

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2012
Pages: 151-165

JOURNEY OF FAITH: BIBLICAL- ECCLESIAL TRAJECTORY

Joseph Xavier SJ[♦]

Revelation and faith are two fundamental concepts of Christianity and its teaching. Christian theology is built on these foundational elements. According to the classical definition of St Anselm, theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. From that perspective, theology originates in the desire for deepening one's faith.

Pope Benedict in his Apostolic Letter, *Porta Fidei*, invites us to deepen our understanding of the gift of faith. Announcing the Year of Faith, the Pope writes: "We want to celebrate this Year in a worthy and fruitful manner. Reflection on the faith will have to be intensified, so as to help all believers in Christ to acquire a more conscious and vigorous adherence to the Gospel, especially at a time of profound change such as humanity is currently experiencing."¹ It will be a propitious occasion for the faithful to understand more profoundly the foundation of Christian faith.² In response to Pope's invitation, this article attempts to reflect on the historical development of the Christian faith.

From the history of Christian religion we know that faith is not a static concept. It has always been creative and dynamic. Therefore, we would like to see how the faith of the Church achieves this dynamic nature down through the centuries. For such an enquiry there is no better place to begin with than the Bible. However, we

[♦] Dr Joseph Xavier, SJ teaches theology at the Gregorian University, Rome. He holds a doctorate in political theology from the same university. His area of specialization is Faith and Revelation. Email: xavier@unigre.it

¹ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter, *Porta Fidei*, 8.

² Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Note with Pastoral Recommendations for the Year of Faith* (6 January 2012).

would like to acknowledge that our study in no way attempts to be exhaustive. It has a limited scope: to bring to light the general idea of faith in the Bible and in the teachings of the Church. With that objective in mind, first we shall briefly mention some of the important features of the faith in the Old Testament (OT). Next, we would like to see how some of the cognitive elements (contents) are already part of the faith of the New Testament (NT), especially in the Kingdom message of Christ and the kerygmatic preaching of the Apostles. In the second part of the article we shall review the growth of faith and its conceptual maturation in the history of the Church. Another concern of this study is to see in what way some of the patristic-medieval thinkers have contributed to have a better articulation of Christian faith. Finally, it will also attempt to review the latest Magisterial teachings of the Church on faith.

Biblical Faith

Generally speaking, the biblical concept of faith underlines the relationship between God and human beings. It is a relationship of trust and commitment. Though truth and knowledge are part of it, biblical faith does not claim to be a gnosis or some sort of higher knowledge about God. It deals with human beings' personal relationship with God. However, this relationship is not the result of human speculation but the consequence of God's intervention in human history, i.e. revelation. From that perspective, we can say that faith is the human response to divine revelation which may take different forms. In fact, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the manifold nature of revelation: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through his Son" (Heb 1:1-2).

In the Old Testament, faith originates in the context of the covenant relationship between God and man. In fact, a covenant is based on the faithfulness of the parties involved. The agreement is binding on both parties of the pact, i.e. God and human beings. The OT covenant is a contract in which God, as senior treaty partner, offers to protect the people who faithfully serve him.³ It is an act of faith for both parties. That is why the Hebrew term for faith has its root in *'amen* (nma) which could mean stability, firmness and faithfulness. In the OT, first of all, faith is an attribute of God who is faithful to his people and his promises: "From this you can see that Yahweh your God is the true God, the faithful (אֱמֵן אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱמֵן)

³ A. Dulles, "The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," in J. C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith That Does Justice*, New York: Paulist Press, 1977, 23.

God who, though he is true to his covenant and his faithful love for a thousand generations as regards those who love him and keep his commandments" (Deut 7:9). In response to God's initiative and commitment human beings are to maintain the pact in faithfulness.

