39.

“We also believe, and so we speak” (2 Cor 4:13):

A Reflection on Lumen fidei (The Light of Faith)

Towards the end of the new encyclical we come across a question from one of the earliest critics of Christian faith, a second-century Greek philosopher named Celsus: “Why claim that [grass] grows for the benefit of man rather than for that of the most savage of the brute beasts?” In other words, on what basis can the claim be made that God created the world for human beings? How is such a claim to be proven? Do human beings work harder than ants and bees and countless other living things? Are we simply deluded in thinking that human beings are special, as in the breathtaking words of Psalm 8: “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, / the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, / what is man that you are mindful of him, / and the son of man that you care for him?” That ancient question has resurfaced in a slightly different form in post-modern culture; it has been a question that Benedict XVI attempted to answer anew. As the letter states, “Our culture has lost its sense of God’s tangible presence and activity in our world” (#17).

The difference in tone between the new encyclical and, for example, Pope Francis’ address to the bishops of Brazil on July 27 is striking. The encyclical is long and theological, having been started and largely completed by Benedict XVI. The address in Rio de Janeiro, on the other hand, is personal, meditative and—given the occasion—brief. The encyclical follows upon Benedict’s previous encyclicals On Christian Love (Deus caritas est), Saved by Hope (Spe salvi), and Charity
in Truth (Caritas in veritate) that appeared in 2005, 2007, and 2009. I was teaching a course on faith and reason when Spe salvi appeared. That letter, engaging and profound, could easily have served as the course’s foundation. The background issue there—and it carries over into Lumen fidei—is, I suggest, the relation between faith and culture. Does Christian faith have a message that can meet head-on and engage the disenchantment with traditional belief that is gradually permeating North Atlantic societies? The question unfolding throughout Spe salvi was: can humanity survive without hope and can that hope be sustained if it has no transcendent ground? In Lumen fidei the question becomes: can the human race flourish without knowing where it came from and why it is here? Are we walking aimlessly through history, or is there a meaning to our fragile existence? And here we arrive at the junction of reason and religion: there is no true understanding of humanity’s origin and destiny, the encyclical argues, without faith. In the same way, there can be no true and lasting love that is not accompanied by trust.

**An appeal to experience**

The strongest argument for the necessity of faith that the encyclical makes is its appeal to experience: what happens to individuals, communities, and whole societies when faith is subtracted from thinking, acting, and relating? What happens when reason becomes autonomous? The encyclical answers: “the light of autonomous reason is not enough to illumine the future . . . in the absence of light everything becomes confused; it is impossible to tell good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which takes us in endless circles, going nowhere” (#3). And again: “Once man has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks
down into the multiplicity of his desires; in refusing to await the
time of promise, his life-story disintegrates into a myriad of
unconnected instants” (#13).

No reasonable person would doubt the critical role trust
plays in human relationships; what else could love or friendship
or social harmony rest upon? What would happen if we could
not trust what others have learned and discovered? What would
happen if cultures lost the traditions of popular wisdom and the
hard-won lessons of the past? In other words, trust—and
believing—is eminently “reasonable.” Such faith, even at its
most basic human level, is a sign of grace at work. Once again
the encyclical: “Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the
lives of those men and women who, though not believers,
nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent
that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever
light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it,
on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed,
at times because they realize how important he is for finding a
sure compass for our life in common or because they experience
a desire for light amid darkness, but also because in perceiving
life’s grandeur and beauty they intuit that the presence of God
would make it all the more beautiful.” (#35) The human being
is by nature oriented towards transcendence. The moment that
we recognize this basic fact about ourselves, we have taken a
first step on the way of faith.

Because faith is a way: the journey metaphor likewise
rests upon experience. In this case, it is the experience that we
are all familiar with of seeking, desiring, looking. “Those who
believe, see; they see with a light that illumines their entire
journey” (#1). “Religious man is a wayfarer; he must be ready
to let himself be led, to come out of himself and to find the God
of perpetual surprises” (#35); “the whole of life is drawn into a journey towards full communion with the living God” (#45). The 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote to his sister: “if you want peace of soul and happiness, then believe; but if you want to be a follower of truth, then seek” (#2). But Christian experience leads to a very different conclusion: not only are seeking and believing, truth and faith, not incompatible; they are inseparable. Truth is discovered by walking, and the way we walk is confirmed to be true because it is life-giving. Such is the force of Jesus’ words, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). In other words, faith is something we do; it is about practice; it is about relating oneself to God. The only way to confirm its truthfulness is to walk it.

