

# FAITH, THEOLOGY, AND BELIEF

By Richard McBrien

## THE PROBLEM-

If the Catholic Church is in crisis today, it can be explained, at least in part, by the persistent failure of many Catholics to discern and understand the differences among *faith*, *theology*, and *belief*. Some bishops, pastors, and educational administrators assure nervous audiences of parents that the task of the religious educator is not to teach the latest views of modern theologians but to teach "the faith." Although there is some truth to this assertion, beneath it often lies the assumption that faith is available in some non-theological state—that it is possible, in other words, to isolate the former from the latter as one might separate two chemicals in a laboratory experiment. It is the burden of this chapter to show why this is not the case.

What we are examining here are the ground rules for thinking, speaking, writing, preaching, and teaching about God, about Jesus Christ, and about the supernatural order in general. What is the source of our knowledge of such realities? What principles govern our interpretation and communication of that knowledge? HOW do we know if our interpretations are accurate? Are there protective and/or corrective devices by which to recognize and to overcome error and distortion?

This chapter, therefore, is about faith, theology, and belief. It is also about the many expressions of belief: Sacred Scripture, and dogmas, and the liturgy. And, finally, it is about the process by which such beliefs are critically assimilated and transmitted to others: religious education and its several forms, such as catechesis, the teaching of theology, and Christian *praxis*. Each of these topics will be defined, explained, and interrelated in logical sequence. For many readers, this may be the most practical, perhaps even the most important, chapter in the entire book.

## *Faith*

How do we come to the knowledge of God, of Jesus Christ, of salvation, of the Holy Spirit, or of any other religious or supernatural reality? Is it by empirically and scientifically verifiable methods alone, or is such knowledge also derived from some other level of experience?

A crucial distinction is immediately in order. Our knowledge of God, Christ, salvation, or similar topics, may be the knowledge of an uninvolved, dispassionate observer such as a sociologist, an anthropologist, or a psychologist, or it may be the knowledge of a highly involved, committed believer in God, Christ, salvation, and related realities.

An atheistic sociologist could spend a lifetime examining the effects of theism on the institutions and cultural expressions of a given national or ethnic group. He or she may produce hundreds of articles and several books which carefully examine the control-group's belief system. He or she may indeed become an expert on the meaning of God, *as perceived by* this particular community of believers. But those are the key words: "as perceived by." We are not speaking here of the sociologist's own knowledge of God, but of his or her knowledge of other people's knowledge of God. So it is possible for someone to know much *about* God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, grace, and redemption, without at the same time *believing* in any one of these realities.

On the other hand, there are people (presumably most of those using this book) who are convinced that they know at least something about God because of God's own self-disclosure through Christ, the prophets, the Apostles, the Church, the created order, and even direct mystical experience. Without doubt, it is *this* kind of knowledge, not that of the sociologist, which is at the heart of our problem. "No one," the author of the Fourth Gospel reminded us, "has ever seen God" (John 1:18).

A believer's knowledge of God is of a necessarily different order from that of the uncommitted observer. The believer's knowledge does not originate in laboratory tests, scientific observation, nor computer technology. And it certainly does not originate in common sense or everyday human

experiences. Insofar as a believer insists that he or she knows something about God, that knowledge is attributed, in one way or another, to faith.

For the moment, it is enough to say that *faith is personal knowledge of God. (Christian faith, therefore, is personal knowledge of God in Christ.)* But already we can see that our emphasis is on the personal rather than on the cognitive or the propositional. Faith is not primarily belief in truths (propositions) which have been revealed to us by God through the Bible and the Church; rather, it is the way we come to the knowledge of God as God. The object of faith, in other words, is not a doctrine or a sacred text, but God, our Creator, Judge, and Savior.

We might also usefully distinguish "faith" from "the faith." The latter expression refers to the whole composite of beliefs held by Christians in general or by Catholics in particular. That expression is closer to what we mean by "doctrines" (see below) than it is to what we have been saying about "faith" itself.

