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Noel O'Sullivan

I Believe in God – *Receiving the Word*

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One question that I grapple with is why some people have faith and others do not. I am not thinking of people who reject the possibility of religious faith but of those, rather, who want to believe and cannot. I was struck a few years ago by the comments made by the priest who celebrated the funeral Mass for novelist Maeve Binchy. She is reported as having said to the former parish priest of Dalkey, a Fr McDonagh: ‘I know that if you are around when I die then you will dispatch me with dignity and without hypocrisy in a faith which I envy and would love to share.’ The homilist at the funeral, Fr Stuart, said: ‘Maeve came from the tradition of the Magi. She was a searcher, a seeker of the divine, but it eluded her.’¹

Another public figure who has commented on his faith in a similar but slightly different trajectory is the actor, Joseph Fiennes, brother of Ralph. Commenting on his role in the 2016 film, *Risen*, he compares his faith journey to that of his fictional character, Clavius²:

I struggle ... Rather like Clavius, I am on that journey. I feel like I am on that trip in the desert with him. I am still asking the questions. There was a time when I was much more agnostic, but I have moved away from that now. I feel much closer to being a believer, but it is a long journey³

1 *The Irish Times*, August 4, 2012, 1 and 6.

2 Roman military tribune Clavius (Joseph Fiennes) remains set in his ways after serving 25 years in the army. He arrives at a crossroad when he’s tasked to investigate the mystery of what happened to Jesus (Cliff Curtis) following the Crucifixion. Accompanied by trusted aide Lucius (Tom Felton), his quest to disprove rumours of a risen Messiah makes him question his own beliefs and spirituality. As his journey takes him to places never dreamed of, Clavius discovers the truth that he’s been seeking.

3 *The Tablet*, 26 March 2016, 19.

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In these comments, both writer and actor lay bare their struggle to be able to say with conviction: 'I believe in God ...' That profession of faith trips off the tongues of those of us who recite the Creed at Mass every Sunday, often – if not usually – blissfully unaware of the profundity of what we are saying and its implications. So what does it mean to believe in God?

'I BELIEVE ...'

We find the profession of faith in two creeds: the Nicene-Constantinople Creed which is the one usually recited at Sunday Mass; the other is the Apostles' Creed. The 'Sunday' creed is the fruit of two fourth century Councils of the Church, Nicea (325) and Constantinople I (381). These were theological councils and were concerned with establishing the identity of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit and, furthermore, their equality with the Father. The Apostles' Creed is different; it grew out of the baptismal formulae of the early Church and had a more prolonged genesis (from the second to the seventh century). Its provenance is the key to unlocking the meaning of our profession of faith: 'I believe in God...' That little word 'belief' (or 'faith') can be deceptive. We use it in the everyday sense when we are expressing an opinion based on some experiential evidence. For example, the statement 'I believe Cork can beat Tipperary' is a different use of the term 'belief' than when it is used in our religious creeds. In relation to my hurling opinion, I am expressing an opinion; I'm speculating. A Tipperary supporter may express the opposite opinion. So 'I believe' refers to opposite opinions in each of these two instances. Religious belief is not the fruit of my opinion or speculation. I can only say 'I believe' in the religious sense when I have heard God's Word. To believe is to receive the word and to live out the implications. It is in response to the word proclaimed that faith is awakened and can be professed: 'I believe....' St Paul makes that abundantly clear in Romans:

How then are they to call on him if they have not come to believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard of him? And how will they hear of him unless there is a preacher for them? So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.⁴

Another way of approaching the question is to contrast the person of religious faith with the philosopher. Through his speculation the philosopher may come to the conclusion that God exists (the first cause, the unmoved mover, etc.): he can say with conviction 'I

4 Romans 10: 14, 17.

believe that God exists'. That is an authentic statement but the creedal expression 'I believe in God' is different. It is not just expressing the conviction that God exists. It is adhering to God, readjusting one's life because of that adhesion, handing oneself over to God. It involves conversion, transformation of one's life. It is far more than the articulation of a conviction. Going back to the baptismal formulae of the early Church will help us here. Let's consider it in terms of an adult baptism. The baptismal formula consisted of a dialogue: 'Do you believe? – 'I do believe'. The question and answer is repeated for each person of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So the newly baptized person is now in relationship with the community (Church) and with God, understood as Trinity. He/she has been able to make the profession 'I believe in God' not because of some deep personal thought process but, rather, as a result of hearing God's word and being able to receive it in ground made fertile by the Holy Spirit. The deep thinking is subsequent to faith: we call it theology (faith seeking understanding). The conversion aspect of 'I believe...' is reinforced when we remember that the threefold profession of faith in the baptismal formula is preceded by a threefold renunciation of sin. So my profession of faith on Sunday is a statement of conversion and a reaffirmation of my incorporation into the Church and the life of the Trinity. The Apostles' Creed is an expansion of the baptismal profession of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

