

Faith Grows

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In some company you can feel very much the odd man out if you can't tell your conversion story. I can't: I'm a 'cradle Catholic'. At least, until recently I thought I couldn't. But after all, faith is man's response to God's action in history, and history includes us. (Is this why it's 'bunk'?)

'What do you ask of the Church of God?' 'Faith', said my godmother for me. My convert friends said it for themselves. And yet in a sense, in a very important sense, otherwise the priest would never have let them get that far, they already had faith. To ask for faith is an act of faith. Think of the father of the epileptic possessed boy in Mark 9. He had heard of cures. He had brought the child to the disciples but Jesus wasn't there. The disciples had tried to drive the devil out but hadn't succeeded. Then Jesus comes. Peter, James and John had seen him transfigured, had heard the voice from the cloud. But the father of the child sees only one more man who asks the same questions. I expect he had already 'tried everything', taken his son to all the doctors and wise women, and answered that question, 'How long has he been like this?' more times than he could count. How often that father had seen his child fall to the ground, in the fire, in the water. How often he had felt himself quite powerless to help his own son. He knows his case is desperate. Everyone has always said 'hopeless'. It isn't surprising that he says, 'If you can do anything . . .' But our Lord says back to him, 'If *you* can', and assures him that everything is possible to those who have faith. The man will do anything to have his son cured. If saying 'I believe' will do it, of course he will do that. He'll shout it out for all to hear. But even as he does so, he looks at our Lord. He remembers that his first words to him were, 'O unbelieving generation!' He feels in his heart that he does not believe. Perhaps only for the boy's sake this fills him with sorrow. But a blind intuition that has leapt the stages of conscious deliberation tells him where to turn for help in this position which is so much worse than all the unhappiness he has known up till now. 'Help *thou* my unbelief,' he cries.

It is a prayer of faith. And what a faith! Ready at once for further trial. O yes, God takes us seriously. Don't let's ever forget it. Jesus commands the evil spirit. The boy has another fit. The crowd says, 'He's

dead'. Many say so, but not the father. He can't say or do anything, only watch Jesus in a kind of dumbness of heart. He sees him take the child by the hand, he sees the boy get up. He has believed. His child is restored.

How wrong we are to think it was easy for the people who saw our Lord to believe. If it had been so simple for them, would our Lord so often have assured them that their faith had brought them recovery? Wouldn't it be a good idea to pray to the father of that boy and ask him to obtain for us the grace to believe and to persevere in believing?

There was a time, a long time, during which all the horrors that we heard about concentration camps and the atomic bomb bit into my imagination and filled me with fear. 'The trouble with you is you have no faith', said my exasperated friends. I was sorely afraid they might be right and yet, at the same time, it seemed hard to hold that only to faithless people do such terrors befall, especially as I came to know personally one priest who had been in Buchenwald, and learned that Nagasaki was the most Catholic city in all Japan.

I tried, as so many have tried before me, to use my faith as a shield. Like Job's friends I found this meant accusing the unfortunate. I couldn't relish that. Slowly, so slowly, I came to see that faith is not something that holds off disaster. Sartre and the others might demonstrate that disaster falls upon the credulous with double force. Their implied conclusion was, 'See how foolish to believe'. At last I realised we should say, 'See how foolish to believe the wrong things or in the wrong way'. I have prayed, I do pray, 'Lead us not into temptation'. I believe our Lord taught us to pray this because the Father desires to hear us, and so I know that faith doesn't mean that other people may be killed on the road, but not me; that other people will get cancer, but not me; that other people will suffer the pain of feeling themselves useless, but not me; that other people may struggle with doubts they can't formulate clearly enough to fight directly, but not me. It means that if I am killed on the road, if I get cancer, if I feel useless, if I wrestle, ill-equipped, against heart-stopping fears, none of this is *the* disaster. None of this can 'separate us from the love of Christ'. Obvious? Yes. But the day we have assimilated it is a day of conversion.

I can't pretend I read St John of the Cross with understanding: I just quarry out busily the bits that suit me. But it does seem to be true that an important and insistent teaching of his is a particularisation of St Paul's, 'Christ dwelling in your hearts through faith'. In face of the great truths of our religion it doesn't suffice to say, 'I believe', meaning, 'I don't deny it'. That, I suppose, would be enough to prevent one's

being burned for a heretic, but for how many of us need this be a fervent preoccupation? That's not the point. We don't believe in order to avoid the flames nor yet in order to obtain the cure of our son. If that were all, there would be no need to cry, 'Help thou my unbelief'. We believe in order that Christ may dwell in us. If we really believe, we pray. Perhaps one at least of the reasons why we find it so hard to pray and so easy to excuse ourselves is that we fear the consequences of believing 'to the hilt'.