

An Amendment to the Concept of:

SALVATION AND FAITH

Father Matta El-Meskeen

The relationship between salvation and faith seems to be misunderstood theologically by many. Someone may assume that he must have faith in Christ—the faith which consists in believing that Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification, as the verse goes (Rom 4:25). [He assumes that it is] through this faith we are saved; “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). Salvation [in this view] comes through the forgiveness of sins and liberation from the punishment of eternal death [on the basis that] Christ died on the cross for our sins. Salvation [in this perspective] also includes the acceptance of eternal life—for Christ trod death down and rose from the dead, raising us with him in newness of life.

[So to summarize the view of many] salvation is understood as being effected through faith, faith being the instrument of salvation or that which brings about salvation. However, this is a theological concept which has been turned on its head.

The correct concept is that Christ fulfilled salvation for humanity and offered it to sinners as a free gift. To him who has faith, who believes, God reckons his faith as salvation. Therefore, faith here is not [something we have to offer in exchange for] salvation, for salvation was fulfilled free and offered free without exacting any kind of price whatsoever. This point can be illustrated practically as follows.

Christ fulfilled salvation, took it in his hands and offered it to the sinner. He who stretches out his hand and takes it is saved. Faith then is neither a price nor a means of salvation; it is both believing and taking together. Such is the case because God in Christ, through love and compassion for the sinner, wishes to save us (“the sinner shall not perish but live”). So the sinner has no preconditions to meet. He only has to trust in the Father’s love—“We know and believe the love God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16). He has only to accept the gift of salvation which God tore out of his Son’s flesh and blood.

For a sinner to be saved, faith demands no mental, emotional or physical effort. All that God requires of him is to accept and be content with the salvation that was fulfilled and offered to him. He has only to make it his own possession and right, starting to live it out on the spot. This he does in conformity with the will of God and Christ “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

It is God’s dealings with Abraham which highlight this theological process. They reveal the depths of God’s benevolence, which transcends our mind and logic. They form the divine basis for the significance and validity of God’s gift and man’s faith, standing for the best image of God’s heart and his thoughts toward humanity.

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ . . . And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look

toward heaven and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:1,5,6).

It is evident here that God offered to become Abraham’s shield, his guardian and protector from all evil, without stipulating any condition or prerequisite. God then affirmed to him that his reward, which means Abraham’s share in God, would be very great, again without setting any conditions or reasons. After this he endowed him with the blessing to have descendants in unbelievable numbers. In answer to all these gifts, Abraham’s only response was to believe God’s free promise. God in turn reckoned to him his faith as righteousness, meaning that he considered Abraham as having become righteous and saintly without any work on Abraham’s part.

The question now is: was it Abraham’s faith that gave him God’s promise and blessing? In point of fact, it was before Abraham’s heart moved with faith that God had [already] made his covenant with Abraham and had promised and blessed him!

What then is the value or weight of Abraham’s faith?

It is his belief in the truthfulness of God, his love, promise and covenant. Abraham’s belief, meaning his faith under such circumstances, captivated God’s heart extremely. It was an honoring, gratification, acknowledgement and praise of God’s faithfulness in his promises and of his lavish love and compassion which he freely shows. Nothing is more honoring to God than to believe in his promises and his extremely bountiful love. Conversely, there is nothing more insulting to God’s glory than to doubt his promises and love. That is the reason why Christ never scolded his disciples more than when he scolded them for being faithless: “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” (Mark 9:19). Note that all that was required to provoke such a forceful rebuke was the fact that their lack of faith had led them to fail to carry out a miracle. God was so pleased at heart with Abraham’s faith that he reckoned it as righteousness, which means that he considered Abraham’s belief in God’s works to be equivalent to the attainment of righteousness or in other words godliness and sainthood in the fullest sense. This is the wonder of God’s behavior and also of Abraham’s behavior at one and the same time.

