

Faith and the grace of Lent

A recent national study indicates that somewhere around 80% of residents of the United States believe in God. That's clearly a substantial majority, but it's also the lowest percentage measured since this question was first asked by pollsters. The number of people who believe in God has steadily declined for decades, and that's a cause for concern. For one out of five Americans to assert that there is no God has an unmistakable impact on our national culture and on the future of this country. Of course, statistics don't tell the whole story, but we're all affected when faith grows faint.

There are some who are professed atheists, who try to offer an argument from science or the problem of evil to prove that there is no God. "Look at the size of the universe. How could there be a God who made all that?" "Look how much evil there is in the world. How could a good God allow evil to exist?" (There are very good answers to these questions, by the way.) Much more common is the practice of atheism by those who live and act *as if* there were no God. There are many who live as if the human soul were not immortal. And finally, by extension, many live and act as if there will be no ultimate accountability at the end of our earthly lives, no final judgment, no heaven or hell. Not surprisingly, when faith in God is absent, there is little regard for what is sacred, for what is true and what is good.

Even among Christians, one can find a kind of "practical atheism," that is, a way of life that carries on *as if* there were no God. It's easy to live everyday lives while keeping God at a distance and paying little heed to his commandments. We might pay lip service to faith, but it has little effect on the choices and decisions we make from day to day. That kind of faith doesn't have roots and withers when the going gets tough.

On Feb. 14, Ash Wednesday, we begin the holy season of Lent. This season of grace is a time for all of us to deepen our communion with God through prayer, to do penance for our sins, and to live more charitably, especially toward those in great need. But underneath it all is the call to deeper faith, more fervent faith, a truly personal faith in the God who loves us. Lent is a time to challenge our status quo, our comfortable way of doing things, and to put our faith more completely in Jesus Christ, who gave his life for us so that we might live eternally. Lent is an opportunity to respond to God's grace in our lives, the grace that is a sharing in his divine life. It is a time to renew our faith commitment to the One who created us, who redeemed us, and who walks with us even now on our journey.

This season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving is also a summons to live out our faith in a lively way, to be a leaven in the world that has lost its way. As people of faith, we are called by our Lord to witness our faith in him before those who don't believe, who have no knowledge of God and no awareness of his presence in their lives. By living our faith joyfully and fervently, we manifest the reality of God in our lives and the joy of being followers of Jesus. We show our fidelity and our adherence to the truths that God has revealed to us, truths about ourselves, our life here on earth, and the eternal destiny that awaits us. By living our faith openly, we give witness to what is right and wrong, as opposed to the relativism of our times that says there are no absolute truths.

We often address Jesus as "Lord," and so he is, the Lord of heaven and earth. Now is the time to really be convinced of this, and to live in such a way that shows we believe it. In other words, using the words of St. Paul from the Ash Wednesday Mass, "now is the acceptable time" to really make Jesus the Lord of everything that matters to us: our time, our work, our study, our leisure, our relationships, our love lives, our entertainment—everything. In contrast to the culture of unbelief that surrounds us, Jesus is calling us to put our faith in God, to believe more fully and live more fully in relationship with him.

We often make certain resolutions for Lent, resolutions of prayer, fasting, and good works, and that's good. Allow me to recommend two resolutions for Lent that will help us to come to deeper faith. First, I suggest time with Christ himself in the Eucharist. Attending Mass every Sunday and even during the week, and spending time with him in quiet prayer is a sure and certain way to open our minds and hearts to the grace of faith that Jesus offers us. And secondly, make an effort to learn more about the faith that has been handed on to us. Read a few verses of one of the Gospels each day and give yourself time to really absorb the Word of God. Read a few paragraphs of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, or any

other authoritative resource on the truths of our faith. There is a wealth of material available to us in print and on the internet. Take advantage of it!

May this beautiful season of Lent enliven our faith in God and help us to be living witnesses of that faith in the world. As Paul tells us, “Now is the acceptable time.”