

INCREASE OUR FAITH

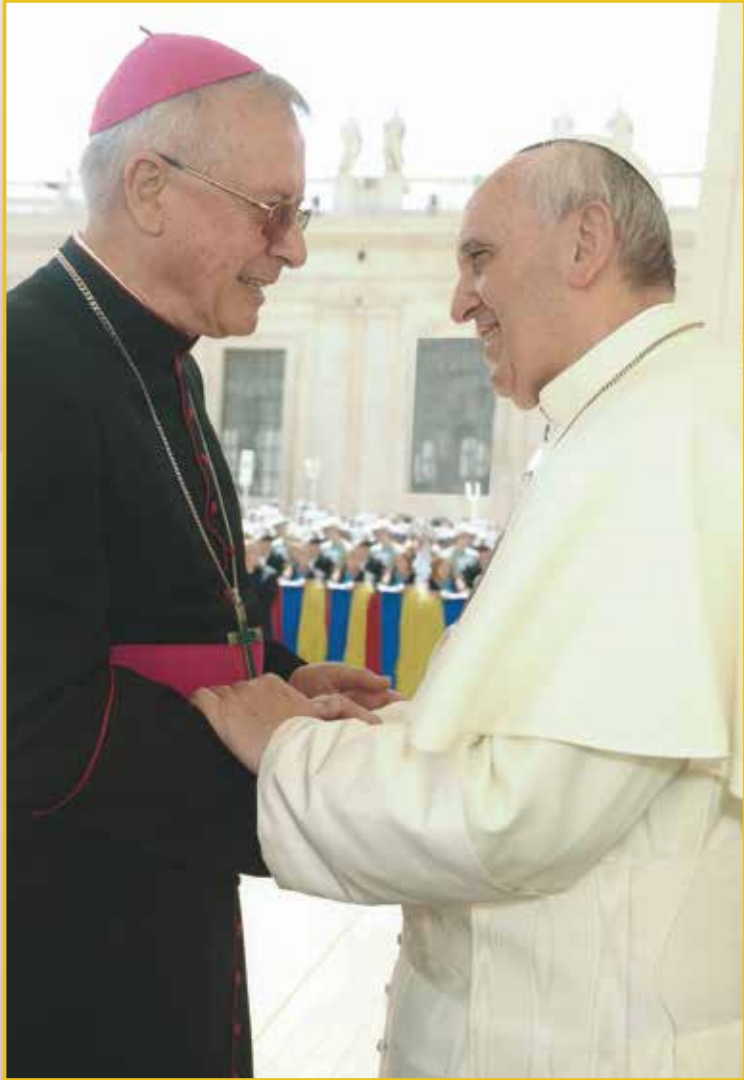
Luke 17:5

Pastoral Letter 2013 No. 2

from

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Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Conclusion of the Year of Faith



Bishop Paul Hinder greeting Pope Francis at the public audience on 18 September 2013 in St. Peter's Square.

Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Pastoral Letter 2013 (2)

INCREASE OUR FAITH

Luke 17:5

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you!

1. We are coming to the end of the Year of Faith which Pope Benedict XVI opened on 11 October 2012 and which Pope Francis will conclude on 24 November 2013. Faith, however, is not a question of a special year. It is a basic virtue that has to continue and to be at the centre of our lives as baptized and confirmed Christians every day. Our baptism would be deprived of its essence if it were not enfolded in faith, hope and love as the gifts of God put into our hearts. We cannot “make” faith, hope and love - they are gifts from God instilled into our hearts by the action of the Holy Spirit; that is why we call them “theological virtues”. In chapter 5 of his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul speaks of faith, hope and love as a grace of God and gives us the following encouragement: *“Hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us”* (Rom 5:5). Without the Holy Spirit given from the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ we would be literally faith-less, hope-less and love-less.

