

What are the Fundamentals of Christian Faith?

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Introduction

I am very grateful to Msgr Brendan Byrne, Maeve Mahon and the Congress organisers for their very kind invitation to speak at this Congress. Initiatives such as this are exactly what were envisaged by Pope Benedict XVI when he called for a Year of Faith. In his Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland almost exactly three years ago, on March 19, 2010, the Holy Father said:

The lay faithful, too, should be encouraged to play their proper part in the life of the Church.

And he instructed bishops to:

See that (people) are formed in such a way that they can offer an articulate and convincing account of the Gospel in the midst of modern society (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15) and cooperate more fully in the Church's life and mission.

I hope that this talk and the rest of this Congress make some contribution towards our own understanding of our faith and our ability and willingness to proclaim it.

The fundamentals are sound

I have been asked to speak to you about the fundamentals of our faith. When I hear talk of "fundamentals" I think first not of faith, but of the economy. Back in 2007, our then Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, assured us that "the fundamentals of the economy are still good". Similarly, the US Senator John McCain, when on the campaign trail said in 2008: "the fundamentals of our economy are strong".

Unfortunately, as we all know, literally to our cost, they were wrong. But we are here not to talk about the fundamentals of our economy but of our faith. And we can and should begin by assuring one another that the fundamentals of our faith *are* strong and sound.

You and I read, almost on a daily basis, media reports speaking of a crisis in the Catholic Church. 'Catholic Church facing gravest crisis since Reformation', one newspaper claimed last week. "The largest institutional crisis in centuries, possibly in church history," claimed another, and there were several more in that vein, and have been for years now.

Well, it is true that there are many things wrong in our Church, and there is much to be done to ensure that it more faithfully represents the Body of Christ. Many of us are, as Pope Benedict said in his Pastoral Letter, “disappointed, bewildered and angered” by some of the things that have happened in our Church. The disappointment is all the more intense because we love the Church, and we know how much the Gospel message is needed in our world today, and we know also the deep joy a living relationship with Jesus Christ can bring.

No matter how much hurt we feel, what is wrong in the Church will not be resolved by simply giving out, or walking away. The scripture passage that keeps recurring to me in recent times is from Mark 9 where the disciples try to expel a demon which is in possession of a young man. They fail, and the young man is brought to Jesus, who is able to do it. The disciples ask Jesus: ““Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer (Mark 9.29)." It seems to me that we really need to pray, pray earnestly for our Church at this time.

But despite all that is wrong, “the fundamentals are sound”. They are sound because the Catholic Church is not our own creation. The Church is founded upon what God the Father has done and continues to do for us through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

Even if all the signs were that the Catholic Church was in serious decline, people of genuine faith would still believe that the fundamentals were sound. However, as a matter of fact the Church is far from collapse. Because we hear so much talk of collapse and decline within the Catholic Church, let’s indulge ourselves for a few moments by considering some facts.

Over the past forty years, Catholics worldwide have remained at a constant 17% to 18% of the world’s population, increasing proportionally as the population has expanded. In real terms, the Catholic population has increased from an estimated ca. 654 million in 1970 to 1.2 billion in 2010. The number of students in Catholic secondary schools, for instance, has increased from 7.7 million to 17.8 million in that same period. Globally, over the past ten years the estimated number of catechists has increased from 2.6 to 3 million.

Worldwide, the number of priests has declined only slightly, from ca 420,000 in 1970 to 412,000 in 2010. During that period, ordinations in Europe declined by a third but increased substantially elsewhere. Over half the world’s Catholics are now to be found in Africa and Latin America, whereas in Europe, just over a quarter. This means that most Catholics in the world are quite poor and very many live in cultural contexts where they are in a minority and face persecution. In fact, from a material point of view we are among the few comfortable Catholics on the planet.

So, this Congress’s invitation to renew and deepen our Catholic faith is not an invitation to remain part of a declining, diminishing and defeated group of people who refuse to come to terms with the realities of modern life and haven’t really grown up or become sophisticated like everyone else. It is rather, an invitation to become more fully, more faithfully alive and

active as part of the Body that witnesses to God's love and God's faithfulness, that witnesses to the fundamentals of our faith, to which I now wish to turn.

