

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

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Brother François

I Believe; Help My Unbelief

I believe, Lord; help my unbelief

How can the Bible speak in one place of a “full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22), and in another text of “faith as big as a mustard seed” (Luke 17:6), the smallest of all seeds? How can we understand the relationship between these two statements; how can we situate both of them in our ongoing life? The father of the epileptic boy dared to say to Jesus, in a single sentence with all the force which anguish gives: “I believe, Lord; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Faith can be felt to be something austere. People often say that “faith alone” must suffice. They thus emphasize the need to be stripped bare: the one who believes must be content with having nothing else, no proof, to have seen nothing, to know or even understand nothing, to feel nothing. And yet, is there anything that determines the course of our life as much as this faith, which is apparently so austere? Nothing has so profoundly influenced the decisions of a lifetime and sustained the continuity of this life than this little bit of faith which is almost nothing. Without fear of error we can say that faith is everything in our life, and, in the final analysis, we can say with equally good reason that it is almost nothing. It is impossible to show what it is in itself. I do not possess it; it does not belong to me. Doubt follows closely on its heels, as the father of the epileptic boy expressed so well in his request.

Is doubt then like the worm that is already in the fruit, finally causing it to rot and fall to the ground? Not necessarily. If doubt always remains possible, that is because God does not want to force our hand in any way and fully respects the freedom of our heart. We could be tempted to say that it comes from the fact that God has confidence in us and desires a relationship with us in which absolutely nothing is forced. Doubt can become dangerous: an abyss opens beneath it. But we can never treat it as a foreign or false element. It is present because there is faith.

It is true that the situation in which we live today makes the presence of doubt more insistent than ever before. In the past people could believe with the whole community of believers, sustained by the convictions of the wider society, whether it was the parish or the Church as a whole. Today, even when we rely just as much on the faith of all the other witnesses, the support of the wider society no longer functions in the same way. Faith has become much more personal. Often it distinguishes us from those who are closest to us. And by becoming a personal choice it has inevitably become more fragile.

In addition, modern science tends to confine faith to a strictly inward realm. Even without always wishing to intentionally, it is in danger of affecting the very nature of faith, because faith in Christ is always part of the warp and woof of History and opens us to a mission on this earth. By relegating faith to the inner world, the exact sciences, but also the social sciences like psychology, could render it much more fragile, for they would remove its impact on real life, making it irrelevant to History. On this point too, doubt becomes more insistent. We should not complain about this situation, however. It causes the true nature of faith to manifest itself even more clearly.

The movement towards Jesus

It has been said again and again that, in the New Testament, believing does not mean first of all holding as true or accepting truths difficult to understand. Nor does faith show itself as that great endurance that characterized certain Jewish circles at the time of Jesus when God's promises took so long to come about.

It can be said that, in the New Testament, faith takes first of all the form of a movement and that it is a concrete step a person takes, that of "coming to Jesus." Perhaps we could even say that before being a "movement towards" it is more fundamentally a thirst, a desire: "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink, whoever believes in me" (John 7:37). If, in this text, Saint John sets in parallel "coming to" and "believing in" (cf. 6:35), he knows at the same time that this "coming to Jesus" depends in the final analysis upon a secret attraction that the Father has already exercised on a person's heart (6:44).

Faith is thus concerned in the first place not with specific truths or with promises for the future, nor even with insights into the existence of a transcendent God. It begins by "going towards" the person of Jesus, and this "going" is often motivated by a thirst. Something is already secretly at

work in the heart. It is already attracted to. With the incarnation, with the presence of Jesus as a human being, faith at first takes an extremely simple form: a desire can contain in itself the beginning of faith; a movement already represents the beginning of the road.

