

**WEDNESDAY AUDIENCE: YEAR OF FAITH:
PAPAL CATECHESIS 03
"No one can have God as Father who does not have the
Church as Mother."
31 OCTOBER 2012**

Dear brothers and sisters,

We continue on our journey of meditation on the Catholic Faith. Last week I explained that faith is a gift, for it is God who takes the initiative and comes to meet us. Thus faith is the response whereby we welcome him as the stable foundation of our lives. It is a gift that transforms our existence, for it allows us to see through the eyes of Jesus, who works in us and opens us to love for God and for others.

Today I would like to take another step forward in our reflection, beginning once again with a number of questions: Is faith only personal and individual? Does it only concern my own person? Do I live my faith alone? Certainly, the act of faith is an eminently personal act that takes place in the most intimate depths of our being and signals a change in direction, a personal conversion. It is *my life* that is marked by a turning point and receives a new orientation.

In the liturgy of Baptism, at the time of the promises, the celebrant asks for a manifestation of faith, and he puts forward three questions: Do you believe in God the Father Almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ his only Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Historically, these questions were addressed personally to the one who was to receive baptism, before immersing him three times in water. And today, too, the response is in the singular: "I believe". But my belief is not the result of my own personal reflection, nor the product of my own thoughts. Rather, it is the fruit of a relationship, of a dialogue that involves listening, receiving and a response. It is a conversation with Jesus that causes me to go out of my self-enclosed "I" in order that I may be opened to the love of God the Father. It is like a rebirth in which I discover that I am united not only to Jesus but also to all those who have walked, and who continue to walk, along the same path. And this new birth, which begins at baptism, continues throughout the whole course of life.

I cannot build my personal faith on a private conversation with Jesus, for faith is given to me by God through the community of believers, which is the Church. It numbers me among the multitude of believers, in a communion which is not merely sociological but, rather, which is rooted in the eternal love of God, who in himself is the communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - who is Trinitarian Love. Our faith is truly personal only if it is also communal. It can only be *my* faith only if it lives and moves in the "we" of the Church, only if it is *our* faith, the common faith of the one Church.

On Sunday, when we recite the "Creed" [the "I believe"] during the Holy Mass, we express ourselves in the first person, but we confess the one faith of the Church as a community. The "I believe" that we profess individually is joined to an immense choir spanning time and space, in which each person contributes, as it were, to a harmonious polyphony of faith. The *Catechism of*

the Catholic Church summarizes this with great clarity: "Believing' is an ecclesial act. The Church's faith precedes, engenders, supports and nourishes our faith. The Church is the mother of all believers. 'No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother' [St. Cyprian]" (n. 181). Therefore, faith is born in the Church, leads to her and lives in her. This is very important to remember.

At the beginning of the Christian adventure, when the Holy Spirit descends with power on the disciples on the day of Pentecost, as narrated in the *Acts of the Apostles* (cf. 2:1-13), the nascent Church receives strength to carry out the mission entrusted to her by the risen Lord: to spread the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of God, to every corner of the world, and to guide every man to an encounter with the risen Christ and to the faith that saves. The Apostles overcome every fear in proclaiming what they have heard, seen and personally experienced with Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they begin to speak in new languages, openly announcing the mystery they had witnessed.

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, we are then told about the great speech Peter addressed on the day of Pentecost. He begins with a passage from the prophet Joel (3:1-5), refers it to Jesus and proclaims the core of Christian faith: He who had been bountifully good to all, and was attested to by God with miracles and mighty works, was crucified and killed, but God raised him from the dead, establishing him as Lord and Christ. Through him, we have entered into the definitive salvation announced by the prophets, and whosoever shall call upon his name shall be saved (cf. *Acts* 2:17-24). Many of those who heard Peter's words felt personally challenged; they repented of their sins and were baptized, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 2: 37-41).

Thus begins the Church's journey. She is the community that carries this proclamation through space and time, the community of the People of God founded on the new covenant in Christ's blood, whose members do not belong to a particular social or ethnic group but who are men and women from every nation and culture. The Church is a "catholic" people that speaks new languages and is universally open to welcoming everyone, that transcends every border and breaks every barrier. St. Paul says: "Here there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all" (*Colossians* 3:11).

