

Faith is born of a personal encounter

FAITH IS BORN OF A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER PREMIUM

Tradition and experience



The original disciples did not come to recognise the divinity of Jesus Christ as a result of reading a theological textbook. They did so by reflecting prayerfully on their personal experience of his life and discussing (and no doubt arguing) amongst themselves about what he had said and how and why he had died – and what came after. Their example is still valid and effective today. People come to faith in Jesus Christ by encountering him through the reading of Scripture and in the life of the Church, and asking themselves, in prayerful humility – who is this man? In reaching their answer they are helped by other people’s similar experiences and other people’s responses. This grounding of faith in a personal encounter is central to the message of Pope Francis, and indeed of the Second Vatican Council.

It is an insight which brings to life the familiar words of the council’s decree *Gaudium et Spes*, which declares that “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” It is our human experience and our encounter with Jesus Christ that gives the Church its agenda. This is especially relevant to moral teaching. And that is where friction occurs between faith handed down and faith interpreted through the lens of experience.

This friction is well illustrated by the gradual but fundamental shift in Catholic perceptions of homosexuality. It also applies to the vexed issues surrounding the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to Holy Communion. The faith as handed down, for instance by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, describes homosexuality as “intrinsically disordered”. But ordinary Catholics have come to realise – by experience – that homosexual men and women are normal human beings with the normal human need for intimacy and love. This experience says that to label them “intrinsically disordered” is insulting, demeaning, and not true. There is nothing wrong with them, but something wrong with a theological account that requires Catholics to set aside what their sincere moral intuition and observation of creation tells them.

The traditional distrust of experience sometimes causes Catholics to question the faith “handed down”, as over church teaching on contraception. Better understood, the point of intersection between faith shaped by tradition and faith moulded by experience could remake Catholic teaching on sexuality into something affirmative rather than negative. This is what Pope Francis was aiming to do with his two synods on family life and the resulting papal document *Amoris Laetitia*, where he warns against “an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations”.

As the theologian Richard Gaillardetz writes in this week’s *Tablet*, the neo-scholastic logic-chopping of the pre-Vatican II era, still favoured by some theologians, provides the basis for the allegation that Pope Francis’s teaching is leading people into heresy. Yet, as he points out, “divine revelation, the Council taught, comes to us not as a set of propositions but as a person, Jesus Christ, and is given to all the people of God. Its discovery is the task of all believers...”

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