

The Direction of Lay Formation in the Apostolic Letter “Porta Fidei”

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In order to encourage all the faithful to renew and strengthen their faith, so as to experience the joy of encountering the Risen Lord and to preach the Good News, the Church designates this year as the “Year of Faith.” To respond to the Church’s invitation means to undergo once again the journey of conversion and to accept the grace of God. What can the Church do in its pastoral ministry to support lay people in their journey of conversion?

This essay first explains the main points in *Porta Fidei*, an apostolic letter by Pope Benedict XVI (hereafter “the Apostolic Letter,” PF), so that readers may have a basic understanding of the background and goals of the Year of Faith. After this, I shall point out some of the suggestions in the Apostolic Letter for the pastoral work of the Church.

1. *Porta Fidei*, Apostolic Letter of Pope Benedict XVI

At the beginning of the Apostolic Letter, Pope Benedict XVI cites the report of Paul and Barnabas to the Christian community in Antioch about the great things God has done with them. St. Paul says God “opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). This verse becomes the theme, the goal and the background for the inauguration of the Year of Faith. To understand the purpose and content of the Apostolic Letter, we must first have a clear understanding of what St. Paul says in the Bible.

1.1 *What is the “Door of Faith”?*

The pope points out that the Door of Faith is always open for us. This door guides us toward a life of communion with God and

fellowship in the Church. The pope's invitation is attractive and generous. It urges us to go forward. But how can one pass through this door and enter a life of communion with the Trinity? The letter says, "It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace" (PF 1). Through baptism, we become children of God and go through this door, and thus begin our journey of faith toward eternal life. But entering through the Door of Faith is only the starting point. We still need to pass through this threshold and walk toward our final destiny with the Church. During this journey, we profess our faith in the Trinity and lead a life of God's love. Therefore, the Apostolic Letter states, "To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime" (PF 1). This requires continuous conversion and deepening of faith: "Only through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger" (PF 7).

1.2 The Importance of Rediscovering Our Faith

Christians are by nature the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). In the life of modern man, however, the significance of faith in society has been tarnishing. In some cases, it is even publicly denied. The essence of the Christian faith and the values it inspires are no longer widely accepted by modern society, which is now undergoing a crisis of religious faith (PF 3). In view of this situation, the pope reinforces this point: "We cannot accept that salt should become tasteless or the light be kept hidden (cf. Mt 5:13-16). People today are still aware of the need to go to the well, like the Samaritan woman, in order to hear Jesus, who invites us to believe in him and to draw upon the source of living water welling up within him (cf. Jn 4:14)" (PF 3). Through the Word of God and the Bread of Life, faithfully handed down to us by the Church, Christ offers Himself as the means of sustenance for His disciples (PF 3). In this way, we may "shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ" (PF 2).

This year is also the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council, as well as the 20th anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Through this opportunity, the pope advises the whole Church to make good use

of these documents, so as to rediscover the Christian faith and to bring about a renewal for the whole Church (PF 4).

1.3 The Invitation of the Year of Faith

In order to bring about a renewal of the Church, we need to be more effective witnesses in our Christian lives, so that we can be a symbol of Christ's presence and salvation, thus leading other people to come to know Christ. This active and influential testimony comes from an inward profession of faith in the Lord, and it is expressed through our external acts. This is truly the Holy Spirit's work of transformation. In view of this, the pope points out that "the first act by which one comes to faith is God's gift and the action of grace which acts and transforms the person deep within" (PF 10). And he continues by saying that it is not enough to simply know the content of faith. We should also be "opened by grace that allows the eyes to see below the surface and to understand that what has been proclaimed is the word of God" (PF 10). From this perspective, "The Year of Faith is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world" (PF 6).

1.4 Summary

God's salvation — "the Door of Faith" — is always open to all mankind. For those Christians who have already passed through this threshold, they should, on the one hand, bring other people to Christ through an active life of Christian witness; on the other hand, they should constantly renew their faith in their journey toward Christ. Knowledge of the Christian faith and a life of witness are indispensable, since it is only when we come to deeper knowledge of what we believe that we may deepen our faith in the Lord, which enables us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

2. The Direction and Goal of Pastoral Work according to *Porta Fidei*

Undoubtedly, faith is first of all God's self-revelation to man, so that man may come to know and experience who He is. This is God's free gift to us, but this gift demands our response. In order to

develop an intimate, personal relationship with God, and to live a life of love in God, it is paramount for us to open ourselves toward the Holy Spirit. Man's faith in God grows and is strengthened through this unceasing response to God's gift. Therefore, the Apostolic Letter stresses that the goal of pastoral ministry is to encourage lay people to lead a life of ongoing conversion and to reflect upon their faith. Through their encounter with Christ, Christians become concrete and powerful witnesses of Christ to other people, so that man may direct his life toward love and communion with God.

Now I shall consider the objective and content of pastoral work during the Year of Faith from three perspectives: (1) an ongoing journey of conversion; (2) reflection upon the Christian faith; (3) the renewal of the Church.

