

The Year of Faith

Brendan Leahy

A Year of Faith is a 'time of grace'*. The Bible has always recognised special moments of God. This is to be a 'time of particular reflection and rediscovery of the faith' (*Porta Fidei*, 4) and a 'summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord' (*PF*, 6). The goal is to 'help all believers in Christ to acquire a more conscious and vigorous adherence to the Gospel' so that 'everyone may feel a strong need to know better and to transmit to future generations the faith of all times' (*PF*, 8). It's not the first time there's been a Year of Faith. There was one in 1967 just after the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict sees the 2012-2013 Year of Faith in line with the Council, but he underlines its missionary, evangelizing dimension because, as he commented at the opening ceremony a few weeks ago, 'there is more need of it, even more than there was fifty years ago!'

WHY A YEAR OF FAITH?

It's easy to list the external circumstances that led to its being called: the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, an 'authentic fruit of the Council' (*PF*, 4). Along with these anniversaries there's the focus in recent years on the New Evangelization as seen in the October Synod of Bishops, dedicated to the 'New Evangelization for the Transmission of Christian Faith', and the establishment in 2010 of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization.

Apart from these immediate reasons, Pope Benedict's decision to call a Year of Faith is linked to some of the constant themes of his pontificate. From the beginning he has pointed to the need to underline the primacy of God in a world where there are huge

* In this article I will draw mainly on Pope Benedict's Letter, *Porta Fidei* and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Note* with pastoral recommendations.

Brendan Leahy is a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin. He is Professor of Systematic Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

changes, challenging us to present God in a new way. In his 2009 Letter to Catholic Bishops, he wrote,

In our days, when in vast areas of the world the faith is in danger of dying out like a flame which no longer has fuel, the overriding priority is to make God present in this world and to show men and women the way to God The real problem at this moment of our history is that God is disappearing from the human horizon Leading men and women to God ... this is the supreme and fundamental priority of the Church.

The formation or educational crisis is another issue that Pope Benedict has often addressed. Faith needs to be supported by correct knowledge because faith today is not a 'self-evident presupposition for life in society' not even for those Christians who 'are more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment' (PF, 2).

The renewal and reform desired by the Second Vatican Council is another constant theme in Pope Benedict's pronouncements. In the *Porta Fidei* letter, quoting Pope John Paul II, he refers to the Council as 'the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century' (PF, 5) and repeats that he is convinced that if the Council's documents are read and received with a correct hermeneutic, that of reform in continuity', then the event of the Council 'can be and can become increasingly powerful for the ever necessary renewal of the Church' (PF 5).

A STRIKING IMAGE

The fifteen paragraphs that make up the Pope's Letter are dominated by the striking image of the 'door of faith'. The image is taken from the Acts of the Apostles where Luke presents us with Paul and Barnabas returning from an apostolic journey and telling the community at Antioch that the Lord had opened 'a door of faith' for the Gentiles. The door is open to everyone, to all peoples.

The image of the door suggests going through into a new realm of existence, that of entering into God's space, sharing in a new divine life with its dynamic of mutual giving and receiving, 'living the life of the Trinity' as Pope John Paul put it. Going through this door brings us into the Church, the family of the children of God, where I am extended from focus on self to becoming a person of communion, increasingly growing as a 'Church-soul' as Origen and other early Church writers put it.

1. Cf. Pope Benedict's address to the Roman Curia, 22 December, 2005.

What's needed to go through the door? Pope Benedict responds that 'it is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace' (PF, 1). Simply listening to the Word of God is not enough. We need to let our hearts and minds be enlightened by God's light.

The Second Vatican Council reminded us that God desires to enter into a deep personal friendship with everyone, no one excluded. Taking up Thomas Aquinas's vision, *Gaudium et Spes* 22 states: 'grace works in an unseen way' in the hearts of all people of good will, 'since Christ died for all'.

Those who cross the threshold embark on a journey that is lifelong. Pope Benedict underlines this aspect of 'journey'. The American writer, Paul Elie, in his work, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, charts something of the faith journey of four American figures of literature, Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy and Dorothy Day. In his homily at the opening ceremony of the Year of Faith Pope Benedict noted the recent increasing interest in pilgrimages such as the *camino* of Compostela. He comments:

How come so many people today feel the need to make these journeys? Is it not because they find there, or at least intuit, the meaning of our existence in the world? This, then, is how we can picture the Year of Faith, a pilgrimage in the deserts of today's world, taking with us only what is necessary: neither staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money, nor two tunics – as the Lord said to those he was sending out on mission (cf. *Lk* 9:3), but the Gospel and the faith of the Church, of which the Council documents are a luminous expression, as is the Catechism of the Catholic Church, published twenty years ago.

