

**WEDNESDAY AUDIENCE: YEAR OF FAITH:
PAPAL CATECHESIS 02**
***"Faith is a gift of God, but it is also a profoundly
free and human act"***
24 OCTOBER 2012

Dear brothers and sisters,

Last Wednesday, with the inauguration of the *Year of Faith*, I began a new series of catecheses on faith. And today I would like to reflect with you on the basic question: What is faith? Does faith still make sense in a world where science and technology have opened horizons heretofore unimagined? What does it mean to believe today? Indeed, in our own day a renewed education in the faith is greatly needed. This should naturally include a knowledge of the truths of the faith and the events of salvation, but above all it should come from a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ, from loving Him, from trusting Him, so that it involves the whole of our lives.

Today, along with so many signs of goodness, a kind of spiritual desert is also widening around us. Sometimes we get the feeling from certain events we hear about each day that the world is not moving towards the building up of a more fraternal and peaceful community. The very ideas of progress and wellbeing also reveal their shadows. Despite the grandeur of scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs, men today do not seem to have become freer and more humane; so many forms of exploitation, manipulation, violence, oppression and injustice still remain.

In addition, a certain kind of culture has taught men to move only along the horizons of *things*, of the practical, and to believe only in what can be seen and touched with one's hands. On the other hand, however, there are an increasing number of people who feel lost and who - in the quest to move beyond a merely horizontal vision of reality - are ready to believe everything as well as its opposite. Within this context several fundamental questions emerge, which are far more concrete than they appear at first sight: What is the meaning of life? Is there a future for man, for us and for the new generations? How shall we direct the choices we freely make toward a successful and happy life? What awaits us beyond the threshold of death?

These insuppressible questions show that the world of planning, exact calculation and experimentation - in a word, of scientific knowledge - important as they are for the life of man, of themselves are not enough. We don't only need bread; we need love, meaning and hope. We need a firm foundation and solid ground that helps us to live with real meaning, even in times of crisis, darkness and difficulty, and amid our daily problems. This is precisely what faith gives us: it is a confident entrusting of oneself to a "Thou" who is God; it provides a kind of certainty different from but no less sure than what comes to us from exact calculation or science.

Faith is not simply a matter of man's intellectual assent to truths about God; it is an act whereby I freely entrust myself to a God who is a Father and who loves me; it means clinging to a "Thou" who gives me hope and confidence. To be sure, this adherence to God is not devoid of content: it enables us to know that God himself revealed himself to us in Christ. He showed us his face and he

truly drew near to each one of us. Indeed, God revealed that his love for man, for each one of us, is without measure: on the Cross, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God made man, shows us in the clearest fashion how far this love goes -- to the point of giving himself, to total sacrifice. By the mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ, God descends into the depths of our humanity in order to bring it back to himself, to raise it to his heights.

Faith means believing in God's unfailing love, which endures even in the face of man's iniquity, of evil and of death, and which is able to transform every form of slavery by granting the possibility of salvation. To have faith, then, is to encounter this "Thou" - God - who sustains me and offers me the promise of an imperishable love that not only aspires to eternity but also gives it. It means entrusting myself to God with the attitude of a child who knows very well that all of his difficulties and problems are safe in the "thou" of the mother.

And this possibility of salvation through faith is a gift that God offers to all people. I think we should meditate more often on this in our daily lives, which are sometimes characterized by tragic problems and situations. We need to reflect on the fact that Christian belief involves this trusting self-surrender to the profound meaning that upholds me and the world: that meaning we are incapable of giving ourselves but can only receive as a gift, and that provides the foundation on which we can live without fear. And we must be able to proclaim this freeing and reassuring certainty with our words and to demonstrate it by our Christian lives.

