

The Year of Faith: Christ's Victory over Relativism

In his interview with Peter Seewald, published as *Light of the World*¹ in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI said that the two 'years' he had instigated by then – the 'Year of St Paul' and the 'Year for Priests' – were given to help the Church return to her original vitality, simplicity, radicality and beauty (p 76). That is perhaps even more true of one of his last gifts to us: the Year of Faith.

The Catholic Church is the only religion with evolution explicitly built into it. The Councils of the Church in particular allow for relevant issues to be dealt with authentically by the Magisterium, the documents and pronouncements of which become part of the fabric of the Church which can be built on with the confidence of faith. It is normally agreed that there have been twenty-one of these ecumenical Councils, the last two of which have been held at the Vatican. Vatican II differed in degree from all the preceding Councils in that it was a pastoral Council: rather than primarily dealing with points of doctrine, it dealt with the mission of the Church and how best to proclaim the Gospel to the modern world. In so doing it did indeed clarify and deepen our understanding of much of the faith, particularly about the Church herself, her Liturgy and the Word of God, but it was the pastoral dimension that shaped the Council.

John Henry Newman has often been said to have been a major force in getting us to Vatican II and I would like to link what I think are the two key gifts of Vatican II to us with two of his most famous principles.

Dialogue *Heart speaks unto heart.* A key question of Vatican II was, in a prevailing culture which has moved from the experience of authority to the authority of experience, how do we respond to the pluralist situation in which we find ourselves? And the answer articulated so eloquently in *Gaudium et Spes* – the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – is 'dialogue'. When I genuinely share something of myself with you and you genuinely listen, and you genuinely share something of yourself and I genuinely listen, then we both grow. This is built on the inalienable dignity of every human person, and their intrinsic freedom. This 'heart to heart' applies to individuals and institutions. It is enriched by an appropriate trust in the goodness of the other. It is enhanced when both sides can acknowledge the beauty and brokenness of both parties. It requires a common desire to discover truth.

Truth This takes me to my second point, which is more a discernment from the documents than something that is explicitly written: Vatican II calls us to have confidence in the truth, and in the power of truth. Perhaps too much in the past, people in the Church have at times felt the need to reinforce the proclamation of the truth with external force – whether it be through undue fear, or psychological or physical pressure. But truth is intrinsically imbued with the power of love (as the last two papal encyclicals have reminded us). Vatican II calls us to trust genuinely in this power of truth itself, which helps us assent to it rather than cling to it. This echoes what, to me, was Newman's most important decision, made at the age of 17, when he chose to follow the truth wherever it led him². The understanding that truth is something distinct, that is to be discovered and assented to through authentic communication, experience, reason and decision, is central to authentic dialogue.

As Christians we can go further and understand that Truth is actually a divine Person and it is primarily God's communication to us that allows for us to receive the truth; the initiative is from Truth himself, which we are created innately receptive to. This Christian understanding of truth enriches our understanding of dialogue; one can enter into authentic dialogue without it, but dialogue is stillborn until both parties can acknowledge there is truth.

That is why the last two popes in particular have clearly spoken of the "tyranny of relativism". Relativism prevents unity, true dialogue and any sense of purpose. It is for this reason that it is the real enemy within our culture. Atheism is both a symptom of and an impulse towards relativism. But atheism of itself does not prevent dialogue.

Relativism's answer to pluralism is silence and an acceptance of a lowest common denominator which is forever being lowered. Relativism's answer to sensitive subjects is to avoid them for fear of friction and offence. The Church's answer to pluralism is dialogue; its answer to sensitive subjects is that they must be dealt with sensitively, in truth.

Fifty years is not a long time in terms of the Church and her Councils. It takes time for the renewed outpouring of the Holy Spirit to be received, assimilated, understood and communicated. Authentic progress is always measured. That always allows louder, less discerning voices to have their day after a Council, and this one was no exception. So much damage was done in the name of "the spirit of Vatican II" by people who had often not read a single actual document. Unsurprisingly, this "spirit" always seemed to agree with what they, before the Council, had decided needed to happen to the Church. Vatican II called for the dialogical nature of the liturgy to complement the mystery of it, not replace it. It called for dialogue to search for the full expression of truth, not to replace it. It called for biblical criticism to enrich the Church's traditional understanding of Scripture, not to replace it.

