

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

What Is Faith?

It popped up on the New York Times website: an interactive item called “Schott’s Vocab.” It’s an occasional blog that seeks feedback from readers, asking them to define certain terms. Previous contenders were “Money” and “America.” This one contest asked Times readers to define one of the most elusive terms of all:

Faith.

The creator of “Schott’s Vocab” noted some already-existing definitions: H. L. Mencken called faith “*an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.*” And Samuel Butler said of faith, “*You can do very little with it, but you can do nothing without it.*”

Okay. Fair enough. This promised to be an interesting exercise.

When I first checked, there were more than 1,100 responses, ranging from the predictably agnostic (“*Faith is a socially acceptable insanity in the same way that alcohol is a socially acceptable drug*”) to the wistful and wise (“*Faith is a gift from the Triune God*” and “*Faith is the ultimate act of creation*”).

It gave me reason to wonder for myself: If I had to define something almost indefinable, how would I do it? I was reminded of a glib definition I once offered for “holiness”: “It’s like defining art. You can’t quite explain it, but you know it when you see it.”

Faith is like that, too. But it begs for something more concrete.

Faith is something ineffable, beautiful, mysterious. It is gazing at the stars on a clear summer night and knowing, in your bones, that Someone did that.

It is looking into the eyes of the person you love and seeing reflected back the joy and wonder and gentleness of a Divine spark. It is standing before another on your wedding day and vowing to create something wonderful together and just believing, above all else, that it *can* be done and that it *will* endure.

Faith is hearing the first startling cry of your newborn child and realizing that you are part of something greater than you ever imagined, and that this has been happening, in this same way, for thousands upon thousands of years.

Faith is taking the hand of that child many months later and leading him gently to take those first staggering steps into the world, and believing that this small creature will not only walk, but will one day dance.

Faith is surrendering your own will into the hands of The One who created you, and believing that He knows better than you which way your life needs to go.

It is giving in to God, without giving up.

It is finding peace and perfect serenity in the sure knowledge that there is a purpose, and a reason, for everything—for that fender-bender in the driveway, or the D on your daughter’s geometry final, even the scary shadow on the X-ray.

It is living in the absence of fear, because you know that life is illogical, and that nothing is permanent, and that every day we have is, quite simply, a gift.

And so, I guess, is faith. It is a gift. I think it is freely offered to all of us—but not everyone is willing to accept it, or to accept the fundamental mystery that surrounds it.

Butler’s definition—“*You can do nothing without it*”—makes sense to me. Faith (and its close sibling, Trust) has guided much of my adult life, and taken me to places I’d never dreamed possible.

But maybe, too, it really is impossible to pin down. Defining faith somehow limits it—narrows its focus and puts it in a box.

And the greatest test of faith may be its very absence of limits. Faith, in its purest form, is a thing that requires leaps. And courage. And conviction. It may also require deeper minds than mine to accurately define.

If I wait long enough, I’m sure someone will. In fact, I have faith in it.

Meantime, there is this, from the late Catholic laywoman Catherine de Hueck Doherty, who just might have put it best: “*Faith walks simply, childlike, between the darkness of human life and the hope of what is to come.*” Amen.

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