



Marco Forlivesi | Riccardo Quinto | Silvana Vecchio (eds.)

*“Fides virtus”*

The Virtue of Faith from the Twelfth  
to the Early Sixteenth Century



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# *Fides Virtus*

The Virtue of Faith from the Twelfth  
to the Early Sixteenth Century

Edited by

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## Introduction

### Faith as a Virtue from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century

by MARCO FORLIVESI AND SILVANA VECCHIO

Tracing the history of medieval authors' doctrines on the nature of faith is far too extensive a topic for one single congress. What the Middle Ages felt on the subject of faith resulted in a huge literary production, spanning over more than ten centuries, involving a vast number of authors and taking a variety of themes into account. In point of fact, hardly any medieval texts fail to take somehow the subject of faith into consideration, and all medieval literature might be regarded as a wide-ranging, astoundingly varied, reasoning on it.

Compared to this vast literature, the IGTM congress that was held in Padua in July, 2011, had a considerably more limited scope. Its aim was to analyse 12th- to 16th-century doctrines specifically concerned with faith as a theological virtue. Several distinctions that can be found in medieval and Renaissance texts seem to legitimate such a choice. On the one hand, medieval and Renaissance authors drew a distinction between (i) faith when it is intended as a corpus of doctrines that the Church presents as God's revelation (*fides quae creditur*), and (ii) faith when it is regarded as the assent, given by men's intellect or intellectual affectivity, to such a corpus of doctrines (*fides qua creditur*). On the other hand, a distinction (at times, indeed, even an opposition) was also made between (i) men's ordinary assent to truth and (ii) a special act of trust in a truth that is supposed to exceed human sensible experience. Such a special act of trust (i.e., faith in a theological sense) requires both divine intervention and some sort of activity on the part of human will. As a consequence, it entails some kind of merit and is therefore related to virtue. Faith as a virtue is, precisely, the notion on which congress speakers were asked to focus. Speakers were invited to move from a strictly historical perspective (that is, leaving confessional and theoretical convictions aside) and to investigate 12th- to 16th century doctrines with regard to faith as a virtue. This means that faith was considered within the wider group of theological virtues (faith, hope and charity), and also compared with cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude).

The choice of focusing on the period ranging from the 12th to the 16th centuries obviously entailed limitations in the scope of the congress. The patristic foundation of the system of theological virtues was left aside, and neither was monastic theology considered systematically. In short, it was the development of the system of theological virtues until the end of Middle Ages, rather than its formation, that was analysed in the congress. Nonetheless, some aspects of the doctrines on faith that arose prior to the 12th century are treated by Paolo

Bettiolo in his prolusory article. Bettiolo scrutinizes a group of 4th- to 7th-century monastic writings stemming from an oriental tradition, linked to Evagrius Ponticus. Within that tradition (where the hallmark of Stoicism is clearly perceptible), the virtue of faith is part of a wider web of faculties and habitus. It is linked to knowledge, charity, fear of God, as well as to impassibility. Despite, at times significant, differences among the authors that Bettiolo considers, a sort of contradiction underlies faith for all of them. The contradiction can be seen between (i) the need for ethics and for monastic practice, on the one hand, and (ii) the human impossibility of leading a proper Christian life, on the other (since a proper Christian life, it was felt, entirely depends on the power of the Holy Spirit and on the mystery of the attainment of the knowledge of Him).

Thanks to Bettiolo's paper on the early centuries of medieval Christianity, the reader can catch a glimpse of how problematic the notion of faith was from the very beginning of this religious tradition. Faith is structurally an ambiguous notion, oscillating between human effort and divine intervention. The chronological limits of the congress precisely facilitated the unearthing of some major issues of this subject, which appear to be more clearly defined and easier to isolate starting from the 12th century.

