

Association of Hebrew Catholics Lecture Series  
*The Mystery of Israel and the Church*

Fall 2013 – Series 12

*Introduction to Theology:  
Faith Seeking Understanding*

Talk #6

*The Virtue of Divine Faith*



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# *The Virtue of Divine Faith*

## **Human Faith**

Since sacred theology is a science built on the foundation of faith, it is reasonable to begin the study of Fundamental Theology by examining the act of divine faith itself.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand divine faith, something must first be said about the nature of faith in general. Faith in general is a *firm assent of the mind to things unseen*. It is an act of the intellect characterized by two elements: firm assent, and an unseen object.

What does it mean for faith to be about things unseen? An object can be seen in two ways: by the senses and by the mind. Things are seen by the senses when they are empirically observed. However, something is also said to be seen when the mind grasps that it is necessarily true. In this second way the mind “sees” first principles of reason, such as the principle that nothing can be and not be in the same way at the same time, every change has a cause, the whole is greater than the part, good is to be sought and evil avoided, and the golden rule. These principles are self-evident and thus are “seen” by the mind. Furthermore, everything that is logically deduced or inferred from evident principles is also seen by the mind as a result of the reasoning process. The conclusions of mathematical, scientific, and philosophical demonstrations fall into this category. Something is unseen, therefore, if it is neither empirically observed, nor self-evident, nor deduced from evident principles through a sound process of reasoning.

When something is seen by the mind, whether through empirical observation, as a first principle, or as a conclusion from evident principles, the intellect naturally and spontaneously assents to the truth. In these cases the intrinsic evidence of the object naturally causes the assent of the intellect. However, when the object is unseen, it is impossible for the intellect to make this natural and spontaneous assent. Nevertheless, experience shows that we can *freely choose* to assent to an unseen object, or not. This free assent of the intellect requires another cause in addition to the object. Since the will is man’s executive faculty and all our free movements are moved by the will, it follows that assent to something unseen will happen if and only if the will commands it. No explicit command or choice is necessary for giving assent to something self-evident, as in the case of “two plus two equals four” or “the whole is greater than the part.”<sup>2</sup> However, when the object

is unseen, the assent needs to be chosen because the object by itself is insufficient to bring it forth. St. Thomas writes:

Faith implies assent of the intellect to that which is believed. Now the intellect assents to a thing in two ways. First, through being moved to assent by its very object, which is known either by itself (as in the case of first principles, which are held by the habit of understanding), or through something else already known (as in the case of conclusions which are held by the habit of science). Secondly the intellect assents to something, not through being sufficiently moved to this assent by its proper object, but through an act of choice, whereby it turns voluntarily to one side rather than to the other: and if this be accompanied by doubt or fear of the opposite side, there will be opinion, while, if there is certainty and no fear of the other side, there will be faith.<sup>3</sup>

However, why would the will choose that the intellect assent to something unseen? The will never acts without a motive, for the free choice of the will results from some deliberation of reason. It follows that assent to an unseen object can be commanded by the will only if there is some motive for giving assent. If the motive for assent is uncertain, then the resulting act is called opinion. If the motive is so strong that the assent is firm, then the resulting act is called faith.

But what would justify such firmness when one cannot see what one is affirming? Normally, the firmness of the act of faith is motivated by the testimony of a witness who is judged to be sufficiently credible, and who claims to see or have seen — whether through empirical evidence or through reasoning from evident principles — what for the believer remains unseen. The firm assent of faith is not arbitrary or without reason, but is motivated by the authority of a witness whom one has some reason to trust. Since there may be reasons both to trust and to doubt a given witness, the choice to believe on his word is a free choice motivated by a free prudential judgment assessing the credibility of the witness.

Faith therefore can be defined as the assent of the mind to truths, not brought about by their intrinsic evidence, but motivated rather by a firm impulse of the will, based on a sufficiently credible witness. In the act of faith, the intellect assents to a given truth (or falsehood) because the will chooses to do so, on account of *motives of credibility* judged to be sufficiently weighty.

Every rational person chooses to make acts of human faith very frequently, and no one could live without doing

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people withhold assent in such cases only in philosophical discussions, and not in their practical life.

3 St. Thomas, *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 4.

1 On the subject of faith, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Mystery of Israel and the Church*, vol. 2, *Things New and Old* (St. Louis: Miriam Press, 2010), chapters 1–2, pp. 1–38.

