



Issue Two

Crisis and Opportunity: The Drama of Growing Faithful

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The statistics are alarming. Around sixty-six percent of young adults (age 18–24) are not affiliated with any religion, and thirty percent say they do not believe there is a God. Even young adults who grew up with a religious identity are falling away from their faith and are less likely to return to it than previous generations.^[1] Americans in general are less religious than they used to be.

It seems that our society is undergoing a large-scale crisis of faith. We who continue to believe in God do not want our sacred places to be secularized as they have been in parts of Europe, with churches converted into clothing shops and skate parks.^[2] Most of all, we want both our contemporaries and future generations to drink from the same life-giving streams that vivify us and give us hope.

What could turn back the tidal wave of secularization? Faith. As St. John assures us, “This is the victory that overcomes the world” (1 Jn 5:4b).

Faith itself is the answer to the crisis of faith. But the term “faith” has many dimensions as you can quickly see by opening the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There we read that faith is the only adequate response to God’s Revelation; it is the complete submission of the whole person, intellect and will, to God who reveals; it is a personal adherence to God; faith is belief in Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, and in the Holy Spirit; it is a gift of God, a supernaturally infused virtue; faith is also a human act accomplished with the interior help of the Holy Spirit; it is a foretaste of eternal life.^[3]

Growth and perseverance in faith has always been a challenge. St. Paul writes, “Fight a good fight by holding faith and a good conscience. Some, by rejecting conscience, have made a shipwreck of their faith” (1 Tm 1:18–19). Quoting this Scripture, the *Catechism* warns us that we can lose the gift of faith. If we want to keep it, “we must nourish it with the word of God,” “beg the Lord to increase” it, and live a life of charity and hope while being “rooted in the faith of the Church” (CCC, 162).

It would be impossible to discuss all of these elements here. Taking for granted that God is generous with His grace and is blessing our children with the gift of faith in Baptism, I would like to look at one aspect of the growth and development of faith: *its human side*.

To shed some light on the issue, I will take up several helpful observations from Romano Guardini, a 20th-century Italian-German theologian and masterful educator. The life of faith and its development was his subject of study. First, he reminds us that faith will not grow to maturity except by its being integrated into the whole life and personality of the believer, but this integration often occurs by way of *crisis*. A faith that is never tried never grows to maturity.

Guardini was no stranger to trials of faith. Growing up in an Italian family in Germany, he found himself caught between two cultures and struggled to find his way as a young person. For reasons he could not identify, his faith in God began to wane in adolescence: God seemed not to exist. Remaining faithful to his prayers and moral sense, he passed through this crisis and emerged with greater conviction and trust than he had before, but Guardini’s faith was never static. After spending decades allowing the light of faith to shed its rays on the culture and thought of his time, the priest and professor again faced the impression of God’s “distance,” now experienced in old age. His writings on the subject are some of his most poignant. I will return to them later.

What is needed to grow *more* faithful through the trials of life instead of less?

The divine gift of faith is given (we might say incarnated) in each individual believer with his particular characteristics and situation. The faith belongs to the Church, yes, but it is received and lived by each person. For this reason, Guardini surmises that *a crisis of faith is rarely about the fine points of doctrine*. Since faith involves the whole human person, there are many reasons why it may become problematic. He lists several sources for such a crisis: 1. disillusionment and scandals, 2. false ideas about faith and God, 3. changes in religious environment, and 4. moral struggles. In each form of crisis there is both danger and opportunity for the individual, and when the crisis is wide-spread, there is danger and opportunity for the Church as a whole.

Let us consider the four possibilities in turn.

1. Disillusionment

Disappointment or scandal caused by the failure of leaders and mentors can shake our faith in what they taught us. We might be suspicious that their teaching is tainted by their own moral corruption—and it might really be so. Take, for example, Marcial Maciel Degollado. The double life of this corrupt founder of the Legion of Christ was protected in part by the rule of “charity” he gave the community—it forbade any criticism of a superior. I also once met a woman from another country who practiced her Catholic faith but confessed to having serious doubts. She

had been molested by a priest when she was much younger. The local bishop ignored the complaints that she and other women had brought against the cleric. She spent years struggling with anger before she found peace in separating the misdeed and its mishandling from God himself. “I learned that God is one thing and the Church is another,” she said to me, with both her words and her tone of voice betraying a wound that was not quite healed.