The OT faith is based on the conviction that Yahweh is the one to whom the world owes its origin, existence and future. Those who live in this world have to depend on Him for their survival.⁴ Faith in that sense is man's awareness of his dependence on the creator. The human person as creature is to conform to the intention of the creator, God. If he fails to do so, he becomes unfaithful and thus exposes himself to the consequences of sin. For example, the book of Genesis highlights the gulf created by human failure to fit in with God's plan: "So Yahweh God expelled him from the garden of Eden" (Gen 3:23). Here it is important to note that, in the covenant relationship, man as creature is the junior partner. Therefore, once man's relationship with God is broken he is not in a position to restore it. He has become an *enemy creature*.⁵ It is only God who can heal that wound. The process in which God restores the broken relationship entails then a call to faithfulness. It is achieved through obedience to the divine statutes: "Keep his laws and commandments as I give them to you today, so that you and your children after you may prosper and live long in the country that Yahweh your God is giving you for ever" (Deut 4:40). Thus, after the Fall, faithfulness on the part of man means obedience to the will of God expressed through divine decrees/revelations. However, one needs to remember that obedience here does not mean fulfilling an obligation but an act of trust and commitment to God who graciously offers him to restore the broken relationship.

In the OT faith as trusting obedience becomes more evident in the case of Abraham. When Abraham is called out of his homeland in Ur of the Chaldeans and sends him forth as a nomad into an unknown land (Gen 12:1-3), he willingly obeys God. Further, when his trust in God is deeply tested by God's command to offer up his only son as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, Abraham passes the test and proves himself to be faithful. In fact, in the Bible, Abraham is often presented as the example of faith. For example, Hebrews extols him as the model who by faith trusts God and his promises: "It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and that he set out without knowing where he was going" (Heb 11:8). Thus,

⁴ E. C. Blackman, "Faith," in G. A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdn Press, 1962-1981, 225.

⁵ R. Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1987, 319.

Abraham becomes the prototype of faith.⁶ Abraham's action shows the dependability of the one to whom the faith is directed, God, even when evidence seems to point the other way. Here Abraham's obedience of faith is not a belief in some dogmas but firm trust (nma/'amen) in God.⁷

In the same way, the story of the Exodus too highlights the dependability of Yahweh especially in the event of miraculous rescue at the Red Sea (Ex 14: 31). It is Yahweh's commitment to his people that brought Israel into a special relationship with God. It is Yahweh who chooses Israel (Deut 7:6-7). There follows a mutuality of obligation (Deut 26:16-19). On Yahweh's part, he is committed to fulfil his undertaking: "to keep the covenant and steadfast love" (Deut 7:9). That is God's faithfulness to his people. However, in the OT, God constantly reminds Israel of its commitments. What are they? According to the book of Deuteronomy, the faith of the people consists in observing diligently the commandment – the statutes, and the ordinances – of the Lord (Deut 7:11). One needs to remember that, for the people of Israel, faith is not a human 'invention' but the human 'response' to God's commitment to his people. That is to say, man's faith is based on God's trustworthiness and steadfast love.

Later in the OT, when Israel finds itself surrounded by powerful and deadly enemies, the men of faith, prophets, come to the fore and instil confidence in the people by reminding them that they need not to fear those human powers because they have a potent ally in heaven. Yahweh stands by them and makes Israel his own people and nation. He has bound himself by a solemn pact to help and protect Israel, provided Israel keeps her side of the agreement. And what is their share of bargain? It is faith. Here faith means firm reliance on the Lord of the Covenant, remaining faithful to him alone. Thus we understand the real significance of the words of Isaiah to King Ahaz: "Unless you take your stand in (nma/'amen) God you shall not be firm" (Is 7:9).⁸ What is called for is strong faith expressed through trust. From that perspective, the opposite of faith is

⁶ A. Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 8.

⁷ In such situation, faith does not necessarily mean that there should be some fixed propositions or information. Therefore it is important to note how some authors have attempted to make a distinction between "faith" and "belief." The basic difference between the two is that, while faith is regarded as a saving relationship to the divine, belief is considered as a merely human construction, a fallible effort to express faith in human language. For a brief discussion on the distinction between faith and belief, see M Colin Grant, "Faith and belief," *Ilfiff Review*, 34/2 Spr (1977) 21-27.

