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You Are the Light of the World

The first in a new series of articles on effective ways to share the "light of faith" with those around us, by speaking a language that people can understand today.

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The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned (Mt 4:16). With words from the prophet Isaiah, Saint Matthew presents under the sign of

light the beginning of our Lord's apostolic activity in Galilee, a territory which joined Israel with the lands of pagan peoples. Jesus, as the old man Simeon had prophesied when he held the Infant Christ in his arms, *is a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel* (Lk 2:32) Our Lord himself will state: *I am the light of the world* (Jn 8:12). With the light of faith, with the light that He himself is, reality acquires its true perspective; life finds its true meaning. But "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 take us in endless circles, going nowhere."[1]

Many people today, sometimes without realizing it, are looking for God. They are seeking the happiness they can only find in God, since their hearts are made by Him and for Him.

Saint Augustine addressed God in prayer: “Thou art there in their hearts, in the hearts of those who confess Thee, who throw themselves upon Thee, who shed tears upon thy bosom after their troubled ways . . . because it is thou, O Lord, not any man, not flesh and blood, but Thou, O Lord, their Maker, who dost remake and comfort them.”[2]

Nevertheless, some still hope to find happiness in other places, as though the Christian God were a rival to their desires for happiness. In reality, they are searching for God, yet they discover “only his shadow, for they do not know Christ. They have not seen the beauty of his face, they do not realize how wonderful his teaching is.”[3]

Do you believe in the Son of Man?

Jesus asked the man born blind, after he was cured. *And who is he, sir, that I might believe in him? (Jn 9:35).* In every corner of the world, there are

men and women who, despite all the indifference and hostility they might seem to show for the faith, also have the hope that someone will show them where to find God, where the One who can give light to their eyes and satisfy their thirst can be found. Their situation is described very well in Saint Irenaeus' words about Abraham: "when, urged on by the ardent desire in his heart, he went all about the world searching for God, and he began to grow tired and was about to give up his quest, God took pity on him who alone was silently seeking Him."[4] We Christians need to try to reach all of these people who are seeking God, with the humble and serene conviction that we know the One they are seeking (cf *Jn 1:45; Acts 17:23*) —although we ourselves often realize that we still do not know Him very well. Our Lord tells all Christians: *you are the light of the world (Mt 5:14); you give them something to eat (Mt 14:16).*

Leaven in the dough

The Gospel “responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us . . . surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people’s hearts.”^[5] Our faith “is capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence,”^[6] in contrast with merely human knowledge, which sheds light on only some aspects of life. Yet the light that *shines in the darkness* (Jn 1:15) faces a cool reception in a world that accepts as real only what can be seen or touched, or what can be known in the light of today’s science and public consensus. Through a sort of cultural inertia over the last few centuries, faith is often seen as “a leap in the dark, to be taken in the absence of light, driven by blind emotion, or as a subjective light, capable perhaps of warming the heart and bringing personal consolation, but not

something which could be proposed to others.”[7]

But we can also find many reasons to be optimistic. Benedict XVI pointed out that in more recent times science has begun to admit its limitations.

“Many scientists in our times say that the universe has to come from something; that we should look at this question again. At the same time, people are acknowledging a new understanding of religion, not just as an ancient, mythological reality, but as something having an inner relation with the *Logos*.”[8] Little by little, the simplistic view that belief in God is just a human device to cover over our ignorance is being overcome. A path has been opened to a concept of faith as an outlook that gives us a deeper understanding of the world, history and mankind, recognizing at the same time the complexities and mysteries involved.
[9]

These new perspectives give rise to new challenges for theology and catechesis, and also for our personal apostolate. “The practice of religion has to discover ways of including this new context, finding new ways of expression and clearer comprehension. The man of today might not readily appreciate how the blood of Christ atones for our sins . . . We have to present concepts that can explain what we mean.”[10] Indeed the task of the theologian is not only to deepen our understanding of the various aspects of the faith, but also to bring each generation closer to the Gospel. Theology and catechesis should not seek to adapt the faith to the short-sightedness of modern times, but rather to make Christ’s teaching understandable for people today. The concerns, challenges and ways of speaking of each epoch need to be confronted, not as a lesser evil, but as the matter from which God expects us to produce a savory bread,

a bread that can nourish everyone (cf *Mt* 14:16). “We were invited to be leaven of this particular dough. Certainly, there could be better ‘flour,’ but our Lord invited us to be leaven here and now, with the challenges this presents. Not on the defensive, not from our fears but with our hands on the hoe, helping the wheat to grow, often sown in the midst of cockle.”[11]

