

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## How God Invites Us to Grow

### SIX STAGES OF FAITH DEVELOPMENT

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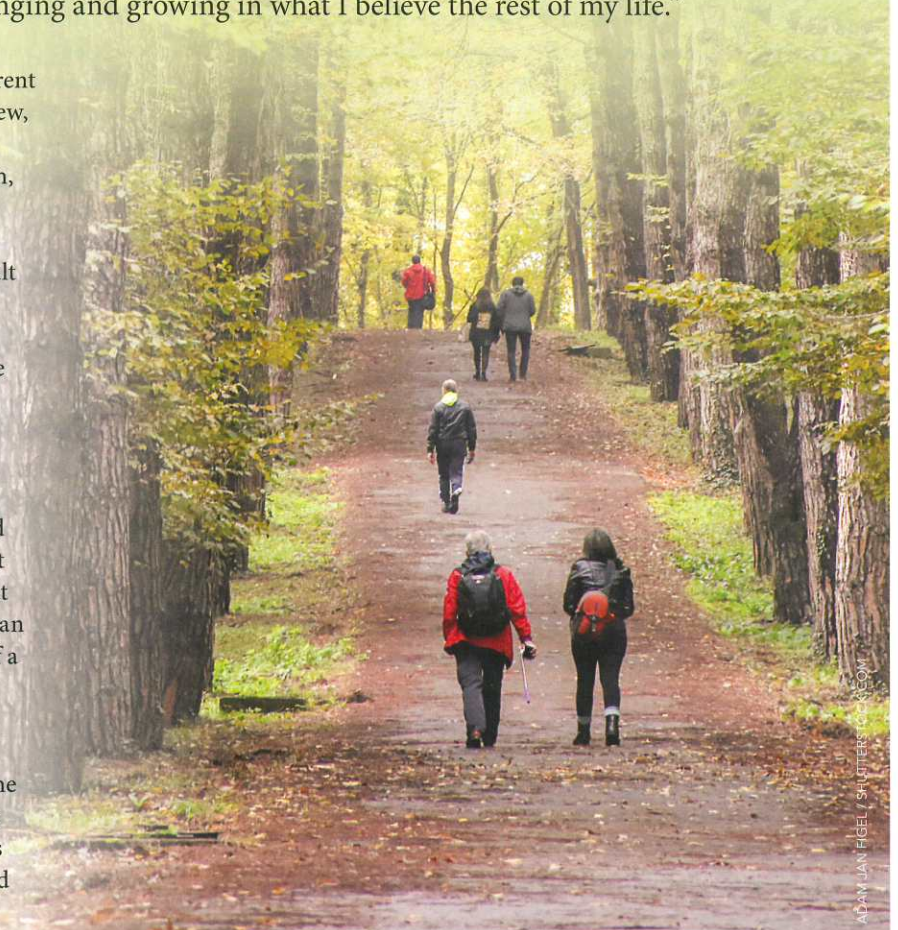
With obvious concern etched on his face and an anxious tremor in his voice, Frank looked across the table at his forty-two-year-old friend. He had not seen Tom in seven years. At the end of a two-hour conversation he searched for the right words: “I don’t know how to say this, Tom, and I don’t want to hurt your feelings...but, you’ve changed. You’re not the same person I knew before. You don’t seem to believe in the things you used to.” Tom calmly responded, “Well, thank you. I consider that a compliment. And I hope I keep changing and growing in what I believe the rest of my life.”

Frank and Tom represent two very different views of adulthood and faith. By Frank’s view, religious faith should remain constant and undisturbed. According to Tom’s view, faith, like every other aspect of adult life, should always be evolving.

Should our faith change throughout adult life? Many adults believe a person’s faith should change throughout life just as one’s body and mind change. This is certainly the prevailing view of spiritual directors and counselors. Yet several questions remain. How does faith change? How do we know whether we are losing our faith or actually growing within it? Will the faith we learned and practiced in our youth be enough to get us through the challenges of later life? What are the common stages of faith most of us can expect to go through? What are the signs of a mature faith?

#### ROOTS OF FAITH

First of all, let’s acknowledge that faith in the broadest sense is our way of understanding God and God’s action in human life. Just as our understanding of ourselves, society, and



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our world inevitably changes as we proceed through life, so also our understanding of God's presence and activity in human life can be expected to change. Faith does not lie in a vacuum but sprouts from the seedbed of our life—experience.