2 Nevertheless, assent can be freely withheld even in such a case by a positive command of the will, as in a skeptic. However, it seems that

so. All society and culture is based on trust in the witness of other people who have seen what we have not. For most of human history (until DNA testing), the identity of our own parents could be known only by human faith. Most of us are still willing to accept that form of knowing! All education begins with human faith in our parents and teachers. We learn primarily by human faith, trusting in the authority of teachers, books, the media, public opinion, and friends. The goal of education is to lead the student to see for himself through right reasoning whatever can be seen. However, every pupil must begin by putting trust in the teacher until he comes to see for himself what he has been taught. Such faith is frequently a moral duty, for one *ought* to believe when the witness who vouches for a certain truth is known to be trustworthy. Withholding assent in such a case, without cogent reasons to the contrary, would be irrational and contrary to social communion and friendship.

Faith in general is an act midway between scientific demonstration and opinion. The essence of faith is that one does not directly see the intrinsic reason for the truth of a given proposition. In this sense, it is like opinion. However, faith differs from opinion in its certitude. In the act of faith, one sees clearly that the proposition merits firm assent on account of the authority of those who teach it, though not on account of its own intrinsic evidence. It is held as certain, and therefore, mere opinion or deliberate doubt cannot coexist with faith, for they are mutually exclusive. A religious opinion is distinct from an act of religious faith, for the former is held to be uncertain or without sufficient foundation.

## 2. Supernatural Faith

What has been said about human faith also applies analogously to the Catholic faith. The Catholic faith concerns unseen objects such as God, heaven, grace, the Trinity, the Incarnation, etc. Why should we believe in these unseen objects? The only morally compelling reason to assent to something unseen is the trustworthiness of the witness. With regard to things that can only be seen by God Himself—such as His inner life and free decrees for our salvation—there can be no other sufficient witness than God, if He chooses to reveal Himself. The act of divine faith is made possible when one grasps that God, who is the First Truth who can neither deceive us nor be deceived, has indeed revealed Himself. This is the source of the firmness of divine faith and the grounds for the duty of believing.

But here a host of objections crop up. First of all, how does one know that God exists? And if He exists, how does one know that He has revealed Himself to men, and if so, where? This is precisely the job of reason. Philosophical reason can determine that God exists. Historical reason can prudently judge that it is reasonable to believe that He has spoken to men through the Jewish prophets and the

person of Jesus Christ, and that this deposit of faith has been entrusted to the Catholic Church. These are the three principal parts of apologetics: God, Christ, and the Church.

Once reason has shown the existence of the divine Witness, it is not hard to show that He is worthy of supreme trust. However, the difficulty is to determine *where God has spoken*. The Catholic faith tells us that He has spoken, above all, in the Incarnation of the Son of God two thousand years ago. But how do we know this? Here too we must trust the witness of others who preceded Christ, who accompanied His Incarnation, and who came after Him. There are three classes of witnesses here, divided according to their chronological relationship before, during, and after the Incarnation. These witnesses are first the prophets who announced His coming, then the Apostles who witnessed His Incarnation (preaching, Passion, and Resurrection), and finally the Church, which preserves and passes on the deposit of faith.

Recognition of the trustworthiness of these witnesses is the work of reason. It would be irrational to believe if reason could not somehow recognize that God Himself has spoken in human history. Reason is indispensable in this task. However, it is not necessary to have extraordinary intelligence to do this. It is enough to sincerely seek religious truth and not be blinded by prejudice.

Although indispensable, reason is not the only cause of the act of divine faith. Faith is a firm assent of the mind to unseen truth, commanded by the will, which is persuaded by reason. However, this persuasion of reason is insufficient in matters of divine faith on three grounds. First, it is insufficient on account of the transcendence and transcendent importance of the unseen objects of faith—the divine mysteries, which, in addition to being unseen, are often contrary to the order of things encountered in ordinary experience. Faith requires one to hold on to what is unseen in preference to the regularities of the empirical world that are subject to our dominion. Second, reason requires aid because the divine witness also remains unseen, and needs to be recognized as speaking through very humble mediators. In coming to this recognition, reason therefore needs the help of the grace of God, which illumines the mind to see the motives for believing that the unseen witness is indeed ultimately God. The will also needs the aid of grace, strengthening and purifying it to sincerely seek those motives and, once they are seen, to cleave to the Word of the unseen God. For this aid the only recourse is prayer.

