

# THE HOUSEHOLD OF THE FAITH

By JAMES QUINN

THE crown of the lenten catechesis is the Easter vigil. It forms its final lesson, summing up in a single vivid experience the whole story of redemption. The age-old aspirations of a world in darkness are here dramatically fulfilled. The long night of Israel's travail ends with its resplendent dawn. This is the night to banish night. At its close the true Light rises in the heavens, never to sink into the shadows. Henceforth there is but one perpetual day.

The Easter vigil is centred on the risen Christ, lifted up to dominate the whole horizon of creation. The life to which he rises is not merely the life of the body but the transfiguring life of the Holy Spirit. The world enters on its new and final era of resurrection. The risen Saviour scatters the darkness of the world, and like the day-spring sheds the radiant light of the Holy Spirit over every place and age.

As he rises in the stillness of the dawn, Christ is not alone. He rises in the company of his faithful people. The Easter drama is not simply a spectacle of joy in the triumph of One who is risen. The Easter stage is thronged with players, for on it the whole risen people plays its part. Christ's triumph is indeed his very own, but he shares it royally with all his people.

The resurrection of a people: that is the lesson of the baptismal service of the Easter vigil. The lesson is most vividly presented when baptism takes place in its natural setting in the Easter liturgy. The whole people of God assembles to enact or re-enact the drama of resurrection. Resurrection is the very meaning of baptism, not only for the individual but for the whole community in the resurrection of glory which will fulfil the gifts of baptism.

Yet how remote from resurrection – still more from general resurrection – the baptismal service seems when it takes place privately, away from its authentic paschal setting. The present ritual of baptism incorporates, it is true, many parts of the old lenten catechesis. But we look in vain for its climax, even for its true meaning, for there is

no word of resurrection apart from the creed. The midnight drama of the Easter vigil is sadly missing.

Resurrection spells out a new and wholly marvellous creation, Christ's Easter world of faith. It is a world we enter by baptism, and know only by faith. The baptismal service stresses the importance of the gift of faith which the new christian receives from the Church as he crosses the threshold of the household of the faith.

'What do you ask of the Church of God?'

'Faith'.

'What does faith bring to you?'

'Life everlasting'.

The question is not: 'What does faith bring you to?' as if baptism were a promise only and not the gift itself of eternal life. It is: 'What does faith bring to you?' Faith makes present the gift of grace. The seed of God's glory is implanted in baptism: the life of heaven has already begun.

#### THE TWO MEANINGS OF FAITH

What is faith? Faith has two meanings, both sanctioned by New Testament usage. One is more general, the other more precise.

Faith in general is our acceptance of Christ as Lord and Saviour. The gift of faith makes us at home in the Easter world of resurrection. Blind eyes are touched by Christ, and open to a new vision of supernatural reality. We are given God's scale of values: we recognise that the gifts of his grace are precious beyond all others, desirable above all earthly blessings. We see God as our Father who dispenses bounty that more than satisfies all desire; we realize too that his surpassing gift is the gift of himself. Our hearts are touched and made responsive to God's invitation to be one with him in love. We are made at home in the unseen spiritual world that surrounds us, God's world of faith. Faith and hope and charity blend together in this meaning of faith.

Faith has also a more specialized sense. It is the homage of mind that we offer to God when we accept the truths he tells us about himself. Yet faith is not simply the agreement of minds; much more it is a communion of persons. Faith is a person-to-person relationship. When God speaks to us of himself, he does not want so much to tell us truths about himself as to open our eyes to see him as he is: a trinity of persons. We look on God with new eyes; we are welcomed by him into a new and personal relationship with him, with each of the three divine Persons.

By faith we welcome with our minds – in response to the prompting of our hearts – the three divine Persons into our souls. We rejoice – for faith is not meant to be a sterile assent to propositions but the loving homage of persons – in the works of love that stand revealed by faith: our creation and supernatural destiny, that are the gracious gift of the Father, our loving redemption by the Son, the unifying activity of the Holy Spirit in the *communio sanctorum* which is the Church.

This new knowledge of God which comes from faith leads on to love. Faith is the first step in the divine friendship. It is from the seed of faith that love blossoms. Love is not blind, and least of all this divine love to which faith admits us. It feeds on knowledge, and so on faith. Unwavering faith in the unchanging God is the guarantee of stability in the marriage of mind and heart that takes place between God and the soul in baptism. The new understanding of God that we have by faith is more real, more secure, more intimate, than the understanding we have of a friend on earth, just as the love to which faith leads is the greatest love of all.