⁸ See note 23 below.

fickleness. The faithless man is the one who puts his trust in some worldly powers. Thus, in the OT, the great sin against faith is idolatry, i.e. placing one's trust in anything other than God. The prophets equated it with adultery, the breach of Israel's monogamous covenant relationship with Yahweh.⁹ The faithful ones, on the other hand, puts their faith in God who assures them peace, prosperity and salvation from death and decay.

In contrast to the Old Testament, faith (*pistij/pistis*) in the New Testament is more than a covenant relationship with a particular nation. It is extended to the whole world. God wants all of mankind to hear the good news about Christ and be saved. St Paul summarizes the intention of God thus: "God wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Again, in the New Testament, the concept of salvation also differs from that of the Old Testament. Salvation is no longer viewed in terms of this-worldly peace and prosperity for a single nation, but heavenly rewards for those who unite themselves with Christ, whom God has raised from the dead. From that perspective how do we understand faith? Faith is the act whereby a man accepts the person of Christ as his Saviour (Rom. 10:9). Now everything is centred on the Christ event. And Christ becomes the measure of faith.¹⁰ In the earthly ministry of Jesus, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, faith is expressed frequently in connection with the stories of healings and miracles. What is important to note is that here faith is seen not only as a result of miracles but also as a force that brings them about: "Your faith has healed you" (Mk 10:52). Here faith means faith in the person of Christ. And those who lacked it could not experience the healing touch of God (Mt 13:58). In short, in the Gospel, the believers are those who recognize the presence of God in the person and ministry of Jesus and who accept the good news of the kingdom that is being inaugurated in and through Jesus.¹¹

Unlike in the OT, the opposite of faith in the NT is neither polytheism nor idolatry but spiritual obtuseness which makes man deaf and unresponsive to Christ and his message.¹² It is important to note that in the Gospels the religious leaders of Israel, though loyal to the Law and their traditions, remain unbelievers because they are not open to the invitation of Christ. Their fault is that when the fulfilment of the OT promises has come in Christ they deliberately remained

⁹ A. Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma*, New York: Doubleday, 1971, 20.

¹⁰ A. Dulles, *The Survival of Dogma*, 21.

¹¹ A. Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 11.

¹² E.C. Blackman, "Faith," 229.

blind to it. That is why Jesus quotes from Isaiah: "Go and say to this people, hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Is 6:9-10; Mt. 13:14-15).¹³

What is important to note is that in the NT faith is not a general belief in God or the saving activity of God in relation to a particular nation but a belief in God through Christ. So Christ becomes the new focus of faith. This Christological concentration is the new dimension of faith in the Bible. It is faith "in the name of Jesus" or "through him." It becomes very evident in the Gospel of John. For him, Christ is veritably God in his self-communication to mankind. The Word of God, *Logos*, brings life, grace and truth to the world. Through him human beings are able to arrive at the knowledge of God (Jn 1:18). Christ is the witness. For John, faith is the response of men to this witness of Christ. In other words, for John, faith results from witnessing. Those who positively respond to Christ ultimately receive sonship in Christ (Jn 1:12).

While in the OT faith is presented as man's response to God's faithfulness to his promises, in the NT this response becomes more personal in the Christ event. It is not only an unwavering trust in God but also a commitment to the person of Christ and his message, especially the Kingdom message. In other words, in the Gospel faith appears both as trust in Jesus and his teaching. Jesus expects his hearers to build their lives upon his words, acknowledging his authority as a teacher.¹⁴ It means in the NT faith also means accepting the cognitive elements of faith. Though trust remains to be the central theme, especially in Paul, faith involves handing down the Christian message as *depositum fidei* or object of faith: "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you/ τὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον" (1Tim 6:20); "You hold fast to the traditions (παραδόσεις), just as I handed (παρέδωκα) them on to you" (1 Cor 11:2).

