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## If You Had Faith (and Indeed You Do)

### Biblical Reflection for 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 28, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Questioning our faith and even the object of it is a daily, healthy exercise! Faith cannot be shelved until we need it, for then we will discover that it has grown weak and meaningless from disuse and will not sustain us. The virtue of integrity involves a well-exercised faith that will enable us to survive even the most awful challenges. Even the strongest among us can be reduced to helplessness and silence.

Let us consider today's Old Testament and Gospel readings to gain some insights into the precious gift of faith. I will also offer you two outstanding, contemporary examples of servants and heroes of our faith: Blessed Mary MacKillop and Blessed André Bessette, who will be canonized on Oct. 17, 2010, in Rome.

Habakkuk's cry is not in vain

The words of the prophet Habakkuk in today's first reading (1:2-3; 2:2-4) have been taken as the prophet's complaint against the internal evils of Judah; the language used is that employed by Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah to condemn the social abuses of their day. In Habakkuk 1:5-7 the Lord answers this complaint by indicating the Chaldean empire as his instrument for punishing his people for these sins. However, Habakkuk's cry is not in vain. The Lord speaks to him: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (2:2-3). That is all that Habakkuk gets -- and most of the time it is all that we get -- "wait patiently for the vision." It seems woefully insufficient. This is why our faith must be a living, growing, developing part of us.

"Increase our faith!"

The sayings of Jesus in Luke's Gospel (17:5-10) continue his response to the apostles' request to increase their faith (Luke 17:5-6), and remind them that Christian disciples can make no claim on God's graciousness; in fulfilling the exacting demands of discipleship, they are only doing their duty. Jesus addresses four independent sayings (verses 1-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-10) to his audience. Luke has woven these four teachings into a narrative: On two subjects Jesus gives very demanding instructions about sinning against a brother or sister (verses 1-2) and treatment of one who sins against you (verses 3-4). The teachings are so difficult that the disciples ask for greater faith, in response to which Jesus calls out and affirms the faith they have (verses 5-6).

Both the first and the second teaching have to do with living together in the community of faith. In the Christian community, two kinds of difficulties will arise often, threatening the harmony of the community. One difficulty grows out of the fact that not all members are at the same level of maturity; there are always "little ones," that is, the newly baptized. The speech and behavior of more mature members could cause one

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of the neophytes to stumble and fall. “Being the cause of stumbling” is what lies at the heart of “temptation to sin” (verse 1) and “cause to sin” (verse 2). Parallels to this text are found in Matthew (18:6-7) and Mark (9:43).

The second kind of difficulty that threatens the Christian community stems from those occasions when disciples sin against one another (verses 3-4). This teaching is very realistic; members of the community hurt one another. It is no wonder that the apostles, upon hearing the instructions in verses 1-4, say to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” (verse 5). In using the term “apostles” and “Lord” in this sentence, Luke speaks not only about Jesus and his immediate followers at that moment in history, but also the Risen Lord of the Church and the apostles and leaders of our contemporary Church.

### Not a reprimand but an affirmation

In Verse 5 Jesus’ followers feel the burden of leadership. Jesus’ response to them calls for a close examination of their responsibilities and challenges: “If you had faith.” The Greek language offers two types of “if” clauses: those that express a condition contrary to the fact (“If I were you”) and those that express a condition according to fact (“If Jesus is our Lord”). The conditional clause in Verse 6 is the second type; we could translate it “If you had faith [and indeed you do].” Jesus’ response, then, is not a reprimand for an absence of faith, but an affirmation of the faith they have and an invitation to live out the full possibilities of that faith. Even the small faith they already have cancels out words such as “impossible.”

### The slave-master relationship

The fourth and final teaching (verses 7-10) is in the form of a parable and has no parallel in Matthew and Mark. It opens in a manner common to a number of Lukan parables: “Will any one of you?” or “Which one of you?” (11:5-7; 14:23, 31; 15:4,8). The assumed answer is “no” or “no one.” The parable is built around the slave-master relationship, rather common in New Testament parables but without a clear analogy in our culture.

### We are only servants

I am sure that Jesus’ words kept echoing in the hearts of the apostles when they set out to proclaim the Gospel. They travelled from one city to another, from one region to the next, spending themselves in the service of the Kingdom and always taking to heart the admonition of Jesus: “When you have done all that is commanded you, say: ‘We are unworthy servants; we have done only what was our duty’” (17:10). Jesus’ words raise questions that cannot be avoided: Have we really done what was our duty? And what must we do now? What tasks lie before us? What resources and what forces do we have at hand? The questions are complex and so the answer to them must be carefully thought through.