(1) The first major theme of the congress (to which one section was dedicated) is that of the history of the interpretation of certain biblical passages that prove crucial for medieval reasoning on faith. Found chiefly in the gospels and in Paul's letters, such passages define faith with respect to hope and charity. They were widely commented upon, either in the context of a comprehensive exegesis of the whole Bible, or in commentaries on the aforementioned books only. These passages are also supremely important for any reasoning on faith as a virtue. (2) Another section of the congress was dedicated to theological-speculative reasoning, that is to say, to the formation and development of systematic theology. Systematic theology itself aimed at clarifying the epistemological and ethical status of faith, and at defining the relationship of faith with respect to the other theological virtues. Papers took into consideration what authors wrote on problematic issues such as the nature of faith, the interconnection and hierarchy among virtues and the relationship between the theological virtues and grace. (3) Finally, the third section analysed pastoral care stemming from theological reasoning on faith as a virtue. It is noteworthy that a vast 'catechesis of virtues' was constructed by theologians on theological grounds during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, resulting in preaching as well as liturgical and devotional formulas.

The three aforementioned themes (i.e., biblical exegesis, systematic theology and pastoral care) were isolated within the congress for the sake of clarity alone. The ties binding biblical exegesis and systematic theology together throughout the Middle Ages do not allow for scriptural commentaries, on the one hand, and *summae* and treatises, on the other, to be separated rigidly. Much in the same way, pastoral care is not a mere translation of theoretical speculations into practice; quite the contrary, theology and pastoral work tend to influence each other.

An example of interplay among congress themes is Marcia Colish's contribution. Though concentrating on Peter Lombard's *Collectanea in Epistulis Pauli*, it highlights the extent to which *Collectanea*, an exegetical work, complements the systematic analysis of Peter's *Sententiae*. Colish specifically focuses on the way 'fides' and 'fiducia' are used in the *Collectanea*. Her analysis sheds light on the tie (based on passages from the Scripture) that links faith, hope and charity together – this being one of the crucial themes in Peter Lombard's theological investigation. On the other hand, Colish identifies the fundamentally intellectual character of faith in Peter Lombard's doctrine, a theme that opens a debate running through all subsequent medieval theology.

A constant for the period considered is the crucial role played by exegesis, particularly exegesis of the Pauline epistles. They represent a *locus classicus*, in commenting on which a whole series of problematic issues on faith were tackled, modelling reasoning on the virtue of faith up until the end of the Middle Ages and beyond. It is well known that, from the 16th century, the interpretation of Paul's verses on faith is a matter for debate between Catholics and Protestants about the role of faith and good works with respect to salvation. The rise of such a debate can be seen as providing a *terminus ad quem* for the congress; nevertheless it should be borne in mind in any historical research on medieval thought on faith, as is shown by Matthew Gaetano in his paper. While investigating Domingo de Soto's commentaries on Paul's letters, and their anti-Protestant aims, Gaetano finds traces of century-old Thomistic reasoning on Paul's statements concerning faith.

In the period of time that goes from Peter Lombard to the Reformation, exegesis as well as speculative theology developed continually and closely connected to each other. A wide range of problems actually reverberated from one field to the other. A number of these problems were explicitly addressed by the participants in the congress. Central to the 12th-century analysis of faith are the two problems of (i) the interconnection among virtues and (ii) the epistemic state of faith. Precisely the epistemic state of faith is at the core of Abelard's reasoning on faith. An article by Constant Mews focuses on Abelard's problematic definition of faith as opinion (*existimatio*) in the *Theologia scholarium*. Mews shows that such a definition stems from Abelard's reasoning on the topic for over a decade, and that the roots of Abelard's view lie in the exegesis of a Pauline verse, Hebr. 11.1, and in several patristic interpretations of the verse, which Abelard had collated in the *Sic et non*. The problem of defining faith also lies at the heart of Simon of Tournai's views on faith, analysed by Francesco Siri. The need for a philosophical foundation of theology led Simon to prefer a philosophical definition of faith (deriving from the Aristotelian-Boethian tradition), rather than a Scriptural one. Such a philosophical definition only, underlying the gnoseological value of faith, makes faith/virtue correspond fully to Aristotle's notion of virtue as habitus.