Ecclesial Faith

The early Church, in continuity with the NT understanding of faith, devised methods and formulas to profess its faith: "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). Thus Paul in his exhortation would encourage his listeners to declare that Jesus is Lord, and God raised him from

¹³ A. Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 11.

¹⁴ A. Dulles, "Faith and Belief," in K. Becker—I. Morali, ed., *Catholic Engagement with World religion*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 2010, 306.

the dead (Rom 10: 9). In other words, the central confession of the early Church was Christological, i.e. the Mystery of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ We find a confirmation of it in the summary statement in John's Gospel: "This is eternal life that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17: 3). All are invited to share eternal life of God through him. The Church's faith from the beginning is based on God's revelation in Christ.

By the late second century, many of the Churches had their own summaries of Christian faith known as "canon of truth." It helped the Church leaders to spell out the basic tenets of faith. It was also known as "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*). Though expressed in variable terms, the content of these canons or rules had the same basic outline. Each Church held on to the faith they received from the apostles of Christ and their successors. The rule was the form and content of truth which authentic teaching transmitted to successive generations. Therefore it functioned as a sort of creed especially during the baptism of a new member of the Church. Though open to adaptation by orthodox teachers, the rule of faith was consistently Christological and Trinitarian in structure.¹⁶ Moreover, these rules served as measure (*regula*) to identify the true faith among different Churches. In other words, these rules helped different Churches, although quite distant from each other and speak different languages, could profess and preserve the *same* faith.

A further development can be seen in the Church's understanding of faith with the introduction of the Trinitarian concept of God.¹⁷ The baptism of a new member to the Christian fold required a solemn profession of faith in the Trinity. However, it is important to note that the Trinitarian perspective of faith was not something entirely new to the Christian faith. In fact, it was latent in the Christological faith. The NT Trinitarian faith is best expressed in the confessional formula that we find at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).

The post-Apostolic Church scrupulously maintained the double expression of the Christian belief, the Christological and Trinitarian faith, especially in its profession of faith. The origin of the Apostles' Creed resulted from the amalgamation of these two fundamental

¹⁵ J. Neuner – J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, New York: Alba House, 1996, 1.

¹⁶ J. Wicks, "Rule of Faith," in R. Latourelle – R. Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994, 959-961.

¹⁷ For example, see the Symbol of Nicaea (325 AD). Cf. J. Neuner – J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 6.

aspects of the Christian faith.¹⁸ For the early Church, the Apostles' Creed represented the authentic Christian faith. Though based on the Gospel and the teachings of the Apostles, it was centred not on dogmatic truths, but on the economy of salvation culminated in the Christ event. The three articles of faith in the Creed correspond to the three periods of the salvation history which are attributed to the three persons of the Trinity: creation to the Father, redemption to Christ, sanctification to the Holy Spirit. Though the history of salvation culminates in the Christ-event, the effects of this divine engagement are still operative in the world through the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

The ecclesial faith during the patristic period and thereafter was very much influenced by the writings of the Church Fathers.²⁰ Though Pre-Nicene writers like Justin the Martyr, Ireneus, Clement of Alexandria defended orthodox faith against secular philosophy and Gnosticism, the post-Nicene gave prominence to mystical and sapiential aspects of faith. It was because the latter wanted to build bridges between the Bible and Hellenistic philosophy. What happened in the process was that the Gospel somewhat lost its glamour. The reason perhaps is that the Church found itself in competition with the pagan mystery religions and Greek philosophical thoughts which also seemed to have offered salvation to man through enlightenment leading to union with the divine. Thus, thinkers like St Augustine gave importance to thought or reason in the act of faith.

