

Faith as a Source of Moral Choices

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Résumé

La foi et les options morales sont des réalités étroitement liées, puisque celles-ci s'originent nécessairement dans celle-là. La vraie foi signifie beaucoup plus qu'une pure théorie: elle se développe progressivement dans un style de vie original. Il n'est pas besoin de rappeler qu'Abraham a été et restera toujours un des meilleurs exemples de la foi authentique par sa confiance inébranlable en Dieu et par son dialogue constant, profond et sincère avec le Seigneur. C'est pourquoi pour lui Dieu n'est pas seulement un guide infallible mais encore le centre de son être.

Comme pour Abraham, la foi doit et peut être expérimentée en tant que don du Dieu Vivant qui appelle individuellement chacun d'entre nous.

Le Christ, notre Seigneur, fondement de notre foi chrétienne, est en même temps le centre de notre vie et, par le Sacrement de l'Eucharistie, la nourriture essentielle de notre âme. Notre foi au Christ devrait, par conséquent, se refléter non seulement dans le système théorique de dogmes auxquels nous devons adhérer mais encore dans la manière dont nous menons nos vies et dans nos options morales, assumées comme une conséquence pratique de notre croyance théorique. La foi, accompagnée et consolidée par les autres deux vertus théologiques, la charité et l'espérance, vise à nous élever vers une perception supérieure et plus subtile de la vie, de notre prochain et, en dernière instance, de Dieu lui-même.

Mots clé: foi, options morales, profession de foi, bonnes actions, Dieu au centre de la vie humaine, vertus théologiques, commandements de Dieu.

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From the very beginning, this title – which I have chosen for our conference today¹ – reunites two fundamental theological aspects: *faith*, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, our *moral choices*.

In one of his public addresses², His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI (still our Pope at this moment)³ was insisting on the fact that faith cannot be conceived as a mere theory or as a barren system of thinking, but that it should rather constitute a genuine style of living, and it is from this perspective that I wish to address you this evening: **Faith as a style of living.**

Therefore, after having mentioned our Holy Father – who by now has already reached Castel Gandolfo – I would like first to remind you of a verse taken from the Book of Genesis, Chapter Twelve, a verse undoubtedly well-known to all of us: «Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.”» (*Gen* 12, 1).

In very few words the Holy Scripture sketches the portrait of a faithful man, that of Abraham. In his obedience towards the will of his Lord, Abraham utterly abandons himself to God, making Him both Guide of his life and Master of his destiny. Spontaneously, he puts both life and fate in the hands of God. He acknowledges God as the core of his whole being. In other words, faith should “suspend” our own ego, transforming God – the one which we are used to perceive as an absolute YOU – into the very

¹ This text represents an adaptation of the initial material, which had been prepared for the conference held on February 28th, 2013.

² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter issued "Motu Proprio" *Porta Fidei* for the Indiction of the Year of Faith (October 11, 2011, Rome); cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html

³ The conference was held in the evening of the very day (and almost at the very time) of Pope Benedict XVI’s retirement to Castel Gandolfo on February 28th, 2013. (tr. n.)

centre of our lives. Otherwise, God would only remain somewhere confined in the distance, at the horizon of life, separate and absent from the inner space of our being.

It is precisely this that Abraham proved by is obedience: that we ought to find the inner strength to ponder seriously enough on this crucial perspective and to have the necessary courage to acknowledge God as our own and true centre. It is, indeed, an extraordinary experience, although it might seem at first hardly accessible. And yet, so many people have passed through it following in the footsteps of Abraham: they resolved to place God in the centre of their own lives.

Throughout history, the faithful have repeatedly entrusted their destiny in the hands of the Lord and the Holy Scripture abounds in similar instances: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”. (*Ps 27, 1*) These are words which we can utter and which can fully sound in the depths of our hearts only if we truly become aware that God and God’s will are indeed the core of our whole being. Otherwise, they remain nothing else but empty words. Hence, we regard faith as an invitation to place God and only God in the centre of our life.

Nevertheless, the multitude of our daily concerns, our busy schedule and all our various activities could easily make us seem more preoccupied with our own self – our *ego* – rather than with the will of God. It may even happen at times that we leave the impression that this our ego has gradually substituted itself for the true God, acquiring, as it were, the consistency of a real “idol”. It can be nothing more than a matter of false impression – a misleading appearance when subjectively judged from the outside – or, on the contrary, it could prove to be a true and saddening truth.

