

A LOOK INSIDE
LUMEN FIDEI
IN THE YEAR OF FAITH

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I OVERVIEW

As our Church prepares to conclude its observance of the Year of Faith, I offer these observations on Pope Francis' new encyclical on faith called, "**Lumen Fidei**", "The Light of Faith." Though the encyclical was largely completed by Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis, without hesitation, made it his own and issued it under his own name.

In a sense, we can hear the voices of two pontiffs in one encyclical!

This is the encyclical many thought that Pope Benedict would issue at the outset of his papacy, not at its conclusion. After all, Pope Benedict was known as a great teacher and defender of the Faith. Instead, Pope Benedict began with "**Deus Caritas Est**" – "God Is Love" – and then proceeded with an encyclical on hope, "**Spe Salvi**" – "Saved by Hope" – and now, in this **Year of Faith** comes an encyclical on faith that was largely his work, an encyclical characteristic of Pope Benedict's deep scholarship and serenity. Perhaps we can say that Pope Benedict wanted us to see that charity opens the door to both hope and faith, that often people begin to believe and hope because they have encountered love. **Lumen Fidei** is about 80 pages in length and is divided into four chapters with an introduction and conclusion. This letter, in a most general sense, treats two things: first, the faith of the Church, what the Church herself believes and teaches; and second, the gift of faith -- the capacity to believe, which we receive in Baptism through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: faith, in other words, as a theological virtue.

The main concern of the encyclical letter is the **New Evangelization**. For all of its beauty and insight, the document is not an abstract treatise on faith; it does not seek to treat obscure philosophical or theological problems, still less does it

purport to be a textbook on the meaning of faith. Rather, it seeks to show faith engages us and our experience. And, at the same time, how faith engages our humanity in all its aspects, the culture of which we are a part, and lights the way as history unfolds.

The introduction, as we shall see in more detail, begins with the question of whether the light of faith is real – or whether it is an illusion, as much of the world thinks. The encyclical will maintain that the light of faith is indeed real and that it sheds its light on the whole of human history, on the Church's mission, on the journey of each person, and on every aspect of human existence – personal and communal, including the common good, the role of the family, and questions of social justice.

The encyclical begins by reminding us that the faith is proclaimed in a skeptical, secular world; it ends by reminding us that the faith has the capacity to transform that same skeptical, secular world from within.

II A CLOSER LOOK

Introduction

Beginning with the Introduction, which tells us that faith has always been seen as light, the encyclical brings together many biblical passages in this way: In the Gospel of John Jesus proclaims Himself “the light of the world”. In St. Paul we read: “God who said ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts.” St. Justin, an early Christian martyr, spoke of Jesus as ‘the true sun whose rays bestow life.’

Yet in our times, faith is not thought of as light but darkness. In fact, many feel that faith is an actual hindrance in the quest for knowledge. Faith may soothe and console those who seek that sort of thing but it is not part of the search for knowledge. It is said to be an illusory light which hinders a humanity that seeks to be liberated from the constraints of ignorance, myth, superstition, and irrational moral constraint.

In all this, the relationship between faith and reason was all but lost. Faith was thought of not as a friend and companion to reason but rather as unreasonable, as anti-rational. Thus, in the not-too-distant-past, modernity put its trust in reason liberated from faith. This was the thrust of the “**Enlightenment**” and its aftermath.

Over time, however, it became clear such trust was misplaced. In the face of bewildering events such as war on an unprecedented scale, in the face of a very uncertain future in which human annihilation seemed not only possible

but likely, reason alone could not adequately light humanity’s way. Many became skeptics, abandoning the search for the bigger picture - the attempt to make sense out of human existence and history - and instead employed reason as dimmer light that helps us find our way only moment by moment, trend by trend. Abandoning its search for truth, a lot of confusion ensued: confusion about human dignity, right and wrong, about the meaning of life itself.

Lumen Fidei urges us once again to see faith as a light, not just as one light among many lights but as the one light capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence.

A light such as this does not come from ourselves but from an encounter with God who calls us and reveals His love to us, the love in which we were created, the love upon which our lives are built. When we encounter God’s love, our eyes are opened to the Person of Christ who entered human history to redeem us; to the daily journey which I must make, a journey that leads me out of myself into relationships with others; and to a future destiny beyond the confines of this world. Only God’s love is completely trustworthy; only the light of God’s love, fully revealed in Christ, reveals us fully to ourselves, reveals the meaning of life by showing us the Father’s love, and unveils our dignity, as well our destiny.

