

Accompaniment Toward Faith

BY FR. PIETER VAN ROOYEN

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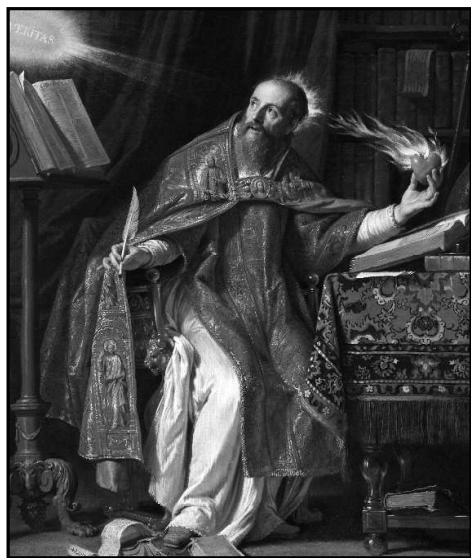
IN HIS APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *Evangelii gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis urged the Church to practice the “art of accompaniment.”¹ But what does this mean, and how do we do it? As others have noted, we have a model of accompaniment in our Lord’s appearance on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35).² When the two disciples were walking away from Jerusalem, their hopes dashed at the foot of the Cross, Jesus accompanied them on

1 Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 169; see further nos. 169–73.

2 See, for example, Bob Rice, “Listening and Accompaniment,” *Catechetical Review* vol. 4, no. 4 (October–December, 2018): 42.

the way: he listened to them, he asked questions, and, eventually, he challenged them and shared the Gospel with them.

What does this mean for us catechists, priests, and teachers



who sometimes meet people who are disillusioned and moving “away from Jerusalem”—away from Christian life? How can we help them? Where do we start? Like Christ on the road to Emmaus, we accompany them: we meet them where they are, we enter their lives, we listen to them, and we ask them questions. But also, like Christ, we accompany them toward a destination, so that, with minds enlightened and

hearts set aflame by the Gospel, they may “return to Jerusalem” and live in the power of Christ’s Resurrection. Thus, Christian accompaniment requires a clear sense of our “destination,” and, in particular, a clear understanding of the nature of Christian faith.

In what follows, I briefly outline the nature of Christian faith (as distinguished from “natural faith”), describe its grandeur and demands, and offer some consequences for our ministry.

Faith Defined: Its Object and Motive

Popularly, “faith” means believing something invisible to the eyes or mind. We can call this “natural faith” or simply “belief.” This kind of natural faith is normal in everyday life since we rarely prove things we commonly believe. For example, I believe that England exists even though I have never seen it.

But Christian faith differs from natural faith because it concerns truths beyond this world, things which “no eye has seen” except God, the angels, and the blessed in heaven.³ In Christian

3 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, no. 7: “the distinction between *theological faith and belief* in the other religions, must be *firmly held*.”

faith the believer assents to truths revealed by God in Scripture or through the definitive teaching of the Church because he trusts God, who is truth itself (see CCC 144). So the *Catechism* explains: “Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a *free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed*” (150).

Thus we may distinguish two dimensions in Christian faith: (1) the content believed, which is called the “material object,” such as the truths contained in the *Catechism*; and (2) trust in God, which is called the “formal object,” or the motive or grounds upon which man freely gives his assent.⁴ Both dimensions are essential, but the foundation of faith is trust. Again, the *Catechism* states it clearly: “What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe ‘because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived’” (156).⁵

Faith: Supernatural

The fact that Christian faith is rooted in trust in God guarantees its supernatural power. Indeed, as St. Thomas Aquinas noted, although faith includes the “imperfection” of not yet seeing or being able to prove what is believed, because faith is rooted in trust in God, the believer “clings” to God and already attains union with him.⁶ Like the woman with the hemorrhage who reached out and touched Jesus (Mk 5:25–34), the believer “touches Christ” with faith, and receives from him a share in his divine life. Indeed, by trusting in Christ through faith the entire “substance of things hoped for” (Heb 11:1) becomes present in the believer, who thus experiences a kind of foretaste of the beatific vision.⁷

4 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [ST] II–II, q. 1, a. 1.

5 An old Act of Faith prayer expresses this well: “My God I believe in thee, and all thy Church doth teach, because thou hast said it, and thy word is true.”

6 See ST II–II, q. 17, a. 6.

7 Explaining St. Thomas Aquinas’ exegesis of Heb 11:1, Benedict XVI wrote: “through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say ‘in embryo’—and thus according to the ‘substance’—there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the

The *Catechism* notes, quoting St. Basil, “faith is already the beginning of eternal life: ‘When we contemplate the blessings of faith even now, as if gazing at a reflection in a mirror, it is as if we already possessed the wonderful things which our faith assures us we shall one day enjoy’” (163).

