LOSING THE FAITH

By ROBERT MURRAY

IT WOULD BE UNREALISTIC, in a symposium on the search for God, not to face the fact that human race is not simply divisible into those who have found him and those who are happily engaged in an active and hopeful search for him. As believers we have also to face the fact that fellow-believers leave our company. They say they have 'lost the faith'. Even we get used to saying it, though if we take seriously all we believe about faith, we ought to think the possibility of anyone actually losing it simply terrifying. We need to think what it means to 'lose the faith', how it can happen and why; where we stand as regards our hold on the faith, and how we should behave towards those who cease to profess it.

In the above lines it has not yet been asserted that anyone does actually lose the faith, does lose that at least implicit attitude of openness to ultimate good which in the last resort, on a christian view, can allow a human person to attain to his final fulfilment. This is a secret of hearts which, the believer must say, only God knows. What *is* a verifiable fact, and already constitutes our agonizing problem, is that many who once professed the christian faith, took part in the assembly and the rites of the christian people, cease this profession and separate themselves from it. The evidence of profession is public: losing the faith, if it happens, is essentially and impenetrably secret. The relationship of public and secret, of verifiable and unverifiable, of active church membership and the interior state of the heart, is what makes our problem so difficult even to pose. The public element is relevant; it will become increasingly clear in the course of this article that, whatever losing the faith means, it is inextricably bound up with one's personal relationships, which for the ex-believer were relationships in the church. But the secret is in the heart.

God alone knows whether any of his children finally abandon the 'way of salvation' in the ultimate and most generalized form in which relationship to himself might be maintained. But we have to face the fact that many people *say* they have lost the faith. Further, certain expressions in the New Testament must make believers take the possibility very seriously. Jesus prophesied that in

the struggle to come 'many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold'.[1] 'When the Son of Man comes', he asked, 'will he find faith on earth?'[2] St Paul clearly sees this falling-away as already happening in the first letter to Timothy, where he says 'certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith' and repeatedly returns to this theme.[3] He is so conscious that his own faith is God's gift and that he too is capable of losing it, that he attends to self-discipline 'lest, after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified'.[4] Even for St Peter Christ himself prayed that his faith might not fail.[5] And every believer, as he looks into the abyss of his own heart, knows that he cannot presume to a stability which the apostles themselves could not claim.

We must face the possibility, then, that faith may really be lost. But when is it lost, and who are they who lose it? If we start from the verifiable fact that someone ceases to 'practise', can we be certain that he has lost the faith? Can we even be certain that he had the faith to lose? These questions must be posed and sorted out before we approach the heart of our problem – the authentic believer, apparently with living faith, who declares that he believes no longer, and proceeds to live out this denial.

Ceasing to 'practise' the faith

We can only start our inquiry from public facts. Let us imagine a case of a kind which is only too often verified. A boy (let us call him Kevin) was born to practising Catholic parents. They had him baptized, believing that this made him a member of Christ and opened his soul to grace. They had the comforting sense that he was now entrusted to the supreme spiritual welfare organization and that he would grow in grace as he learned to 'practise his religion'. They taught him the traditional prayers. At about six, an age fixed by custom rather than any assessment of Kevin's moral maturity, he joined a class and learned how to go to confession: an alarming experience but, after all, the whole class had to go and it was the necessary preliminary for the excitement of first communion. Kevin learned the special and difficult words which belonged to the separate, other-wordly world of the mass and the altar. He learned to serve mass and enjoyed it; when-

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[1] Mt 24, 11–12. [2] Lk 18, 8. [3] 1 Tim 1, 19; 4, 1; 6, 10, 21.
[4] 1 Cor 9, 27. [5] Lk 22, 32.

ever he went to mass he went to communion, used the words which belonged to that world, and would have said that he believed them. In his moral life he was like any other little boy – selfish and generous, cruel and kind, saying his prayers regularly and lying without scruple when he was frightened. No one helped him think about God, to pray, to grow in moral understanding. There was no bible at home; it figured in the religion class at school, but religion was the dullest and worst taught subject.

As Kevin entered his teens he began to feel exciting new powers in his body and began to be interested in girls. At confession a priest asked him embarrassing questions which reopened the anguish of times when he was tiny, when he had been slapped and told not to be 'dirty'. Now Kevin began to find that 'dirty' or (as the priest called it) 'impure' seemed to cover much of what was most interesting in life. He went to confession less often, and therefore naturally less often to communion. His parents noticed but they did not know what to say. They couldn't understand this generation, which questioned everything. At home, religion belonged to the fixed order. Kevin began to experience it as a restraint on all that he found attractive, and as containing nothing interesting or attractive in itself. At sixteen the mass meant no more to him than it had done when he was seven, and it was no longer fun. He stopped going. His parents scolded him and they had a row. Kevin saw it was no use explaining. He left them alone and left the church alone. If anyone later were to ask him if he had lost the faith, he would say yes.