Hence, among the theological items which deserve all understanding and attention is the fact that faith in God, in itself, is the greatest honoring and glorification to be rendered to God; for it means believing his promises and covenants with mankind, which are charged with love freely-given. Faith means accepting God’s gifts and boldly taking possession of them as rights given to mankind; this is the proper response to God’s unconditional giving. When God said to Abraham, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1), it was not said to Abraham in the sense of an appeal or expectation or even endeavor: God said it in the same tone in which he said to creation: “Let there be . . . ; and there was . . .” (Gen 1:3). It was [given] in the form of a command, [no sooner said than] carried out, because the blessings given by God include the guidance and protection of grace: “I am your shield” (Gen 15:1).

The divine saying, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16), [describes] what God fulfilled through Christ. God connected love, sacrifice, faith, and eternal life. Together [they represent] an offering or a completeness of self-giving which must be carried out. Faith in what God did through Christ is a gift, like the gift of love, the gift of sacrifice, the gift of eternal life which He gave freely. He who has faith, believes and trusts, will have entered eternal life. Faith is offered as a gift together with eternal life. A person has no merit except in responding with trust by grace—thus gaining the gift as a right [of his own], because it was offered to him free of charge. Faith is offered side by side with eternal life—both gifts together. He who takes the one takes the other. If you believe this offer you are saved. Faith is nothing more than a matter of the heart’s belief. [As] a person is moved to trust, [so] eternal life flows in.

From what is said above it is clear that faith, in God’s eyes, is equal to righteousness, meaning complete godliness and sainthood. In other words, faith is esteemed by God as being on a higher plane than offering one’s whole life in fasting, praying or doing good deeds to gain his favor.

Such is the reality of faith in the Christian life. He who believes and trusts that God exists lives in that existence. He who believes and trusts that God is love lives in his love. He who believes and trusts in the salvation which God made through his Son lives in that salvation. We therefore say: “Whoever believes in him shall have eternal life” (Jn 3:16); “He who believes in him is not condemned” (Jn 3:18); “He who believes in the Son has eternal life” (Jn 3:36); “if you would believe you would see the glory of God” (Jn 11:40); “Believe in the light, that you may become sons of light” (Jn 12:36); “He who believes in me shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35); “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (Jn 6:47).

We would like to remind the reader that according to [the pattern of] Abraham’s faith the blessing comes first, then faith; that is, it is believing which justifies a person before God. It is not faith that gives a person the blessing, but the blessing is offered first and faith follows. For God [first] blessed Abraham and promised him an inheritance. Then Abraham believed and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. You have received salvation, grace and eternal life. All that is left for you to do is to have faith in this fact and believe it, so that God may reckon your faith as righteousness. But your faith will have no value unless you believe that God has given it to you freely [without demanding anything in return]. He has already brought you salvation, blessings, grace and eternal life as a gift. Your faith by itself is not equal to the cost; it will not soften God’s heart nor oblige him to give you anything. For God’s heart is full of compassion for you and he has offered you all his love [without demanding anything in return], in the salvation brought about through his Son. Now do you believe you have really been saved?

In the case of, for instance, Lazarus’ sister Martha, God’s glory was in front of her and around her. Christ said to her: “if you would believe you would see the glory of God” (Jn 11:40). This meant that her mere faith was enough to let her see and possess the glory of God. Faith then is like an open window through which we can see God’s glory. But our faith does not bring down

God's glory from heaven nor raise us to it. Salvation is such: it is in us, for us and around us. If we have faith or believe that it exists we will see it and live: "For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved" (Rom 10:10). It is clear that this verse applies to Abraham's faith through which he believed the promises and which God reckoned to him as righteousness. St. Paul considers that the heart and not the mind is the source of belief; for God's gifts and talents to us and the salvation which has been fulfilled lie at the spiritual and not the intellectual level. Belief then is a vision of the heart.

The heart thus becomes the source of faith, i.e., vision, belief and trust. The weight of its faith, in other words, the belief in God's promises and salvation that was fulfilled through the Lord Jesus Christ, is a true claim to salvation and consequently to obtaining the righteousness of Christ. For Christ, in working out [our] salvation, "was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom 4:25). For this reason, our faith in salvation, meaning our belief in it, indicates that we have received it in the spirit; for we were actually raised and inevitably justified! Hence it is the heart that has faith, [in the sense that] it believes, and so is justified by Christ's righteousness which is equivalent to the utmost Christian perfection.

