

Franciscan University Presents
“Lumen Fidei and the Life of Faith”
With guest, Father Sean Sheridan

Excerpts from the papal encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, “The Light of Faith”

**Chapter Two: UNLESS YOU BELIEVE,
YOU WILL NOT UNDERSTAND
(cf. Is 7:9)**

Faith and truth

23. Unless you believe, you will not understand (cf. Is 7:9). The Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint translation produced in Alexandria, gives the above rendering of the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz. In this way, the issue of the knowledge of truth became central to faith. The Hebrew text, though, reads differently; the prophet says to the king: "If you will not believe, you shall not be established". Here there is a play on words, based on two forms of the verb 'amān: "you will believe" (ta'amînû) and "you shall be established" (tē'amēnû). Terrified by the might of his enemies, the king seeks the security that an alliance with the great Assyrian empire can offer. The prophet tells him instead to trust completely in the solid and steadfast rock which is the God of Israel. Because God is trustworthy, it is reasonable to have faith in him, to stand fast on his word. He is the same God that Isaiah will later call, twice in one verse, the God who is Amen, "the God of truth" (cf. Is 65:16), the enduring foundation of covenant fidelity. It might seem that the Greek version of the Bible, by translating "be established" as "understand", profoundly altered the meaning of the text by moving away from the biblical notion of trust in God towards a Greek notion of intellectual understanding. Yet this translation, while certainly reflecting a dialogue with Hellenistic culture, is not alien to the underlying spirit of the Hebrew text. The firm foundation that Isaiah promises to the king is indeed grounded in an understanding of God's activity and the unity which he gives to human life and to the history of his people. The prophet challenges the king, and us, to understand the Lord's ways, seeing in God's faithfulness the wise plan which governs the ages. Saint Augustine took up this synthesis of the ideas of "understanding" and "being established" in his Confessions when he spoke of the truth on which one may rely in order to stand fast: "Then I shall be cast and set firm in the mould of your truth".^[17] From the context we know that Augustine was concerned to show that this trustworthy truth of God is, as the Bible makes clear, his own faithful presence throughout history, his ability to hold together times and ages, and to gather into one the scattered strands of our lives.^[18]

24. Read in this light, the prophetic text leads to one conclusion: we need knowledge, we need truth, because without these we cannot stand firm, we cannot move forward. Faith without truth does not save, it does not provide a sure footing. It remains a beautiful story, the projection of our deep yearning for happiness, something capable of satisfying us to the extent that we are willing to deceive ourselves. Either that, or it is reduced to a lofty sentiment which brings consolation and cheer, yet remains prey to the vagaries of our spirit and the changing seasons, incapable of sustaining a steady journey through life. If such were faith, King Ahaz would be right not to stake his life and the security of his kingdom on a feeling. But precisely because of its intrinsic link to truth, faith is instead able to offer a new light, superior to the king's calculations, for it sees further into the distance and takes into account the hand of God, who remains faithful to his covenant and his promises.

25. Today more than ever, we need to be reminded of this bond between faith and truth, given the crisis of truth in our age. In contemporary culture, we often tend to consider the only real truth to be that of technology: truth is what we succeed in building and measuring by our scientific know-how, truth is what works and what makes life easier and more comfortable. Nowadays this appears as the only truth that is certain, the only truth that can be shared, the only truth that can serve as a basis for discussion or for common undertakings. Yet at the other end of the scale we are willing to allow for subjective truths of the individual, which consist in fidelity to his or her deepest convictions, yet these are truths valid only for that individual and not capable of being proposed to others in an effort to serve the common good. But Truth itself, the truth which would comprehensively explain our life as individuals and in society, is regarded with suspicion. Surely this kind of truth — we hear it said — is what was claimed by the great totalitarian movements of the last century, a truth that imposed its own world view in order to crush the actual lives of individuals. In the end, what we are left with is relativism, in which the question of universal truth — and ultimately this means the question of God — is no longer relevant. It would be logical, from this point of view, to attempt to sever the bond between religion and truth, because it seems to lie at the root of fanaticism, which proves oppressive for anyone who does not share the same beliefs. In this regard, though, we can speak of a massive amnesia in our contemporary world. The question of truth is really a question of memory, deep memory, for it deals with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness. It is a question about the origin of all that is, in whose light we can glimpse the goal and thus the meaning of our common path.