A relevant example in this sense is the figure of the rich young man in the Gospel of Mark (*Mark 10, 17-23*). Jesus encounters an anonymous character – known afterwards as “the rich young man” – who declares himself eager to inherit the everlasting life. Jesus summarises the contents of the *Ten Commandments* to which the latter replies: “Teacher, all these I

have kept from my youth.” (*Mark* 10, 20) His words have a spontaneous effect on Jesus, who “beholding him” adds: “One thing you lack: go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”. (*Mark* 10, 21) The Evangelist records that he “went away sorrowful” (*Mark* 10, 22). This youth was a faithful person, he was acquainted with the Law of Moses, and he had even observed its prescriptions consistently. Why his unexpected reaction, then? For him faith was a theoretical set of rules. God was existing somewhere in his universe, he was aware of His existence, he was even able to perceive Him from afar, but He never truly duelled in his own heart. His heart was only filled with human concerns, desires, ambitions.

In a similar way, there are countless human concerns and desires, which could surround us, could fill our hearts and lives and, eventually, could threaten to keep us at a certain distance from God. That is why Jesus told the young man to sell everything, meaning actually much more than his earthly possessions. He asked him, in fact, to renounce everything which could bind him to this world – earthly possessions together with his earthly mentality. He required him to adopt an utterly new attitude by leaving behind the ideals of this perishable world, and by freeing himself from the chains of all human concerns and ambitions, in order to make himself more available for the “everlasting world” which he had just professed to desire. However, in the case of the rich young man, his careful observance of the Law did not spring from a genuine relationship with God or from a deep and devoted obedience as with Abraham. Hence, his impossibility to leave the central role of his life to be played by God.

Therefore, I insist that true faith requires the suspending of one’s own ego. Otherwise it means that we have failed to enter the universe of faith or to lead a genuine life of faith, although we might be left with the impression that we have successfully had. And we may live under the spell of this illusion until the end of our days, unaware that we resemble more closely the rich young man rather than Abraham.

As I have already said, true faith is to be understood as the result of God's fully reigning in our hearts. When we place our destiny in the hands of God and when God becomes the Ruler of our lives, we implicitly put our trust in Him – as Abraham did, and as the rich young man failed to do. The will of God had been previously revealed to both of them, but Abraham would listen to the voice of God and follow precisely His directions (although most of the times they implied painful sacrifices on his part), while the young man – despite his initial enthusiasm – could not go any further beyond the level of this sole occasional, strictly theoretical dialogue with Jesus, that bore no practical consequences on his spiritual life.

Thus, we perceive faith as an authentic dialogue between human beings and their Creator. A dialogue founded on the assertion: “I believe in You, O Lord!”; a dialogue in which God is understood as our divine and only Ruler. It is only from this perspective that we, as human beings, can establish a true communion with the Living God.

What is *faith*? Faith is a way of living. Faith goes beyond any theory and beyond any abstract teaching. As I was earlier saying, faith means living in communion with God. His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI once taught, that in its essence, the Christian faith means encountering God⁴, the Living God. This is how the Holy Father has referred to faith. Therefore, the whole centre of our faith is God, while the core of our faith is this simple and fundamental statement: “I believe in God”. Consequently, faith can be perceived in two ways: firstly, as a gift from God, the Word of God which is calling us and which expects from us a body-and-soul response – sometimes even beyond the limits of endurance; secondly, as being a direct and unsophisticated dialogue between man and God, a dialogue in which the created tells the Creator: “Lord, I believe in You”.

⁴ At the beginning of May 2004, Pope Benedict XVI (still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at the time) had declared in an interview given for the Catholic weekly *Vita Trentina* that: "If we stay with this impression, we do not live **the essence of Christianity**, which is **an ever new encounter, an event thanks to which we can encounter the God who speaks**

The title itself conveys the idea that our *moral choices* originate from *faith*. What does this actually mean? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* could be a useful starting point in our endeavour to reach a better understanding of this phenomenon. The *Catechism* tells us about the Creed⁵ – “I believe in God the Father, ... in God the Son, ... and in the Holy Spirit” – expanding and commenting in detail on each of its constitutive parts. There follows, then, a step-by-step explanation about the celebration of the Christian mystery – referring to the Paschal Mystery of Christ and to the Holy Sacraments of the Church⁶. Further still, it analyses at length God’s Ten Commandments⁷, afterwards discussing about the Christian prayer⁸. Therefore, we can conclude that our faith is *professed* in the lines of the Creed, *celebrated* in the Holy Sacraments, *lived* by observing the Commandments, and it eventually *takes the shape* of prayer.