### *Theology*

Faith is personal knowledge of God. It is our perception of God in the midst of life. Unalloyed faith does not exist. Nowhere can we discover and isolate "pure faith." Real faith, living faith, if you will, exists always and only in a cognitive, (more or less) reflective, (more or less) scientific state. Every thought about the meaning of faith is precisely that: a thought about the meaning of faith. Every word of interpretation designed to articulate and illuminate the meaning and implications of faith is again precisely that: a word of interpretation, not faith itself. When some Catholics warn against the contamination of "the faith" by theology, they reveal a fundamental confusion about the relationship between faith and theology.

Faith is not theology, to be sure, but neither does faith exist apart from, or independently of, theology. Theology comes into play at that very moment when the person of faith becomes intellectually conscious of his or her faith. From the very beginning, faith exists in a theologically interpreted state. Indeed, it is a redundancy to put it that way: "theologically interpreted." For the interpretation of one's faith is theology itself.

Theology is, as St. Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) defined it nine centuries ago, "faith seeking understanding" (*aides quaerens intellectum*). More specifically, *theology is that process by which we bring our knowledge and understanding of God to the level of expression.* Theology is the articulation, in a more or less systematic manner, of the experience of God within human experience.

Theology, in the broad sense of the word, may emerge in many forms: a painting, a piece of music, a dance, a cathedral, a bodily posture, or, in its more recognizable form, in spoken or written words. These forms, of course, never do justice to the perception which they hope to express. Not all theology is good theology. We can ineptly or incorrectly translate our experience or knowledge of God. We might even have a thoroughly distorted or false experience of God in the first place, which no form, however cleverly constructed, can ever redeem.

When all is said and done, religious educators, bishops, preachers, parents, and the Church at large do not transmit or hand on faith apart from theology. They hand on faith in and through the theology they are using. In other words, they transmit particular interpretations or understandings of faith in their various and multiple forms. It is entirely beside the point, therefore, to warn religious educators against teaching theology instead of handing on the faith. *Faith exists always and only in some theological form.* The question before the Church today and in every age is not *whether* that faith will be transmitted according to some theological interpretation, but rather *which* theological interpretation is best suited to the task at a particular moment.

What is so unacceptable about appeals to "the faith" over against the "private views of theologians" is that a particular theology is implicitly equated with faith itself. Consequently, any

criticism of that theology is automatically perceived as an undermining of faith. In effect, what is proposed is that "the faith," which must not be confined and corrupted by *any* theology, can only be understood properly in terms of *one* theology, often the neo-scholastic theology popular in Catholic colleges and seminaries just prior to the Second Vatican Council.

### *Belief*

If theology is faith brought to the level of self-consciousness, then belief is theology in a kind of snapshot or frozen state. Theology is a *process*: belief is one of its several *products*. In the general sense of the word, a belief is something accepted as true even in the absence of clear and convincing evidence. In the theological sense of the word, *a belief is a formulation of the knowledge we have of God through faith*.

Belief has many forms. At the one end of the spectrum, these beliefs are widely shared and officially approved (doctrines, dogmas). At the other end, they are held by select groups or individuals and are not officially proposed for universal acceptance (for example, the presumed appearances of the Blessed Mother at Fatima and Lourdes).

*There are many Christian beliefs, even though there is only one Christian faith.* Christian faith, as defined above, is knowledge of God in Christ, who is the key and focal point of all human experience. Over the centuries of Christian history there have been literally thousands of beliefs held and transmitted at one time or another—i.e., interpretations of faith which significant segments of the Christian community have found useful for expressing and articulating their own knowledge of God in Christ. Some of these beliefs endured the test of time (e.g., the great Christological dogmas), while others have receded beyond the range of vision or even of collective memory (e.g., the Two Swords theory of papal authority, proposed in the Middle Ages).

What has been true in Christian history is true also in the contemporary Church. Hundreds of different beliefs vie with one another for attention and acceptance. Some of these beliefs are grounded firmly and deeply in the tradition of the Church, e.g., belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, while others have shorter and/or more tenuous roots, e.g., belief in the infallibility of the pope. The sorting-out process, however, is never finished. We are faced constantly with the problem of evaluating and reevaluating our beliefs in the light of our ongoing experience and of our subsequent theological interpretations of that experience. These, in turn, are judged against that "instinct of faith" which somehow gives the whole Church its inner coherence and its radical identity and continuity in the midst of change. It is at the point of the "somehow" in the preceding sentence that our rich poetry about the Holy Spirit inserts itself.

