

(Sermon delivered by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, in Sacred Heart Church, University of Notre Dame, on Sunday, November 5, 1967, to inaugurate a series of sermons on the Year of Faith, proclaimed by Pope Paul VI)

YEAR OF FAITH

I am very happy to have the opportunity of speaking to the University community this afternoon on the Year of Faith, recently proclaimed by our Holy Father, Pope Paul VI. There will undoubtedly be many who will question why the Holy Father recently declared a "Year of Faith". Unfortunately, people are inclined to question almost everything that comes from Rome these days. One would think that we would be used to such years by now. No one balked at the "International Geophysical Year" or the "Year of the Quiet Sun" or the "Indian Ocean Year". All would welcome other non-scientific years, such as the "Year for Human Rights" or the "Year for World Human Development" or the proposed "International Education Year".

I suppose that the uneasiness in this case comes from the fact that the "Year of Faith" cuts closer to the bone. Faith is a highly personal matter. It has very real consequences. It involves deep commitments, very far beyond geophysics, oceanography, and even solar radiation. Faith gets at us in the depths of our personality and being, what we do or do not believe and why, and what this belief or unbelief does to our lives at the innermost level of our personality.

Personally, I am very glad that the Holy Father proclaimed this year, because I think we need it now in a very special way. In the post-Conciliar world, many things are changing and, in a time of rapid change, there needs to be a few things which do not change. Faith is one of these. How we

express it may be different and with what cultural trappings it is clothed may change from age to age. But what we believe most deeply and most fundamentally as Christians is not a matter of change. Today, many things about the Faith tend to get blurred. Faith itself is seen in many new patterns, some very authentic and some highly distorted. In such a setting, Faith as construed by some becomes in or out by personal judgment and interpretation. Faith becomes highly flexible or horribly rigid. All is suddenly black or white. Orthodoxy and heresy are painted in stark contrast, with the result being, for the great broad spectrum of the people of God, confusion.

I will presume to suppose that in the face of these very real contemporary developments our Holy Father wanted us to use a Year of Faith to consider the Faith anew, to see what it really is and what it means to you and to me. I can only speak for myself, and I claim no special charisma. But I am here and you are there, and I must testify.

I am not afraid to say to you, openly and simply, that the Faith is my most precious possession. It is the one reality which I am prepared, unequivocally at this moment, to follow, even unto death. Till they point the gun or begin the torture or accumulate the temptations that follow all of us in daily life, this must be a qualified testimony, since no man knows the limits of his endurance until he is tried. But, as of this moment, I am prepared to say, "For this Faith, I am ready to live differently each day, and to die for it if I must". Any Faith less than this is not the Faith that the Holy Father speaks of when he proclaims this year. One of the great benefits of this year is that each of you must make your own assessment of your own commitment regarding the Faith.

What has the Faith that can demand this fidelity even unto death? Only one ultimate base: The Word of God. (For a more complete treatment of Faith and the Word of God read the Vatican Council II documents on Revelation and the Church.) If Faith tends to falter, in the life of an individual from time to time, one should first ask: "What does he know of the Word of God?" Not what he knows of the theologians he reads, not what he finds in the Religion Section of TIME or NEWSWEEK, but what he knows of the pure and unadulterated Word of God. This is what is most important. What is this Word of God? Last week in preparing for this sermon, I re-read at one sitting the Gospel of Saint John. I had, of course, read it many hundred times in years past, but every time I read it anew it seems to bring something new to me. You might ask, "Why Saint John?" I can only say that Saint John seems to say something special, in a style different from all of the other evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is another reason. Some years ago when speaking to someone who had been in a Siberian labor camp of the Soviet Union, I learned that many of the inmates who were faced with much greater challenges to their Faith than any of us have faced to date, were sustained by a tattered, handwritten version of the Gospel of Saint John which passed from hand to hand, and was read by flickering candles. This sustained them more than anything else.

In reading Saint John, I noticed anew that two words seem to form a kind of leitmotiv of everything that he writes appealing to our Faith. These two words are life and light. As I read, I marked some passages that I would like to read to you now. As I read them, I trust you will listen to them as addressed directly to you and remember that they are not really my words, but the Word of God.

Saint John's Gospel begins by envisioning what the Word of God means as it was declared in his day. His Gospel opens with the words:

"At the beginning of time the Word already was; and God had the Word abiding with him, and the Word was God. He abode, at the beginning of time, with God. It was through him that all things came into being, and without him came nothing that has come to be. In him there was life, and that life was the light of men. And the light shines in darkness, a darkness which was not able to comprehend it." (Verses 1-5)

A few lines later on, Saint John says that all of those who did welcome Our Lord and receive His Words became the Children of God. This is our true vocation.

