

Faith: Something that Grows and Changes Over a Lifetime

Have you ever thought about how the faith has changed in you over your lifetime?

Yesterday on Saturday, August 6th, our Church celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration. Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mountain and have this incredible experience of seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah. They don't quite understand it all yet, especially Peter who just wants to stay there on the mountain, but in time, they will know the deeper meaning of what they saw.

Like them, our faith should change as we grow in knowledge of God over our lives. We need to look at where faith has been in our lives by looking at where we have been, and honestly look at past experiences of faith. What did we learn about God growing up? Did our parents talk to us about faith, or did they see that as the job of a CCD teacher? Did we have a bad experience with a nun or a priest? Was there an event in our lives that caused us to question God, or really challenged our faith? In life, we have different stages of faith that we go through. We need to be aware of where we are at and how based on how we present it, we can work wonders for someone's faith or push them away.

Early on, we might learn basic prayers and rules of our faith, but we can also get an image of God. God can either be a loving parent or grandparent figure somewhere in the sky, or, for those who have an unhealthy impression of Him at this stage, He can be the exacting mother or father who is impossible to please. A child's faith is healthy at this point if the images that fill his or her mind are positive ones that paint the world as a friendly, welcoming place and God as loving and dependable. Images of God that cause fear, guilt and worry can cause serious damage to the faith at this stage, and can create a scrupulous, anxious person, which is why it's so important to be affirming to young children and remind them of how much God loves them, and also look back to see what kind of image of God we learned as youngsters.

In elementary school, faith becomes more literal. This makes sense if you think about how at that age, we become fascinated with hearing and even reading stories. For a First Communion present, I got a picture Bible, and really enjoyed the readable stories of the Bible. The stories were fascinating, but I also needed to move beyond the stories and know them more in-depth. It's great to learn stories at this age, or certain truths of the faith, but if an adult's faith remains at this level later in life, it can become anti-intellectual or even resistant to the deeper meanings Scripture may have; remember we are not fundamentalists or "Bible only" but Faith and Tradition. A person at this level can view God as a rewarder of good and a punisher of evil, and it is true that God is just and loving, but we also don't want to think that saying an extra "Hail Mary" will get us an "A" on the test, because sometimes prayers aren't answered as we think they should. Also,

if we can't think "outside the box" so to speak, when we see bad things happen in life to people we care about, we can think as people did in Jesus 'time when they saw an ill person – that this person must have done something to offend God, and blame ourselves entirely for mistakes loved ones make. Learning the catechism and Bible quotes is great, but we need to also take faith up a notch.

As we get a little older, we also recognize how faith is also part of a group. We value friends growing up, and often model ourselves after mentors in life. This can be a good thing, as being on a team inspires us to pitch in and do our part. Especially since Vatican II, we've been reminded of the importance of being active participants at Mass, but the problem can sometimes be when faith goes unquestioned. Our minds are wonderful things, and we need to think about why we believe what we do, and learn it at a deeper level. When we do that, while questions may be uncomfortable at times, we can make our faith grow.

Faith also needs to be something that is personal, which is why we have to take personal responsibility in helping it to grow. I once read of a priest who told the story of a 43-year old woman he knew who mentioned that for years, she had received the Sacrament of Penance at least biweekly. She knew it had become merely a routine for her, but was afraid to stop going for fear that something bad might happen in her life. But her growing appreciation of God's constant love and ready forgiveness gave her courage to alter this routine. As a result, she said "I go to confession less frequently now, but it seems so much more meaningful to me." When faith becomes personal, it can help us to do what is best for us to grow on our own faith journey. For some that is bi-weekly confession; for others it's semi-annually. A personal faith is one that is willing to put up with upsetting others, whether it's taking a stand and doing the right thing, trying a different Catholic church if one isn't getting much out of the music or preaching at their own parish, or even questioning a Church teaching while also trusting in the Church as our Mother and guide and showing humility. I went through a period of questioning the faith a lot when I was in high school. I've also gone through periods of excessive anxiety and worry too on my faith journey. But I've also learned from these experiences which I think have also strengthened my faith.

Finally, as the faith changes within us, we come to see Jesus in one another and learn how we need to have a sacrificial aspect of our faith for one another. This may sound obvious, but sometimes we fail to see Jesus in one another. We can divide people based on class, race and sex, and while we've made strides in combating such thinking, there is no getting around original sin's effects. We still can look down on people based on their job, their appearance, or political beliefs and forget that God loves us all the same. Once we realize the truth of how much God loves us, we have to ask ourselves how selfless our love will be and how we live that out. Do we strive to love those who are hard to love or get under our skin? Do we sacrifice for one another out of love?

Over the course of a lifetime, the faith in all of us has highs and lows. Evangelical churches are full of fallen away-Catholics who prefer a different style of worship or music; restaurants are full of people out to brunch who would prefer not to have Mass conflict with a Sunday morning routine outside of Christmas and Easter; and even Catholic churches can be full of many people who are going through the motions because mom and dad make them go or they want to keep the spouse happy, or because this is something they've simply done all their lives but never thought about why. The Church asks us to go to faith formation through Confirmation, but beyond that all we are required to do is to assist at Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. For some, the faith entails being dropped off on a Wednesday night and taking a picture on the day of First Communion and Confirmation. That can't be an option for those of us who take the faith seriously. On top of Mount Tabor, The Father tells us that we are to listen to His beloved Son – What is our answer going to be? Let's listen to our Lord, and learn how to journey with Him truly growing in our faith each and every day. Life is like climbing a mountain, and sometimes it takes a bit of faith to keep going remembering we'll get to the summit eventually. Jesus is with us every step of the way, so let's listen to Him on our journey through life and trust in the Holy Spirit to truly help our faith grow with every step on that journey.

God bless,

Fr. Paul