Jesus came among us as one who serves. And so, too, do his followers; they must be first and foremost servants of others, not masters. There is no place or time at which the disciple can say: “I have completed my service, now I want to be served.” This applies especially to those of us who have been entrusted with the leadership of God’s people in any way. The request for an increase of faith (verse 5) must not seduce apostles or leaders to assume that with the increase comes elevation in position so that the period of serving ends. Apostles and leaders come under the instructions for all disciples. No matter where we find ourselves, a servant is a servant.

### Australia’s first saint

On Sunday, Oct. 17, Benedict XVI will canonize six saints in St. Peter's Square. They include the Polish Blessed Stanislaw Soltys, who died in 1489; Spanish Blessed Candida María of Jesús, who died in 1912;

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Italian Blesseds Camilla Battista da Varano, who died in 1524 and Giulia Salzano, who died in 1929; Canadian Blessed André Bessette, who died in 1937; and the Australian Blessed Mary of the Cross MacKillop who died in 1909. MacKillop together with Father Julian Tenison Woods, founded the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in Australia.

One aspect of Blessed Mary MacKillop's life speaks powerfully to us in light of today's readings. When she was excommunicated by the Church, her own sisters were forbidden to speak to her and many of them were also sent away from the congregation. Mary received refuge from friends and, eventually, from a Jewish businessman who provided a house for her and some of the women forced to leave. The Jesuit fathers realized that an injustice had been done and continued to give her the sacraments. Five months after the excommunication the bishop realized his error and, from his deathbed, sent one of his priests to remove the sentence of excommunication. During the time of excommunication, Mary would not have an unkind word said about the bishop and continued to pray for him.

This strong Australian woman never became bitter against the Church leaders who opposed her so vigorously. During his visit to Sydney for World Youth Day 2008, Benedict XVI, in speaking of Blessed Mary MacKillop, said "I know that her perseverance in the face of adversity, her plea for justice on behalf of those unfairly treated and her practical example of holiness have become a source of inspiration for all Australians."

We give thanks to God that Mary MacKillop will be proclaimed a saint on Oct. 17.

Brother André Bessette of Montreal

Canadian Holy Cross Brother André Bessette, founder of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, was born into a large Catholic family in 1845 in the Quebec village of Saint-Grégoire d'Iberville. When he had applied for vows in the Holy Cross Congregation, his religious superiors decided they could not accept him knowing that his poor health would be an impediment to future ministry. Alfred was devastated. Alfred begged the local bishop to intercede with the Holy Cross superiors, saying "My only ambition is to serve God in the most humble tasks."

For nearly 40 years Brother André worked as a porter at the College of Notre-Dame in the Montreal neighborhood of Côtés-des-Neiges. Speaking about his assignment as doorman, he once quipped, "When I joined this community, the superiors showed me the door."

Brother André urged people who came to him to pray with confidence and perseverance. Word spread quickly when many of those with whom he prayed were healed. Brother André insisted, "I am nothing ... only a tool in the hands of Providence, a lowly instrument at the service of St. Joseph." While some supported him, many others opposed him and even considered him dangerous to the well-being of the school's reputation because they regarded him as a charlatan. As the tensions increased at the college with so many of the sick coming to see the porter, the school officials permitted him to receive the sick in the nearby tramway station rather than the college.

Brother André had great faith and a strong devotion to St. Joseph. In 1900 he received permission to raise money for a shrine to St. Joseph. The first shelter was constructed in 1904. Holy Cross authorities allowed for a room to be added to the chapel and Brother André was assigned to live in that room where he could receive pilgrims and pray for them. He spent his days seeing sick people who came to him, and spent his evenings visiting the sick who could not make it to the oratory. Construction on what would become known as St. Joseph's Oratory began in 1914. By the 1920s the oratory hosted more than 1 million pilgrims annually, and hundreds of cures were attributed to his prayers every year. St. Joseph's Oratory is now the largest shrine to St. Joseph in the world.

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These two new saints of the Church stirred into flame the gift of faith they had received from God. They suffered at the hands of the Church, yet continued loving and believing. What hardship both bore for the sake of the Gospel! They were never ashamed of their testimony to the Lord and they radiated charity, joy and hope. Their strength came from God. Truly the Spirit dwelt within them. (Second Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14).

[The readings for this Sunday are: Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; Second Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; and Luke 17:5-10.]

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On the Net:

Salt and Light Catholic Television Network Web site: [www.saltandlighttv.org](http://www.saltandlighttv.org)

More information on Australia's first saint: [www.saltandlighttv.org/prog\\_special\\_mary\\_mackillop.html](http://www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_special_mary_mackillop.html)

For more information on Canada's first native born male saint: [saltandlighttv.org/brotherandre/](http://saltandlighttv.org/brotherandre/)

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