

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – B
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Holy Family Catholic Church
Kirkland, Washington
08 July 2018

Ezekiel 2:2-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
(See Luke 4:18) Mark 6:1-6

Beg the Lord to Increase Our Faith

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French philosopher and author who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957.¹ He was raised and educated in the Catholic faith, and always had a respect for Christianity, but he himself struggled to believe. Many categorize him as an atheist, but that label doesn't quite fit him. He wrote this paradox about himself: "I do not believe in God and a I am not an atheist."² He was in the strange position of lacking faith in God, but not completely denying His existence, either.

His novels included characters who, much like him, struggled to believe in God. Toward the end of his novel, *The Plague*, two characters engaged in an emotional exchange about faith. For months, Father Paneloux and Dr. Rieux had been working together to heal people suffering from the plague and to try to stop the pestilence from spreading in their city. Dr. Rieux – representing a person who struggled with faith – expressed his weariness, despair, and anger toward the situation. In response, Fr. Paneloux – representing a person with faith – offered him encouragement:

"I understand," [Father] Paneloux said in a low voice. "[This situation is difficult] because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand."³

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This encouragement from Father Paneloux captures something of what is involved in having faith: loving and believing in something – in *Someone* – that we cannot fully understand. This does not mean that faith is illogical or unreasonable. It means the very opposite. There is

never “any real discrepancy between faith and reason.”⁴ Furthermore, because faith is founded on Divine Truth, rather than human knowledge, *faith is the most reasonable thing there is.*⁵

Since the deepest mysteries of our faith surpass human understanding, we can only know them because, in His grace, God has revealed them to us.⁶ God sent His Only Son into our world as the fullness of all Revelation.⁷ To reveal: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”⁸ To reveal the Good News that Heaven is open to any and all of us by repenting of our sins and believing – having faith – in God’s Promise. Jesus’ mighty deeds of healing people were a sign of God’s Promise; a sign of the greater deed He came to accomplish: to set us free from sin and prepare us for Heaven.

Faith in God’s promise is both a free gift that He gives to us, and a personal response that He calls each of us to make.⁹ “We can lose this priceless gift” if we ignore or reject it.¹⁰ Therefore, we must protect and nourish the gift of faith by: spending time each day in prayer with God; reading the Word of God; coming to Mass regularly; receiving forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and being strengthened by the Eucharist. Even more, the *Catechism* teaches us that “we must *beg* the Lord to increase our faith.”¹¹

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Beg the Lord to increase our faith! This is an acknowledgement that faith is a struggle. All of us experience that struggle – sometimes more of a struggle than other times. In my ministry as a priest, I often encounter people who – like Camus or Dr. Rieux – tell me that they struggle with their faith. People who are seeking good in their lives, who want to believe in God, but who find themselves struggling to believe. In that struggle, however, I see people who are *strengthening* their faith. I see people whose *desire* to believe demonstrates that *there is faith there*. More faith than they realize! The Lord can work with that. The Lord can draw greater

faith out of that perseverance and struggle. The greater concern is when someone is no longer even trying to engage his or her faith. It's more difficult for the Lord to work with that situation.

Last week's Gospel, together with this week's Gospel, help us see this distinction between struggling with faith and letting faith lapse. The woman afflicted with the hemorrhages was an outcast who, after twelve years of suffering, had good reason to despair and lack faith.¹² She was desperate and bold in touching Jesus' cloak. But she was also timid, fearful, and trembling when Jesus called her forward. It was her encounter with Jesus – her openness to an encounter with Jesus – that not only healed her physically, but also drew faith out of her and affirmed her faith. I don't know if she knew what kind of faith she had, but her encounter with Jesus revealed a great faith that God had been strengthening within her for many years.

