38.

**Touching Faith, Sustaining the Call**

“It will be a moment of grace and commitment to a more complete conversion to God, to strengthen our faith in Him and proclaim Him with joy to the people of our time.”

—Benedict XVI, announcing the Year of Faith

I recall being in the seminary chapel in the spring of 1962, listening to one of our teachers reassure us that nothing in the Church was going to change. That memory came back to me as I opened Yves Congar’s wonderful diary account *My Journal of the Council* (Liturgical Press, 2012). Congar was fifty-eight when the Second Vatican Council opened (I was nineteen); John Paul II would name him a cardinal some thirty-two years later. Reading Congar’s journal today, with its refreshing candor, one understands why some in the Church were so confident that nothing was going to change, while others saw why the need for change was absolutely crucial. For some people, the only thing necessary was to set our eyes on heaven and fix our hope on the kingdom; the path was fixed and the means were clear. For others, there was no way for the Church to walk, except through the world. And this meant accompaniment. It would also require a colossal change of outlook. The opening sentences of *Gaudium et spes* are as thrilling today as when the world first heard them:

> The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the women and men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in
their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation that is meant for every human being. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with humankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.

Following Congar through the Council, I notice how much the various actors in the conciliar drama were drawing from one another, how much they were learning from one another and supporting each other. In the face of ideological resistance and some not so edifying ecclesiastical maneuvering, the bishops and theologians who could read the signs of the times were truly nourished by one another’s faith. They did not simply share ideas and theological perspectives, although this was important. They shared a confidence in the Spirit that enabled them to imagine a different way of being church and to face the future with hope. They enabled each other to hold on to the sureness of their vocations by trusting the providence that had brought them to that moment. It is fitting that we should remember what they achieved some fifty years ago as we embark upon the “year of faith.”

“You faith has made you well”

In the fifth chapter of his Gospel, Saint Mark recounts the story of a woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Counting on the safety and anonymity of the crowd, she reaches for Jesus’ cloak as unobtrusively as she can, convinced that merely touching the hem of his garment would be enough to make the bleeding stop. But then she is found out; her faith gave her away.

The humanness of the story—the feelings of the woman, the reaction of Jesus, the puzzlement of the disciples—is stunning. Jesus actually does not know who touched him, and
he would not stop looking until he had found out. The woman, trying to keep her uncleanness secret, sought to avoid his notice; maybe she wanted to spare Jesus from contracting her uncleanness if she were to touch him. The disciples are flabbergasted that Jesus would ask who touched him, given the crowd heaving in on them from all sides. Fearful and embarrassed, the woman at last comes forward and falls to the ground in front of him.

The entire scene is one of Mark’s wonderful interruptions: Jesus and his disciples were on their way to heal a dying girl—a matter of considerable urgency. That, Mark seems to be saying, is the way life is. The arrival of Jesus interrupts our plans, and occasionally the arrival of others interrupts his. If the reader is wondering why the woman was so desperate to touch his cloak, the answer is simple: she wanted to be cured. As Mark writes: “for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well’.” Yet there is something else at work here.

At the end of the story, Jesus assures the woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mk 5:34). She wanted to be healed, yes. But the source of Jesus’ healing power was the Spirit and, just as importantly, his own faith in God—a faith that had been nurtured in Nazareth and tested for forty days in the wilderness. How could Jesus have called his disciples to deeper prayer if, in praying, he never had to struggle, if his own prayer had always been drenched with consolation? How could he have credibly called others to trust God absolutely and unconditionally, if his own faith in God had never been put to the test? Maybe what the woman was really reaching out to touch, then, although she did not realize it, was Jesus’ own faith. She had touched his
absolute trust in God, and he obviously had felt hers. There is no other story like it.

**Faith is the only way**

For Mark, faith is everything: faith in Jesus, of course, as when the evangelist imagines the disciples asking, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mk 4:41) Or when the heavenly voice instructs them, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mk 9:8) But above all what matters is faith in God, as when Jesus assures the synagogue leader, “Do not fear, only believe” (Mk 5:36). Or when he says to the father of the epileptic boy, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes” (Mk 9:23). Or when he tells the disciples, “Have faith in God” (Mk 11:22).