Joseph Ratzinger has written about the intrinsic difficulty of the act of faith, due to its unseen character, in his *Introduction to Christianity*:

It [faith] signifies the deliberate view that what cannot be seen, what can in no wise move into the field of vision, is not unreal; that, on the contrary, what cannot be seen in fact represents true reality, the element that supports and makes possible all the rest of reality. And it signifies the view that

this element that makes reality as a whole possible is also what grants man a truly human existence, what makes him possible as a human being existing in a human way. In other words, belief signifies the decision that at the very core of human existence there is a point that cannot be nourished and supported on the visible and tangible, that encounters and comes into contact with what cannot be seen and finds that it is a necessity for its own existence.

Such an attitude is certainly to be attained only by what the language of the Bible calls “turning back”, “con-version”. Man’s natural inclination draws him to the visible, to what he can take in his hand and hold as his own. He has to turn around inwardly in order to see how badly he is neglecting his own interests by letting himself be drawn along in this way by his natural inclination. He must turn around to recognize how blind he is if he trusts only what he sees with his eyes. Without this change of direction, without this resistance to the natural inclination, there can be no belief. Indeed belief is the conversion in which man discovers that he is following an illusion if he devotes himself only to the tangible. This is at the same time the fundamental reason why belief is not demonstrable: it is an about-turn; only he who turns about is receptive to it; and because our inclination does not cease to point us in another direction, it remains a turn that is new every day; only in a lifelong conversion can we become aware of what it means to say “I believe.”

From this we can see that it is not just today, in the specific conditions of our modern situation, that belief or faith is problematical, indeed almost something that seems impossible, but that it has always meant a leap, a somewhat less obvious and less easily recognizable one perhaps, across an infinite gulf, a leap, namely, out of the tangible world that presses on man from every side. Belief has always had something of an adventurous break or leap about it, because in every age it represents the risky enterprise of accepting what plainly cannot be seen as the truly real and fundamental.<sup>4</sup>

The merit of the act of divine faith comes from the difficulty of entrusting ourselves to God’s unseen truth and preferring His unseen Word to our sight of lesser things.

### **Hebrews 11:1**

The fact that faith concerns things unseen is emphasized in a brief and enigmatic definition of faith given in Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen.” The first clause distinguishes divine faith from human faith. Divine faith concerns not just any unseen thing, but the ultimate object of human hope: the supernatural end of intimate union with God promised by God Himself. “Substance” (*substantia*) is the literal translation of the Greek *hypostasis*,<sup>5</sup> and indicates that faith gives us the foundation, already here in time, of the things we hope

for.<sup>6</sup> The second clause emphasizes the two aspects of faith mentioned above: firmness and an unseen object. Faith is the evidence, which here seems to mean *certainty*, of things not seen.

Divine faith not only is the foundation for things hoped for, but also is the first step in their realization. Through faith, the believer enters into a certain preliminary union with God on the level of knowledge, sharing in God’s knowledge of Himself and of His plan for mankind. It is a participation of what will be full in the beatific vision. Faith also prepares for a union of wills, for one cannot love and desire what one does not know. Without faith, supernatural hope and charity are impossible. In this sense faith is the foundation of the spiritual life.

Pope Benedict XVI has a very interesting commentary on Hebrews 11:1 in his encyclical *Spe salvi* 7. Commenting on the word here translated as “substance,” he says:

Faith is a *habitus*, that is, a stable disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to what it does not see. The concept of ‘substance’ is therefore modified in the sense that through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say ‘in embryo’ —and thus according to the ‘substance’ —there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the whole, true life. And precisely because the thing itself is already present, this presence of what is to come also creates certainty: this ‘thing’ which must come is not yet visible in the external world (it does not ‘appear’), but because of the fact that, as an initial and dynamic reality, we carry it within us, a certain perception of it has even now come into existence.

Because divine faith realizes this presence “in embryo” of what we hope for, this faith can only be the fruit of God’s grace.

Divine faith can be understood in two ways, as an act, and as a habitual readiness or capacity to make that act. In the latter sense, faith is a *habitus*, a “stable disposition of the spirit,” and a supernatural virtue. Human faith, on the contrary, lacks stability and is not a virtue, because it is not always good to believe everyone who makes some

6 See St. Thomas’s explanation of the definition of faith contained in Hebrews 11:1 in *ST II-II*, q. 4, a. 1: “The relation of the act of faith to its end which is the object of the will, is indicated by the words: ‘Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for.’ For we often use the term substance to refer to the first beginning of a thing, especially when the whole subsequent thing is virtually contained in the first beginning. For instance, we might say that the first self-evident principles are the substance of science, because these principles are in us the first beginnings of science, the whole of which is itself contained in them virtually. In this way then faith is said to be the ‘substance of things to be hoped for,’ for the reason that in us the first beginning of things to be hoped for is brought about by the assent of faith, which contains virtually all things to be hoped for. Because we hope to be made happy through seeing the unveiled truth to which our faith cleaves. . . . Accordingly if anyone would reduce the foregoing words to the form of a definition, he may say that *faith is a habit of the mind whereby eternal life is begun in us, making the intellect assent to what is non-apparent.*”

4 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 50-52.