In several places in the Fourth Gospel, we can follow this kind of journey. Chapter 9 tells the story of the healing of a man born blind. At the beginning, this man only knows that he has been cured by "the one called Jesus" (v. 11). Later he already states that "he is a prophet" (v. 17). When the others protest, he takes another step forward: for him it must be a man from God, because if he did not come from God he would have been able to do nothing (v. 31 & 33). In the end, when he meets Jesus again and discovers in him the Son of Man, he bows his head to the ground and says "I believe" (v. 35-38). What a journey he has undertaken! First vague notions, then a breakthrough to the mystery and finally an act of adoration. A person who had no sight at all is now seized to such an extent that, for the moment, the fact of seeing no longer matters. The light has become an inner light, and that light is enough.

In chapter 20 there are also several journeys. Peter and John run to the tomb. They find it empty, with the cloths arranged very carefully. The Gospel says about the beloved disciple that "he saw and he believed" (v. 8). We are not told exactly what he believed. Did he have a premonition? Mary

of Magdala was enabled to see the risen Christ. She recognized him when he called her by name (v. 16). The evening of that same day, the apostles were also able to see Jesus. They verified the marks of the Passion. But it is by breathing on them, by breathing his own life into them, that Jesus placed faith within them (v. 20 & 22). The journey of this chapter only comes to a climax with Thomas. He was unable to believe, but in the presence of Jesus he was overwhelmed, certainly because the marks of the Passion were before his eyes, but probably equally or more so because he realized that Jesus read what was in his heart. When Thomas said, “My Lord and my God!” the last word also evokes adoration (v. 27-28).

Each person can focus on one particular element of these journeys. What is striking, it seems to me, is that on the one hand they begin with very little, and on the other, throughout the journey, Christ is much more present than the person searching could realize. We can say this of ourselves, too: we set out with almost nothing and as we went forward, we realized that we were already acquainted with the one towards whom we were going. An attraction emanating from him was already there before us. Faith is not a reality that can be measured, for it does not consist only in a “movement towards.” It is already in itself the presence of the one towards whom we are going.

Christ in us by faith

When Jesus is no longer in the midst of his disciples physically, the movement towards him is no longer expressed by changing one's place – going towards him and then following him – as was the case before the resurrection. Whoever believes in him still takes a concrete step, but this step involves abandoning oneself to him, handing oneself over and leaving room for him. The paradox of faith thus becomes more evident: it is practically nothing and it is what matters more than anything else. It is a matter of opening the door of our heart to him constantly, while at the same time knowing that he is already inside. Is there anything poorer or more disinterested than that – opening the door to someone who is already there? Christ does not dwell within me like a stranger who wants to take my place. He is there as the one who loves me, who has put himself in my place, who in his love is, in the depths of my being, more myself than I am. And yet it is up to me to open the door to him constantly, for between him and me everything remains personal; nothing happens without me, automatically. Everything is of the nature of a living relationship.

Saint Paul expresses this with great perceptiveness: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. The life I am presently living in the flesh (in my weak and mortal condition), I live in

faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.” (Galatians 2:20.) Christ is present, because we gave ourselves to him by having believed in him: it is no longer I who live; he dwells within me. Still, as long as we are in this life, we can only live this in faith, by giving ourselves constantly to him, by surrendering ourselves to him, by opening our hearts to him.

In this sense too we can understand Saint John when he describes faith as “the victory that has conquered the world” (1 John 5:4). Saint John does not want to suggest that we have to exaggerate our faith to such a degree that the world has no longer any hold over us and can no longer seduce us. No, he reminds us that, in coming to believe, we have let Christ enter our life and in this way the world has been unmasked in us together with what it wants us to believe. Henceforth we keep the door of our heart open to Christ, who “in us is stronger than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). From that moment on it can be said that he is our faith.

Saint Paul for his part employs a curious expression: “the faith of Christ” (e.g. Philippians 3:9). It thus does not only mean faith in Christ, either in the sense of recognizing who Christ is or in surrendering ourselves to him, trusting in him. There is more: faith comes from him as a gift; it is the faith of Christ and I receive it as that by which he unites me to himself and enables me to live like him. Here again, my part in faith seems almost nothing. And

yet everything is given to me together with faith. This “almost nothing” determines my whole way of being.

Who are you?

Having reached this point in my reflection, I pause first of all to consider two questions found in the Gospels: one that is asked of Jesus, and another by which he questions us.

