

The Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*: Cross-sectional Theological Reflections and Pastoral Implications

From time to time, Popes have often decided to dedicate a specific intention to particular years. Besides the customary Holy Years celebrated periodically since 1300 and culminating in the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, we have witnessed in the last five decades the celebration of a number of special years by the Universal Church. Among these, one recalls the Year of Faith (1967-68) on the nineteenth centenary of the martyrdom of St Peter, the Marian Year (1987-88), the Year of the Rosary (2002-03), the Year of the Eucharist (2004-05), the Pauline Year (2008-2009) and the Year for Priests (2009-10). In each case, the aim of different Popes was to invite the Universal Church to reflect more deeply on a particular aspect of the mission and life of the People of God.

On 16 October 2011, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI announced the celebration of the Year of Faith from 11 October 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, to 24 November 2013, the Solemnity of Christ the King. The Pope first announced the event in the context of a homily during the Mass concluding the First International Meeting organised by the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization. In the Angelus Address, following that celebration of the Eucharist, he referred once again to the Year of Faith. On the following day, 17 October 2011, an Apostolic Letter by Pope Benedict, *Porta Fidei*, for the indiction of the Year of Faith, was presented

* Hector Scerri, Head of Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology at the University of Malta, lectures in christology, sacramental theology and eschatology. He is the President of the Interdiocesan Theological Commission of Malta and Gozo, and the President of the Ecumenical Commission of the Archdiocese of Malta. He is a member of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, the *Società Italiana per la Ricerca Teologica*, the *Association Internationale Cardinal Henri de Lubac*, and *Societas Oecumenica*.

to the press. The Letter had been signed by the Pope a few days earlier and bears the significant date of 11 October, the anniversary of the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council in 1962.

The scope of this article is twofold: (1) firstly, to identify Benedict XVI's intentions for the celebration of the Year of Faith. The key to his intentions is found in the mentioned homily and address on 16 October 2011; (2) by means of a cross-sectional reading of the Apostolic Letter, to identify a number of themes in *Porta Fidei* while proposing some pastoral implications for ecclesial life in dioceses, parishes, religious groups and movements. This article does not seek to provide a summary of the Apostolic Letter, but focuses upon the main threads of its text.

The Indiction of the Year of Faith: the Scope of Pope Benedict XVI

What are the Pope's intentions for the celebration of the Year of Faith? What lies at the very heart and mind of Benedict XVI? The first seven years of his pontificate have clearly shown that the current Bishop of Rome is not only a professional theologian but also a learned catechist well-versed in the art of pedagogy. An attentive following of his speeches, particularly his many encounters with the general public, as well as during special meetings with young people or priests or other categories, it is all too evident that Pope Benedict loses no opportunity to teach the Christian faithful.¹

The basic key to understanding *Porta Fidei* lies in the conclusion of the homily during the Mass for the New Evangelization, celebrated in St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican on 16 October 2011. The aims accompanying the Year of Faith are fourfold: (i) "to give a fresh impetus to the mission of the whole Church to lead human beings out of the wilderness in which they often find themselves to the place of life, friendship with Christ that gives us life in fullness"²; (ii) to be an experience of grace and a commitment for a more profound conversion towards God; (iii) to lead the faithful to strengthen their faith in God; and (iv) to proclaim God and his Good News with joy to contemporary humanity. The Holy Father challenged the congregation in St Peter's Basilica: "Dear brothers

¹ Cf. James Corkery, "Joseph Ratzinger's Theological Ideas: The Facial Features of a Theological Corpus," *Doctrine and Life* 56, no 4 (2006): 10; Aidan Nichols, *The Thought of Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London: Burns and Oates, 2007), 134-46.

² Pope Benedict XVI, "Homily, Mass of the New Evangelization, 16 October 2011," *L'Ossevatore Romano* (English edition, 19 October 2011): 7.

and sisters, you are among the protagonists of the New Evangelization that the Church has undertaken and carries forth, not without difficulties but with the same enthusiasm as the first Christians.”³ These words are implicitly addressed to all the Christian faithful all over the world.