Dear reader, your faith in salvation, which in practice means that you believe that Christ died and was raised for your sake, directly offers you the "righteousness of Christ" from God as a free [gift]. "Righteousness" we define as the utmost godliness and sainthood. It is for that reason that believers in apostolic times were named saints, for they had truly become sanctified by their faith in the blood of Christ:

"To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: . . ." (Rom 1:7);

"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus [through faith] called to be saints . . ." (1 Cor 1:2);

"To the church of God, which is at Corinth, with all the saints . . ." (2 Cor 1:1);

"To the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus: . . ." (Eph 1:1);

"To all the saints in Christ Jesus . . ." (Phil 1:1);

"To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae: . . ." (Col 1:1).

It is obvious from the manner in which St. Paul addressed them, that all the Christians who formed the church were considered saints because they had faith in Christ and were in Christ. "Saints in Christ" means that they draw their righteousness from Christ's righteousness, and their sainthood from Christ's sainthood. Therefore they are truly righteous and truly saints. Theologically speaking, faith in Christ means union with Christ based on salvation, receiving the Holy Spirit and eternal life. Union with Christ also implies communion in Christ, that is, sharing in eternal life.

Sadly and unfortunately, Christians nowadays are no more named saints. Only the bishops and the rest of the clergy are named as such, and then only as a title. Each of them is given this title and addressed as "your sainthood"¹. This is despite the fact that any Christian believer is called righteous and a saint in Christ, on the basis of his faith. [Through faith] he has believed

and accepted his fellowship with Christ and his inheritance in God with Christ. This is evident from the verse: “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons . . .” (Phil 1:1). Accordingly St. Paul made the title of sainthood the same for all the congregation which believed in Christ, together with their bishops and deacons. For the attribute of sainthood is derived from “faith” in Christ: it is not [acquired] as a personal qualification. “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness” (Rom 10:10 AV), meaning unto sainthood or sanctification. Christ in whom we believe “is the source of . . . our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30).

The discrimination that exists today in [the use of] the title of sainthood can be traced to a loss of appreciation of the value of faith for godliness. Once freely available as a gift, faith in Christ has become a matter of status and personal prestige. Its value as a gift of godliness by which we trust in God’s promises and receive his free gifts has been lost: “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29). So sainthood became associated with suffering alongside Christ.

We now call for raising the value of faith as being God’s first and foremost gift given to whoever God has chosen and called to himself, that he may receive through faith, i.e. through believing God, all the promises of salvation which God fulfilled in his Son for our sake. His faith will then be reckoned to him as righteousness, which means he will receive sainthood in Christ, there being no difference between one believer and the other. Titles we will not discuss, but would have the ordinary believer be aware that his faith will be reckoned to him as righteousness, meaning sainthood, provided he believes that the promises of salvation have been fulfilled for him and that he has received them according to God’s sure word. For everyone who received salvation and lives it out is the true believer in Christ.

Now that we know the truth and firmly believe that God has reckoned us righteous in his Son and made us saints to his glory and praise, what sort of life are we to lead in the sight of God, Christ and his angels? We repeat and confirm to the reader that God does not only count us as saints, but will also judge us on the grounds that we are actually saints who have been sanctified through the blood of his Son and by his Holy Spirit. [Even] if we find it too much to be counted or called saints in terms of the gospel and the church, we will [still] be judged on these grounds, [as really being the bearers of] the blessed name of saints. If God through Christ made us true saints, and not only assumed it, then we must understand and trust that he has given us his Holy Spirit to work in us holy works with the thoughts, ideas and meditations of the saints.

We are called saints in God’s church, and were determined to have communion with all its saints since the beginning: “Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12). Hence, we definitely have the support, help and reminder of their spirits to live up to the level of their behavior and sainthood. As for the sainthood that holds us together as believers in Christ, it [does not consist of] promises, names or titles, but [constitutes] an inheritance—the inheritance of filial sainthood in the body of the Son. The church is a church of saints. None can live in it or belong to it except saints, whether they be

children, men, or women—all alike. All are contained within the body of Christ as its members who have an existence and communion in him and with him, who live in his sight and presence

