

Most everyone has heard the term “doubting Thomas,” but truth be told it’s a very unfair label. Saint Thomas the Apostle is actually a man of deep faith, having the most profound statement of faith in the New Testament that we hear in our Gospel from today, “My Lord and my God.” He will boldly proclaim the faith, laying down his life for it. And as for his prior statement about wanting to touch the hands and side, I think that’s something all of us have felt at various points. I sure know I have. My faith like that of us all goes through it’s challenges. That being said, it’s important to think of our faith as a real journey; a matter of the heart and the head. The way we make it is by being open to that ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Church, knowing that it’s not something we can deduce like a mathematical formula, but it’s also not a leap into the dark.

In fact, if you look at our faith, doubt is often a part of the journey. Consider what some of the other saints have dealt with:

St. Jane Frances de Chantal was happily married to Baron Christophe de Chantal. They brought seven children into the world, four of whom survived to adulthood. Unfortunately, their marital bliss ended abruptly with Christophe’s accidental death while hunting.

For Jane, this triggered a lifelong struggle with doubt: She once thought: “On the one hand, I am caught between the excruciating pain, and on the other hand, my love for our holy Faith that is so deep, that I would rather die than deny the least article of it.” Did she perhaps question why God would allow this to happen?

In any case, she chose steadfastly to trust in God, despite the darkness. She begged Him for a guide to help navigate her way. When St. Francis de Sales came to preach a Lenten retreat at her parish, she recognized him as the director she saw in a dream. She asked him to be her spiritual director. He accepted and in time, Jane expressed her desire to become a Carmelite nun. Francis suggested that she might start her own religious congregation.

Consequently, she founded the Congregation of the Visitation with the help of Francis. When she died, there were 87 monasteries and tremendous growth after her death. Her journey was not on a radiant path, however. She once said, “Most often, there is a confused sort of strife in my soul, between feelings of being plunged into an impenetrable darkness that I am powerless to do anything about; I have a kind of spiritual nausea that tempts me to give up trying.” She didn’t give up, however, but strove even more to cling to God.

St Paul of the Cross gives a remarkable example of perseverance through darkness.

An Italian saint of the 18th, century, he founded the Passionists, a congregation whose principal devotion is the Passion of Christ. The notable aspect of Paul’s experience of darkness is that it not only lasted 45 years, but 12 years of intense spiritual joy preceded it and five years of consolation followed it. He understood his trial in terms of sharing in the Passion of Christ, especially the aspect of feeling abandoned by God. He

likewise grasped that his sufferings were obtaining grace for those who were in need of spiritual help.

Nonetheless, he did not despair nor allow himself to be mired in discouragement during his journey through the dark forest. His faith kept him going, knowing that a pasture of unearthly joy lay just beyond the shadowy woods. Eventually, his trial passed into a five year period of heavenly sweetness. He received visions of the Virgin Mary, St. Michael, and the Christ Child. He often experienced a spiritual transport known as an ecstasy, by which his senses were suspended and he became entirely absorbed in God.

St. Thérèse is French saint, known as the Little Flower; famous for teaching that we do simple things with great love to glorify God, and not all of us are going to be household names. Pope Pius X proclaimed her “greatest saint of modern times.” She earned this accolade not so much through her charm, but through her virtuous life and wisdom. Her teachings, found principally in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*, explain her doctrine known as the Little Way. A brief description in her own words is, “The abandonment and the love of a child who knows that his Father loves him.”

However, this childlike confidence came to perfection in a crucible of suffering. In the last 18 months of her life, as she was dying of tuberculosis, she passed through a “trial of faith,” as she termed it. In her own words: “He (God) allowed my soul to be enveloped in utter darkness...and the thought of Heaven, which had consoled me from my earliest childhood, now became a subject of conflict and torture.” In her youth, she thought atheists were not being truthful, but now she had an intimate experience of their thoughts.

