

Examples of Faith (II): Moses' Vocation and Mission

The second article in a series on figures from Sacred Scripture who offer us an example of deep faith in God and his providence.

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We have seen how Abraham's faith is a model of obedience and trust in God, to such an extent that he is rightly called *the father of all who believe.*^[1] Now we are going to look

at some episodes in Moses' life that will give us the opportunity to see faith as committing ourselves to God.

Indeed, all Moses' life is characterized by being a response of faith to God's revelation. Thus we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: *By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the destroyer of the first-born might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same thing, were drowned.* [2]

When God approaches us, inviting us to have faith, he does not just tell us what is true; he gives us himself. Accepting the gift of faith leads us to begin a journey towards God, and commit ourselves totally to him for love. "God awaits you. So, wherever

you are, you must commit yourself to imitating him and uniting yourself to him, cheerfully, lovingly, keenly, though circumstances may require you—even permanently—to go against the grain. God awaits you—and needs you to be faithful."[3]

The response of faith brings light to our whole life, giving it a sense of mission. "Christian faith and calling affect our whole existence, not just part of it. Our relations with God necessarily demand giving ourselves completely. The man of faith sees life, in all its dimensions, from a new perspective: that which is given us by God."[4] Thus faith "becomes a new criterion of understanding and action that changes the whole of man's life."[5] To have faith, and to commit oneself to God in a life of apostolic mission, are two sides of the same coin.

Living by the light of faith

At the time of Moses' birth, the Pharaoh had ordered all the male children born to the Israelites to be killed. *By faith Moses . . . was hid for three months by his parents.*[6] This phrase suggests that his parents' faith made them perceive that it was not God's will that the child should die, and that their faith gave them the strength to disobey the ruler's command. They could have had no idea of all that was to depend on their action. When they had, as they thought, given up their son, Divine Providence not only permitted them to see him adopted by an Egyptian princess, but also enabled his own mother to continue feeding him and caring for him.[7]

Moses grew up in Pharaoh's palace and was instructed in all the knowledge of the Egyptians. But something happened that changed his life radically. To defend an Israelite, he killed an Egyptian and

became an outlaw. In Moses' choice to take the side of his Israelite brethren we can see a decision based on a conviction of faith, on the awareness of belonging to the chosen people. *By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward.*[8]

By the light of faith, Moses recognized that to take on himself the hatred and scorn suffered by the Israelites had infinitely more value than the material pleasures of Egypt that would lead to spiritual perdition. "I am going to tell you what man's treasures are on earth so that you will not despise them: hunger, thirst, heat, cold, suffering,

dishonor, poverty, loneliness, betrayal, calumny, prison...."[9]

Moses had to flee from Egypt to avoid falling into Pharaoh's hands. And so he came to the land of Midian on the Sinai Peninsula. It might have seemed that his good dispositions and his concern for the Israelite prisoners in Egypt had not done him any good. Nevertheless, men are not the only actors in the history of the world, nor even the principal ones. When Moses had settled down in his new country and could justly have imagined that his life would now carry on normally, God came out to meet him and revealed to him the mission for which he had been reserved since his birth. This was to be his vocation and would shape his innermost self.

Calling and the response of faith

Moses' mission is set within the context of the history of the

patriarchs. God, hearing the groaning of the children of Israel oppressed in Egypt, *remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob,[10]* and he chose Moses to free his people from slavery. To be faithful to his promise to Abraham, the Lord again intervened in history. While Moses *was keeping the flock of . . . Jethro, priest of Midian . . . the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."* When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush.[11] The story of Moses' vocation shows us the basic elements found in every calling to follow God's plans: God takes the initiative and reveals himself; he entrusts the person with a mission, and promises his favor to

enable that person to fulfil the mission.

God opens up a path in an astonishing way, and adapts himself to the person he is speaking to. Having attracted Moses' attention by the burning bush, he calls him by his name, "*Moses, Moses!*"^[12] The repetition of his name emphasizes the importance of what is happening and bestows certainty about the call. Every vocation includes this awareness of belonging to God, of being in his hands, which leads the person to be at peace. It is what Isaiah expressed in his hymn: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine.*^[13] St. Josemaria loved to savor these words, combining them with Samuel's response: "*Ecce ego, quia vocasti me*—Here I am, because you called me!"^[14]

God's call brings with it the conviction that the vocation is no mere fantasy or figment of the imagination. Moses' vocation stresses this second aspect of a calling in showing how the Lord presents himself: *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob*^[15]—the very One in whom his ancestors had believed. *I am who am.*^[16] Every divine calling includes this initiative of intimacy in which the Lord lets himself be known.

We might find Moses' reaction surprising. Despite having seen the marvel of the burning bush, and being certain of what is happening, he starts to offer excuses: *Who am I to go to Pharaoh?*^[17] He tries to get out of what the Lord is asking of him, the mission being entrusted to him, because he is aware of his own insufficiency and the difficulty of the task. His faith is still weak, but his

fear does not lead him to turn away from God's presence. Moses talks to God simply and sets out his objections, and allows God to show forth his power and provide a remedy for his weakness.