Less dramatic examples of scandal come in ordinary ways. Similar to the realization that our parents are only human, we must come to terms with the weaknesses and character flaws of our religious mentors...without giving up on Christ, the Church, or our religious mentors.

Hopefully, in more cases than not, our religious leaders help us come through a crisis with renewed faith. Sometimes a small thing matters immensely. I experienced the power of many seemingly ordinary gestures of kindness at times of faith crisis in my own life. One such gesture stands out in my mind. While living abroad and pursuing a time of formation in a religious community, I recall passing through something like a spiritual fog. God seemed distant and unreal. I began to experience troubling temptations against the faith. One evening, a group of monks from Africa visited us. The prior of their community came over to me, asked my name and shook my hand. His eyes were so kind and loving. When I returned to my room that night, I thought to myself, “I don’t know if God exists, but I can’t live without the love I saw in that monk.” I knew the love that he expressed had come from his faith in Jesus Christ. His kindness affirmed my own faith in that love. The spiritual fog I had been living under dissipated as soon as I renewed the gift of my life to that love’s Source.

2. False Ideas

This first set of examples about scandal leads us directly to the second: false ideas about God, faith, and the Church can cause a crisis of faith. For example, apart from the scandal of sinful actions themselves, there can be a set of false ideas about God and the Church that must be purified and refined. How is it that God chooses sinful human beings to represent him? Or viewed from the other direction, can God forgive *me* and call *me* into a relationship with Him? To answer these questions, faith must seek understanding through prayer, study, and holy conversation. The only remedy to an unformed faith is a timely formation. It must take objections to the faith seriously if it is to be convincing or helpful.

Guardini cites the apparent contradiction between faith and science as one of the main sources of crisis in his time. Many young Christians—Catholics being numbered among them—list the **contradiction between faith and science** as a reason why they no longer practice the faith.

The difficulty of reconciling modern science with the ancient science of the faith is found not so much in the apparent contradiction of certain doctrines, such as evolution versus creation, but, rather, in a clash of worldviews. How can we reconcile our culture’s exaltation of radical self-determination with our faith’s message that we are lovingly fashioned by our Creator? These are more than mere ideas: they take concrete forms, reinforced by our technology and sanctioned by our government. We are applauded for manipulating realities that were once simply received with the given structure of our world and bodies, such as gender, the differentiation of species, and human reproduction. Where this contemporary worldview

contradicts Divine Revelation, we need a serious and refined intellectual formation. Moreover, we need a Catholic culture that offers a lived alternative. When faith is strong enough to shed its light on thought and culture, it purifies what is antithetical to human dignity and humbly keeps what is authentically human.

There is no way around the difficulty of this encounter between commonly-held but antithetical cultural views and the faith of the Church, which has its own authority and generative power. If we were to give a name to the widespread crisis of faith that is carrying away the younger generations in its wake, it might well be the absence of a faith that is fruitful in the production of a vibrant culture. Some Catholic writers such as Fr. Matt Fish and Robert Royal are reminding us that faith needs culture to survive. A faith without culture is a dying thing.

3. Environment

Another cause for a crisis of faith, according to Guardini, is the change in one's religious environment. He has in mind the student who leaves home and finds himself surrounded by an environment that dramatically differs from home. The structures that supported his religious life now give way, and he is challenged to stand on his own two feet. Often enough the young person fails to take responsibility for his own faith and religious practice. Guardini states that this situation isn't so much a faith crisis as a revelation of the weakness of the young person's convictions. He never had a serious faith to call into question. Unlike the young adults of previous generations, who came back to the practice of faith as they married and began raising a family, current statistics show that the young adults of today are not returning to the faith. Is this evidence of the weakness of their faith convictions? Is it a consequence of the increasing hostility of the popular culture to traditional beliefs?

Regarding the need to build a Catholic home life and culture, this point made by Guardini also reminds us that young people need to be challenged to take responsibility for themselves and their faith even before they leave home. If the lack of culture is deadly for faith, so too is a superficial personal faith that has no depth.

