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FAITH AND THE TRIALS OF LIFE

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The gift of faith is celebrated in the readings chosen for this Sunday. A review of the Church's teaching will help us to appreciate the importance of this virtue. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). This description by a Christian theologian of the first century emphasizes the personal commitment of believers to the presence of God in their midst, ordering their lives toward the goal of spiritual and eternal happiness. The foundation of this relationship is the divine Word, whereby God has accomplished great things for all creatures and especially for his people. The evident truth of God's revelation in the past is the guarantee of divine promises of what is yet to come. "By faith a person freely commits his or her entire self to God, making the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals ..." (Vatican Council II, *Divine Revelation* #5). The insight into all reality provided by the divine gift of faith is the basis for a response that engages the person in a covenant bond with God and with his people.

Thus we might describe the ideal situation of the faithful, but the concrete circumstances of life introduce the tragic dimensions of sin and suffering. How does the believer deal with injustice and oppression? Of course, people should be able to appeal to reason and good will, trying to resolve difficulties by overcoming misunderstanding and seeking the common good. But all too often brute force is the short cut for some to impose their will on their neighbors. The victim may turn to others for help, but often in vain. "I don't want to get involved!" Hearing such a reply, the persecuted intensify their recourse to God. But at times their pleas seem to go unanswered. In the Kingdom of Judah shortly before the Babylonians overwhelmed the chosen people, the prophet Habakkuk felt deeply the anguish of the afflicted.

"How long, O LORD? I cry for help but you do not listen! I cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not intervene" (1:2). Of course, God could answer that human freedom must be respected, even when terribly abused. The Torah ("instruction" or Law) of God had been revealed to become the foundation for a perfect society. However, the Law is benumbed in the minds of the powerful and judgment is not rendered or is perverted (see Hb 1:4).

Lest the ordinary folk become discouraged, Habakkuk must act as a watchman. From his position on the city wall, he can see not only the besieger but also the deliverer. The divine promise of safety and salvation will not disappoint those who persevere. "If it delays, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not be late... The just man, because of his faith, shall live" (2:3-4).

St. Paul took up the statement that righteousness and integrity are rooted in a person's faith and constitute a basis for hope in a life of peace (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). Jesus was the Deliverer for
whom the prophets were looking. His union with the persecuted provided the key to understanding how God does intervene in history while respecting the free will of all, even when they misuse this and other human gifts. "Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the One who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence" (Heb 5:7). Although the Father did not remove the cup of suffering, Jesus triumphed in the resurrection and then could offer the fullness of life to all who believe. This is the content of Christian faith and the pattern which the afflicted and persecuted should assimilate.

In the midst of temptation and trials, the faithful make their own the prayer of the Apostles: "Increase our faith!" (Lk 17:5). Just as our understanding of divine revelation deepens, especially regarding the impact of the person and work of Christ on our lives, so our faith matures as a covenant experience of God's love. The image of a mustard seed indicates how Jesus taught that faith is a living reality, enabling us to experience the marvels of God. The hyperbole of moving mountains or transplanting mulberry trees (Mt 17:20; Lk 17:6) describes the surprising evidence of God's gift in our lives. These manifestations of divine love provide the means for removing obstacles to peace and understanding among people. May they be the sign of our faith and that of the Church in the world today!