2. When Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, speaks about the spiritual gifts, he puts in the centre the gift of love in the “canticule of love” (chapter 13); he finishes by stating *“and now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love”* (1 Cor 13:13). All the other gifts are somehow transitory; however faith, hope, and love “abide”. We are well aware that we have not yet reached the goal, but we are on the way. Knowing that we are only at the beginning, we ask the Lord with the disciples: *“Increase our faith!”* (Luke 17:5); they realized that their “little faith” was only the starting point. Their request was provoked by the word of Jesus that we must forgive our brother or sister again and again if he or she asks for pardon (cf. Luke 17:3-4). It seems that the disciples were rather shocked and knew that they were simply not capable of doing so. It was the realisation of this incapacity that made them request: “Increase our faith!” Jesus then uses the image of a mustard seed to explain to his disciples that even very little faith can achieve great things if it is activated. Most of us may go through similar experiences; we have a lot of good will but very often little faith. That is why at the end of

this Year of Faith I would like to encourage all of you not to give up. We are a pilgrim people on the way to the kingdom of heaven and our faith is a “faith on the way” which develops its strength in little steps like the mustard seed.

3. Whoever has had the chance of taking part in a pilgrimage on foot may have experienced that walking - hours and hours, days and days - changes our mind. So I remember, many years ago, the passages on foot I made in the desert of the Holy Land and the pilgrimages on foot in Italy to the places through which Saint Francis of Assisi had passed. Moreover, friends have told me of the deep faith experience they had walking for weeks on the way to the Shrine of Saint James of Compostela in Northwest Spain. Walking along, with a backpack on the shoulders, purifies the mind and makes the pilgrim aware that what he is doing reflects his own faith journey. He may feel the burden of the luggage and the pains in his feet, but he goes forward because he wants to reach the pilgrim shrine. The journey to the shrine is as equally important as the shrine itself that has to be reached. Thus is our faith. Isn't it Saint Paul who in his letter to the Philippians speaks about this experience: *“It is not that I have already taken hold of it (i.e. the resurrection from the dead) or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ”*? And then he adds what is very important for our own faith journey: *“Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 4:12-14). I cannot tell you better than Saint Paul: Forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead and pursue the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus! Of course, this has to continue after the Year of Faith!

4. We find the topics of “way” and “journey” as expressions for faith very often in the Bible. I can give you only a few hints in order to encourage you to make an expedition yourself through the Bible. - In the Acts of the Apostles the Christian faith is several times simply called *“the way”* (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 22:4; 24:22). To believe in Christ and to live according to the gospel has to do with moving, going forward. We cannot remain where we are. We have to walk! Faith in Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord, is not something established once and for all, but dynamic, comparable to a pilgrimage. The roadmap is given to us in the Scriptures and in the guidance of the Church. However, it is not sufficient to know the map and the signposts. We have to set out and walk, even at the risk that at times we feel lost, are getting tired or may be delayed by people who want to lead us in a wrong direction.

5. Look at the people of Israel during their exodus! When they reached the shores of the Red Sea pursued by the troops of Pharaoh they fell immediately into crisis and blamed Moses for having led them on the way to death. What did God do? He told Moses: *“Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you, lift up your staff and, with hand outstretched over the sea, split the sea in two, that the Israelites may pass through it on dry land”* (Exodus 14:15-16). First they had to go forward; only by going forward was the sea split and they could pass dry shod. This is the way it works with our faith: We have to go first, and going according to his word we can see that God’s promise materializes. The truth of God’s promise is revealed while we are “on the way”. How often we want to have guarantees beforehand! However, God only gives them “on the way”. That is faith!

6. Keep in mind prophet Elijah on his flight to Mount Horeb. He was passing through many crises until he finally reached the mountain. There his image of God was corrected; God was not present in the phenomenal and miraculous events of the *“strong and heavy wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks”* not in the earthquake, and not in the fire. No, the presence of the Lord was in *“a tiny whispering sound”* (cf. 1 King 19:1-18). After this new experience of God he received a new mandate. With a changed image of God he walked back through the desert in order to continue his mission.

Jesus makes reference to both Moses and Elijah, when they appear on the Mountain of Transfiguration as the main-witnesses of the Old Testament and representatives of Jewish Law and the Prophets; it is the moment when the voice from heaven tells the disciples: *“This is my beloved Son; listen to him”* (Luke 9:7). Jesus is now the new Moses who is teaching his disciples “the way” while walking with them through Galilee and Judea - this is the beginning of the new Exodus. He speaks about a Kingdom which is coming in a dynamic way and proclaimed by people who are moving: First Jesus himself and then his disciples whom at the end of Matthew’s gospel he is commissioning with these words: *“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age”* (Mt 28:18-20).