As shown by Mark Clark in his contribution on the gospel commentaries of two major Parisian masters, Peter Comestor and Stephen Langton, 12th-century exegesis tends to develop into a more theological-speculative kind of

reasoning. When confronted with interpreting problematic Scriptural passages, both masters recall the polysemy of the word 'faith'. They also extend their treatment of faith to ecclesiology, considering faith as far as it is fundamental for the self-comprehension and self-conception of the Christian community. The crucial role played by Langton in reasoning on faith is confirmed by Magdalena Bieniak. Her paper investigates Langton's *Summa* and theological quaestiones with respect to the problems of the interconnection and hierarchy among virtues. Langton clearly states faith's superiority, to some extent reducing the primacy of charity compared to the other theological virtues. This is a wholly original feature, which anticipates the views of certain 13th-century masters. The novelty of Langton's position is apparent as soon as it is compared with the background to 12th-century theological debate and is perceptible if one considers the papers analysing faith in the writings of the school of St Victor. Fabrizio Mandreoli's research on Hugh of St Victor's *De sacramentis* finds traces of a theological reasoning (grounded in some biblical texts) that gives charity the primacy among virtues (although, of course, charity is inextricably linked to faith and to the other virtues). Hideki Nakamura, on his part, shows that Richard of St Victor's exegetical-theological path in the *Beniamin minor* reaches a definition of faith which links it to both grace and charity. It is charity, however, that lets men know God's mysteries, since, in Richard's view, they are nothing but the mystery of God's love.

12th-century biblical commentaries, treatises and theological quaestiones comprise and convey the results of considerable speculative work. A specific lexicon concerning faith as a virtue emerges, in addition to a dossier of scriptural references and a full range of concepts that also prove crucial for 13th-century theology. In the first decades of the 13th century, issues concerning theological virtues find their place within theological *summae*. This exact moment is focussed on by Riccardo Saccenti. His paper scrutinizes the problem of the interconnection of virtues in *summae* of Parisian masters from the first half of the 13th century, such as William of Auxerre, Philip the Chancellor, Alexander of Hales, Hugh of St Cher, and Roland of Cremona. For these masters, investigating how virtues are interconnected also means identifying the natural and supernatural aspects of each virtue. The crucial issue of the hierarchy of theological virtues (that is, fundamentally, the relationship between faith and charity) is tackled by distinguishing between formed and unformed faith: a distinction that will persist in the subsequent scholastic debate.

While maintaining some of the previous features, the debate on faith as a virtue evinces a new appearance from the 13th century. Theological reasoning is now systematic and aims at being scientific (or, at least, raises the question of the epistemological status of theology). The problematic issues of the epistemic value of faith and of its truthfulness attain an ever-increasing importance in late Scholasticism. An analytic examination of the role and nature of faith is developed, and such analysis is affected by the transformations gnosiology and epistemology underwent during the 13th century. The relationship between faith and exegesis itself is remodelled, as is shown by Tiziano Lorenzin in his

contribution, which is dedicated to Bonaventure and to the role he assigns to faith in interpreting the Scriptures. Reasoning on the epistemic state of faith appears at that time the most important matter of debate among theologians. Thomas Marschler scrutinizes the treatment Thomas Aquinas gave to the virtue of faith in the *Summa theologiae*. In Aquinas' view, the believer's assent is produced from the interaction of cognitive and volitive acts. Not only does such a doctrine remain unchanged throughout Aquinas' theological production but it is also constantly repeated in later Thomistic theology. In point of fact, the co-participation of intellect and will in the act of faith is far from being exclusive to Thomistic thought; on the contrary, it is a wide-spread doctrine in the 13th century. As Fortunato Iozzelli's paper shows, co-participation of intellect and will in the act of faith is endorsed by Peter Olivi, both in his theological writings (e.g., his *Commentary on the Sentences*) and in his *Commentary on Luke's Gospel*. This can be seen in the way Olivi analyses certain gospel characters that are exemplars of believers (e.g., the Virgin Mary, Peter the Apostle, the Good Thief). It emerges from this analysis that the believer's assent does not result from speculative judgement only, but also requires an affective motion of the will. And in the writings of Duns Scotus, too, (analysed by Antonino Poppi) the complex relationship between will and intellect is crucial to the investigation of faith as a virtue. With an eye to the wider debate as to whether theology is a science, Poppi focuses on Scotus' seminal distinction between acquired faith and infused faith. Acquired faith is a natural disposition that lies in reason and is generated by reason itself and, to some extent, by will. Infused faith is a supernatural habitus, which is directly infused by God, precedes charity (at least in certain respects), and makes the intellect's inclination towards assent more perfect. Taking full advantage of this distinction, the specific nature of the virtue of faith can be brought to light, and its relationship to other theological virtues (first and foremost charity) clarified. A contribution by William Duba concentrates on the relationship among faith, hope and charity in the thought of one of Scotus' pupils, Francis of Meyronne. While making use of Scotus' terminology and arguments, Francis modifies his own position throughout his writing on theology, reaching conclusions that appear to be very different from those of his master. Scotus' categories (the distinction between natural and infused faith, in the first place) are no less central to the thought of William of Ockham, which is analysed by Christophe Grellard. Opposing natural and infused faith allows Ockham not only to clarify faith's status as a virtue, but also to define the relationship between implicit and explicit faith, with consequences that spread to ecclesiology. Still in the 15th century, tackling the topic of faith as a virtue meant analysing the dialectics between human will and divine grace. This is done, for example, by Johannes von Paltz and Johannes von Staupitz (both of whom Augustinian masters of theology) in terms that seem to anticipate those of the Reformation, as is explained by Christoph Burger in his article.

