

FIRE UPON THE EARTH:

A Year of Faith, personal conversion and the new evangelization

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In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks the first words of his adult ministry not to his family or to his friends -- but to his adversary, Satan, in the desert. He says, "*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*" (4:4). And in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus begins his public ministry with these first words: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel*" (1:15).

My goal tonight is to speak about personal conversion and the new evangelization, through the lens of the Year of Faith. And I'd like to do that in three steps. *First*, I'll revisit what a "year of faith" is, and why Pope Benedict felt we needed one. *Second*, I'll talk about Pope Francis and the new spirit he brings to witnessing our faith as a Church. And *third and most important*, I'll speak about what we need to do, and how we need to live, going forward – in other words, how we might share our faith so fully and joyfully that we truly become God's *lumen gentium*, God's "light to the nations."

Before we start though, I want to go back to those two verses from Matthew and Mark, because they frame our whole discussion tonight.

This is the verse from Matthew: *Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*. In the Gospel, when Jesus says these words, he's ravenous from 40 days in the desert. But he's speaking with the devil here about a great deal more than bread. Men and women need food and shelter to survive. These things are basic to their dignity. But they need God to be fully alive. Human beings are more than a bundle of appetites. Our longings go beyond what we can see and touch and taste. We were made for God. And material answers to questions of the soul can never be more than a narcotic. The proof is all around us. So much of the suffering in modern American life – we see it every day – can be traced to our misdirected desires, and the distractions we use to feed them. We look for joy and purpose in things that can never give us either.

Here's the verse from Mark: *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*. This is one of the key moments in all of Scripture. Jesus comes out of the desert on fire with the presence of his Father. He calls on us to wake up from the darkness in our lives. He speaks with passion and urgency. And that's how we need to hear his words, because time matters. Time is the only thing in life we truly own, and none of us has more than a little of it. God is near. The kingdom is coming. What we do right now to prepare for it – tonight, tomorrow and for however long God gives us in the world -- has consequences not only for ourselves, but for the people we touch with our lives.

The kingdom of God is at hand. God's kingdom builds on two foundation stones in the human heart: repentance and belief. *Repentance* makes us new, and it makes us sane. It makes us new because it gives us a chance to begin again by healing the evil we've done. It makes us sane because it's an act of humility and truth telling. It forces us to look honestly at who we are, how

we've failed, and the people we've wounded. And *belief* – specifically belief in the gospel, belief in the “good news,” because that’s what the Old English word “god-spell” means – gives us the ability to hope that despite all our failures, despite our insignificance and sins, the greatness of God’s love can reach down and redeem *even us*. We have a future, we have meaning, we have hope for something more than this life, because we belong to a people that God calls his own and loves without limits. And he proves his love with the sacrifice of his own son.

That brings us to the first step in our talk tonight: *what a “year of faith” is, and why Pope Benedict felt we needed one.*

Benedict announced the current Year of Faith in his apostolic letter *Porta Fidei*, or “Door of Faith.” The Year began on October 11, 2012, the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II and the 20th anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It ends next month on the Solemnity of Christ the King.

A Year of Faith is a time set aside by the Church to focus on the meaning of our baptism – in other words, who we are, what we believe and how we’re called to act as a Christian community. Pope Paul VI announced the last Year of Faith in 1967, hoping to heal the ambiguity and turmoil in the Church that followed Vatican II. That was a turbulent time. And yet, despite the confusion of the ‘60s, Paul led a Church that still had a strong memory of her own unity and purpose. The Church pursued her mission in a developed world that was still broadly influenced by a Christian moral vision and vocabulary.

Times have changed over the past five decades. In many ways, the challenges facing the Church in the world, and the fractures even within her own house, have grown more difficult. In Pope Benedict’s words, we now live in a world marked by “a profound crisis of faith.” And this fact shaped the course of his entire pontificate.

In *Porta Fidei*, Benedict listed three reasons for calling a Year of Faith. He hoped Christians would be led to *profess the faith* more fully and with conviction; to *deepen their encounter with Jesus Christ* in the Liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, and to *witness the faith* more credibly by the example of their lives. He stressed that “A Christian may never think of belief as a private act. Faith [involves] choosing to stand with the Lord so as to live with him.” Therefore faith, “precisely because it is a free act, also demands social responsibility for what one believes” (10).

Above all, in living the Year of Faith, Benedict wanted the Church and her pastors to recover the courage and zeal “to lead people out of the desert toward the place of life,” toward the God who gives us life in abundance (2).