Paying attention to the mentality of today’s world does not mean adding new elements to the Gospel; rather it forms an essential part of fidelity to Christ’s truth. We need to protect the faith, live it in an authentic fashion, and teach it to others (cf *Mk* 16:15). Therefore we need to appreciate our faith for what it truly is and help others to do so: as a gift from God that can transform our lives, filling them with light. “There are some who pass through life as through a tunnel, without ever understanding

the splendor, the security and the warmth of the sun of faith.”[12]

Our effort to show others the light and warmth of the faith is imbued with a genuine desire to understand the perplexities and doubts of our contemporaries, and not dismiss these concerns as mere stubbornness or confusion. This is the best path for finding in each case the right words to convince others. There are people, Saint Josemaria wrote, “who know nothing about God because no one has talked to them in terms they can understand.”[13] When someone doesn’t understand, it could be that the friend giving the explanation doesn’t totally understand the question either. Perhaps the one explaining fails to grasp fully the other person’s doubts and concerns, and speaks in an overly abstract way without engaging that person’s interest. At the same time, it is good to remember that “we will never be

able to make the Church's teachings easily understood or readily appreciated by everyone. Faith always remains something of a cross; it retains a certain obscurity which does not detract from the firmness of its assent. Some things are understood and appreciated only from the standpoint of this assent, which is a sister to love, beyond the range of clear reasons and arguments.”[14]

Catholics have at times been criticized as narrow-minded since they refuse to go along with certain presuppositions that the world at large accepts as given. Nevertheless, we can't give in to fear or resentment in the face of these criticisms. We need to recognize the personal insecurity or hurt that underlies a negative response, and always be on the lookout for better ways of explaining our vision of the world. Thus others will come to see in us “a

breadth of vision . . . a careful awareness of trends in science and contemporary thought, and a positive and open attitude towards the current changes in society and in ways of living.”[15]

This is the first in a series of editorials that will try to illustrate how the Catholic faith gives satisfactory answers to the deepest aspirations of the human heart in the 21st century. As Vatican II taught, Christ “fully reveals man to himself.”[16] We want to address the difficulties that many people, including Christians with good formation, have in understanding certain aspects of the faith, and in trying to explain them to those whose faith has grown cold, or who want to learn more about it. Hence we have in mind a very broad public: believers, others who are doubtful, and non-believers with a least some opening to the faith.

The various topics covered, without claiming to be exhaustive, will be focused on recalling pathways and opening up new avenues for grasping points that may be less clear to people today. In summary, we want to try to show how the faith illuminates reality and how the light of faith enables us to live a coherent life. Among the questions to be addressed are: What difference does it make to my life, for example, that Christ has risen from the dead, or that God is a Trinity of Persons? How does belief in the creation of the world affect my vision of reality? If life beyond death is not a physical place, how can I consider it as real as the ground I step on?

Where your synthesis is

Merely watching a game of tennis on television doesn't improve a person's tennis skills. What one learns by watching others play has to be put

into practice on the tennis court. In a similar way, deepening our knowledge of the faith is not merely a matter of memorizing information and explanations. We can benefit enormously from what we read or study, but we need to personally assimilate the truths we learn and make them our own. “When theology is studied not in a routine or rote-learning fashion, but as part of life, it helps the mind greatly to make the truths of faith its own and to think in the faith and from the faith. That is the only way to tackle the many complex issues that arise in professional life and in the overall progress of society.”[17]

Charity, fraternal love, seeing each person as a brother or sister, is without doubt the clearest and most genuine testimony of the faith. *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn 13:35).* When people

know they are truly loved by someone, in an unconditional way, they sense the Love of the One *who loved us first* (1 Jn 4:19). They sense a Love that is not of this world since it rises above so many things—mistakes, antipathies, timidity, ignorance—which lead people to ignore or disrespect others. “God can only be seen with the heart; reason alone is not enough.”[18] Charity, which speaks to the heart, makes God visible in the world. But when charity is lacking, God’s presence becomes hard to discern and the legitimacy of the one seeking to evangelize others is undermined, making of that person a false prophet (cf Mt 7:15).