Knowledge of the truth and love

26. This being the case, can Christian faith provide a service to the common good with regard to the right way of understanding truth? To answer this question, we need to reflect on the kind of knowledge involved in faith. Here a saying of Saint Paul can help us: "One believes with the heart" (Rom 10:10). In the Bible, the heart is the core of the

human person, where all his or her different dimensions intersect: body and spirit, interiority and openness to the world and to others, intellect, will and affectivity. If the heart is capable of holding all these dimensions together, it is because it is where we become open to truth and love, where we let them touch us and deeply transform us. Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he or she becomes open to love. Through this blending of faith and love we come to see the kind of knowledge which faith entails, its power to convince and its ability to illumine our steps. Faith knows because it is tied to love, because love itself brings enlightenment. Faith's understanding is born when we receive the immense love of God which transforms us inwardly and enables us to see reality with new eyes.

27. The explanation of the connection between faith and certainty put forward by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is well known. For Wittgenstein, believing can be compared to the experience of falling in love: it is something subjective which cannot be proposed as a truth valid for everyone.^[19] Indeed, most people nowadays would not consider love as related in any way to truth. Love is seen as an experience associated with the world of fleeting emotions, no longer with truth.

But is this an adequate description of love? Love cannot be reduced to an ephemeral emotion. True, it engages our affectivity, but in order to open it to the beloved and thus to blaze a trail leading away from self-centredness and towards another person, in order to build a lasting relationship; love aims at union with the beloved. Here we begin to see how love requires truth. Only to the extent that love is grounded in truth can it endure over time, can it transcend the passing moment and be sufficiently solid to sustain a shared journey. If love is not tied to truth, it falls prey to fickle emotions and cannot stand the test of time. True love, on the other hand, unifies all the elements of our person and becomes a new light pointing the way to a great and fulfilled life. Without truth, love is incapable of establishing a firm bond; it cannot liberate our isolated ego or redeem it from the fleeting moment in order to create life and bear fruit.

If love needs truth, truth also needs love. Love and truth are inseparable. Without love, truth becomes cold, impersonal and oppressive for people's day-to-day lives. The truth we seek, the truth that gives meaning to our journey through life, enlightens us whenever we are touched by love. One who loves realizes that love is an experience of truth, that it opens our eyes to see reality in a new way, in union with the beloved. In this sense, Saint Gregory the Great could write that "amor ipse notitia est", love is itself a kind of knowledge possessed of its own logic.^[20] It is a relational way of viewing the world, which then becomes a form of shared knowledge, vision through the eyes of another and a shared vision of all that exists. William of Saint-Thierry, in the Middle Ages, follows this tradition when he comments on the verse of the Song of Songs where the lover says to the beloved, "Your eyes are doves" (Song 1:15).^[21] The two eyes, says William, are faith-filled reason and love, which then become one in rising to the contemplation of God, when our understanding becomes "an understanding of enlightened love".^[22]

28. This discovery of love as a source of knowledge, which is part of the primordial experience of every man and woman, finds authoritative expression in the biblical understanding of faith. In savouring the love by which God chose them and made them a people, Israel came to understand the overall unity of the divine plan. Faith-knowledge, because it is born of God's covenantal love, is knowledge which lights up a path in history. That is why, in the Bible, truth and fidelity go together: the true God is the God of fidelity who keeps his promises and makes possible, in time, a deeper understanding of his plan. Through the experience of the prophets, in the pain of exile and in the hope of a definitive return to the holy city, Israel came to see that this divine "truth" extended beyond the confines of its own history, to embrace the entire history of the world, beginning with creation. Faith-knowledge sheds light not only on the destiny of one particular people, but the entire history of the created world, from its origins to its consummation.

Faith as hearing and sight

29. Precisely because faith-knowledge is linked to the covenant with a faithful God who enters into a relationship of love with man and speaks his word to him, the Bible presents it as a form of hearing; it is associated with the sense of hearing. Saint Paul would use a formula which became classic: *fides ex auditu*, "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17). Knowledge linked to a word is always personal knowledge; it recognizes the voice of the one speaking, opens up to that person in freedom and follows him or her in obedience. Paul could thus speak of the "obedience of faith" (cf. Rom 1:5; 16:26).^[23] Faith is also a knowledge bound to the passage of time, for words take time to be pronounced, and it is a knowledge assimilated only along a journey of discipleship. The experience of hearing can thus help to bring out more clearly the bond between knowledge and love.