7. Before the Lord could commission his disciples for this mission he had to educate them and to make them experience the faith journey. In fact, the gospels are in great part the story of how Jesus prepared them for the

work of evangelization in a dynamic way. The public activity of Jesus and the teaching to his disciples happen basically by walking and talking. The Kingdom is on the way, “coming”. It has to be announced by people who are themselves walking and ready to cross the borders. “Go!” is one of the fundamental words of Jesus.

8. I offer you some examples to remind you. Many of the healing stories in the New Testament end with Jesus’ command “Go!” Thus he tells a paralytic: “*Rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home*” (Mt 9:6), or the healed leper: “*Go show yourself to the priest*” (Mt 8:4). The disciples are commissioned to do what Jesus does: “*Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons*” (Mt 10:6-8). “*Go and tell*” he advises the disciples of John the Baptist who have to report to their master what they have seen. The women at the tomb of Jesus are told: “*Go quickly, and tell his disciples, He is risen*” (Mt 28:7).

9. To follow Jesus means going with him wherever he goes. He has no use for disciples who are not ready to move and to go with him even in difficult moments. Thus Peter was invited to walk over the water, trusting that he could do what Jesus did as long as he kept his eyes fixed on him. And it worked until he stared at the threatening waves and lost his confidence. It is in going forward, fixing our eyes on Jesus, that we can overcome the deadly risks of our life (cf. Mt 14:22-33). Peter learned it step by step. During the crisis provoked by his Eucharistic speech by the Lake of Galilee, Jesus asked his closest friends: “*Do you also want to leave?*” Simon Peter had no better answer than “*Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God*” (John 6:67-69). For the true disciple there can be no better companion on the way than Jesus! To believe means to remain with him and to go with him even in moments when we find it difficult to understand Jesus.

10. “*Increase our faith*” is indeed a process of learning and very often a painful one, marked by “trial and error”. One of the most beautiful examples of this process in the New Testament occurs after Resurrection, in Luke’s gospel (chapter 24). Two disciples are leaving the city on the way to Emmaus after the seeming calamity of Jesus’ death on the cross and his burial. Their hope is broken. Depressed, they remember the past while walking and talking. Suddenly a stranger joins them - they do not recognize Jesus - who listens to their grievances. The journey of faith often starts with emptying our hearts and telling our disappointment and bad experiences to the Lord whom we may not

yet fully recognize. Patiently walking with the two disciples, Jesus, still incognito, starts to explain on the basis of Scripture why the Messiah had to suffer. Step by step he leads the two depressed disciples to new hope and a new understanding. As they approach the village and Jesus gives the impression that he is going on farther, the fire in their hearts is already burning and they urge him to stay with them which he does. Finally, at a meal, as Jesus is breaking the bread for them, their eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus who, at the same moment, vanishes from their sight. They had left the city of Jerusalem as hopeless unbelievers; now, after having experienced the risen Lord on the way and recognizing him “in the breaking of bread”, they run back as believers *“to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them”* (Luke 24:33). All of them have become enthusiastic witnesses for the Lord. Can’t it become our own story? And could it not be that we too have to pass through this process even more than once during our lifetime?

11. I mentioned that our faith is a journey. However, we have to keep our eyes open, and every now and then we have to stop in order to fulfil our mission. For example, if it happens that we are on the way *“from Jerusalem to Jericho”*, like the Good Samaritan, and meet the one who was stripped, beaten and left half-dead by brigands, we have to put oil on his wounds. Afterwards we do not continue the way alone but take the wounded with us, entrusting him to the care of the next inn, still showing interest for his recovering (cf. Luke 10:29-37). Thus the journey of faith becomes the journey of love and charity. Accompanying the people who are in difficulties and showing our solidarity with them is an essential part of our faith commitment to Jesus.

12. Time and again we have to stop and take a breath. We have to sit down and listen to the voice of Jesus in order to get new energy. Remember the words of Jesus while he stayed in the house of his friends Martha and Mary! When Martha, fully occupied by her activities as a host and rather upset, complains about her lazy sister she receives the embarrassing answer from the Lord: *“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her”* (Luke 10:41-42). So the journey of faith needs the moments of taking a rest and listening to the voice of the master; only then is new energy given. Sometimes reading the Bible or reciting our prayers we may feel that nothing happens. We may have the feeling that our heart does not respond and that our words are empty and meaningless. Regarding this experience I read recently the following consoling passage: *“At such a moment, there is only one possible path to follow: keep practicing. Say your prayers out of duty or fear, or for some other reason, but keep praying. Keep on,*

even if all seems in vain. The angel in charge of receiving your words, and who is also responsible for the joy of faith, has wandered off somewhere. However, he will soon be back and will only know where to find you if he or she hears a prayer or a request from your lips” (Paulo Coelho, Like the Flowing River, p. 119).