Fundamentally, Receivers

The most important things in life always come to us as a surprising and unexpected gift. There is a world of difference between receiving something, and simply taking it. In both instances you end up with something you didn't have, but to receive a gift gratefully requires great humility. You have to let go, you have to be accepting. To take or seize something requires nothing of the sort. You are still in control, you are still powerful.

The Christian mystic John Moriarty used to say that we are generous givers, but we are damned mean receivers.

This brings me to the fundamentals of our faith. Life is about receiving, not taking. Life is about realising and accepting that we are dependent human beings, creatures, utterly dependent upon God for all that we have, and all that we are. We are not, nor can be, self-made men and women. Everything that is important to us, that has any real value, we cannot make or create for ourselves. Think about it: love, happiness, healing, forgiveness, and acceptance, all of these, no matter how much we strive for them, when they happen we always experience them as a surprising gift.

Our culture tends to teach us differently. It teaches us to strive after, to grasp, to try to be in control, to seek to determine and shape things. The atheistic philosophers, people like Sartre and Camus, for instance, spoke of their conviction that there is nothing outside of ourselves that we could receive, that we are condemned, as they put it, to 'making ourselves' down to the last detail. For them, life is essentially about inventing ourselves. There is nothing given. In fairness, they recognise this as an 'intolerable burden'.

The Christian sees things very differently. Who and what we are is essentially given freely by God as a gift. We have to discover ourselves, but not invent or make ourselves. Our basic dignity, our basic self-worth, is not something we have to create for ourselves. It is given as a gift, part and parcel of simply being a human being.

Of course, it doesn't stop there. We are, unique among creatures, invited and enabled to become co-creators. We join joyfully in the task of God's continuing creation. We become, to echo the words of Pope Benedict, co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.

God the Father, who created us: *I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth...*

The first fundamental of our faith, therefore, is that there is God, not a god or any god, but God the Father, Our Creator, who has loved us into being and that our lives are not just a happenstance, a coincidence, but God's plan and God's gift.

Speaking at the Synod of Bishops in Rome last October, Pope Benedict XVI said:

... the great suffering of man — then, as now — is this: behind the silence of the universe, behind the clouds of history, is or isn't there a God? And, if this God is there, does he know us, does he have anything to do with us? Is this God good, then does the reality of good have any power in the world or not? This question is as relevant today as it was then. Many people wonder: is God just a hypothesis or not? Is he a reality or not? Why do we not hear him?

Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that “Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance”. That, I suggest is the only logical conclusion if you do not believe in God. But if you do, then you can rejoice in the equally logical conviction that our lives have reason and purpose, because they are the fruit of an eternal love.

And if you want to test out which of these two hypotheses is most valid, then ask yourself: which is most life-giving? Which enables you to feel and be most alive? The claim that we are born without reason, prolong ourselves out of weakness and die by chance, or, that we are born of an eternal love, a love that is unconditional, a love we cannot lose because we did not earn or merit it in the first instance; that God knows us, sustains our lives here and now; heals and forgives us. And that in and through our lives God can and really does great things? Which of these worldviews is the most empowering and life-giving?

Here is another thought. I wonder if so much of the anxiety, the suffering as the Pope called it, the despair, which, tragically sometimes even leads people to take their own lives, arises because we do not really know that God exists, that God is good, that God cares for us and has not abandoned us? Or else, knowing this, we simply cannot accept it, because we are ‘damned mean receivers’ who wish to earn our own eternal keep. We are simply too arrogant to accept, as theologians such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar reminded us, the reality that, that “ours is an indebted existence”.

Do we not see in our society today a futile attempt to establish and exercise a false kind of autonomy, for instance in the demand today for abortion, and euthanasia? The reality, whether we like it or not, is that we always are, from the moment of conception until death, interdependent creatures.

We have been talking about what it is to be a creature and to accept the reality of our creaturliness. In so doing, we have begun to get to the core fundamentals of our faith. The fundamentals of our faith revolve around the activity of the Trinity, the three persons in one God, and we have been talking about the work of ‘God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth of all things visible and invisible’ as we recite in the Nicene Creed.¹ To describe God as Creator, and to claim, as Christians do, that God created us *ex nihilo*, that is,

¹ Here we will take the Nicene Creed (325, modified Constantinople, 381) rather than the Apostle’s Creed.

out of nothing, is to say that God created us out of nothing other than God's own very self. It is to say that we are made in the image and likeness of God and remain in eternal relationship with God.

