

EPIPHANY

As you know, back on October 11 last year, the day that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the Church began observing a Year of Faith that will continue all through the current liturgical year, ending just before the next season of Advent. There is, of course, a sense in which every year is a year of faith, for as St. Paul once wrote to the Corinthians, in our life on earth “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). But there are particular reasons why, in our own time, a year of faith is called for. In his homily at the opening Mass of this special year, Pope Benedict said that in many respects we are today living in a spiritual desert. Here is part of what he said on that occasion:

In the Council’s time it was already possible from a few tragic pages of history to know what a life or a world without God looked like, but now we see it every day around us. This void has spread. But it is in starting from the experience of this desert, from this void, that we can again discover the joy of believing, its vital importance for us men and women. In the desert we rediscover the value of what is essential for living; thus in today’s world there are innumerable signs . . . of the thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life. And in the desert people of faith are needed who, with their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive.

Surely we could all name some of these exemplary “people of faith” who point out the way for the rest of us. In a very interesting interview that he gave a few years ago, one of the Protestant “delegated observers” at Vatican II, the theologian George Lindbeck, said that people like

“Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa have done far more to sustain continuity with Jesus and the apostles than have theologians with their ever-changing explications of the faith.”¹ This is very much in accord with something that Pope Benedict has said a number of times in the course of his life, namely, that the two most powerful and effective witnesses to the Gospel have always been the saints and the great Christian artists. There is, however, something ironic in Professor Lindbeck’s statement. For years people thought that Mother Teresa was practically living the heavenly life of full, clear vision already here on earth, but with the publication of her letters to spiritual directors we learned that this was not at all the case. In one of the most striking passages from that correspondence, she wrote the following to Fr. Joseph Neuner:

... Father, since 1949 or 50 this terrible sense of loss, this untold darkness ... such that I really do not see ... The place of God in my soul is blank.—There is no God in me.... He is not there.—Heaven—souls—why these are just words—which mean nothing to me.—My very life seems so contradictory. I help souls—to go where?—Why all this? Where is the soul in my very being?²

We may readily agree with her spiritual director that Mother Teresa was here undergoing that dark night of which saints like John of the Cross have written, and we may further agree that there is nothing one can do in that state but persevere in bearing it “in the assurance of God’s hidden presence and of the union with Jesus who in His passion had to bear the burden and darkness of the sinful world for our salvation,”³ but that may not do much to lighten the difficulty of faith in our own lives. As Mother Teresa’s great friend and supporter, Pope John Paul II, said

in his address to two million young people at World Youth Day in Rome in the year 2000, “It is hard to believe in the third millennium. Yes, it is hard. There is no need to hide it.”⁴

And if we ask why faith can be so hard, for one answer we need look no farther than our reading from the prophet Isaiah for this feast of the Epiphany, where Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem bathed in the splendor and glory of God, with other nations walking by her light and their leaders walking by her shining radiance. What we see instead is a city beset by bitter contention, while the entire land of Israel, what we are wont to call the Holy Land, is mostly known for outbreaks of violence and the threat of further open warfare. Where is God, where is the Prince of Peace, in all of this? Those are real questions, and perhaps the only satisfying answer is to recognize that we need to live more than just by faith alone. After all, there is the second theological virtue, hope, which sometimes gets overlooked but which is crucial if we are to persevere in our Christian discipleship. In fact, hope and faith depend on each other, and only with both may we find “not only a consolation in suffering, but also the protest of the divine promise against suffering.”⁵

Moreover, it is hope that helps us live a life of love, the kind of love that never despairs no matter how many horrors at places like Newtown and Aleppo we hear and read about, a love that makes no distinction between persons on grounds of race or ethnicity or religion. In the solemn blessing that we will use to close this celebration of the Eucharist, one of the petitions goes like this: “Since in all confidence you follow Christ, who today appeared in the world as a light shining in darkness, may God make you, too, a light for your brothers and sisters.” We will be that light only if we live after the example of people like Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day, no matter how much darkness we might sense around us or even in our own hearts. Through our reception of the sacramental body and blood of Christ at this Mass, may we be epiphanies of the

Lord Jesus as we continue our pilgrimage through the desert of this life toward the radiant land that has been promised us.

¹ George Lindbeck, "Performing the Faith," *The Christian Century*, Nov. 28, 2006, p. 29.

² Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *Come Be My Light*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C. (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 210.

³ Joseph Neuner, quoted *ibid.*, 214.

⁴ Quoted by George Weigel, *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 247.

⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM, 1967), 21.