

What is Faith? (19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19—The Faith of Abraham

¹ *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* ² *For by it the men of old received divine approval...* ⁸ *By faith Abraham obeyed* when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. ⁹ *By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.* ¹⁰ *For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.* ¹¹ *By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.* ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. ¹³ *These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.* ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, *they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.* Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. ¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son,* ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.” ¹⁹ *He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence he did receive him back* and this was a symbol. (Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19)

1. Faith: What is “faith” (Greek *pistis*)?

- a. Hypostasis: “the *hypostasis* of things hoped for” (11:1)
- b. Elengchos: “the *elengchos* of things not seen” (11:1)

2. Multiple Translations:

- a. “*Substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen” (KJV, Douay)
- b. “*Assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen” (RSV, ESV)
- c. “*Realization* of what is hoped for and *evidence* of things not seen” (NABRE)

3. Eschatology: “things hoped for” (11:1)—i.e., future realities (unrealized)

4. Anagogy: “things not seen” (11:1)—i.e., heavenly realities (invisible)

5. Faith of Abraham:

- a. Obedience: “Abraham obeyed” when he was “called to go out” (11:8)
- b. Patience: “by faith he sojourned in the land of promise” (11:9)
- c. Hope: “he looked forward to the city” of God (11:10)
- d. Belief: Sarah “considered him faithful who had promised” (11:11-12)
- e. Death: they “died in faith, not having received what was promised” (11:13)
- f. Anagogy: “they desire a better country, that is, a *heavenly* one” (11:16)
- g. Sacrifice: “by faith Abraham... offered up Isaac” (11:17)

- h. Eschatology: “God was able to raise men even from the dead” (11:19)
- i. Fulfillment: “hence he received him back” (11:19)

Living Tradition

Pope Francis: *There is an urgent need, then, to see once again that faith is a light, for once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim. The light of faith is unique, since it is capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence. A light this powerful cannot come from ourselves but from a more primordial source: in a word, it must come from God. Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfilment, and that a vision of the future opens up before us. Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time. On the one hand, it is a light coming from the past, the light of the foundational memory of the life of Jesus which revealed his perfectly trustworthy love, a love capable of triumphing over death. Yet since Christ has risen and draws us beyond death, faith is also a light coming from the future and opening before us vast horizons which guide us beyond our isolated selves towards the breadth of communion. We come to see that faith does not dwell in shadow and gloom; it is a light for our darkness. Dante, in the Divine Comedy, after professing his faith to Saint Peter, describes that light as a “spark, which then becomes a burning flame and like a heavenly star within me glimmers.” [Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Paradiso XXIV.145-47) It is this light of faith that I would now like to consider, so that it can grow and enlighten the present, becoming a star to brighten the horizon of our journey at a time when mankind is particularly in need of light. (Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, The Light of Faith, no. 5)*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C)

1. How would you define the word “faith”? How does your definition line up with the description of faith in Hebrews 11?

For Further Reading

1. Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey. *Hebrews*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2005.
2. St. Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews*. Translated by F. R. Larcher, O.P. Lander, Wyo.: Aquinas Institute, 2012.
3. Mary Healy, *Hebrews*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, Mich. Baker Academic, 2016.