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Faith

Welcome and Presentation

Prayer: “You are the Most High..”

First I remind you of the rule for our meetings: please treat everything that is shared here as confidential to this group and this time. Just a word regarding housekeeping arrangements: in future, we will meet here at 1pm and we will start our time of sharing at exactly 1.30pm. It is important that you are on time for the beginning of our reflections to avoid disturbing others and also to respect the time and effort we have put into preparing these retreats. Please inform us beforehand whether you intend to come / or not to come: we need to know the number of seats and photocopies we have to prepare, etc..

Our topic today is faith, what the Church calls one of the three theological virtues that orients our human capacity to participate in the very life of the Holy Trinity. There is perhaps no other theme that so directly points to that very private and most intimate sphere of our lives: and that is the sacred space between the Creator and his Creature, us and our God. In that space, everything is unique and reflects the fact that God knows us in our depths better than we know ourselves and therefore He uses the language of love that is the one that we can respond to. With this in mind, our hope for today is that in sharing some reflections on different aspect of the faith journey, each one of us will be able to deepen, nourish and affirm their own experience as well as being moved and gladdened by what others here may share.

To start us on our reflection, we will look at four themes that are related to Faith. We are aware, of course, there are a dozen others that could have been chosen. We reiterate what we have already said on a number of occasions: we know that each one of you has many gifts and could prepare a retreat afternoon here at DCH as much as we can. So we would encourage you also to consider doing that on a theme that is close to your heart. Today we have chosen to look at:

- 1) faith and certitude
- 2) faith and experience
- 3) faith as apprenticeship of listening
- 4) faith and the creed.

1) Faith and certitude

Scripture Reading: He 11:1-3; 8-10; 12:1-2

(Y) At first glance, faith seems to be a strength to believe in the “unbelievable”. It seems to be this content we have to accept and to believe in, like blindly. Faith is often understood as the belief in the dogmatic statements of the Church we have to accept without questioning. Is faith a certitude which excludes any doubt?

For me, faith is before all linked with what we assume IS, but which we cannot know. It is related to the unknown, to the unaccomplished, to what remains at all times behind the appearances. We know that it exists because we have had glimpses of it in the past, but in fact we are ignorant of what it is. Faith is a strength which pulls us forward and gives us courage to address the mystery. It moves us forward. It is the energy for discovery. Faith is a process and the dynamic state of remaining rooted in the unknown.

Faith is not the usual kind of knowledge; in faith an unknown part remains which is mystery. It is an opening to what is, a form of deep acceptance without feeling threatened. It opens us to transformation when we come in touch with this Reality which exists behind all appearances. It is even more than an acceptance; it is a need, an urge for transformation. We know that this transformation will bring us happiness because we know that we have to change. Faith is rooted in the consciousness of this necessity for change, and this is why it can bring the unaccomplished to be accomplished.

In faith, there is always a part of doubt, of uncertainty, of fear also. This uncertainty is healthy, because the spiritual path is a practice of the art of “not knowing” or “unknowing”. We must learn that we don’t know; we must discover how rich it is to be ignorant, because then faith can be enlivened by the Spirit in its dynamic ways. It allows God to act in us. Our fragility is the door which opens out onto God’s truth. Of course, we learn along the path, but what matters is not what we learn; it is the fact that what we learn brings us to another threshold. Each threshold is a new point of view, a new perspective which changes our outlook about life and changes us too.

Faith is therefore an energy which remains rooted in God. Faith is grace. It is a gift we have to struggle for, but it is never a reward. It is a pure gift. Faith can be said to be the energy of attraction, of yearning, i.e, love.

Faith is therefore not something we “have” as if it were an object we possess. Maybe we should not say: “I have faith in God”, but rather: “Faith pushes (or pulls) me towards God”. “ I am taken by the energy of faith which reveals to me my true nature”. “I am transformed by faith”. In fact, when we relate to God, we have mainly a passive role, the role of opening to him and letting him do, so that the living truth of the living God can act on and in me.

Song

Time of personal reflection:

We will now take 15 min. for personal reflection. You can stay here or go for a walk outside and look at the call of faith to you, when you were may be asked to leave some kind of “familiar shore” behind and to set out “for the deep”. Look at what kind of quality that experience helped to strengthen. We will meet back here for sharing.

