

***Lumen Fidei* – The Light of Faith**

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Introduction

Lumen Fidei (The Light of Faith) is the last of three papal encyclicals on the three theological virtues – faith, hope and love.

The first two are *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), which is subtitled “On Christian Love”, and *Spe Salvi [facti sumus]* (In Hope we were saved – Rom 8:24), subtitled “On Christian Hope”.

Who wrote this present encyclical? Pope Francis tells us that, “These considerations on faith...are meant to supplement what Benedict XVI has written in his encyclical letters on charity and hope. He himself had almost completed a first draft of an encyclical on faith. For this I am deeply grateful to him, and as a brother in Christ I have taken up his fine work and added a few contributions of my own” (n. 7). So the answer is – substantially, Pope Benedict XVI.

In this encyclical, we have an exposition of the nature of faith by one of the preeminent theologians of the last 100 years, a name that can be mentioned in the same breath with that of Barth, Congar, de Lubac, Guardini, Rahner and von Balthasar.

***Lumen Fidei* in Context**

To begin with, I wish to place this encyclical in the context of the two others. Why did Pope Benedict address the three theological virtues in what could be called “reverse” order – love, hope and then faith? Why begin with love?

We can find an answer at the very beginning of *Deus Caritas Est*: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is Love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). The whole basis of being a Christian begins with love. It lies in encountering God and his love for us.

Reading through these three encyclicals, I think that we are being taught something of great importance – we cannot properly understand the three theological virtues if we treat them in isolation from each other, if we just divide them into three discrete virtues. In treating of the moral virtues, Plato said that “virtue is one”, and I think that, as well as treating the theological virtues separately in an analytical way, we need to approach them synthetically as well.

In all three of these encyclicals, Pope Benedict treats these three virtues together. In *Deus Caritas Est*, faith and love are inseparable. In the beginning, we cannot separate our faith in God from God's love for us, a faith which does not just "believe", but "knows", because God abides in us.

This inseparability is made even more explicit in *Spe Salvi*, where Pope Benedict points out that in several biblical passages the words "faith" and "hope" seem to be interchangeable – that hope is equivalent to faith (n. 2).

Finally, in *Lumen Fidei*, he writes that: "We 'believe in' Jesus when we personally welcome him into our lives and journey towards him, clinging to him in love and following in his footsteps along the way" (n. 18).

We can say that faith, hope and love are like a single plant. Faith is like the roots, hope is like the stem and branches, and love is like the leaves, blossoms and fruit.

To put it another way, faith and hope are temporal modes of love, that is, they are temporal modes of self-gift. To decide to trust in a person, and to expectantly trust in them for the future, are modes of surrendering ourselves to them.

Following St. Paul (1 Cor 13:13), when we say that in the fullness of our beatific communion with God only love will remain, it does not mean that faith and hope will be shed as a cicada sheds its outer skin, but they will be subsumed into our love for God, as a caterpillar mysteriously becomes a butterfly.

Benedictine Themes

Turning to *Lumen Fidei* itself, there are a variety of ways in which one could approach it. One could give a summary of it, as does Nicholas Tonti-Fillipini in a recent issue of *Kairos*. Or one could write a commentary, seeking to pick out points of interest, such as that given by Francis Rocca in the *Catholic Herald*. Or one could do what David Schütz does for the Catholic Adult Education Centre in *Inform* – explain the central idea of the encyclical, which he identifies as "journey" – a very astute observation. I highly recommend David's article.

However, in order to avoid covering the same ground that these approaches take, what I propose to do is to highlight what I have called some "Benedictine Themes" in the encyclical, themes which keep recurring in the encyclical, themes which I hope will help you to do more than understand the encyclical when you read or reread it, but enable you to respond to it in faith, hope and love.

Encounter

The first theme is “encounter”. “Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which proceeds us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives” (n. 4).

Seeing

The second is “seeing”. “Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see. . . . Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time” (n. 4).

Hearing

The third is “hearing”. “Abraham does not see God, but hears his voice. . . . Faith is our response to a word which engages us personally, to a ‘thou’ who calls us by name” (n. 8).

Yet, there is sight – “Faith ‘sees’ to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons open up by God’s word” (n. 9).

If we wish to see God, we must choose to respond to his word.

Remembering

The fourth is “remembering”. “As a response to a word which proceeds it, Abraham’s faith would always be an act of remembrance” (n. 9). Since it is a memory of a promise, it opens up to the future, not just to the past.