Following the celebration of the Eucharist in St Peter’s Basilica, Pope Benedict XVI proceeded to address the faithful from the window of his study in the Apostolic Palace. Before the recitation of the Angelus, he continued to elaborate further upon the aims of the Year of Faith. Within the context of this brief address, he also stated that: (v) this year offered an opportunity to rediscover the beauty and the centrality of the faith; (vi) the faith can be renewed and deepened on a personal level as well as on a communitarian level; (vii) and that the accent of this year was not so much a celebratory one, but rather marked with a missionary attitude *ad gentes* and aimed to promote the New Evangelization.⁴

In his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, Pope Benedict XVI goes into greater detail with regard to the aims behind the Year of Faith. As a professional theologian, the Vicar of Christ reminds the faithful that they can deepen their faith by returning to the sources of our religion. This *ressourcement* to Scripture, to the writings of the Church Fathers and to early liturgical texts is especially important to experience the vitality of the experience of the early Church. Engaging themselves in an attentive and discerning reading of the signs of the times, the members of the Church are called to a personal and ecclesial renewal. Pope Benedict, in fact, affirms that the Year of Faith is “a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world. In the mystery of his death and resurrection, God has revealed in its fullness the Love that saves and calls to conversion of life through the forgiveness of sins.”⁵ This fundamental experience, the Pope teaches, is carried out by means of an authentic interpretation of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.⁶ Using the important tools offered by the documents of this landmark in the history of the life and the mission of the Church, Christians can undergo a profound experience of ongoing renewal.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, “Angelus Address, 16 October 2011,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (English edition, 19 October 2011): 7.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Letter Porta Fidei*, 11 October 2011, no. 6.

⁶ An important pronouncement by Pope Benedict XVI on the authentic interpretation of the Second Vatican Council was made during his first annual address to the Roman Curia on the occasion of the exchange of Christmas greetings, on 22 December 2005. See Benedetto XVI, *Insegnamenti*, I, 2005 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), 1023-1027.

Four Aspects Encountered in *Porta Fidei*

As stated above, the scope of this section of the paper is not to provide a summary of the Apostolic Letter published in October 2011. This section seeks to present a number of themes which one discovers while carefully reading between the lines of the text of this insightful work by Pope Benedict XVI. Unravelling *Porta Fidei* leads to the discovery of the threads which bind the main themes of the document. Most naturally, there are other themes which one may discover. The following reading of *Porta Fidei* also offers the reader with a number of pastoral perspectives useful to ecclesial life. Moreover, each theme can be accompanied with one or more scriptural texts which may be taken as a useful paradigm for reflection and orthopraxis.

The Faith Experience as a Journey

One of the recurring themes in *Porta Fidei* is the journey-dimension of the faith experience. This is an experience which, when embraced by the individual, is far from static. It is useful to observe the images used by Benedict XVI. In the opening words of the first paragraph of the Apostolic Letter, he affirms: “The ‘door of faith’ (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime.”⁷ Travel-paradigms are very common in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, for example, the journey of Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land promised to him by God (in Genesis), the great milestone in the history of the People of God which narrates their liberation from Egyptian bondage and their arrival in the Promised Land (in Exodus), the journeys of the prophets Elijah and Elisha (in the Books of the Kings), and the missionary journeys of Paul and the other apostles (in the Acts of the Apostles).

Pope Benedict invites Christians to undertake a spiritual journey, and he refers to the pivotal image of the Exodus journey, while echoing the homily pronounced during the Mass for the inauguration of his pontificate. He writes: “The Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.”⁸ The desert in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is not only the place of aridity and death,

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 2.

but it is, on this account, the place and the experience of dependence upon God who provides protection, nourishment and guidance. Moreover, the desert is the place where one listens unhindered to the word of God. Even the word for desert in Hebrew, *midbar*, is etymologically related to the word *dabar* which signifies God's word. Listening to the word of God leads the believer to experience the need of purification, a process which can be embraced wholeheartedly and with single-mindedness.

The German Pope continues to dwell on the theme of the journey of faith when he refers to the experience of the Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel. Again, one notices that important stimulus to move from stagnation to the life-giving water. Benedict XVI affirms that "the people of today can still experience the need to go to the well, like the Samaritan woman, in order to hear Jesus, who invites us to believe in him and to draw upon the source of living water welling up within him (cf. Jn 4:14)."⁹ Brother John of Taizé affirms that

the image of the journey as a key to the Bible has one great advantage: its dynamic, open-ended character. In addition to corresponding well to the mentality of our time, it enables us to grasp the progressive quality of God's self-revelation, and the dimension of risk, adventure, which is so fundamental to the life of faith. Pilgrimage as understood here is not the movement *toward* faith, conceived of as a static mentality, but on the contrary an aspect of believing itself – as for Abraham, the journey and the risk only begin when one says *yes* to God's call and sets out on the road of the promise.¹⁰

It is in this light that one can continue to unravel this important theme in *Porta Fidei*. The dynamic character of the believer's experience in the encounter with Christ is highlighted. The love *of* Christ and *for* Christ propels Christians in a centrifugal experience which leads them to bear witness in society and to be persuasive agents of the New Evangelization.

