

Confession of Faith

Dorothy Day

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Summary: A conversation with her young daughter (Tamar Teresa) about faith in God. Notes the ways liberal relatives influence their children's disbelief and the effects of religious education on Teresa. Argues that faith in God is not unreasonable and that unbelief stems not from lack of reason, but from lack of inquiry. (DDLW #41).

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Teresa was talking about a friend of ours who did not believe in God. Teresa is six and a half.

"He does not believe in God!" she ruminated. " Perhaps he has forgotten."

" Yes, perhaps that is it, maybe he has forgotten."

" I forget many things," she went on. " I forget when I was a little baby. I forget when I was a little baby and couldn't walk and I used to crawl up and down the sands and even crawl into the waves and they would splash me. But you tell me about it, so I know."

"It is easy forgetting things."

"And I believe you, too," she went on. "Why doesn't Jim believe you if you tell him about God?"

"Because he hasn't belief. That's what faith is. I tell you something and you believe it, and that is faith."

"I say 'I Believe in God' in school. But I never saw God. Maybe when Jim sees God he will believe in Him. Why do we believe in Him?" she wanted to know.

"Because the Church tells us to. You know, the Sisters tell you in school and the priest tells you."

"Just like you tell me about when I was a little baby and I believe you. I don't remember either. I love to be Catholic, don't you?" Teresa concluded.

And then after a long while and evidently after a good deal of thought: "But good people will go to Heaven anyway, won't they, Dorothy?" I assured her that I thought they would.

And this calling me by name instead of by "mother" had led to another discussion in the past which I reminded her of. I had said, "When are you going to begin calling me 'mother'?"

"I don't know. I'm used to calling you Dorothy. I'm just used to it."

“But no one will know that I am your mother if you call me by my name.”

“But I know it,” comfortably.

“How do you know I’m your mother?”

“You told me so. You *are* my mother, I know it.”

But that is faith, too. You might have been somebody else’s child left to me to take care of when you were too young to remember and I told you I was your mother."

“But I *know* you are my mother.” It was an absolute certainty, but the certainty of faith.

And I thought of those words of St. Augustine:

“After that, O Lord, Thou, by little and little, with most gentle and merciful hand, drawing and calming my heart, didst persuade me—taking into consideration what a multiplicity of things which I had never seen, nor was present when they were enacted, like so many things in secular history, and so many accounts of places and cities which I had not seen; so many of friends, so many of physicians, so many now of these men, now of those, which unless we should believe, we should do nothing at all in this life; lastly *with how unalterable an assurance I believed of what parents I was born*, which it would have been impossible for me to know otherwise than by hearsay—taking into consideration all this, Thou persuadest me that not they who believed Thy books (which, with so great authority Thou has established among nearly all nations) but those who believed them not were to be blamed. . . .”

St. Augustine was laying emphasis on belief in the sacred writings because, as he said, " no wranglings of blasphemous questions . . . could once wring the belief from me that Thou art."

Teresa’s little conversations may seem very precocious, but circumstances of her life make it inevitable that she think on such questions. Where another child accepts naturally, she accepts, ponders, and understands.

She has a cousin of her own age of whom she is very fond, and there are two older cousins of ten and twelve. These children, though baptized at birth, have had no religious training save some desultory teaching on the part of a grandmother. They take great interest in the fact that Teresa goes to parochial school.

“What do they teach you there?” The oldest child asks. " Just prayers and the Bible?"

“I know how to pray,” little Sue proclaims. “I say my prayers every night.”

“Yes, you just use them as an excuse to stay up a little longer,” her father scoffed at her, “and keep the other children awake.”

“When I started to school this year, I told my teacher that my mother and father didn’t believe in God, but I did,” Sue went on.

Teresa has other friends who are just as defiantly non-believers. Little Rose goes to a modern school—she is nine—and last Christmas some old-fashioned friend said cheerily, if thoughtlessly, " Was Santa Claus good to you, Rose?"

And Rose coldly replied, " I don’t believe in Santa Claus. I don’t even believe in God."

Her father thought her intelligence exceptional. " I never bring any influence to bear on her," he stated firmly.

" I don't believe in influencing a child. Let them come to their own conclusions."

So Rose has become a Young Pioneer. Her father is an active worker in a Communist organization doing propaganda work, but he never brings any influence to bear on Rose.

"Neither do I with Teresa," I tell him with all seriousness. "I use no persuasion at all. I just put her in a Catholic school. Just as you put Rose in a progressive school. I don't make her say her prayers. She just wants to."

But he doesn't see my point. He really believes that he has had nothing to do with influencing Rose's beliefs.

Another close relative who is much concerned if his wife serves meat on a Friday when I am visiting them, and who will insist on tearing himself away from his comfortable Sunday-morning pursuits to drive me five miles to Mass and to wait outside the church an hour to drive me back, is quite frank about his children. " If I should die," he says, looking darkly at his wife, whose mother is a "new-thought" advocate, " I want my children to receive no religious training whatever. When they go to college, I want them to take a course in comparative religions and the history of religion." With the end in view (he regards the result as inevitable) that they will reject all religion.

"Do you believe in God?"

If you ask this question of a "liberal" he will say he doesn't know. He will usually admit to praying in times of terror—the terror which comes to all when a loved one lies ill. He will be humble about his cowardice and be childlike in a desire to throw himself in reliance upon his Maker. But at the same time, he is bitterly opposed to giving his children religious instruction, regarding religion as an emotional aberration.

"Liberal" women are less unquestioning in their ideas as to religion and their children's education. Questions are always coming up on the children's part and they have no answer.

One friend said doubtfully, "It would be so much easier to bring up a child with religious ideals. Things would be far simpler and matter of fact. Ethics are so abstract."

God and His Mother Mary, St. Joseph and the Little Flower, are not abstractions to Teresa. They are good and loving realities.

"Does religious teaching really help them to be good?" one dear friend, the mother of several children, asked quite simply and sincerely.

I told her how Teresa interrupted her act of contrition at night to say, "I was good today. I didn't do anything. But I'm still sorry for hitting Freddy yesterday." And my friend, harassed by the many problems of behavior among her brood, said doubtfully and somewhat sadly,

"I don't know. I wish I knew."

So, with cousins and uncles and aunts and friends, none of them believers, but none of them untouched by the question of the existence of God, it is inevitable that Teresa look, and listen, and ponder.