

To the Students of the University of Dallas at the Rome Campus
“Abraham, our Father in Faith”
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Gospel: Luke 9:28-36

In the first reading we see Abraham, whom the Church recognizes as our “father in faith” (cf. Roman Canon), receiving God’s promise to make of him a great nation, to give him an inheritance as numerous as the stars. It is said that in response Abraham put his faith in God, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness (cf. Genesis 15:6-7). **But after this beautiful statement** by the narrator, Abraham asks a question that seems to spoil everything, insofar as it appears unbecoming of a man of faith: for in response to God’s promises, Abraham asks, “How am I to know this?” **What does Abraham mean, “How...?”** Is this a sign of doubt or mistrust? Is he not willing to take God at his word? What is the nature of Abraham’s faith? And how can I live my own faith, such that he can truly be considered *my father in faith*?

Oftentimes, if we want to understand a question better we need to look at its answer. Turning back to the text, we see that when Abraham asked, “O Lord, how am I to know I shall possess this land?” (Genesis 15:8), the Lord did not respond as if the question were, “What kind of proof can you give me?” **For in his response God did not offer a proof**; rather, he offered a covenant. Following an ancient custom, God calls for various animals in order to perform a ritual by which he inaugurated a contract or mutual agreement between Abraham and himself. **God’s promises, in response to Abraham’s question, thus take on a new form**, the form of a covenant **that binds two persons to each other** for the fulfillment of some condition. Thus, in this moment there is a change in their relationship; God’s promises to Abraham evolve from a one-sided declaration of good will to a genuine compact – from one person’s one-sided profession of love to a genuinely bilateral agreement between two persons. This takes place thanks to Abraham’s response to God’s initial promise; that is, thanks to his question. **For his question shows that God’s promise did not fall on deaf or uninterested ears**. Rather than saying nothing in response – and an uninvolved, “Okay, thanks God” might be about the same as nothing – Abraham responded in a way that revealed his personal engagement with the one making the promise; he was interested and concerned in the fulfillment of this promise. **This personal concern or engagement – which is not the same thing as doubt – became an invitation for God to**

establish the covenant. It was Abraham’s way of saying “Yes” to God’s plans; of signaling his interest; of being open to take his relationship with God to a greater and more personal level by means of a covenant agreement.

Thus Abraham’s question, far from spoiling his profession of faith, actually helps us to understand what is so special about it. Abraham’s faith was so special because it was so personal; that is, Abraham’s faith was special **because it was directed to God as from one person to another.** Abraham did not “believe in God” as so many seem to do today: that is, his faith in God did not rest in the simple affirmation, “Yes, I believe that God exists.” **Abraham’s faith was more like,** “Yes, Lord I believe that *you* exist; that *you* – the one whom I now address – are the one, true God; the Creator of all and the Lord of my life, in whose presence I wish to live forever.” **Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) once described this personal aspect of faith** by comparing it to the faith of the “tragic hero” or the one who, though admirable insofar as he always tries to do the right thing – who tries to obey *God’s* laws and live life as *God* wants – nevertheless does not reach “the wondrous glory the knight [of faith] attains in becoming God’s confidant, the Lord’s friend... in saying ‘You’ to God in heaven.” For although the tragic hero may rack his conscience and strive to do the right thing, even at the cost of personal suffering, in the end “the tragic hero addresses [God] only in the third person”¹ and thus never reaches a truly personal relationship with him. **In constantly asking himself, “What does *God* want me to do?” he forgets to ask, “Lord, what do *you* want me to do?”** Thus, in spite of the seeming nobility of all of his actions he remains without the joy of heaven, which is a joy of *communion and relationship* with the personal God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In addition to this personal or subjective aspect of Christian faith, there is, of course, also an element that is more “objective” or communitarian. God, after all, addresses his Gospel to a community, to a Church made up of all nations on the earth. **But this Gospel – this New Covenant – while addressed to all of us** together must in the end be ratified by the consent of each of us as individuals. Thus, following Abraham our “father in faith” (Roman Canon), **I propose that each of us** asks him-or-herself about the personal character of his or her relationship with God. What is the nature of my response to the promises of God? ***Am I, like Abraham, invested personally in his promises?*** In other words, do I take the Gospel as a message directed

¹ *Fear and Trembling*, 77.

to me, personally; and do I live in expectation of its fulfillment in my life? Do I live in dialogue with God, asking him constantly about the how, when, and why of his saving promises?

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, Pope Benedict wrote that this “personal character” of faith is the “most fundamental feature of Christian faith or belief.”² **In fact, according to him, Christian faith is summed up not in the words “I believe in something” but in the words “I believe in *Thee*.” Christian faith is essentially “an encounter with the human being Jesus, and in this encounter [faith] experiences the meaning of the world as a person.” This meaning of the world, which we encounter in the person of Jesus, is “the unconditional devotion” of God for men; it is his love for me and for all of us; it is a promise to redeem, to save, and to make whole; it is a love, therefore, that gives hope and makes our lives worth living. In this dialogue of faith, where I encounter Jesus, the Son of God and Revealer of his love, I come to understand myself, my place in the world, the direction of my life. In this dialogue of love – between a human being and the Author of all life – I find my vocation.**

I think if we look at the Pope’s actions in recent times, we see that he is a true son of Abraham, a man of real and deep faith. For whenever he talks about his decision to renounce the papacy, he always explains it as the result of personal prayer and **the examination of his conscience in front of the Lord**. He is doing this in obedience to the Lord; in other words, he is doing this because he believes it is the next step in his vocation, which he comes to understand through a lifetime of living in personal dialogue with Jesus Christ. **He takes seriously the words of the Father, “This is my chosen Son; listen to him” (Luke 9:35); he listens for the voice of the Son speaking in his own life.** Rather than allow his vocation to be determined by the dictates of a six-hundred year old human tradition, **he chooses to act in faith: he chooses to live his life as something received ever-new from an ongoing dialogue with the Lord.**

As a final thought, it’s worth reflecting on how Peter himself received his vocation – his identity, the direction of his life – in *personal conversation* with the Lord. He did not “figure it out” from any kind of abstract analysis or objective calculation. In the end, he learned who he was only after he learned who Jesus was: after he turned to Jesus in faith, recognizing in him the Revealer of the Father’s love. For after Peter confessed his faith in Jesus, “*You* are the Son of God” Jesus then turned to him and said, and “*You* are Peter, the rock upon whom I will build my Church.” Peter’s

² Introduction to Christianity, 47.

vocation, Pope Benedict's, yours and mine springs always from this kind of faith, from a relationship of personal knowledge and love with Jesus, in whose love is revealed the purpose and meaning of all things.