Pope Benedict states: "*Caritas Christi urget nos*' (2 Cor 5:14): it is the love of Christ that fills our hearts and impels us to evangelize. Today as in the past, he sends us through the highways of the world to proclaim his Gospel to all the peoples of the earth (cf. Mt 28:19)."¹¹ Within this active process, Christians are called to deepen their faith. In fact, the Holy Father invites Christians to

⁹ Ibid., no. 3.

¹⁰ Brother John of Taizé, *The Pilgrim God: A Biblical Journey* (Portland: Pastoral Press, 1985), 3-4.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 7.

rediscover and to study afresh the content of the faith,¹² as well as to retrace “the history of our faith, marked as it is by the unfathomable mystery of the interweaving of holiness and sin.”¹³

During this ongoing encounter and experience of Christ, believers are called to proclaim the faith.¹⁴ It is true that the life of Christians is at times shrouded in weakness and sin; but, far from contradicting the sacred mysteries they encounter, their failures spur them to bring faith and life into greater harmony with each other. This has been very well expressed by St Peter Chrysologus, bishop of Ravenna, who dwells upon the implication of the celebration of the sacraments on the life of the Christian:

Be, O man, be both a sacrifice to God and a priest. Do not lose what the divine authority gave and conceded to you. Put on the robe of sanctity, gird yourself with the belt of chastity. Let Christ be the covering of your head. Let the cross remain as the helmet of your forehead. Cover your breast with the sign of heavenly knowledge. Keep the incense of prayer ever burning as your perfume. Take up the sword of the spirit. Set up your heart as an altar. Free from anxiety, move your body forward in this way to make it a victim for God [...] Thus your body will become your sacrificial victim [...] Your body lives, O man, it lives as often as you have offered to God a life of virtues through the death of your vices.¹⁵

Participating in the encounter with the word of God and in the Eucharist urges Christians to look beyond their personal problems and needs. Listening to the proclaimed word and partaking in the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ instills within them an irresistible desire to be prophets on the edge of society, truly attentive to the needs of the marginalized. Yet, this type of prophetic existence should not be somber, since the dedicated Christian, according to St Augustine, ought never to renounce being a messenger of Easter joy:

Alleluia means “Praise the Lord”. So let us praise the Lord, brothers and sisters, with our lives and our tongues, with hearts and mouths, with our voices and our behaviour. That, surely, is how God wants *alleluia* to be sung to him, so that there is no discord in the singer. So first of all let there be harmony in ourselves between tongues and

¹² Ibid., no. 11.

¹³ Ibid., no. 13.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 13.

¹⁵ Peter Chrysologus, “Sermon 108,” as quoted in Adalbert-G. Hamman, *The Mass: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1967), 227-228.

lives, between mouths and consciences. Let our voices, I repeat, be in harmony with our behaviour.¹⁶

The renowned Italian theologian, currently the archbishop of Chieti-Vasto, Bruno Forte reflects upon the challenges accompanying the faith-journey. He expresses his conviction that this journey is marked by an unending struggle. He writes: “*Chi pensa di aver fede senza lottare, non crede più in nulla: con Dio non si perde, si capitola in una resa senza condizioni di intensissimo amore, di profondissima morte. La fede è l’esperienza di Giacobbe.*”¹⁷ This leads us to refer to the night-long struggle of Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok (Gen 32:23-32). This faith experience entails one’s dying-to-self in humility to serve the Lord while divesting oneself of any conditions one may be tempted to make. The scriptural icon which can be proposed for meditation and application is the journey of Tobias as described in the book of Tobit. The journey is characterised by determination, progress, spiritual and physical healing, as well as by an important Christian attitude, namely, allowing oneself to be guided and led.

