

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

ASSIGNMENT 1B: THE EXPERIENCE AND CONTENT OF FAITH

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The Experience and Content of Faith: Inseparable Twins

Faith involves God’s revelation – God’s action (self-communication) in the dynamic of faith.¹ There is both an *experience* of faith, as well as a *content* of faith. Kelly refers to the experience of faith as *fides qua* (the [subjective] faith by which we believe) and the content of faith as *fides quae* (the [objective] faith that is believed).² This short essay describes these two dimensions of faith – experience and content – and shows why Catholic theology emphasizes their unity.

In describing the experience of faith, a defining characteristic is that it is “a response to God’s desire to be known by human beings”³ in human experience. The capacity to experience faith, then, is granted supernaturally by God – “it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). It is an act of grace – something given to us by God. Augustine supports this premise, of which Kelly writes, “he [Augustine] acknowledges that all his own efforts to encounter God were worthless without an initiative on God’s part to open his eyes and ears”.⁴ Furthermore, the experience of faith occurs in daily living.⁵ To summarize, the experience of faith is an experience of being drawn into the life of God, of being “divinized”.⁶

Constituting the content of faith is God’s self-revelation or self-communication – and, what God reveals is God himself. This self-revelation consists of God’s works and God’s word.⁷ From the record of the sacred Scriptures, one may conclude that God’s self-disclosure to human beings takes place in the context of life and history. For example, Kelly observes that Abraham’s personal history was the vehicle for the encounter with God.⁸ From the self-revelation of God, the naming of God becomes possible.⁹ “When the

fullness of time had come” (Gal 4:4), through Jesus Christ – his words and works, as well as through his very person – the self-revelation of God continued, albeit in a new way.¹⁰

Kelly rightfully concludes that the content of faith and revelation belong together as two sides of one coin.¹¹

From the foregoing descriptions of the experience and the content of faith, their close relationship becomes evident. Understandably, therefore, Catholic theology emphasises the unity of these two dimensions of faith. Otherwise, if for example, the content of faith is separated from the life of the believing community, then it becomes irrelevant to human existence.¹² Or, if the experience of faith is separated from its content, then it becomes empty and subjective.¹³ This unity is highlighted in *Dei Verbum* (from Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation): “The obedience of faith” must be our response to God who reveals. By faith one freely commits oneself entirely to God, making “the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals”, and willingly assenting to the revelation given by God.¹⁴

In summary, the two aspects or sides of faith – experience and content – are closely linked, and their unity are rightfully emphasised. The self-revelation of God (content of faith) presupposes a response of faith (experience of faith) if it is to be truly a self-communication; the experience of faith is only possible on the basis of God’s self-revelation (content of faith).¹⁵

Bibliography

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Endnotes

¹ Gerard Kelly, “Grounded in Faith”, in *An Introduction to Catholic Theology*, ed. Richard Lennen (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 56.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 58.

⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁵ Bernard Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) quoted in Gerard Kelly, “Grounded in Faith”, in *An Introduction to Catholic Theology*, ed. Richard Lennen (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 59.

⁶ Kelly, “Grounded in Faith”, 63.

⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

⁸ Ibid., 63.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 66.

¹¹ Ibid., 68.

¹² Ibid., 77.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David A. Lysik, ed., “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” in *The Bible Documents – A Parish Resource* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2001).

¹⁵ Kelly, “Grounded in Faith”, 68.