In the end, what the believer “touches,” what grounds the disciples’ faith, is nothing less than Jesus’ own faith and trust in God, his own relationship with the Father. That is what they came into contact with, and that is what the evangelist hands on to us. The evidence for belief is not the healing miracles; the miracles are but signs that point to the action of the Spirit in the words and works of Jesus. The evidence or “proof” upon which our faith rests is what the disciples experienced in their relationship with him. Their relationship with Jesus—each one distinctive—was what shaped and eventually anchored the way they related to God. Reach back far enough and what we touch is not the miraculous deeds but the trust in God of the one who worked them. Reach back far enough and what we touch is not words on a page but the religious experience of the ancient communities who handed the memories and stories of Jesus on to us.

Discipleship was not some neatly defined “thing” like citizenship or membership in a club that each of the followers
shared equally. Mary Magdalene’s relationship with Jesus was not identical to Simon’s, and Simon’s was not the same as that of the Beloved Disciple, or Thomas, or Salome, or the rich young man, or the nameless woman who anointed his body beforehand for burial. No two figures in the gospel stories related to Jesus in exactly the same way. The same holds true in our communities today.

**Touching the faith of others**

The people who came to believe in Jesus believed in God first. They may have been sinners, but they were not atheists. Unless they believed in God, their minds and hearts would not have been open to what Jesus was saying about the kingdom; and they almost certainly would not have been receptive to his call. There may be a lesson for us here.

In societies that are becoming increasingly secular, where the God-question may be of little or no concern to a growing number of people, the challenge for the Church is quite different from the challenges the apostles faced. At least the Greeks and the Romans had their gods, as did the Egyptians and the peoples of Asia. Religious ritual and belief were a part of life. How then do we talk about Jesus to people who may have no sense of God to start with? In a secular age the Church might need, first, to re-light the way that leads toward the transcendent. To be sure, transcendence runs deep in the gospel story; but people are not going to find it if they don’t know what they’re looking for.

Sometimes in a family where parents have little or no religious faith a child will still manage to discover God. When the child undergoes a spiritual awakening and becomes a believer, nearly always this discovery or awakening occurs because the child (as a teenager or young adult) comes into
contact with religious faith. This can happen directly, through the words or witness of someone outside the family who is a believer. Or it can happen indirectly, through contact with the culture of belief by means of sacred art or architecture, through books or music. To some degree we see such indirection in the case of Thomas Merton and Aaron Jean-Marie (later Cardinal) Lustiger.

From my own spiritual tradition, there is Ignatius himself. Saint Ignatius experienced his first spiritual awakenings while recuperating in the Loyola castle, holed up with Jacobus de Voragine’s lives of the saints *The Golden Legend* and Ludolph of Saxony’s *The Life of Jesus Christ*. Surroundings, like books, are powerful carriers of meaning and grace. There is no telling what will happen when a child’s eyes fall on beauty that a grown-up’s eye no longer sees. Merton discovered such beauty in Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan and Lustiger in the Orléans Cathedral of Sainte-Croix.

**Attractive, unsettling, and contagious**

A vibrant, practiced faith is attractive; it may also be unsettling; and it can even be contagious. Attractive, because one lives from principle and conviction, courageously, without the need to impose those convictions on others; it is joyous living. Unsettling, because such living challenges the rest of us to ask why we are not living more authentically. Contagious, because life according to the gospel—especially as it becomes more prophetic—inspires and excites; faith can be caught. And once caught, we gravitate toward a different sort of companionship. The ones Jesus called blessed are the ones in whose company we feel more and more at home: “the poor in spirit,” “the meek,” “those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness,” “the merciful,” “the pure of heart,” “the peacemakers.”

Every once in a while, upon encountering someone of great spiritual depth—whether personally or in a book or in a film—I find myself wondering what I would look like if my whole life could pivot on the mystery of God the way theirs does. I don’t think I am alone in asking this. For a brief moment or two, in the imaginary world of what might have been, we are monks and recluses, heroic missionaries, mistresses or masters of the interior life, pilgrims or saints, martyrs, men and women fully of God, prophets. For a moment, the dream of holiness seems neither impossible nor unrealistic. Face to face with the possibility of achieving such spiritual depth, “I want to be like that” becomes “I could be like that.” Consciously or not, women and men who live by faith are, at the same time, spreading and sharing that faith. They enable us to believe in ourselves. The faith of others sustains us when our own well starts to run dry, just as there are times when others take heart because of what they see and hear in us. Becoming aware of this mutual dependence is humbling; it’s also how God wants it.