It can be shaped by all kinds of experiences, primarily personal: parental love and correction, Church teachings, school, answered and unanswered prayers, unanticipated joys or heart-wrenching failures, discussions, and disagreements with friends or colleagues.

And the experience that most often signals a shift or change in faith is the experience of conflict or confusion. The conflict may be caused by a prayer that receives no *clear* response, or by disillusionment with a respected authority figure, the breakup of a marriage or cherished friendship, or an encounter with persons whose faith and values seem vastly different from our own. In each instance, the moment of conflict and confusion has the potential to challenge us to *rethink* our view of God.

It is no surprise then that Jesus once told his followers: "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division" (Luke 12:51). Experiences of conflict and confusion may tell us that our previous faith is inadequate to deal with some new dimension of life—that our faith must now be reshaped. Similar to how St. Paul's highly legalistic faith before his conversion from Judaism came into conflict with and was reshaped by his encounter with the early Christians.

I recall the father of a family whose faith was substantially changed when his son was in a tragic automobile accident. "How could God let this happen?" he asked over and over again. The absence of any immediate answer forced him to a new understanding of how God is present in the world. And there was the Catholic senior high student who went to a small Protestant college and suddenly found that she didn't have answers to the questions her dorm mates posed. Deeper searching and questioning ushered her into a new level of faith.

Researchers guided by the important work of Professor James Fowler of Emory University have been conducting interviews on the faith lives of men and women for nearly twenty years. Currently they have identified as many as six different stages of faith people seem to exhibit. In each case, the movement to the next stage occurs when some life experience invites a person to a new understanding of God. The new stage of faith imparts a fuller, more adequate insight into life and makes possible more responsible and truly loving decisions.

Let's examine these stages of faith. We will focus on the most noteworthy features of each stage as well as the kinds of experiences that often signal movement to a new stage. Keep in mind that what we will be looking at is not really a "road map" detailing the straightest and surest route to union with God. It is more a description of the "road signs" that many people have encountered on their journey of faith. Knowing what road signs to look for may help prepare you for especially difficult parts of the journey and may guide you through some of the unexpected turns of life. Spotting certain landmarks and milestones along the way can reassure you that you are progressing in the desired direction. And recognizing that there are different phases of the

journey may help you understand, respect, and aid your fellow travelers.

## 1. IMAGINATIVE FAITH

Until around age seven, a child's faith can be expected to be highly imaginative. A host of different and sometimes conflicting images of God, the world, and the hereafter fill children's minds at this stage. A child's faith is "healthy" at this stage if the images that fill his or her mind are positive ones that picture the world as a friendly, welcoming place and God as a loving, dependable parent. This is true of one five-year-old's comment that "God can go all around the world in one day. And he can't ever do bad things to you!" It is less apparent in another young boy's comment that "the devil can come up out of a hole in the ground and get you when you're bad!"

Images of God that cause fear, guilt, and worry to a child are the real dangers to faith at this stage. Destructive images of God and the world may continue into adult life and give one's faith a scrupulous, anxious, or pessimistic cast. But by the time a child reaches the "age of reason" around age seven, the desire to know how things really are lessens reliance on imagination alone. Now a child wants to know more about how the world really is and how things fit together. The child is ready for the world of story and for a new stage of faith.

## 2. LITERAL FAITH

Children in the early years of school are fascinated with stories. Not surprisingly, then, learning the religious stories of one's family or church group gives children at this age a clearer, more consistent picture of God. Bible stories, in particular, remain a very apt method of religious instruction; however, for children at this time all Bible stories are taken literally. The story of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Moses and the Ten Commandments, Jesus' crucifixion, and Paul's conversion are all read the same way: as literally and historically true. While literal faith is appropriate for children at this stage, adults whose faith remains literal into their later lives may at times appear anti-intellectual or resistant to the deeper meanings of Scripture and life itself.

The central feature of literal faith is a view of God as one who rewards good and punishes evil. God is presumed to operate as the parent who loves and praises us for being good but also corrects and penalizes us for wrongdoing. Faith then entails bargaining with God. "If I do what God expects of me, I can count on his help in return." I remember in elementary school often promising to say ten extra "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys" if God would help me do well on a test or in an important baseball game. But I noticed eventually that God was not always as predictable or reliable as I thought. Yet some adults live much of their lives with a literal faith.