For Augustine, to believe is "to ponder with assent" (*cum assensione cogitare*). He is of the opinion that rational understanding is necessary to grasp the meaning of the proclamation of the Gospel. "No one indeed believes anything unless he has first thought that it ought to be believed."²¹ Again, according to him, people may be moved to believe by proofs or signs, but at the same time, one cannot ignore the

¹⁸ J. Neuner—J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 1. It is to be noted that, though some traditions attribute its origin to the Apostles of Christ, the so-called 'Apostle Creed' is one of the many variants of ancient baptismal confessions. See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, London: Longman, 1972, 398.

¹⁹ As a divinely ordained institution, the Church too has an important role to play in God's engagement with the world. That is why Karl Rahner describes the Church as "the historical and social presence of God's self-communication to the world in Christ." K. Rahner, *Theology of Pastoral Action*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1968, 29.

²⁰ Cf. W. J. Burghardt, "Fathers of the Church," in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 1967 ed., vol. 5, 853-855.

²¹ "Nullus quippe credit aliquid, nisi prius cogitaverit esse credendum." Augustine, *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum Liber Unus*, 2. 5.

fact that that which moves one may fail to move another.²² In such case, reason is more convenient and persuasive than proofs. Thus, for him, reason has an important role in the act of faith. However, it does not mean that, for Augustine, faith is subordinate to reason. On the contrary, it is faith that perfects reason and enables it to understand what it first believed. To drive this point home, Augustine rephrases a quotation from Isaiah (Is 7: 9): “Unless you believe you shall not understand.”²³ Further, for Augustine, though reason enables one to see what he/she ought to believe, one also needs divine grace to begin to believe. He reminds us that there are many things we cannot understand except by first believing. In such case, only grace can enable us to have the act of believing. For him, faith is both the beginning of wisdom and divine illumination. Thus, Augustine brings to the fore the mutual priorities between divinely infused faith and reason.²⁴

In the Middle Ages, Scholastic theologians make serious attempts to integrate Aristotelian philosophy into Augustine’s doctrine of faith. Thomas Aquinas can be considered as the representative of this school of thought. In his writings Aquinas defines faith as “that habit of mind (*habitus mentis*) whereby eternal life is begun in us, causing the intellect to assent to things that are not manifest.”²⁵ We know that in the Aristotelian categories *habitus mentis* is a stable quality inclining the mind toward acts of a certain kind. Applying this concept into the Christian idea of faith, Aquinas argues that faith is not an acquired habit obtained by practice but an infused habit instilled by God’s grace.²⁶ Thus, for Aquinas, faith in the

²² “Cum ergo alius sic alius autem sic moveatur ad fidem, eademque res saepe alio modo dicta moveat alio modo dicta non moveat, aliumque moveat alium non moveat.” *De diversis Quaestionibus ad Simplicianum libri duo*, 2.14. Later, Aquinas seems to endorse this view of Augustine on faith. See *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 4 a.1

²³ “Sed nisi essent rursus aliqua quae intellegere non possumus, nisi ante credamus, propheta non diceret: *Nisi credideritis, non intellegetis.*” *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps 118, 18. 3. Augustine makes this affirmation based on the Septuagint translation of the OT: “ἐὰν ἡ πιστεύσητε οὐδὲ ἡ σὺνῆτε.” The Hebrew text reads differently: “If you will not take your stand on me you will not stand firm / יִרְמָסוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ” (Is 7: 9).

²⁴ A. Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 27; *The Survival of Dogma*, 22.

²⁵ “Since habits are known by their acts, and acts by their objects, faith, *being a habit*, should be defined by its proper act in relation to its proper object.” *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 4 a.1.

²⁶ “Now the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God, so that it is subject to the free-will in relation to God.” *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 2 a. 9. A. Dulles, “Faith and Belief,” 307.

strict theological sense does not rest on human inference but on the authority of God who reveals himself in grace and revelation.

