

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
The Gospel and the New Evangelization

What is the Good News of the Catholic Faith? What does the Church offer that people cannot get elsewhere? We cannot very well evangelize if we cannot answer this question. In the document *Lumen Gentium*, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council offered this simple summary of the Catholic faith: "The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation of the divine life." (*Lumen Gentium*, 2)

What does this mean? What is this gift of "divine life" that God intends to give His children? God gives many good things to people: food, shelter, loved ones, the beauty of nature, and sometimes even social harmony, good government, and the administration of justice. But none of these constitutes the blessing of the Gospel.

Christ did not come simply to provide us with goods of a social or bodily nature, but with a good that utterly transcends nature. He came that we might know God intimately and personally, in a way that exceeds our rational capacity, a way that is ordered to eternity, to supernatural fulfillment and joy. "This is eternal life," Jesus says, "that they might know you, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3)

In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict expounds on this truth:

What did Jesus actually bring, if not world peace, universal prosperity, and a better world. The answer is very simple: he has brought God . . . He has brought God and now we know his face, now we can call upon Him. Now we know the path that we human beings have to take in this world. Jesus has brought God and with God the truth about our origin and destiny: faith, hope, and love. (*Jesus of Nazareth*, 44)

How can we have this intimate relationship with God? Since God is a spirit, we cannot know him directly in this life through our senses. If we are to have an intimate experience of God in this life, it must be in a way that exceeds the senses. This is the way of *faith, hope and love*. Since these are spiritual realities, given to us through grace, they can only come by sharing in something of God's own nature - which is love itself. Those who remain in this grace to death have the promise of an even greater gift: to see God as He is in His essence.

St. Paul describes this reality very beautifully:

We see now through a glass in a dark manner: but then face to face. Now I know in part: but then I shall know even as I am known. And now there remain faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity. (1 Corinthians 13: 12-13)

To know God like this in the next life means that we shall know the source of all beauty, all truth, all goodness, and all being. Whatever you find delightful in this life is only desirable because it has its being and goodness from God. Thus, the experience of God in the next life will fulfill your every rational desire to a degree that is unimaginable. Those whom the church calls

mystics or contemplatives have some vague and shadowy experience of this in this life. They can disregard the greatest sufferings or deprivations because they have "tasted the heavenly gift."

The Church calls all people to develop the life of faith, hope, and charity as much as possible in this world, because this is the doorway to eternal life. That is why the Council spoke of a "universal call to holiness." That is also why the council dwelt at length on the means of developing this supernatural life. Chief among them is the Church herself - as a Sacrament of salvation for the whole human race. (*Lumen Gentium*, 1) Through her doctrine, sacraments, and instructions she provides the principle means of remaining in communion with Christ.

The Catechism summarizes all of this teaching in a beautiful passage:

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life.

There are many good things in this life, but, as Jesus said, "There is only one thing necessary." (Luke 10:42) In this year of faith, do not lose sight of the central mystery of the Catholic faith: to share in the intimacy of God's inner life, through faith and prayer, in fellowship with the Church, in the hope of eternal life. This is the Gospel of the Lord.