

32963 Article ~ 4-25-10

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That's Hard to Believe

How fortunate we are to live in the age and time and place we do. Most of us have enough. Many of us have far more than we need. We are blessed. And yet there is one way in which we are perhaps less fortunate than those who lived long ago and far away. And our misfortune, we think, lies in the fact that we modern and fortunate people tend to have trouble with faith. It seems illogical to us. In fact, as theologian Martin Marty has noted, we live in a scientific age in which we are taught to expect proof. We want empirical evidence to support and verify any assertion of truth.

But that's not the way faith works, is it? The claims of truth we make about the love of God for the world and God's loving outreach to every human life can't be conclusively proven. So is belief in something we cannot fully verify just wishful thinking? Is it just grasping at straws? Some might think so. But we've always admired Father Henri Nouwen and the way in which he answered these questions for himself.

Nouwen was a fan of the flying Rodleights, who were German trapeze artists. Nouwen greatly admired these acrobats and they befriended him. Once, Nouwen recalls, he asked the leader of the troop, called the flyer, what it was like to be swinging some fifty feet above the circus floor and then just let go. The flyer paused for a moment and then he said: "To do that, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I am the star, but the real star is my catcher. You see, the flyer does nothing, and the catcher does everything. And the worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher. The flyer pivots and spins through the air, unable to see who or what is ahead of him. He must simply stretch out his arms and trust that the catcher will be there for him. But if he can learn to do that, he'll be caught."

Don't we live like the flyer on the trapeze? We are spinning and swirling through life, unable to see where we are headed. We can't see or touch or prove the existence of a catcher who won't let us fall. But nevertheless, we must learn to reach out our hands and believe that we will be safely caught and held. Reaching out in faith, unseeingly, but trustingly, is really the only way open to us.

It's true, we may not get the empirical proof we'd like about our religious beliefs. But really, we don't have that kind of proof for any of the things that are most important to us, do we? How can we conclusively prove love, or friendship, or hope? We can't. But we know they exist. We feel them. And they are what make life worth living.

So day by day, and even moment by moment, let's hold out our hands, and just trust we'll be "caught" by the powerful grasp of the God whose presence we cannot prove, but never doubt.