First of all, the one people asked Jesus: “Who are you?” (John 8:25).

Believing is difficult. That comes from the nature of faith. For believing exposes us to what cannot be proven. To the extent that faith is authentic it will always remain fragile, with a fragility that can be considered inherent to it. The difficulty of believing comes in addition from the identity of this Jesus in whom I believe. I would like to ask him about himself: “Who are you?” Even if it is true that faith is fragile in itself, the questioning in the final analysis has its source in your person, Lord Jesus. So who are you?

If you had been a great religious figure, I could admire you and take your life and teaching as a rule of life. But I would remain at a distance; I would not believe in you. By continuing to evoke you within me I could bring you close to me, but I

would remain short of faith; I would not have surrendered myself. I might even have the feeling that I have not grasped who you are.

For you were so different from the great religious figures of humankind. You were very religious, of course: the Gospels tell us how you prayed. But even in this respect you are still so different. Your life bears so little resemblance to an upward movement. In no way do you present yourself as an inspired offshoot of humanity. Discipline, meditation, struggle and suffering did not cause you to attain a superior level of experience. The movement of your life is different. Not a slow conquest, a laborious initiation, a progressive improvement. While following the evolution of human growth, you are a being who lives like a gift, from the start. In you, everything is already found in the being you have received.

What you say of God does not give the impression that you discovered it at the end of a long journey. You speak as if it were obvious. To such an extent that you are able to speak of him in such a way that even a child can understand. And when you tell us to love our enemies – a truth that represents the key to every human existence on earth, the ultimate truth beyond which there is no need to search for one that is deeper – you state this not as the fruit of an arduous search, but as something obvious that is given with what you are. You do not need to justify that entreaty, to give reasons for that truth. On your lips, it is simple and clear.

The need that marks every human existence, the need to acquire, to attain, does not characterize your life. At least when I read the Gospels, you seem rather to receive, always to receive. Your very being in its totality is a gift from on high. The symbolic language says it well: you are the one who comes from above (John 3:31). You come from somewhere else. In your life there is a naturalness, an innocence that can only be explained in that way. Your origins seem completely different from ours. Even the most religious or noble-minded persons were never so simple.

When I have trouble explaining to myself your birth and your resurrection, it is enough for me to focus on what, according to the Gospel, you were unquestionably. Starting from that, what seems difficult finds its rightful place. Your very being, your behaviour show that you are not from here and that I cannot judge you according to the laws of this world. You know where you came from and where you are going (John 8:14). The two extremes of your life, your coming and your departure, the two moments when heaven and earth must have touched, become clearer starting from the centre, where I see you being and acting.

As a gift from above, you can do nothing but descend. You have the weight of every great gift. You “came down,” as the Gospel puts it (John 6:33, 38), and you are still coming down. Everything is found in this downward movement: joining those who are lower and who seem to be unreachable.

Thus the word “gift” does not only express where you come from. It also helps us understand where you are going. You return to the Father from whom you came, but you return in an identical movement of giving. This return could be called an ascent, but in reality you only find the Father again by letting the gift flow out totally. Before the weight of this love – the Father’s love, who gave you to humanity, and your own love that made you give yourself – death no longer has any power. The insuperable barrier has been crossed. We can now ask you where you are going, because a way forward has been opened. You returned to the Father, and now we will cross over with you.

You were often very discreet about yourself. You used mysterious expressions to speak about the origin and the end of your life. That was intentional. People had to come to you through faith. And now we have to try and discover the meaning of this discretion.

Where is your faith?

If faith is not first of all adhering to some truths or submitting to a claim that cannot be verified, then it is basically trusting, surrendering oneself to another, to his words or to what he is able to do. Those who believe stop measuring everything

with respect to themselves. They do not look at themselves. They abandon themselves.

The faith placed in Christ can only grow, however, when it relies on knowledge. As I advance, it becomes more and more indispensable for me to understand better what had attracted me to him in the first place and led me to place my trust in him. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word for knowledge describes less an intellectual approach than a communion of persons. Wishing to know Christ, I thus attempt to deepen what I can know about him, how the Gospels speak of him and how the other writings of the New Testament show him alive.

