Catholicism 101

What is Faith?

We have no more basic of a question to begin our journey into the basics of the Catholic faith than with the topic of faith. Faith is how we describe our beliefs, our attitudes towards the unknown, as well as part of ourselves. Taking time to explore this word and its context is central to everything else that is proclaimed by the Catholic Church. So, what is faith?

Faith in general

In the most general sense of the word, faith is belief. Those who have faith, believe in something. Everyone has faith. Some people believe that walking under ladders or breaking mirrors will have serious consequences for our lives. Others have intricate systems which describe the nature of the universe, the human person, and answer the questions of "why?" Yet, we must come back to the most basic understanding as faith is belief.

Yet, we need to go deeper into the core meaning and value of faith. Our modern world dismisses faith as a set of fables or stories that do not relate to the scientific model of understanding the universe. Understanding of faith as stories for the simple and science as the grandmaster for the intelligent pits faith and reason against each other as contenders in a fight. The true nature of faith builds a wholistic picture of the universe and everything in it as it founds everything with belief. To get to this conclusion we must see faith in its many aspects.

Faith as a believing system

The most common way we characterize faith today is through a system of beliefs. All major religions of the world are systems of belief founded under certain principles with laws and codes that govern them. These faith traditions or systems bring collective wisdom of generations together to describe the nature of the human person, the characteristics of deities, and society together. For us, we need to be clear about our system of beliefs. We are Catholic Christians. But, what does this mean? The Christian religion is a system of beliefs governed by the God-man Jesus the Christ. Therefore, all Christian belief systems fall under the same basic structure of believing that Jesus is God made man who came to bring salvation to the world. Yet, we can more greatly specify how we understand the Christian message by adding the descriptor: Catholic. Catholic in its most basic sense means universal. St. Ignatius of Antioch first used this term to describe the universality of the Christian church in the 2nd century in his letter to the Smyrnaeans. St. Ingatius' use of the word catholic set the tone for the goal and mission of the church as the universal religion that could reach all people of all times and places. Today we continue to use the word "catholic" to describe the types of Christians we are which is Catholic Christians. Another way to describe our faith system is as Roman Catholic Christians. This makes a distinction between the Greek Catholic Christians, which are in communion with us, and the Greek Orthodox Christians, which are part of the same church but not in communion.

Faith as the core of our humanity

Created with faith

We need to take a few steps back. The more modern understanding of faith and its connection to our humanity is that faith is a choice we make. As Frederick Nietzsche famously said: “faith is opium for the masses.” Too often we reduce faith to a system of comfort to help us cope with the challenges of life. Yet, we need to reevaluate the value of faith as part of our humanity. We did not choose faith nor did we decide one day to come to faith. Instead faith is part of our creation. We were given faith from the moment of our conception. Here are a few examples to prove my point. At the very beginnings of our life, we build faith systems to help us to understand the world. We believe that our parents will care for us and love us. We believe that we can explore the world without any harm coming to us. As we grow up these faith systems continue to develop. We believe in the love and care of our friends and teachers. We build systems for understanding the world rooted in either the knowledge of our teachers or the wisdom gained from experience. Regardless, our lives are dedicated to belief: we want the world to be knowable, to have purpose and meaning, and to seek something greater. Everyone has these desires.

As we glance across the various human cultures, we see a similar trend of faith. Even the most primitive of humans had simple faith traditions of either statues directed towards fertility, places of refuge with signs indicating their family connections, or even ritual sites. One thing is obvious as we gloss over all human cultures: faith is central to our identity and sets us apart from the rest of creation. We return to the question of why? Why is faith so important to humanity and human cultures. Unlike the rest of the creatures of our world, humans have the ability to ask deeper questions and to understand the universe. As we probe deeper into the mysteries of the universe, we realize just how much we don’t know and how little we can control. Many of the world religions realized this lack of control and the need to make the chaos of the world ordered. We can think back to God’s command to Adam after the fall: “till the soil.” Why did he have to till the soil? To make the world conform back to its original goodness when it had fallen into sin. The same applies to the goal of most religions: to give a system of control to its adherents so that the world can be more ordered and knowable.

Faith as making the world ordered is the psychological model for understanding faith and it has strong limitations. The greatest and most obvious limitation is it makes religion and faith a human construct. Faith is no more than the desire of the human being to seek something greater than herself and try to make the world controlled. The psychological model is the most often sited example of the context of faith by atheists, who ironically, believe that religion is merely an human invention. Again, faith. Faith is not merely a human construct but deeply rooted in our search for meaning and purpose in the universe.

True faith, the faith built into the human person, seeks what is greater than us. Faith propels us into the mysteries beyond us and helps us to know the unknowable, to seek that which is greater than us, and ponder the deeper truths of the universe. When faith emerges from the depth of the human person, it doesn’t seek to conform the world to its own but to seek the one who created it. A belief system rooted in the nature of the human person in relation to the truth of creation builds

a foundation of truth that helps the person understand the universe. What is the purpose of faith? To know, love, and serve God.

