

Item #39 (Some Thoughts on the Origin of Christian Faith)

This was Entry #46 on my previous website.

On the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2012, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church issued a “Note with Pastoral Implications”, in pursuance of the announcement by Pope Benedict XVI that a Year of Faith was to be observed in the Church from October 11, 2012, to November 24, 2013. The present writer wishes to attempt a contribution to this Year of Faith based on his researches into the Epistle to the Hebrews. The present state of these researches may be found in my book *Hebrews—An Interpretation* (Subsidia Biblica 47; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2016).

This contribution, of course, is to be interpreted in accord with the conditions mentioned in the home page of this website, that is, that no “proof” is being attempted, only “plausibility”. Further, the arguments advanced for this plausibility are worth only their intrinsic plausibility, and are not to be interpreted according to a presumed authority attributed in any official or unofficial way to the Roman Catholic Church (of which the writer is an unworthy member) or of the Society of Jesus (in which the writer entered well over sixty years ago), or of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (where the writer was a resident in various capacities for fifty years). Further still and finally, the writer gladly submits these speculations to the official judgment of the Church, on the highly unlikely outcome that the Church think them worthy of attention.

The following speculations are based on a statement of the prologue of Hebrews that God created “the ages” through His Son (δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας). Regardless of the precise meaning affixed to “the ages”, it is clear that God is responsible through the Son for all created reality without exception.

Further, it is reasonably clear that the Son as a descendant of Abraham had faith in God in the face of death (Hebrews 2,13a—ἐγὼ ἔσομαι πεποιθὼς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ). This faith is to be interpreted as faith-trust, and with regard to the Son as man: it is nonsensical to say that the Son as God had faith-trust in God. To say that the Son who is God had faith-trust as man in God is not nonsensical, even though it presents the mystery of the Incarnation in all its fullness. It would seem to follow that this faith-trust of the Son as man was a created entity, otherwise it would be non-created, i.e., divine. But a divine faith-trust is nonsensical, as mentioned above. It would seem to follow, then, that this faith-trust of the Son as man was created by the Son as God.

This interpretation of the divinely-created faith-trust of the Son as human would seem to be supported by the way the word ὑπόστασις is used in the epistle. The word itself came to mean “person” in subsequent Catholic thought, as is witnessed to by the

Council of Chalcedon in 451. But that stage in the evolution of the word is not represented in Hebrews. In Hebrews ὑπόστασις seems to have the objective meaning of “that which stands under” in a uniquely Christian sense. (Hence the impossibility of giving it a meaning which can be placed neatly in recognized categories. The word used in the later meaning of “person” suffers from the same problem; to this day “person” must be described, not defined.)

The word ὑπόστασις seems to be used in Hebrews as an indication of the macro-structure of the entire epistle. The word is used three times to indicate the three principal parts of the work:

1) In Hebrews 1,3 ὑπόστασις is used to indicate that the Son is the imprint of “that which stands under” the “externals” of God, i.e., His glory. (Part I: Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6)

2) In Hebrews 3,14 ὑπόστασις is used to indicate that the Eucharist and all that it gives rise to is “that which stands under” the participation in Christ’s Mystical Body. (Part II: Hebrews 3,7 – 7,28)

3) In Hebrews 11,1 ὑπόστασις is used to indicate that faith is “that which stands under” all that hope looks for, i.e., faith is the objective basis for all of Christian life. (Part III: Hebrews 11,1 – 13,21)

The use of ὑπόστασις in the prologue is the prime analogate on which the other two uses are based. In the prologue it is used to indicate “that which stands under” the external glory of God. This “internal” reality of God, i.e., his substance, is reproduced exactly in the Son. As such it suggests sameness but, in the image of the imprint, difference. As a divine ontological reality this ὑπόστασις will remain forever.

The other two usages analogously suggest the influence of this abiding ontological reality without univocally reproducing it.

The reality of Christ in the Mystical Body touches on His ontological abiding existence, but the participation in that life through the sacraments will eventually give way to a glorified existence which has no need of such sacramental participation. Thus this objective ὑπόστασις involves the eternal ontological ὑπόστασις of the Son, but in a temporary, analogous way (Hebrews 3,7 – 10,39).

ὑπόστασις as “that which stands under” all that Christians hope for, i.e., faith, is the basis for the final part, Hebrews 11,1 – 13,21. And this use is the focal point of this note. This underlying reality is the basis for Christian knowledge which gives rise to Christian hope. It is thus involved analogously in Christ’s ontological and hence abiding divinity (otherwise the word ὑπόστασις would not have been used), but at the level of knowledge, not at the level of ontological participation. Parallel to the objective participation in Christ in the second part, this participation would, analogously, thus be used of participation in the faith-knowledge of Christ. But this faith-knowledge will eventually disappear with glorification, i.e., it is created. But if it is created, it must have been created by the Son acting as the agent of the Father.

The faith-knowledge of Hebrews 11,1, together with the hope

with which it is paired, would seem to be the faith-trust of the Son as human mentioned in Hebrews 2,13a. This faith-trust of the Son as human in Hebrews 2,13a is the psychological counterpart to His taking on of blood and flesh mentioned in Hebrews 2,14. It is the area of His “being tested” so that He becomes capable of helping others (Hebrews 2,18). But this faith-trust of the Son as human has disappeared with His glorification, just as the faith-trust of all others who have been glorified has disappeared. But for those of us who remain this side of glorification the need for this faith-trust is all too real.

Thus it would seem plausible to say that “the faith of the Church” mentioned in the Mass, since it will eventually disappear and hence is a created reality, was created through the Son. Further, inasmuch this “faith of the Church” is an objective reality, which is an intrinsic part of participation in the Church, i.e., the Mystical Body of the Son as human. Hence it would seem plausible to say that just as participation in the Mystical Body is participation in the ontological reality of the Son, so the “faith of the Church” is an essential part of being a Christian. It is a psychological given as part of membership in the Church: when we believe we believe with the ontological faith of the Mystical Christ. Such faith cannot be the product of human willing; it can only be the product of divine gift. **(15 February 2012)**

How Jesus even as human can have faith-trust, given the fact that he enjoyed the Beatific Vision in his life on earth, poses a real problem. Perhaps a way toward a solution can be seen in the supposition that Jesus must have realized that he was the new Isaac and that his real death (not just a symbolic death as was Isaac’s) must be followed by a real resurrection (not just a symbolic resurrection as was Isaac’s if the blessing promised to Abraham through his seed was to be realized. Faith-trust in his resurrection that was compatible with the Beatific Vision seems plausible on this basis. **(14 August 2017)** In which case his “faith” would have been “fidelity” to the unfulfilled “parable” of Isaac. **(19 December 2019)**

¹ The above note is grounded in a close reading of the epistle, which has issued in a detailed microstructure which in turn is the basis for a comprehensive macrostructure. But the speculative nature of the note will quite possibly demand re-writing based on re-thinking, with February 15, 2012, as a temporal starting point.