Chapter One: We Have Believed in Love

The title of the first chapter, “We Have Believed in Love”, is instructive. Pope Benedict began his trilogy on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity – with charity, with love, for God is love, eternal love, an utterly generous, self-giving love, a love that is both trustworthy and true. Believing in God, having faith in God, therefore, means believing in love.

In this chapter, the encyclical offers us a summary of salvation history in which

the God of love creates the world, creates man in His image and likeness, and reveals Himself to humanity:

- beginning with **Abraham**, our father in faith,
- sustaining and deepening that revelation of His love in His people, Israel,
- fulfilling the faith of Israel by sending His Eternal Son into the world, and
- continuing that mission of salvific love in and through the Church
- until the end of time.

The faith of Abraham, the faith of the people of Israel, found its fulfillment in Christ. Scripture & ancient Christian writers saw the faith of Abraham as pointing toward Christ, as a way of believing in Christ in advance. Theirs was a faith that remembered what God had done in times past but also remembered and pressed on to the future fulfillment of all that God had promised. Christian faith is centered on Christ – it is the confession that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised him from the dead. All the threads of the Old Testament converge on Christ, who is the definitive fulfillment of God’s promises and the definitive revelation of God’s love. He is the eternal word of love - a perfect love - in its ability to transform the world and in its power to bring human history toward its culmination.

The proof of the utter reliability of Christ’s love lay in his dying for us. In dying for us ‘while we were yet sinners’ – as St. Paul said – in giving up His life not only for friends but for sinners and enemies, Jesus not only proved the truthfulness, the steadfastness, of His love but also its power to change and transform hearts. “This explains why the evangelists could see the hour of Christ’s crucifixion as the culmination of the gaze of faith; in that hour the depth and breadth of God’s love shone forth.” Yet this gift of love went beyond dying. The utter reliability and power of God’s love is seen in the Resurrection ... a love stronger than sin and more powerful than death, to quote Blessed John Paul II. That Jesus entered human history, assumed our human nature, shared in our infirmities and suffering, though innocent took upon Himself our sins, underwent the experience of death that epitomizes our alienation from the Creator, and rose from the dead in His human body ... this means that faith in Jesus Christ really

does illumine every aspect of our humanity, our history, our human nature – body, mind, spirit – our human frailty ... this means that faith in Jesus is light for every aspect of our existence and that when Jesus speaks the Word of Truth to us, it is a word that surprises us, leads us beyond ourselves to unseen horizons – yet it is also a word that is by no means alien to us and to our experience. Salvation has come to us because God has engaged our history and our humanity.

But there is another side to faith. Faith means gazing at Jesus who, in revealing the Father’s love, reveals us to ourselves. But we are united with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit precisely so that we can believe in Him. “Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus but sees things as Jesus Himself sees them, with His own eyes – it is a participation in His way of seeing .” The Pope charmingly says that we need experts in various aspects of our lives ... for example, pharmacists to provide us with medicine, lawyers to defend us in court. When it comes to God we need someone who is trustworthy; that person is the Father’s only son who “made His dwelling among us, and we saw His glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth,” (John1:14).

Once we begin to see as Jesus sees, the life of faith begins to take root in us. We begin to see the Father as Jesus sees him; we begin to see our own lives as Jesus sees them. We live a new life, we are a new creation. But in what does it consist? In accepting the gift of faith, we become God’s children. We abandon the effort to save ourselves by our own goodness and works but rather to be open “to something prior to ourselves,” God’s love. Faith opens us to a love greater than ourselves, a love that precedes us but also a love that can transform us from within, including every aspect of our lives. Through faith we can begin to see as Jesus sees but also through faith we can begin to love as Jesus loves, with the result that the Father can see and love in us what He sees and loves in Christ. In this way our minds are opened to a truth greater than ourselves, our hearts to a love greater than ourselves. And thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, our lives take on a whole new breadth, an openness to God, but also an openness to others that makes us fit to become members of Christ’s Body, the Church, that prepares us to be a part of the Church’s communion of faith. We come to see ourselves in an essential relationship

with all other believers. We are united with Christ and at the same time with other believers, past and present. Through communion with Christ in the Church we are opened to all others.