5 The RSV translates *hypostasis* as “assurance.” However, it seems that “substance” would be a more exact translation.

claim. Divine faith, on the contrary, is always virtuous, for it is always good to assent to God's Word. Furthermore, divine faith is a theological virtue, for it attains to God Himself. Its object is God as the First Truth, as known through God's own Revelation of Himself. Because faith is a supernatural virtue, both the act and habit of faith must have their point of departure in God's grace.

### **Definition of Divine Faith**

At this point we can give a definition of divine faith. There are four fundamental elements that enter into divine faith: (1) what kind of thing it is; (2) its object; (3) its efficient cause; and (4) its motive. First, divine faith is a supernatural virtue. Second, the object of faith is God's Revelation of Himself. Third, the first efficient cause of the act of faith is the grace of God. Fourth, the motive of divine faith is the credibility of God and not the intrinsic evidence of the things believed.

Divine faith is therefore a supernatural virtue by which we believe the truths God has revealed, moved by God's grace, because God is Truth.<sup>7</sup> The First Vatican Council includes these four aspects in its classic definition of divine faith as a

supernatural virtue by which we, with the aid and inspiration of the grace of God, believe that the things revealed by Him are true, not because the intrinsic truth of the revealed things has been perceived by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God Himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.<sup>8</sup>

In the act of divine faith, we commit our mind and will to God's self-revelation precisely because we recognize the presence of His Word, the living Truth who "can neither deceive nor be deceived." Any other motivation for believing would not be supernatural, nor worthy of God. For example, if one believed for social reasons, or because the content of Revelation seemed reasonable, this would not be an act of supernatural faith, which must be motivated principally by committing oneself to the witness of God, who is Truth.

*Dei Verbum* 5 further develops Vatican I's treatment of faith, adding a new aspect by speaking of faith as "obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See *The Roman Catechism*, trans. Robert I. Bradley and Eugene Kevane (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1985), p. 20: "By this divine faith we give a firm and unhesitating assent to God revealing His mysterious truths." *The Roman Catechism* also defines faith as that "by which we give our unhesitating assent to whatever the authority of our Holy Mother the Church teaches us as revealed by Almighty God" (p. 15). Notice that the Church is brought in here as the vehicle of Revelation. The role of the Church in the act of faith will be discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, ch. 3, D 1789, DS 3008.

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the teaching of Vatican I and II on faith are clearly equivalent, for we give our whole self freely to God in the act of faith (DV 5) precisely through the habitual submission of our intellect and will to God who reveals Himself (Vat. I). This habitual submission

'The obedience of faith' (Rom 16:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,'<sup>10</sup> and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving 'joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.'<sup>11</sup> To bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts.

Since Revelation consists in God *revealing Himself* to us, revealing to us His love, faith likewise consists in returning that love by *entrusting our whole self* to God. This is done through making intellectual assent to God's Word, and committing our lives to that unseen Truth which we have embraced and believing Him without reservation. Our assent, in turn, is moved by a free choice of the will; and the will is moved efficaciously by God's grace which "gives joy and ease" to our assent to the Truth. All mature virtues, in fact, give joy and ease to their exercise, and faith is no exception. It can be seen here that the greatest obstacles to the act of faith are the fear of entrusting ourselves to God and the pride by which we wish to be autonomous, refusing to submit to any superior, even one who is Love and Truth.

### **Faith Is Light**

Paradoxically, the act of faith involves both light and darkness. The definition of faith given in Hebrews 11:1 alludes to both aspects when it speaks of faith as "the *evidence* of things *unseen*." Insofar as faith is of things unseen, it involves a darkness, for we cannot directly see that which we believe to be true. The life of faith always involves walking in a darkness that is disconcerting to the natural man and our natural desire to see where we are going.

However, supernatural faith is essentially light, for it provides an irrefutable evidence—God's testimony—in favor of the most important truths that a human being can know in this life. Faith lights up the path of man by disclosing his transcendent Source and the goal of his life: the Triune God. Psalm 119:105 emphasizes this aspect of faith: "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." As God's Word is light, so is the virtue of faith that receives God's Word as truth.