In Chapter III, Saint John writes:

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, so that those who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life. When God sent his Son into the world, it was not to reject the world, but so that the world might find salvation through him. For the man who believes in him, there is no rejection; the man who does not believe is already rejected; he has not found faith in the name of God's only-begotten Son. Rejection lies in this, that when the light came into the world men preferred darkness to light; preferred it, because their doings were evil. Anyone who acts shamefully

hates the light, will not come into the light, for fear that his doings will be found out. Whereas the man whose life is true comes to the light, so that his deeds may be seen for what they are, deeds done in God." (Verses 16-21)

At the end of Chapter III, Saint John says:

"The man who does accept his witness has declared, once for all, that God cannot lie, since the words spoken by him whom God has sent are God's own words; so boundless is the gift God makes of his Spirit. The Father loves his Son, and so has given everything into his hands; and he who believes in the Son possesses eternal life, whereas he who refuses to believe in the Son will never see life; God's displeasure hangs over him continually." (Verses 33-36)

In Chapter VI, I marked two passages:

"Believe me when I tell you this; the man who has faith in me enjoys eternal life. It is I who am the bread of life. Your fathers, who ate manna in the desert, died none the less; the bread which comes down from heaven is such that he who eats of it never dies. I myself am the living bread that has come down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever. And now, what is this bread which I am to give? It is my flesh, given for the life of the world." (Verses 47-52)

"The man who eats this bread will live eternally." (Verse 59)

And later on in Chapter VI, Saint John says:

"After this, many of his disciples went back to their old ways, and walked no more in his company. Whereupon Jesus said to the twelve, Would you, too, go away? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom should we go? Thy words are the words of eternal life; we have learned to believe, and are assured that thou art the Christ, the Son of God." (Verses 67-71)

In Chapter VIII, we find these words:

"And now once more Jesus spoke to them, I am the light of the world, he said. He who follows me can never walk in darkness; he will possess the light which is life." (Verse 12)

Later on in this Chapter, he says:

"Believe me when I tell you this; if a man is true to my word, to all eternity he will never see death." (Verse 51)

In Chapter IX, there is the wonderful sentence which reads:

"As long as I am in the world, I am the world's light." (Verse 5)

In Chapter XI, Saint John says:

"Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and life; he who believes in me, though he is dead, will live on, and whoever has life, and has faith in me, to all eternity cannot die." (Verses 25-27)

My last two citations are from Chapter XII of Saint John. In Verse 24, Saint John says:

"Believe me when I tell you this; a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die, or else it remains nothing more than a grain of wheat; but if it dies, then it yields rich fruit. He who loves his life will lose it; he who is an enemy to his own life in this world will keep it, so as to live eternally. If anyone is to be my servant, he must follow my way; so shall my servant too be where I am." (Verses 24-26)

A few lines later he says:

"If only I am lifted up from the earth, I will attract all men to myself." (Verse 33)

"I have come into the world as a light, so that all those who believe in me may continue no longer in darkness. If a man hears my words, and does not keep true to them, I do not pass sentence on him; I have come to save the world, not to pass sentence on the world. The man who makes me of no account, and does not accept my words, has a judge appointed to try him; it is the message I have uttered that will be his judge at the last day. And this, because it is not of my own impulse that I have spoken; it was my Father who sent me what words I was to say, what message I was to utter. And I know well that what he commands is eternal life; everything then, which I utter, I utter as my Father has bidden me." (Verses 46-50)

I have cited these words of Saint John because so often one speaks of Faith without speaking of the root of Faith which is God's Word. You may have thought at times whether Our Lord really knew what would happen to His Word once it was proclaimed to the world. He did indeed know and spelled it out for us in a wonderful parable, which is found in Chapter VIII of Saint Luke's Gospel:

"A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, there were some grains that fell beside the path, so that they were trodden underfoot, and the birds flew down and ate them. And others fell on the rocks, where they withered as soon as they were up, because they had no moisture. And some fell among briars, and the briars grew up with them and smothered them. But others fell where the soil was good, and when these grew up they yielded a hundredfold. So saying, he cried aloud, Listen, you that have ears to hear with."

