



ARCHDIOCESE OF DENVER

From Faith Comes Witness

*A Pastoral Letter on the Year of
Faith and its Impact*

Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L.
Archbishop of Denver



YEAR OF FAITH²⁰¹²₂₀₁₃

NOVEMBER 21, 2013

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Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The end of the Year of Faith is upon us, and it has been a time of great grace that has created spiritual momentum in the Church. Many have asked me – “What comes next?” and this pastoral letter is my reply.

This past September when I went to Our Lady of Guadalupe’s Shrine for our Year of Faith Archdiocesan pilgrimage I saw the graces of the Year at work among the pilgrims. One couple had dedicated their marriage to Our Lady of Guadalupe 58 years ago on their honeymoon and came back with us to give thanks to her for leading them to Christ and bringing his blessings to their marriage. Other faithful from the Archdiocese experienced peace, healing and confirmation in their faith at the holy sites we visited, especially the house of Saint Juan Diego’s uncle, Juan Bernardino, who was healed of an illness through Our Lady’s intercession. Many learned for the first time of Blessed Miguel Pro, S.J. and the Cristo Rey Martyrs.

I, too, received grace as I stood before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and was reminded of the first time I stood in front of her in 1996. I will never forget that moment, when I was struck with awe and wonder at the realization of Mary’s real presence in both my life, and in the life of the Church. I experienced her love for me in a personal and tender way, and I was drawn by her to love Jesus and receive his love for me even more. The miracle of the image continued in my own heart.

In this Year of Faith, we have all had the opportunity to encounter Jesus anew at the personal and communal levels.

Catholics throughout the Archdiocese of Denver participated in the Pilgrim Passport program, which took them to seven churches and a shrine and offered them the chance to deepen their encounter with Jesus.

Parishes throughout the Archdiocese were also involved in bringing people closer to Christ. Many of them hosted Bible studies, classes on the Catechism, and talks on the documents of Vatican II throughout the year.

Parishioners were also able to attend retreats, seminars and conferences, as well as participate in missionary activities and pilgrimages.

At the international level, more than 8 million pilgrims traveled to Vatican City to visit the tomb of St. Peter and participate in the numerous events held each month. The groups that descended on the Eternal City included Church movements, seminarians and novices, families, pro-life groups, catechists and people entering the Church, to name a few.

When Benedict XVI introduced the Year of Faith with his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* in October 2011, he called it “a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world.”¹

The fact that the Year of Faith has taken place at this point in history is no accident. Every one of us has been willed by the Father to live in these times, and we have been given the challenge by Pope Emeritus Benedict and Pope Francis to ask for the gift of increased faith.

I believe that faith has been deepened in the hearts of many of the faithful during this time of grace. And this is vital for the future of our Archdiocese, our country and our Church, because the cultural context we live in is becoming increasingly dismissive of faith.

The Year of Faith and History

When he published *Porta Fidei*, Benedict XVI revealed that the main reason he convoked the Year of Faith was the way Western culture has forgotten God.

He noted that “Whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, because of a profound crisis of faith that has affected many people.”²

This situation presents enormous challenges for the Church. As Benedict XVI put it, “in vast areas of the earth the faith risks being extinguished, like a flame without fuel.”³

While this situation is similar to that of the early Church, the time that we live in is different in key ways that make it historically unprecedented.

Never before in history has a society tried to exist without any reference to God or a deity of some kind, as Western society is attempting to do now. Even in primitive societies, people worshipped what they believed to be nature gods that gave them an established set of values that differentiated between right and wrong. In contemporary Western society, good and evil are being cast aside in favor of following passions and indulging desires. Each person is left to personally decide what is good and what is evil with no reference to any objective criteria.

I believe there are three developments that make our cultural context different from any other. These need to be understood, especially because they illuminate the importance of the Year of Faith and how crucial our response to its graces is for the future of our Church and society.