But what had Kevin lost? Had he ever had *living* faith to lose? However real we believe the effect of baptism to be, as the sign of incorporation in the church, we must acknowledge that baptism cannot bear its proper fruit unless living faith is helped to grow. Kevin's case is all too common; the sacramental system alone had been relied on as a conveyor-belt from the font to the deathbed. Kevin's period of religious practice might have been longer and more painful. Let us imagine another person, Mary. The externals of her early catholic life were similar to Kevin's, but her parents were intensely insistent on catholic practice, apostolic activity and strict, almost puritan morality. Every day ended with the family rosary. Catholic affairs and doctrines were constantly discussed at home. If one thing was clearer than another in Mary's developing mind it was that faith – which meant the right doctrines put in the right words – mattered above all else. As Mary grew up and experienced strong emotional stirrings, the nuns to whom she was entrusted

talked a lot about cultivating a 'supernatural outlook'. She thought seriously about a religious vocation, which her parents, having wished they could have 'given a son to the priesthood', were only too evidently eager that she should undertake. There are various ways we can imagine Mary developing. Perhaps she went to a novitiate, perhaps even took vows, struggling to mould her 'nature' to the 'supernatural outlook' for a few years. Perhaps the intellectual seriousness to which she had been educated won her the painful decision not to enter an order, and she struggled through her student years, experiencing increasing tension with her parents, especially her father. In the end, it became too much. Perhaps through reading, perhaps because she made friends who taught her to laugh at herself in a way she had never dared, but now rather liked, Mary began to have a vision of spiritual freedom, of fulfilment as a person through love and laughter, which appeared to her not as the gift of Christ or the message of the church. She just had to break free from that 'supernatural outlook' and that humourless God in her father's image. And one day she found she had done it. She had come out into the sunshine. She didn't want to break her mother's heart, but she saw clearly now it was *her* life and she had to live it as she could. She had been trying to live it as she couldn't.

What faith had Mary lost? Certainly adherence to the creeds and explanations of them she had learned. But the faith of St Paul, of joyful freedom in Christ? The faith which in the concrete christian life is not really distinct from hope and love but is a total, personal, relaxed, loving adherence to God, the God who made the body and sex and all joy and who has made all things new in Christ? That humourless, slave-driving 'supernatural outlook' is only too recognizable as a mask for the 'super-ego'.[1] A 'faith' that was dominated by the super-ego *had* to be changed: if it could not bend, it had to be broken or lost so that the Spirit of Christ might start again.

It is a tragedy for the church if any member finds that spiritual freedom and human fulfilment can only be found outside, for 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'.[2] A life of christian profession, involving all orthodox doctrine and all sacramental

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[1] For the reader unfamiliar with this term and suspicious of its origins, *Freud, Psychoanalysis, Catholicism*, by Dempsey, P. J. R. (Mercier Press, 1965), is a helpful introduction. Cf also Croft, G., 'I cannot pray' in THE WAY 3 (1963), pp 205–13.

[2] 2 Cor 3, 17.

practice, which comes to be seen as an inhuman tyranny – whether the 'tyrant' is external (father, priest or superior) or the voice of a conscience that has never sorted itself out from the super-ego – was not a life of *real* faith; profession and practice were not the expression of that joyful, total gift of the heart which we see in Jesus's approach to the Father, which the New Testament tells us is ours through and in him, and which is the meaning of living faith. The 'faith' that was lost was a defective, twisted faith – something more destructive, perhaps, than the unauthorized doctrinal formulations which we call 'heresy'. A recent work on the problem of loss of faith even describes the situation of such a 'believer' before he departs as 'masked heresy'.[1] And indeed, just as the christian expression 'heretic' designates one who (from the speaker's point of view) takes up an unbalanced position but remains a believer (otherwise he would be called an 'apostate'), perhaps we should allow that some who 'lose the faith' really *find* faith, but (tragically to us) find it outside where christians believe it is to be found. Certainly there is much idealism, bearing fair fruit in moral life and social service, among many who have formally abandoned christian profession. Believers must humbly face the possibility that some of them have made a journey which they *had* to make, even to find God, precisely because their experience in the church did not touch the inmost yearning of their hearts, but rather choked and chilled it. Perhaps through them God challenges his church and asks whether its attitudes and structures are not in constant danger of declining towards those attitudes and structures from which Christ came to liberate us.

