

# The First Sunday of Lent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 26:4-10
<i>Response</i>	I will be with him in trouble
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 91:1-2, 10-11, 12-13, 14-15
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 10:8-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 4:1-13

Welcome everyone to the First Sunday of Lent for year C. We’re going to continue, during this season, to study the letters of Paul. But during the season of Lent, the Church takes a break (so to speak) from the continual reading through various letters of Paul and now gives us certain key passages from the writings of Paul that are appropriate to the season of Lent, especially to the stages of formation for candidates for Baptism and First Holy Communion during the RCIA process... which the rest of the faithful also participate in as a kind of renewed catechesis of the basic elements of the Gospel and the mystery of Jesus’ Passion, death, and resurrection.

So during this season of Lent, we’re going to be looking at some famous and very consequential passages from the letters of Paul that the Church gives us. In this case, for the very first Sunday of Lent in year C, the Church takes a famous passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans that is focused on the necessity of faith for salvation. So right at the beginning of Lent, the Church is going to take the words of Paul to call us to faith. So here’s the reading for today. It’s from Romans 10:8-13. St. Paul says this:

But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says,

“No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”<sup>1</sup>

Okay. In this passage, Paul is in really the climax — or one of the climactic points — in his letter to the Romans, which is very much focused on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Christ, and also on the necessity, the centrality of justification by faith — being made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. And so at this point in the letter, Paul is returning to that emphasis on faith, and here he uses the word faith to discuss its necessity, its centrality, for being saved.

Now, in order to understand what Paul is getting at here, the first thing we want to make sure we understand is, what does he mean by the word “faith”? The Greek word for faith is *pistis*, and it has a number of a variety of connotations, a variety of meanings. And we could do a whole series just studying how the word faith gets utilized in the New Testament as a whole, and in the letters of St. Paul in particular; it’s a very important word for Paul.

For our purposes here, I just want to make a few brief points about what the Greek word *pistis* — which we translate as faith — means in the language of Paul, and how we can correct certain misunderstandings that we might have in English. So let me just say a few words here.

The first point I want to make is... when we use the word faith in English, we tend — especially in a religious context — to mean primarily, if not exclusively, intellectual assent to some truth or some proposition. So if I say I have faith that Jesus is the Son of God, what I mean is that I assent in my intellect; I believe that assertion. “Jesus is the Son of God” is true. And that idea of belief is one of the meanings of the word faith in Paul. So when Paul will talk about the *pistis* or the faith of believers, he does mean that they accept as true that Jesus Christ is the Son

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

of God, that He's coming to judge the living and the dead... so on and so forth — the kind of articles we find in the Creed, for example.

But that's not the only meaning of the Greek word *faith*. There are other connotations that it can have. So for example, the Greek word *pistis* can also mean “trust” or “confidence.” And here the emphasis is less on intellectual assent to a particular truth or proposition than it is on a kind of relational confidence or relational trust in another person.

So if you say, “I put my trust” — my *pistis*, my faith — “in God”. It doesn't just mean I believe that the things that God has said are true. It means that I will act in a way that manifests my trust and my confidence in the truth of those matters, or in the reliability of God to fulfill His promises, to keep His word... so on and so forth. And we use this expression in English when we say “I trust that person.” You could just as easily say “I believe in that person”, meaning “I know they're reliable; I'm confident in them.” That's another connotation of the Greek word *pistis* — so not just belief, as in intellectual assent, but trust or confidence in another person.

And then finally, the Greek word *pistis* can also mean faithfulness or fidelity. So here the emphasis is more on the other person's fidelity to their work, fidelity to their promise, or our fidelity to God, in this case — or obedience, for example. Paul will talk about the obedience of faith. And what he means by that is not just our intellectual assent to what God is saying is true, but our acting on that assent in a way that we are faithful.

And if you know any Latin, you can see this really clearly in the English word “fidelity,” because that comes from the Latin word *fides*, which means faith. So when a person lives a life of fidelity, for example, to their spouse, what are they? They are being *faithful* to the spouse. And if a person commits adultery, we will often refer to that as being *unfaithful* to the spouse.

Now that doesn't mean that the person doesn't believe that their spouse isn't their spouse anymore. It means that they're acting in such a way as to manifest a lack of trust, but also a lack of fidelity — faithfulness to that person.

So the Greek word *pistis*, faith, can mean belief. It can mean trust. It can also mean fidelity. So all those different meanings — and there are more we could get into, but for now, that’s just a kind of basic rundown of some of the connotations of the word. Those were all swirling around under the surface whenever you’re reading the letter of Paul, and he’s talking about the importance of *pistis* — the importance of faith in the process of salvation.