#### FAITH AND THE RISEN CHRIST

It is baptism which admits us to this new relationship of faith between ourselves and God. In baptism we are made one with the risen Christ. By faith we share his mind and enter into his life. We enter into the Church, his body. The Church is the community of those who are united by faith to the risen body of Christ: this is the household of the faith. The resurrection-life of faith is the life which creates and sustains the Church: the risen Christ is her only Lord, and the fulness of her life. That life comes to her in the resurrection of baptism; it is nourished by the risen body of Christ in the Eucharist. The great assembly of God's people, gathered as the risen body of Christ, feeds by faith on the risen Christ, truly present in its midst. The faith of the Church finds its source and its inspiration in the resurrection.

The risen Christ is not only the foundation and the source of faith; he is also the object of our faith. The resurrection is the perfect summary of faith. The Church's faith can be expressed simply in three words: 'Christ is Lord'.

Christ receives the divine title of 'Lord' when he is exalted above every creature through his resurrection. His human nature comes fully and for ever under the transfiguring power of the Holy Spirit. 'Christ is Lord' means that Christ is risen in the power of the Holy

Spirit to give perfect glory to the Father. It means too that the universal purpose of Christ's coming has been achieved, for we too can make the passage from this world into the new world of faith and resurrection, to bring back to its source the Son's love for his Father in the homecoming of heaven.

Our faith in the resurrection of Christ is not simply an acceptance of the physical fact of a man rising again from the dead. The resurrection is indeed a physical event, a historical fact, the greatest by far of all: Christ did indeed rise again from the dead. But the meaning of the resurrection is beyond telling more glorious than any other historical event. The resurrection is essentially a supernatural reality. The life to which Christ rose is a life perfectly responsive to the transforming action of the Holy Spirit. As a supernatural event, it is the object of divine faith. It is, too, a cosmic event; it radically alters the whole course of history. It also sums up the whole of our faith. Christ is the mediator between God and man, between God and the universe; in his mediation he sums up all truth about God, about himself and about the whole creation.

#### THE FAITHFUL FATHER

Through the faith of the Church, Christ speaks to us about his Father. Faith itself is the gift of the loving Father, a grace outflowing from the source of all being and all goodness. God the Father is full of grace and loving kindness. He reveals himself to us in faith: why does he do this? He does it because he is a God of graciousness and love. He sent his Son into this world to reveal his Father and to bring the Father's love into the hearts of men. The gift of faith is the pledge of his love for us.

The Son does not tell us of his Father as of one who must remain a stranger to us. He is no stranger; he is our Father also. The Father gives himself to us through his Son, and in that giving he reveals himself as Father. He is the Father of mercies, and the greatest of his mercies is the gift to us of himself. He gives himself wholly to his Son, and he gives himself wholly to us through his Son; the gift he bestows is limited only by our capacity for receiving it.

A quality of the graciousness of God the Father is its fidelity. There is in the Father a steadfastness, a constancy, an unchangeable self-identity. The Father is strong and true, a God of faithfulness. He is true to himself. When he speaks to us we know his word to be faithful and true because he is who he is. When we recognise and accept his fidelity, we rest secure in his faithfulness; we abide in the

Father. The strength of our faith is the strength of the Father's faithfulness.

This is the Father who in times past spoke to Israel in the covenant of mercy and fidelity which he established with his people. Israel was deeply conscious of his loving kindness in choosing it out of all nations to be the people of his predilection, to be the Father's firstborn son. Israel knew also the security of God's faithfulness that reinforced the covenant: God was the rock of Israel. God in his loving mercy enabled Israel to make its response by a corresponding faithfulness: whenever Israel was faithful to the covenant, it was – and Israel knew it – by a special gift of God's graciousness.

God the Father continues to speak to the new Israel, the Church. He speaks as to his household. Our faith, like Israel's faith, is a covenant faith, a community faith. We are one family, and God is our Father. He teaches us as a family: our faith in him is at once a personal faith and a family faith. It is the faith that comes to us in baptism; as there is one baptism, so there is one faith.