In one of the most personal passages he ever wrote (Philippians 3:4-11), Saint Paul makes the transition with no problem from faith in Christ to knowledge of Christ. If faith caused him to leave behind all he could pride himself on so that he could trust in Christ alone, that faith necessarily became a personal knowledge of Christ, as he actually lived, knowledge of the power of his resurrection and communion in his sufferings.

Since Christ is not a figure of the past and there is nothing static about life with him, trust will always be a characteristic aspect of faith. For we will constantly be placed before unexpected situations. Already life itself never allows us to stand still. But still more, Christ himself calls us to follow him where he goes before us.

No one can store up trust. We can acquire a cer-

tain serenity, of course, or make our convictions more solid. We can let ourselves be penetrated by the word “trust” and repeat the texts that speak about it. But trusting someone is always lived out on the road. That road leads us to ever new situations; it sometimes becomes almost impracticable; it can even descend into a darkness where all the support of our senses seems to vanish. Then He is the only thing that matters. We can no longer look at ourselves. All we can do is try and grasp the little we hear of his voice, the flicker of light that we can still discern. And at times, anguish can overtake us to a degree that we no longer hear or see anything.

How, in such situations, could Jesus reproach his disciples for their “little faith” (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8)? Can faith be measured? Should they have had more (a larger provision of) trust? In what way was their faith insufficient? Would he have wished them to have shown themselves capable of dealing with or resolving the situation? It is strange, incidentally, that the evangelist Matthew was able to put side by side in the same verse the reproach for having “little faith” and the promise given to “faith as large as a mustard-seed” (17:20). If faith in itself is almost nothing, why then blame those who have only a little?

Should the disciples’ faith have expanded to take a detached view of the situation and in this way to master it? But such an attitude would hardly have been in conformity with the spirit of the

Gospel, with the simple trust of poor men and women. Perhaps the expression “little faith” describes rather a trust which doesn’t go far enough, which would stop halfway as if there were areas in which it could not count on Jesus, a trust that would have limited Jesus’ power to what is only spiritual or inward and which would not be able to recognize his presence at the heart of Creation or History. The disciples did not go far enough. They returned to what seemed possible to them instead of going forward with almost nothing, with Jesus alone. Their trust was short-sighted.

There are some people I can never forget who, while being familiar with doubt, committed themselves with great daring. They were able to give priority to the little bit of light contained in faith. That little light had for them infinitely more weight than the most intelligent arguments that presented themselves to their minds. In this way they went far and never stopped. A total faith can at the same time be a very little bit of faith. It feels everything that can trouble it, but it refuses to let itself be divided by limiting itself to a part of life. Faith focuses entirely on the one in whom it believes. It does not have its foundation in itself. It has only him. And it cannot fix him, close him in, or reduce him to its own measure. It always goes forward, leaving us with the impression that we do not have enough faith.

In telling the story of the calming of the storm in his own way, Saint Luke replaces Jesus’ reproach

to his disciples (“Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”) by a question: “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25). Luke tones down the reproach and asks for a response by the readers. I would like to imagine myself in a similar situation and hear Jesus’ question for myself. I have the impression that I could not keep from replying, “But you are our faith.” In us faith is lacking, that is obvious. It is never on the same level as the gift that was given to us and it does not manage to hold firm in the face of critical events. But when you are there, I believe. You take everything upon yourself, including my lack of faith. Your presence is the presence of faith.

The story of the father of the epileptic boy mentioned at the beginning of this reflection shows better still how close Jesus is to those who cannot believe. The father came up to Jesus saying, “If you can do something, have pity on us and help us” (Mark 9:22). Jesus threw the words “if you can” back to the father and added, “Everything is possible to those who believe.” He practically said to the father, “It is up to you to trust.” And yet he did not wait; he stood beside the father and, when that man was unable to believe, he also took that upon himself. He believed with the father and in this way the impossible took place. We should not think, then, that a weak faith is far from Jesus. He himself comes to the aid of those who have difficulty in believing.