At times, where knowledge of the truth is concerned, hearing has been opposed to sight; it has been claimed that an emphasis on sight was characteristic of Greek culture. If light makes possible that contemplation of the whole to which humanity has always aspired, it would also seem to leave no space for freedom, since it comes down from heaven directly to the eye, without calling for a response. It would also seem to call for a kind of static contemplation, far removed from the world of history with its joys and sufferings. From this standpoint, the biblical understanding of knowledge would be antithetical to the Greek understanding, inasmuch as the latter linked knowledge to sight in its attempt to attain a comprehensive understanding of reality.

This alleged antithesis does not, however, correspond to the biblical datum. The Old Testament combined both kinds of knowledge, since hearing God's word is accompanied by the desire to see his face. The ground was thus laid for a dialogue with Hellenistic culture, a dialogue present at the heart of sacred Scripture. Hearing emphasizes personal vocation and obedience, and the fact that truth is revealed in time. Sight provides a vision of the entire journey and allows it to be situated within God's overall plan; without this

vision, we would be left only with unconnected parts of an unknown whole.

30. The bond between seeing and hearing in faith-knowledge is most clearly evident in John's Gospel. For the Fourth Gospel, to believe is both to hear and to see. Faith's hearing emerges as a form of knowing proper to love: it is a personal hearing, one which recognizes the voice of the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:3-5); it is a hearing which calls for discipleship, as was the case with the first disciples: "Hearing him say these things, they followed Jesus" (Jn 1:37). But faith is also tied to sight. Seeing the signs which Jesus worked leads at times to faith, as in the case of the Jews who, following the raising of Lazarus, "having seen what he did, believed in him" (Jn 11:45). At other times, faith itself leads to deeper vision: "If you believe, you will see the glory of God" (Jn 11:40). In the end, belief and sight intersect: "Whoever believes in me believes in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (Jn 12:44-45). Joined to hearing, seeing then becomes a form of following Christ, and faith appears as a process of gazing, in which our eyes grow accustomed to peering into the depths. Easter morning thus passes from John who, standing in the early morning darkness before the empty tomb, "saw and believed" (Jn 20:8), to Mary Magdalene who, after seeing Jesus (cf. Jn 20:14) and wanting to cling to him, is asked to contemplate him as he ascends to the Father, and finally to her full confession before the disciples: "I have seen the Lord!" (Jn 20:18).

How does one attain this synthesis between hearing and seeing? It becomes possible through the person of Christ himself, who can be seen and heard. He is the Word made flesh, whose glory we have seen (cf. Jn 1:14). The light of faith is the light of a countenance in which the Father is seen. In the Fourth Gospel, the truth which faith attains is the revelation of the Father in the Son, in his flesh and in his earthly deeds, a truth which can be defined as the "light-filled life" of Jesus.^[24] This means that faith-knowledge does not direct our gaze to a purely inward truth. The truth which faith discloses to us is a truth centred on an encounter with Christ, on the contemplation of his life and on the awareness of his presence. Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of the Apostles' *oculata fides* — a faith which sees! — in the presence of the body of the Risen Lord.^[25] With their own eyes they saw the risen Jesus and they believed; in a word, they were able to peer into the depths of what they were seeing and to confess their faith in the Son of God, seated at the right hand of the Father.

31. It was only in this way, by taking flesh, by sharing our humanity, that the knowledge proper to love could come to full fruition. For the light of love is born when our hearts are touched and we open ourselves to the interior presence of the beloved, who enables us to recognize his mystery. Thus we can understand why, together with hearing and seeing, Saint John can speak of faith as touch, as he says in his First Letter: "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 Jn 1:1). By his taking flesh and coming among us, Jesus has touched us, and through the sacraments he continues to touch us even today; transforming our hearts, he unceasingly enables us to acknowledge and acclaim him as the Son of God. In faith, we

can touch him and receive the power of his grace. Saint Augustine, commenting on the account of the woman suffering from haemorrhages who touched Jesus and was cured (cf. Lk 8:45-46), says: "To touch him with our hearts: that is what it means to believe".

[26] The crowd presses in on Jesus, but they do not reach him with the personal touch of faith, which apprehends the mystery that he is the Son who reveals the Father. Only when we are configured to Jesus do we receive the eyes needed to see him.