The first difference is the loss of a sense of community, which results in people feeling less sure about their identity and the duties they have towards others. While there are many contributing factors to this loss, the removal of God strikes at the core of our collective understanding of community.

God, in the three Persons of the Trinity, is the perfect community. When he is removed, the perfect model of how to love unconditionally within families and in society at large is lost. Furthermore, the Second Vatican Council teaches us that, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”⁴

Thus, when God is ignored and a Christian worldview is replaced with a secular one, people begin to lose the sense of what it means to be human, as well as an understanding of their final goal and the meaning of their lives. Relationships become shallower and the desire for the true good of the other is set aside in favor of personal profit in this life. In families, the most basic cell of society, self-sacrifice for the sake of eternal reward is replaced with the temporary pleasures this life offers. In a word, our vision becomes earth-bound; we become self-focused and satisfied with the

world, we forget heaven and at times our neighbor.

But we are created in the image and likeness of God and we will only be truly fulfilled by eternal union with him. Jesus reveals to us our true identity as the beloved sons and daughters of the Father and invites us to live with him in the heart of the Trinity.

The second unprecedented change our culture has undergone is the explosion in technological advances, particularly in the realm of communications. These advances are morally neutral, but they can be used in ways that help or harm society.

For example, we have seen that the Church is able to bring the Gospel to the farthest corners of the globe, but at the same time the sheer volume of messages and the convincing way that some of them are presented has created confusion about some of the most fundamental questions in life. This has raised the question today that Pilate posed to Jesus, ‘What is truth?’⁵

Now the truth must compete with many destructive answers to those questions: What does it mean to be human? What is the meaning of freedom? What will make me happy? And what is truth?

Pope Francis described the narrative that is competing with a Christian understanding of truth in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*.

“Surely this kind of truth — we hear it said — is what was claimed by the great totalitarian movements of the last century, a truth that imposed its own world view in order to crush the actual lives of individuals. In the end, what we are left with is relativism, in which the question of universal truth — and ultimately this means the question of God — is no longer relevant. It would be logical, from this point of view, to attempt to sever the bond between religion and truth, because it seems to lie at the root of fanaticism, which proves oppressive for anyone who does not share the same beliefs.”

“In this regard, though, we can speak of a massive amnesia in our contemporary world,” Pope Francis concluded. Indeed, we are experiencing a “massive amnesia” at this time in history!

“The question of truth,” he clarified, “is really a question of memory, deep

memory, for it deals with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness.”⁶

The flood of new technological abilities has also given people the false perception that perfection is attainable in this life, if only they have the right tools. This is the heresy that man can save himself, simply dressed up in more futuristic-looking clothes.

Finally, one other major difference of our time is the perception that Christianity has been tried and found insufficient. In reality, as G.K. Chesterton put it, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”⁷

As God is increasingly pushed out of our society in favor of a self-centered, technology-driven existence, our collective moral compass loses its bearings. The new poles of orientation are feelings, usefulness or the ever-changing fashions of the moment. ‘If it feels good, do it,’ is one modern slogan that captures this well.

The future pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, famously captured this phenomenon in his homily for the Mass for the Election of the Supreme Pontiff in April 2005.

“Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,’ seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”⁸

Given this context, I think it is obvious why the Year of Faith has been so important and why the answer to “What comes after this?” is even more crucial for the Church to succeed in bringing the truth about man, as revealed by Christ, to as many people as possible.

What Comes Next?

The Year of Faith will end with a closing Mass in St. Peter’s Square on Nov.

24, the Solemnity of Christ the King. The evening before, Pope Francis will welcome people preparing to enter the Church this coming Easter through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults.

In many ways, this ceremony is the perfect final event for the Year of Faith. It is an illustration of how the search for truth and the gift of faith can lead to Christ and his Church.

When Pope Francis speaks to the catechumens, he will focus on the passage in St. John's Gospel where John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Then, two of John's disciples follow Jesus to see where he is staying.