The Centrality of the Word of God

The faith journey which has been reflected upon so far has the word of God as its lifeblood. The proclaimed word of God brings about personal and communitarian transformation and conversion. Pope Benedict XVI, from the start of his Apostolic Letter, affirms that the proclamation of the living Word of God allows the heart “to be shaped by transforming grace.”¹⁸ It is only by this openness to the Word that “an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world”¹⁹ can take place.

This encounter with the Lord is a transformative experience. The believer’s encounter with God does not consist in the repetition of gestures or useless words. It is an encounter with the living God who instills within us a passionate love for him and for neighbour. God, writes Bruno Forte, is like a devouring fire: “*Se Dio per te non è fuoco divorante, se l’incontro con Lui è per te soltanto tranquilla ripetizione di gesti sempre uguali e senza passione d’amore, il tuo Dio non è più il Dio vivente, ma il ‘Deus mortuus’, il ‘Deus otiosus.’*”²⁰

¹⁶ Augustine, “Sermon 256/1,” in Augustine, *Sermons 230-272B on the Liturgical Seasons*, ed. John E. Rotelle (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1993), 167.

¹⁷ Bruno Forte, *Confessio theologi ai filosofi* (Napoli: Cronopio, 1995), 29.

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 6.

²⁰ Forte, *Confessio theologi*, 31.

For the purposes of this part of this article, the reader can focus on a particular Gospel pericope, that of the disciples of Emmaus²¹ who are encountered only once in Luke's Gospel while they were travelling. The narrative is found in Lk 24:13-35 – the Gospel characterized by an emphasis on the mercy of God, the *quotidiennité*²² of God's invitation to salvation to all and the diffusion of the Good News starting from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This particular narrative – one of many in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, and in particular in the New Testament – has been chosen because it can be considered to be an epitome of all spiritual journeys where the encounter with the word of God is highlighted. It is a journey marked by a radical transformation after the encounter of two discouraged disciples with the Risen Christ.

The purpose of these reflections is not an exegetical one. The narrative will not be read from the point of view of the scriptural science of exegesis, but chiefly from the angle of missionary spirituality. The two disciples were overwhelmed by a sinking feeling of sadness. Everything seemed to be collapsing around them. The excruciating death of their beloved Master was to them the sudden end of the hope he had so powerfully instilled in their thirsting hearts. Their Master's death was a great humiliation. Everything around them came crushing down on that terrible Friday afternoon. It had indeed been a shattering experience, especially for that small circle of intimate friends who shared his life and vision. Thus, with sadness wafting about in their minds and enveloping their hearts, they decided to leave the Holy City. Why not return to the countryside where they belonged? And so they did. They trudged on and on. The road to Emmaus was not short. It was something like 12 kilometres long. The two disciples mumbled and grumbled about the terrible fate of their Master. Although they knew the road to their home village so well, the journey seemed never-ending. It seemed they had shackles on their aching feet. They hardly realized that someone was following them closely.

Specific parts of the text are being referred to enable the reader to enter into the shoes (or the sandals!) of Cleopas and the other disciple. The Lucan text is an incisive one. Luke, whom Tradition has often considered to have been a painter besides being a doctor, is a master story-teller. The vivid colours in the details of the text serve to induce the listener or the reader to empathize with

²¹ Cf. Jacques Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I am?: Introduction to Christology* (New York: Orbis, 1994), 53-55.

²² Cf. Hector Scerri, "Quotidienneté in the Writings of Adalbert-G. Hamman (1910-2000): The Existential Concern of a Twentieth-Century Patristic Scholar," *Studia Patristica*, no. 40: *Papers Presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2003*, ed. F. Young, M. Edwards and P. Parvis (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 331-336.

the two disciples, and to experience the same feelings which had wrecked their former enthusiasm.

Heads down, their hearts swimming in a sea of gloom, they failed to notice the man walking in their shadow. They did not recognize the man... What took place as they plodded on was an outpouring of grief. They expressed their previous expectations about the Messiah The stranger, a man of compassion and empathy, proved to be a real companion to the other two. As it had been throughout his life, he was yet once more being true to his mission The unending journey to Emmaus seemed to lapse into timelessness. They hardly realized that they had reached their destination. The stranger's mysterious and enlightening presence shook their predicament to its very foundations. Time had flown ... or had they experienced the timelessness of the Eternal Word who had just spoken to them?