The dialogue between faith and reason

32. Christian faith, inasmuch as it proclaims the truth of God's total love and opens us to the power of that love, penetrates to the core of our human experience. Each of us comes to the light because of love, and each of us is called to love in order to remain in the light. Desirous of illumining all reality with the love of God made manifest in Jesus, and seeking to love others with that same love, the first Christians found in the Greek world, with its thirst for truth, an ideal partner in dialogue. The encounter of the Gospel message with the philosophical culture of the ancient world proved a decisive step in the evangelization of all peoples, and stimulated a fruitful interaction between faith and reason which has continued down the centuries to our own times. Blessed John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio, showed how faith and reason each strengthen the other.[27] Once we discover the full light of Christ's love, we realize that each of the loves in our own lives had always contained a ray of that light, and we understand its ultimate destination. That fact that our human loves contain that ray of light also helps us to see how all love is meant to share in the complete self-gift of the Son of God for our sake. In this circular movement, the light of faith illumines all our human relationships, which can then be lived in union with the gentle love of Christ.

33. In the life of Saint Augustine we find a significant example of this process whereby reason, with its desire for truth and clarity, was integrated into the horizon of faith and thus gained new understanding. Augustine accepted the Greek philosophy of light, with its insistence on the importance of sight. His encounter with Neoplatonism introduced him to the paradigm of the light which, descending from on high to illumine all reality, is a symbol of God. Augustine thus came to appreciate God's transcendence and discovered that all things have a certain transparency, that they can reflect God's goodness. This realization liberated him from his earlier Manichaeism, which had led him to think that good and evil were in constant conflict, confused and intertwined. The realization that God is light provided Augustine with a new direction in life and enabled him to acknowledge his sinfulness and to turn towards the good.

All the same, the decisive moment in Augustine's journey of faith, as he tells us in the Confessions, was not in the vision of a God above and beyond this world, but in an experience of hearing. In the garden, he heard a voice telling him: "Take and read". He then took up the book containing the epistles of Saint Paul and started to read the thirteenth chapter of the Letter to the Romans.[28] In this way, the personal God of the

Bible appeared to him: a God who is able to speak to us, to come down to dwell in our midst and to accompany our journey through history, making himself known in the time of hearing and response.

Yet this encounter with the God who speaks did not lead Augustine to reject light and seeing. He integrated the two perspectives of hearing and seeing, constantly guided by the revelation of God's love in Jesus. Thus Augustine developed a philosophy of light capable of embracing both the reciprocity proper to the word and the freedom born of looking to the light. Just as the word calls for a free response, so the light finds a response in the image which reflects it. Augustine can therefore associate hearing and seeing, and speak of "the word which shines forth within".^[29] The light becomes, so to speak, the light of a word, because it is the light of a personal countenance, a light which, even as it enlightens us, calls us and seeks to be reflected on our faces and to shine from within us. Yet our longing for the vision of the whole, and not merely of fragments of history, remains and will be fulfilled in the end, when, as Augustine says, we will see and we will love.^[30] Not because we will be able to possess all the light, which will always be inexhaustible, but because we will enter wholly into that light.

34. The light of love proper to faith can illumine the questions of our own time about truth. Truth nowadays is often reduced to the subjective authenticity of the individual, valid only for the life of the individual. A common truth intimidates us, for we identify it with the intransigent demands of totalitarian systems. But if truth is a truth of love, if it is a truth disclosed in personal encounter with the Other and with others, then it can be set free from its enclosure in individuals and become part of the common good. As a truth of love, it is not one that can be imposed by force; it is not a truth that stifles the individual. Since it is born of love, it can penetrate to the heart, to the personal core of each man and woman. Clearly, then, faith is not intransigent, but grows in respectful coexistence with others. One who believes may not be presumptuous; on the contrary, truth leads to humility, since believers know that, rather than ourselves possessing truth, it is truth which embraces and possesses us. Far from making us inflexible, the security of faith sets us on a journey; it enables witness and dialogue with all.