Along the way, it's important to remember also those 'very many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world' (PF, 10). Their questioning and searching is 'an authentic "preamble" to the faith, because it guides people onto the path that leads to the mystery of God' (PF, 10).

THREE TASKS

There are three main ways we can mark in a 'worthy and fruitful manner' the faith that is to be 'professed, celebrated, lived and prayed' (PF, 9): proclaim the Gospel, increase our knowledge of the faith and bear witness.

Proclaiming the Gospel. In terms of proclaiming the Gospel at this time of history, the Pope comments, 'we cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden' (cf. Mt 5:13-16). The Risen Christ sends us out to offer to all the light of his words but for this we need a more credible witness so that the people of today will 'still experience the need to go to the well, like the Samaritan woman, in order to hear Jesus' (PF, 3). The Church as a whole must set out to lead people 'out of the desert', towards the place of life, towards Christ.

Intensify our knowledge of the faith. The Year of Faith is an opportunity to 'rediscover the content of the faith... and to reflect on the act of faith' (PF, 9). Pope Benedict wants to emphasise the relationship between the 'act' of faith in which I entrust myself totally to God who has communicated himself to us in Jesus Christ, and the 'contents of faith'.

Throughout the letter the Pope is careful to remind us that 'there exists a profound unity between the act by which we believe and the content to which we give our assent' (PF, 10). At the risk of an oversimplification, it can be said that before the Second Vatican Council, the emphasis was on the objective, content dimension of faith. After the Council, the focus shifted more to the subjective, experiential element of faith. In both cases, there is a danger of undervaluing the other dimension. While Pope Benedict wants us to see the profound link between both dimensions, he also perceives a particular need today to draw on the Catechism of the Catholic Church which provides a 'systematic and organic synthesis' and also offers 'a permanent record of the many ways in which the Church has meditated on the faith and made progress in doctrine so as to offer certitude to believers in their lives of faith' (PF, 11). To assist us in Ireland, there's the national directory for Catechesis, *Share the Good News* (2011).

In his call to 'intensify' our knowledge of the faith, Pope Benedict suggests a number of themes worth pursuing.

- Faith is both a personal and communitarian act. Each person's 'I believe' is a sharing in the collective 'I believe' of the whole Church in response to God. In that sense it is in and from the Church that we learn to say 'I believe'. Faith is a communitarian journey in the Risen Christ who takes hold of our whole being - mind and soul, body and life - and clothes us with his light, enabling us to translate the Truth that is Jesus into 'daily life'. This is important. Faith is not to be limited to a corner of my life.
- 'A Christian may never think of belief as a private act' (PF 10).

At Pentecost, the apostles showed how faith has a public dimension. They proclaimed without fear. So too all believers are invited to speak and give public witness because faith implies public commitment and social responsibility.

- There's the issue of the relationship of faith and reason that Benedict XVI has touched on so often during his pontificate - from Regensburg to London. Here the topic of faith and science opens up: 'The Church has never been afraid of demonstrating that there cannot be any conflict between faith and genuine science, because both, albeit via different routes, tend towards the truth' (PF, 12).

Michael Paul Gallagher's work, *Faith Maps: Ten Religious Explorers from Newman to Joseph Ratzinger*² is a text that many have found helpful in accompanying their reflection on faith.

Bear Witness to Faith. The third task placed before us this year is that of bearing witness to faith. 'Faith and charity each require the other, in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path.' (PF, 14). The faith that works through love brings new life and offers 'a new criterion of understanding' (PF, 6), enabling us to recognise the face of the Christ in everyone who asks for our love (PF, 14). For experiences and stories of faith in new communities and movements, see Susan Gately's recent book, *God's Surprise: New Movements in the Church*.³

So much can be learned from attention to the charismatic dimension of the Church, those men and women (martyrs, saints and all who have witnessed to the Gospel and its demands of communion and justice) who in every generation have blazed a trail of light in the history of the Church and society (PF, 13). In particular, Mary to whom Pope Benedict entrusts the Year of Faith.

