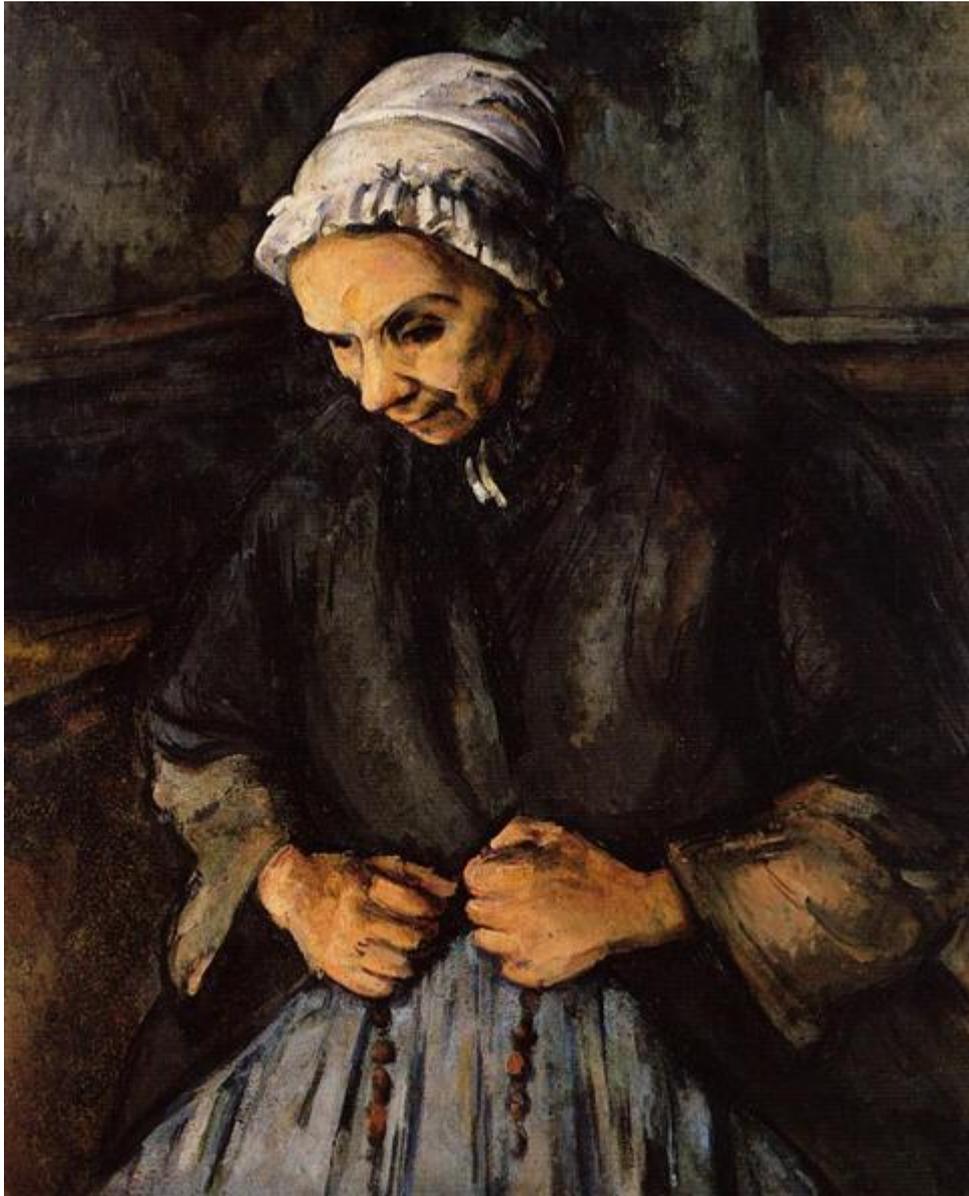


FAITH – 2



Paul Cezanne, Old Woman with Rosary, 1896, National Gallery, London

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Cezanne was proudly provincial, he inhabited a hinterland between non-conforming urban sophistication and rural life. When he stayed in the country he startled his city friends by going to Mass. In this painting we find a sensitivity towards faith which is rare in late 19th century art.

We see here an old woman, she is bent, her clothes shabby. She seems to stare with unseeing eyes into a fire (the light that illumines her face and hands is consistant with the glow of a hearth). Her large hands are clenched, like those of a bare knuckle fighter, around rosery beads. When we look closely we discover that the rosery is broken.

According to the National Gallery catalogue it was Joachim Gasquet, the poet and writer, who offered a rather colourful account of the sitter, whom he described as “an old nun who, having lost her faith and escaped from the convent, wandered aimlessly until the painter took her in as a servant.” This entry may help with identifying the old woman and locates the painting to Cezanne’s family home near Aix-en-Provence but it’s hard to read into this picture a lack of faith. For my part I see it quite differently.

The introverted eyes, the tense if damaged body shape and the fierce grasping of those beads cry out faith. The rosary is broken, just as she seems damaged; but there is faith here. Dogged, rugged despite-it-all faith. For me this is a painting filled with empathy and sympathy, the tone is dark but she looks to the light; the fists suggest she continues to fight.

The journey of faith is rarely on the spiritual equivalent of smooth tarmac. We travel over rocky ground, climb sometimes, to the heights, or drop into deep gullies, where the ground is heavy, and mud sticks. Sometimes all we can offer to God are the broken remnants of a former devotion like a broken rosary.

If all we have is our isolation and loneliness then this is what we must offer our Lord and wait with the confidence that when things happen to damage the links of our fragile faith chain, we will still be held firm in the unbroken security of his eternal love.