Why does Aquinas say that the motive of faith is the authority of God? Is it not something imposed from outside? Not necessarily so. He explains the authority of God in belief by analyzing the act of faith itself. For him, faith always has two elements – the formal and material objects. The formal object is that which determines the nature of the act. It qualifies the object to be grasped by the assent of faith. In other words, it is the credibility of the witness.²⁷ In theological faith, the witness is God. His word is to be trusted without qualification because he is the First Truth. He is the very act of knowing by which he knows himself perfectly. As formal object of faith God is the ultimate reality. In other words, with regard to theological faith, there is nothing that can exist as formal object, witness, beyond or above God. The believer cannot make a true act of faith without accepting the reliability – the “authority” – of the witness. And if he is credible as formal object of faith, what he reveals of himself too, material object of faith (the content of revelation), is to be believed on the basis of his authority. Whoever trusts the witness will have to accept what the witness says as well. In other words, for Aquinas, faith does not exist without the formal and material object of faith, i.e. God as witness (*Credere Deo*) and God as the principle material object of faith (*Credere Deum*). The content or material object is what God says, i.e. revelation as the Word of God. How does it come to us? According to Aquinas, the Word of God, originally entrusted to the prophets and Apostles, comes to us through Scripture and the apostolic tradition. Further, the Church has organized the data of revelation under certain headings like the articles of the Creed. They are proposed to us as propositions of faith. However, Aquinas is quick to affirm that in the act of faith the believer does not assent to these propositions for their own sake, but uses them as a means for assenting the realities they signify, i.e. a belief that tends towards union with God (*Credere in Deum*).²⁸

²⁷ For example, in any human act of faith, if the witness is not reliable, faith as trust and commitment is not possible.

²⁸ “Now the act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in a thing. For as in science we do not form propositions, except in order to have knowledge about things through their means, so is it in faith.” *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 1 a. 2. ad 2. A. Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, 35. For a brief treatment of Thomistic understanding of faith see also G. O’Collins, *Christology*, London: Oxford University Press, 1995, 252-54.

It goes without saying that the Thomistic concept of faith, especially its intellectualistic interpretation of faith as an assent to revealed truths, has a great influence on Catholic teaching on faith.²⁹ In fact we see an official endorsement of Scholastic-Thomistic thinking about faith and reason in the documents of Vatican I, especially in its Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Filius*. What does *Dei Filius* say about faith? After explaining the concept of revelation, the document in chapter 3 describes faith as the human response to God's revelation: "we believe to be true what God has revealed" (DS 3008). Here the emphasis is on the content of faith. While elaborating further the idea of faith in the document the Council makes it clear why one has to believe:

The Catholic Church professes that this faith, which is the beginning of human salvation, is a supernatural virtue whereby, inspired and assisted by the grace of God, we believe that what he has revealed is true, not because the intrinsic truth of things recognised by the natural light of reason, but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither err nor deceive. For, faith, as the Apostle testifies, is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11: 1).³⁰

Faith is understood as an intellectual assent to the divinely revealed truths. The human response to these revealed truths takes the form of "obedience" (*obsequium fidei*). Moreover, in the act of faith, the believer affirms that the content of faith is true. On what basis can he/she affirm that it is true? It is on the basis of God's testimony.³¹ We believe it because of the dependability of the speaker, i.e. God. In other words, according to *Dei Filius*, our faith is based on the authority/truthfulness of God. Here one can see the influence of Aquinas' thought on the document. As seen above, for Aquinas, the formal object of faith is God, the First Truth. The motive of religious

²⁹ For example, Leo XXII, in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) extols the contribution of Thomas with these words: "Again, clearly distinguishing, as is fitting, reason from faith, while happily associating the one with the other, he both preserved the rights and had regard for the dignity of each; so much so, indeed, that reason, borne on the wings of Thomas to its human height, *can scarcely rise higher*, while faith could scarcely expect more or stronger aids from reason than those which she has already obtained through Thomas." Cf. *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 12 (1879) 109. See also John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 43-44.