The correct understanding of the very first lines of the bible (Gen 1:1) is: "In the beginning of God creating the heavens and the earth". God isn't finished creating yet, and in fact, God remains intimately involved in and sustains our lives here and now. God is not like an inventor who creates us and abandons his inventions or moves on to other projects. God's love is, as we have seen, an eternal love.

In order to be able to love, God gave us the gift of freedom, a gift which makes it possible to be truly human but also to do horrible and outrageously inhuman things. The gift of human freedom carries, as we know from history and from our own personal histories, a huge price tag in terms of evil, but in terms of what we do, and what we fail to do.

God the Son who redeemed us: *For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven*

[I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.]

The fundamentals of Christian faith include the conviction, as I have already stated, that God did not just create us and leave us to our own devices. In fact, we believe that from all eternity it was God's plan to give God's self to us as fully as possible. Christians believe that God's self-revealing and self-giving to God's Creation climaxes in the human being of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, we Christians believe that, (I am quoting here from the Preface we use at Mass on Christmas Day):

*In the mystery of the Word made flesh
A new light of your glory has shone upon the eyes of our mind
So that, as we recognise in him God made visible,
we may be caught up through him in love of things invisible.*

Jesus is God made visible. When we want to understand or imagine what God is like, we look at Jesus Christ.

That God would give God's very self away, would take the risk of being born in a fragile and puny human life, reveals the depth of God's love for us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16), we are told.

How Jesus lived, and died, and why, is also revealing. As the Nicene Creed reminds us:

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

God the Father creates; God the Son rescues us, redeems us, that is, literally "buys us back" from the various ways we allow our humanity to become less than human and diminished, in other words, from our sinfulness. The result is that there is no human experience alien to God. We are even told that Jesus 'descended into hell', which, if you take Von Balthasar's interpretation, means that Jesus even entered into solidarity with those who reject all human solidarity and relationship with God.

A friend of mine who works in child care remarked to me that he finds that some children who are fostered out, after an initial period of being "as good as gold" and well-behaved, can, seemingly inexplicably become less well-behaved and even disruptive and seemingly deliberately push the boundaries with their foster parents to see what will happen. His view is that there is a deep human need in all of us to know that we are genuinely and fully accepted as we are, loved unconditionally, warts and all. Children in foster care need to know that they are loved regardless of how they might behave, that the love the foster parents show them is not arbitrary or dependent on their good behaviour. And, according to my friend, we all have this need.

Well, according to the Benedictine scholar Sebastian Moore, God recognises and addresses this need in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. To quote Moore:

(In the crucifixion and death of Jesus) God obeys the deepest psychological law of acceptance: to be convinced of my acceptance, I must know that I am accepted at my worst. God shows me to myself as worse than I had ever conceived in order to leave me no possible room for doubt - that is to say no possible *further* experience of evil that might create doubt - that he loves and accepts me (Sebastian Moore, *The crucified Jesus is no stranger*, p.4).

God, according to St Anselm, is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. So also is God's love. Now of course, this is no easy love, it comes at a huge price in the crucifixion and death of Jesus, and its acceptance in our own lives means letting go of all the false sources of security to which we cling. It is a tough love, a searingly challenging love out of which to live our lives.

To know that we are loved unconditionally is not a licence to do whatever we like. It is, rather, an invitation to accept the terrifying challenge to love unconditionally. The Spanish mystic St John of the Cross recognised this challenge. He wrote: "Where there is no love, put love -- and you will find love."

Just two scripture passages suffice to remind us of how Jesus Christ lived and loved. The first is from Matthew's Gospel (11: 4 – 6). The disciples of John the Baptist were trying to work out who Jesus was and they were interrogating him. We are told that

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

To suffer blindness, lameness, deafness and leprosy in that cultural context was not just to be disabled and disadvantaged. It was also to be accursed. It was with such people that Jesus was most concerned.

The second passage is from 1 Cor 13: 4 – 7 and relates to St Paul's description of Christian love. Love, we are told, in this familiar passage:

is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The early Church could only speak of love in this way because this was how they encountered Jesus Christ, who embodied God's love. Jesus was patient, kind, never envious, boastful, rude or arrogant, irritable to resentful, and rejoiced in the truth.