The modern secular world, however, tends increasingly to view Christian faith as principally sentiment rather than light. Faith has undergone a drastic category shift. From

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of mind and will is realized through the supernatural virtue of faith, infused by God into our souls.

<sup>10</sup> See Vat. I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 3, Denz. 1789.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Denz. 1791.

being understood as a virtue that perfects the intellect to know supernatural truths, it is seen rather as a pure option of the will to help one get through life. As such it can be tolerated perhaps within the confines of the church, but must be banished from any influence in the public square.

In response to this caricature of faith, the encyclical on faith by Pope Francis, *Lumen fidei*, stresses that faith is light:

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.<sup>12</sup>

### **Faith Is Not Subject to Error**

The light of divine faith, unlike human faith, is not subject to error, for faith is properly divine or supernatural only insofar as it is belief in what has actually been revealed by God. For this reason, divine faith is strong enough to be described as “the *substance* of things hoped for.” Divine faith has a certainty that comes from its divine source that enables it to be a sufficient foundation for man’s journey to his supernatural end. *Lumen fidei* 10 speaks of this aspect of faith:

Faith understands that something so apparently ephemeral and fleeting as a word, when spoken by the God who is fidelity, becomes absolutely certain and unshakable, guaranteeing the continuity of our journey through history. Faith accepts this word as a solid rock upon which we can build, a straight highway on which we can travel. In the Bible, faith is expressed by the Hebrew word *’emūnāh*, derived from the verb *’amān* whose root means “to uphold”. The term *’emūnāh* can signify both God’s fidelity and man’s faith. The man of faith gains strength by putting himself in the hands of the God who is faithful.

Thus the proper response to God’s word is appropriately expressed by the Hebrew term *Amen*.

However, it sometimes happens that a believer is mistaken in thinking that something has been revealed by God which has not in fact been revealed. When someone believes something false in matters of religion, the error should not be attributed to the virtue of divine faith, but rather to human faith in some heresy or false interpretation or insight that is mistaken for divine Revelation. Some-

thing has been believed out of ignorance or negligence that ought not to have been believed.

Belief in religions other than Christianity and Judaism lacks an essential element of divine faith. Although members of these religions may have an exemplary interior disposition of self-abandonment to God and His will, they cannot firmly adhere to His revealed Word to which they lack access. The doctrines of other religions should be understood as human beliefs arising from man’s search for God, rather than a supernatural response to God’s seeking out man and revealing Himself to him. The natural religions of the world contain many elements of religious truth pertaining to the natural order, but their foundation is mankind’s religious insight rather than God’s public Revelation, attested to by sufficient motives of credibility. The Declaration *Dominus Jesus* 7 of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith explains this distinction between divine faith in the revealed truth and belief in religious wisdom contained in other religions:

For this reason, the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions, must be *firmly held*. If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which ‘makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently,’ then belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute. This distinction is not always borne in mind in current theological reflection. Thus, theological faith (the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God) is often identified with belief in other religions, which is religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself.<sup>13</sup>

In summary, divine faith is the freely chosen, firm, stable, joyful, and self-abandoning adherence of the mind, moved by divine grace, to the truths revealed by God about Himself and the ordering of all things to Him, not on account of their own intrinsic evidence, but based on the veracity of God who cannot deceive or be deceived.

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13 See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, declaration *Dominus Jesus* 7: “For this reason, the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* in the other religions, must be *firmly held*. If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which ‘makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently,’ then belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute. This distinction is not always borne in mind in current theological reflection. Thus, theological faith (the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God) is often identified with belief in other religions, which is religious experience still in search of the absolute truth and still lacking assent to God who reveals himself.”

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12 *Lumen fidei* 4.

## Motives of Credibility

The great difficulty in making the act of divine faith lies in determining when and where God has spoken. God does not appear directly to everyone; rather, He ordinarily speaks to mankind through intermediaries who are entrusted with a divine mission of being the instruments of God's Revelation. These intermediaries are the prophets in the Old Testament; the Apostles and Evangelists; and the Magisterium of the Church; and, above all, Jesus Christ. However, when God speaks through intermediaries, it must be possible to recognize that they truly have a divine commission. Otherwise it would be extremely imprudent to believe, for one could be deceived by any charlatan or honestly deluded person into believing whatever they claimed was revealed to them by God. Therefore, prophets, apostles, and the Word Incarnate, must come equipped with divine credentials or *motives of credibility*.<sup>14</sup> These motives allow us to make the transition from human faith in the word of a prophet to divine faith in God who speaks through the prophet.

