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Now that the Year of Faith is upon the Church, how are Catholics to gather its fruits? What can Catholics do to commemorate it?

After all, in previous declared years these questions were easier to answer. The Year of the Priest? Encourage young men to consider a vocation to the priesthood — check. The Year of St. Paul? Read Second Corinthians and mount a large Roman sword on the prayer room wall — check, check. The Year of Faith? . . .

Those who are stumped are not alone. Fortunately, the possibilities for living out the Year of Faith are numerous. If we examine the nature of faith itself, the faith, the Catechism as the content of the faith, and the lives of the saints as the method, that is, the way of lived faith, we will make great “leaps of faith” to live this year well.

Pope Benedict XVI has been called the Pope of ecumenism, the Pope of Christian unity. The Church has been scarred by numerous attacks upon the faith over the past 50 years since the Second Vatican Council. But there have been great strides toward unity among the followers of Christ, and great reasons for encouragement. By establishing this Year of Faith, the Pope is offering an antidote to the division within the body of Christ. Through his efforts for a New Evangelization, he is working toward the unity of all believers. In order to do that, believers need to have some important conversations about faith. Certainly, therefore, this Year of Faith is meant to be an ecumenical endeavor.

Faith Itself

Before defining faith, let us first develop by contrast what it is not. The Catechism identifies the following sins against faith: voluntary doubt, involuntary doubt, incredulity, heresy, apostasy, and schism (cf. 2088-2089). These sins all share a common factor of division and give us but a glimpse of the struggles of our age.

Voluntary doubt reflects more of a choice of the will than involuntary doubt. I remember my own “faith crisis” when I was an undergraduate. Fortunately, through the study of the faith, more frequent reception of the sacraments, and switching from ESPN to EWTN, my faith was strengthened and has continued to grow. Similarly, many students in high school and college — and people who in general are not formed in their faith — struggle against both forms of doubt.

Incredulity is a sin that also goes by another more palatable name: dissent. Dissent is a powerful temptation in an age that has been marked by so-called “Cafeteria Catholicism.” The reality of dissent over recent decades has permeated all levels of catechetical formation, from the sacramental formation of the “little ones” to Catholic higher education to adult catechesis. It is always injurious to the faithful. Heresy goes a step farther than dissent, renouncing a truth that must be believed. Apostasy goes yet farther, totally repudiating the faith. Schism breaks communion with the pope or with those in communion with him.

So what is faith? Back to the Catholic grade-school basics: Faith, along with hope and love, is a theological virtue. The theological virtues are infused in us at baptism and are increased through the reception of the sacraments. That brings us to our first “leap of faith.”
Leap of Faith #1: Live a vibrant sacramental life: attend Mass more than obligation requires, confess monthly or even bi-monthly, renew baptismal and confirmation vows, and so on.

Faith is at its heart a response. God has made Himself known to us, and that requires something of us. Faith comes from the Greek word pistis, derived from the word peithō, which means “to believe.” Aristotle used the term pistis to refer to modes of persuasion. In faith, we are persuaded of something. It is related to the concept of trust, having conviction in one who is faithful or trustworthy. Faith, trust, belief—these concepts are all related. Faith is our response to the God who has revealed Himself, the Catechism points out.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that faith is infused into the soul by God and produces two main effects. Fear is the first of these, and it comes in two forms: servile fear whereby one dreads punishment and filial fear whereby one dreads separation from God. The former comes from lifeless faith, the latter from lively faith. Purification of the heart is the second effect. When one desires to approach God out of lively faith, he seeks to purify himself of all that is not of God (II-II, qq. 6-7).

Additionally, Hebrews gives a fitting definition: “Now faith is the assurance (hypostasis) of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The Greek word hypostasis should look familiar if we are familiar with the term hypostatic union. This refers to the union of the two natures of Jesus Christ in His one hypostasis, that of the Eternal Son of God. In Hebrews, it is not being used in the same way as the Church Fathers used it when discussing Christology. In Hebrews, faith is the “substance” or the “underlying reality” of hoped-for things.

Most people know that faith, along with hope and charity, is a theological virtue. Many people, however, do not know that faith and hope—unlike charity—do not remain after death because they imply imperfection in the subject. Aquinas explains that love remains forever because it does not in essence imply imperfection (I-II, q. 67). In heaven, we attain our hope's desires. What more could we hope for? This makes for an exciting prospect about our present imperfect state that may help give us a proper perspective on the Year of Faith: This life is our one chance to live faith (and hope) to the full!

The Faith

The Nicene Creed opens with the word Pisteuō, in Latin, Credo, in English, “I believe.” The substance of our belief is what follows. This is commonly referred to as “the faith.” The baptismal rite makes this point explicit. After questioning the catechumen about his belief in the articles of the Creed, the priest states, “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church.”