One can understand the type of spiritual journey those two men were experiencing. In a crisis situation, they opted out of the Jerusalem community. Overcome by delusion, they thought it would be better to forget their former positive experiences with Jesus of Nazareth. Their journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus is one marked by pessimism, self-centredness and self-pity. One is struck by the radical transformation which they were to experience. On arrival at their destination, the two disciples instinctively invited the stranger to share their frugal meal. Their hearts had already experienced an initial transformation. They felt they had to be welcoming Their hearts of stone were already becoming hearts of flesh. Their hearts began beating fast when they saw him take the bread, break it and bless it. Their hearts beat even faster, as they unsuccessfully tried to embrace him. He had vanished before them.

Reflecting on this encounter, the English theologian and author Nicholas Lash, of the University of Cambridge, writes that “at the end of the road, the context is one of hospitality: they invite the stranger in. He is the guest; they are his hosts. At least, this would have been so, in the old language. What they discover, when they are at table, is that it is they, in fact, who are the guests, recipients of hospitality, and that it is he who is the host.”²³ As Lash provocatively affirms, the two disciples have learnt *to speak a new language*. As soon as they recognise their Risen Master, they begin to grasp a new reality, his new presence which transcends space and time. The contrast between the emotional-spiritual experiences of the two journeys is highlighted, inviting the reader of Luke 24 to relive the essentials of this gospel pericope.

²³ Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 166.

Overpowered by joy, the two disciples rushed out from the house and ran back to Jerusalem, while they shouted: “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?” (Lk 24:32). Brother John of Taizé introduces an innovative concept or divine title, that of *the pilgrim God*. In the text by Luke we have seen the Risen Christ who could have done things otherwise, and yet who decides *to be a travelling companion* to those two dejected disciples. In other words, borrowing Brother John’s words, we are faced with *an itinerant God* who encounters human beings, opening for them, and others through them, a future full of promise.²⁴

One observes a turning-point in the narrative. After their eyes – *the eyes of faith* – were opened when they encountered their Risen Master, they became changed individuals. They re-embark on a journey – a journey which is physically similar to the previous one, though in reverse, but spiritually very diverse. They felt it was their duty not to lose any precious time, and to return once more to the Jerusalem fold. Off they set, back to Jerusalem! Forgetting they had just made that painful journey... putting aside all their previous fears... although it was dark and dangerous to travel... they ran and ran with amazing speed. Though the paving stones their feet stepped upon were the same ones they had trudged upon a couple of hours earlier, the journey was remarkably different. From the passive meandering of pessimism they now rushed forth with active torrents of optimism. The narrative of Luke 24 is considered to be one of the best paradigms of all spiritual journeys. One observes the different emotional states the disciples were in. Those two physical journeys are an icon of that internal journey of the individual who is searching for the Divine.

The Complementarity of the Content of the Faith and Daily Life

Pope Benedict XVI, in *Porta Fidei*, underlines the relationship between *knowing* and *doing*. On one hand, Christians profess the creed, that is the content of the Christian faith, while on the other, they are called to act as responsible beings inspired by the richness of the Word of God. The Pope teaches that “knowing the content to be believed is not sufficient unless the heart, the authentic sacred space within the person, is opened by grace that allows the eyes to see below the surface and to understand that what has been proclaimed is the word of God. Confessing with the lips indicates in turn that faith implies public testimony and commitment.”²⁵ In other words, Pope Benedict is referring to the complementarity between *fides quae creditur* (the

²⁴ Cf. Brother John of Taizé, *The Pilgrim God*, 14-15.

²⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 10.

content of the faith) and *fides qua creditur* (the practical commitment and witness). This is the relationship between knowledge and action, or between the mind and the heart of the believer.

This leads believers to consider the experience of the first Christians as it is described in the introductory chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. Four characteristics — teaching, unity, the breaking of the bread, and prayer — indicate that Christians shared faith, brotherhood, love and mercy. In sharp contrast to the society which surrounded them, the early Christians carried out an offering or a distribution of goods which took place in connection with the breaking of the bread. The well-known biblical scholar from the Reformed Tradition, Joachim Jeremias, while interpreting *koinonia* as assistance (*Unterstützung*), affirms that it can also be understood as being a work of charity (*Liebestätigkeit*).²⁶

Unity and charity are the two corresponding poles of the new lifestyle of the members of the earliest Christian community who “met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously” (Acts 2:46). It is clear from this text that the community of disciples which Jesus founded was to be based on brotherly communion in the sense that Christians shared their life and resources. St Paul employs the term *koinonia* also to describe the action of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:13). This Pauline application of *koinonia* helps one to understand better the complementarity between the Eucharist and the action of the Holy Spirit in the community.

