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***Lumen Fidei*: The Light of Faith in the Year of Faith**

Bishop John Folda

Only two weeks after my ordination as Bishop of Fargo, our Holy Father Pope Francis issued the first encyclical letter of his pontificate, entitled *Lumen Fidei* – the Light of Faith. Continuing a series of teachings on the fundamentals of our Christian lives, begun by Pope Benedict XVI, Francis turns to that most basic foundation of all, faith itself. And from the very first words of his encyclical, from which its title is drawn, he teaches us that faith is a light that illumines every dimension of our lives.

The world carries on “as if God does not exist,” and often declares faith in God to be against human progress. Faith is equated by some with darkness, an unwillingness to step into the light of reason and scientific truth. On the contrary, faith, in reality, is a necessary path to truth. It elevates our minds and our very lives to higher things, to the highest truth of all, to God himself. Faith moves us to reach above and beyond ourselves toward the One who has made us. It calls us to exceed the limits that we have set for ourselves and to seek the highest truth, good, and beauty that can be found in God alone.

Furthermore, faith in God impels us to look at one another in a different way. Without the gift of faith, indeed without living the faith we have been given, it is easy to look askance at one another, to see in the other nothing more than a transitory being that may or may not be of some use to us. This is the story of our modern era, where the dignity of the human person has been so often denigrated and replaced by mere utility or even forgotten. Faith allows us to see one another more deeply, more charitably, to recognize each other as children of God, and therefore as brothers and sisters. Faith, in short, calls us to be more perfectly human, that is, to be more like Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

Pope Francis reaffirms what most of us learned as children: faith is a gift. It is a grace given to us so that we might know the truth, and know it more fully and clearly. But faith can be diminished, or even lost, if it is ignored or smothered by lesser goods. Faith must be actively cultivated, and hence Pope Benedict XVI had declared a Year of Faith, a time for deeper reflection on this gift of faith that we have received, and a time for sharing that faith with others. Yes, faith is meant to be shared! As we have received the gift of faith, so we also have an obligation to share that gift with others. In our politeness, we may at times be reluctant or too shy about professing the faith that has so shaped our lives. But the current Holy Father, Francis, is also urging us to cast aside fear or hesitation and to give witness with renewed vigor to our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man.

If we would be true and reliable witnesses of this faith, then we must know it and understand it well. How easy it is to settle for an elementary and simplistic faith, one that does not challenge or move us, a faith that does not permeate every moment of our lives. But Pope Francis, and Pope Benedict before him, is inviting us to a deeper faith, a more complete understanding of our faith.

By our celebration of the sacraments, especially Baptism, the Eucharist, and Reconciliation, we encounter the love of the Father as his children, and we enter into a love relationship with God that arouses and strengthens our faith. And by regular and faithful reading and

reflection on the Word of God in the Sacred Scriptures, the light of faith illuminates our lives and allows us to know God more intimately.

How could we fail to mention one of the great blessings of our time, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*? The *Catechism*, and the *Compendium of the Catechism* that followed it, are wonderful resources not only for religious educators, but for all the faithful. A steady and careful reading of one or the other of these volumes is bound to answer many questions and shed light on the many uncertainties that we face in daily life. No Catholic household should be without the *Catechism* or its *Compendium*, and if we read it alongside the Bible, our understanding of the faith will undoubtedly grow.

Pope Francis reminds us too that faith is not received in isolation but is given to us within the communion of the Church. A person of faith does not lose his or her unique individuality, but faith welcomes each of us precisely as individuals into the Church, the Body of Christ. In our time of rugged individualism, it is fashionable to “go it alone,” or to be “a non-conformist.” But any observer of our society and culture can see that people are more and more isolated from one another, even with the plethora of gadgets that claim to link us together. Faith draws us into the great family of believers that Jesus himself established, the Church. And it is within the Church that the truth of the Gospel is received, where the faith is fostered and nourished.

Last month I had the opportunity to present a talk for the Year of Faith in Valley City and Grand Forks on the topic of “Faith in the Middle Ages through the Reformation.” This is a vast topic, and a one-hour talk could hardly do justice to its scope. But this talk reminded me, and hopefully my listeners, that through the struggles and travails of history, faith endures and brings the light of Christ to every age and culture. Faith has been passed on in the Church over many generations by people of great holiness, by famous saints like Francis, Thomas Aquinas, and Ignatius Loyola, but also by ordinary believers like us.

The light of faith not only calls us together in unity, but it also sends us forth in charity to carry out the mission given to each of us by Christ. In this Year of Faith, may we rediscover the wonders of this gift, and with renewed appreciation for the faith in all its richness, may we live it and pass it on.