That encounter with Jesus was so convincing that Andrew went to his brother Peter and said, "We have found the Messiah!" I pray that your experience of the Year of Faith involved an encounter with Jesus that impacted you like Andrew was.

In the story of Andrew and Peter, we find the blueprint for what we are called to do after the Year of Faith. The Year of Faith was not a marketing campaign for Catholics to get excited about; it was a time to meet Jesus and his Church, to come to know and love Jesus and his Church more deeply. It was a time to grow in intimacy with Jesus, to encounter the Lord in your heart.

The consequence of our growth in love should be a reaction like Andrew's, who ran and told his brother about Jesus. His brother Simon went to see Jesus and received a new identity – the name Peter. St. Matthew also recalls for us that when Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" the Father gave Peter the gift of faith and revealed to him that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God."⁹

From St. Peter's life, we can see that the experience of faith should lead us to witness to the truth, to Jesus himself, who is the truth.¹⁰

In *Porta Fidei*, Pope Benedict beautifully describes how faith naturally leads to sharing the love, joy and truth experienced in Christ. "Only through believing," Benedict says, "does faith grow and become stronger; there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one's life

apart from self-abandonment.”

When one surrenders their life in love and trust to Jesus, he adds, it becomes “a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God.”¹¹

Pope Francis also spoke about faith leading to witness in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, where he reflected on the early Christians experience of faith.

He wrote, “In the acts of the martyrs, we read the following dialogue between the Roman prefect Rusticus and a Christian named Hierax: ‘Where are your parents?’ the judge asked the martyr. He replied: ‘Our true father is Christ, and our mother is faith in him.’”

For the first Christians, faith was “an encounter with the living God revealed in Christ, [which] was indeed a ‘mother,’ for it had brought them to the light and given birth within them to divine life, a new experience and a luminous vision of existence for which they were prepared to bear public witness to the end.”

As I have already mentioned, the world we live in today is different. The loss of community, advances in technology and the accompanying belief in salvation by it, and the perception of Christianity as being passé indicates that the environment we live out our faith in is unlike any other time in history.

In this context, arguments from authority carry less weight. But what can never be erased from the human heart is the longing for love – the desire to love and to be loved, the desire to be united with God, who is love itself.

“The men and women of our time,” Pope Francis said in his message for the 2013 World Mission Sunday, “need the secure light that illuminates their path and that only the encounter with Christ can give.”

The consequence of that encounter is faith, which the Holy Father called “a gift, not reserved for a few but offered with generosity ... It is a gift that one cannot keep to oneself, but it is to be shared. If we want to keep it only to ourselves, we will become isolated, sterile and sick Christians.”

Intimacy, Formation, Witness

I believe the answer to the question “What do we do after the Year of Faith?” is clear.

First, through the gift of faith, we are invited to continue to grow in intimacy with Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. In our daily encounter with Jesus, he will fill us with the Holy Spirit and lead us to the Father. We are led through prayer and the regular celebration of the sacraments – the Eucharist and Reconciliation – into the communion of love and life that exists within the Trinity. **Our lives are forever changed the more we fall in love with Jesus!** Let us continue to cry out with the apostles each day, praying the words, “Increase our faith.”¹² Only in that intimacy with Jesus can we go out into the world to be a light for it and invite others to come to know Jesus, no matter what the cost.

Second, we can continue to grow in the understanding of our faith. We are blessed in our Archdiocese with the Catechetical and Biblical Schools, as well as the Augustine Institute, ENDOW, and FOCUS to name a few places of formation. We can also continue to read on our own the Documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and most especially to engage in daily prayer with the Sacred Scripture, most importantly the four Gospels. Taking 10 minutes a day and prayerfully reading a passage from one of the Gospels will nourish our faith and help us to encounter Jesus in new ways.