GOD'S SILENCE

The Letter could not but refer to the issue that arises often along the journey of faith - God's apparent silence. The Pope acknowledges this: 'How many of the saints have lived in solitude! How many believers, even in our own day, are tested by God's silence when they would rather hear his consoling voice!' (PF, 15). We can think here of Mother Teresa of Calcutta or Thérèse of Lisieux.⁴

Pope Benedict leads us to perceive how the rhythm of faith goes through a dying and rising as we read in St. Paul's Letter to

2. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2010.

3. Dublin: Veritas, 2012.

4. See Brian Kolodiejchuk (ed.), *Mother Teresa: Come be My Light* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

THE FURROW

the Romans (Rom 6:4). It is in the measure to which we let ourselves be transformed by the Crucified Christ – in our thoughts, affections, mentality and conduct – that we enter into the ‘radical new reality of the resurrection’ (PF, 6).

PASTORAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Note with pastoral recommendations for the Year of Faith, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith proposes many ideas at a number of levels ‘without precluding other initiatives which the Holy Spirit will inspire’ throughout the year.

At the universal level, for instance, it speaks of ecumenical initiatives, aimed at the restoration of unity among all Christians which ‘is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council’ (Note, 8). Pilgrimages and youth days are to be encouraged. It is recommended that episcopal conferences and individual bishops attend to catechetical formation, making use of the language of communications and art, promoting ‘television and radio transmissions, films and publications focusing on the faith’ (Note, 4). Getting to know local saints as authentic witnesses of faith is also advocated. Perhaps it is not out of place here to mention the recent publication, *Treasures of Irish Christianity: People and Places, Images and Texts*.⁵

Dioceses are encouraged to see the Year of Faith as an opportunity for a ‘renewed creative dialogue’ between faith and reason ‘through symposia, meetings and days of study’ (Note, 5). Study of the Council and the Catechism of the Catholic Church is to be strongly promoted. Parishes, communities, associations and movements are to help intensify the celebration of faith in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist. There’s a universal call to evangelization: ‘All of the faithful, called to renew the gift of faith, should try to communicate their own experience of faith and charity’ (Note, 10).

In this coming Year, each of us is asked to not be ‘lazy in the faith’ but rather be ‘a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world’ (PF, 15). The Pope’s Letter suggests a prayer we could focus on – the Creed. He quotes Augustine who wrote: ‘You have received it (the Creed)..., but in your minds and hearts you must keep it ever present, you must repeat it in your beds, recall it in the public squares and not forget it during meals: even when your body is asleep, you must watch over it with your hearts.’⁶

5. Co-edited by Salvador Ryan and Brendan Leahy and published in Dublin by Veritas in 2012.

6. cf *Sermo* 215,1; cf PF, 9.

Meaning and Relevance – a conversation among priests

Johanna Merry

If one were to describe current realities which signal a world undergoing rapid change and in crisis, certain patterns emerge. Unemployment, financial uncertainty, forced emigration, disruption of communities are widespread, in addition to ongoing stories of war, violence, famine, disasters, decadence and widening inequality. Globalisation and its attendant technology have brought the distant near, experience immediate, sometimes with overpowering effect. Institutions of church and state are subject to a degree of unravelling as one crisis replaces another; the conflict of competing ideologies has accelerated as the secular world jostles with an ecclesial one, at times attempting to override one another. Cosmology, ecology and contemporary physics have added breadth and freshness to the story of the universe, whilst traditional values and belief systems are challenged by a maelstrom of knowledge, fluid principles, fragmenting family systems and social breakdown.

This article seeks to capture the collective mood of priests today who seek to make ongoing meaning of their life and mission into the future amidst a mounting tide of turbulent currents. Inspired by a group of priests who gathered in a ‘borrowed room’ to ponder the question of meaning and relevance through exploration and conversation, the garnered musings of a wider spectrum of religious and missionary priests who gathered in other borrowed spaces for ministry mentoring are also reflected in the narrative. Hope-filled patterns emerged, which may stimulate an appetite for conversation among priests about their evolving identity and mission into the future.

I wondered about ‘borrowed’, how and why this depiction? What emerged was a sense that their own space was cluttered, that an alternative space was needed to take stock; a borrowed space also meant borrowed time, accentuating the focus to get what they wanted, done; a room with a different view from the places and spaces from which they came and at a distance from the familiar

Johanna Merry is a Human Resource Consultant. Her email is: merryjo@eircom.net