Doubt is Often Part of Our Faith Journey

On this Second Sunday of Easter, we have Jesus meeting the apostles in the locked room, and the famous encounter with Thomas who isn't with them, and then is seemingly set in his ways before he opens his heart and mind and utters the profound words of faith, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas is unfairly labeled "the doubter" at times; let's not forget he is a saint and professes his faith. His eyes see a man; but his mind and heart see God!

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, who also battled many doubts - but she persisted always in her faith and her charity.

Doubt is certainly part of our journey too; we go through spiritual dryness and setbacks, or see people suffer, or wonder sometimes “where are you God?” when we pray. So how then do we best deal with doubt?

First, remember it is not a sin: that is despair, giving up on God entirely. Doubt is often part of that journey!

Second, remember Jesus is there to help us overcome our fears. Contemplate that word “peace” that Jesus says to them. When we are afraid, when we hurt, when we suffer, we can think about that word Jesus says to them and that it’s also said to you and me.

Third, remember faith is a journey, and is a matter of the head and the heart. On the one hand our faith has a lot of evidence in it; such as the tomb of Saint Peter, or the empty tomb of Jesus, and the testament of the early Christians who gave their lives for the faith; or the Shroud of Turin, the burial cloth of Jesus. There is the spiritual component too, the listening to where we are called to go in life and the prayer

experiences we have. We combine these into faith. But some things can be hard to understand; other times we don't "feel" the closeness of God. This doesn't mean God is silent, or that the Church is wrong. Rather we just need to keep persisting both in prayer and our contemplation of our faith and things will gain clarity as we go through our lives.

And lastly, we can turn to the Church to help us on our journey. Because of the Church, we have the guidance of the Holy Spirit that helps the Church to teach on faith and morals. We have the Mass and the Eucharist. Through the Church we can experience mercy in sacraments like confession. The Church is also the Body of Believers, both those who are with us at Mass and the saints who intercede for us and help us.

I know Saint Thomas the Apostle speaks to me in that there are many times when I wish I could touch the hands and side of Jesus and converse with Him, for there are so many questions I have like all humans that walk the earth. Someday these will all be answered, and while I go through struggles as we all do, I know that I don't journey in the dark. The Holy Spirit illumines the road, and Jesus walks by my side.

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.

Have a blessed week!

Fr. Paul