

Faith isn't found in one's head or heart, but in where one sits

Living In Exile

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Daniel Berrigan was once asked: "Where does your faith reside, where's its real seat?" His answer is wonderful, both in colour and insight: "Your faith is rarely where your head is at and rarely where your heart is at! Your faith is where your ass is at! Inside what commitments are you sitting? Within what reality do you anchor yourself?"

Faith, in his view, is not anchored in the head or the heart. But how is that possible? If it isn't in the head or the heart, where is it?

From Aristotle, through Thomas Aquinas, through contemporary philosophy and psychology, analysts have generally agreed that, as human beings, we have three major spiritual faculties: HEAD, HEART and GUT, each with a special function. In our heads, we think. In our hearts, we feel. What happens in the gut? In the gut, we know, just simply know, in a way beyond thoughts and feelings. The gut has to do with intuition, it lets us know what we "have to do." It's there that we experience the categorical imperatives within our lives.

With that as background, we can begin to understand the wisdom of Berrigan's answer. To use just one example: There are times when each of us in the most important commitments within our lives (faith, family, church, morality) find ourselves in a situation where our heads aren't in it, our hearts aren't in it, but we are in it! Against the more spontaneous wisdom of our heads and against the more natural feelings of our hearts, we are anchored by another kind of thought and feeling which

perhaps we can't explain to anyone, even to ourselves, but which keeps us sitting, standing and walking solidly inside of a certain commitment. We are doing "what we have to do" because at some deep level we simply "know" that this is what we need to do, that this is what is right. That's faith.

Faith is manifest in our decisions, our commitments and our life-choices, more than in any intellectual beliefs or passionate feelings. It shows itself in decisions, in choosing certain commitments and in remaining within them. It's helpful to know this.

How do I know whether my faith is weak or strong? By checking where my ass is at! Why am I inside certain commitments? Why am I remaining there? That, ultimately, is the criterion. The same holds true for assessment of others' faith. What's to be said of those among our own children, siblings, neighbours and friends, who no longer go to church and seem, on the surface at least, to be rather cavalier about the faith?

How we assess their faith may not be based upon where their heads and hearts are at, but rather upon where they are at. Do they radiate charity, graciousness, respect, hospitality, honesty, generosity, moral integrity, concern for justice? To what are they giving their lives? What commitments are they sitting and walking within and why? Faith is judged by these things, not only by how someone thinks, feels or expresses herself explicitly in the area of faith.

God, as Jesus makes clear, is a self-emptying God, and we live in the wonder and grace of that kenosis. God, it seems, is self-secure enough so as to not need to be always the centre of conscious attention, the acknowledged life of the party.

We see then that there is a real difference between the idea of faith and its reality. Too often we confuse these.

Faith is also an idea and that idea can sometimes be stimulating intellectually. As well, the idea of faith can stir and inflame the heart. The reverse is also true. As a notion, faith can sometimes seem intellectually stifling and can feel emotionally crippling. Feelings and thoughts run a wide gamut and so we must be careful to not mistake how we think and feel about God on any given day for the reality of faith.

Thoughts and feelings about God are not necessarily faith, as we all too quickly learn when our faith is challenged either by the distractions of everyday life, the scandals in the church or, more deeply, by personal tragedy, when we are cut down at our roots by terminal illness, the loss of health through aging, and other irreversible losses. It's then that we find out, only too quickly, that the idea of faith, as distinct from the reality of faith, lacks the substance to truly let us believe in a deeper life than what the world can give us now.

C.S. Lewis, in recounting his own journey to faith, tells us that it was not, in the end, his thoughts or feelings that led him to faith. Rather it was God's grip on him, an inchoate brand in his soul that wouldn't go away, a nagging burn in his gut. As he puts it: "The harshness of God is softer than the kindness of men and God's compulsion is our liberation."