No less rich and varied than the panorama that emerges from medieval theology is the range of themes on faith as a virtue that can be found in pastoral writings. In this field, theoretical problems investigated by theology tend to re-

main in the background, and the topic of faith as a virtue is tackled in more concrete terms. Indeed, the aim of pastoral care does not lie in explaining what faith is, nor what its epistemological status is. Pastoral care, on the contrary, aims at exhorting people to faith, expounding its contents, supporting it through devotion and condemning deviations; moreover, such catechesis is achieved mainly by means of predication. The problem of the contents of faith (which is not missing in theological debate but is marginal to the definition of faith as a virtue/habitus) is central to pastoral work, as it (primarily) aims at transmitting the essential elements of faith, as well as building or strengthening the believer's assent.

A variety of literary genres co-operate in this intense pedagogic effort, with a major role played by treatises on vices and virtues. Indeed, treatises on vices and virtues were an indispensable tool for preachers, who would find doctrines, values, and models of behaviours there, and pass them on to simple believers. Richard Newhauser analyses the Treatise on Faith included in the most important medieval handbook on vices and virtues, that by the Dominican William Peraldus. In the context of analysing all theological virtues, Peraldus examines the virtue of faith through taking into account both its contents (the articles of faith) and – to an even greater extent – its deviations. *Infidelitas* (which, in fact, was not an unknown theme in theological literature) becomes a matter of major concern for him, with a detailed analysis of different kinds of heresies and doctrinal mistakes. Peraldus' treatise bears witness to the important role the Dominican order played against heresy in the mid-13th century. In addition, the twin themes of stigmatizing *infidelitas* on the one hand, and analysing the doctrinal contents of faith on the other, produce a sort of 'canvas' of great use to preachers when writing their own sermons. This scenario is confirmed by Carlo Delcorno in his study, dedicated to Jordan of Pisa's sermons on the Creed. Although Jordan's cycle of sermons are in the vulgar tongue, they tackle theologically sophisticated problems. Moreover, they appeal to the listeners' rationality, thus aiming at an intellectual – rather than affective – sort of assent.

The *fides/infidelitas* interplay and the opposition between virtues and vices, so frequent in literature for pastoral care, also allow for a visual, theatrical presentation of the subject, which proves particularly useful in liturgy and devotion. Faith is represented in a sort of liturgical drama (in all probability to be staged for nuns) in Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*, studied by Michael Embach. Hildegard's drama does not contrast the virtue of faith with its opposite, vice, but with the Devil himself, and makes use of a number of visual images of great impact. Figurative language is also dominant in the laudi by the Jesuate Bianco of Siena, analysed by Silvia Serventi. Here the theme of the interconnection between virtues (central, as has been seen, to theological debate) is tackled through a variety of metaphors, such as the chain and the tree, which visualise the relationships among virtues (with charity having indisputable primacy). The primacy of charity is also one of the features characterising devotional literature linked to the so-called *Devotio moderna*. As Charles Caspers' contribution shows, these writings make use of a very emo-



tional sort of language, while the tendency to omit the subtleties of scholastic reasonings often results in emphasizing the topics of charity and *timor Domini* over faith.

