

Second Sunday of Easter: Our Doubts and His Mercy

This week's Gospel presents us with Doubting Thomas and our annual reflection on doubts and faith.

First of all, in this context, I am not considering faith as a compendium of dogmas, but faith as the belief in the very basis of our religion. By this I mean the core, the fundamentals: belief in God's existence, belief in the Trinity, belief in the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, belief in the spiritual and our sharing in the spiritual, belief in the presence of God in the Word of Scripture and in the Sacraments, belief in our salvation by the Lord, belief in the presence of the Spirit of the Father and the Son in the teaching of the Catholic Church.

A young lady who had become a Catholic in high school and was in college once asked me, "Why does the priest say during Mass, 'The Mystery of Faith' and the people respond with an acclamation that includes some of the articles of our faith?" She was stuck on the word *mystery*. Perhaps she had only seen that word used in the context of a murder mystery like an Agatha Christi whodunit. I explained to her that when we use the term *mystery* at Mass we are referring to that which we believe that is beyond our minds' grasp. In the early Church the sacraments were called the mysteries.

All of us would be quick to affirm the mystery of faith. Still, that does not mean that we do not go through periods of doubt. It is quite normal for people to doubt, in fact, it is part of the human condition. It is normal for people to question themselves. It is normal for people to question the depth of their faith or even if they have any faith at all. I really do not believe that a person with doubts has lost faith. He or she is rather searching for faith.

Maybe we can understand this better if we consider two of the ways that doubt enters our lives.

First of all, most of us entered into periods of doubt as we grew up. Many times we were quite vocal about this. A pre-teen or teen might question a religion teacher: How do I know that God exists? How do I know that all this Jesus stuff isn't just made up by a bunch of people who want other people to give them money?

Those questions, often asked with the lack of tact that only a young person can get away with, are not as confrontational as they might seem. Consider the young person's perspective, or consider our own perspective when we were young. We had experienced religion in a story-telling manner, or whatever way that it could be possible to communicate the faith to children. Our most intense lessons came when we prepared for First Communion, at the ripe old age of 7 or 8. But, at 13 or 14, perhaps in confirmation class, we were looking for ideas that relate to our growing intellectual capacities. In school, we had graduated from arithmetic to algebra, but in our understanding of our faith, we were still somewhere around 8 years old. The vast majority of the time teenagers who challenge the faith are not really questioning faith,

but questioning a childish understanding of faith. That is why experiences like youth ministry are so important to their faith life. They can now relate to the faith according to their level of maturity.

Still, even with the greatest of programs, a teenager as well as all of us must be willing to take a leap of faith and recognize within himself or herself that there are things that a person will never know and understand because they are too great for anyone to comprehend, things like the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. The prayer that all of us must make, teens and adults is simply: I trust in God, even when there are things within me that want to doubt. I can distinctly remember going through teenage doubts and finally saying, "What the Church teaches, I believe. End of story."

There is another type of doubt that is far more difficult to deal with. That is the doubt that enters our lives when things go wrong, very wrong. It is one thing to be a person of faith when all is wonderful in our lives. It is another thing to have faith when a loved one gets sick or dies, or when we are afflicted with a serious illness, or when our life plans are destroyed by the malicious actions of another, perhaps a former spouse. It was easy for the Disciple Thomas to believe in Jesus when he experience his healing, and when the words of the Lord burned within his own heart. It was difficult for Thomas to believe when his own world appeared to fall apart on Good Friday. Thomas doubted the Resurrection because he could not get pass the crucifixion.

It is often the same with us. We are so torn up by many crises in our lives, that sometimes we cannot get pass those crises to an experience of the new life of Christ that is offered on Easter. We can be so torn up by the physical events of our lives that we close the door to the possibility of the spiritual. That is essentially what Thomas did. That is what we tend to do. It is a normal human reaction to suffering. It really does not mean that we do not believe in God. We are not even questioning his goodness, even when we shake our fist at heaven and shout, "How could you?" We just are being held back by the pain of physical life from recognizing the joy of the spiritual life.

Many people persecute themselves for having these thoughts and wonder if God will forgive them. When you love someone, you are more concerned about their pain then you are about the way they express their pain. God loves us too much to be concerned with anything other than our pain. At the same time, he tells us to give him our pain and take a step out of physical suffering and a step into spiritual joy.

That is really what Easter is about. Easter is all about entering into the spiritual. Easter is about the conquest of the physical by the spiritual. Easter is about life conquering death, love conquering hate, Jesus rising from a tomb, and us taking a step out of the physical and into the spiritual.

Doubting is part of the human condition. It will exist in all our lives to some extent or other until the time that we see our God face to face. At that time the whole concept of doubt will be pointless. But until then, we recognize our humanity and we humbly ask God to admit us as we are, human beings with human limitations, into his divinity.

Faith is the one gift that God promises will be given to all who seek it. But even if we were to have the faith of a saint, we would still have doubts. Joe Corbett, a very wise man I knew who passed away in 2011, once told me something that I have treasured throughout my life. One of his adult sons told him that he wished he had the faith his father had and went to daily Mass like his dad did. Joe answered, "I don't go to daily Mass because I have great faith, I go to Mass because I need faith." Those words have always stuck with me.

When Doubting Thomas made his act of faith, Jesus responded, "You believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen but believe." Jesus was talking about us. He was calling us blessed because we have often taken a leap of faith and left the limitations of the physical for the infinite gifts of the spiritual. Remember Thomas had an experience of the Resurrected Jesus. We only have an experience of an empty tomb. We have not seen, but we believe. At the conclusion of the Gospel of John, *John 20:31*, John wrote:

"All these things have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you might have life in his name."

Perhaps there are some people reading this who are experiencing intense doubt. The doubts that we suffer at various times of our lives, are not all that bad after all. The experience of doubt can lead us to take a more determined step into faith. No, not a step, a leap, a leap into the arms of the Lord who loves us with all our human limitations, including those that might question his very love. Maybe that is why Pope St. John Paul II declared that the Sunday that we reflect on doubts and faith should also be the Sunday that we recognize the overwhelming Divine Mercy of the Lord.