And now, in accordance with what we have said and again affirm as a living experience which God has offered in his Son as one of our rights, which are sealed with the blood of Christ and the good pleasure of the Father, let us trust God's promises and the gifts of his Son. The sainthood we have received is the fruit of his Holy Spirit who is with us and in us—dwelling in the temples of our spirits which God and Christ have sealed with blood. What is left for us to do is to set the Holy Spirit free to work within us by opening up new potentialities in our behavior and actions—offering love to everyone, especially to our enemies who curse us, abuse us, persecute us and plunder our property. For sacrificial love activates the Holy Spirit and speeds up his work—illuminating thought and [showering] his countless gifts [upon us]. The Holy Spirit does not come from outside us but is within us, dwelling in us according to the promise of our Lord and Savior. He is only waiting for us to beckon him by obedience and submission. Then He will act in power, to [bathe] the depths of our [beings] in light, and open us up to the depths of the Son['s being], that we may know the Father's will that has been offered us in Christ.

Praying for the Holy Spirit to descend upon us or fill us is but an expression in terms of the feelings and sense: we seek to feel his action in us. But he is actually within us awaiting the movement and offer of our will in order to manifest himself in it, enhance it and ignite it with fire from Christ. The fire of Christ is the flame of divine love. If divine love dwells in us, it will turn everything in us to God's account, [and also] to that of our neighbor and our enemy, free of charge. In return we will have nothing but the face of Christ looking down on us from heaven as he once looked down on St. Paul, filling his life with thanks, praise, prayer and ministry which never grew cold.

Saints in Christ, strength, light and oil of the church: the church without your sainthood is dark and its doors burn with the fire of sin, negligence and irresponsibility. Kindle your sainthood by zealously believing the truth and action of the Spirit, that the fragrance of Christ's sainthood may return to the church, making the world believe that Christ really [lives] in you. When your lives and the activity of your sainthood are absent, Christ is absent from the church. The cross in the church is turned head-down and abased because there is no one to take it up genuinely and follow Christ with the true determination to die on it. Crosses are sold in churches and on streets for piasters.² This has led to the value of the cross being debased in peoples' eyes, because [that quality of] sainthood and the saints who valued the cross at the rate of sacrificing their necks and their blood have fallen into oblivion.

We always need to go back to Abraham's faith and look for its meaning, nature and power. When God gave Abraham and his descendants his gifts of freely given and eternal blessings, Abraham believed and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. Abraham's faith here was simply his belief—but with confidence in God's grace which had been given him. We cannot help but wonder at his faith, which was nothing more than believing God's promise of a blessing.

It was but a signature or seal on an agreement for a gift and inheritance which God pledged to him on oath. It became immediately valid with the signature of his faith.

This is exactly the case with the decree of salvation, which Christ wrote with his blood and God the Father sealed by offering his freely given fatherhood to all who would receive it. Nothing remains but to seal it with our sanction and believe in confidence that it might become effective here and now.

What is really amazing about the greatness of God the Father is his decision to offer righteousness—the righteousness of Christ—to any one who would stamp it with his endorsement and believe, that is, have faith in the work of salvation: He will offer him the power of sainthood or sanctification in Christ.

It is the importance given to faith in the first place which deserves our greatest wonder. For God decreed that the mere endorsement of any person for the work of salvation would make it immediately effective to his benefit. Not only so, but God set no limits to his generosity when He added that he who has faith, who believes what the Father and Christ have done, will be made righteous, that is, will be given sainthood—which is the full qualification to obtain eternal life with God.

Salvation in itself confirms to us the greatness of God the Father, which is manifest in his fatherly love and in the offering of his Son for our sake. The way to receive salvation reconfirms to us the greatness of God the Father. For it is demonstrated in the way He transmits salvation to us through faith. Faith is the gift of believing trustingly in God's promises in order to gain all these promises, which He pledged in his divine economy from eternity. Over and above everything else, God decided that he who would have faith and believe would be offered the righteousness of Christ, that is, the sainthood of spirit in Christ—free of charge.

People of faith, wake up and make use of your right to faith. Do not dismiss your inheritance with the saints in Christ. Your faith and sainthood are treasures to the church and the world. They are a living testimony for more faith to manifest the reality of Christ, if you really want Christ to have an existence in the church and in the world. For Christ's presence and manifestation depend on your faith in your sainthood. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thes 4:3)