³⁰ J. Neuner—J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 44. Here one may see an echo of Aquinas: "On this way then faith is said to be the 'substance of things to be hoped for,' for the reason that in us the first beginning of things to be hoped for is brought about by the assent of faith, which contains virtually all things to be hoped for." *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 4 a.1.

³¹ R. Latourelle, "Revelation," in R. Latourelle—R. Fisichella, ed., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, 927.

faith therefore is based on God, the ultimate truth, who is the authoritative witness for everything that is believed. In other words, in faith, the principal element to be accepted is the authority of God.³² Once the credibility of the speaker, God, is established, it will not be difficult to believe the things that the infallible witness reveals, the material content of faith. That is why *Dei Filius* asks the faithful to believe to be true all those things that God has revealed. The document specifies the object of faith: "All those things are to be believed with divine and Catholic faith which are contained in the word of God, written or handed down, and which by the Church, either in solemn judgment or through her ordinary and universal teaching office, are proposed for belief as divinely revealed."³³ Thus, faith is an affirm assent to that which the Church authoritatively teaches in the name of God. It seems to equate faith with belief.³⁴

This understanding of faith has many positive points. First of all, here, faith is not an empty experience/feeling of some faceless divinity but it has a "material" object to believe. Secondly, it clearly recognises the importance of Scripture, tradition and the teaching authority of the Church. Thirdly, it offers a firm identity to the Church as a community of believers. Having said that, however, one has to admit that here faith is not an interpretation of believer's life, but rather as an acceptance of mysterious information handed down from the past. In other words, the faithful are not encouraged to be creative in putting into practice the data of their own experience, but are reduced to a passive submission to the doctrines of the Church. Here we need to ask: Is the acceptance of truths sufficient for salvation? What about hope, charity and personal commitment? Strangely enough, Vatican I makes no reference to the promises of God or Christ as the object of faith. Vatican II takes into consideration these issues when it describes the nature of faith.

The obedience of faith is to be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals, and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it. To

³² "Now, in matters of faith, the will assents to some truth, as to its proper good, as was shown above (q. 4 a 3): wherefore that which is the chief truth, has the character of last end, while those which are secondary truths, have the character of being directed to the end." *Summa Theologiae*, II, II q. 11 a.1.

³³ J. Neuner – J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith*, 45.

³⁴ Cf., note 7 above.

bring about an ever deeper understanding of revelation the same Holy Spirit constantly brings faith to completion by His gifts.³⁵

At first sight, it might appear that Vatican II is just repeating the affirmations of *De Filius*. A close look at the article makes us realise that there is a significant improvement in the understanding of faith. Though faith is described as obedience in Pauline terms, the document clearly tells us where the priority lies, i.e. God. In other words, the object of obedience is none other than God himself. Here obedience is understood primarily as a free and trusting commitment to God who reveals himself to humanity. Only secondarily, it is proposed as a free assent to the divinely revealed truth. In other words, for Vatican II, revelation consists not only of revealed truths as doctrines but more fundamentally the reality and life of God who invites human beings to share his life. Here faith is understood as a response to an invitation to share God's life in Christ. In short, we may say that faith according to the teachings of Vatican II is a personal, subjective human response to the Word of God.

Another Magisterial document that deals with the question of faith is *Verbum Domini* (VD), the Post Synodal Exhortation (2010).³⁶ It approaches the theme from the perspective of the Word of God. While Vatican II allocates only one article (DV 5) on faith, this document dedicates fairly six articles (VD 22-28) to explain the Christian idea of faith. Though it does not offer something entirely new, based on the fundamental teachings of Vatican II, it interprets faith with the key term 'dialogue.' In place of "authority" of the revealing God, *Verbum Domini* proposes faith as a "dialogical" engagement between God and the human person. In this dialogue not only the Word of God but also the human words play their respective, indispensable part. Articles 23 and 24 of *Verbum Domini* show how human words directed to God are crucially important in this dialogue process. They are existential questions that man finds no answer when left to himself. For example, while article 23 draws our attention to the "listening" God, article 24 presents psalms as examples of the human side of the dialogue.