A sincere faith

In the second epistle to Timothy, Saint Paul evokes the memory of the sincere faith which is found in Timothy (1:5). A sincere faith is, literally, a non-hypocritical faith, a faith without hypocrisy. It is thus a faith which does not accept any break between what one believes and how one lives. It is understandable that Saint Paul praises this in Timothy. Who would not do so in seeing someone draw out all the consequences of his faith? In the opposite case, refusing to put them into practice discredits all the words of faith one speaks.

But there can be another form of hypocrisy: making use of faith for what it does not offer, trying to go beyond it by theories which are more attractive, more interesting or subtler, using the name of Christ for causes that differ from the Gospel. If it is true that all faith is fulfilled by being put into practice as well as by leading to knowledge, faith itself can never be placed at the service of self-interested goals. What it gives will remain of the order of faith. It is denatured as soon as it becomes an ideology or a gnosis.

On an intellectual level, for example, faith remains at the root of all reflection. It will never be anything but a poor faith, received over and over again. That basis can never be left behind. And in the realm of spiritual life, those people with the most discernment have never stopped repeating

that it is not feelings or extraordinary experiences that guarantee communion with God; this communion always begins with the simplest openness, since all it can do is offer itself freely and it will go infinitely far beyond all we have been able to make our own. As Saint John of the Cross says at the beginning of the Ascent of Mount Carmel, “Faith, faith alone, is the closest and most proportionate means to unite the soul to God.”

Mysteriously, it is this poor faith, this “faith alone,” that can become a source of gratefulness. It seems like so little and what it offers has apparently such little effect on life in the world. And yet, how can we ever be thankful enough to have been attracted to Christ, to have learnt to know him more personally and to have received some light in the heart concerning him? Gratefulness, therefore, for the gift of faith, but gratefulness also for the gift which is Christ himself. For in desiring to express what he is in himself, God would never have been able to go any further than what he did in Christ.

In writing to a Church – that of Colossae – where people explored other sources of certainty than that which is given in faith, it is significant that Saint Paul adds to each of his clarifications and exhortations a call to give thanks (Colossians 1:12; 2:7; 3:15; 4:2). In fact, even if it feels very weak, faith is strengthened by keeping its eyes open concerning all that has been given to us and by consciously giving thanks for it.

A sincere faith, then, does not present itself as a naïve faith that refuses to go forward and to face questions directly. It is rather a faith that lets itself be borne forward by gratefulness and in this way keeps the tiny flame placed in the heart burning. The indigence of such a faith has nothing sad or austere about it, for it is not felt as if we did not receive enough. It calls us rather to live more and more a personal relationship with Christ in the sense that Saint Paul speaks of this to the Philippians: “I consider everything a disadvantage because of what is far superior – knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:8). If there is happiness in faith – and the first Christians said that they were happy to believe – that happiness does not only come from the perspectives opened up by faith. It is found just as much in the knowledge of Christ, in a concrete and intimate communion with him.

Our faith also includes more impersonal elements, of course. The mystery of creation and that of the presence of the Spirit in that creation touch dimensions of infinity that lie far beyond us. In the dialogue with the religions of India, but also when confronted by the exact sciences, it is important to be very aware of this. Nonetheless, the heart of faith will always remain the discovery of Christ, the relationship with him, the striving to see his face. The more impersonal elements are illuminated starting from the centre. Thus Saint Paul can situate Christ in his relationship to the universe as it has been created with all its dimensions and its

history (Colossians 1:15-20) and at the same time view his own sufferings as a very personal way of entering into communion with the fate that is still in store for this Christ in this world (Colossians 1:24). Starting from the fire that burns in his heart, the most distant perspectives are illuminated.

Adoration

At the end of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the apparition of the Risen Christ strikes the disciples to such a degree that they fall on their knees before him in an act of adoration. The evangelist notes that “some, however, doubted” (Matthew 28:17). At the climax of the Gospel it is thus clear that God does not impose himself and forces no one. Each person remains present in his or her freedom, including the one who hesitates.