Third, we are blessed in our Archdiocese to have many outreach services to the poor and needy that need faithful volunteers. I am always humbled by how so many of our faithful quietly volunteer year after year at Catholic Charities, the Samaritan Shelter, Centro Juan Diego, The Lighthouse Women’s Center, Friends of St. Andrew’s, Christ in the City, and the Gabriel Houses, just to name a few. We give witness to our faith and nourish our faith by serving and encountering the poor who live on the outskirts of society. One poor person in his encounter with a Christ in the City volunteer told her, “You are the first person who ever told me ‘God loves me.’” It changed his life!

Finally, and most challenging, this time of grace must lead us to courageously and joyfully share our faith in Christ with the world. In 1975, Pope

Paul VI already sensed that Western society needed this kind of approach. As he wrote in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”¹³

To carry this out we must pray daily for the gifts of the Holy Spirit – knowledge, understanding, wisdom, counsel, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord. Today, most of all we must pray for the gift of fortitude, because our culture will challenge, reject and even hate us because of our faith in Jesus and his Church.

This will not be easy, and in some cases it will be painful and involve the cross. In the Gospel reading for the Closing Mass of the Year of Faith, we will read about Jesus hanging on the Cross between the two thieves who were crucified with him.

One reviled and mocked him, but the other said, “Have you no fear of God?” Even though he had sinned, the good thief wanted to reach heaven and was willing to acknowledge his sin. In our increasingly secular culture, it is becoming acceptable to revile God, to mock people of faith. But like the good thief there are also people of good will who, for all of their imperfections, are just waiting to meet Christ.

We are called to respond like the good thief, who encountered Christ and confessed his sins. Then we will be able to give witness to his love and mercy for us. This will require us to move out of our comfort zones, to move beyond maintenance mode and to be more apostolic, more evangelistic. We must bring the truths of our Catholic faith into the public square to bring light to the darkness and to enhance respect for the dignity of the human person at all stages of life.

The Second Vatican Council reminded Catholics 50 years ago that, “**This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age** (emphasis added). . . .”

“Therefore, let there be no false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and

even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation. Christians should rather rejoice that, following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory."¹⁴

Today, may this clarion call of the Council penetrate the heart of every Catholic in the Archdiocese so that they give witness to their faith without fear or compromise!

Everyone in the Archdiocese of Denver has an opportunity to encounter Jesus and grow in faith, even once the Year of Faith is over. Jesus, the one who is love, mercy and truth, stands ready to meet you, in prayer, in the Sacraments and in the spiritually and materially poor. He desires to call you 'friend.'¹⁵ And once you have met him, the Holy Spirit will fill you with a joy that cannot be contained, that impels you to "go and make disciples of all nations."¹⁶

Then we can say with the good thief, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And we can hope to hear in reply, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."¹⁷

In the Heart of the Father,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Samuel J. Aquila". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, S.T.L.
Archbishop of Denver

Endnotes

- 1 Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, 6, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, October 11, 2011.
- 2 Ibid, 2.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Apostolic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, Second Vatican Council, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965.
- 5 John 18:38.
- 6 Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, 25, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013.
- 7 *Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, Vol. 4, p. 61. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987.
- 8 Homily of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals, Mass for the Election of the Supreme Pontiff, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, April 18, 2005.
- 9 Matthew 16:16.
- 10 John 14:6.
- 11 Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, 7.
- 12 Luke 17:5
- 13 Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975.
- 14 Apostolic Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 43, Second Vatican Council, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965.
- 15 John 15:15
- 16 Cf. Matthew 28:19.
- 17 Luke 23:43

**“Today, may this clarion call
of the Council penetrate the
heart of every Catholic in the
Archdiocese so that they give
witness to their faith without
fear or compromise!”**



The Most Rev. Samuel J. Aquila was named Archbishop of Denver on May 29, 2012. His episcopal motto is taken from the fifth verse of the second chapter of the Gospel of St. John: “Do whatever he tells you.”