The Crisis of Living Faith

So far, however, we have considered instances which, though they may be more typical and more frequent in the present historical state of institutional christianity, do not (or do not entirely) constitute the acutest problem, for they are cases where we must ask seriously whether the 'faith' that was lost was ever what faith ought to be, living healthily and freely, or even living at all. We must now consider the person who, as far as we can tell, *did* have living faith. And this means that, even if we can read no man's heart, the believer must look into his own heart and 'take heed lest

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[1] Bellet, M., *Ceux qui perdent la foi* (Paris, 1965).

he fall';[1] for if I hope to be saved by faith, I know also that my faith is God's gift and one which I could lose. As I grow older I know better and better how easily I could lose my way. Therefore the case of the real believer who abandons his faith can be approached through my own experience as a believer. Every christian who has tried to follow Christ seriously knows that he lives through crises and trials of faith, some short, some lasting years, and he can understand it only too well if some give up. The more he has suffered, the better he should be able to understand.

Let us imagine another case, of two friends who tried to live a full and serious christian life. Both were adult converts, both mature as persons, both had a sense of humour, were balanced, modest and kindly. In the first years they loved every detail of the church's liturgical life, they went to Rome and Lourdes and experienced a thrill like nothing they had ever known. They read theological books and discussed them with fascination; they spent time daily in prayer and fed their prayer with regular reading of the bible and spiritual classics. Perhaps one became a priest or religious: it makes no difference to the sequel. The time came when neither could go on pilgrimages, and indeed they no longer wanted to. That first joy had gone; hard to say where. Prayer, too, had become drier. No more glow of the heart when meditating on the gospels; no more excitement over the truths of the faith. The blessed Sacrament became a veiled mystery that no longer seemed luminous; then, a trial of faith. Where prayer was so difficult, both friends began to fail, both in attentiveness and regularity. Though neither of them was excessively hag-ridden by the super-ego, both accused themselves uneasily of infidelity and mentioned it in confession; their confessors were kind and encouraging, but things did not get easier.

Every christian who has tried to follow Christ seriously recognizes the picture. Indeed, we are told that it must be so; this is how God trains us for his embrace. What was intelligible becomes unintelligible, what was a joy becomes a burden; many of the concerns of the church seem irrelevant or worse. A temporary relief is brought as understanding grows that faith is not concerned only with what can be expressed in words, but is an adherence of the whole person to God, but this too becomes more mysterious. And all the time there is the sense of growing weaker, of committing increasingly

[1] 1 Cor 10, 12.

serious betrayals. The believer feels he is dying as a believer. Of our friends, one day one became certain that he *had* died as a believer. Integrity demanded that he should cease professing belief, should pick up the pieces of his life and try to go out and make something new. The other stayed and went on dying, though the hardest death of all was the departure of his friend; he felt as if he were now dying for two. Yet at moments he became aware of something holding him. St Paul's teaching about dying with Christ to grow in his new life began to mean something new. He began to see what 'dying daily' means, how total it must be; it must embrace the whole of us, even our conceptual grasp of the faith. Life continued difficult, but later he was able to see that there had been a distinct turning-point. He had hit the bottom and found it was the hand of God.

What happened to the other? What was the difference between them? Here we reach the heart of the mystery. To the believer, faith itself is a mystery, but one which he can somehow penetrate, find a next step and a next. But loss of faith is a total mystery, where the steps are unknown. In the past believers have skirmished round this area of mystery, discussing such questions as whether anyone can leave the church without formal culpability. Such discussions only breed hardness of heart; it is not for men to pronounce sentence, nor is the time for it in this life.

One strand that seems to have given is hope. Popular spiritual teaching has suffered much from the schematization of faith, hope and charity. St Paul never meant any such thing. Of course they are separable, at least conceptually, and conceivably even in fact; but in the lived christian life, they are simply aspects of our approach to God, made possible by his gift, and lived out in our personal relationships. They are inextricably intertwined; 'by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness' says St Paul, and immediately goes on to speak of 'faith working through love'.[1] Love, for its part, 'believes all things, hopes all things'.[2] In the over-intellectualized presentation of faith, which dominated Catholic catechetics till the biblical revival bore fruit in a more pauline view, hope somehow fell between faith and charity, between head and heart, with no convincing place. In fact it is *the mainspring of faith.* The greatest passage on faith in the New Testament, chapter XI of the Letter to the Hebrews, is about total commitment to God, spurred and

[1] Gal 5, 5–6. [2] 1 Cor 13, 7.

kept alive by hope. St Paul's great argument about justification in Romans stresses hope at the key points, the example of Abraham's faith[1] and our own reception of grace.[2] When faith is most severely tested it is *hope* that can keep it alive. When faith fails, it may often be because it was conceived of in too limited, too intellectual a way, so that in the total darkening of the intellect it seemed dishonest to rely on hope. But it is not. Christianity is built on hope; christian faith means certainty from the past that hope is possible for the future. This viewpoint is central for a contemporary theological movement which is to be warmly welcomed.[3]

