

A hand touch: God's grace and human response

Fr. Augustino Vu Dinh Trung^{1*}

¹ The Catholic Institute of Vietnam, Vietnam

¹ Xuan Loc diocese, Dong Nai, Vietnam

* Corresponding author's email: augustinotrung@gmail.com

*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7848-8478>

*  <https://doi.org/10.54855/csl.22245>

Received: 06/07/2022

Revision: 28/07/2022

Accepted: 28/07/2022

Online: 29/07/2022

Abstract

Faith is God's gift to man but needs human cooperation. Therefore, Faith is the intersection between God's gift and human response.

Đức Tin là ân ban của Thiên Chúa cho con người, nhưng cần con người cộng tác. Vì thế, Đức Tin là điểm giao nhau giữa ân ban của Thiên Chúa và hành động đáp trả của con người.

Keywords: touch, God's love, servant

Introduction

Those who have been fortunate enough to once look back at the dome of the Sistine church will surely be amazed at the magnificence of the giant painting on the dome, made by the genius sculptor and painter Michelangelo. Nine different paintings link this huge fresco, and the picture of God



flying to touch Adam's hand is the most noticed and is also the center of the fresco. This is a unique and meaningful picture depicting a "touch of the hand." God plays an active role in reaching out to people with all his love. Meanwhile, Adam responded with a tired and passive attitude with his wrists lowered, showing the weak and fickle human condition. This "touch of the hand" is also used by many authors to refer to faith in people. God always takes the first step; he reaches out his hand to wait for the free response of man. And when people respond, the "touch" describes the formation of faith. Therefore, when talking about the Christian faith, the Church has made the following statement: "Faith is a gift of God and a human act."¹.

¹ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 179,180.

Fides quae creditur

First, to believe is to accept what God has revealed.² Everything seems so simple, and now we just need to accept Revelation. But it is not easy to accept Revelation because it is beyond our understanding, for there is an infinite, impossible distance between God and us. Therefore, in order to have faith, to accept Revelation, we must have the gift of the Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide us³. He will move and turn our hearts to God, igniting in us the desire to overcome hesitations and avoidances⁴. Saint Augustine likens that gift to divine illumination, and St. Thomas Aquinas speaks of an inner impulse. Theologian Karl Rahner speaks of the divine being⁵. It is by the grace of God that man's weaknesses are healed, and at the same time, his capacity is enhanced to be able to receive Revelation. When a man has received Revelation, God does not let the man do it in his own strength, but he gives us the necessary graces to help us deepen the meaning of truth and contemplate God, that is, understanding, argumentative and intelligent.⁶

Moreover, the primary purpose of God's self-manifestation is not to force our intellect to accept or obey but to enable man to enter into a personal relationship with God. God is the one who took the first step. He is a mighty One, but he has spoken to mankind as a friend. Throughout human history, God has revealed Himself to the first human ancestors, then to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and on the last day, God has spoken to us through His own son, Jesus Christ.⁷ To save and bring people back to God, Jesus came to earth as a human, was born in a poor cave, and lived a human life like us. This is an unbelievable event. If a head of state wields a hoe and plow like a farmer, we have rarely seen it. Here again is a great God, Lord above lords, king over kings. He did not come down to earth to survey, to taste the taste of the world, but he lived as a real person. All for the love of humanity, to make it easier for mankind to come to him. Moreover, with his death and resurrection, Jesus restored the intimate bond between God and man, allowing the man to "touch the hand" of God. With the Paschal Mystery, Jesus gave his divine life to us through the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, by which our faith is nourished. Even so, many times, we still feel that there are "dark nights of faith", something that even saints have experienced, such as Saint Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. It is these challenges as gifts from God to increase each person's faith⁸.

"I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth, I will make your faithfulness known through all generations."⁹ Grace is always there, but accepting it or not is human freedom. Pope Benedict commented that human life is always a struggle between

² Cf. PHAN TAN THANH, "*Thần Học Mặc Khải*", Dominican Academy, 2011, p.249.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Faith, and Reason*, 9.

⁴ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Dei Verbum*, 5.

⁵ Cf. THOMAS P. RAUSCH, *Introduction to Theology*, OJ, 2002, p.142.

⁶ Cf. PHAN TAN THANH, "*Đời Sống Tâm Linh XI: Thần Học Đức Tin*", Dominican Academy, 2013, p.231.

⁷ Cf. VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Dei Verbum*, 2-4.

⁸ Cf. TADEUSZ DANCER, "*Hồng Ân Đức Tin*", translated by Pham Quoc Huyen, Hanoi, Religious Press, 2012, p.100.

⁹ Psalm 89,1.

