

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
Insight from the Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*

In October of 2011, Pope Benedict XVI announced that the Church would celebrate a "Year of Faith." In his apostolic letter *Porta Fidei*, the Pope called for a renewed study of the Catechism and of the documents of Vatican II. (Hence, the existence of this column.) In the recent encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis has issued a kind of manifesto for this project, setting forth the vital importance of faith in the world. Pope Benedict wrote the majority of the text, but Pope Francis has added his own contribution and taken up the responsibility of publishing it. It could not have come at a better time for us, for never in our country has the role of faith in society been more contested. What follows is a brief reflection on the Pope's encyclical, especially in light of the teaching of the council.

The Pope's major theme is that true faith is not an irrational will to believe (mere wish fulfillment), but is rather fundamentally ordered to truth - the truth of the human person, his origin, meaning, and destiny. The objective truth of faith comes from its origins in God: "Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives."

The Pope also stresses that faith is not simply an affirmation of dogma (though it certainly entails Church dogma). It also means adopting a new way of seeing, looking at the world through Christ's eyes. Above all, this means that the man of true faith is transformed by love. He recognizes that the knowledge we need is more than abstract principles, but a "capacity to participate in the vision of another, this shared knowledge which is the knowledge proper to love."

This transformative vision is part of what faith has to offer to the modern world. The critics of faith depict it as a prescientific way of understanding, simply an attempt to answer questions that can now be answered by science. Now that we have science, the critics hold, there is no need for faith. But the Pope's encyclical radically undercuts this argument. To be sure, faith *does* answer questions of origin and destiny (without in any way conflicting with the aims of science), but it does so in a way that is "capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence." This is something that science divorced from faith can never do.

The Pope also argues that faith can even be of service to science. It can keep the scientist open to the transcendent. He writes:

It [faith] also illumines the material world, trusts its inherent order and knows that it calls us to an ever widening path of harmony and understanding. The gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness. Faith awakens the critical sense by preventing research from being satisfied with its own formulae and helps it to realize that nature is always greater. By stimulating wonder before the profound mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation.

The truth is that modern atheistic materialism is a deeply irrational and immoral view of the world. It is characterized by the error of scientism, rather than true science.. Scientism (as opposed to science) holds that the only questions worth asking are those to which we can give answers in the language of mathematics or of physical science. Since value, meaning, and human purpose cannot be expressed in the language of mathematics (the modern atheist says), *they must not exist*. This is a demonstrably false view of the world, but many atheists embrace it anyway because they desire to extirpate faith from the world.

The Second Vatican Council touched directly on this danger. The document *Gaudium et Spes* considered the challenge of atheism at some length, and the threat it poses to human dignity. The bulwark against this, however, is the Gospel:

Thanks to this belief [in the Gospel], the Church can anchor the dignity of human nature against all tides of opinion, for example those which undervalue the human body or idolize it. By no human law can the personal dignity and liberty of man be so aptly safeguarded as by the Gospel of Christ which has been entrusted to the Church.

Many modern people - even many Catholics - tend to think of faith as a private affair, as something essentially subjective and personal, something that cannot be proposed (let alone imposed) on society at large. As such, people of faith are to be excluded from the public sphere, their voices derided as irrational. The Pope's encyclical, following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, refutes that view. Without denying the intensely personal character of belief, the Pope shows the deep need of modernity for faith, and for Catholic faith as the strongest guarantor of man's inherent dignity, rationality, and freedom.