

**I DO BELIEVE,  
HELP MY UNBELIEF**

Mark 9:24

**A Pastoral Letter  
from  
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**for the  
Year of Faith  
11 October 2012 – 24 November 2013**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may the Lord grant you peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!

1. Each one of us has his or her own faith experience. Many could relate impressive personal faith stories; perhaps there were particular moments during our childhood when we experienced a confidence in God that seemed to be indestructible. Others may have found, after many difficulties and sufferings, a return to a faith which has become the anchor of their lives. Some may have suffered because of the sins and human weakness of other faithful, including Church ministers, and thus gone through trials until their friendship with Jesus was restored. Most of us, however are struggling day after day with our own limitations and many may have become tired and lost the intimacy of close friendship with God. We know that there are many in the Catholic Church who have become indifferent or are even reconsidering their Christian vocation as such. There is no doubt that the Church and her members need a kind of revitalisation.

### **Proclamation of the Year of Faith by Pope Benedict XVI**

2. This revitalisation is exactly what Pope Benedict XVI intends with the proclamation of the “Year of Faith”, which starts on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, and concludes on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2013, the Solemnity of Christ the King. The Pope announced this Year of Faith officially in his letter *Porta Fidei* (“The Door of Faith”) and invites all of us to renew our faith commitment and to deepen it on the basis of our baptism, the sacrament through which we have become Christians, children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Every year, during the Easter liturgy, we renew our baptismal vows professing solemnly that we do renounce the powers and the works of the Evil One and that we believe in God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

### **Meanings of “I believe”**

3. What does it really mean when we say “I believe”? How many times in our life do we use the expression rather thoughtlessly! I can share my opinion in a discussion saying: “*I believe* that things should go this way!” Sometimes we express our uncertainty telling: “*I believe* that John has passed his exams but I am not quite sure.” It becomes more serious if I say to someone: “*I believe* you!” It means that I take the other person as trustworthy and therefore his or her words and gestures as true and honest. The day I have to say to someone: “I can’t believe you anymore!” reveals the moment of loss of confidence and leads to the rupture of a relationship. If I say to my friend, “*I believe in* you”, I mean that I put my trust in him and that I consider him the master of his life and able to keep his friendship with me even in difficult times. Isn’t that exactly what men and women express when they exchange their marriage vows?

### **Christian Belief**

4. Passing on to the level of our Christian faith, “*I believe*” of course means much more than simply “I think, but I am not sure”. It means: “I am firmly convinced and put my trust in God.” Our journey of faith is a very special one as Saint Paul says: “*We walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Co 5:7). It is part of our human nature that we

want to see, to touch, and to experience with all our senses as with Saint Thomas, the Apostle, regarding the Risen Lord: *“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe”* (John 20:25). Although the Risen Lord gives him the unique opportunity, He makes it clear to him and all of us: *“You believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”* (John 20:29). True Christian faith may sometimes be supported by extraordinary signs and experiences, but at the very end true faith remains a question of trust in the One who said: *“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life”* (John 14:6).

### **Lack of Faith**

5. The disciples of Jesus who later became the witnesses of faith had to go a long way. How many times Jesus *“was amazed at their lack of faith”* (Mark 6:6)? Again and again he had to reprehend his hearers, especially his disciples, because of their *“little faith”* (e.g. Mt 14:31; 17:20; Luke 12:28). The Lord first had to remove mountains of unbelief among his own disciples when he said: *“Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”* (Mk 11:22-24).

6. The critical situations in the life of the disciples were always moments of lack of faith and trust. When they could not cast out an evil spirit in a boy (Mark 9:14-29); when Simon Peter walked over the water and began to sink (Matthew 14:22-33); when they had forgotten the provisions for their journey (Matthew 16:5-12); when they deserted and fled at the time of the Lord’s arrest in Gethsemane (Mark 14:50); when they were proved *“foolish and slow of heart to believe”* like the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:25). Actually, the first thing that had to be restored after the Death and Resurrection of Jesus was their faith.

### **Wavering Faith**

7. Jesus had been aware of this on the eve of his Passion as it is remarkably expressed in his prediction to Simon Peter that he would deny him three times the same night: *“Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers”* (Luke 22:31-32). The Lord knew about the division in the hearts of the disciples: their good will and love as well as their weakness and timidity when it came to the moment of trial.

8. This division in the life of the disciples is also in ours. We should never be too sure of ourselves even though most of us may be practicing Christians. Saint Paul reminds the faithful in Philippi: *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* (Phil 2:12-13). Somehow we all are swaying between belief and love on one hand and failure and betrayal on the other. This division is expressed best in the prayer of the father who in Mark 9 pleads for the healing of his boy possessed by an evil spirit. After having explained to Jesus all the troubles and sufferings they have gone through with the boy, the father implores the Lord: *“If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.”* Jesus is immediately aware of the uncertain faith of the father. Picking up his words Jesus replies: *“If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes.”* Immediately the father surrenders

crying out: *“I believe, help my unbelief!”* (Mark 9:22-24) Is it not our own dramatic faith situation in which we have no other choice than to make the words of the tormented father our own: “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!”