Formed in faith

The most common phrase we hear or use when talking with people is, “just have faith.” As long as you believe, it will all work out in the end. I have found this phrase lacking. What if I am in doubt? Will God not come through for me? What if I believe and God doesn’t come through for me? What if what I believe is wrong? So many issues surround the topic of belief as sufficient. The Catholic Church greatly expands the expectation of faith beyond a simple statement of belief and roots it back into the fullness of the human person.

As I mentioned above, we are creatures endowed with faith and we will always choose to believe something. Our first area within the realm of faith is truth. All statements of faith and belief focus on truth. We either trust the institution, the leaders, the systems, or the deity. Trust is an essential component of faith. This trust is our emotive response. We believe, as a function of our feelings, that these ideas are true and worth living by. Therefore, the first part of the human person that is rooted in faith is our emotive response in trust.

The second part, and the often-neglected part, is the intellect. Faith is founded by the reality of the universe. This side of faith greatly alters most people’s perception of a lived faith experience. Most people think of faith as once-and-done: once I believe, I have sufficient faith. Yet, the desire of the human person is always to seek a greater understanding. As St. Anselm put it: “Theology is faith seeking understanding.” When we pair our intellect with our faith, God expands into a mystery. God becomes something that the mind reaches out to with the hopes of grasping. Faith is now a quest to seek the deeper meanings rooted in the reality of God. Our intellect is an important and necessary part of our faith lives. We don’t simple want to believe in God, we want to know. We don’t simply want to accept axioms of faith, but understand and apply them. Faith is an intellectual pursuit as the experience of a true and living God demands that the person seek a greater relationship built on trust and knowledge.

Faith as a supernatural gift

The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes clear that faith is not a natural gift or a natural part of the human person but a supernatural gift given to all people. We hear echoes of the supernatural gift of faith in the Book of Genesis when God created Adam by breathing into him. The Second Vatican Council reiterated this truth in its document *Lumen Gentium* by stating that faith is a supernatural gift that helps us to adhere to the truth of God. The document continues, faith is the supernatural gift under the inspiration of God’s gift that helps us to know God and his ways as true. We often think that we can use our intellect and reason to approach the truths of God and adhere to his truth. But something more challenging emerges when we try to force our intellect to believe the things of faith. The intellect will help us to understand the truths of God and truths about the universe, but they remain as truths. Faith is the supernatural gift that allows us to trust in God’s goodness. Although we can understand some of the truths by our intellect, we cannot build a relationship with God and trust him without faith.

The second side of the supernatural gift of faith is our will. Our will is the strength within us that allows us to choose and act on those choices. Although we can believe whatever we want, until those choices are made and become part of who we are, we have not truly believed them. The supernatural gift of faith empowers our will to not only accept the truths of God by faith but also to use them and choose them as extension of ourselves. Faith requires willpower. Faith requires action. We need to act on our faith in order to truly believe.

Living Faith

The topic of faith falls flat if we cannot use it as part of our daily lives and as an extension of our identity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church identifies four primary ways in which we use our faith and build it.

Faith as profession: Faith needs to be professed. Faith needs to have an expression that identifies us. The most common examples of a professed faith would be a person standing on a street corner promoting the faith, a missionary in a foreign land preaching the Gospel, a priest, monk, nun, or friar wearing their habits, or a person on a program promoting the faith. The profession of the faith doesn't need to be bold but authentic. Since faith is rooted in the reality of the human person, the truest sense of ourselves is when we live the faith as part of our identity. How we act, think, behave, and live are all professions of the faith.

Faith as Sacrament: our faith has two sacramental characters. The first is based on the seven sacraments of the church. We are not a people of isolation but a people of community. Faith needs a community to support and strength it. The Sacraments are a communal celebration to encourage and promote the life of faith. Our faith grows as we participate in a believing community. Additionally, faith is a sacramental life. A sacrament is a visible expression of God. We are visible expressions of God to the world. As continue to live our faith, we also proclaim it by our lives as visible signs of God.

Faith as life: Faith is not simply a system of beliefs nor an external expression of our hope. Faith is an internal reality which gives foundation and support to truth. Therefore, faith needs to be a lived experience which touches each corner of our lives. Whether from the emotional response of love and trust in God to the intellectual quest to seek him, faith informs the entire human person transforming it into the mystery through which it was made. The more faith impacts the daily experiences of each person and informs their way of live, the more the person finds the truth, the meaning, and purpose of their lives.

Faith as prayer: the greatest sense of belief is the act of prayer. Coming to know God, spend time with him, dedicate time to him, and encounter him as a real person is the life of faith. No person can say they know God without the intimate encounter which comes through prayer.