Obviously, the researches presented at the congress could not cover the whole range of problems related to the topic of *fides/virtus*. Nevertheless, contributions isolate a number of recurrent problems, which are tackled in different contexts at different moments, echoing one another in the ongoing debate. Perhaps the most significant element, emerging from many of the papers presented, is that of a tension, almost a contradiction, that is structurally intrinsic to the notion of faith itself. On the one hand, the virtue of faith is believed ultimately to derive from a special infusion of grace (that is to say, on God's initiative); on the other hand, it is also thought to require a voluntary assent on the believer's part; furthermore, this assent, again, appears possible only thanks to faith itself. This problematic issue is closely investigated by the many medieval thinkers studied in the congress, and is tackled by means of a whole range of distinctions (infused vs acquired faith; formed vs unformed faith; implicit vs explicit faith). Thanks to such distinctions, the structural equivocity of the term 'faith' is distributed over different levels of discourse, levels which medieval thinkers then try to link to one another by using the different disciplines and dialectical techniques at their disposal (in the fields of logic, gnosiology, epistemology, anthropology and metaphysics). The aim of this effort, the ultimate goal of medieval thinkers from at least the 12th century, is to hold together two key-features defining faith: (i) on the one hand, the gnosiological 'weakness' of faith, which is an assent, maybe a sort of obscure understanding, yet not a sight, either of God or of anything else; (ii) on the other hand, the absolute 'certitude' and 'truth' of faith, which were never the matter of any controversy. These features gave rise to a crucial gnosiological problem, that is to say, how a person adhering to the allegedly true and undeniable faith (i.e., the faith that medieval and Renaissance authors believed to be true) can really know that his/her faith is not a mere opinion. It was precisely in facing this problem that those authors, in a supreme effort to solve it, begot the kaleidoscopic variety of conflicting theories that is the subject of much of the present publication.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, the 'voluntary' dimension of faith raises the question of the relationship between the latter and charity. Constructing a hierarchy of virtues with faith at the top seems to encounter an insurmountable obstacle in the writings of Paul the Apostle, since for Paul the first virtue is undoubtedly charity, which will continue to subsist in the afterlife, whereas faith appears to be limited to man's temporary condition as a *viator*, being superseded by the sight of God in the afterlife and therefore being structurally inferior to charity. The debate that late Scholasticism, in particular, raised on this specific problem gives emphasis to the mutual relations between faith and charity, so that the question of primacy tends to be minimised in favour of a mutual dependence between the two. It is, however, the reasoning on faith's 'temporal' and earthly character that, above all, highlights

faith's political and ecclesiological dimension. In this respect, faith is not seen primarily as an intellectual attitude, capable of generating true judgements, but rather as a sort of theological-anthropological prerequisite, generating, when present, a person's belonging (or, when absent, a person's not belonging) to the political community of believers. Precisely the political dimension of faith makes the problem of *infidelitas* so immediate and momentous for these authors, both on theoretical grounds (creating the need to explain how a lack of assent to the 'true' faith is possible) and on practical grounds (eliciting the will to reduce the extent of *infidelitas* and the number of *infideles* thanks to a widespread work of predication/persuasion and persecution/repression).

The dialectics of *fides/infidelitas* running through many of the texts studied in the contributions dealing with this specific topic re-opens the question of the contents of faith, a theme that speculative debates on the formal definition of faith as a virtue had left aside. In a way, the design to define the elements indispensable for belonging to the political community of faithful people (by way of analysing the articles of faith) and, correspondingly, to elaborate a (potentially endless) catalogue of possible deviations from 'true' faith fills the gap separating the *fides qua creditur* and the *fides quae creditur* on a practical level. This design, despite the variety of scholastic distinctions and theories, reconstructs the unitary character of faith in the perspective of many of the authors examined, determining the political facet of medieval and Renaissance discourses on faith.

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