

Knowledge is Not Enough!

by Sebastian R. Fama

Addressing a crowd of 40,000 people, Pope John Paul II said the following: "Through the Holy Spirit, Christians are brought into a **personal relationship with God**" (General Audience September 20, 2000). Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, speaking to a group of religion teachers and catechists stressed the same point. He said: "Catechesis is not so much a matter of transmitting knowledge as it is a question of leading people to **a relationship with Jesus**." Later as Pope he said:

We can be witnesses only if we know Christ first hand, and not only through others—from our own life, **from our personal encounter with Christ**. (Pope Benedict XVI, Vatican City, January 20th, 2010).

Pope Francis has made similar statements, he wrote: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed **personal encounter with Jesus Christ**, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; **I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day**" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 3).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is just as explicit:

Great is the mystery of the faith!" The Church professes this mystery in the Apostles' Creed and celebrates it in the sacramental liturgy, so that the life of the faithful may be conformed to Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and **that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God** (CCC 2558).

The apostle John tells us that those who worship God must worship Him: "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). So, a proper understanding of the truth is vital but in no way is it enough. Christianity is much more than a collection of facts. The loving God who created us desires to be in a relationship with us. When asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

You can read about, or be told about someone and come to appreciate who they are. However, you can't truly love them solely based on what you know. You need to meet them and get to know them in a personal way. In the same way you can't really love God unless you get to know Him in a personal way. Paul refers to the Church as "the bride of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). Paul's marriage analogy is a good one as it illustrates the type of relationship that should exist between God and Man. A true marriage is a covenant. A covenant involves a total giving of oneself to another. And that is just what Jesus did on the cross. We return that love by humbly submitting our lives to Him.

Some people understand the importance of having a relationship with God. But unfortunately, they stop there. I have actually heard people say: "I have no need of doctrine. All I need is Jesus." Yes, all you need is Jesus. But Jesus is a person who taught many things. And you cannot separate Him from what He taught. As the Scripture says: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). And of course, that would include all the teachings contained in Scripture. Paul warns Timothy about a time in the future when people would "**not tolerate sound doctrine**" (2 Timothy 4:3). He tells Titus to: "**Exhort with sound doctrine** and refute opponents" (Titus 1:9). And again to: "**Teach what befits sound doctrine**" (Titus 2:1).

This idea of "No doctrine, just Jesus" often results in people being led by their feelings rather than the Holy Spirit. While the Holy Spirit certainly does guide us in a personal way, it is sound doctrine that confirms that the guidance is from the Holy Spirit and not from those who would deceive or manipulate us. When we focus on our feelings we can end up with a god of our own making, a god who is subject to our desires rather than a God who: "leads us in paths of righteousness" (Psalm 23:3). We have only two choices in life; We can say yes to God or we can say no to God. But under no circumstances can we ever tell Him how to be God. And that is just what we do when we ignore sound doctrine. Remember the last thing Jesus said to his apostles was: "Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

In Psalm 42:1, David expresses his need for God: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." It is perfectly natural for those who have a relationship with God to long for Him. But where does such longing come from? Paul gives us the answer in Philippians 4:13, where he says, "I can do all things in Him [Christ] who strengthens me." That would include everything that is expected of the believer. Not only avoiding sin and being charitable, but even the simple act of recognizing and desiring God. We are enabled to obey Christ by His grace working in us. We do nothing that God requires of us on our own. Indeed, Jesus tells us as much in John 15:5: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, **for apart from me you can do nothing.**"

How do we abide in Christ? As we saw earlier Pope John Paul II said that we are brought into a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is free for the asking. Jesus tells us as much in Luke 11:9-13:

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given you, seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent, or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! (Luke 11:9-13).

Now it is true that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at Baptism. However, like any gift, it is useless if it remains unused. For instance, there are some who claim to embrace the faith. However, it seems to have little or no impact on their lives. Faith demands a response. We must consciously cooperate with the grace received at Baptism as well as the grace we receive through the sacraments and prayer. Only then can we become "a new creation in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Bottom line: the more open we are to God's grace the more He manifests His power in our lives.

We are often inspired by the lives of the great saints. We sometimes tend to think that they are different from us. That somehow, they had a special invitation to holiness that the rest of us have not received. But that is not true. We are not only called to holiness; we are also called to a special purpose. We may not all be called to do the same thing, but we are all called to do something. Blessed John Henry Newman wrote:

Realize it, my brethren; - everyone who breathes, high and low, educated and ignorant, young and old, man and woman, has a mission, has a work. We are not sent into this world for nothing; we are not born at random; . . . God sees every one of us; He creates every soul, He lodges it in the body, one by one, for a purpose. He needs, He deigns to need, every one of us. He has an end for each of us; we are all equal in His sight, and we are placed in our different ranks and stations, not to get what we can out of them for ourselves, but to labor in them for Him. As Christ has His work, we too have ours. (*Discourses to Mixed Congregations* 6:111).

Knowledge apart from grace can be harmful. If we have the wrong attitude while witnessing to others we can turn them away from Christ. Evangelization should always be an act of love. It should never include anything which belittles another. The Holy Spirit enables us to see things as God sees them and to love people as He loves them. We will never be perfect in this life. But with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we will be the best that we can be.

So, what's the secret? How does one go about establishing a dynamic, personal relationship with God? You can pray for it. But the sentiments expressed in your prayer must exist in your heart. Realize that you are a sinner and humble yourself before your God. Ask for His forgiveness and guidance. If your prayer is genuine, God will come into your life in a dynamic way. If you truly desire Him, you will find Him. And when you do, you will know "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).