Sharing

2) Faith and experience

Scripture Reading: Mt. 14: 22-33

(U) Sometimes we are exhorted to have “blind faith”. How can we understand this? May be blind to rational argumentation in that we trust that inner call rather than the often very seductive voices of the world? Or blind in regard to the outward vision, all the better to hone the “inner vision” that has intimations of invisible things. It seems to me, in all other regards faith cannot be blind and it demands of us the use of all our faculties. Faith grows through our own experience. We have to confirm our faith through experience. Faith sheds light on our experience and experience sheds light on our faith. Both grow together, especially if we accept to look at the nature of each of them. What does it tell us?

Experience strengthens our faith because experiences in everyday life are never outside or apart from an experience of God. Faith allows our experience to discern the true meaning of what happens to us. Each experience can in general have two kinds of explanation: a factual one and a spiritual one. We should strive to learn to interpret events in spiritual terms. We would therefore better understand the real meaning of each event and each of them would be an opportunity for strengthening our faith. How can that be true of experiences that are bad, or even evil where innocent people suffer?

I want to introduce you to an extraordinary woman Etty Hillesum, who started off as an ordinary one. A young Jewish woman of 27 years of age in Holland, attracted to life, and in love with a man. She lived during the Second World War under Nazi occupation. We have her journals from 1941-43. What is incredible in reading them is that while she was extremely aware of all the horror that was going on, these years were also those of an incredible inner growth and, paradoxically, of liberation. Throughout all the years of horror - she finished by spending months in a “holding” camp of Westerbork in Holland before being transported to Auschwitz where she perished - began slowly but surely an evolution that led to the almost uninterrupted experience of the Presence of God. Under Etty’s hand, the name of God seems to be cleared of any traces of any particular tradition, it seems to be a kind of faith of absolute purity - like the deepest, most profound cry of the heart, where all races, traditions and religions are transcended. The last words in her eighth exercise books that we have from her are “One would like to be a balm poured out onto so many wounds.” She lucidly saw all the horror, and noticed all that was going on, yet nothing could take from her a sense of meaning in life. Before we have time for personal reflection, I will read to you one of her “talks” with God which is as heart-rending as it is astonishing.

I said that faith reveals what is unknown, beyond appearances, but this is not entirely true. In fact, faith helps us to understand appearances as signs of God. God hides because he loves us and remains discrete; he does not want to impose himself; he wants to be discovered, he wants us to search for him. Yet this world can be understood as being filled with signs pointing to Him when we look at it with the eyes of faith.

We are full of representations, full of expectations of what things should be. We are searching God very often in a preconceived way. That is why we miss him so often. We are looking for a king but he comes as a servant, as one of the poor. Experience, when we learn to read it, changes our faith. It cleans it of all the false images we have accumulated. Once again, we have to open and to watch what happens. If we truly watch, then we change and we learn to recognise him in everything.

Text: O God, you have enriched me.... Prayer of Etty Hillesum

Time of personal recollection: We leave you with this powerful text. Reflect on your own experience. We meet again in 15 min.

Sharing

TEA

3) Faith and the apprenticeship of listening

Scripture text: Jn 5:30

(Y) Faith is a call for listening to God, because we know he cares for us and he leads us and because we know he is our only security and he is our only way to peace and happiness. How do we listen to God? How do we know that what we understand as God's will is really his? It is a strange thing; God's call grows in us in a mysterious way where we can say: that's it! There is a kind of certainty about it, but nevertheless there is also a part of doubt, a kind of doubt in ourselves, which makes us ask again and again whether it is really God's will. Is that discernment or is that a lack of faith?

Especially when God's call concerns a main issue in our life, we have to trust fully our intuition, we have to trust our discernment as given by the Holy Spirit. Then we have to commit ourselves to this expression of his will; we have to trust fully and to accept fully the consequences as being part of the way.

It is a strange feeling; if we do God's will, there is a kind of security; we are almost no more responsible for the consequences! He is in charge. But it does not mean that the way he is calling us onto is smooth and easy. It can be painful. How do we cope with the fact he sends us on a difficult path?

Time of personal recollection:

Sharing

4) Faith and the creed

(U) The creed is a summary of faith. Does the creed say what faith is? Does the creed nourish your faith? It provides a language that Christians share in common. How important is it for you to have companions on the Way of Faith? I will now say the Creed, a lot slower than we say it usually. I would ask you to let each phrase sink into the core of your being, and simply resonate there.

Time of sharing:

Prayer and Blessing: "God our challenger and our comforter..."

Song: Amazing Grace