From her earliest days, then, the Church was the place of faith, the place where the faith was transmitted, the place where, through baptism, we are immersed in the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection, which frees us from the prison of sin, gives us the freedom of children and introduces us into communion with the Trinitarian God. At the same time, we are immersed in a communion with other brothers and sisters in faith, with the entire Body of Christ, and in this way we are brought forth from our isolation. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council reminds us: "God does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness" (Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, 9).

Again recalling the liturgy of Baptism, we may note that at the conclusion of the promises whereby we renounce evil and respond "I believe" to the central truths of the faith, the celebrant declares:

"This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church and we glory in professing it in Christ Jesus Our Lord". Faith is a theological virtue given by God but transmitted by the Church throughout the span of history. Again St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, states that he has handed on to them the Gospel, which he himself had also received (cf. 1 *Corinthians* 15:3).

There is an unbroken chain in the Church's life, in the announcement of God's Word, in the celebration of the Sacraments, which comes to us and which we call Tradition. It provides us with the guarantee that what we believe in is Christ's original message, as preached by the Apostles. The core of this primordial announcement is the event of the Lord's Death and Resurrection, from which the entire patrimony of faith flows. The Council says: "The apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 8). Thus, if Sacred Scripture contains God's Word, the Tradition of the Church conserves and faithfully transmits it, so that men of every age may have access to its immense wealth and be enriched by its treasures of grace. In this way the Church, "in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*ibid.*).

Lastly, I would like to emphasize that it is within the ecclesial community that personal faith grows and matures. It is interesting to observe that in the New Testament the word "saints" refers to Christians as a whole - and certainly not all of them had the necessary qualities to be declared saints by the Church. What, then, was intended by the use of this term? The fact that those who had faith in the Risen Christ and lived it out were called to become models for others, by putting them in contact with the Person and the Message of Jesus, who reveals the Face of the living God. This is also true for us: a Christian who allows himself to be gradually guided and shaped by the Church's faith - despite his weaknesses, limitations and difficulties - becomes, as it were, a window open to the light of the living God that receives this light and transmits it to the world. In the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, Blessed John Paul II affirmed that "missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!" (no. 2).

The widespread tendency today to relegate the faith to the private sphere contradicts its very nature. We need the Church to confirm our faith and to experience God's gifts: His Word, the Sacraments, the support of grace and the witness of love. In this way, our "I" taken up into the "we" of the Church - will be able to perceive itself as the recipient of and participant in an event that far surpasses it: the experience of communion with God, who establishes communion among men. In a world in which individualism seems to regulate human relationships, causing them to become ever more fragile, faith calls us to be the Church, i.e. bearers of God's love and communion to all mankind. (cf. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 1). Thank you for your attention.

In English Pope Benedict XVI said...

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our series of catecheses for the Year of Faith, we have seen that faith is something intensely personal: a gift of God, which transforms and enriches our life. At the same time, the gift of faith is given in and through the community of the Church. In Baptism I receive and appropriate the faith of the Church; my personal faith finds expression in the recitation of the Creed and in the communal celebration of the sacraments. The new life I live in Christ through the gift of his Spirit is received and nourished within the Church's communion. In this sense, the Church is our Mother. As Saint Cyprian says, "No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother". Dwelling in the Church's living Tradition, may we mature in the faith we have received and, by putting it into practice, become beacons of Christ's light and peace in our world.

Conscious of the devastation caused by the hurricane which recently struck the East Coast of the United States of America, I offer my prayers for the victims and express my solidarity with all those engaged in the work of rebuilding. I now greet all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Malaysia, Canada and the United States. My greetings go in particular to the group of elders from Nigeria visiting Rome on pilgrimage, and to the members of the Vox Clara Committee. Upon all of you I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

All Saints

A final thought for young people, for the sick and for newlyweds. Tomorrow we celebrate the Solemnity of All Saints, which reminds us of the universal call to holiness: dear young people, may your aspirations to happiness be realized in the Gospel Beatitudes; dear sick, may carrying your cross with Christ sanctify you in love; and may you, dear newlyweds, learn how to devote ample time to prayer, so that your married life may proceed along a path of holiness. Thank you all.