

CELEBRATING THE YEAR OF FAITH

Around this time of year many of us are returning to a heavier work load and a multitude of activities after the rather lighter schedule of the summer.

It so happens that this is also true for all of us as we look at our Catholic faith. The Holy Father has called a Synod of Bishops on the subject, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Catholic Faith. This will take place in Rome October 7-28, 2012.

In addition to this, Pope Benedict has declared a Year of Faith beginning October 11, 2012, the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II and concluding November 23, 2013, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King.

New Evangelization

Evangelization is the making known the message of Jesus to all people. The “new” evangelization is not because the subject of evangelization is new – that remains Jesus and his message – but because it calls for a new enthusiasm, a new language and a new method.

Making Jesus and his message known in a new way is intended for two main audiences: those who have never heard of Jesus and his message and those who are Christian in name only.

The latter are people who come from Christian backgrounds, are familiar with Christianity, believe they know and understand Christianity but who no longer practice that faith in a meaningful way.

The new evangelization tries to take the Gospel to persons who are already Christian but are no longer practicing as Christians. The need for this is clear in an American statistic: the largest religious group in the United States is Catholics; the second largest religious group in the United States is non-practicing Catholics.

The question is how do we make the Gospel fresh for those for whom it has become stale? How do we help people look at the familiar until it looks unfamiliar again? How do we try to Christianize someone who is already Christian?

There are no simple answers. We already have been trying to do this for generations. Look at our immediate relationships.

Anxious parents have been trying to do this with their children. Anxious pastors have been trying to do this with their parishioners. Anxious bishops have been trying to do this with their dioceses. Anxious spiritual writers have been trying to do this with their readership.

An anxious Church has been trying to do this with the world.

The Synod of Bishops together with the Holy Father will try to address these issues.

All called to mission

From the very outset there is one thing we must all consider: each of us as baptized and confirmed persons has the privilege and responsibility of making Jesus and his message known. The Synod invites us to ponder this privilege and responsibility.

There are various ways in which we can exercise this privilege and responsibility. The first is by personal witness. Blessed John Paul II said, "People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers ... the witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission."

The second is by verbal testimony. The spoken word has a lasting impression. The practice of Christian worship is a third way of proclaiming the Gospel. This faithful practice is known to have had an impact on many.

The living of good community life is a fourth model of evangelization. People need to belong. They come to our communities for a variety of reasons and if they feel welcome they will stay.

Another model of evangelization is works of charity. From its earliest days Christianity was seen by outsiders as having two parts. The first was found in the good news message of hope and optimism for a life with God beyond the temporal one on earth; the second was seen in the daily demonstrations of good works and charity for those in need.

Looking at these models we see how we are all called to mission. Some have the ability in one form of mission, others in another form. We all have ability.

Renewed conversion

Hand in hand with the Synod is the Year of Faith. This Year of Faith is to help Catholics appreciate the gift of faith, deepen their relationship with God and strengthen their commitment to sharing faith with others.

This year is to contribute to a renewed conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the rediscovery of faith which will help make members of the Church credible and joy-filled witnesses to the risen Lord in the world today, capable of leading the many people who seek it to the door of faith.

Two great events

The beginning of the Year of Faith coincides with the anniversaries of two great events that have marked the life of the Church in our days: the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council called by Blessed Pope John XXIII and the 20th anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church by Blessed Pope John Paul II.

The purpose of Vatican II was to transmit doctrine - pure and whole, without change or misrepresentation - so that it would be faithfully respected, elaborated and presented in a way that corresponds with the needs of our time. The Council, gathered together in the Holy Spirit,

eagerly desired to proclaim the Gospel to every creature and so bring the light of Christ to all people, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in accord with the Council, is both an authentic fruit of Vatican II and a tool to help with its reception.

The Catechism was proposed as a compendium (collection) of all Catholic doctrine and a sure point of reference for local catechisms. The Catechism truly expresses what could be called “the symphony of the faith”.

It includes the new and the old because the faith is always the same yet the source of ever new light. To respond to this twofold demand, the Catechism repeats the old traditional order and at the same time the contents are often expressed in a new way in order to respond to the questions of our age. This Catechism is a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion and a sure norm for teaching faith.

Opportunities to deepen knowledge

So here we are now about to enter the Year of Faith with all its challenges. This year offers special opportunities for all believers to deepen our knowledge of the primary documents of Vatican II and our study of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

I suggest that in our parishes we undertake a special study of a Council document. A good place to begin would be the document on the Liturgy. This would be a major help to all of us in living and celebrating our faith.

If parish-wide sessions are difficult, I suggest such a study for the Parish Pastoral Council, Parish Finance Council and Parish Liturgy Committee.

The Year of Faith highly encourages associations and organizations in the community to work at renewal. I suggest that groups like the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic Women’s League, Youth Groups and groups of priests and religious undertake a study of some of the documents as part of their regular program.

The promotion of parish missions would be a very laudable practice.

All of us are called to renew the gift of faith within us. This could be done by more religious reading such as Sacred Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Should you choose to read the Catechism I suggest you begin with Part Four, Christian Prayer. This may well be the greatest help at the start.

The Year of Faith can be an opportunity to pay greater attention to Catholic schools. Schools are a perfect place to offer students a living witness to the Lord and to nurture their faith. This can be done by making use of good catechetical tools.

The Year of Faith also provides a good opportunity to intensify the celebration of faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, the mystery of faith and source of the new evangelization, the faith of the Church is proclaimed, celebrated and strengthened.

We are all invited to participate in the Eucharist actively, fruitfully and with awareness in order to be authentic witnesses to the Lord. Vatican II teaches, “Christian believers should not be at the Eucharist as strangers or silent spectators”.

In the words of our Holy Father, “To enter the door of faith is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime. It begins with baptism, through which we can address God as Father, and it ends with the passage through death to eternal life” (Apostolic Letter, The Door of Faith).

May this Year of Faith enhance our lifetime journey for eternity.

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