Now those are beautiful words. We need to take them to heart. The image of man’s “crisis of faith” as a desert is a powerful one, and true. But if surgeons have just saved your child from cancer, it can be very hard to see the modern world as wounded or empty of meaning. Vatican II understood this clearly in describing the modern age as a patchwork of light and shadow. There’s enormous beauty and good in the world. Humanity has achieved great things. We have a right to take joy and pride in them. But just as we can often learn the right lessons from a

failure, we can also learn the wrong lessons from success. Rich or poor, mighty or weak, every one of us is mortal. Every one of us will die. And so will every one of the people we love. It's profoundly *rational* to ask what our lives mean; to acknowledge the limits of our reasoning and senses; and to hope for and seek something more than this life. But these questions – so urgent, so fundamental – are exactly the ones modern life buries under a mudflow of distractions and narcotics.

One of the conceits of our age is the idea that reason and science have banished superstition and brought a new era of light to human affairs. Faith, sin, heaven, hell, God and grace – these are throwback ideas to a dark age of supernatural mumbo jumbo and witch burnings, doomed to the dustbin of history. In effect, this is the atheist version of a creation myth. It's a sunny theory. And for people who imagine themselves as materialists, it can be very comforting.

But it's false. As scholars like Christian Smith and many others have shown, there's really no such thing as an "unbeliever." We all put our faith in something. In fact, we all believe in things we can't see or prove every day, including the premises we use to organize our understanding of reality. Science operates off first principles – in other words, assumptions about the nature of reality – that can never be proven by science itself.

The cultural power of science comes from its ability to explain many of the observable workings of reality, and also from the technology it creates, which can be very useful in humanity's service. The trouble is that scientists are also directly or indirectly responsible for Sarin gas, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the technology that murdered 6 million Jews and the "morning after" abortion pill. Both of the great murder ideologies of the last century – Marxism-Leninism and National Socialism – based their claims to legitimacy on science. More human beings were gassed, starved, aborted, burned or shot in the name of genetic and racial hygiene, or the laws of history, or scientific materialism in the 20th century than died in all the previous 19 centuries of religious conflict and persecution combined.

Some years ago the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, a former Marxist and now a Catholic, wrote that the "new dark ages [are] already upon us" – a darkness brought on not by religion, but by the vanity, moral confusion and failure of the Enlightenment. The key difference between the sixth century and our own, said MacIntyre, is that this time "[the] barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this [fact] that constitutes part of our predicament."

MacIntyre's words may explain a lot about the framework of Catholic thought over the past 200 years. The Church is a global community. But her heartland for centuries has been Europe. Issues in Europe and the developed world have tended to mold her agenda. Quite apart from the mistakes and sins of her own leaders, the Church in Europe in the years since the Enlightenment has faced constant pressure from revolutionary violence, intellectual contempt, ideological atheism, idolatry of the nation state, two disastrous world wars and mass genocides. And Catholic attempts to hold on to the Church's privileges have often made conflicts worse.

Today a new and even more effective atheism – the practical atheism of an advanced but morally empty liberal consumer culture – is pushing the Church to society's margins. This, on a

European continent that owes much of its identity and history to the Christian faith. And we can see some of the same trends now in Canada and the United States.

Obviously I'm using a very broad brush here. There's no way to squeeze a couple of centuries of Church life into a few sentences. But thinking like this has helped me imagine what God may hope for us in the leadership of our new universal pastor and bishop of Rome. And that brings us to the second step in my talk tonight: *Pope Francis and the new spirit he brings to witnessing our faith as a Church*.

Pope Francis issued his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* or "Light of Faith," in June -- just three months after his installation. Benedict clearly helped shape the text. But Popes don't put their names on major teaching documents unless they believe in the content. So in seeking to understand Francis, it's worth hearing some of his words from *Lumen Fidei*.

Here's a passage. "*Faith consists in the willingness to let ourselves be constantly transformed and renewed by God's call . . . The beginning of salvation is openness to something prior to ourselves, to a primordial gift that affirms life and sustain it in being*" (13, 19).

Here's another. "*Faith is necessarily ecclesial; it is professed from within the body of Christ as a concrete communion of believers . . . Faith is not a private matter, a completely individualistic notion or a personal opinion: It comes from hearing, and it is meant to find expression in words and to be proclaimed.*" (22).

Here's a third. "*In the Bible, the heart is the core of the human person, where all his or her different dimensions intersect: body and spirit, interiority and openness to the world and to others, intellect, will and affectivity . . . Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love*" (26).

And here's a fourth and final passage. "*[Love] requires truth. Only to the extent that love is grounded in truth can it endure over time . . . [And if] love needs truth, truth also needs love. Love and truth are inseparable*" (27).