Each day, however, we see around us that many people remain indifferent or refuse to welcome this announcement. At the end of the Gospel of Mark we today have before us hard words from the Risen One, who tells us: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (*Mark 16:16*), he will be lost. I would like to invite you to reflect on this. Confidence in the action of the Holy Spirit must always move us to go out and preach the Gospel, to courageously witness to the faith. But in addition to the possibility of a positive response to the gift of faith, there is also the risk of the Gospel being rejected, of a vital encounter with Christ not being received. St. Augustine posed this problem in one of his commentaries on the parable of the sower: " We speak - he said - we cast the seed, we scatter the seed. There are those who despise, those who criticize and those who scoff. If we fear them, we shall have nothing more to sow, and the day of harvest will remain without a crop. Therefore, may the seed come forth from good soil (*Discourse on Christian discipline*, 13,14: PL 40, 677-678).

Rejection, then, cannot discourage us. As Christians we are witnesses of this fertile soil: despite our limitations, our faith shows that good soil exists, where the seed of God's Word produces abundant fruits of justice, peace, love, of new humanity and of salvation. And the whole history of the Church, with all its problems, also demonstrates that good soil exists, good seed exists, and it bears fruit.

But we ask ourselves: where does man obtain that openness of heart and mind that enables him to believe in God who became visible in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, and to receive his salvation so that Christ and his Gospel become the guide and light of life? The answer: we are able to believe in God *because he draws near to us* and touches us, because the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Risen One,

enables us to receive and welcome the living God. Faith, then, is first and foremost a supernatural gift, a gift of God. The Second Vatican Council states: "To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving 'joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it' (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 5).

The basis of our journey of faith is Baptism, the sacrament that gives us the Holy Spirit – making us children of God in Christ – and marks our entrance into the community of faith, the Church: we don't believe on our own, without the preceding grace of the Spirit; and we don't believe alone but together with our brothers and sisters. From Baptism on, every believer is called to re-live and make this confession of faith his own, together with his brothers and sisters.

Faith is a gift of God, but it is also a profoundly free and human act. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states it clearly. It says: "Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. [It] is contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason" (n. 154). In fact, it involves them and exalts them in a gamble on life that is like an exodus; i.e., a going out of themselves, a departure from the security they afford and from their mental constructs in order to entrust themselves to the action of God, who shows us the way to attain true freedom, our human identity, true joy of heart and peace with everyone. To believe is to entrust oneself in all freedom and with joy to God's providential plan for history, like the patriarch Abram, like Mary of Nazareth. Faith, then, is an assent whereby our minds and hearts pronounce their "yes" to God by confessing that Jesus is the Lord. And this "yes" transforms life and opens the way towards the fullness of meaning, making it so new, so rich in joy and reliable hope.

Dear friends, the times in which we live need Christians who have been seized by Christ, who grow in faith through familiarity with the Sacred Scriptures and the Sacraments – persons who are like an open book that tells of the experience of new life in the Spirit and the presence of God who sustains us on the journey and opens the way to endless life. Thank you.

Pope Benedict XVI continued in English:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our series of catecheses for the Year of Faith, we now consider the nature of faith. More than simply knowledge about God, faith is a living encounter with him. Through faith we come to know and love God, who reveals himself in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and in so doing reveals the deepest meaning and truth of our human existence. Faith offers us sure hope and direction amid the spiritual confusion of our times. Before all else, faith is a divine gift which enables us to open our hearts and minds to God's word and, through Baptism, to share in his divine life within the community of the Church. Yet faith is also a profoundly human act, engaging our intelligence and freedom. When we welcome God's invitation and gift, our lives, and the world around us, are transformed. May this Year of Faith help us to live our faith fully, and to invite others to hear and welcome God's word, opening their hearts to the eternal life which faith promises.

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I offer a cordial greeting to the General Chapter of the Salvatorian Sisters. I also greet the large group of pilgrims from Japan. My warm welcome goes to the priests from the Archdiocese of Westminster. I welcome the members of the Apostolic Union of Clergy. I also greet the study group of Anglican clergy visiting Rome. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present, including those from England, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Nigeria, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Canada and the United States, I invoke God's blessings.