(Verses 5-8)

We are told that His disciples asked Him what this parable meant. Our Lord told them that "The seed is God's word. Those by the way side hear the word, and then the devil comes and takes it away from their hearts, so that they cannot find faith and be saved. Those on the rock, are those who entertain the word with joy as soon as they hear it, and yet have no roots; they last for a while, but in time of temptation they fall away. And the grain that fell among the briars

stands for those who hear it, and then, going on their way, are stifled by the cares, the riches, and the pleasures of life, and never reach maturity. And the grain that fell in good soil stands for those who hear the word, and hold by it with a noble and generous heart, and endure, and yield a harvest." (Verses 12-15)

Even knowing that all would not accept His Word, or believe and have Faith, Our Lord still perdured unto the end and gave to His Apostles the task of preaching the Word, the good news of Salvation, to the whole of creation. We find this in the final words of the Gospel of Saint Mark:

"Then at last he appeared to all eleven of them as they sat at table, and reproached them with their unbelief and their obstinacy of heart, in giving no credit to those who had seen him after he had risen. And he said to them, Go out all over the world, and preach the gospel to the whole of creation; he who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who refuses belief will be condemned." (Verses 14-16)

So it is that this Year of Faith brings us back to look at the taproots of our Christian belief, to the sources of light and life of which Saint John spoke, to Baptism and our Faith, to the two essential elements of our Salvation in time and in eternity.

Faith goes much deeper than the surface realities that so often concern us: Whether we pray in Latin or in English, whether we use black or purple vestments, organs or guitars, whether we sing Gregorian Chant

or folk music, whether our Eucharistic bread is made of whole wheat or bleached white flour. These are not really matters of Faith or of our fundamental commitment in Faith. Faith begins at the simple Word of God, as spoken to us by His Incarnate Son, and expanded in us by His Holy Spirit. Faith is our ultimate and deepest assurance that God is our Father and that we can speak to Him as such, and that Jesus Christ is our Brother and that all others are our brothers in Christ, and that the Holy Spirit is our Light and our daily inspiration, if we will accept Him.

Faith takes us as we are and illumines our mind beyond where it can reach by itself. Faith expands our questing to God Himself and enlarges our intellectual horizons beyond time to eternity. Faith teaches us that by Baptism we were born again of the Holy Spirit, a phrase used by God's Word as well in describing the birth of His Son from His Virgin Mother, Mary. Faith assures us, again by God's Word, that this rebirth is unto everlasting life and, that as members of Christ's Church, this eternal life is ours right now in the depths of our souls, and that we grow in it by following Christ Our Lord, as our Truth, our Way, and our very Life. All prayer and all the Sacraments are means to this end, to join us to Christ, to undergird our hope, which is impossible without Faith, and to deepen our love for God and man, which also depends on our Faith. Faith also buttresses human freedom which is a fragile thing, so open to evil as well as to good, so easily depressed by frustration, so alone without the strength of God's grace and the promise of His Word.

Faith is then a key to another world, a key we did not earn, but was given to us freely by Our Saviour, a key which we can indeed lose if

we do not cherish it, live it, and strengthen it by all the means that the good Lord gave us, particularly by meditating on His Word. The greatest of all human tragedies today is not the holocaust of Vietnam, not the threat of thermo-nuclear war, not the inhumanities that accompany Civil Rights movements, not social injustice and charity, but that some people gave up their Faith so easily, for such silly reasons, while others are willing to die for it. What is really tragic today is that in losing the Faith, if we are to believe God's Word, it is really eternal life and all hope that is lost.

Faith is the one great quality that Christ Our Lord required of all those whom He encountered as He walked the hot and dusty paths of Judea and Galilee. How often He said, after giving sight to the blind, health to the sick, forgiveness to the sinner: Thy faith has made thee whole.

And the same words are true of each of us today: whatever our anguishes, our difficulties, or our frustrations because of what our Faith requires of us, we can say humbly to Christ, "Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief", and, believing Him, despite all of our faults and imperfections, we will indeed be made whole again. With Faith, our minds will be enlightened by His great light, our petty, busy, fragile lives filled with His eternal life, even now, and certainly unto eternity where eternal life and light will at last dispel all the darknesses and all the binding human limitations of temporal life and death. Then we will no longer need Faith or a Year of Faith for we shall see. We may indeed see now, in a glass darkly, as through the dark stained glass windows of this church as evening

comes upon us, but then, "In His light we shall see the Light". And more than this, we shall live, for all I have said to you today is summed up better in another sentence which is also part of the Word of God, in which Our Lord expressed to us the whole meaning of His life on earth and now in His Church: "I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly".