



Boston Catholic Journal



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THE FAITH OF FOOLS



... and the Painted Tunnel

Faith is much like a painted tunnel set upon the face of a granite wall, and we are invited to run into it — *full speed* — not knowing whether the dark opening is an illusion, or if a tunnel, how deep it is, and whether it bends immediately to the right or turns sharply to the left. We do not know if it falls precipitously down or steeply curves up ... if it is not an illusion at all. We have no idea how wide it is.

Some have told us that it is a real tunnel. Others have told us that it is just black paint artfully brushed on a solid wall. We only really see the wall around it. This we believe to be real. We have approached the wall and knocked our knuckles against the granite face on all the sides surrounding what appears to be a black opening, and after a few vigorous attempts we find our knuckles sore and because the surface is uneven, bleeding.

Someone comes along and asks us to instantly run at the black opening. We are told that depending on the speed at which we run, we will enter the more deeply into the tunnel ... which for all appearances and in all probability is just a painted surface. We can walk carefully toward it and very, very slowly approach what appears to be a dark opening. This way, if it is an illusion, the injury to ourselves will be minimal. If we rush at it full speed and the apparent opening is just that — “apparent” — we will be seriously injured, and what is more, look like fools in the effort. After all, we had been warned by others, in fact, by many others, that it is an

illusion created by a clever artist, much like the three dimensional drawings we have seen on the sidewalks of large cities, skillfully drawn by enterprising artists. There “appears” to be depth, and we are amazed at the skill, and may even, for all our realization that it is a carefully crafted illusion, blench before stepping over the outer periphery of the drawing.

This is a most apposite metaphor for Faith, and Christ is either a clever artist or we are simply credulous fools. It may be both. Perhaps the skill of the Artist depends heavily on the gullibility of the fool. Moreover, most of the fools are not the *literati*, the well-educated, the scholars, those who know the real state of affairs in the world, and hold multiples degrees to attest to this. They clearly are not willing to be fools.

So what of the rest of us? What of those who, like us, stand in perplexity, hesitation, and even doubt before the “painted” tunnel? All of them, all of us, have inadvertently walked into brick walls and know the penalty of our inattentiveness ... and we walk away, ashamed that we have shown ourselves fools.

Let us further suppose that it is widely rumored that many have actually run into the painted tunnel — and are never heard from again! What are we to make of this? What has become of them? Is it good or bad? We have no way of knowing — even *if* such rumors have some apparent substance to them.

What is more, we have known some people who have in fact run into the wall and immediately recoiled off it, suffering greatly, and coming away “the wiser”, knowing from experience that the tunnel is an illusion, and who can even show you the scars of that regrettable encounter.

AN ILLUSION?

Even if the “painted” tunnel is *not* an illusion as some maintain, although they themselves only believe it without actually having run into it head on and at full speed — it appears to be of an unpredictable nature. Sometimes it proves to be an opening, and sometimes not. In fact, some have claimed to enter it — and to have returned! While we cannot verify that they have in fact entered it, it certainly appears to be the case that, in a different way, their lives, too, have been changed as a result ... much like those who bounced off the wall.

Why would this “opening” be of such a nature that for some it proves to be, in fact, a real opening, while for others it turns out to be an illusion? Why do they return from their encounter with the painted tunnel with such strikingly different — even totally conflicting — accounts?

We — who are merely spectators of this drama — really have no idea, still less assurance, of the likelihood of our own experience with the painted tunnel, which all of us at least see, and will never know, cannot know, until we ourselves participate in the drama. We behold alike the wounded and the healed as a result of their encounter with the “tunnel”. We stand on the sidelines, observing this bizarre spectacle, hoping to attain to some certainty, one way or another, through the experience of others. Again and again we fluctuate between believing that the tunnel is real and that it is painted. We watch one limp away, and we disbelieve. The next moment we watch another return, made whole, and we believe. The one thing we do not doubt is that the painted tunnel will change us, one way or another, and that we can only find out which way if we run into it.

There is another unique characteristic of the tunnel: as we grow older the opening looms larger. It is not more real or less real, more apparent or less apparent; it is just ... more obtrusive.

This, in turn, reveals something uniquely characteristic of us: a growing reluctance to run into the wall. It is not so much that we fear being injured as a consequence, as we fear discovering that it is only an illusion after all, a mere painting, very old, but nevertheless very vivid.

Why is this? Because even our doubt contains within itself at least the latency of belief. We do not doubt what we do not believe, or what we know is not the case. We only doubt what, for all its improbability, is yet the *possibility* of being real. And this is to say that doubt itself contains an implicit acknowledgement of the very thing doubted. Even if belief is suspended, it is not entirely abandoned. It is a comfortable position. While we forfeit any possible benefit of belief, we incur no penalty that would result from a validated disbelief. In other words, we are more comfortable without the consolation of finding that our belief corresponds to a reality, than we are in possibly finding that our disbelief corresponds to a reality — that there is nothing, that the tunnel is a painting on an opaque and impenetrable wall, that it is an illusion only, beyond which there is nothing. Better to implicitly hope there is something and find oneself pleasantly surprised that it is indeed the case despite all improbability ... than to relinquish hope altogether in finding that there is nothing.

The problem with this approach is Jesus Christ. He does not ask you to take a stand. He requires you to take a stand. Not on the issue, but on Him. The issue after all, at least if you are a Catholic, is inseparable from Him. You cannot stand on the sidelines. One way or another you will be forced to come to terms with the tunnel. And the way you approach it is very likely the measure you enter into the life of Christ.

You can pass it by altogether, fearful of what it will require of you if you enter the tunnel, or of finding there is nothing if you merely collide with it, with what was the *possibility* that there was nothing and finding out that there really is nothing, and living with that realization.

HITTING THE WALL

You can also approach it tentatively, cautiously, carefully, seeking at every step to verify something of the reality of the tunnel before moving a step closer until, sufficiently assured, and with great apprehension, you make the final “*actus fidei*”, or “act of faith”, and fall forward against the black opening that may yet still be a solid wall — and breathe a sigh of relief that your modicum of faith, yet imbued with doubt, did not fail you.

Or you can run into the tunnel full speed in the face of all improbability and against all the palpable evidence that it is just a painted tunnel on an unyielding surface — and enter the depths of the Heart of Christ Himself.

Ah, yes, you ask ... nevertheless, what of those who ran and recoiled off the wall? We would be dishonest if we cannot answer this. This, ultimately, is at the heart of the mystery of Faith itself which, were it possessed of certainty, would not be faith.

God alone knows the depths and the motives of the human heart. There is no “methodology” to Heaven. Indeed, none of us are assured of our own salvation which, St. Paul tells us, “we work out with fear and trembling.”

One thing is certain: you will know nothing of it — and very likely suffer greatly because you wish to know nothing definitive of it — whether it is real or an illusion — until you throw yourself against the wall.

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