Some years ago, a brilliant scientist astonished me with the remark: "When it comes to my faith, I do better staying with what I learned in the third grade." Indeed, he continued to view God as the judge who doled out fortune or misfortune according to one's behavior. But this faith proved woefully inadequate in the scientist's life. He continued to blame himself

for the misfortunes of an alcoholic son and an emotionally troubled daughter. Somehow he must have done something wrong! Why else would God allow this? A faith so strongly rooted in moral bargaining with God will rarely prove adequate to resolve the complexities of adult life.

### 3. GROUP FAITH

Since most young people naturally value the importance of friendship, they often come to view God as one who treats them much like a trusted companion. At the same time, young persons often tend to model themselves after admired and respected figures. This growing significance of companions and esteemed authority figures leads faith in the adolescent and early adult years to be strongly influenced by the group.

As a result, a central feature of faith at this stage is that it is largely conformed to the expectations, values, and understandings of the significant groups to which we belong. This may be our family, church community, peer group, or colleagues. Greater identification with a group usually strengthens and supports our understanding of God and makes us more aware of community responsibilities. One young man well expressed faith at this stage by commenting, "My faith has always helped me keep on the right path in life and reminded me what God expects of me."

A further feature of faith at this stage is that it remains largely unquestioned. Confidence in the authority and dependability of the group eliminates or alleviates questions. The following statement made in a faith interview is typical at this stage: "My father was a good Catholic, went to daily Mass, followed the Ten Commandments, and told my brother and me to do the same....Whenever we wondered how to act, he said we should follow the exact teaching of the Church. Questioning it would only get us into trouble." While group faith imparts helpful clarity and consistency, it also runs the risk of discouraging personal responsibility. In the extreme, it gives rise to a blind defense of one's own group. Also, religious practices done because "everybody else does them" eventually become lifeless and mechanical.

For many adults, certain experiences sooner or later force them to question earlier beliefs. It may be the experience of seeing opposing opinions or even conflict among religion teachers, priests, or bishops. Or it may be the inability to accept or understand some Church teaching or a change in Church practice. The Second Vatican Council provoked questions for countless Catholics. Questioning of this kind, troubling as it is, often signals the birth of a new, more challenging stage of faith.

### 4. PERSONAL FAITH

Studies have shown that many believe that questioning earlier beliefs strengthens faith. Adults recognize that it does not suffice to hold certain beliefs and perform religious practices only "because my parents did, or my teachers taught me to, or Church authorities say I should, or everybody else does." Personal faith develops a desire to take personal responsibility. The beliefs people hold and the values they live by at this stage point to a more personal (though not private) faith less

dependent upon group expectations. My understanding of God is now increasingly shaped by my personal life experience. Former beliefs are examined and may be altered, renewed, deepened or, if found faulty, discarded altogether.

The passage to a personally "owned" faith rarely occurs without significant tension and struggle. Saint Teresa of Ávila is known to have found her own journey from a conventional to a more personal faith to be a wrenching experience. She noted wisely that the point at which doubts and questions appear may lead persons to feel that they are losing their faith. The opposite is often true. God may be leading them to probe the deeper meaning of their previous faith.

For some, the transition to a personal faith means that they must be willing to endure the pain of standing at odds with friends, family members, and Church leaders. For one college student it meant enduring the ridicule of his peers as he chose to adhere to his Christian values in the face of the differing sexual practices of his university roommates. For a young Catholic woman it meant a decision to expand her awareness of other Christian Churches by attending for a time worship services of other faiths—much to the distress of her parents. Such decisions may be necessary if persons are to develop a mature conscience and assume responsibility for the values they choose to live by. Faith-filled living now means accepting that even the most helpful laws, norms, and guidelines are sometimes limited in their ability to point out the best behavior. Reliance upon a God who is ever-loving and who has blessed us with the gift of human reason now makes it possible for persons to act increasingly according to their own most honest judgments and decisions. Still, those who continue to search for answers to the more complex questions of life are often led to the discovery of a source of wisdom that lies sometimes even beyond personal reason.