2.1 An Ongoing Journey of Conversion

Once I heard an interesting sharing at a gathering for newly baptized Catholics. When one man heard for the first time in his life that "the journey of faith is an ongoing process of conversion," he found this idea very strange. He thought, "Isn't conversion a once-and-for-all experience? Wasn't I converted to Christ Jesus when I was baptized?" The first step to be taken is to help lay people understand that faith requires ongoing conversion, and that baptism is only the starting point of this lifelong journey. If we want to reach the destination of the faith journey, we should continue our formation after baptism. We should learn how to deepen our relationship with the Lord in our journey of faith, and to live out the Paschal mystery in our everyday life. During Easter each year, the Rites of Initiation remind us that the Sacrament of Baptism is a dynamic process of entering the Mystical Body of Christ. Baptism is a symbol of man renouncing his sins and of his determination to commit himself to Christ. Yet this is only the first step of the faith journey; after this, one must continuously commit himself to Christ, respond to God's love and walk on his journey toward God. From this, we can see that there are two meanings of "conversion." The first is conversion from a life of sin to a life of grace; the second is ongoing transformation through self-reflection and daily

commitment to one's own ministry. All catechumens must first undergo the process of initiation and enter the Door of Faith. In the same way, all who are baptized must enter the Paschal mystery through ongoing conversion.

2.2 Mystagogy in the Concrete Christian Life

The instructions on the four periods of formation in the catechumenate, contained in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, may serve as a guideline for the post-baptismal formation of lay Catholics. The four periods of the catechumenate are precatechumenate, catechumenate, period of purification and enlightenment and, finally, mystagogy. This is the process which all catechumens have to go through, but each and every lay Catholic also undergoes the same process of conversion, in which they are continuously transformed by the Word of God. In other words, they also go through the process of seeking, learning, understanding and actual practice.

Seeking: As the pope says in the Apostolic Letter, Christians face numerous challenges of faith in their everyday lives. The Christian faith is often confronted with questions and doubt. Even believers may “forget about God” and experience a crisis in their religious life (PF 2). In spite of this, man never ceases his search for the meaning of life. When we are able to relate this search for meaning with God, the ultimate goal of life, we begin a new stage in our journey of conversion, as if it is a new precatechumenate.

Inquiring: Deep in his heart, modern man has many questions, desires and concerns about human life. We can support lay Catholics in such a way that they may listen to the voice of God in their everyday lives, so that they may cultivate an open heart to encounter the Lord, receive His guidance and be transformed. When Jesus saw the two disciples of John the Baptist who were following Him, He asked, “What are you seeking?” (John 1:38). The first step for mutual contact, understanding and caring is “listening.” Here lay Christian communities play a significant role. Parishes may encourage their members to join these associations, so that lay Catholics may support and encourage each other in their

faith journey. Just as the Lord walked along with the disappointed and perplexed disciples who had gone astray in their journey to Emmaus, listening to them and opening their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:13-35), we may invite the Lord to walk with us as we “walk along” with each other.

Understanding: Each follower of Christ should continuously cultivate a profound knowledge of Christ Jesus. As the Apostolic Letter says, faith grows and is strengthened by a deeper understanding of the content of the Christian faith. Besides frequent reading of the Bible and prayer, we may make good use of Church documents, such as the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which explain to us the content of our faith in a systematic way. The diocese and parishes may organize formation courses for lay Catholics for this purpose.

Practice: In order to live a life of discipleship, a Christian must put into practice the values of the Christian faith in everyday life. Jesus, our Master, accomplishes the mission given to Him by God the Father both through His words and actions. He sends us out to manifest the presence of the Kingdom of God through our actions. Therefore, while washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper, Jesus asks us to wash the feet of one another. He says, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

2.3 *Renewal of the Church*

New Evangelization: In the Apostolic Letter, what the pope means by “new evangelization” is that the joy and enthusiasm of the Early Church for witnessing to the Risen Lord should be revived. On the other hand, it also means seeking “new” ways and instruments to preach the Good News, so that the Good News of Jesus may be understood by different people from different ages, circumstances and cultures.

Understanding of the Church: When talking about the renewal of the Church, it often comes to the minds of lay Catholics

that it has something to do with the diocese, parishes or priests. But what can lay Catholics do? What does “the Church” refer to?

In the Apostolic Letter, the pope states clearly, “The renewal of the Church is also achieved through the witness offered by the lives of believers” (PF 6). The Church is “the People of God” gathered together by God Himself. This imagery may help lay Catholics to be aware of their mission and realize that the purpose of the Church’s existence in this world is to spread the Good News of God.

The Promotion and Development of Lay Ministry: Each and every baptized Christian has a share in the priesthood, prophetic office and kingship of Jesus Christ. Besides, he is also called to serve the needy in the Church community. Through his charitable work, he manifests the presence of God’s Kingdom on earth. The emergence of lay ministry is a response to needs in the development of Christian communities. Through active witness and charitable work, it spreads Christ’s Good News in the concrete situation of society. Nowadays, lay people’s participation in the life of the parish has become more proactive. Even so, there is still room for improvement in the social dimension of their ministry — they need to reach out to the people living in the neighborhood.

Conclusion

Faith is a journey of departure from the old self, as well as an ongoing process of conversion which brings about a transformation into the new self. There are many challenges and threats in this journey, yet these are excellent opportunities for us to ask, “Who am I? What is God’s position in my life? How deep are my knowledge, trust and love of God?”

When we reflect upon our faith, God’s salvation is manifested in us. Let us respond generously to the invitation of the Year of Faith — rediscover and renew our faith, revive the joy and enthusiasm we experience in our encounter with Christ, and manifest to the world the glory of God the Father.