We see the exact opposite in today's Gospel.¹³ Upon returning to His hometown of Nazareth, Jesus visited people who were on the inside of the faith. People who should have known Him and been open to recognizing what God was revealing through Him. At first, they were impressed by Him and were astonished at His wisdom and great works. But their shallow faith was uncovered when they were quickly swayed by the murmuring going around against Him.

Last week, Jesus was amazed at the great faith of the woman and the synagogue official. Their struggle with faith made it possible for them to receive, and for Him to give them, the gifts of healing. This week, Jesus was amazed at the lack of faith of the people of Nazareth. Their lack of faith made it impossible for them to receive, and for Him to give them, the gifts of healing.

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Our modern-day sports movies do well at capturing this principle of the importance of struggling with faith. My favorite movie, *Rudy*, is based on the true story of Daniel “Rudy” Ruettinger, an undersized football player who fulfilled his dream of playing for the great University of Notre Dame Fighting Irish football team in the early 1970s.¹⁴

The movie shows several years of hard work and sacrifice that Rudy put into getting accepted into the University and finally making it on the team as a walk-on. Through many setbacks along the way, Rudy showed great faith, perseverance, and struggle. Those many setbacks served to not only test his faith, but also to *strengthen* his faith. Until – the week of the last game of his career – it appeared that his faith had finally been broken. He didn’t make it on the dress list for the game, so he decided, “What’s the point in trying anymore?” and he quit the team.

All those years Rudy was like the woman and the synagogue official – showing great faith. Then, all of a sudden, Rudy was like the people of Nazareth – disbelieving that any of it meant anything.

Rudy’s story shows us two things about faith: how *important* faith is in getting through life’s difficulties – and how *fragile* faith can be when facing life’s difficulties. Thankfully, Rudy had a good friend, the stadium manager, named Fortune, who reminded him about his great faith and convinced him to rejoin the football team.

The great victory for Rudy wasn’t that he eventually got on the field and sacked the quarterback on the last play of the last game of his career. The great victory for Rudy was that he struggled with his faith, and that his faith made it possible for him to even be on the field.

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The gift of faith that God has given to each of us is so precious and it cannot be taken for granted. Let us pray, let us *beg* the Lord to always strengthen our faith. Let us encourage one another and pray for one another to increase in faith. Let us especially pray for anyone we know who is struggling with his or her faith.

¹ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1957/

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1957 was awarded to Albert Camus "*for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times*".

² Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1951-1959 (Volume 3)*, in Notebook VIII. August 1954 – July 1958, translated by Ryan Bloom (2008), 115.

³ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (1991), 218.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 159

⁵ CCC 157:

"Faith is *certain*. It is more certain than all human knowledge because it is founded on the very word of God who cannot lie. To be sure, revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience, but 'the certainty that the divine light gives is greater than that which the light of natural reason gives (St. Thomas Aquinas).' 'Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt (Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman).'

⁶ See Philippians 4:7: "...the peace of God that surpasses all understanding..."

Also see *Roman Missal* Solemn Blessing 10. Ordinary Time II:

"May the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ."

⁷ See CCC 65-67 and also 73: "God has revealed himself fully by sending his own Son..."

Dei Verbum 2: "By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation."

⁸ Mark 1:14-15

⁹ CCC Glossary:

FAITH: Both a gift of God and a human act by which the believer gives personal adherence to God who invites his response, and freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed. It is this revelation of God which the Church proposes for our belief, and which we profess in the Creed, celebrate in the sacraments, live by right conduct that fulfills the twofold commandment of charity (as specified in the ten commandments), and respond to in our prayer of faith. Faith is both a theological virtue given by God as grace, and an obligation which flows from the first commandment of God (CCC 26, 142, 150, 1814, 2087).

¹⁰ CCC 162

¹¹ CCC 162

¹² Mark 5:25-34

¹³ Mark 6:1-6

¹⁴ *Rudy* (1993): "Rudy has always been told that he was too small to play college football. But he is determined to overcome the odds and fulfill his dream of playing for Notre Dame."