And then there is Mother Teresa. When the time came for Sister Agnes to profess religious vows as a Loreto Sister, she desired the name of Thérèse. She felt a strong bond with the century French nun and wanted to have her as a patron. However, another nun had already taken that name, so she opted for the Spanish equivalent, Teresa. Mother Teresa has many things in common with her patron, not least being a battle with doubt.

On September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa was on a train ride from Calcutta to Darjeeling, for a much-needed retreat as a Loreto Sister. On the way, she had a mystical encounter with Jesus, who asked her to go the “holes of the poor,” to bring them relief. She was happy teaching as a Loreto Sister, but she obeyed what she termed a “call within a call.”

For the next several months, her spiritual life overflowed with consolations. Then the darkness descended. When the change came, she at first thought it was her fault. In the years that followed, she came to understand that it was a sharing in Jesus’ own thirst on the cross. In letters to her spiritual directors, she revealed an aching thirst for God, which mirrored Jesus’ own thirst for souls. Painful though it was, she accepted her trial of faith as being a way to emulate Jesus on the Cross.

Most all of us can relate to their stories; I know that I certainly can. On the one hand, I have faith, it's why I followed the call to the priesthood. But this is faith that has its challenges too. As a priest, I've been in many situations; an infant who died suddenly; teens who took their lives or died of cancer; with families dealing with tough situations. And then there are the mysteries that we all deal with; I think about these too as I anoint people, and often there are pictures in their home of them and their spouses many years ago when life seemed like it would last forever. All of us ask that question "why" when we see what goes on in the world. We might not get every answer to every question this side of heaven, but there is a path through our doubts and struggles.

First and foremost, it's important to remember doubt is not a sin. Sometimes a person brings it up in confession, and I always say if you had given up on your faith, you would not be here. The challenge is to make peace with our doubts and to accept them as part of our faith. The path forward is seen in our Gospel today.

We are told the apostles are in a locked room, out of fear. Their teacher and master has just been killed; surely they are expecting maybe they will be too. But note what happens. Jesus appears to them, and despite the doors being locked, He is in their midst and says that beautiful word "Peace." This is the starting point. That no matter what we go through, God stands with us. He comes to us not to condemn, but to offer us that peace. Saint John Paul II wrote an encyclical on suffering, and in it he noted the cross changes everything; it reminds us of how God stands with us and takes on our suffering. But note that Jesus also shows the disciples his wounds; it's a reminder of what He went through and we always see the wounds on the resurrected Christ's body. Jesus then again says "peace" a second time. So what do we get from this? That despite all that has happened, God never gives up on us for His love is so great. Sometimes with doubt, a person looks at their life and thinks look at what I've done; I've made so many bad choices, how could God love me? Saint Paul though is right when he says nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. There is simply love that is always there for us to meet us where we are at. We celebrate that in a special way on this Sunday which is also known as Divine Mercy Sunday; celebrating the private revelations of Sister Faustina, the Polish nun who had the vision of Jesus speaking to her of His infinite love for us all. We just need to have a bit of trust that this love is given to us always, without exception.

Hopefully we believe that, but as we all know we are not able to experience things in quite the same way as Thomas. I know I would like to physically see Jesus, but that's not quite possible. So how then do we deal with the doubts that come up about God and the things we are going through, so we can make that word "peace" be something that is truly in our hearts?

Here, the main thing to remember is that again doubts are a part of faith, but as one priest, Fr. Sam Keyes, a theology teacher from John Paul the Great Catholic University puts it, it has to be the right kind of doubt. What he means by this is that we don't want on the one hand bigotry, which is not true skepticism, but where we refuse to think something might be true. This is a person who will never believe, even if Jesus were to

slap him in the face because that person is so confident of their rightness of opinion that they can't accept an alternative. As such this person might think well there is no resurrection and if Jesus showed up, well I still won't believe, there's some way to explain it.