In this process Moses experiences personally the power of God, who begins working through him some of the miracles Moses would later demonstrate to Pharaoh.[18] In this way Moses realized that his limitations did not matter, because the Lord would not abandon him; he perceived that it would be the Lord who would liberate the people from Egypt. All he, Moses, had to do was to be a good instrument. In any calling to a true Christian life, God assures the person of his favor and shows his closeness: *I shall be with you.* These words are repeated to all those who have received a difficult mission for the sake of mankind.[19]

Faith and fidelity to God's mission

Moses, aware of his mission, was always guided by his trust in God's promise to take the chosen people to the Promised Land, certain that with the Lord he would be able to overcome all difficulties. *It was in faith that he performed the paschal rite and the sprinkling of blood, to leave Israel untouched by the angel that destroyed the firstborn; in faith that they crossed the Red Sea as if it had been dry land, whereas the Egyptians when they ventured into it were drowned.*^[20] But this faith was not founded solely on a call received in the past; rather it was fed by simple, humble dialogue with God. God is invisible, but in a certain way faith makes him visible, because faith is a way of knowing things that cannot be seen.^[21] Faith in God leads to living out one's personal vocation with all its consequences.

As faith is a living reality and needs to grow, dialogue with God never ends. Prayer enkindles faith and makes us aware of the vocational meaning of our own existence. A life of faith begins to develop, which links prayer with everyday things and urges us to give ourselves to others, and to unfold the richness of our own vocation in the midst of ordinary life. Hence the importance of learning how to pray and teaching others to pray. As St. Josemaria taught: "Many things, whether they be material, technical, economic, social, political or cultural, when left to themselves, or left in the hands of those who lack the light of faith, become formidable obstacles to the supernatural life. They form a sort of closed shop which is hostile to the Church. You, as a Christian and perhaps as a research worker, a writer, scientist, politician or laborer, have the duty to sanctify those things. Remember that the whole

universe—as the apostle says—is groaning in the pangs of labor, waiting the liberation of the children of God."[22]

Moses, in short, is a particularly good example of the relation between faith, fidelity and effectiveness.

Moses is faithful and effective because the Lord is close to him, and the Lord is close because Moses does not try to escape God's gaze, but speaks frankly about his own doubts, fears and weakness. Even when everything seems lost, even when the recently-rescued people make themselves a golden calf to worship, Moses' trust in God leads him to intercede for the people. Then their sin is converted into the opportunity for a fresh beginning, which shows forth God's mercy even more clearly.

[23] For God "never tires of pardoning, but we sometimes get tired of asking for pardon."[24]

The Letter to the Hebrew highlights some exceptional moments when Moses' faith shines out. But we could go through his whole life and find many more episodes. He was also obeying, for example, when he went up Mount Sinai to get the Tablet of the Law, and when he established and ratified God's Covenant with his people. The most succinct and accurate praise is that given at the end of Deuteronomy: *There has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.* [25]

Moses' life was marked out by his vocation, inseparably united with his mission: God called Moses to free his people and to lead them, to *bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.* [26] The liberation of Israel entrusted to Moses prefigures Christian redemption, the true liberation. Christ is the one who, by

his death and resurrection, has ransomed us from the radical slavery of sin, opening the way to the true Promised Land, Heaven. The exodus of old is fulfilled, more than anywhere else, within our heart, and consists of responding to grace. The "old man" gives way to the "new man;" the old life is left behind, and now we can walk in the new life.[27] And this spiritual exodus is a total liberation, capable of renewing every personal and social dimension.

If we take up our vocation and help our friends to take up theirs, we will bring Christ's liberating action to all men and women. As the Holy Father said, we must "learn to come out of ourselves to go in search of the others, to go to the very outskirts of existence."[28] *Ignem veni mittere in terram*, I have come to bring fire to the earth,[29] our Lord said, referring to his burning love for mankind. And St. Josemaría felt

impelled to reply, thinking of the whole world: *Ecce ego*, here I am!

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[1] *Rom 4:11*

[2] *Heb 11:27-29*

[3] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, 51

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 46

[5] Benedict XVI, Motu Proprio *Porta Fidei*, 11 October 2011, no. 6

[6] *Heb 11:23*

[7] See *Ex 2:1-10*

[8] *Heb 11:24-26*

[9] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 194

[10] *Ex 2:24*

[11] Ex 3:1-4

[12] Ex 3:4

[13] Is 43:1

[14] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 984.

See also the comment on this point in the critical-historical edition edited by P. Rodriguez.

[15] Ex 3:6

[16] Ex 3:14

[17] Ex 3:11

[18] See *Ex 4:1-9*

[19] See *Gen 28:15; Josh 1:5*; etc.

[20] Heb 11: 28-29

[21] See *Heb 11:1*

[22] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, 311

[23] Ex 33:1-17

[24] Pope Francis, Angelus, 17 March 2013

[25] *Deut 34:10*

[26] *Ex 3:8*

[27] See *Rom 6:4*

[28] Pope Francis, Audience 27 March 2013

[29] *Lk 12:49*

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