13. Like the people of Israel on their journey through the desert and like the people listening to Jesus, we are hungry and need to be nourished. What the manna was for the people in the desert and what the bread and fish were in the stories of the multiplication, so is the Eucharistic bread for our journey of faith. It is the food that leads us, as the viaticum, even through the door from this life to the eternal. Each time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the priest after the consecration says *“The mystery of faith”*, and the whole assembly answers: *“We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.”* The mystery of faith for us Christians, therefore, has a very precise essential content: the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the first letter to Timothy, Saint Paul speaks about the qualifications of deacons saying *“they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience”* (1 Tim 3:9). Just a few verses later he develops in a more detailed manner how *“to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth”*. And then he continues: *“Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory”* (1 Tim 3:15-16). We find here already, in other words, what the Church later will profess in the Creed. The mystery of faith is celebrated in the holy Eucharist, professed in the Creed, and has to be implemented in our faith journey day after day. Ministers are required to lead us on this way. Let us pray that he may call some of our young people to become workers in the vineyard of the Lord who will accompany and serve us on our pilgrimage towards the eternal goal!

14. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I encourage you to persevere in your faith journey. Remain committed although you may have your own difficulties. Some of you may have a broken life or may have fallen into sin; others may live in conflict with others or have a feeling of inability to forgive. Do not forget that in view of such difficulties the disciples asked the Lord: *“Increase our faith!”* The journey of faith is not first of all a question of piety and devotion but the self-commitment to the Lord who never rejects anybody who approaches him in confidence and humility. Persevering on the journey of faith despite our limits and shortcomings will make us discover that we are loved without limits by the One who has given his life for you and for me. We

do not need to be acrobats in faith; we only need to remain faithfully on the track. We have to accept the daily challenge and to convert the love we are enjoying from the Lord into love of the ones we are in touch with: husband or wife, sons or daughters, neighbours and strangers, sick and prisoners, babies and aged people, saints and sinners – there is no end to the list. Simply, do not stand still; go forward eagerly in the strength of the Holy Spirit you received in Baptism and Confirmation.

15. May we have the courage of the disciples after Pentecost! In the strength of the Holy Spirit they were moving and giving witness to what they believed. Thus going behind the chariot of the Ethiopian, Philip “*heard him reading Isaiah*” and traveling with him could explain “*the Way*” (Acts 8:16ff). Isn’t it what our catechists and many others are doing: helping others to understand Scripture and to learn more about our faith? This requires “walking with the people” be it with children or adults, with well-integrated Catholics or with people who are distant – always respecting the laws of the country where we are living. We need such “Philips” who are attentive to men and women in search of the Truth and give them guidance in order to find the Lord and to believe in him.

16. On this, our journey of faith, we are blessed to have an experienced guide in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is simultaneously our guide and companion on our pilgrimage. At the beginning of her vocation, she heard the greeting of the angel Gabriel: “*Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you ... Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God*” (Lk 1:28.30). These words marked the beginning of a very difficult life journey. She first travelled “*to the hill country ... of Judah*”, where Elizabeth “*filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in loud voice: ‘Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ... Blessed are you who believed’*” (Lk 1:39.42.45). The beautiful words of the gospel could deceive us. The journey of Mary is anything but easy. Her way is full of obstacles and trials: the difficult conditions surrounding the nativity of Jesus in Bethlehem; the flight to Egypt; the difficulties in understanding the prophetic and messianic vocation of her son; and finally the Passion and Death of Jesus on the cross. We find the secret of her life in her faithfulness and in her trust, as Elizabeth said on the occasion of Mary’s visit in Judah: “*Blessed are you who believed.*” The Church understood very soon that this faith of the Virgin Mary and her role in salvific history did not finish with the tragedy she suffered under the cross; with the Easter victory of her Son as well as with her Assumption into the glory her life of faith was fulfilled. Her journey started with an act of faith and trust and was completed “full of grace” and so we profess every Sunday: “I look forward

to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come”. The Virgin Mary is, in our faith, the guarantee of a promise given to us all. - Let us therefore *“persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith”* (Hebrews 12:2).