It is a well-known fact that the entire text of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan (or the Nicene) Creed is based on a very simple formula, which has signified the life of the whole Church from its beginning and up to the present: *Jesus is the Lord*. This is the foundation stone of our faith, of the entire faith of the Church itself; and these are the words in which there resides the whole life of the Church: *Jesus is the Lord*.

It also represents the basis of our Creed. Throughout the centuries, God has gradually revealed Himself as Trinity and the Apostles’ Creed first, afterwards the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as well, represent a

to us, who approaches us, who befriends us". Cf. <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/cardinal-ratzinger-tells-why-many-misperceive-christianity>

⁵ In the Second Section of the First Part, *The Profession of the Christian Faith*, art. 185-1065. Cf. the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Second edition), Libreria Editrice Vaticana; e-book version.

⁶ The First and Second Sections of the Second Part, *The Sacramental Economy* and *The Seven Sacraments of the Church*, art. 1066-1690; cf. *op. cit.*

⁷ The Second Section of the Third Part, *The Ten Commandments*, art. 2052-2557; *op. cit.*

⁸ The First Section of the Fourth Part, *Christian Prayer*, art. 2558-2865; cf. *op. cit.*

threefold answer to a threefold question: *Do you believe in the Father? Do you believe in the Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?* These three are the roots of the Twelve Articles, that expand the corpus of our Christian Creed, joining and binding together its constitutive elements. Actually – as many of you are probably already aware – in the Latin language *articulus* has precisely this meaning of a “binding” or of an “articulation”. Therefore, these are the articles of which the Creed consists and which shape the Creed into a unitary structure. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all present in this basic text, implicitly attesting to our own faith in the effective presence of the Holy Trinity.

We discover, thus, among the lines of the *Catechism* a proposition, an invitation to adhere mentally and spiritually to the truths contained in the Creed, the articles of which follow one after the other, building brick on brick the edifice of our Christian faith. A faith which the Church professes and, thus, preaches and teaches. These teachings, gathered from various sermons or otherwise, grow in time into a moral inner structure, somewhat similar to a theological skeleton which spiritually supports our entire being. It inevitably bears on our daily life, on our deeds, on our attitude and the decisions we make. No genuine profession of faith can ever be separated from the real living and the concrete actions and acts.

These are in fact the true deeds of faith, the palpable tokens of our inner moral principles. Supposing we failed to set into practice that which we know and believe, our faith would be hardly more than a barren “written law”, a well-constructed system of religious theories and dogmas maybe, but nothing of what genuine faith should imply. It would never be, for instance, that open dialogue with God – which we have mentioned before – a deep and sincere communion with our Creator, based on and originating from an unrestricted trust in the Living God.

One cannot emphasise enough the crucial role that our personal endeavours play in the constant strive to harmonise our inner and outer deeds with the moral principles which we profess. Celebrating or participating in the celebration of the Holy Sacraments is undoubtedly an

act of faith and, in equal measure, a fortunate moral choice. It can be counted as one of our most significant opportunities to celebrate our Christian faith together as a religious community. For, indeed, the Church means community, mainly based on the sharing in our common faith.

Afterwards there follows the observance of the Ten Commandments. And yet, even before mentioning God's Commandments, the *Catechism* interposes a series of theological and philosophical themes, meant in a certain way to prepare us for the actual setting into practice of our moral criteria. All these themes build on our perception of ourselves as human beings, of our neighbour, of God. They rely on reasons dealt with in the light of faith and bearing the unmistakable touch of the Divine Revelation. They rest upon such notions as the *dignity of human beings, freedom, equality, human conscience, virtue and sin*. It constitutes – we could say – a theological preparation in the view of receiving the revelation of the moral truths contained in the Tables of the Law. Only afterwards, the Commandments are dismantled piece by piece and are systematically commented upon.

We are confronted with a whole “map” of moral aspects which we should bear in mind whenever we are on the point of making a decision. They are various and complex criteria meant to assist us in our choosing right from wrong, in other words, when making moral choices. Leaving aside all such theoretical co-ordinates for one moment, we could say that human life in general is made of countless moral choices – some are easier, some may seem more difficult. It mostly depends on what we are used to do, on what we have been previously taught, and eventually on the perspective from which we contemplate one alternative or the other.

I was reading these days a short story⁹ published by an American writer. It was set somewhere at the North Pole, where in a small pub two friends were sitting at the same table. One of them was a believer, the other one was not. After several glasses, the unbeliever confessed that it happened at times that he found himself speaking about God, or even with God, although actually he were an atheist. A few days earlier, for instance – the story goes on –, he had been caught in a terrible snow storm, completely lost his way, and fearing that he was doomed to perish, spontaneously addressed God, begging Him to work a miracle and to save his life. (It was a genuine prayer, in fact, on the part of this man.) Hearing this, his friend rejoiced and said: “Well, as far as I see, God answered your prayer and you have been saved!”. “No way,” the unbeliever replied. “A crew of Eschimos passed by, found me stuck in the snow and brought me back home. I owe them my life.” “Still, it was God who sent them to you.” “God? What has God to do with all this?”