### 5. MYSTICAL FAITH

Don't let the word "mystical" put you off. It simply suggests communion with God. The hallmark of this fuller stage of adult faith is nothing other than an experience frequently described by Christian mystics, the experience that God dwells in us. Saint Paul witnesses this mystical faith when he says, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). He calls others to this faith by reminding them, "You are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you" (Romans 8:9). For most people this awareness of God's inner presence begins with a longing or compelling desire to be one's whole self, to live one's life as meaningfully as possible.

Thomas Merton expressed this longing by relaying the idea that finding his truest self will relate to having found God. This inner yearning to be all that God invites one to be leads persons at this stage to listen more intently to their thoughts, feelings, and deepest desires. They begin to heed Paul's reminder that God often speaks to us through "inexpressible groanings" (Romans 8:26). A woman religious in her fifties captured this view of faith when she said, "I believe that listening to the deepest part of me is identical to listening to God. At that point we are one."

At this stage of faith the awareness of God's inner presence leads one to become more aware that God also dwells in all others. One begins to see people of various creeds, races, and nationalities as brothers and sisters to one another. A seventy-year-old man's comment exemplifies this stage beautifully: "I have learned to have respect for anybody, I could sit down and talk to Muslims or Jews or anyone, and if they started talking religion in their way, I could really and completely fit my mind to theirs, see where their mind is going, and understand their ideas." Interfaith dialogue isn't seen as a threat but an opportunity for new understanding. Recognition of the sisterhood and brotherhood of all people also intensifies one's commitment to the well being of all humankind.

Mystical faith can strongly influence one's relationship to religious institutions. Heightened awareness of the ultimate authority of the Holy Spirit lessens one's reliance upon the limited authority of human groups. Adults who live a genuinely mystical faith discover a new responsibility to challenge and strive to improve the institutions to which they belong, such as church, government, or civic groups. However, they also discover at times that an even further degree of faith may be needed to live up to their ideals.

## 6. SACRIFICIAL FAITH

Occasionally history provides us with examples of people who have so identified with the well being of others and who are so committed to the values of truth and justice that they have a capacity for selfless love that outreaches most of us. Jesus, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and Archbishop Oscar Romero are examples of this vast selfless love. Such persons display a radical and consistent commitment to the doing of God's will that is uncompromised by concern for personal status or security. In some cases the willingness to sacrifice self for others has led to martyrdom. For less famous persons, it leads to a constant dedication of self to the growth of other persons and the improvement of society as a whole.

Robert Bolt's highly regarded play, *A Man for All Seasons*, presents the political life and death of St. Thomas More and portrays well the features of a truly sacrificial faith. Thomas More resists King Henry VIII's claim to be head of the Church in England and reveals the faith that inspires him with his famous last words, "I die the king's good servant, but God's first." For a person of such faith, following the will of God, carefully discerned, leaves no room for compromise. One's commitment to the values of truth, justice, and love is all-consuming.



## WHAT FAITH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

So what stage or degree of faith should you have? Should we seek the "highest" stage? Should we all hope to reach the point of a totally sacrificial faith? No doubt many would see that as ideal. But should anyone dare tell you where you should be at a given stage of your faith journey? To insist that you reach complete maturity now is like grabbing a budding flower by the stem and trying to yank it upward into full bloom. Such an effort would be violent and destructive, and it ignores the truth that there is a season for everything.

Faith remains always a gift of God. The precise stage of faith to which we are called by God depends greatly on our life experiences. God loves us at each stage of our development. He affirms us at the level at which we are and, when the time is right, invites us to fuller life. This invitation may come in the form of a gnawing dissatisfaction with our way of life or through the unrelenting pressure of doubts and questions. It may be spoken in our search for better solutions to life's problems.

As we become more conscious that faith develops in stages, we also come to some practical conclusions. For example, we may need to learn patience and realize that some things are beyond our control. It may take time, and even trial-and-error, to get from one stage to another. We need to trust that God is in the often uneven process of our growth in faith. Therefore, it's OK to feel conflict, fear, and doubt or to face hard questions. This may even be our cue to reach out to others for help and guidance, which is already a sign of growth.

Finally, the stage-by-stage process of faith teaches us that change is not a bad word. It's the stuff of human life, the meaning of conversion, the way the kingdom comes, like the little mustard seed that, by grades, becomes a full-grown tree. Openness to change, to the ongoing invitation of the Spirit, may well be the gift of God we need the most.

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