

The Journey of Faith Goes through Peaks and Valleys

In this week's Gospel, two disciples of Jesus meet a stranger on the road. When they meet him, they are initially very down and out, relating to the stranger how this great prophet and teacher has now been killed. They also share how some women from their group explained that the tomb was empty, but they have yet to come to understand what this means. But then the stranger, after listening to them, explains to them how the Scriptures predicted what would happen. It's when the stranger is invited in due to the late hour of day that they break bread, and he vanishes from their midst and they come to realize that this was Jesus with them the whole time.

I love this Gospel because there's so much here about the faith as a matter of the head and the heart, and it really being a long journey through life.

With respect to the heart, sometimes God feels very close, sometimes not so much. Odds are you've had an experience in prayer or at Mass where you felt God all around you. But then you may have had stressful situations, or times of great suffering, where God did not seem all that close. We also experience these same things in our marriages, friendships and relationships too. But when one is in love, they keep on journeying with the other person no matter what. Think for instance of God. Time and time again we as humans have rejected Him, choosing sin. But what is the answer to all of this? God seeing the good inside of us. God looking to the heart. God becoming one of us, and dying for us, all out of love. On our part, sometimes like the disciples, it can be hard to see past pain and difficulty. When we go through these valleys, it's important to remember faith isn't based on feelings. The disciples don't realize it's Jesus with them at first, and sometimes we can be like that, not seeing past the pain which obscures God's face. But as God does not give up on us, we too can't give up on God. It's okay to question, to even be angry, but keep on journeying with God. Remember just because we can't always feel Him, it doesn't mean He's not there. We can grow in the faith through the heart by spending more time with God in prayer, trying different types of prayer, and persevering in prayer even through periods of dryness or when we feel busy. Even a simple prayer asking God for help in trusting and letting go can work wonders, especially in tough times.

With respect to the head, faith is meant to keep growing. Sometimes it can stop though once we get to confirmation. There really are a ton of great resources for us to grow in our knowledge of the faith, so consider checking them out. From spending time with the Bible, to reading some great online material at sites like Bishop Robert Barron's "Word on Fire," or the United States Council of Catholic Bishops' site, or EWTN.com, the Catholic cable channel, or lifeteen.com, which is the web site of Life Teen, a Roman Catholic movement for youth. There's also tons of great books out there too. Of course some of this can fall under the realm of "fake news" too - some websites have agendas to attack the Church, or the pope, or bishops, etc. So just make sure to vet the website and make sure it isn't agenda-driven. You can also look for the imprimatur stamp on a Catholic book too, indicating it is in alignment with Catholic doctrine.

Through all of this too, its important to try to journey with others. Sometimes people we know and love are like the disciples. They've given up; life has beaten them down; they can't see through the storm; or they've rejected the Church. Jesus though continues to walk with them, and on our part we need to do that too. Don't give up on people in situations like that. Pray for them. Set an example for them through the testament of your life. Be patient. And look for times to talk about what you believe and why and explain it to them. Sometimes we work the fields but can't see the growth going on in a soul, so never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes in our faith, we can go on auto-pilot and go through routines. Routines are good; such as going to Mass, praying, etc. But it's important to think about why we do what we do, and to also remember that as great as it can be to be a Christian, inevitably sometimes it can be really hard when people challenge our faith, and life deals us so much suffering. But when we look to the Cross and to the Eucharist, we are reminded that God is with us every step of the way. So let's open our minds, eyes and heart to His presence, and realize He never gives up on us - so may we never give up on Him.

God's blessings to you,

Fr. Paul