As we can see, this is the effect which most frequently those that we bear in mind or heart might have upon reality. How differently can one and the same reality be perceived! Hence, the importance of having received the right spiritual and religious education, of possessing a stable and deeply rooted faith. Our inner eye will always be influenced up to a certain degree by that which we have been previously taught; while our mental attitude, on the other hand, will further affect the way in which we interpret all surrounding data.

Moreover, even unbelievers may at times find it necessary to address God in prayer. Even if only for one moment. It is on such occasions that God accidentally becomes their centre, but unfortunately, this state cannot last – it dissolves itself as easily as it has appeared. It passes away as a

⁹ The story, including its dialogues, was retold spontaneously from memory and may differ more or less from the original version. It was not meant as an *ad litteram* quotation. The excerpt was referred to solely for the sake of its moral relevance and it was used merely as an illustration of the different ways in which two people can understand one and the same reality. (tr. n.)

dream, for a true and consistent dialogue with God requires perseverance and practice. Still, God answers even the prayers of the unbelievers. And a prayer remains a prayer, and bears its own spiritual value.

Speaking again about His Sanctity Pope Benedict XVI, I wish to share with you a thought of his, namely that the Creed expresses the simplicity of our faith. The profession of faith of the Early Church and the basis of its spiritual life were residing in those simple words: *Jesus is the Lord*. Thus, the Church offers us a *summa theologica* in miniature, which encompasses its entire essence. The Apostles' Creed reveals two aspects: firstly, that faith is simple; secondly, that faith – far from being an indifferent set of religious teachings and barren theories – is in itself anchored in the event of our Baptism, the event which means an intrinsic encounter between man and God. It is in this encounter between man and God that we discover faith as a theological virtue – that very faith that cannot be separated from charity and hope. Faith, charity and hope are interwoven as a threefold crown which ought to enlighten and accompany our whole life. None of them can be left aside without impairing the whole. One cannot, for instance, devote oneself to the completion of an outstanding work of charity – which often implies great personal renunciations – without a deep faith in God and without the firm hope of attaining everlasting life. Faith, charity and hope are born together and develop together throughout our life. We could say that faith calls for charity and hope, or at least expresses itself through the two of them.

Moral choices themselves can be easier or not. The easier ones are sometimes referred to – in theology – as a *fundamental option* similar to an inner automatic reflex as it were, responsible for certain simple and logical choices. These, however, far from being spontaneous, are the result of a repetitive practice, the same repetitive practice required or implied in the acquisition of a moral habit, i.e. a vice or a virtue. It is the repetition, therefore, the frequency of a given experience that leads to the forming of a corresponding habit – a moral reflex, in fact, that enables or even binds us to choose almost instantaneously one alternative or the other.

The *Parable of the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10, 25-37) brings forward the figure of a certain man, who presumably was in the habit of being compassionate and helpful. Always and towards anyone. Maybe he had been taught so, maybe he had an inborn inclination towards doing good. Nonetheless his reaction is simple, spontaneous, and does not imply any lengthy deliberation. He accidentally comes across a wounded fallen man – a complete stranger to himself – and seeing the state in which this was, interrupts his journey, pours wine and oil on the victim's wounds and takes him on his mule to the nearest inn, where after paying the innkeeper two *denarii* orders that he should be well taken care of at his further own expense. "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you," he says. (Luke 10, 35)

It almost leaves the impression of an automatic behaviour, as if void of any previous reasoning, only set in motion by virtue of an unalterable inner mechanism. And yet, this is no automatic behaviour. It has its roots in his previous formation, in his past, in a long series of good deeds marked by his perseverance in being helpful and attentive towards the others. That is why he almost instantly devotes himself to the taking care of the wounded man. He already has a formed habit of putting himself in the service of his neighbour.

In a similar way, by means of faith and education, we can find it easy to make good and moral choices; although this does not mean that any good or moral decision is immediately felt as being easy. Time and again, moral choices require effort, restraint, renunciation; and still, when perceived through the eyes of faith, they seem much less inaccessible or forbidding than otherwise. For instance, those who have dully attended the Sunday service for years or are used to making good and frequent confessions would hardly think of them as difficult or complicated. Again, fasting on Fridays can become almost natural for those who have had behind them a long and consistent practice of observing Fridays. For those lacking this experience and these habits, on the other hand, any of these

simple acts may be felt as complicated. None of them comes automatically as it might seem when judged from the outside.