The year of faith and vocation

What the Pope desires for the year of faith—that it should be “a moment of grace” and a “commitment to a more complete conversion to God”—ought to be our hope, not just for the anniversary of Vatican II, but for every year. Nevertheless, for many of us, entering into the year of faith might mean reflecting on how our vocational awareness has been sustained over time. What keeps the flame alive? Ultimately, what sustains us, of course, is our relationship with the risen Christ; whatever we do, whatever we choose, we do because of him. Yet Jesus does not represent a timeless, faceless
“cause,” no matter how holy or spiritual. Whatever Jesus did, whatever choices he made, were always for the sake of his people. For us, then, to find Jesus is to find his people; and to be with his people is to know and love him.

Other things sustain us as well: Scripture and Eucharist, the joy we find in our work, and conversation with others who are living the same call. Not just chit-chat, but genuine conversation about the things that matter: this is crucial to keeping vocational awareness alive. In countless non-verbal ways, from one day to the next, we draw courage and strength from the goodness we see in one another. Our own faith deepens as we watch how others live theirs: how they handle suffering and diminishment, how they forgive, how they accept disappointment, how they thank God before beginning a meal, how they listen.

Yet we also need to say something. Faith that is never spoken, when our relationship with the mystery of God does not find its way into words—this sort of “implicit” faith has a certain incompleteness about it. If we cannot talk about our faith, then maybe we are not fully comfortable with the choice we made to follow Christ and to center our lives in the gospel. It is not a matter of whether we are introverts or extroverts; what matters is whether or not we have, and are, “friends in the Lord.” Imagine the disciples never talking about how their lives were different after they came to know Jesus, never sharing how they remembered him! What did they do, once Jesus was no longer with them? What do we do? They depended on one another. They preached the forgiveness of sins. They lived what they believed. They told the story of Jesus as people who were really part of it. Can we do the same? Religious, priests, and
ministers of the gospel who can do this are keeping one another vocationally alive.

Perhaps, then, the year of faith will be a year of the Church that speaks. But not about devotional practices or changes in the missal or the catechism, and not even about the cluster of red-button topics that today get tempers flaring. Fifty years ago, the Church spoke. It spoke from the depths of its faith about the mystery of God. It told the world, loudly and clearly, the reasons for the hope that it has. Together, we are still that church. But if we are to speak to the world, we must first practice speaking to one another. That’s where the energy for mission comes from. That’s where we sort out what we really and truly believe from what is merely learned words and ideas about God.

In his opening address to the council on October 11, 1962, John XXIII said:

In the daily exercise of Our pastoral office, it sometimes happens that We hear certain opinions which disturb Us—opinions expressed by people who, though fired with a commendable zeal for religion, are lacking in sufficient prudence and judgment in their evaluation of events. They can see nothing but calamity and disaster in the present state of the world. They say over and over that this modern age of ours, in comparison with past ages, is definitely deteriorating. One would think from their attitude that history, that great teacher of life, had taught them nothing. They seem to imagine that in the days of the earlier councils everything was as it should be so far as doctrine and morality and the Church’s rightful liberty were concerned.

We feel that We must disagree with these prophets of doom, who are always forecasting worse disasters, as though the end of the world were at hand. Present indications are that the human family is on the threshold of a new era. We must
recognize here the hand of God, who, as the years roll by, is ever directing men’s efforts, whether they realize it or not, towards the fulfillment of the inscrutable designs of His providence, wisely arranging everything, even adverse human fortune, for the Church’s good.

The confidence of the Pope is stunning and unforgettable. His words reveal the depth of his faith and the light of his prayer, which he was sharing with the council fathers and the world. The same providence that inspired John XXIII to call the council is working among us now. From the wellsprings of our faith, we must tell the world, again, about the mystery of God unfolding in our time.

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