THE WORD OF GOD

The question arises as to where one hears the word of God prior to making a profession of faith. Traditionally the word was heard in the home and the parish. Family life spoke of God and witnessed to God in the most concrete of ways. School and parish combined to provide a catechetical environment for the child who was gradually able to own the profession of faith made on his/her behalf at baptism: 'I believe in God...' First Communion and Confirmation initiated the child into the sacramental life of the Church whereby growth in faith was possible. Nowadays, all this is changing. Many adults come to faith today through religious movements, like Youth 2000. Despite their being baptized as children, their faith may have petered out during adolescence and early adulthood. Being part of a movement (Neo-Catechumenate Way, Focolare, Pure in Heart, etc.) is the locus in which many people find faith: hearing the word of God and receiving it with joy. It is no surprise that the new movements in the Church have seen such success in passing on the faith because Christianity is of its nature communitarian. It is in community that we hear the word of God and respond to it in faith. The conversion that is an intrinsic part of the profession of

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faith is nourished in these new movements; service of others is given priority; self-indulgent lifestyles are more easily set aside in a caring faith community.

‘...IN GOD’

Who is this God in whom we believe? Who is the Christian God? Christianity grew out of Judaism, a religion which put great emphasis on the uniqueness of God. In contrast to the polytheistic religions of the time, Judaism was strictly monotheistic. Christianity too is monotheistic but in a radically different sense. While there is only one God, that God is not an isolated individual but a community. We believe God is a communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now each of these terms is used in an analogical sense. While there is a certain similarity between the human words we use to speak about God, there is in fact a greater dissimilarity. For example, we can say God is wise or God is love but his wisdom and love are radically different from our paltry understanding of these terms. Similarly, God is not a father in the ordinary human sense of the word; likewise with the term Son. The use of the terms ‘Father’, ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ is intended to denote relationship. The Father is the Father of the Son: in other words the designation Father is a relational term. Similarly, the term Son is also relational. The terms Father and Son do not imply that one existed before the other, as in the human understanding of these words, but that both are in relationship one to the other.

It is easier to say what God is not than to say what or who he is. Sure, we can define God as the Supreme Being, the creator and ruler of the universe. Theology will tell us that God is the transcendent ground of being (Tillich) and the transcendent ground of value (Kant) but it is the community experience of God that leads us to the point of being able to say with conviction, ‘I believe in God.’ It is when we experience the providence, the mercy and the love of God in the ‘bits and pieces of everyday’ that our profession of faith deepens. This is why our celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, must be prayerful and participative. Good liturgy enlivens faith.

But the great luminaries of the Christian tradition have always cautioned against the temptation to reduce God to our own level/image in our attempt to understand him. St Augustine’s cryptic statement in that regard is hard to surpass: ‘If you understand, it is not God. If you are able to understand, you understand something other than God.’⁵ Inspired by Augustine, Pope Francis, in his first major interview in 2013, commented as follows:

5 *‘Si comprehendisti, non est Deus. Si comprehendere potuisti, aliud pro Deo comprehendisti.’* Saint Augustine, *Sermo* 52, 16, Migne PL 38.

In this quest to seek and find God in all things there is still an area of uncertainty. There must be. If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. For me, this is an important key. If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him.⁶

What a profound and consoling insight into the faith journey! I wonder if this may be the missing link for those who find it difficult to believe. Maybe they are expecting a level of certainty that is not humanly possible: their bar of certainty is so high as to be unattainable. The profession of faith is a human act imbued with grace. It is expressing allegiance to Mystery. Inevitably, there will be some doubt. Archbishop Eamon Martin, in a recent address, drew attention to the stumbling and halting attitude of people of faith which is evident in their hesitancy to profess it openly:

The reality is that the vast majority of people of faith may not yet be ‘intentional disciples’. They are still seeking, still on the way, perhaps not yet able to courageously speak from the conviction of a deep personal encounter and relationship with the Risen Lord.⁷

Only the Holy Spirit can unleash this conviction and courage: ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1: 8).

6 Interview with Pope Francis, 30 September, 2013.

7 Archbishop Eamon Martin, ‘The Importance of Speaking in the Public Square,’ <http://www.armagharchdiocese.org/importance-speaking-public-square/> accessed 1st April, 2017.