It may seem a little strange, if you think about it, that the Catholic Church should have a “year of faith.” Aren’t Catholics by definition already people of faith? Isn’t this already what it means to be a Catholic, that is, to be a believer? Don’t we, for instance, recite the Creed at every Mass, thereby declaring that we “believe” all sorts of things about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

In order to introduce this year of faith, I’d like to attempt to look into this apparent riddle by drawing on the speech which Pope Benedict gave as his own introduction to the year, *Porta Fidei*.

Let’s repeat the question. Why do Catholics need a year of faith? After reminding us of the fact that we are called, as Catholics, to lead people “out of the desert” and “towards friendship with the Son of God,” Benedict goes on to say the following:

> It often happens that Christians are more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment, continuing to think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society. In reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is often openly denied. Whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of faith..., today this no longer seems to be the case ... (*Porta Fidei*, par. 2, emphasis mine).

What is the Pope saying in these lines? He is calling attention to a new situation for Catholics in the world. If you think about it, since the conversion of Constantine in the 4th century, Catholics have always been in a culture that was itself a product of and thereby productive of the faith which they confessed. Even after the fall the Empire and then the division of Christendom after the Reformation, Catholics tended to live in countries which were more or less explicitly Catholic. Again, what one confessed in Church and the customs and values of the surrounding culture largely coincided. The Church’s calendar, for instance, was the nation’s calendar; the Church’s values were in many cases the law of the land.

Even when Catholics came to a relatively hostile place like the United States, they tended to form Catholic subcultures, or, what were known as Catholic ghettos: little oases of Catholicism in an otherwise Protestant or secular world. The life of a Catholic in this country in, say, 1940 would have revolved around the ethnic parish, and the parochial schools served the purpose of reminding us of how and why we were different from the surrounding culture.
While all of these situations—the Emperor becoming a Catholic, the country and its culture being largely Catholic, or the ghetto in which one lived being Catholic—had their advantages, none of them did much to prepare Catholics to live their faith in the midst of a hostile or indifferent world. Indeed, Catholics were so used to assuming that the culture which surrounded them was already Catholic that most of them would have had no idea of the need or even how to evangelize it. Why, to go back to Benedict, would we need to invite people “out of the desert” and “towards friendship with the Son of God”? Weren’t we surrounded precisely by friends of the Son of God already?

And yet, as Benedict reminds us, “this no longer seems to be the case.” And this means that living out our faith merely in terms of “social, cultural and political” movements is no longer sufficient (as it may have been in, say, 17th century France). All of this is a roundabout way of saying, “We’re not in Kansas anymore.” The world which we live in is neither the Christendom of Constantine, the Christian nation of Italy, nor the Catholic ghetto in Philadelphia. We therefore have to be careful not simply to assume that the values of our surrounding culture are simply the values of the Faith.

A quick illustration of this may help. A friend of mine teaches at Villanova University. You may know that Villanova is an Augustinian school, after the great Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was a man who knew the importance of distinguishing the Church from the surrounding culture, for he was much more sober about the Roman Empire than were most of his fellow Catholics at the end of the fourth century. During his inaugural speech, a new president of Villanova stood up and said the following: “If I had to summarize the teachings of St. Augustine in one word, that word would be ‘diversity’.” In one fell swoop the president of Villanova had reduced St. Augustine to Oprah Winfrey; he had, that is, simply equated the “values” of the Catholic faith with the “values” of contemporary American culture.

But this misstep of the president of Villanova is not unique. All of us who are Catholic in the modern world have a tendency simply to assume that the values of the broader culture are already Catholic, and that’s because we have always had the protection of a surrounding culture. We therefore assume that American values such as freedom, equality, diversity, tolerance, compassion, globalization, capitalism, humanism, etc., mean the same thing in a secular culture that they mean for a Catholic. And what Benedict has been saying, for a very long time now, way before he was Pope Benedict, is that that is no longer the case. It is high time, he is saying, that we re-familiarize ourselves with what it means to be distinctively Catholic.

From the foregoing it may seem that what I am saying Benedict is calling for can be summed up in one very scary word: sectarianism. In other words, isn’t Benedict simply calling for a return to the Catholic subculture of the 1940’s and 50’s? The answer to this must be an apodictic No! For if you’ll notice the problem of assimilation—that is, Catholics confusing their faith with the broader values of their culture—and the problem of sectarianism—that is, Catholics sequestering themselves into isolated subcultures—are equally failures to be the “salt of the earth.” Let me repeat this: the solution of what we’ve come to call “conservative” Catholicism, that is, to be distinctively Catholic and to create little havens of conservative Catholicism, such as Steubenville, and the solution of “progressive” Catholicism, namely, simply to equate the Catholic faith with the agenda of the Oprah Winfreys of the world, are products of the same failure. They are, to put it another way, two sides of the same coin. And neither of them is what Benedict is calling for.

So, what is he calling for? You’ll recall that heresies always opt for one truth at the expense of all others. For instance, Arius was so adamant about the transcendence of the true God that he could
not acknowledge that this man named Jesus, who lived on earth for thirty-plus years, could be God. Now, it is true that God is transcendent, but it is also true that God became a man, and so is also immanent. Similarly, the heresy of sectarianism consists in the truth that Catholicism is distinct, that what it means by freedom is very different from what George W. Bush or President Obama mean by freedom. And the truth of the Catholic progressives is that God came, not for the sake of a Catholic ghetto, but for the sake of the world. But the error of both of them is that they fail to hold these two truths together. The “traditionalists” succeed in not being of the world, but they fail to go into the world; while the “progressives” succeed in being in the world, but only by also being of it. In one case that light is kept under the bushel, in the other the salt has lost its flavor.

So, once more, why a year of faith? The answer is really rather simple. It is to remind Catholics of who they are so that they can go into the world and be its salt and light.

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