May the Lord bless you and keep you faithful to him who wants to *“increase our faith”*.

+ Paul Hinder OFM Cap.
Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia
(United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen)

On the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, 4th October 2013

APOSTOLIC VICARIATE OF SOUTHERN ARABIA – PARISHES IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

ABU DHABI - St Joseph's Parish

P.O. Box 54, Tel: 02 446 1929, Fax: 02 446 1868;
abuparish@yahoo.com, www.stjosephsabudhabi.org
Location: Al Mushrif, on 17th Street, Between Old Airport Road and
Karamah Street (near Al Khubairat British School)

AL AIN - St. Mary's Church

P.O. Box 15645, Tel: 03 721 4417, Fax: 03 721 7929
alainchurch@gmail.com, www.stmarysalain.com
Location: Near Etisalat, Opposite Oasis Hospital;

DUBAI - St. Mary's Church

P.O. Box 51200, Tel: 04 337 0087 / 335 8504, Fax: 04 334 7594;
stmarysdx@gmail.com, www.stmarysdubai.com
Location: Oudh Metha Road, Close to Oudh Metha Metro Station

JEBEL ALI - St. Francis of Assisi Church

P.O. Box 72715, Tel: 04 884 5251, Fax: 04 884 5216;
info@stfrancisjebelali.ae, www.stfrancisjebelali.ae
Location: Exit 25 of Sheikh Zayed Road (Near Ibn Battuta Mall), in Jebel Ali Village, Behind the
Hospital and the school, in the churches' area. The last entrance is St. Francis of Assisi Church.

FUJAIRAH - Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church

P.O. Box 1168, Fujairah. Tel: 09 223 1377, Fax: 09 222 3238.
olphufjairah@gmail.com, www.olphufjairah.org Nearby landmarks: Water tower, Carrefour.

RAS AL KHAIMAH - St. Anthony of Padua

Box 10946, Ras Al Khaimah. Tel: 07 222 2377; Fax 07 222 9618
thomasampatt60@gmail.com
Location new church: Al Jazeera, Al Hamra, Near tall chimney of glass factory; exit 119 of E311.

SHARJAH - St. Michael's Church

P.O. Box 1745, Sharjah; Tel: 06 566 2424 / 06 566 2049, Fax: 06 566 3324
stmichaelsch@emirates.net.ae, www.stmichaelssharjah.org
Location: Al Yarmook Area, Close to Al Estiqlal Square, The Ministry of Labour and the Russian
Orthodox Church with its many domes and golden crosses.

Bishop's House - Abu Dhabi

P.O. Box 54, Abu Dhabi, Tel: +971 2 446 1895; Fax +971 2 446 5177;
info@ccsarabia.org, www.ccsarabia.org
Location: in the compound of St. Joseph's Church

PARISHES IN OMAN

RUWI - MUSCAT - Sts. Peter and Paul Church

P.O. Box 613, Ruwi 112. Tel: +968 2470 1893; Fax +968 2478 8840
ruwiparish@gmail.com, www.ruwichurch.org

GHALA - MUSCAT - Holy Spirit Church

P.O. Box 371, Madinat Qaboos 115. Tel: +968 2459 0373, Fax: +968 2450 2513
ghalachc@omantel.net.om, www.holyspiritchurchoman.com

SALALAH - St. Francis Xavier Church

P.O. Box 1405, Salalah 211. Tel: +968 2323 5727; Fax +968 2323 5787
ashokgonsalves@yahoo.co.in

SOHAR - St. Anthony's Church

P.O. Box 842, Sohar 311. Tel. +968 2684 1396; Fax +968 2684 4469
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OUR LADY OF ARABIA - PRAYER

"O Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Arabia and our Patroness! To you we offer up our prayers for the needs of the Church here and throughout the world. Help us to remain one with your Son Jesus and united amongst ourselves, so that we may be true witnesses for Christ in our daily lives and that the Lord's blessings of peace and harmony be within our families and communities always. Trusting in your maternal intercession, we beseech you to hear our humble prayers and grant us the graces we seek... so that we may give glory to God forever. Amen. **Our Lady of Arabia, pray for us!"**

The feast is celebrated in the two Vicariates of the Gulf on the Saturday after the Baptism of the Lord, in 2014 on 18 January.