Talk is cheap. It is only in relationship with Christ; it is only in a state of discipleship that we can hope to realise this love. The question of discipleship leads us to discuss the last two fundamentals we will be touching on and which we will take more or less together the role of the Holy Spirit and the life and work of the Church.

The Holy Spirit who sanctifies us: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,

[Nicene Version: *I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.*]

I am going to switch Creeds now, in the interests of brevity, and take the summary version from the Apostle's Creed which reads:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.*

I am only going to make a few remarks here, and take the Holy Spirit and the Catholic Church together. It is fundamental to our faith to believe that the Holy Spirit guides our Church. At this very moment, we hope and pray that the Spirit is being listened to in Rome by the College of Cardinals. Perhaps, given the week that is in it, it would be appropriate in this regard to recall some words from Pope Benedict that might surprise us.

Back in 1997, the then Cardinal Ratzinger was asked on Bavarian television if the Holy Spirit is directly responsible for who gets elected as Pope. This was his response:

I would not say so, in the sense that the Holy Spirit picks out the Pope. ... I would say that the Spirit does not exactly take control of the affair, but rather like a good educator, as it were, leaves us much space, much freedom, without entirely abandoning us. Thus the Spirit's role should be understood in a much more elastic sense, not that he dictates the candidate for whom one must vote. Probably the only assurance he offers is that the thing cannot be totally ruined.

This is how the Holy Spirit works. The Spirit gives us many gifts as we know. Among these we can include freedom and responsibility. At the same time he does not abandon us, and hopefully, if we allow, guides us. It is no different for a Pope, and it is no different for us. In his final meeting with cardinals on the morning of his retirement, Pope Benedict said that he never felt abandoned by God over the past eight years as Supreme Pontiff. But it would be wrong to think that somehow the Holy Spirit was present to Benedict in a way that he did not feel the heavy burden of the choices and decisions he had to make. He is too good a theologian to believe that human frailty, even that of the Pope, is easily disposed of by God's grace.

It is the same with us. We are called to co-operate with God's grace in the circumstances of our every day. God wishes us to become saints, that is, holy and wholly human, that is fully human beings. Our daily prayer is that of the Our Father: one of praise, one of petition that we might be instrumental in bringing about God's reign, one for healing and forgiveness for our sins and the grace to avoid evil.

Conclusion

I hope that some of what I have said has assured you that the fundamentals of our faith are sound and strong. If this is the case, then we all have much work to do. It has been suggested that the reason many young people do not find the Church appealing is because it is not challenging enough. I cannot imagine anything more challenging than striving to become a true disciple of Jesus Christ. But we need to represent that in a culture becoming increasingly confused about our faith, and ambivalent and even, at times, hostile towards it.

I want to make just a few concluding remarks about the situation in Ireland in which we currently find ourselves. The public witness to and proclamation of our faith matters more now than ever: that is, offering, as Pope Benedict urged us, "an articulate and convincing account of the Gospel in the midst of modern society".

First of all, there is no such thing as a “neutral” culture. Someone’s values are influencing how we live our lives, the context in which we raise our children and so on. As citizens we have a right to seek to influence these values; as Christians we have a responsibility to do so.

We need to rediscover a humble yet confident and authoritative voice in Irish public life, one that is respectful of the complexity of the painful situations that so many people find themselves in, yet one which offers the only hope, the hope that comes from knowing and loving Jesus Christ, that is real and genuine and which can endure.

In order to be able to do this we must work on ourselves, or rather, let God work on us and in us. The sacraments are the God-given wellsprings of our spiritual life and wellbeing. Baptism conforms us to Christ and Confirmation confers our mission as disciples upon us. The sacraments of initiation are completed in the Eucharist which we receive again and again, as our continuing formation, our food for our journey as disciples. Marriage and the Sacrament of Orders both build up the Body of Christ and serve communion within the Church. And finally, the Sacraments of Penance of the Sick are there to heal us and restore us to communion with God, ourselves and one another.

I think as a Church we need to be disturbed into rethinking and reimagining how we prepare for and celebrate the sacraments which are so fundamental to our spiritual lives. I think this is particularly important because some of them, especially baptism, confirmation and marriage, are in danger of becoming perceived as cultural commodities rather than privileged moments of graced encounter. But that is a talk for another day.

I want to thank you very much for your kind attention and wish you and the organisers of this event a very fruitful and enriching Congress.

Eamonn Conway

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