### **The Courage to Jump**

9. Dear friends in Christ, the Year of Faith has as its purpose the strengthening of our fragile faith and the restoring of our trust in God through friendship with his Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore faith is not, first of all, a question of intellectual knowledge, although we have to reflect on our relationship with God and to know, as far as possible, the sources of the revelation. Again, faith is not simply a question of religious feeling, although we should be able, at least at certain moments, to savour the friendship our Lord is offering. First of all faith is simply an act of trust in the Lord who calls me: I “jump” and walk towards him, as Peter did when he recognized the Lord walking on the waters and asked him: *“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”* He said: *“Come.”* So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water and came toward Jesus (Matthew 14:28-29). Once I recognize the Lord I have to take all my courage and leave behind the settings of human security (the “boat”) and to walk where there is no secure path simply because Jesus tells me: “Come!” We should not be surprised if such a walk is not simply a success story but marked by fear and trial, especially if the dangers are taking our full attention and obscuring our sight of Jesus. The experience of “beginning to sink” is part of our faith journey. There is no other way than to cry out with Peter: “Lord, save me!” Jesus will immediately stretch out his hand and catch me saying: *“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”* (Matthew 14:31)

10. Peter was together with other disciples in the boat; and so was Thomas in the upper room eight days after Easter. Both Peter and Thomas revealed themselves later in acts of personal faith and the consequent professions of faith: *“Truly you are the Son of God”* (Matthew 14:33); *“My Lord and my God”* (John 20:28). Only then was either of them entering into full discipleship and able to bear witness to the Lord before others.

### **Believers Passing through Darkness**

11. What we must try to do during the Year of Faith is precisely this: to renew with courage the faith which Peter and Thomas demonstrated and make it our own by praying to the Lord: “If it is you, command me to come to you on the water; if it is you show me the wounds of your love.” The community of the Church is the place where we are invited to restore our faith in Jesus Christ, the living Son of God, and to commit ourselves according to our personal and professional life situation. We should do it humbly, knowing how weak we are. We do it, aware that darkness is an essential part of our faith journey. Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus was not sure any more at the end of her life if she really believed, she simply surrendered herself to God. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta had little “feeling” of God in her life, but trusted him in the experience of her darkness, serving in love the poorest of the poor. Blessed John Henry Newman went through the same experience of dryness of faith and darkness, but has left us one of the most beautiful hymns which can help us in our own lives:

*Lead, kindly Light, amid 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.*

*I was not ever thus, nor prayed 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!*

*Meantime, along the narrow rugged path, Thyself hast trod,  
Lead, Saviour, lead me home in childlike faith, home to my God.  
To rest forever after earthly strife  
In the calm light of everlasting life.*

What more do we need? There are many who seek miracles and extraordinary signs to excite their faith that by the grace of God they may be given a special help at certain particular moments. However, the normal daily faith-journey is a “*narrow rugged path*” on which “*the kindly light amidst th’encircling gloom*” may “*lead me on*”. Did not the Lord tell Thomas and through him each of his followers: “*You believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*” (John 20:29).

### **“Lead, Saviour, lead me home in childlike faith, home to my God”**

12. Many Catholics have given up their regular religious practice. Some of them may quarrel in their heart with the Church and even with God because of ordeals which made them despair of the love of God and his work in the Catholic Church. Some of them may have deserted and gone to other religious denominations. They surely will not find their way back by reasoned arguments alone and even less by criticism. The best way to show them the love of God is our own genuine Christian witness. We have to show them through our lives the love of the Good Shepherd who patiently looks after those who have gone astray and died for them on that lonely hill of Calvary. It is the only way to open again the door for that “*childlike faith*” that leads “*home to my God*”. We should never forget that none of us started as a saint, and therefore confess humbly with Saint Paul: “*I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus ... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life*” (1 Timothy 1:13-16). This is the way to reach out to those who have lost God or not yet found him in Christ Jesus. Thus the witness of lived faith can become a beacon for the world, for those who have forgotten their Christian roots as well as for those who have never heard of Jesus Christ.

### **Training our Faith in Prayer**

13. The Year of Faith gives us the chance to renew our faith commitment especially by *deepening our prayer*. This does not mean to multiply the words, but primarily to pray with more commitment and devotion than before. It starts with the *Our Father* and the *Hail Mary* which all too often have become superficial fillers in the ocean of words we are addressing to the Lord. However, prayer out of the depth of a loving heart knows that the Lord is present and looking at me although I may not

realise it and very often not find the right words. There are moments when we can only cry “*I believe, Lord, help my unbelief!*” Or: “*Jesus, Son of the living God, have pity on me!*” We should keep this in mind each time, when after the penitential rite during the Holy Eucharist we pray: “*Lord have mercy! Christ have mercy! Lord have mercy!*” Let us never get tired of interceding for others. The intercessory prayer is a test case of our faith!