Nor is the light of faith, joined to the truth of love, extraneous to the material world, for love is always lived out in body and spirit; the light of faith is an incarnate light radiating from the luminous life of Jesus. It also illumines the material world, trusts its inherent order and knows that it calls us to an ever widening path of harmony and understanding. The gaze of science thus benefits from faith: faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness. Faith awakens the critical sense by preventing research from being satisfied with its own formulae and helps it to realize that nature is always greater. By stimulating wonder before the profound mystery of creation, faith broadens the horizons of reason to shed greater light on the world which discloses itself to scientific investigation.

Faith and the search for God

35. The light of faith in Jesus also illumines the path of all those who seek God, and makes a specifically Christian contribution to dialogue with the followers of the different religions. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of the witness of those just ones who, before the covenant with Abraham, already sought God in faith. Of Enoch "it was attested that he had pleased God" (Heb 11:5), something impossible apart from faith, for "whoever would approach God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb 11:6). We can see from this that the path of religious man passes through the acknowledgment of a God who cares for us and is not impossible to find. What other reward can God give to those who seek him, if not to let himself be found? Even earlier, we encounter Abel, whose faith was praised and whose gifts, his offering of the firstlings of his flock (cf. Heb 11:4), were therefore pleasing to God. Religious man strives to see signs of God in the daily experiences of life, in the cycle of the seasons, in the fruitfulness of the earth and in the movement of the cosmos. God is light and he can be found also by those who seek him with a sincere heart.

An image of this seeking can be seen in the Magi, who were led to Bethlehem by the star (cf. Mt 2:1-12). For them God's light appeared as a journey to be undertaken, a star which led them on a path of discovery. The star is a sign of God's patience with our eyes which need to grow accustomed to his brightness. Religious man is a wayfarer; he must be ready to let himself be led, to come out of himself and to find the God of perpetual surprises. This respect on God's part for our human eyes shows us that when we draw near to God, our human lights are not dissolved in the immensity of his light, as a star is engulfed by the dawn, but shine all the more brightly the closer they approach the primordial fire, like a mirror which reflects light. Christian faith in Jesus, the one Saviour of the world, proclaims that all God's light is concentrated in him, in his "luminous life" which discloses the origin and the end of history.^[31] There is no human experience, no journey of man to God, which cannot be taken up, illumined and purified by this light. The more Christians immerse themselves in the circle of Christ's light, the more capable they become of understanding and accompanying the path of every man and woman towards God.

Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the lives of those men and women who, though not believers, nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed, at times because they realize how important he is for finding a sure compass for our life in common or because they experience a desire for light amid darkness, but also because in perceiving life's grandeur and beauty they intuit that the presence of God would make it all the more beautiful. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons tells how Abraham, before hearing God's voice, had already sought him "in the ardent desire of his heart" and "went throughout the whole world, asking himself where God was to be found", until "God had

pity on him who, all alone, had sought him in silence".^[32] Any-one who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by his help, for it is characteristic of the divine light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love.

Faith and theology

36. Since faith is a light, it draws us into itself, inviting us to explore ever more fully the horizon which it illumines, all the better to know the object of our love. Christian theology is born of this desire. Clearly, theology is impossible without faith; it is part of the very process of faith, which seeks an ever deeper understanding of God's self-disclosure culminating in Christ. It follows that theology is more than simply an effort of human reason to analyze and understand, along the lines of the experimental sciences. God cannot be reduced to an object. He is a subject who makes himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship. Right faith orients reason to open itself to the light which comes from God, so that reason, guided by love of the truth, can come to a deeper knowledge of God. The great medieval theologians and teachers rightly held that theology, as a science of faith, is a participation in God's own knowledge of himself. It is not just our discourse about God, but first and foremost the acceptance and the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the word which God speaks to us, the word which God speaks about himself, for he is an eternal dialogue of communion, and he allows us to enter into this dialogue.^[33] Theology thus demands the humility to be "touched" by God, admitting its own limitations before the mystery, while striving to investigate, with the discipline proper to reason, the inexhaustible riches of this mystery.

Theology also shares in the ecclesial form of faith; its light is the light of the believing subject which is the Church. This implies, on the one hand, that theology must be at the service of the faith of Christians, that it must work humbly to protect and deepen the faith of everyone, especially ordinary believers. On the other hand, because it draws its life from faith, theology cannot consider the magisterium of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him as something extrinsic, a limitation of its freedom, but rather as one of its internal, constitutive dimensions, for the magisterium ensures our contact with the primordial source and thus provides the certainty of attaining to the word of Christ in all its integrity.