Worship

The fifth is “worship”. The journey of faith leads to worship – “Faith becomes a summons to a lengthy journey leading to the worship of the Lord on Sinai, and the inheritance of a promised land” (n. 12). Remembrance of God’s mighty deeds are recalled and celebrated in worship.

Gazing upon God’s Face

The sixth is “gazing upon God’s face”. We are called to encounter God ‘face to face’. The opposite of faith is idolatry. “Faith by its very nature demands renouncing the immediate possession which sight would appear to offer; it is an invitation to turn to the source of the light, while respecting the mystery of a countenance which will unveil itself personally in its own good time. Martin Buber once cited a definition of idolatry proposed by the rabbi of Kock: idolatry is ‘when a face addresses a face which is not a face’” (n. 13).

Participating in the Vision of Another

The seventh is “participating in the vision of another”. We are called to encounter God face to face, yet we cannot see God face to face – we need a mediator. Moses spoke with God on the mountain and communicated God’s will to the people of Israel. We do not encounter God just individually, but with others. “Here mediation is not an obstacle, but an opening: through our encounter with others, our gaze rises to a truth greater than ourselves” (n. 14). This is the knowledge which is proper to love – “this capacity to participate in the vision of another” (n. 14).

Beholding the Pierced One

The eighth is “beholding the Pierced One”. We must turn the gaze of our faith upon Jesus Crucified, for here the depth and breadth of God’s love shine forth – “it is precisely in contemplating Jesus’ death that faith grows stronger and receives a dazzling light; then it is revealed as faith in Christ’s steadfast love for us, a love capable of embracing death to bring us salvation” (n. 16). Unlike Moses, who could not see God’s face, we can gaze upon the face of God when we behold the Pierced One. The love of God is “a love that can be encountered, a love fully revealed in Christ’s passion, death and resurrection” (n. 17).

Participating in Jesus’ seeing

The ninth is “participating in Jesus’ seeing”. Going back to the idea that love is the capacity to participate in the vision of another, we are told that – “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” (n. 18).

Living in Christ

The tenth is “living in Christ”. Faith is a new way of seeing which brings salvation. “Faith in Christ brings salvation because in him our lives become radically open to a love that precedes us, a love that transforms us from within, acting in us and through us” (n. 20). Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (cf. Eph 3:17). “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20) (n. 21).

The meaning of these verses is brought out in the following magnificent passage – “The self-awareness of the believer now expands because of the presence of another; it now lives in this other and thus, in love, life takes on a whole new breadth. Here we see the Holy Spirit at work. The Christian can see with the eyes of Jesus and share in his mind, his filial disposition, because he or she shares in his love, which is the Spirit. In the love of Jesus, we receive in a certain way his vision” (n. 21).

Living in the Body of Christ

The eleventh is “living in the Body of Christ”. To live in Christ is to live in his Body. “Just as Christ gathers to himself all those who believe and makes them his body, so the Christian comes to see himself as a member of this body, in an essential relationship with all other believers” (n. 22).

Not only that, but Christ ‘sees’ the world through us – “in the words of Romano Guardini, [the Church] ‘is the bearer within history of the plenary gaze of Christ on the world’” (n. 22).

Christ sees the world through his Body, and it is only by being a member of this Body of Christ that we can see the world with the eyes of Christ.

The Heart

There are more Benedictine themes which I could attempt to elucidate if time permitted – but I will finish on a twelfth theme, the one which I think lies at the heart of the theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI – the heart.

What kind of knowledge is the knowledge of faith? The encyclical quotes St. Paul to the effect that “One believes with the heart” (Rom 10:10). It goes on to say that: “In the Bible, the heart is the core of the human person, where all his or her different dimensions intersect: body and spirit, interiority and openness to the world and to others, intellect, will and affectivity. If the heart is capable of holding all these dimensions together, it is because it is where we become open to truth and love, where we let them touch us and deeply transform us. Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love. Through this blending of faith and love we come to see the kind of knowledge which faith entails, its power to convince and its ability to illuminate our steps. Faith knows because it is tied to love, because love itself brings enlightenment. Faith’s understanding is born when we receive the immense love of God which transforms us inwardly and enables us to see reality with new eyes” (n. 26).

Conclusion

I hope that this all too brief reflection has given you some ideas about how to read not just *Lumen Fidei*, but all three of these encyclicals. They are not the kind of documents that one reads once, and then leaves aside. Rather, they will reward the returning reader with some precious jewels that can be set into one’s life of faith in the Body of Christ.