

Struggling to Believe is Not the Same Thing as Doubting

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Q: In your last column, you said you believe everything the Church teaches. What if I struggle with believing? Where does that put me?

A: We are sometimes under the impression that believing or having faith means that we simply accept a teaching or the situations of our lives with no questions. If that is the case, then I need to clarify what I mean by having faith. It certainly does mean assenting to all of the truths of the Catholic Church, but it does not necessarily mean the absence of struggling with belief.

We know that faith is not mere belief. Faith is when we submit our intellect and will to God, who has revealed himself to us through Scripture and tradition. It involves both our minds and our lives. Because of this, faith is not the absence of a struggle. The life of faith is by its very nature a battle to place our entire selves under Christ's lordship. If you struggle to do this, it is not failure, it is engaging the call.

The great figures of the Old and New Testaments demonstrate that faith involves struggle. Think of Abraham struggling to walk in faith as he is called from his homeland. Consider the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel through the night. (As a result of his struggle, he is rewarded with the new name Israel.) Even Jesus, in a mysterious way, struggled when faced with doing his Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane. Think of the great saints who asked the deepest and most difficult questions about the existence and nature of God, suffering and salvation.

The difference between these examples and someone who rejects God is the difference between having doubts and having difficulties. Not only are doubts and difficulties not the same thing, they are not even the same kind of thing. Doubt is a decision. A difficulty is a dilemma.

Every sin is essentially a decision. No one sins accidentally. A sin is not a mistake. Sin is essentially about relationship. It involves knowing what God wants and refusing to obey God in love. It isn't an error; it is saying "no."

Sin looks like this: "God, I know what you want me to do. I don't care. I want to do what I want to do."

Therefore, when it comes to doubt, this also involves full knowledge and full consent of the will. It is saying, "I know what the Church teaches, and I know why the Church teaches this. I refuse to submit to it."

That may be you. You may find yourself in rebellion against God or against the Church. But it may be that you have difficulties with belief. Many times, we think that we are doubting when we are actually merely struggling to understand or to live up to our call to be holy.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls this struggle "involuntary doubt." It refers to "hesitation in believing, difficulty in overcoming objections with the faith, or also anxiety aroused by its obscurity" (CCC 2088). This is vastly different from "voluntary doubt," which "disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief."

The difference between difficulties and doubts is so profound that Blessed John Henry Newman once stated that "10,000 difficulties do not make one doubt."

And yet, we have to be a person who is not content with difficulties or anxieties. We may say things like "I struggle with some teachings of the Church" with a sly look in our eyes. That contentedness with difficulty is neither noble nor harmless. It is one thing to struggle to know and love God and something quite else to have "difficulties" and not care to resolve them. That attitude can often lead to a spiritual blindness and an inability to hear God when He speaks. There is very little that God can do with the cool and indifferent.

Even if people have a difficult time with faith, if they struggle to seek after and follow God, they are light years ahead of one who does not believe and does not care. If we seek, knock and ask, we have Jesus' word: We will find.