Where faith is all dark and hope fails, the heart goes out of prayer. It may be simplifying too much to point out that 'losing the faith' seems usually connected with ceasing to pray; the relationship is very complex, but there is undoubtedly some correlation. True enough, a certain kind of prayer *has* to die, as a certain kind of faith has to die; and a practice of prayer that continues may sometimes be too much involved in illusion and in psychic disorder to be a channel for living faith. But a basic, deliberately maintained openness to and concern for God's will must continue or the channel will be blocked up. It is at this point that the believer under strain inevitably accuses himself of infidelity and thinks of the thorns that choked the sower's seed, and of the biblical image of marital infidelity.[4] Certainly, we should be slow to use the latter comparison to condemn anyone who loses the faith, but it may help us to understand the stages by which that basic openness is lost, to consider the breakdown of a marriage which for long was happy and in which a real love and union of personalities was choked.[5]

The salvation of faith is often in the simplest prayer, above all that of petition – not surprisingly, since this is the natural expression of hope; likewise it is not surprising that the first casualty in the life of prayer is often the prayer of petition, so earthy and childish, in which we actually demean ourselves to ask God for things, for others and (most humbling of all) for ourselves.

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[1] Rom 4, 18. [2] Rom 5, 2–5; 8, 18–25.
[3] Cf Moltmann, J., *Theology of Hope* (London, 1967); Metz, J. B., 'Creative Hope' in THE MONTH, September, 1966. [4] Eg Jer 3, 1–5; Hos 1–2; Ezek 16; Apoc 2, 20–22.
[5] Nelson seems to offer a particularly tragic example; cf Warner, Oliver, *A portrait of Lord Nelson* (London, 1958).

Salvation through community

When faith is undergoing a crisis, we often find the greatest help to stability in the fact of the christian community; conversely, when faith fails it often appears that there was some block, from one side or the other, which prevented the claim and also the comfort of the community from being felt. When all meaning has disappeared and I seem to be in total darkness, the only meaning I can find may be in my relationship to others. The time may come when it seems that the last strand that holds me is my responsibility to those whom I love and who care what becomes of me; the last remaining prayer that makes sense may be that of the desolate psalmist:

> Let not those who hope in you be put to shame
> through me, Lord of hosts:
> let not those who seek you be dismayed
> through me, God of Israel.[1]

The only comfort left to me may be the presence of a fellow-christian who understands, but who knows not to preach; one to whom I need not explain, need not even talk, but who will be ready with a warm, strong, human hand. The day when it comes to this, that hand is the church, is God's love incarnate; it can save my faith. 'No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us'.[2]

It is because of these truths (truths of experience which we cannot doubt, even if we doubt our 'experience' of the unseen God) that having the faith cannot be separated from being in the church, and losing the faith cannot be separated from abandoning the church. Once again, the relationship is complex. There are some who, on their own testimony, repudiate the church but continue most firmly to profess christian faith; others stay in the church but, as far as the evidence goes, suggest that their state of faith is such as to make a true believer anxious. But despite the difficulties in expressing the correlation, faith and the church – the concrete community – belong together and there is something tragically wrong if they fail to grow together, or are violently torn asunder. For faith is *in the church*; the church is both an element in what we believe about God and is the 'locus' of our believing. If faith in the church is lost, God's saving action can indeed continue in the heart

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[1] Ps 69 (68), 6. [2] 1 Jn 4, 12.

of the one who departs, but inevitably both he and the church are left wounded, and he worse.

How are those who stay to treat him who goes out? There are several obvious and indispensable 'do's and 'don't's. Integrity of personal witness must be maintained, but without a trace of censoriousness, or of anticipating the judgment which belongs to God alone. The pair of friends we imagined must remain friends, true friends, on whatever terms are possible, in whatever common language they can find. In any case, the believer who has lived through a crisis of faith today will find that he needs a new language just as much as his friend, who can no longer (as he still can) respetc the old formulas at all.[1] Just as much as his friend, he will find that what means most to him now is what is simplest and most human in the gospel message. In this, let us hope, our friends will not feel divided, and the believer will stay, sincerely and patiently, with his friend as he goes on his lonely quest, looking now for he scarcely knows what. The believer will never give up hope, never give up caring; he will realize humbly that he cannot preach by word, only in his life, and only God can make his life such a pattern fo freedom and human warmth as to attract his friend back to the church. If the Spirit had been allowed to bear its fruits of love, joy, freedom and the fulfilment of personality, he would not have gone out. It is only if he can be shown that those fruits are richer and lovelier in the church than anywhere else that he can be drawn back.

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[1] Cf Bellet, M., *op. cit.*, Part III, 'Vers un nouveau langage'; Moore, S., O.S.B., *God is a New Language* (London, 1967).