Motives of credibility are supernatural signs that show the action of God, and such signs are referred to as miraculous. To show the divine origin of the Revelation received by Israel and the Church, there are three principal miraculous signs: the miracles worked by the prophets, Christ, and the Apostles; the prophecies about the Messiah and the Church; and the very existence of the Catholic Church, in that it can be seen to be something more than a merely human society, because of its universal spread, continuity, and holiness.<sup>15</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting Vatican I, speaks of these three motives of credibility:

Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability "are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all"; they are "motives of credibility" (*motiva credibilitatis*), which show that the assent of faith is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind."<sup>16</sup>

With regard to the Church as a motive of credibility, Vatican I says:

But, even the Church itself by itself, because of its marvelous propagation, its exceptional holiness, and inexhaustible fruitfulness in all good works; because of its catholic unity and invincible stability, is a very great and perpetual motive of credibility, and an incontestable witness of its own divine mission.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For the motives of credibility, see Feingold, *The Mystery of Israel and the Church*, vol. 2, *Things New and Old*, 4–11.

<sup>15</sup> The Catholic Church is a motive of credibility through its four marks: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

<sup>16</sup> CCC 156. See Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*, ch. 3, DS 3009, 3013 (D 1790, 1794).

<sup>17</sup> Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution concerning the Catholic Faith, chap. 3, Denz 1794.

This motive of credibility, however, requires serious knowledge of history<sup>18</sup> and the ability to distinguish the holiness of the Church from the sins and scandals of bad Catholics who, in their sin, act contrary to the Church's own teaching and thus fail to manifest her supernatural life.

## The Witness of Miracles

Let us begin with miracles. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He attracted his attention by an evident miracle: a burning bush that was not consumed. When God then asked him to be His messenger to Pharaoh and the elders of Israel, Moses in turn asked for a miraculous sign by which his divine commission would be recognized:

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A rod." And he said, "Cast it on the ground." So he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from it. But the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand, and take it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand—"that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."<sup>19</sup>

This witness of miracles was continually manifested by Moses in the succession of the ten plagues, in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, in the column of fire and cloud that led the people, in the manna by which they were fed in the wilderness, in the water brought out from the rock by the rod of Moses, in the divine fire on Mt. Sinai, in the tablets of the Law written by the finger of God, in the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River, in the falling of the walls of Jericho, etc. Every step of the way of the Chosen People was marked by this witness of a power that could only come from God. Moses repeatedly reminds the Chosen People of these motives of credibility—the prodigious miracles by which God took them out of Egypt with a "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm."<sup>20</sup>

When, centuries later, the Chosen People had fallen largely into the worship of Baal, Elijah used the same method. He challenged the prophets of Baal to demonstrate the truth of their religion by having fire descend from heaven to consume a sacrificial offering. Of course, they were unable to do this. Elijah then prepared an altar for sacrifice, doused it with water, and fire came down from heaven at his invocation to show that the worship of the God of Israel is the true religion:

<sup>18</sup> See the famous line of Bl. John Henry Newman: "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant" (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989], 8).

<sup>19</sup> Ex 4:1–5.

<sup>20</sup> See Deut 7:8. In Deut 29:1–5, before telling the Israelites of the punishments that would come upon them for infidelity, Moses calls to mind all the prodigies they witnessed.

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.” Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.”<sup>21</sup>

The same witness of miracles is constantly given by Christ as proof that He is who He claims to be. When messengers came from John the Baptist in prison, asking Jesus if He was the one that Israel was awaiting, Jesus replied solely with the witness of His miracles (Mt 11:4–5): “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” Or again, He said to the people in Jerusalem on the feast of Chanukah (Jn 10:25, 37–38):

The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness to me. . . . If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

All of His great teachings were preceded by miracles to show the truth of what He said. For example, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes preceded His teaching on the Bread of Life in the synagogue in Capernaum. The raising of Lazarus shortly preceded His Paschal mystery, which was then confirmed by the miracle of the Resurrection, witnessed by the Apostles and more than five hundred of the disciples, as St. Paul tells us. The birth of the Church was confirmed by the miracle of Pentecost and the cures worked by the Apostles.

With regard to the witness of miracles, there is a perfect harmony between the Old and the New Testament, and indeed with the entire life of the Church in which miracles continue to exist in every age.

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21 1 Kings 18:36–39.