Finding adoration and doubt side by side can help us better to understand both adoration and faith. Adoration is not what we often imagine, a forced submission as if we found ourselves in front of such a superior power that all we could do was give in and prostrate ourselves. Nor is it the same thing as a ritual gesture that could remain totally exterior. Even if it willingly expresses itself by a movement of the body (in the Bible, placing one’s forehead on the ground), it comes from within, as

the story of the man born blind showed us. That man who can finally see no longer needs to look at Jesus, to the extent that his healing enlightens him within, and he offers homage to Jesus (John 9). Thomas for his part does not need to touch Jesus’ wounds either. Knowing that he is recognized in his doubting goes beyond any material observations. What springs up in him then is nothing but adoration (John 20).

Elsewhere in John’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of adoration “in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23-24). The expression “in Spirit” means first of all: according to the spiritual nature of God – God is Spirit – thus without being linked to this or that particular place or to this or that outer representation. But the expression cannot not also mean that this adoration is animated from within by the Spirit, by that Spirit which brings us inwardly into harmony with God. And if “in truth” certainly indicates an opposition to any still imperfect knowledge concerning God, we cannot exclude the idea that in this expression truth is also that which human beings are convinced of in the depths of their being. It is a question of an authentic adoration which will be felt within as legitimate and not forced.

And yet the simple word “adoration” can easily lead us to believe that there is something elevated in it, reserved for those who have a strong faith. A maxim of Saint John of the Cross can help us better to grasp how we should understand adoration:

“The Father spoke only one word, it was his Son; and in an eternal silence he never stops saying it; so we too must hear this word in silence.”

God’s silence represents a trial for those who want to believe. Certainly, this silence proves that God never forces himself on anyone, but for many people God is far too silent. Those who spoke in his name brought correct ideas and knowledge of his will, but they did not reveal God’s true nature or open his heart. For that, it was necessary to wait for his Son. In him, God broke the silence. In him he went as far as possible to express who He is, and to say it not by making speeches but by a human life like ours, a life that gives itself. He never could have gone further than that. Nothing could show more who He is from all eternity and how much He loves.

That one word now rings out unceasingly. God does not add any others. He says it over and over again. In this sense, it can be said that it resonates in a silence, not being covered up by other statements. To grasp it, the soul must become used to this silence, going beyond the search for quick answers or easy solutions. The word comes from God’s heart, opens his heart and looks for ours, calling out to what is in the depths of our being. It goes from one heart to another.

What I hear then, is that there is love only in Him. I will hear that again and again. However far I may go in coming closer to God, I will never reach the end of this truth. I must welcome it in si-

lence ever anew, in a silence that attempts to reach the silence of God Himself.

Understanding Jesus’ coming against this background of silence opens us to adoration. Already the simple fact that the silence was broken overwhelms us. God did not remain mute; He wanted to speak a word not from above, but in an existence like ours, from below. And the content of that word overwhelms us still more: this is the worth we have in God’s eyes; this is thus the secret of creation! God went that far! With what respect is this said to us, however. Nothing is imposed.

Our inner discussions, our arguments through which doubt is fostered then seem out of place. What God says in the coming of Jesus – even if it comes to us only in the form of a whisper, “in the sound of a gentle breeze” (1 Kings 19:12) – what God says there has infinitely more weight than what can come from within us. We are thus recognized on a deeper level than that which our consciousness attains. All we can do is remain silent and surrender ourselves, bowing down.

Just as for many the awareness of having only a weak faith does not keep them from acting with great and bold confidence – because they give the priority to that little that enlightens them – the same thing is true for adoration: the priority is given to what has taken hold of us and what was sufficient to overwhelm us. A faith aware of its fragility could easily contract, shrinking to human meas-

ure. But that would be to go against the nature of faith. It is the nature of faith to tend towards what is still beyond, towards an encounter, towards adoration.

© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France
DL 1043 - juillet 2007 - ISBN 9782850402401

Achevé d'imprimer en juillet 2007 imprimerie - AB.Doc, 71100 Chalon sur Saône