with tears and said, 'I believe! Help my unbelief'" (Mk 9:24).

And we too, now, after our short meditation, repeat the same words. "Lord, I believe! I have been brought up in your faith, I have resolved to follow you closely. Repeatedly through my life, I have begged for your mercy. And I have repeatedly considered it impossible that you could have performed such marvels in the hearts of your children. Lord, I do believe, but help me to believe more and better!"

And let us also address this plea to our Lady, Mother of God and our mother too, who teaches us to believe: "Blessed are you for believing; the message that was brought to you from the Lord shall have fulfillment" (Lk 1:45).

¹ Roman Missal, Gloria.

² In Ioannis evangelium tractatus, 44, 2.

³ St. John Chrysostom, Homiliae in Matthaem, 66, 1.

⁴ St. Ambrose, Expositio evangelic secundum Lucam, 6, 56, 58.

⁵ St. Teresa, Life, 1, 6.

⁶ Athanasian Creed.

⁷ Cf. St. Teresa, Way of Perfection, XL, 9.

The Riches of the Faith

By Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer

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In his letter to the Galatians—a hymn to the riches of the faith—St. Paul tells us that Christians should live with the freedom which Christ won for us (cf. Gal 4:3). This was the message of Jesus to the first Christians, and it will continue to be the same throughout the centuries: it is an announcement of liberation from misery and anguish. History is not subject to blind forces nor is it the result of chance; it is the expression of the mercies of God the Father. The thoughts of God are far above ours, says Scripture (cf. Is 55:8; Rom 11:33). Thus to trust in the Lord means to have faith in spite of everything, going

beyond the appearances of things. The charity of God, who loves us eternally, lies beyond each event, even though at times it may be difficult for us to appreciate it.

When a Christian lives with faith—a faith which is not merely word of mouth, but the result of personal prayer—the sureness of divine love shows itself in joy, in interior freedom. Those knots which sometimes tie up the heart, those heavy weights which oppress the soul, are broken and removed. "If God is for us, who can be against us." A child of God, a Christian who lives by faith, can suffer and weep; he can have motives for sorrow, but none for dejection.

Freedom in fraternity

Christian freedom comes from within, from the heart, from faith. It is not something merely individual; it expresses itself externally. A characteristic expression of this freedom comes from the life of the first Christians: fraternity. Faith—that great gift of God—has reduced the divergencies, the barriers, so that they have disappeared, "and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female" (Gal 3:28). To know that we are brothers, to love each other as such, over and above differences of race, social condition, culture, or ideology, belongs to the essence of Christianity.

It is not my mission to write about politics. Neither is that the mission of Opus Dei, since its only purpose is a spiritual one. Opus Dei has not been nor ever will be involved in group or party politics, nor is it bound to any person or any ideology. This separation from politics is not an apostolic tactic, not just praiseworthy conduct. It is an intrinsic necessity for Opus Dei to proceed in this way. Its very nature demands it, and it is shown by its love for freedom and its confidence in the Christian who lives and works in the world, acting with complete independence and personal responsibility.

There are no dogmas in temporal affairs. It is not in accordance with the dignity of man to fix absolute truths in questions where necessarily each person will look at things from his own viewpoint, according to his particular interests, his cultural preferences, his personal experience. To try to impose dogmas in temporal affairs leads inevitably to forcing other people's consciences, to lack of respect for your neighbor.

Freedom is not indifference

I do not say that a Christian ought to be indifferent or apathetic about temporal affairs; definitely not. I do think, however, that a Christian has to make his civic and social aspirations compatible with an awareness of the limitations of his own opinions, respecting the opinions of others and respecting genuine pluralism. A person who does not know how to live this way has not reached the depth of the Christian message. It really is not easy to reach that far; and in a certain sense we never get there, because the tendency to selfishness and pride never dies in us. That is why we are all obliged to examine ourselves as sinners, constantly seeing our actions in the light of Christ, recognizing ourselves and being ready to make a fresh start. It is not easy, but we have to keep trying, always harder.

In creating us God has run the risk and the adventure of our freedom. He wanted a history which would be a real one, the product of genuine decisions, not fiction nor some sort of game. Each person has to experience his own personal autonomy with all that implies: trial and error, guesswork, and sometimes uncertainty. We have to remember that God, who has given us the security of faith, has not revealed to us the meaning of all human events. Aside from things which for a Christian are absolutely clear and secure, there are other matters, very many in fact, in which only opinion is possible. By that I mean: a Christian can reach a kind of knowledge of what can be true and convenient, but he cannot affirm it to be so in a completely certain way. It is not only possible that I be wrong, but even if I am right, others can be right too. An object which for some people is concave seems convex to those who have a different perspective.

Freedom: a result of faith

Awareness of the limitations of human judgment leads us to recognize freedom as a condition for living together. But freedom is not everything; it is not even the most important consideration. The root of respect for freedom lies in love. If other people think differently from me, is that a reason to regard them as enemies? The only real reason for doing so would be selfishness, or the intellectual blindness of people who think that politics and material progress are the only real values. A Christian knows that this is not so because each person has an infinite value, an eternal destiny in God. Jesus Christ has died for each one of us.

We are Christians when we are capable not only of loving humanity in the abstract, but also of loving each person who comes along. It is a sign of maturity to feel responsibility for the tasks which the prosperity of future generations depends on; but that fact about the future must not lead us to be careless about dedication and service in ordinary day-to-day affairs: being kind in a practical way toward people who work with us, living true friendship with our colleagues, having concern for people who are needy even though their misery may seem unimportant in comparison with the grand ideals we are looking for.

To speak of freedom, of love for freedom, is to place a grand ideal before us. It is to speak of one of the greatest riches of the faith. Because—let us not fool ourselves—life is not like a romantic novel. Christian brotherhood is not something which comes from Heaven once and for all for everybody, but rather is a reality that has to be built up each day, in a life which is not easy, with its conflicts of interest, tensions, and struggles, with that daily contact with narrow-mindedness in others and in ourselves.

But if this panorama discourages us, if we let ourselves be conquered by our selfishness, or if we fall into the skeptical attitude of the person who shrugs his shoulders, such failure means that we need to deepen our faith and contemplate Christ more. The only way in which a Christian learns to know himself and to know others is to live every day in such a way that he himself is Christ present among men.