doubt and belief, always putting us in a fundamental choice that we cannot refuse: to believe or not to believe in God¹⁰. This is a response of the human self, not a response of one aspect, but a response of the whole person, a human act. Through the ages, the human mind has always had a germ of aspiration towards God, which is expressed through philosophical and religious reflections. Man has tried his best but still cannot find his way to the destination, for he is created with eyes that can only see what is not God. Knowing that God acted first, he revealed to the man himself supernatural and profound truths. These truths are most clearly expressed through Scripture and Tradition. We know that most of the knowledge that people gain is left behind by previous generations or, in other words, by trust.¹¹ This is even more necessary for things related to the transcendental world, the world that humans do not know and cannot touch. To have faith, reason must be open to and accept the absolute. In conforming to what is contained in Revelation, human reason is neither destroyed nor humiliated, for this conformity is always made by reason by a free and conscious choice.¹² With that choice, reason can delve into Revelation, learning its content, meaning, and origin. Reason plays a very important role in the act of believing but cannot construct the content of faith. It tries to find reasons for convincing faith both objectively and subjectively, tries to clarify the theoretical foundations of the faith, and understand the mysteries of Revelation. God's Revelation is boundless, and human reason is finite, so human reason sometimes has to stop before the truths of Revelation. At this point, we see a struggle in people, including those who have faith: man cannot know about God, so God has given Revelation to man, but when receiving Revelation, reason Man's mind continues to struggle with incomprehensible mysteries, man cannot find clear proofs. This forces people to continue to choose: to believe or not to believe. Is this the will of God: He respects human freedom? Let's imagine what the scenario would be like if God were a truism before our eyes. Who among us dare not believe and disobey God? So, is our faith really free or just a secret compulsion? Therefore, when reason is powerless before the mysteries, man is given perfect freedom: to commit or to retreat from the faith. At this point, we need to have an adventurous jump, need to be reckless, and dare to consider what we can't see to be true. Philosopher Kierkegaard once said, "I fully believe, although I cannot fully understand."¹³

"Love returns love; kindness returns kindness". So, faith is not only accepting Revelation but also man's response to God's call and loving gaze. God's love for man is so high and great, an infinite love. How can we be indifferent to that love? Run to God, say to God: "I love you very much". Use our small love to respond to God's immense love. It is when we love God that we believe in Him. How can we love someone if we don't trust that person? And it is that faith-love that will transform our lives, help us turn inward, and make a conversion. From the inner transformation, faith will impel us to change our lives, help

¹⁰ Cf. JOSEPH RATZINGER, "*Đức Tin Kitô Giáo Hôm Qua và Hôm Nay*", translated by Nguyen Quoc Lam, Pham Hong Lam, Hanoi, Religious Press, 2009, p.71.

¹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Faith and Reason*, 31.

¹² Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Faith and Reason*, 41-43.

¹³ TRAN QUANG THUAN, "*Hành Trình Tâm Linh*", Ho Chi Minh, Phuong Dong Publishing House, 2012, p.330.

us to do God's will in all things, to accept to crucify our own will to obey God's will: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."¹⁴.

In addition, faith is a constant response and dialogue between man and God. It is not enough to be baptized, to receive the faith. That faith must also be maintained in the midst of the storms of life. It is a constant battle with one's own desires, a struggle between existential choices in life. Faith needs to be made stronger through the feast of the Word, the Eucharist, and the Sacraments. In addition, we also need to be mindful of the community and missionary aspects of the faith.¹⁵ God gives the gift of faith to all mankind, so the individual's faith is placed in relation to the community. Christians, let's help each other promote the faith life and bring that faith to everyone.

On the whole, faith is the meeting point between God's gift and human response. Being aware of that, how should we live? How can we receive grace when we cannot feel it? It is important, first of all, to open your heart to taste the immense love and grace of God. Open your senses to feel the world. Open your eyes to admire the beauty of the universe and listen to the sounds of life, all these things let you know that you are alive, and that is a great gift that God has given you. God has also revealed himself to us, giving us the gift of faith so that we can gain eternal life. Once we have felt God's grace, what should we do next? God's grace is great, but if we don't accept it, it's useless. So, we must open our hearts to God's grace and cooperate with His grace. Let God guide us, enlighten us, and at the same time, let us strive to learn the Scriptures, the Sacred Traditions, to attend Mass and the Sacraments, to gain a better understanding of Revelation and Faith. And most of all, we must have a prayer life and enter into an intimate relationship with God. Mother Teresa said: "The fruit of faith is prayer, and the fruit of prayer is faith." Our life should be a life of constant prayer, a constant dialogue with God. Give God all the joys and sorrows in life. It is these things that will help our faith become stronger and stronger.

In particular, faith also needs to be expressed through action. Saint James said: "*Faith without works is dead.*"¹⁶. People of faith must live what they believe and must demonstrate their faith through concrete words and deeds. Living the faith also means participating in and sharing in the common aspiration for peace and fraternity, striving to build the perfect social structure to prepare new humanity. The Second Vatican Council further emphasized that Christians must concretize their life of faith: "For the Christian, neglect of earthly duties is the neglect of duty towards one's neighbor, and more to God himself, putting his salvation at stake."¹⁷.

¹⁴ Gal 2:20.

¹⁵ Cf. PHAN TAN THANH, "Đời Sống Tâm Linh XI: Thần Học Đức Tin", Dominican Academy, 2013, p.232.

¹⁶ Jame 2:17.

¹⁷ Gaudium et Spes, 43.

Conclusion

In short, God always loves and wants people to come to God to be happy. God humbled himself to reveal to man: Who is He? And God also gives people the gift of faith and acts on people's hearts so that people turn to God. But God does not force a man to believe in Him but leaves man free to respond. So will we choose to believe in God or reject His love? We should follow the example of Mary. With her yes: "I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled."¹⁸, Mary touched God's hand and accepted God into her life, even though her mind could not comprehend it. Her whole life was the constant response of faith, the response of the whole person. Let us follow her example, receive the gift of Faith from God, let's make a "touch" with Him. Then our lives will be transformed, and we will feel joy and will taste the peace and happiness of the heavenly kingdom right here on earth.

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Biodata

I am Augustino Vu Dinh Trung, born in 1989. I come from Vietnam. I am a Catholic priest, ordained in 2020. Currently, I am an auxiliary priest at An Binh parish, Xuan Loc diocese. At the same time, I am also a student at the Catholic Institute of Vietnam.

¹⁸ Luke 1:38.