At key historical moments in that sorting-out process (moments of "crisis," as we saw in chapter 1), the Church, acting through members set apart by the inspiration of God, by theological competence, and/or by episcopal ordination, is compelled to make decisions and to bring those decisions to the level of formal expression. These expressions may take different forms: letters, liturgical documents, narratives, and theological reflections which the Church itself recognizes to be fundamental, normative, constitutive expressions of its faith (*Sacred Scripture*); official

teachings based on Sacred Scripture and the ongoing experience of the Church (*doctrines*); official teachings proposed with such solemnity that their rejection is tantamount to *heresy*, which is a denial of some truth of faith deemed by the teaching Church to be essential to that faith (*dogmas*); or officially approved and/or mandated cultic acts and sacramental celebrations through which the community ritualizes in word and action what it believes in the depths of its heart and consciousness (*liturgy*). Indeed, there is a Latin axiom, "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*," which means literally that the law of praying is the law of believing. We express our belief in our worship.

In stop-action language: Theology ("faith seeking understanding") follows faith, and belief follows theology. In fact, however, faith and theology do not really exist apart from one another

whereas belief and theology can and do exist apart. The theologian can express all sorts of judgments about the reality of God as he or she presumably experiences God, without at the same time resorting to formulae or propositions which have already attracted wider attention and acceptance, whether officially (as in the case of a doctrine) or unofficially (as in the case of a belief about the healing effects of Lourdes water).

### *Religious Education*

Although religious education has more to do with communication than it does with speculation, it would be a grave oversimplification to suggest that religious education is merely the delivery system for a faith-community's beliefs. Religious education is more than the process of communicating what has been grasped by theology and officially adopted by the Church. The religious educator is at once theologian and educator, for *the field of religious education is located at the point where theology/belief and education intersect*. On the one hand, the religious educator must himself or herself critically investigate and understand what is to be communicated and, on the other hand, must attend to the methods, context, and effects of the communicative process.

The aim of religious education is to help people discern, respond to, and be transformed by the presence of God in their lives, and to work for the continuing transformation of the world in the light of this perception of God. *Christian* religious education focuses on Jesus Christ as the great sign or sacrament of God's presence in human history and, more specifically, in the Church which is the People of God and the Body of Christ. Christian religious education, or simply "Christian education," is concerned, therefore, not only with the transformation of the individual and of the world in the light of Christ, but with the transformation of the Church, which is the primary context for **our** experience of God as Creator, as Redeemer, and as Reconciler.

Just as there are many different forms of belief, so there are "vial different forms of religious education or of Christian education. Religious education, first of all, is as divisible as religion itself. There are at least as many different kinds of religious education as there are religions. Christian education, too, can be divided along denominational lines: Lutheran education, Baptist education, Catholic education, etc. And Christian education can also be divided according to specific purposes. *Catechesis*, for example, introduces the new or potential member of the Church, whether a child or an adult, to the whole of the Christian proclamation. The purpose of catechesis is, as the Greek word from which it is derived suggests, the "echoing" of the Christian Gospel in a way that is at once pastoral and systematic. Catechesis, therefore, is not the same as *preaching*, which is yet another form of religious or Christian education. Catechesis is systematic in intent and method (whether it employs the question-and-answer format or not). Preaching is not. Catechesis seeks to echo the Christian message in a way that provides the new or potential member of the Church with a sense of the interrelatedness of Christian mysteries or doctrines and of their relative centrality and importance. All catechists and preachers, however, are Christian educators, but not all Christian educators are catechists and preachers.

Much the same can be said of still other forms of religious or Christian education. The *teaching of theology* is clearly a form of religious education, but it differs from catechesis in that it is directed primarily at those who are already mature members of the Church, and it differs from preaching in that it is scientific, appealing immediately to critical reason rather than to a conversion of the mind and heart. So, too, Christian *praxis* is a form of religious education. It is at the same time critical reflection on action already taken, and action that is taken after critical reflection. *Praxis* is not related to theory as practice is related to theology. *Praxis* involves the coming together of theory and practice to produce something different from each. It is, in any case, a way of doing religious education, one of its several forms.

This chapter began with a brief description of the problem created by our failure to understand the differences among faith, theology, and belief. We identified these as the "elements of the problem," emphasizing their relationships one with another.