4. Morality

The faith crisis caused by a moral struggle is perhaps the type of difficulty I have encountered most among my friends and in my work at a Catholic parish. How often have we heard the story of a Catholic couple that marries only to later divorce, and because of this, to leave the practice of the faith? Likewise, other difficulties with sexual morality and identity (premarital sex and cohabitation, contraceptives, gender identity and same-sex attraction) have caused a number of people to part ways with the Catholic Church. Jean Twenge states in her book *iGen* that the young adults she interviewed consistently cited their variance with traditional teachings regarding sexual morality (including sex outside of marriage, "gay marriage," and LGBT issues) among their reasons for not attending church.^[4] The promotion of sins by the broader culture only increases the sense that Christ's teachings—particularly regarding marriage and sexuality—are impracticable and oppressive. And in some ways, we must agree. Without Christ in our lives, these moral teachings are impracticable! It is the grace of Christ that strengthens us to live the Christian moral life. Without recourse to prayer, the Sacraments, and the communion of the Church, we find ourselves too weak to live according to the teachings of Christ. Our crises of

faith that stem from moral struggles come in part from our “boot-strap” mentality and individualism. We think we should be able to do it all on our own, and we expect it to be relatively easy.

We must also admit the objective reality of sin. Our rationalization of sin does not mitigate its consequences in our lives, especially when we have turned a blind eye to our faults or convinced ourselves they are not that bad. Conceding to sin and acting on temptation has a dramatic effect on the life of grace in our souls. Less serious sins dispose us to greater sins. All sin weakens our will and darkens our intellect. We deaden our spiritual senses and eventually lose the life of grace. Unprepared for sacrifices at the beginning of our spiritual lives and proudly self-confident, we can easily lose our faith.

What does faith need to grow and thrive?

I began this article with a summary of points from the *Catechism* on faith and how we can nourish ours. If we are to keep the faith, we must read God’s Word, pray, live the life of charity and hope, and remain rooted in the faith of the Church (cf. CCC, 162). The passage reads as a summary of the Christian life. Are we doing these things?

Guardini’s own crisis of faith as a young man is quite instructive. Whatever the reason for his difficulty, one can identify key behaviors on his part that helped him resolve it. Guardini was formed in philosophy and made use of St. Thomas Aquinas’ famous proofs of God’s existence to strengthen his belief, but he also sought the answer to his faith crisis in prayer and Sacred Scripture. He and his friend Karl Neundörfer, who was going through a similar trial, were praying and reading in the upstairs part of the Guardini family residence when they both received the insight they needed. Opening the Scriptures spontaneously, Guardini came upon Mathew 16:25, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” He understood that he must give his life away fully to God, but also reasoned that the only way this would be possible was through the objective reality of the Church. The Church, with its authority and structure, would prevent him from an illusion of self-gift when he was really holding fast to himself. Not long after this time of prayer, Guardini and his friend would both decide to enter the seminary. This decision would come after being impressed by the peace and devotion of Benedictine monks. Guardini would not himself become a monk, but he was inspired by their witness, becoming a Benedictine oblate and diocesan priest.

These biographical details highlight several important elements for passing through a faith crisis successfully: intellectual formation, prayer, Scriptures, holy friendship, Christian witness. These all flow from the life of the Church and bring us back to the Church. The young Guardini did not give up his moral life or succumb to his temptations; rather, he sought God in prayer, Scripture and holy friendship. He recognized that the Church was the place God would meet him with certainty and welcome the gift of his life. This is true regardless of the specific vocation one might have.

There is one more element that Guardini can give us to help us through our own faith crises. Like St. John of the Cross, Guardini came to hope beyond hope and believe without any sensible consolation. His is a faith that comes to rely upon God absolutely, hoping to receive from God everything promised by Him. Guardini intuited that his experience would become more

common, because the less the world is shaped by faith, the more that faith must survive without exterior help. The faith of our times has to be pure and ready for sacrifice. Faith comes to fulfillment in our loving union with Christ's self-offering. Such a faith has come of age. It is fruitful. It will be passed on. It will give birth to genuine culture.

We can do nothing better to promote the growth of our faith than to open our heart to [loving God]; to be generous enough to desire the existence of a being who surpasses us; to wish to encounter the Most High in order to give ourselves to Him; to adopt the bold, joyous attitude of one who does not fear for himself, for he knows that the gift of oneself is stronger and more creative than self-containment can be.[5]

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Keep reading! The next article is on science education with the help of educational genius Charlotte Mason.

[1] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2018), 121, 124.

[2] *Ibid.*, 119.

[3] CCC, 142–143, 150–152, 154, 163.

[4] Twenge, 139.

[5] Romano Guardini, *Living the Drama of Faith* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1998), 62.