



ARTICLES


Belonging, Believing, Behaving: The 3 B's of Faithful Being

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As I look back on the development of my faith growing up, I notice there was a certain order to it. First came *believing*—in God, in Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit. Then *behaving*—believing required that you had to behave in a certain way (do this but don't do that). Lastly came *belonging*—faith gave you a sense of belonging to family, to a faith community, and yes, even to God himself.

This was the order of priority—believing, behaving, and belonging. The older I get, however, the more convinced I am that a sense of *belonging* to God


 comes first and not last. Only when we realize that we belong to our God

who created us and loves us can we then come to believe and then see how both belonging and believing shape our behaving.

In the Old Testament, priests like Abraham and Moses offered sacrifice to God as an acknowledgement that—although humans were stewards of creation—everything God had made still belonged to him: “Look, to Yahweh your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth and everything on it” (Deut. 10:14); “Arise O God. Judge the world, for all nations belong to you” (Ps. 82:8).

Furthermore, a key part of God’s plan to redeem all creation was to choose for himself a people who would be a sign and instrument of his saving love. This chosen people would be a people who belonged to God himself: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6-8). This was the heart of the covenant that God established with Israel.

This theme of belonging finds its fulfillment in the New Testament, beginning with the Gospels. In the accounts of Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan, the Father’s voice declared Jesus as his beloved Son “in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:8). Therefore, from the very outset of his public ministry, Jesus’ life was claimed by his Father. When he was found in the temple, Mary learned a painful lesson that although Jesus belonged to her as his mother, as Son he ultimately belonged to the Father, and his mission was directed to save the whole world (Mark 3:31-35; Matt. 12:48-50; Luke 2: 41-50; 8:19-21). Then the Good Shepherd himself teaches that “the sheep that belong to me listen to my voice” (John 10:27).

This theme of belonging was taken up strongly by St. Paul. He reminds the  Christians in Rome that “by his call you belong to Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:6). To

have the Holy Spirit is to belong to God, for “anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9).

Then to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them that “you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor. 3:23). For Paul, Christ’s claim of us is greater than any other group, body, or person. That is why he identifies *belonging* as being essential to unity—that the Corinthian Christians didn’t “belong to Paul” or “belong to Peter” but to Christ (Cf. 1 Cor. 1:12).

This scriptural theme of belonging to Christ is seen at the very beginning and end of the life of a Christian. As a priest, I am always struck by the words at the beginning of the rite of Baptism when I trace the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead with the words: “I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of the cross and I invite your parents and godparents to do the same.” This claiming by Christ of the life of the child takes place through the Church. It is through the Church as the Body of Christ that this belonging is lived out. In Baptism, we could say that while God claims us as Father, the Church claims us as Mother.

Then comes the end of life and the funeral of the baptized Christian. As the body of the deceased enters the Church, the priest or deacon prays: “May the Lord claim you as one of his flock.” So right at the beginning of life and at the very end, the Christian is someone whose life is claimed and belongs to another—namely, God.

How extraordinary and countercultural this is! We might protest, “No one claims my life but me!” Or, “My life belongs first to myself.” Our postmodern culture tends to define identity in terms of what we possess rather than who possesses us. Yet this truth of belonging is the faith of the Church and something pivotal that Bishop Barron reminds us in his series *Untold*



Blessings: Three Paths to Holiness. There he outlines that “your life is not about you but about God’s purposes for you.”

In other words, we don’t belong to ourselves but first to God our Father. With this message, Bishop Barron is reaching back to the examples of some of the greatest saints, who knew this in their bones. A key moment in the life of St. Francis of Assisi was when he realized he belonged not to his earthly father but his heavenly one: “From now on I want to say ‘Our Father who art in heaven’ not ‘My father Peter Bernardone’”. Similarly, it slowly dawned on the Little Flower that “I no longer belong to myself, I am totally surrendered to Jesus, so He is free to do with me as He wills” (St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Manuscript C*).

As with St. Francis and St. Thérèse, a similar slow realization unfolds in us that we are not orphans in this world but are claimed as God’s own. We belong to him. To be human is to belong, for it ties together both our existence (to be) and our longing (to long for God, to long for home). This is why to “be-long” is so important.

And in this light of belonging to God, believing in him becomes clearer. Believing becomes our “yes”—our response to the “yes” of God, whose assent first brings us into being. Faith becomes an acceptance of the truth that we are God’s, that we belong to him and he claims us as his own. Faith in Jesus gathers us together as the sheep that belong to him and who listen to his voice. Gathered in the family of the Church, every other belonging is subordinate to our belonging together to him.

Then comes behaving. Effective evangelization doesn’t lead with what we should or shouldn’t do. It’s not a code of ethics. Rather, it is a way of life that



flows from a living relationship with our loving Father who claims us proudly as a son or daughter.

Belonging, believing, behaving. I have come to realize that this is the right order. We believe in the One who claims us and we behave according to what we believe.

So if you read these words and wonder what your life is all about, consider that perhaps the real question is not “*Who am I?*” but “*Whose am I?*”

And as this question surfaces in your heart, remember that you were marked by the sign of the cross at your Baptism and claimed for Christ as one of his own. In prayer may you hear the gentle whisper of the Father’s voice that says, “You belong to me. You are mine.”

TOPICS

Catholic Church Evangelizing Faith Identity

BIBLE REFERENCES

Deuteronomy 10:14, Psalm 82:8, Deuteronomy 7:6-8, John 10:27, Genesis 1, Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:8, Romans 1:6, Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 3:23, 1 Corinthians 1:12

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