The same happens with observing God's Commandments. It makes a great difference, whether we are accustomed to observing them or not, whether we have received a proper moral education, and whether our faith and reverence for God are deep and strong enough. The Ten Commandments bring together many theological and spiritual aspects. And in a certain manner they direct them towards a point of inner convergence which is – or, better said, should be – God Himself. In this case, observing the Law, the divine Law of God, can be counted among the easy, almost natural moral choices. Otherwise, if God does not represent the centre of our being, observing the Commandments might prove to be quite difficult.

Even so, we can find ourselves confronted with difficult choices. For instance, the well-known and much-discussed issue concerning the love of one's enemies. Love and forbearance of one's neighbour can in itself be trying enough at times. Compared to it, Jesus' requirement that we should also love our enemies appears as even more demanding. It requires, first of all, a considerable understanding of subtle and complex theological aspects – the true meaning of the human being, the dignity of each person and their value as seen through the eyes of God, the worth of good deeds done even when there is no earthly benefit to be expected, and many other alike. Then, there is the intricate question of *love* and of *forgiveness*. What is *true love* and *true forgiveness*? There is no point in loving one's enemy with a love that fails to be sincere, or to forgive him without truly forgiving, but rather by harbouring an everlastingly latent feeling of grudge. It is certainly better than an open conflict, but how far it stops from what Jesus is expecting from us!

A helpful thing might be to honestly recall all the many occasions when we ourselves have been forgiven – by others or by God Himself. What it meant to us. How and in what measure it affected us, our life and our relationship with the others. And then, *dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut*

et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.¹⁰ How crucial this element seems if we have the strength to ponder more earnestly on the meaning of these lines! ***Sicut et nos dimittimus.*** It is almost a clause, a condition to which we freely agree and, in the same time, a promise we make and should accordingly be ready to keep. It binds us again and again, every time we pray the Lord's prayer. And it should equally make us more and more aware of our own duty to love, forgive and forbear one another.

From this same perspective we should, then, wonder how truthful our prayer is if we bind ourselves to forgive without actually forgiving. Or without making any attempts of the kind. Even if we have been grievously wronged and, consequently, forgiveness comes with more difficulty, we should still endeavour to forgive them "with all our heart". Even if it takes time. And then, on the other hand, the more we forgive, the easier it becomes to forgive, and the more sincerely we forgive. It almost becomes natural.

Prayer, again, is part of our moral choices. It is a resolution, a determination to re-freshen our inner dialogue with God. In the *Lord's Prayer* we say "*Thy Kingdom come*", and we should honestly refer to the Kingdom of God with His own rules and after His own principles, not after ours. It is easy to utter "*Thy Kingdom*" and meanwhile to think or dream of our own personal kingdoms made up of selfish concerns, desires and ambitions – the very things we have been discussing at the beginning of this conference. Maybe the essence of one's proper attitude is best expressed by the widely used phrase: "*fiat voluntas Tua*"¹¹. Not my will, but Thine. For Thou art the core of my inner being.

It is interesting that the German language has two almost similar words: *Lebensmitte* and *Lebensmittel*. The former means "the centre of life", while the latter means "nourishment", and both could be used with reference to Jesus – on the one hand, Jesus as the centre of our lives and, on

¹⁰ Taken from the Latin version of the *Lord's Prayer: And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.* (tr. n.)

the other hand, Jesus who in the Holy Eucharist offers Himself to humankind as spiritual nourishment. For it is the Holy Eucharist which, most of all, builds and consolidates our spiritual life, preparing the background for any proper moral choice. Apart from faith and theological or religious teachings – that have their own spiritual role –, the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist outstandingly strengthens us in our quest and endeavour to become what God expects us to be, as it is Jesus Himself who is communicated by means of our sharing in this sacrament.

It was my purpose this evening to lead you – metaphorically speaking – as if along the bank of a river, and to wonder whether we have the courage to dive in. To dive into what? Into a spiritual inner space in which there is no room for our own human concerns, and wills, and projects, but a space solely filled with the Presence of the Living God, a space where God alone lives and reigns.

If we do have the strength to look upon faith in this way, I am convinced – and it was my aim to convince you, as well – that we are right.

(translated into english by Ioana Iliescu)

¹¹ Again quoted from the Latin version of the *Lord's Prayer: Thy will be done.* (tr. n.)