People often struggle with fear of sinning against the virtue of faith. This fear, however, can paralyze inquiry and lead to fideism, commonly known as “blind faith” that is divorced from reason. Fideism is a very un-Catholic error. Deep down, there is a fear that one will encounter an aspect of the faith that is unbelievable. On the other hand, we are not Jeffersonian rationalist Christians, sitting with our Bible in one hand and scissors in the other, eager to excise from the faith anything that is deemed contrary to modern thought. The faith is altogether reasonable, through and through, from the sublimity of the Trinitarian processions to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to the all-male priesthood. The mysteries are given over to our contemplation, but understanding that which is sublime requires us to give chase, to ask questions. As the Church is fond of saying, Fides quaerens intellectum, that is, “faith seeking understanding.”

Leap of Faith #2: Fides quaerens intellectum—seek understanding this year of faith.

The Year of Faith is the time to take our understanding of the faith to the next level. There is a big difference between doubting and questioning. One can ask a question doubtfully or faithfully. But we must have the humility to seek the Church’s mind in all things.
Faith seeks understanding. As St. Paul says, “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). Therefore, take and read! Tolle, lege! These were the words of a child that St. Augustine heard while he was weeping bitterly, and his reading led him to his conversion. During this Year of Faith, simply study the faith.

**The Catechism as the Content of the Faith**

What better place to start that reading than the Catechism of the Catholic Church? It’s not a mere Catholic reference book, but a life-giving compilation of Sacred Tradition and Church doctrine. In Porta Fidei, the Apostolic Letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict wrote,

In order to arrive at a systematic knowledge of the content of the faith, all can find in the Catechism of the Catholic Church a precious and indispensable tool. It is one of the most important fruits of the Second Vatican Council. . . . The Year of Faith will have to see a concerted effort to rediscover and study the fundamental content of the faith that receives its systematic and organic synthesis in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. (no. 11)

True story: Having determined to read the Bible cover-to-cover in 2004 but with no idea how to go about doing that, I first dusted off and read the Catechism cover-to-cover. The Catechism gave me a true context for understanding the content of the faith and empowered me for my trek through the Scriptures. I love how Pope Benedict in Porta Fidei gives articulation to the misty, amorphous intuition of my mind from that time reading the Catechism. He said, “what is presented here is no theory, but an encounter with a Person who lives within the Church.” Yes!

**Leap of Faith #3: Assigned reading for this Year of Faith: the Catechism of the Catholic Church.**

Four parts to the Catechism, four seasons—coincidence? Know how many paragraphs per day you have to read to accomplish this feat in the Year of Faith? Seven. That’s a theologically perfect number. Look, the Pope even made the Year of Faith 13-and-a-half months long (October 11, 2012 – Nov. 24, 2013). There’s a pedagogical phrase, if you will, a teacher is wont to use in situations like these: “I’m giving you a homework extension, so don’t come in here with excuses.”

**The Method of Faith—The Lives of the Saints**

Hebrews 11, alluded to above, demonstrates lived faith throughout salvation history, telling the great deeds and profound sufferings of many of the fathers and mothers of the faith “of whom the world was not worthy” (v. 38). Despite that they did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (11:39-12:2).

Imitation of Jesus and of the saints, particularly Our Lady, is the way of faith’s perfection. What really do Christians have to fear? Our Lord and God has borne our ills in the flesh and has ascended above the heavens to send His Holy Spirit to indwell and transform us. In no one is this more apparent than in the Blessed Mother.

**Leap of Faith #4: Get to know Our Lady in the Scriptures, through prayer, or through Marian consecration. Consider increasing devotion to the saints—there are some great resources and even some excellent movies out there.**

Our Lady in particular deserves special attention. When Mary journeys with the in-utero Savior, Elizabeth exults, saying, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord”
(Lk. 1:45). This is spoken by a woman living with one who had been silent for three months because he “did not believe” the words of an angel (Lk. 1:20).

In his encyclical on hope, Spe Salvi, Pope Benedict wrote, “Could it have ended before it began? No, at the foot of the Cross, on the strength of Jesus’ own word, you became the mother of believers. In this faith, which even in the darkness of Holy Saturday bore the certitude of hope, you made your way towards Easter morning.” As though picking up where Hebrews 11 left off, Pope Benedict continues this theme in Porta Fidei: “By faith, Mary tasted the fruits of Jesus’ resurrection, and treasuring every memory in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19, 51), she passed them on to the Twelve assembled with her in the Upper Room to receive the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1-4)” (no. 13).

Faith is characteristic of Our Lady. Meditate upon Luke 1 and 2, John 2, John 19, Acts 1. From the Annunciation to the Upper Room, Mary serves as a model of faith and trust, as a lover eager to take upon herself all the desires of her beloved. In her, faith and hope are consumed and transformed into perfect and ardent love, which is one virtue that will never fade away into eternity.

In his wisdom, Pope Benedict has a plan to help guide the Church into this 13-and-a-half-month “year.” Expect great things from Rome for the new evangelization. Meanwhile, this coming Year of Faith, take the saints for your companions and make a leap of faith—or four.

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