Chapter Two: Unless You Believe You Will Not Understand



The title for this chapter comes from Isaiah 7:9: ‘Unless you believe, you will not understand.’ These are words that Isaiah spoke to the wavering King Ahaz. But the word “understand” is translated differently in Greek than in Hebrew. Our translation is closer to the Greek: ‘Unless you believe, you will not understand.’ But in Hebrew it reads, ‘unless you understand, you shall not be established ...’ The encyclical shows us how the two translations are compatible. Ahaz was terrified of his enemies. Isaiah was telling him that to believe in God’s promises was to be established upon the rock of God’s truth and trustworthiness. The Greek translation says that belief leads to understanding, in the sense of having our lives firmly established in the truth.

Let’s not forget the central point of the encyclical: Faith illuminates the whole of human existence. How inadequate, therefore, is a notion of faith which divorces it from truth: “Faith without truth does not save, it does not provide a sure footing. It is a beautiful story, the projection of our deep yearning for happiness, something capable of satisfying us to the extent we are willing to deceive ourselves.” But faith and truth go together, and how important for the times in which we live. Our age considers truth that can be seen and measured as the only real truth. Technological and scientific truth is considered to be valid. But any other kind of truth is up for grabs. We live in an age of relativism when the opinion of the powerful prevails, not because it is actually true but because it is put forward in a powerful way. Since relativism rejects universal truth, God is crowded out of the picture. Today the bond between religion and truth is also suspect because it is thought to be at the root of fanaticism which seeks to oppress anyone who may not agree. Yet the truth of which the

encyclical speaks is not an ideology to be imposed. Rather, the encyclical tells us that truth is really a question of memory, memory of our common origins, memory of the law written on our hearts, a memory that unites us in a way that goes beyond our everyday concerns. In remembering our common origins we can also glimpse the goal of our lives and thus see more clearly the common path we tread as human beings.

So how can the Church’s faith, and we who believe, contribute to a proper understanding of truth? St. Paul tells us that, “One believes with the heart” – which in the Bible means, ‘the core of one’s being.’ The heart is what holds us together – body, mind, and spirit – and it is faith that transforms the entire human person, so much so that he or she becomes open to love. Love is not a blind emotion. Rather, faith opens us to love because love itself brings enlightenment. Faith opens us to God’s immense love that transforms us from within and enables us to see reality with new eyes. If truth is tied to love, so too love is tied to truth. Without truth, love becomes a fleeting emotion and does not last. “True love, on the other hand, unifies all the elements of our person and becomes a new light pointing to a great and fulfilled life.” Love needs truth and truth needs love. We seek “an understanding of enlightened love” (William of St.-Thierry). The knowledge, the truth that comes from faith is born of God’s love and is capable of illuminating not only every facet of our being but also the entire path of human history.

Because faith illumines every aspect of our human lives and history, the Bible describes faith not only as hearing God’s Word but also as a way of seeing, seeing the light of God’s glory if indeed from afar. Faith comes from hearing but leads to sight, to knowledge and understanding. Whoever believes will hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and gaze upon Him. The understanding that faith yields prompts us to encounter and contemplate the Lord, it yields a growing awareness of His presence in our lives...it is faith that sees! But in hearing and seeing we also touch the divine realities in which we believe. “In faith we can touch him and receive the power of His grace” ... especially in and through the sacraments. In signs perceptible to the senses of hearing, seeing, touching, the Sacraments enable us to encounter the Christ who is the center of our faith.

“What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 Jn. 1:1).

In the same vein, the encyclical speaks of the dialogue between faith and reason. It turns out that, in a skeptical world, faith believes in reason, in its capacity for truth, even if that capacity be limited and flawed. The first Christians found that thirst for truth in the Greco-Roman world and this thirst became decisive for spreading the Gospel, even amid persecution. From that time onward there has been a dialogue between faith and reason, one that continues in our own times. Faith helps us see that those things we love in life contain a ray of understanding that can help lead us to the source of all life, all knowledge, all truth, and all love. Many think of truth as entirely subjective (my truth is not your truth) and fear that a common truth would lead to totalitarianism that would stifle all individual creativity and thought. But faith leads to a truth of love that cannot be imposed but proposed. Far from stifling the individual, faith opens them to truth and love. Far from discounting the material world, the scientific world, faith is lived in and through the created world and encourages scientists and thinkers to be open to reality in all its richness & wonder.