Most of the damage done to the Church and the world in the name of Vatican II was done by relativists "interpreting" the Council – and imposing their interpretation on the rest. Relativism is a denial of absolute truth in favour of a philosophy that truth may depend on circumstances and culture: morals are relative to the social group within which they are constructed. There is certainly pressure from our culture to play by relativist rules: "You can practise your private religion, so long as you do so by the rules of relativism": silence, not dialogue; avoidance, not sensitive communication; opinion not truth; emotion not grace, the unruffled peace of death, rather than the challenging peace of life. And for too long, too many of us have agreed to play by the relativists' rules, because surely we're being proud and arrogant otherwise? Enough!

To me the Year of Faith is exactly that: the Church saying "Enough!" We are all called to reject the relativist agenda and to be Catholics as Christ called us to be. In *Porta Fidei* – The Door of Faith – Pope Benedict's announcement of the Year of Faith, he calls us all to know our faith more, particularly through the Creed, the Vatican II documents and the resultant Catechism of the Catholic Church. If we truly believe in the power of truth to bring us to life, then we will be passionate for every element of that truth. There are so many ways given to us to help us access them, but only we can choose to avail of them.

He also called us to be joyful and confident in the faith. Why shouldn't we be? It is

part of the relativist agenda for us to be apologetic and embarrassed about it. Have you seen what irrational opinion is believed in around us? We have nothing to be embarrassed about. This goes hand in hand with knowing our faith better. The more we know our faith, the more we will naturally be confident and joyful in it; the more confident and joyful in it, the more we will thirst for the truth.

The third thing Pope Benedict asked of us was for this to lead to a deeper commitment from each of us to participate in the new evangelisation. But again that will happen naturally if we take on board the other two. No fiancé needs to be told to talk about a partner, or communicate the love of that spouse. It's part of being in love. We might need to learn skills in communicating, in being part of the new evangelisation, but the most important part – the desire to evangelise – automatically comes from being in love with Christ and his Church.

The Year of Faith marks an important stage in the implementation of Vatican II. The battle with relativism has been won inside the Church, and the Year of Faith is a clarion call to us all no longer to play by the rules of relativism in our relationship with the world and those around us. I might sound unbelievably naïve to say that the battle has been won within the Church but I believe it is true, at its true heart. Relativism gained such momentum that its damage will be felt for a long while to come. There are so many elements within the Church still scarred by it. But the energy has gone out of it; at the true heart of the Church, Truth has conquered. Like all "good" heresies, relativism will continue to rear its head, but it will become increasingly toothless within.

The Year of Faith calls us then to be more authentically Catholic to the world. This does not mean we will be more successful in any earthly terms! From the example of the Lord himself, I would say exactly the opposite. His authentic proclamation of the gospel only led to Resurrection through crucifixion. And he went to his death with his eyes open. He set his face like flint (Lk. 13:31-33) knowing where his authentic witness was taking him. We are his body and cannot expect a different fate. Vatican II's trust in the power of love and truth was an "eyes open" choice to follow Our Lord to Calvary.

We are not called to be successful, but faithful; that's why we had a Year of Faith, not one of Success. It helps us return enriched to the vitality, simplicity, radicality and beauty of our faith; to share in Christ's victory over relativism by more authentically believing and proclaiming in the faith of our fathers – with whom we are proud to be true to Him till death.

Fr Stephen Fawcett

1. Light of the World, Catholic Truth Society, 2010
2. Apologia Pro Vita Sua, 1864, available from Penguin, and others
In the Apologia Newman wrote of the essayist Thomas Scott: "He followed truth wherever it led him, beginning with Unitarianism, and ending in a zealous faith in the Holy Trinity. It was he who first planted in my mind that fundamental Truth of religion."

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