So with that in mind, go back to the passage here. And in this case, let’s look at what Paul is saying in light of that. So in verse 8, it begins:

But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)...

So notice there, Paul can describe his entire Gospel as being “the word of faith.” So for him, the word faith in a sense summarizes the Good News that he’s sharing with the Romans. Well, what does that mean? He explains:

... because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart...

And here that Greek word for “believe” is *pisteuó*. It’s the verbal form of *pistis*, which is the noun. So if you believe in your heart or you have faith in your heart, for example:

... that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

So pause there. Notice here... Paul is clearly using the verb “to believe” and the noun “faith” to talk about an assent to the truth that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead and that He is Lord. But notice that Paul makes sure it isn’t just an intellectual consent; it’s also verbal expression. So I need to believe in my heart and confess with my lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and He’s been raised from the dead. If I do both those things, then I will be saved.

So what Paul is trying to do here is express kind of a Jewish — or very biblical, actually — anthropology where you don't just focus on the interior or just on the exterior but on both. And that's really what he's using. The image of the heart is the image of an interior assent, and then the image of the lips is a symbol of the exterior consent, by confessing verbally our assent to the truth that Jesus is Lord and that God raised Him from the dead.

Now, it's funny here... you'll notice we might talk about believing in our hearts, because we're reflecting the biblical languages. But usually, we think of faith as something that takes place in the mind. But one of the interesting things is that if you look at the Bible, it will frequently use the image of the heart, not only to describe the seat of the human emotions, but also the intellect. So the heart is a very powerful metaphor for, in a sense, the deepest part of the mystery of a person, where a person decides for or against God — that's the heart. It's the innermost secret of the person. And sometimes it's used more to reflect our will, like the choices we make. Other times it is used, though, as a symbol for our intellect. So it's just a biblical way of describing that interior complete assent to the truth that Jesus is Lord and that He's been raised from the dead. And then the lips, of course, obviously, are more physical and express that outward public manifestation of inward faith.

So here, Paul is saying if you do both these things — believe in your heart, confess with your lips — you will be saved. And then he explains why in the next verse:

For man believes with his heart...

And again, that's the verb *pisteuó* — he “faiths with his heart”.

...and so is justified...

Or made righteous or declared righteous.

... and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.

So this is going to be interesting too. You'll notice throughout the history of early Christianity, the importance of not just believing but confessing, is going to become very crucial. Now when we use the word confession in modern day Catholic circles, we tend to think of it primarily as confessing the bad things that I've done, like the Sacrament of Confession — which is technically, actually, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We call it the Sacrament of Confession because that's the part of it we're most scared of, and so we have to focus on the confession part. But it's actually the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

And that's true, because we're using our lips to verbally confess our sin in order to be reconciled. But remember, the word "confess" was also used in the early Church to talk about a public profession of faith.

So there are certain saints — like Maximus the Confessor, for example — who are called the confessors, precisely because they were martyred for the sake of the confession of faith. In other words, they were charged to renounce their faith, and they refused to renounce their faith because they confessed that Jesus is Lord. And they were either put to death for it and became martyrs in that way, or like Maximus, had his tongue cut out. And so he's called the confessor, because he refused to renounce the faith verbally in a public way.

So here, Paul is, again, talking about making the confession of faith and a belief in the heart in order to be justified and to be saved.

Now... why are both those things necessary? Remember, Paul is a Jew. He's a Jewish believer in Christ, and so he's going to cite the Jewish Scriptures as a foundation for his emphasis on the necessity of both believing (faith) but also confessing. So the Scripture says here in verse 11 — he quotes the Scripture and he's quoting from Isaiah:

The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.

And then he quotes a second Scripture:

For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

So here he’s quoting Joel 2 and Isaiah 28. The first quote is from Isaiah 28:16. The second quote is from Joel 2:32. And what he’s saying is, if you look at the Jewish Scriptures and look at the Old Testament, the prophets reveal that anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord — that’s with the lips — will be heard, and whoever believes with the heart will be saved. And those are the foundations for Paul’s emphasis on both faith and the confession of faith with the lips.

And what Paul is saying here — this is important. Notice he says because there’s no distinction between Jew and Greek. The same Lord is Lord of all.

Now why does he say that? Well, because the context of the letter to the Romans that he’s writing about, is wrestling with this question of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Christ. And you’ll probably recall from other videos that Paul was called by God to go not exclusively to the Gentile people but predominantly or primarily. So he’s sent out to the nations. He’s the apostle to the Gentiles. And whenever he would get to a city in the book of Acts, he would always go to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. But he clearly has a special vocation to go to the nations.

And so as he’s building churches throughout the Mediterranean that consist predominantly of Gentiles — but not exclusively of Gentiles — there will be Jewish converts to the Gospel. One of the things that happens is, in these congregations where you have lots of Gentiles and in some cases fewer Jews — it’s not always the case. It’s a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles. The question of priority, status, relationship within the Body of Christ between these Jews and Gentiles is going to be a problem. Well, it’s going to be a source of some conflict, a source of tension, but also just raising questions. What’s the relationship between the Old and New Testament? What’s the relationship between Jew and Gentile? Which promises of the Old Testament continue to be binding on Jews, or all they all binding on Gentiles? Like for example, circumcision — you know the practice of circumcision in the book of Genesis.

So all that's being worked out. And what Paul is trying to emphasize here — and this is important for us today — is it doesn't matter what ethnicity you are. It doesn't matter what race you come from, what people you come from, what continent you hail from. Whether you're a Jew (of the people of Israel) or you're a Gentile (meaning you belong to every other nation in the world), Christ is the Lord of all. He's the same Lord. So everyone, Jew or Gentile — which is a very first century Jewish way of saying “all of humanity” — is called to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to believe that He has been raised from the dead and that He is the Son of God. In other words, in order for anyone to be saved, they have to come to faith in Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord. So Paul is emphasizing not just the necessity of faith, but the universality of it. This faith is for all people.

And that's something he's going to really have to stress in a first century Roman context, because you had all these different deities — these gods and goddesses. You had lots of local deities. You had certain kings setting themselves up as divine kings, the divine Caesars. There's a whole cornucopia of different cults from the east and the west, and local deities, and local shrines. There's so much variety on display when it comes to the kinds of religious worship, as well as different beliefs about the afterlife and different gods and goddesses in that first century context. And so what Paul is saying is, “Look, whether you're Jew or Gentile, Christ Jesus is the Lord of all humanity. He's the Lord of all people. And belief in Him is necessary for salvation... and not just belief, but confession” — in other words, outward affirmation, outward *profession* of His Lordship in order to be saved.

Alright, okay. Now... what's the significance of that for us today? Well, there's all kinds of significance that we could draw out of it. But for me at least, one thing I found striking about this particular text is — well, two things.

First, you can see why the Church would put this on the first week of Lent. Remember that since ancient times, the season of Lent has been a season where the Church would devote herself in a particular way to the catechesis of converts, of people who are coming into the Church, of the catechumens and candidates. And it would devote particular attention to making sure that over the course of the season of Lent, with the Sunday readings and with the homilies, that those people who were coming into the Church would get a basic overview of the faith, of the

Christian faith. And starting with faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and faith in His resurrection and willingness to profess it publicly is a great place to start, because that is what converts into the Church are going to be called to do on Easter, at the Easter liturgy, at the Paschal liturgy. They're going to make a profession of faith in reciting the Creed, and then they're going to act on that by being baptized.

So this is a preparation for that ultimate act of faith, which will come to expression in the sacrament of faith, which is Baptism. But for those who are already in the Church, it's also a reminder of the fact that faith continues to be necessary for salvation, and not just belief but what? Fidelity to your own baptismal vow, fidelity to your own profession of faith — living out that faith is just as necessary as someone who's been baptized for 30 years as it is for someone who is about to be baptized. So it's a beautiful way to begin the season of Lent as a preparation for the great Paschal liturgy of Easter.

The second reason I think this is important is in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, especially for Catholics in the west, in my experience, I've noticed that sometimes — especially among certain devout Catholics — there can be a tendency to allow the conflict over faith and works (that originated at the time of Martin Luther in the Reformation) to color the way we see our Catholic faith.

And I know this is an oversimplification, and I know it's a bit of a caricature, but like many caricatures, there is truth to it. And I've encountered Catholics, for example, in my own experience, who will say something to this effect (think of it this way): “Well, Protestants have faith, but we have works. The Protestants have Scripture, but we have tradition.” So there's this tendency to kind of give in to the conflict over those emphases that you definitely saw at the time of the Reformation and to, in a sense, cede faith to Protestantism or to the reformers.

Well, obviously that's just false dichotomy, because if you look at the Catholic Scriptures, you look at the Catholic tradition, you look at Catholic doctrine, it's not an either/or. It's a both/and. Catholics have always affirmed both Scripture *and* tradition, and they've always affirmed both faith *and* works. And so sometimes — I actually had a seminarian one time say this to me. He said, “Dr. Pitre, you know, whenever I read Paul, he sounds like a Protestant to me.” And so he was

uncomfortable. He was being very honest about it, but the reason he said that, I think, is because in his own experience of catechesis and preaching and teaching, he heard a lot of emphasis on the importance of works (like in apologetical context), but not as much emphasis on the importance of faith.

So when he reads Paul talking over and over and over again about justification by faith, the only lens that he has to hear those words is through his Protestant friends or Protestant preachers who he's heard put *a lot* of emphasis on that.

So what I'd just say here is... I just want to emphasize in closing that that's — although that might be true of people's experience, it's not true of Catholic doctrine. Catholic doctrine is *just* as emphatic, it's amazingly emphatic, about the necessity not only of works — works are going to be important, but this is very important. James 2:24:

You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

That's scriptural; that's Catholic teaching. However, Catholic Church's teaching is extremely emphatic about the fact that faith is necessary for salvation. Full stop. This is something that is basic Catholic teaching. In order to prove the point, I'll just end with a couple of quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. And these quotes are going to make three key points. First, that faith is a gift from God. Second, that although it is a gift, we have to cooperate with that gift. It's also a human response. We have to believe in our hearts and confess with our lips to that gift. And then finally, both that gift and our response are necessary for salvation. They're not optional. So this is the Church's teaching. Paragraph 153 of the *Catechism* says this:

*Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him. "Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and 'makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth.'"*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 153

Alright, pause there. So first point: faith itself is a gift. It's a supernatural virtue, a supernatural strength to believe and accept everything that God reveals. And that gift is given to you at Baptism — that's why Baptism is called the sacrament of faith. So even a little baby whose intellect and will aren't fully developed in the sense that they can't exercise them like an adult does at the age of reason, they receive the gift of faith that actually enables them to believe in the Baptism. So it's a grace. It's a gift.

Second, at the same time, faith is also a human response to that gift. The *Catechism* says in paragraph 154:

Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. *But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. Trusting in God...*

See, notice the dimension of trust there, like the other second dimension of faith.

... and *cleaving to the truths he has revealed* are contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason... *In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace: "Believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the divine truth by command of the will moved by God through grace"*<sup>3</sup>

And that is from that famous Protestant theologian St. Thomas Aquinas. Sorry, just kidding. No, that's from St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa*.

So this is basic Catholic doctrine. Faith is a gift from God, but it's also a human act by which we freely respond to that grace and we assent with our intellect and choose with our will to both believe what God has revealed as true and to act on it: "moved by God through grace".

And then finally, and this is really crucial. In paragraph 161, if you go down a little further, on the necessity of faith, Catholic doctrine:

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 154-55, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 2, art. 9

*Believing in Jesus Christ and in the One who sent him for our salvation is necessary for obtaining that salvation.* “Since ‘without faith it is impossible to please [God]’ and to attain to the fellowship of his sons, therefore without faith no one has ever attained justification, nor will anyone obtain eternal life ‘but he who endures to the end.’”<sup>4</sup>

I’m going to say that again; this is really important. So faith is necessary for salvation.

If you meet a Catholic who puts all the emphasis on works — what we do — and no emphasis on faith, that Catholic person is out of step with the Catholic teaching itself, with Catholic doctrine. Because the Church is really clear that faith is necessary for obtaining salvation. In fact, it says without faith, it’s *impossible* to please God. We can’t just build up a mountain of good works and hope that they will somehow appease God’s wrath if we don’t both believe Him and trust in Him. And it’s for that reason:

... without faith no one has ever attained justification...

You cannot be justified without faith.

Now who is the Protestant theologian that is saying that without faith, no one is ever justified? Oh wait, it’s Vatican I. So this is dogmatic Catholic teaching. This is standard Catholic doctrine about the necessity of faith.

So although historically it may be the case — especially when you get into apologetic debates or Protestant/Catholic dialogue — it might be the case that we experience an emphasis on faith from our separated brothers and sisters and emphasis on works from Catholic apologists trying to explain the relationship between the two... the reality of the fact is, Catholic teaching also emphasizes the necessity of faith. It’s both/and, not an either/or. For Catholics, we believe in Scripture *and* tradition, and we assert the necessity of faith *and* works.

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<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 161

And that Catholic doctrine is really crucial, because Paul, of course, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is right — that without faith, no one will be saved. But if we believe in our heart that Jesus is Lord and confess with our lips that that's the case, then (as Paul says) we will not only be justified, but we will be saved.