Further in article 25 the document makes an attempt to specify what faith is. Reaffirming the teachings of Vatican II, especially of *Dei Verbum*, the document defines faith as the human response to the God who speaks. This response takes the form of "obedience of faith"

³⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, 5.

³⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010.

(Rom 16:26). Though it reaffirms the teachings of Vatican Councils on faith, what is new in *Verbum Domini* is that it spells out clearly how the obedience of faith is actualized. It invites us to reflect on the condition of the possibility of faith. In order to listen to God, the human person must open his/her mind and heart to the working of the Holy Spirit, i.e. docility to the promptings of the Spirit. In other words, to a great extent, it is our personal attitudes and inner dispositions that leave us open or else closed to the possibility of believing. At the same time, it needs to be affirmed that faith is not purely a subjective human act alone. It means faith is a response to God's initiative. Therefore, the document brings to the fore the role of the preaching of the Word. Again here the document bases its argument on the Pauline text: "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). However, it is not a set of doctrines. The document identifies the Word of God as the person of Christ: "Faith thus takes shape as an encounter with a person to whom we entrust our whole life." In synthesis, according to the document, faith means a personal encounter with God in Christ.

Conclusion

While dealing with the question of the development of Christian doctrine, Newman makes an interesting observation:

[From] the nature of the human mind, time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas; and that the highest and most wonderful truths, though communicated to the world once for all by inspired teachers, could not be comprehended all at once by the recipients, but, as being received and transmitted by minds not inspired and through media which are human, have required only the longer time and deeper thought for their full elucidation.³⁷

Newman calls it 'the theory of development of doctrine.' The same can be attributed to the Christian faith. From our study we understand that faith is not a one-dimensional static concept. It is multifaceted and dynamic. In the OT we see faith as a personal trust in God who reveals himself as Saviour. The human person accepts with trusting submission all that God promises and commands. Moreover, in the OT, faith is not only a human attitude toward God but also a divine attribute in the form of God's faithfulness to the promises he made to his chosen ones. Thus faith is seen as a necessary ingredient in the covenant relationship between God and

³⁷ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1890, 29-30.

man. In the NT faith receives a new perspective in the person of Jesus Christ. Here faith is more than a trust in the promises of God. It is the affirmation in the fulfilment of God's promises in Christ, i.e. Jesus as the bearer of the Kingdom. Moreover, in the NT, though personal trust continues to be the central theme, faith brings to the fore the cognitive element of faith in the form of assent to the message of Christ. Later, in the Book of Acts, we see how the hearers frequently accept the proclamation of the Apostles that Jesus is the Messiah.

In the early Church there were attempts to codify the fundamental elements of the Christian faith. For example, the primitive Christian communities professed their faith in brief formulas: "Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts 9: 20; Heb 4: 14). During the patristic period the Church leaders solidified further those formulas with the rules of faith (*regula fidei*) and the Apostle's Creed. When the Church had to face the challenges of Greek philosophy, the Fathers of the Church, without losing the core elements of Christianity, made serious attempt to make Christian faith accessible to non-Christian world and entered into constructive dialogue with philosophers in search of truth. This process continued during the Middle Ages by incorporating Aristotelian categories in the expression of Christian faith.

In recent history, especially in the two Vatican Councils, the Church highlights the reasonableness of Christian faith. At the same time, it does not hesitate to present faith as the human response to the divine initiative, i.e. revelation. Further, in *Dei Verbum*, for example, the Church emphatically affirms that in order to be truly authentic, human faith requires the grace of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ In other words, the Christian faith is not some abstract truths that human beings hold about God. It is the faith that deals with the self-communication of a loving God who invites every person to have a personal relationship with him. This relationship reaches its culmination in the act of faith. From that perspective, Christian faith is the *denouement* of the divine engagement with the world culminated in the Christ event.

³⁸ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 153-155.