The covenant with the new Israel speaks even more eloquently of God's faithfulness than did the first covenant with Israel. It is, by an act of infinite graciousness, an unconditional covenant, a covenant of especial fidelity on the part of God: it is to last for ever. God the Father, by a free and deliberate choice, has willed that the new Israel should live always within the peace and security of the new covenant of grace. He has endowed the new Israel with his own fidelity, by making it the rock of the new covenant, by bestowing on it the divine gift of unshakable faith. That faith, issuing as it does from God's infinite faithfulness, cannot fail. It is always there, always accessible, always discernible, though each member of the new Israel remains free to accept it or reject it, free to be faithful or to be faithless.

#### THE OBEDIENT SON

Through the faith of the Church, Christ speaks to us about himself. Because of the sacramental character imprinted by baptism, God the Father sees in the baptized the image of his Son. By the gift of baptismal faith the Son shares with us his attitude of filial love of, and obedience to, his Father. Our faith comes to us from the Father, through the Son: with the Son we listen to and obey the Father.

The obedience of faith imposes on us the mission of faith. The Son is the apostle of the Father; we through faith are apostles of the Son. What we receive we must also give. The Son gives to the Holy

Spirit all that he receives from the Father; through the Holy Spirit he gives also to the world. We too in our own degree receive the gifts of the Father's mercy and faithfulness; we must also give them to the world with a like mercy and faithfulness.

By faith we take on the likeness of the Son. Faith makes us share in the humility of the Son, in his condescension, in his lowering of himself to the level of our weakness. Faith is a *kenosis*, an emptying of ourselves. By faith we retrace the footsteps of the Son as he entered this world of darkness. Faith belongs only to this world of darkness: it is an exile's view of home, far from the noonday brightness of our homeland in heaven. Faith is a beacon, but it requires new eyes to see its light. Faith is an acceptance of limitation; it shares Christ's self-denial for the sake of a greater homage to God's faithfulness. The surrender that faith demands redeems the pride of man, because pride is brought low in the darkness of faith's vision. Faith, too, is a challenge to man's self-sufficiency, for faith is found faithful only within the community of faith. Nor can man add to it; he can only preserve it, for it is not his to change.

At the same time, faith is an exaltation, a resurrection. The knowledge that comes through faith can come only from above; it can therefore only uplift. By faith man lives the heavenly life, though as yet without full possession of it by vision. The source from which faith flows is the Father; it flows to us through the risen and heavenly life of Christ. By faith we dwell with Christ in heavenly places. The risen Christ is the firstborn of many brethren; faith makes us free of the household of the Father as brethren of the risen Son.

#### THE UNIFYING SPIRIT

Through the faith of the Church, Christ speaks to us about the Holy Spirit. The new life to which Christ rises is the life of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit joins to the risen body of Christ the persons of the baptized, forming one community of the Spirit. Because he is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, he unites us by faith and baptism with the Father through the Son. The Holy Spirit is the bond of unity within the Godhead, and so he is the bond of unity uniting us by faith and love with the Father and the Son.

Communion with the risen Christ by faith and baptism creates the Church. This is the communion of saints, the household of the faith. It is within this household that the Holy Spirit is active, leading us through faith in the risen Son to the eternal Father. Within the household of the faith there are three sacraments by which we are

made especially one with the risen Christ and share his heavenly priesthood: the sacraments of baptism, holy order and the Eucharist. The liturgical assembly of the Church, called into being by these sacraments, is the place above all others where the Holy Spirit meets us in love and truth. It is to this trysting-place that the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father in response to the sacrifice of the Son: the mission of the Holy Spirit is to enlighten the faith of the Church, to enlarge its hope, to fan into warmer flame the fire of its charity. It is the task of the Holy Spirit to lead the Church in faith and hope and charity to the Father through the Son. The eucharistic community is the highest expression on earth of our communion in faith and love with the Father, made possible by the unifying love of the Holy Spirit, acting in and through the Body of Christ.

#### THE EUCHARIST AND FAITH

The place of faith is the faithful community, the body of Christ. The risen Christ speaks to us of this at the Easter Mass. Present at that Mass is the faithful people of the Covenant, the community of the baptized. They are summoned by God, not to a private testing of their faith but to a liturgy of faith. They are called to the Eucharist, where the risen Christ, the object of their faith, is present. The Church approaches the Father through the risen Christ, and through the mystical body of Christ, formed by all who are united with him in faith and baptism: the faith of the Church is not a private faith but a community faith. It is within the assembled community, in the celebration of the Eucharist, that the faith of the Church is increased, renewed and brought to its focus.