Faith: Firm and Unconditional

But the foundation of trust also requires a believer’s firm and unconditional assent to everything revealed by God. The assent of faith is firm because “it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie” (CCC 157).⁸ Faith does not *hedge its bets*, because doing so would reduce faith to mere opinion.⁹ Rather, by faith the believer entrusts himself entirely to God and orders his life and priorities according to the truth of what God has revealed.

Likewise, the assent of faith is unconditional because the ground and motive for faith is trust in God. The believer cannot pick and choose what he believes or withhold his assent until he understands or proves what has been revealed, because putting these kinds of conditions on faith undermines its foundation in trust. Reason can help man understand God’s revelation and demonstrate its reasonableness, but a Christian cannot make his understanding the *sine qua non* for the assent of faith. Faith demands our trust in God, who has spoken and who is truth itself (see CCC 156).

Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas taught that someone who obstinately (i.e., culpably) withholds assent from one article of faith eliminates all faith in his heart since he destroys faith’s

whole, true life. And precisely because the thing itself is already present, this presence of what is to come also creates certainty: this ‘thing’ which must come is not yet visible in the external world (it does not ‘appear’), but because of the fact that, as an initial and dynamic reality, we carry it within us, a certain perception of it has even now come into existence” (*Spe salvi*, no. 7).

8 This firmness of faith doesn’t preclude questions and even the feeling of darkness—consider the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta or St. Thérèse—rather, firm faith means clinging to God, who is with you in the darkness.

9 See ST II–II, q. 5, a. 3.

foundation in trust.¹⁰ As the *Catechism* notes, because he loves and trusts God who has spoken in Scripture and through the Church, the believer “submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer” (143).

Practical Consequences

What does this mean for the catechist who seeks to accompany men and women toward faith? Does this mean that we should begin with the hardest doctrines to “weed out” the unbelievers? No, of course not. But neither should catechists ignore difficult teachings or take lightly someone’s refusal to believe what God has revealed in Scripture or through the definitive teaching of the Church. Since faith is rooted in trust in God, catechetical accompaniment should lead with the *kerygma* and seek ways for men and women to encounter God’s love in Jesus so that they can give their “yes” to Christ, whose truth and goodness are manifest in his words and deeds. Faith as “personal adherence to Christ” provides the foundation for the believer’s assent to everything revealed by God, so catechetical accompaniment needs to help men and women first know the love of Jesus.¹¹ Knowing Christ and experiencing his love and mercy provides the power and motive for repentance and faith.¹²

But while they proclaim the *kerygma* and share Christ’s invitation to faith, catechists must also share the depth of the demands of faith, which is a full and personal adherence to God, a “surrender,” through which the believer conforms his mind and

10 See *ibid.* Note the qualifier of “obstinacy”—God alone knows the culpability of someone’s unbelief, and, as Fulton Sheen noted, many of those who reject Catholic doctrine actually only reject what they think the Church teaches, which is often very different from Catholic doctrine. Many who reject Catholic faith, therefore, reject a caricature of it without ever having heard a morally compelling explanation of the truths of faith; thus, much unbelief may not be “obstinate” unbelief. Cf. Pope Francis’ encouragement for pastoral prudence and charity in this regard in *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 44.

11 Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 36–39, 164.

12 Recall the sinful woman in Luke 7:47, who showed great love in response to having received great mercy: “So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

heart to God's word, not vice versa. Indeed, as C. S. Lewis expressed through Aslan in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Jesus is not a "tame lion" who merely confirms our ideas and tells us what we want to hear. Rather, as Lord of the Universe, Jesus reveals truth that sometimes challenges us and always demands our faith.

Indeed, while the road to Emmaus may provide a model for catechetical accompaniment, Abraham's faith may provide a model for the destination of that accompaniment. God asked Abraham to do something that seemed utterly opposed to the fulfillment of his promises and Abraham's happiness—surely God's word to Abraham felt like darkness and death. But Abraham trusted God's goodness, confident that God would somehow provide (see Gen 22:1–24).

And just as God did for Abraham, he does for believers today. When God's word—communicated through Scripture or the definitive teaching of the Church—challenges us, or when he asks for obedience and trust in the face of difficulty or distress, he always promises to provide. But, remarkably, God doesn't just give us a ram like he gave to Abraham; he gives us his Son. In Jesus, the "LORD provides" (Gen 22:14) more than we could ever ask or imagine. Thus, even when the surrender of faith seems to lead to sadness and pain, in fact, it always leads to light and life, since the one whose Word we believe is himself ultimate truth, beauty, and goodness. In pastoral accompaniment, we walk with people toward faith in Christ so that they may follow him wherever he leads: often through a cross but, ultimately, toward resurrection and eternal life.

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