The other extreme though is the person who is the naive believer, who cannot doubt anything. This person sees things in black and white, and so when they read about Thomas, they can't understand where he's coming from. What do you mean, you have doubts? Have you rejected God? What is wrong with you?

Another way to put it is faith and reason working together. Think of it as a matter of the heart and head. Faith is not just blind; where we trust always and don't think about the reason for that trust, as if it's just a leap into the dark. On the one hand, there is the data that gives us proofs for the existence of God; the details the Gospels give us for instance of the burial cloth being rolled up carefully and put on one side of the tomb; the tomb that was found of Pilate; the testament of the early Christians who gave their lives for the faith; the order of the universe and things in the natural world. All of these things help us to see that faith isn't blind. But faith is also a continuing journey; you love someone, you learn new things about them all the time. It's why we learn the faith by studying it; this is the mind part. Fr. Sam Keyes was just ordained in 2021, but he's middle aged, grew up Baptist, was ordained an Anglican priest, then became Catholic and was ordained a Catholic priest - a big reason is he was open to learning about the faith at a more deeper level. As Pope Francis said recently, "If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble." We do this, but also make time for prayer so God can reach out and touch our hearts. Note Thomas, at first, is kind of erring on the side of the extreme rationalism side of things; unless I touch the hands and put my finger in his side I will not believe. Thomas is trying to set the terms at first. But when he lets Jesus take over, that is when it leads to a deeper faith. His eyes see a man; but he now sees his God because faith has taken over.

These extremes are absolutes and are irrational. We hopefully find the middle ground, and that is where most of us live. A doubt about something doesn't mean you start things over. You maybe doubt your friends, your family, yourself, but you try to understand things and also have trust. You also admit when you are wrong. And with the disciples, they are also realistic. Note they believe but struggle too, and are empathetic to Thomas when he does show up and starts saying he won't believe unless he touches the hands and the side. Jesus though allows this, because He sees the faith that is there, and His love allows Thomas to come to reaffirm his faith.

Lastly, the Church is there to help us too. The others are together when Jesus appears the first time, but Thomas is not there. Think of this as a kind of Mass or example of the early Church. The Church is the gift Jesus gives us to help us on our journey. She is there to convey mercy, though sacraments like confession; She is there to lead us in

worship where we receive Holy Communion, our food for the journey. But She is also there to guide us too in faith and morals. The Holy Spirit guides our Church, and She teaches us - but do we listen? Again, questioning is a good thing. But sometimes we can become arrogant and lack humility. Like a child who thinks mom or dad just is being mean for setting boundaries, we say well the Church doesn't know anything, is outdated, who are they to tell me what to do with my body or my life or who someone can marry or why can't they get with the times. The Church though just wants one thing: our salvation. In the Church, we are brought closer to God, experiencing His love and mercy, but also learning what it means to really be a Christian. It's when he is with the others Thomas experiences this, so hopefully we too have an appreciation for the Church and trust in Her to help us, even when we are going through doubts. The Church is also the body of believers too - so we can turn to the saints for help; we can turn to others for help like our friends and fellow parishioners and family members, for we are a community of believers who help one another on our journey.

From St. Jane, we learn the importance of a spiritual guide and the virtue of trust. St. Paul of the Cross's example teaches us the value of patience and hope and the rewards that follow darkness. From St. Therese, we learn the necessity of exercising faith and ignoring the enemy. Finally, from St. Teresa we understand that the suffering caused by doubt has value in God's eyes, when offered to Him with love. Doubt will always be a part of our lives, and I have so many questions for God like we all do. But we do not worship a God who says this person should win Powerball tonight, and this person should die in an accident tonight. God allows evil. We won't have all the answers to "why" this side of heaven. But we do have a promise: I am with you always. And we have a beautiful offer from our Lord: "Peace." May that peace help dispel our fears, anxieties and doubts, and may like Thomas we strive to let go and let God, knowing that God believes in us and will help us go onward and upward to the land of light.