But the authenticity that is expected of a Christian today is not limited to the testimony of love. Another important factor is the natural and personal way one speaks about God. When someone habitually reflects on

and strives to grasp more deeply the content of the faith, with an interior dialogue that nourishes one's prayer life and is nourished by that prayer, then speaking about God to others will not merely involve passing on doctrinal and theological concepts. Rather it will mean passing on one's personal experience of living with God and for God. In contrast, as Saint Augustine says, "it is a waste of time for a person to preach exteriorly the Word of God, if he makes no effort to listen to that Word interiorly."[19] To listen to the Word of God means to let it shape how we think, speak, and live—so that it sheds light on all the events and circumstances in our life, and truly becomes *ours*.

"Where your synthesis is, there lies your heart," Pope Francis wrote, paraphrasing an expression of Christ (cf *Mt* 6:21). "The difference between enlightening people with a synthesis and doing so with detached ideas is

like the difference between boredom and heartfelt fervor.”[20] To truly move the hearts of others, we don’t need to be a great orator. Rather we need to speak from our own experience, in our own words, from our own life of faith. Hence doctrinal formation should not be restricted to the closed compartment of our knowledge, isolated from everything else in our life. Rather it should be in contact with every part of our being and life. And although each person’s approach to the faith will be different, the same Spirit should be recognized in each one.

This is what we see in the saints, who speak to us about God in so many different ways, and the same is true for so many hidden saints in the world today. If every age—perhaps more so today—has its Towers of Babel with the noise of strident and discordant voices (cf *Gen 11:9*), the languages the Holy Spirit speaks

continue to expand in a “new Pentecost”[21] wherever people are ready to listen to him. For “if the Holy Spirit does not interiorly assist the intellect, a person works in vain . . . If the Holy Spirit does not accompany the heart of the listener, the words of any teacher will be useless.”[22]

Drinking from your own well

Culture, someone has said, is what remains after a person forgets most of what was learned at school. “Our formation never ends,”[23] Saint Josemaria liked to say. We need to keep studying throughout our life, with the attitude described in the Gospels of a farmer working the soil to produce a larger harvest (cf *Mt* 13:3-43). Growing crops is a continuous and arduous task, but with patience leads to the satisfaction of seeing the first shoots

of new plants and eventually the mature fruit.

Together with our personal dialogue with God in prayer, and our readiness to dialogue with others, our personal reflection is required in order to mature in our grasp of the faith, acquiring a personal tone of voice that is open and authentic. This interior dialogue requires plowing the terrain, sowing the seed and irrigating the field. We need to clarify our ideas, seeking the adequate words, although at times we may stumble in trying to explain ourselves. Ideas we borrow from others can help us a lot here, although we can't simply parrot them if we want to speak to each person *heart to heart*.

It is not enough to acquire information and facts, as though we were accumulating as much data as possible. Rather we need to acquire

and deepen our personal insights into God and the world around us, with an ardent and penetrating look. Striving to deepen our grasp of the faith is a task for each person, whatever their position: university professor, manual laborer, teacher or accountant. This essential task is not separate from the effort to know the content of the faith better, but rather forms part of it and guides it. It is a matter of striving to make our own what we hear, not only in our deeds but also in our ideas and our way of speaking. “I am a man of this time if I live my faith sincerely in the culture of today with the mass media of today, with dialogue, with the realities of the economy, etc. If I myself take my own experience seriously, and seek to adapt to this reality. In this way we are on the way to making ourselves understood by others. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux said in his book *De Consideratione*, for his student, Pope Eugene:

contemplate drinking from your own well, that is, from your own humanity. If you are sincere with yourself and begin to realize what faith is for yourself, from your human experience now, drinking from your own well as Saint Bernard put it, then you will also be able to say to others what needs to be said. And in this regard I think it is important to be truly attentive to today's world but also to the Lord within: to be a man of this time and at the same time a believer in Christ, who in himself transforms the eternal message into a current message for today.”[24]