The appeal to experience in order to clarify how faith and reason are connected from within—two moments conjoined in the life of the mind—should not be underestimated. When the encyclical says, “faith ‘sees’ to the extent that it journeys” (#9), it is implicitly drawing on experience. We learn, from experience, that the failure to drink liquids leads to dehydration, and dehydration has consequences. So too we learn from experience that the reluctance or the failure to seek or to journey has consequences, and these can be dire for the human spirit. Ultimately, faith brings us to “see” that we come from God—all of us—and that we are most like God when we love. “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” (#4). “Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love” (#26).
The communal setting of faith

The third chapter of the encyclical situates faith in its ecclesial context. Faith is not a private matter between the individual believer and God; it lives and breathes within a community of remembrance. “By its very nature, faith is open to the ‘We’ of the Church; it always takes place within her communion” (#39). “The Church is a Mother who teaches us to speak the language of faith” (#38). The journey each of us makes is not a solitary one; it always includes the company of others. The letter argues that we have to trust the tradition—the long line of faithful women and men—that goes back to the first disciples, the first witnesses. “I cannot possible verify for myself something which happened so long ago” (#38). And here the encyclical becomes elegant: “But this is not the only way we attain knowledge. Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others. Even our knowledge and self-awareness are relational; they are linked to others who have gone before us. . . . Self-knowledge is only possible when we share in a greater memory” (#38).

Just because they lived so much closer to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection faith did not come any more easily to the first disciples than it does to us. After all, there were many who listened to Jesus and saw what he did but in the end walked away in disbelief (John 6:60, 66). Even some of the disciples, on the very mount of the ascension, still had their doubts (Matt 28:17). Yet there is a reality in every age that empowers and gives life to faith because God is to be found there; it is the reality of the poor and disheartened, a reality that is very much on the mind of Pope Francis. Drawing on the Emmaus story
about two disillusioned disciples walking away from the city of hope and promise, this is what he said to the bishops in Brazil:

We need a Church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a Church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a Church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning. . . . Today, we need a Church capable of walking at people’s side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church able to make sense of the ‘night’ contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger picture.

_A Church that can walk at people’s side_: here may be the best response we can make today to non-belief. “We also believe, and so we speak,” Saint Paul wrote. We speak, and thus we act, as a result of our belief; and perhaps we speak most effectively today, as a Church, when we accompany those who are poor, or spiritually adrift, or searching. “Faith does not merely gaze at Jesus, but sees things as Jesus himself sees them, with his own eyes; it is a participation in his way of seeing” (#18). Jesus saw the world as a prophet would, and the gospels are very clear about what he noticed. In scene after scene we find him among his people, speaking and acting from the depths of his own faith. The Church that walks at people’s side is a Church that takes risks. This is what having faith means. Pope Francis once said in an interview: “We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a Church that is wrapped up in its own world . . . It is true that going out into the street implies a risk of accidents happening . . . And if I had to choose between a
wounded Church that goes out into the street and a sick withdrawn Church, I would definitely choose the first one.” As the encyclical warns, “Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted” (#53).

So, why faith?

The encyclical does not attempt to explain why God created us to live by faith rather than, say, by a direct and immediate revelation that would make the transcendent dimension of our lives transparent. It does speak of Moses as a sort of privileged witness whose religious experience we have to trust, since he (like many others) became a mediator: “The people may not see the face of God; it is Moses who speaks to YHWH on the mountain and then tells the others of the Lord’s will” (#14). Yet Scripture also recalls Moses saying, “I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit upon them all!” (Numbers 11:29). So, Moses apparently would like to see all the people inspired! Besides, what sort of mediator would Moses or any of the prophets have been, if they were exempt from the faith struggles the rest of us must pass through?

It does not seem right that God should have given us intelligence, but at the very point where salvation is at stake we God expects us to forsake intelligence and accept on faith. Perhaps the problem is that we tend to think of faith and reason as contrasts rather than complements. It is not as if Moses’ interior life was built on certitudes received at Sinai while everyone else’s was built on faith. Faith, the encyclical insists, is itself a way of knowing; there is nothing artificial about it. Faith should not be juxtaposed to reason (especially when “reason” is restricted to what takes place in the physical and
natural sciences). Faith, like all knowing, is one more indication of how much we depend upon one another.

The search for God is at the same time a search for a community because there is no path to God that bypasses God’s people. Figures like Abraham, Moses, and Elijah populate the Bible, both Testaments. But in the end the biblical story is not about individuals; it is about a people. “The individual’s act of faith finds its place within a community, within the common ‘we’ of the people” (#14). Find the people and we will find God; find the people and we will understand.

[2013]