The authentic experience of Christian communities of all ages can be immortalized by the extent of the relationship between celebration and witness, that is between *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*: “Now that you *know* these things, blessed are you if you *act* accordingly” (Jn 13:17). This leads to a proposal of the biblical icon of the washing of the disciples’ feet in Jn 13. The pericope is laden with action-verbs focused on the prophetic action of Jesus when he carried out the task normally done by slaves. The text serves as a paradigm for the exercise of authority in the Church in a spirit of service which is marked by selfless availability and disinterested solidarity.

A noteworthy exponent of the inseparable interdependence of *leitourgia* and *diakonia* is St John Chrysostom. He was always anxious to connect liturgy and life, charity received and charity practiced. John Chrysostom reveals the prolongation of the Eucharist in the life of the Christian. A recurring theme in his sermons is the exhortatory appeal that Christians give homage to the body of Christ in the poor. Without mincing his words, he holds that remaining

²⁶ Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 147.

complacent in the face of social inequality amounts to worshipping the Bread of Heaven without assuming the prophetic task of sharing earthly bread.

In fact, John Chrysostom rebuked those members of his flock who were not willing to help others, even in small things: “For you the Father has not spared his own Son, his only born Son; yet you disregard this Son when he dies of hunger. [...] God has given his own Son to us, and you have not given [...] even a crumb of bread [to him] who has been immolated and delivered up for you.”²⁷ John therefore praised the custom of the faithful who, after participating in the Eucharist, did not return immediately to their homes; having brought abundant provisions with them, they sat at the same table with the poor, and ate and drank the same things. It is in this light that the Bishop of Constantinople emphasizes charity in order that communion may be a true sharing and that the poor may have their share. In fact, availability in all circumstances means being ever attentive to the needs of one’s neighbours who may be asking not for financial assistance, but for one’s time, competence or moral support.

John Chrysostom was consistently interested in the social dimension of the Eucharist. On several occasions, he links the Eucharist to a number of social exigencies, and claims that it should induce a change in lifestyle. A liturgical celebration which is inward-looking and closed to the social milieu defeats its purpose. In this regard, one observes that John Chrysostom drew a parallel between Christ and the needy, between the venerable table of the Lord and the holy hand of the hungry.

John Chrysostom repeatedly insists that the Christian conception of the Eucharist is not to be restricted only to the celebration of the sacrament and to the reception of the Body and the Blood of Christ, but is to include living by grace in the world, and labouring for the eradication of poverty and the transformation of oppressive structures. John Chrysostom affirms very clearly that Christians are responsible for their neighbours, especially if the latter lack what is intrinsic to human dignity.

The Context of the Faith Experience

All that has been presented in this article – the faith experience as a journey, the proclamation of the word, and commitment – always takes place within a particular context. The faith experience of the Christians was never meant to be an isolated experience taking place within the walls of a laboratory or a sacristy. Living and sharing one’s faith inevitably – or rather thankfully! – takes place within a true down-to-earth context. In *Porta Fidei*, Pope Benedict XVI refers to

²⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 15, as quoted in Hamman, *The Mass*, 30.

the challenges faced by Christians of all ages. He explains that for many centuries, until recent times, the Christian faith, so often intertwined with culture, was “a self-evident presupposition for life in society. In reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is openly denied.”²⁸ The Pope goes on to explain the profound crisis of faith which has affected so many people and societies. Nonetheless, it is within these milieux that the Gospel is to be proclaimed.

It remains ever important to remain attentive to the signs of the times²⁹ and to remain in dialogue with all the stakeholders present in society. True to his character and outlook upon life, Pope Benedict reminds us that “we must not forget that in our cultural context, very many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world. This search is an authentic ‘preamble’ to the faith, because it guides people onto the path that leads to the mystery of God.”³⁰ These very realistic words by the Holy Father remind one of what Bruno Forte writes, when considering the experience of both the believer and the unbeliever: “*Il credente in fondo non è che un povero ‘ateo’, che ogni giorno si sforza di cominciare a credere. Se il credente non fosse tale, la sua fede, la sua fede non sarebbe niente altro che un dato sociologico, ... una delle tante ideologie che hanno ingannato il mondo e determinato l’alienazione del mondo.*”³¹

The biblical icon which can be proposed here, is the situation of the early Christian community preceding and during the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35). The Church was then facing cultural challenges, internal debate, and the danger of rupture. What stands out clearly is personal and ecclesial discernment which led to concrete decisions and actions. This biblical pericope can be studied, used for personal and communitarian prayer, and applied in the context of the reflection of the local Church upon itself and vis-à-vis society. The passage is applicable to the faith experience in relation to the cultural context of the *ekklesia*. The text, just as that of the two disciples of Emmaus, may also be useful during the celebration of parish assemblies, diocesan missions and pastoral synods.

²⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 2.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid*, no. 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 10.

³¹ Forte, *Confessio theologi*, 38-39.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this article, the great figure of Cardinal John Henry Newman is being proposed. Newman was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010 during his pastoral visit to Great Britain. The spiritual experience and the depth of the faith journey of Newman can accompany Christians as they celebrate the Year of Faith. Some of the themes which have been underlined in the course of this paper are very conspicuous in the life of the great English convert. Much has been written and said about the Mediterranean journey once embarked upon by John Henry Newman. On his return journey, somewhere at sea, off the coast of Sardinia, probably when becalmed in the Straits of Bonifacio, on 16 June 1833, Newman expressed his interior state in three brief stanzas. One of the chief contemporary Newman experts, Roderick Strange, states that “for many years congregations have delighted in singing ‘Lead, Kindly Light,’ largely oblivious of its origins. To know its source, the relief and gratitude which inspired it, is to recognise instantly its intense personal character for Newman.”³²

In this poem, “The Pillar of the Cloud,” one is struck by the theme of the journey. Newman’s long journey, far from home, is a metaphor of that deep interior spiritual struggle he was experiencing. Strange affirms that the poem

captured poignantly his experience of the kindly light which had guided him through darkness when he was far from home: one step was enough; it acknowledged the wilfulness which once had loved to see and choose its own path, but now no longer; it professed hope in the power that would continue to guide him over rough countryside of every kind – moor and fen, crag and torrent – till the night was gone.³³

This is the complete text of the poem:

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th’ encircling gloom
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home --
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene – one step enough for me.

³² Roderick Strange, *John Henry Newman: A Mind Alive* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 113-114.

³³ *Ibid.*, 114.

I was not ever thus, nor pray'd that Thou
Shouldst lead me on.
I loved to choose and see my path, but now
Lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on,
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.³⁴

This experience may inspire Christians to live the Year of Faith in a profound and meaningful way. Christians are provoked to give an answer to the questions asked by other believers, and the questions asked by society. All Christians are faced by deep existential questions. They are faced by personal dilemmas. Shall they “put out into the deep water” (Lk 5:4)? Or do they prefer, perhaps, the shallow water where their securities thrive? Shall they allow the Spirit of God to fill their hearts and lives that they may be led wherever he wants to lead them? Are Christians faithful to our prophetic calling? Are they courageously facing the challenges of twenty-first century society?

This article has sought to provoke the reader to delve into themes which are not immediately identifiable at a first glance of the Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*. Pope Benedict XVI, in calling the Universal Church to celebrate the Year of Faith, is inviting the faithful to dig deeply in the search for our Christian roots. The Holy Father is urging all the members of the People of God to rediscover the richness of the Word of God and the teachings of the Magisterium, in particular the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In his Address to the participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on 27 January 2012, Benedict XVI described the Year of Faith as

a favourable moment to repose to all the gift of faith in the Risen Christ. [...] As we know, in vast areas of the earth, faith risks being extinguished, like a flame that is no longer fed. We are facing a profound crisis of faith, a loss of the religious sense that constitutes

³⁴ John Henry Newman, *Verses on Various Occasions* (London: Longmans and Green, 1903, rev. 2002), 156-157.

the greatest challenge to the Church today. The renewal of faith must therefore take priority in the commitment of the entire Church in our time. I hope that the Year of Faith will contribute, with the cordial cooperation of all the members of the People of God, to making God present in this world once again and to giving men and women access to the faith to entrust themselves to the God who loved us to the end (cf. Jn 13:1), in Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen.³⁵

Hector Scerri
Dept of Fundamental & Dogmatic Theology,
Faculty of Theology,
University of Malta,
Msida MSD 2080
Malta

hector.scerri@um.edu.mt

³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 27 January 2012," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition, 1 February 2012): 3.