A person who acts in this way learns something from every conversation, and isn't be stymied by the objections raised, but rather sees them as challenges to try to understand their own faith better. They will be eager to learn how others think, and to accompany them in their unrest and

worries. They will spend a lot of time listening and learn something from everyone. Rather than a struggle to assert one's own position and combat arguments, this dialogue will be seen as a harmonious "give and take," in which everyone's contribution can help to clarify the truth. "Dialogue is much more than communication of a truth. It arises from the enjoyment of speaking and it enriches those who express their love for one another through the medium of words. This is an enrichment which does not consist in objects but in persons who share themselves in dialogue." [25]

It is true that a Catholic should defend the faith. But this effort shouldn't involve conquering lost ground but rather building on a serene conquest. We know where to find the happiness that our heart seeks, and that all men and women want to find. And we want to seek it along with them: *My heart says to*

*thee, 'Thy face, Lord, do I seek' (Ps 27:8). What serenity this certitude gives us! We are happy to enter into a dialogue with everyone, with our brothers and sisters who are seeking the same Person I am seeking, who share with me much more than they realize. We will make progress along with them, knowing that over time the truth will come to light and our friends will discover *ubi vera sunt gaudia*, where true joy can be found, [26] and we will rediscover it with them.*

Suggested Readings

Here is a list of some books and documents that offer advice on how to speak effectively about the faith today. Future articles in this series will also provide bibliography for each topic covered.

Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (29 June 2013).

Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), especially ch. 3 on “The Proclamation of the Gospel.”

Benedict XVI, Catechesis in the Year of Faith (October 2012 – February 2013), especially "How to speak about God?" (28 November 2012) and "The desire for God" (7 November 2012).

Pontifical Council for Culture, 2006 document: *The Via Pulchritudinis, Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and Dialogue*

Babendreir, Joe, *The Faith Explained Today: Popular Edition*, Scepter Publishers, 2009.

Barron, Robert, *Catholicism: a Journey to the Heart of the Faith*, The Catholic Company, 2011.

Chaput, Charles, *Strangers in a Strange Land. Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World*, Henry Holt, 2017.

Dolan, Timothy – Allen, John, *A People of Hope. The Challenges Facing the Catholic Church and the Faith That Can Save It*, Image Entertainment, 2013.

Mora, Juan, Nine Keys for Communicating the Faith.

Trese, Leo, *The Faith Explained*, Scepter Publishers, 2012.

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[1] Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (29 June 2013), no. 3.

[2] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, V.2.2

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 179

[4] Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 24.

[5] Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 265.

[6] Pope Francis, *Lumen fidei*, no. 4

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2010, p. 135.

[9] Cf. Benedict XVI, Address at the University of Ratisbon, 12 September 2006.

[10] Benedict XVI, *Light of the World*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2010, pp. 135-136.

[11] Pope Francis, Homily, 2 February 2017.

[12] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no, 575.

[13] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 941

[14] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 42

[15] *Furrow*, no. 428.

[16] Vatican II, Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (7 November 1965), no. 22.

[17] Bishop Javier Echevarria, Pastoral Letter on the occasion of the Year of Faith (29 November 2012), no. 35.

[18] Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*.

[19] Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 179.1.1

[20] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 143.

[21] *Furrow*, no. 213. Cf *Acts* 2:1-13.

[22] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint John's Gospel*, 14.6

[23] Saint Josemaria, notes taken at a family gathering, 18 June 1972

[24] Benedict XVI, Address, 26 February 2009 (cf Saint Bernard, *De consideration libri quinque ad Eugenium tertium*, II.3.6. [PL 182, 745]).

[25] Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 142.

[26] Roman Missal, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Collect prayer.

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