My point is this: Anyone hoping for -- or worried about -- a break by Pope Francis from Catholic teaching on matters of substance is going to be mistaken. At the same time, the tone of this pontificate will certainly be distinct from anything in the past century. Pope Francis has been formed by experiences very unlike the factors that shaped John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Francis said shortly after his election that the cardinals had chosen a bishop of Rome from the "[far] end of the world." Argentina may be the most European of Latin American countries, but Pope Francis' world as a priest and bishop has been the global South, the problems that wound it and the poor who inhabit it.

Last Sunday's reading from the Book of Amos (6:1, 4-7) -- "*Woe to the complacent in Zion, lying on beds of ivory*" -- would resonate with this Pope in a uniquely vivid way. So would the Gospel reading from Luke (16:19-31) about the Rich Man and Lazarus. In other words, Pope

Francis comes to the moral and cultural struggles of the Church in the North from a different perspective.

A lot of commentators have already analyzed the recent *La Civiltà Cattolica* interview with Pope Francis. I wrote about it myself last week. I won't revisit what I said here. But I do want to highlight some words in the interview that struck me as a clue to the way his Pope thinks about the future. The interviewer asked Pope Francis about the relationship between the "ancient" Churches of the developed world, the global North, and the "young" Churches of the developing world, including the global South. The Holy Father answered this way:

"The young Catholic Churches, as they grow, develop a synthesis of faith, culture and life, and so it is a synthesis different from the one developed by the ancient Churches. For me, the relationship between the ancient Catholic Churches and the young ones is similar to the relationship between young and elderly people in a society. They build the future, the young ones with their strength and the others with their wisdom. You always run some risks, of course. The younger Churches are likely to feel self-sufficient; the ancient ones are likely to want to impose on the younger Churches their cultural models. But we build the future together."

How that future will play out is unclear. It holds opportunity and risk; ambiguity and hope. But God is in charge. God will guide his Church. And God will fill this holy man who is our Pope with the wisdom to lead us well.

That brings us to the third and last step in these thoughts tonight: *what we as Catholics need to do, and how we need to live, in the years ahead.*

I think we make a mistake when we identify the "new evangelization" too closely with techniques or technologies or programs. It's true that using the new means of communication to advance the Gospel is important. We just founded the Cardinal John Foley Chair in social communications here at the seminary. And I'm glad we did. Today's mass media are reshaping society. They influence how we think, what we buy and how we live. We need to understand the language and master the tools of the modern world. Through them, with God's help, we can do a better job of bringing Jesus Christ to our people, and our people to Jesus Christ.

But the main instrument of the new evangelization is the same as the old evangelization. It's you and me. There's no way around those words: *Repent and believe in the gospel.* The world will change only when *you* change, when *we* change, because hearts are won by personal witness. And we can't share what we don't have.

The words and habits of religion are easy. We can sometimes use them to fool ourselves. We need to drill down below the counterfeit Christianity so many of us prefer into the substance of who we are and what we really treasure. We need to let God transform us from the inside out, and conversion requires humility, patience and love. It requires letting go of the desire to vindicate ourselves at the expense of others. So much of modern life, even in the Church, is laced with a spirit of anger. And anger is an addiction as intense and as toxic as crack.

Pharisees come in all shapes and sizes, left and right. We need to be different. As Pope Francis said in his *La Civilita Cattolica* interview, the Church needs to be more than “a nest protecting our mediocrity.” We prove or disprove what we claim to believe by the zeal and joy of our lives. What we need to do in the years ahead is what God has *always* asked us to do: forgive each other; encourage each other; protect the weak; serve the needy; raise the young in virtue; speak with courage; and work for the truth without ceasing – always in a spirit of love.

There’s a passage in *The Confessions* where St. Augustine writes “*My weight is my love.*” For Augustine, the more our hearts burn with the love of God, the more the heat of that love carries us upward into his presence. And I think this is exactly what Jesus means in the Gospel of Luke, when he says “*I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled*” (12:49). A world on fire with the love of God is a world redeemed; a world lifted up on the heat of that love into the arms of God.

The reason the world has paused for Pope Francis -- if only for a little while -- is that so many people sense in him something more than himself; not just God’s truth and God’s justice, but God’s *tenderness*. It’s the tenderness Charles Peguy captured in his poem “God’s Dream,” where God says:

*[From] those who share my dreams
I ask a little patience,
a little humor,
some small courage,
and a listening heart --
I will do the rest.*

*Then they will risk,
and wonder at their daring;
run -- and marvel at their speed;
build -- and stand in awe of the beauty of their building . . .*

*So come now --
Be content.
It is my dream you dream,
my house you build,
my caring you witness,
my love you share.*

And this is the heart of the matter.

The heart of the matter is God’s love. It always has been. It always will be. So as we draw to the close of this Year of Faith, may God turn our hearts to him, and make us a “fire upon the earth” – a fire that lifts up his creation in love.