

FURTHERING OUR FAITH THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD

By Franco Maggiotto

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“By faith Abel ... , by faith Enoch ... , by faith Noah ... , by faith Abraham ... , through faith also Sara ... , by faith Jacob ... , by faith Joseph ... , by faith Moses ... , by faith Rahab And what shall I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the Prophets; Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises ...” I (Hebrews 11)

By Faith. Right from Abel, the second human generation, the second man born of woman after his brother Cain: it is with Abel that faith begins. Its history is so ancient that it belongs to the beginnings of humanity and it has continued forever from one generation to the next right down to our times. The appearance of faith merges with the awakening of human consciousness and, from Abel onwards, there have been those who in every generation have lived by faith. To be sure, the paths of faith have differed across the very wide range of human cultures; its manifestations have been of every shade and its affairs complex. Even in the Bible which is certainly the document of a single faith, the Judeo-Christian faith, we encounter very different experiences of faith which are recorded in languages, attitudes and behaviour that are just as different. But all these are traceable to just one basic, underlying position: *“by faith”*.

By faith John the Baptist . . . , **by faith** Jesus, who not only lived, spoke, acted, healed and suffered by faith but faith also saved Him from death: He is *“the author and finisher of our faith”* (Hebrews 12:2). **By faith** Levi the publican, the Roman centurion, the woman without name who anointed Jesus’ head. **By faith** Peter, Paul, Phoebe, Giulia, Perside. By faith Stephen, and with him the ranks of Christian martyrs, many of whom in our age. What more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Clement, Justin, Irenaeus, Priscilla, Domitilla Hippolytus, Cyprian, Origen and countless others, great and small, famous and obscure, known and unknown, men and women, (perhaps more women than men) who over the centuries have written down the history of their faith — a singular and a mysterious history — so that it might reach us.

And even that great Christian upheaval and revival that we are accustomed to calling “Protestant Reformation” may indeed be interpreted and condensed into these two small but great words: *“by faith”*. Having sprung up as a personal decision and very soon a chorus of faith also, the Reformation placed itself in the service of faith in two ways: by locating its centre in Christ once again and by giving it greater substance with the

Biblical Word. **By faith** Luther, who meditated at great length — for years — on the Scripture, thoroughly understood and welcomed the central message of Christianity: grace that is perfectly free, unmerited and unconditional, — that sets us free (from our neurotic anxiety for salvation) and makes us responsible (the world before God and God before the world). **By faith** Zwingli . . . , **by faith** Bucer, Capitone, Vadiano, Calvin and countless others in all the countries of Europe, Italy included, and in all social spheres.

By faith, furthering faith through the Word of God. It was not a painless operation, not even in the sphere of the Reformation itself, but it was salutary. Faith was blessed by that great labour, through tensions and conflicts too.

By faith, but not always and not only. Even Sara doubted and was unbelieving faced with a promise she thought impossible. The great Moses doubted as well and did not enter the Promised Land, though he saw it and welcomed it from afar. Even Jesus on the cross cried out: *“Why?”* (Mark 15:34). Thus it was at the time of the Reformation too: **by faith**, but not always and not only. So it is today also. Let the person who has never doubted take a step forwards. Every true believer prays thus *“I believe; help thou mine unbelief”* (Mark 9:24). And again *“Lord, increase our faith”* (Luke 17:5).

Remembering the Reformation means, once more, to take possession of these two small, but great words; *“by faith”*. *And what is faith?* It is to be certain of God and in God. It is to live in His presence, with Him and in Him, steadfast in His promises that find their *“yes”* and their *“amen”* in Jesus Christ. It is not to trust in ourselves, in the power of our intelligence, our knowledge and our will; make use of them by all means but not trust in them. It is to take part in the building of the city of man but not to trust in man. It is to live and to work in the church but not to believe in the church. It is to believe in God. In God alone, revealed in His Word illuminated by His Spirit.

FrancoMaggiotto