The light of faith in Jesus also illumines the path of those who seek God precisely because our life in Christ penetrates to the core of our existence. It is not divorced from the world, but right in the heart of earthly reality, right in the heart of our human experience. As we draw nearer to the light of God’s love, we are not consumed but rather our lights begin to glow more brightly ... in a way that helps attract and light the way of those who are searching. Those who set out to do good to others may find that in loving others they are led to the source of love. Helping others to search for God in a way that does not take him for granted is very much a part of the New Evangelization.

So too theology is more than merely an effort of human reason to analyze and understand religion. Theology is a science of faith, it is a participation in God’s knowledge of Himself, not merely our efforts to talk about God in learned ways. It is done in communion with the Church, the Pope and the Bishops, and with a desire to protect the faith of ordinary believers.

Chapter Three: I Delivered to You What I Also Received



If the first two chapters were about the gift of faith, the second two chapters of the encyclical are about sharing the faith. It is proclaiming what we have heard. It is allowing the glory of God shining on the face of Christ first to illumine our hearts and then to shine forth in our words and deeds. It is spreading the light to envelop the darkness just as we do at the Easter Vigil. It travels from place to place and from one generation to the next. Yet in this process how can we be certain that it is the ‘real Jesus’ who is proclaimed and believed in? As individuals we cannot achieve such certainty but we can if we are part of the Church’s memory ... which, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has reminded us of all Jesus taught and kept alive both His presence and saving deeds. Through the Church’s memory we are all contemporaries of Jesus.

So too it is impossible to believe on our own. Faith always takes place within the communion of the Church. In saying “I believe” we are part of the fellowship of the Church, thus we can also say, “we believe” ... The God in whom we believe is a communion of Persons upon which the Church is modeled and in whose communion she shares. Faith puts us in relationship to believers: “After the cleansing we are welcomed in the home of our mother, the Church and as part of a new family, pray the Our Father together with their brothers & sisters” (Tertullian).

The faith is transmitted not only as a word that is taught but indeed in the celebration of the sacraments. Transmitting the faith is more than handing down a venerable idea which might be contained in a book or handed on as a spoken message. But what the Church hands on in her living tradition is “the new light born of an encounter with the true God, a light which touches us at the core of our being and engages our minds, wills, and emotions, opening us to relationships lived in communion...” The special means for passing down this fullness, a means that engages the whole person – is the sacraments. Further, we rightly speak of the sacraments of faith, for the sacraments presuppose faith.

But it can also be said that the faith itself has “a sacramental structure”... “Our Redeemer’s visible presence has passed into the sacraments,” wrote Pope Saint Leo the Great in the fifth century. As faith awakens, we can see how visible, material sacramental signs point beyond themselves to presence, the words, and the deeds of Christ and enable us to touch the divine realities we profess to believe in.

The faith is transmitted first and foremost through Baptism. The **rites of Baptism** are more than a pedagogical tool. They do more than illustrate the faith we profess. No, through Baptism we participate in the death, burial, and rising of Christ. We become a new creation; what we profess gives rise to a whole new way of life that demands the engagement of the whole person and sets us on a path to goodness. The baptized are to live this new way of life in the Church.

One is baptized “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” By that very fact, at our Baptism, we become a part of salvation history, the journey from the calling of Abraham, to the faith of Israel, to fulfillment in Christ, and to salvation in and through the Church. Water is a symbol of both death and life, for we die to sin and self and rise to newness of life. The baptized are immersed in water which symbolizes how the work of Christ penetrates to the depths of our being and transforms us radically. We receive a new name, a new identity, so as to say that we have become adopted children of God and sharers in the divine nature.

The sacramental character of faith finds its highest expression in the Eucharist. The Eucharist itself is known as “the mystery of faith” for the true Presence of Christ and the re-presentation of his death and resurrection proclaims, strengthens, and nourishes our faith in an incomparable way. In the Eucharist the eyes of faith see the living memory of the Church at work. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church not only recalls what Christ said and did to save us, but indeed his Presence, his saving words and deeds become a present reality, or to put it another way, we become the contemporaries of Christ. The Bread and Wine are completely changed in Christ’s Body and Blood, so that we might share ever more deeply in Christ’s death and resurrection, and thus be drawn,

body and soul, into the movement of Christ to the Father, a movement that includes ourselves and all creation.