### **Living with the Word of God**

14. During the Year of Faith we are invited to read regularly and attentively the *Word of God*. A short meditation on the daily Mass readings may help us to deepen our knowledge of the Bible. The daily reflections on *God’s Word 2012* or for the coming year *Bible Alive 2013 – A Daily Companion* are helpful means in order to remain on track. The Bible opens our mind and heart not only to the story of God with his people in the past, but also for the ups and downs of our own relationship with God. Thus praying the *Psalms* gives us the opportunity to thank and to praise, to lament and to cry, to implore and to recall the great deeds of the Lord in our own lives.

### **Living the Sacraments**

15. We are living our Christian faith in the *community of the Church* in which we have been incorporated by the sacraments of *Baptism* and *Confirmation*. In the *Holy Eucharist* the Lord has given us the sacrament which keeps present in our midst his sacrifice on the Cross, renews our belonging to the body of Christ, the Church and strengthens us on our journey of faith by receiving the bread of life. There is a deep meaning in the invitation after the consecration: “*The Mystery of Faith!*” It is the moment of faith *par excellence* when we profess our full faith in Jesus Christ, the living Son of God, present in the sacrament and given as “*the bread of life*” to sustain us on our journey of faith. In the sacrament of *Reconciliation* we experience the mercy of the Lord and can be restored in our faith if we should have failed as once Peter did. Then “*the Lord turned and looked at Peter ... and he went out and wept bitterly*” (Luke 22:61-62). Do not hesitate to restore your faith in the Lord through the experience of a healing confession!

### **Knowing the Catholic Faith**

16. In order to *deepen our faith and its knowledge* I recommend strongly the study during the Year of Faith of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, especially the different articles about the *Apostolic Creed*. In it are expressed the basic mysteries of our Christian faith. It is the common ground we share with all baptized. For this purpose it will be good to read, alone or in common, the respective part of the *CCC*, i.e. *The Profession of Christian Faith* (numbers 185 – 1065). If you prefer a shorter version, you may go through the *Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church* (numbers 33 – 217). Our young people may go carefully through the *YOUCAT: Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church* (numbers 25 – 165). Once this is done, you may continue with the other sections of the Catechism: *The Celebration of the Christian Mystery* in the sacraments (numbers 1066 - 1690); *The Life in Christ* (numbers 1691 – 2557); and finally the *Christian Prayer* (numbers 2558 – 2865). I ask those who are in charge of the parish shop to see that these books are actually available for the faithful.

### **Foster the Unity**

17. The Year of Faith may also be an opportunity to *foster the unity among us* beyond the borders of different Church traditions (rites), languages and ethnic bounds.

We should always be aware that according to Saint Paul we are “*the family of faith*” (Gal 6:10), maintaining “*the unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace*” and living “*as one body and one Spirit, just as (we) were called to the one hope of (our) calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4:3-6). In this conviction we may also reach out to those who have become lukewarm or even lost their connection with the Catholic Church.

### **Taking Initiatives**

18. I encourage the priests and all the faithful not to miss the opportunity of the Year of Faith, and to take *appropriate initiatives* adapted to the situation in their respective country, parish, and parish group or association, always keeping in mind that faith is not just a question of knowing a list of worded truths but of a personal relationship with God, as it is beautifully expressed in 1 Peter 1:8-9: “*Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, as you attain the goal of [your] faith, the salvation of your souls.*” Although living in the gloom of the present time, we take our stand with him and shall resist when storms are threatening us. Remember the word of Isaiah which he spoke to king Ahaz just before presaging the birth of a child called Immanuel: “*If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all*” (Isaiah 7:9).

### **Mary, the Guardian of our Faith**

19. The Virgin Mary, Mother of God, has given birth to Immanuel, which means God-with-us. Elizabeth blessed her not only for the fruit in her womb but also because “*she had believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord*” (Luke 1:45). During the years I spent in Fribourg/Switzerland I had regularly to go for mass to a place named Bourguillon which had a regional shrine under the title “*Mary, Guardian of our Faith*”. People had given the shrine this title in times of struggle for the Catholic Church. Let us each time when we pray the Holy Rosary ask the intercession of our Lady, “*Guardian of our Faith*”. She will be a sure guide to Jesus, her Son, and always teaches us: “*Do what ever he tells you!*” (John 2:5)

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Dear friends in Christ, may the Year of Faith become for all of us a time of grace. Let us humbly pray with the disciples of Jesus: “*Increase our faith!*” (Lk 17:5) and finally renew our commitment of faith, hope and love with the profession of Simon Peter: “*Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you*” (John 21:17). - May the Lord bless and keep you!

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