

The Year of Faith: At the Halfway Point

By Dr. Dan McGuire

What are you doing to celebrate the “Year of Faith”? Perhaps some of you are asking, “Year of What? When did all this start?”

Pope Benedict announced the Year of Faith (Oct. 11, 2012 – Nov. 24, 2013) to mark two important anniversaries in the Church. October 11th 50 years ago was the opening of the Second Vatican Council that has set the course for the Church in modern times. On that same day, 30 years later, the revised Catechism of the Catholic Church was published. These two important anniversaries were meant to be celebrated, reflected upon – and most importantly – lived during this special year. Most notably, this was meant to be centered around the local parish and the individual family.

In 2000, as the Church began her third millennium, Pope John Paul II published a document which called for a new evangelization effort. Entire countries that were once at the heart of Catholicism, like France and Italy, had experienced such a large scale abandonment of the faith that their cultures were no longer predominantly Christian. This Year of Faith is meant to be a part of that new effort to make the Gospels – the Good News of Christ – meaningful for modern believers. The focus for this year was to be on prayer, sacraments and catechesis, each meant to foster an encounter with Jesus Christ.

So now that we are halfway through the Year of Faith, it is a good time to pause and ask ourselves, “How are we doing?”? If your answer is, “Well, to be honest, this is the first I’ve heard of it.”; do not fret. There is still plenty of time. Let’s look at each of the three elements (prayer, sacraments and catechesis) and consider why they were chosen and what resources are available to us.

All three elements are about conversion. Since you are reading this on your parish website, you might be thinking, “I have been converted for years, this is not for me.” In reality, conversion is for everyone; it is not a one-time event but a life-long process. Consider the apostles. They were initially converted when Christ called them to leave their fishing boats and follow Him. Over the three years of His public ministry they came to know Him and His message until St. Peter could say, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). But even after this new depth of conversion, they all abandoned Him and St. Peter even denied knowing Him.

It was not until they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they were ready to begin the work they had been called to do. If even the apostles were in need of a series of conversions, it would be a safe bet we all are in similar need. Conversion is a process of an ever deeper encounter with Christ. There is always more that can be done until the day we see Him face to face in Heaven – that is when conversion is complete. So, each of the three elements (prayer, sacraments and catechesis) are aimed at making that conversion deeper, more meaningful and ever-new.

1. Prayer Prayer is always the starting point. In our busy lives, with so many voices and concerns demanding our attention, it may be hard to put prayer first. Here the individual, the family and the parish must decide that conversation with God is worth making a priority. If we decide to include Him in

our daily tasks, we will find that conversation spills over into energy and motivation for the more important moments in each person's life. In the Year of Faith, we want to ask, "What is the next step in my (our) conversion? What is the next step you need me (our family, this parish) to take on this journey we call faith?" Any effort at conversion or evangelization is ultimately an encounter between Christ and each person He wants to love into Heaven. If you want to know what to do, you need to ask God!

2. Sacraments The sacraments are gifts Christ gave His Church so that through her (the Church), people might meet Him in a special way. Through the actions of the priest (or deacon or bishop), Christ Himself comes to meet His people. Most of the readers of this piece are likely to be fully initiated (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) into the life of grace. The sacraments of holy orders and marriage provide grace in a singular way to live out our personal vocations. So, the focus on the sacraments in this Year of Faith emphasizes the sacraments of healing (Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick) and communion (Eucharist).

If encounter with Christ is the real message, can one have a more personal encounter than to receive His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity into their own bodies? The frequent reception of the Eucharist at Mass is always the most personal possible encounter with Christ. For those of us who live in rural areas and have experienced the sadness of not having Mass available from time to time, it is even more meaningful.

The Eucharist is primary, but it implies Reconciliation. St. Paul tells us that those who receive the sacrament unworthily (not in the state of grace):

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. (1 Cor. 11:26-29)

Some people have a hard time going to this sacrament of healing because they have been conditioned to see it as an act of judgment or punishment. While judgment and acknowledgement of bad consequences are part of confession, it is no less an encounter with our Lord, the Good Shepherd. In the confessional, Jesus finds His lost and wounded sheep and puts it on His shoulders to carry it home. Christ weeps with us over our weaknesses and offers us His strength to heal.

3. Catechesis: This is a theologian's favorite subject, but something most of us thought we completed at Confirmation. But catechesis is just another means of encountering and loving Christ. We cannot truly love someone we do not know. If our knowledge of Christ is that level of knowledge appropriate for a 2nd grader (or if you are older, an 8th grader), how well do we really know Him? If the God-man is the inexhaustible mystery of God's love, can we ever know Him well enough? We learn math, science and English for many years; each year building on the last and building us up as well. Why on earth would we not do the same for Christ? Get involved in a Bible Study or Adult Education program. Read some of the writings of the great saints, or commit to listening to a podcast of a good book while you drive.

So, as a parish or as a family, how are we doing? There is still half the year left; let's do more – and perhaps try something different. Look for opportunities to celebrate the Year of Faith or start ones on your own. Resources abound, all you need to do is look with eyes of faith and new eagerness. (For those who are web-savvy, check out: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/new-evangelization/year-of-faith/>) You will see a sidebar on the right with links to a host of ideas and information. Dust off that Bible and the Catechism. Encounter Christ on an ever deeper level and allow love to grow into conversion.