

# Foundations of Christianity

## Faith

### By Father Michael Himes

1.
  - a. Karl Rahner described the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council as the Church's first self-actualization as a world Church. It was the first time the Catholic Church really expressed itself as a world church. A universal church.
  - b. Up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the church was more in the Western or European culture. Now many, many Catholics live in non-western cultures, in Africa and in Asia.
  - c. This presents a challenge for the church - the 2<sup>nd</sup> great crisis for the church.
2.
  - a. The 1<sup>st</sup> great crisis for the Church occurred during the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of Christians.
  - b. As recorded in the Letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles, this was the 1<sup>st</sup> time the Gospels moved out of the Jewish/Palestinian community to the wider Mediterranean world. More and more Gentiles wanted to become Christians. The question for the Christian missionaries became: In order to become a Christian, does one have to be Jewish first? Do the men have to be circumcised? Does everybody have to observe the kosher laws in order to be Christians?
  - c. This challenge would be a very big change for the Church. Representatives gathered in Jerusalem as described in the Acts of the Apostles to discuss how to handle this. Some people said yes, people must become Jewish first then Christian. Others, including St. Paul, said no, it would be an enormous, unnecessary obstacle to reaching the Gentile world. A compromise was reached. Central obvious tenets of Judaism could be observed and no, they do not have to become fully Jewish first in order to become Christians.
3.
  - a. So in the 2<sup>nd</sup> crisis for the Church, does one have to be "Westerner" first before becoming a Roman Catholic? Some, including Father Himes, say no but, how do we work out all the diverse cultural differences within the church?

So how does this have anything to do with the question of Faith?

4. There are 2 possibilities of faith that confront the Church today.  
- **Relativism**: Anything goes. Different strokes for different folks. Everybody's opinion is just as good as everybody else's on every issue.

- **Idolatry:** A particular position, a particular way or reasoning, a particular way of praying and worshipping is “The Only Way”. Those who don’t believe that way aren’t Christians.

5. An American Theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr of Yale University, wrote an essay “Radical Monotheism and Western Culture” (1960) in which he was sorting out the differences between relativism and idolatry and suggesting what might be acceptable. He identified the following approaches:

a. **Polytheism:** Worshipping many gods. There is a tendency towards this. What is the most important thing in your life? That is your god, and each of the gods we choose is equally good. Anything goes.

b. **Henotheism:** Worshipping one God. One stroke for everyone because it’s “My God” because I know my God is the “real” God. This is dangerous as it can lead to Idolatry. It takes a particular image of God and makes it the supreme God.

c. **Radical Monotheism:**

We are endlessly tempted to Idolatry.  
God is always bigger than our best image of God.  
Your God is what is the important thing in your life is.

Catechism of the Catholic Church – Fitting God to our categories is a dangerous temptation.

Relativism ► Polytheism

Idolatry ► Henotheism

6. **Radical Monotheism** is a deep conviction that there is the Truth but we don’t possess the Truth, the Truth possesses us. That is the crucial difference.

\*\* God is always bigger than our best image of God. \*\*

There is One God and that One God has all of us, we don’t have God.

We don’t reduce God to our symbols and our images.

There is no one image of God that is exalted as the only image of God.

7. Faith is not about doctrine, creeds, and moral codes. **First and foremost, faith is a commitment to an ongoing pilgrimage. Faith is a commitment to ongoing growth, ongoing development, ongoing change. Faith is always in motion. It never settles, it never simply stops. We believe but we don’t stop learning.**

We're finally seeing the Church as it really is. We are a pilgrim people. That's what Vatican II said, being, in its terms, self-actualized. A people who are pilgrims, in motion, people moving and changing, people who are developing.

Obtaining deeper and deeper insight into the Truth which possesses them. The absolute Truth which is God.

8. Ernst Troeltsch, a theologian at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said that people ask the wrong questions about ethical dilemmas. Choosing between good and bad is not an ethical dilemma. When faced with a decision between good and bad, of course, good is the answer. An ethical problem is when one is faced with 2 or more irreconcilable goods, or with 2 or more irreconcilable evils. The dilemma lies in choosing the better of the 2 goods or the lesser of 2 evils.

The life of faith is a life lived among shades of grays. When confronted by shades of grays, one must make very careful decisions.

9. Robert Bolt, a playwright, wrote "A Man for All Seasons" about St. Thomas More.

Father Himes quotes an insightful comment made by St. Thomas More to his daughter Margaret in the play/movie:

"God made angels to show him splendor, and he made plants for their simplicity, animals for their innocence, but man He made to serve him in the tangle of our minds."

10. It's not clear, it's not simple, it's not that obvious – a life of faith, a life of commitment to a Truth which we all have partly but never have totally. Which always grasps us more deeply than we grasp it. Which always leads us on. The willingness to live in a world in which we cannot absolutize anything of ours because the true absolute – God – the absolute good, is true. God is always ahead of us, before us, beneath us, above us, around us and never simply ours - never in our package, our framework. Faith is a willingness to recognize that we are always called to pilgrimage. We are never a people to settle. Here below, things always change. We are a people that have no abiding city. No sooner we are settled, we have to move on. We are people who live by faith and that's what the virtue of faith is about. Faith is a willingness to live with a God who is always a mystery.

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