The Eucharist is the means of renewal of our faith. Without the Eucharist there would be no faith, for without this renewal faith would wither and die. So true is it that faith in Christ and faith in the real presence of Christ merge into one. In the great eucharistic discourse in the sixth chapter of St John's gospel these twin objects of faith intermingle. They are in essence the same: the risen Christ. God our Father spreads before us his heavenly table to nourish our supernatural life of faith: our food is Christ, on whom we feed by faith in his teaching and by communion with his glorified Body, truly present in the Eucharist. Christ is the way, the truth and the life.

Why should faith be centred so particularly on the Eucharist? Why should faith in the Eucharist be a test of the unity of the Church? Why should communion with the Church be manifested by communion with the risen body of Christ? One answer is that the faith of

the Church is a community faith, not simply a private faith: it requires to be tested and proved in community. Faith grows within the household of the faith, where Christ is present. The presence of Christ in the Eucharist sums up the whole economy of salvation: this is the Jacob's ladder of the new covenant, carrying the whole traffic between heaven and earth. Here the heavens are opened to allow the whole people of God to enter into communion with the risen and ascended Christ.

The Eucharist, like the body of Christ which it is, is the appointed place to which we bring the whole of our lives to God in and through Christ. The Eucharist, like the risen body, is the chosen instrument of the Holy Spirit, uniting God's people in a single faith. The faith of the whole Church depends upon its use of the Eucharist.

#### THE HOUSEHOLD OF THE FAITH

The Eucharist is the focus of love, the hearth of the household of the faith, the centre from which warmth spreads outwards to the whole family. Faith enters into the heart of our response of love: love and faithfulness are one. Faith unites us in a marriage of mind with Christ. Our baptismal faith is the expression of our common unity of mind, destined also to lead to a unity of heart. Our loving understanding of Christ's mind – of the mind of the Blessed Trinity – grows especially in communion with Christ in the Eucharist. Holy Communion is the high point of the day-to-day living with Christ which began with the wedding of baptism.<sup>1</sup> This is the sovereign means of knowing Christ more clearly and so of loving him more dearly.

This knowledge of Christ must be a personal and living knowledge, not an academic and formal knowledge. It presupposes a faith in Christ's teaching presence within his Church. It may begin as a knowledge of the truths of the faith, but it must grow into something more personal and more intimate. The way in which it grows into a communion of persons – for the individual as for the Church – is through the devout reception of holy Communion.

The Eucharist is the meeting-place of faith. Here the Holy Spirit is especially active, drawing us into oneness with the Father through the Son. Here each individual member of the Church learns to savour the sweetness of the faith as each brings his heart to this meeting with the risen Christ. The faith of the believing Church cannot fail,

<sup>1</sup> Cf *The Wedding-feast of Israel*, THE WAY, April 1963, pp. 95-104.



for it is from the Eucharist that it draws its strength and renews its faithfulness, and Christ's presence to his Church cannot fail. The great means of growing in our understanding of the faith is the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit, active above all in the devotion we bring to our communion with Christ in the Eucharist. Doctrine develops, not primarily in the minds of theologians but in the communion of person and Person in holy Communion.

We may sum up our theme as follows. Our fragile lives lie wholly within the uplifting hands of God the Father. He speaks to us words of faith through his incarnate Son, risen in the power of the Holy Spirit to a wholly marvellous new life. Our faith comes to us as the Father's merciful and gracious gift to us; it is rock-like with the faithfulness of the Father. It comes to us through the risen Son, and so is Son-like: childlike, trusting and obedient. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the love of Father and Son: the Spirit leads us back by faith through the Son to the Father. The Holy Spirit is the bond of unity within the Godhead, and so unites us with the Father through the Son, thus making possible a return to its source of the Father's self-giving love. The Holy Spirit works within the covenanted sphere of the Father's love: the risen Body of Christ, to which all the baptized are united, forming one Body with him through faith and baptism. This is the household of the faith, at the centre of which is the focus of our faith, the risen body of Christ, present in the Eucharist.