Finally, in this Chapter, the encyclical reminds us of the unity and integrity of faith. We are not talking merely about a system, like a mechanical system, which requires all its parts to be in the right place and functioning perfectly. Rather, the faith is one because the Triune God is one. The faith is one because there is but “one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism.” The faith is one because it is shared by the whole Church. We profess the faith of the Church in union with the Apostles, the saints, the Pope, the Bishops, and the Church throughout the world. By professing the faith in union with the whole Church we can come to see the unity and integrity of the faith, how what the Church professes, gives rise to a life of sacramental worship, to a way of living, and to way of intimacy and gratitude through prayer to the living God.

Because the faith is one it must be professed in its purity and integrity. This is not a question of ideological purity (as in totalitarian systems) but rather a recognition that everything the Church professes is interconnected. To deny one of the articles of faith is to distort them all. The faith is handed on in its unity, integrity, and purity through the **Magisterium** which, in obedience and in service to God’s Word, preserves and explains the faith of the Church from age to age.

Chapter Four: God Prepares a City for Them



Let us remind ourselves of the fundamental thesis of the encyclical: faith is a light not only for our personal journey toward God but indeed for the whole of human existence, for our lives as individuals and communities, and for the whole sweep of human history. For that reason, the final chapter of the encyclical shows how the light of faith provides a solid and reliable basis on which to build the earthly city, an earthly city worthy of our human dignity, an

earthly city which is open to the source of all life and goodness, an earthly city which is open to the transcendent destiny of its citizens.

Here Lumen Fidei reminds us that faith is linked to love. The light of faith is not about imposing sectarian doctrine on society but first and foremost about building relationships of love and respect. So often society holds together on the basis of utility, fear, greed ... but not “on the goodness of living together.” Faith, the letter says, is a common good. It does not merely brighten churches or solely lead to an eternal city but helps to earthly society to journey forward in hope, in a word it helps to build a **civilization of love**. The hands of faith are raised to heaven even as they go about building in charity a city based on relationships in which the love of God is laid as a foundation.

Lumen Fidei also points out the blessings which have come to society from the ‘gaze of faith’ of Christians ... among them:

- a profound understanding of human dignity
- the very notion of personhood
- the love which God has for each person called to eternal life
- a sense of what makes human life precious and unique
- an understanding that, while the world was created for man, it deserves respect
- faith has helped discern just forms of government
- faith offers the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation

But when faith is weakened, society is harmed; the foundations of trust are weakened. Faith illumines life and society for it also brings a new creativity that can enrich every relationship and shed light on every problem.

Faith also brings strength and consolation amid suffering. For a person of faith, in weakness we come to see that ‘we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord’ (2 Cor. 4:5). Faith also sheds its light on the sufferings of humanity. How many men and women of faith have been mediators of light for the suffering, in our own day, for example, **Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta**. They do not solve all humanitarian problems or dissolve the mystery

of suffering but bring to that fundamental human experience the presence of God’s love, and a sense of hope that, finding goodness in this world, they are called to eternal life in the next: “In union with faith and charity, hope propels us towards a sure future, set against a different horizon with regard to the illusory enticements of the idols of this world, yet granting new momentum and strength to our daily lives.”

Conclusion: Blessed Is She Who Believed



Lumen Fidei concludes with a brief meditation on the Blessed Virgin Mary, it portrays Mary’s sinless heart and the goodness of her life as the most fertile of soil for the seed of the Gospel, a soil that has borne fruit beyond all imagining. The encyclical also makes reference to the memory of Mary, who stored in her immaculate heart all the mysteries of Christ, overshadowed as she was by the Holy Spirit. She is preeminently a woman of faith: “Blessed is she who believed...”

The encyclical references the history of holy women of whom Mary is preeminent. It shows how Mary is the prime exemplar of how faith shapes every aspect of our existence and sets us on the path to follow Christ even to the foot of the Cross. Mary embodied all that God promised, she embodied the Kingdom of the **Beatitudes**, and she shared in the paschal mystery more fully than any other human being. Mary points out to us her Son Jesus, and all the mysteries of our faith, and to the entire sweep of God’s plan to save the world, to salvation history itself. Just as she prayed with the Apostles for the Holy Spirit, so too she prays that we will open our hearts to the Holy Spirit so that transformed by faith, we may be the Lord’s witnesses in our world, and that the light of faith may increase in us until the day of the Lord dawns in all its splendor.

Dear friends, this encyclical letter, Lumen Fidei is a great gift, not only to the Church, but to all men and women of good will, and to all who are seeking the truth. As we read in the letter, “Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey.”