

Enlightenment: Reflections on Pope Francis's Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*

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FOR THOSE who have eyes to see and ears to hear, Pope Francis's first encyclical letter, *Lumen Fidei*, affords enlightenment in at least three respects: first, as regards the encyclical's unique authorship; second, as regards the encyclical's noteworthy scope and structure, and finally, third, as regards the encyclical's luminous leitmotif.

Authorship

Lumen Fidei (LF) is a novelty in the relatively brief but rich history that papal encyclicals have enjoyed since Pope Leo XIII turned them into the central instructional instrument of his ordinary magisterium. Promulgated on June 29, 2013, the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, *Lumen Fidei* is the first encyclical letter of the newly elected Pope Francis. At the same time, this encyclical conveys the rich theological patrimony of the Pope emeritus Benedict XVI. Pope Francis states the matter explicitly:

These considerations on faith—in continuity with all that the Church's magisterium has pronounced on this theological virtue¹—are meant to supplement what *Benedict XVI* had written in his encyclical letters on charity and hope. He himself had almost completed a first draft of an

On October 8, 2013, an earlier version of these reflections was offered at Duke University Divinity School to faculty and students gathered for a colloquy of graduate students in theology and ethics. I am grateful to the colleagues and students for their reactions to my observations and for their own thoughts and observations.

¹ LF refers to the Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, chapter 3 (DS 3008–3020); to Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, §5; and to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 153–65.

encyclical on faith. For this I am deeply grateful to him, and as his brother in Christ I have taken up his fine work and added a few contributions of my own. The Successor of Peter, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, is always called to strengthen his brothers and sisters in the priceless treasure of that faith which God has given as a light for humanity's path. (§7)

The genesis of *Lumen Fidei* thus gives ample and lively witness not only to the one faith that the two successors of St. Peter obviously share but also to their spiritual brotherhood as well as to their inspiring humility. *Lumen Fidei* represents the completing element of Benedict XVI's trilogy of encyclicals on charity, hope, and faith and simultaneously constitutes the opening of Francis's papal magisterium. Precisely in its Janus-faced nature—looking simultaneously backward and forward—this encyclical forms the magisterial center of the year of faith that Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated on October 11, 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and that Pope Francis concluded on November 24, 2013, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

As a theological testament of Benedict XVI, *Lumen Fidei* displays all the signs of the theological and philosophical milieu that shaped the pope emeritus as a student and professor in post-WWII West Germany: St. Augustine, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, and St. Bonaventure inform the encyclical's foundational theological horizon; Bl. John Henry Newman, Romano Guardini, and Heinrich Schlier inform its proximate theological horizon leading up to Vatican II; the philosophers Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein stand for aspects of a complicated post-Christian intellectual landscape that Catholic theology had to face in Europe from the eighteenth century on. Martin Buber, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and T. S. Eliot stand for Jewish and Christian thinkers and poets, East and West, who profoundly understood and engaged a world "after faith."

But in §57 the attentive reader also comes across striking references to St. Francis's transformative encounter with the leper and to the centrality the poor and the destitute play in Bl. Mother Teresa of Calcutta's vocation. §57 concludes with the following arresting formulation:

Suffering reminds us that faith's service to the common good is always one of hope—a hope which looks ever ahead in the knowledge that only from God, from the future which comes from the risen Jesus, can our society find solid and lasting foundations. . . . Let us refuse to be robbed of hope, or to allow our hope to be dimmed by facile answers and solutions which block our progress, "fragmenting" time and changing it into space. Time is always much greater than space. Space hardens processes, whereas time propels towards the future and encourages us to go forward in hope. (§57)

It is not at all unlikely that §57 is one of the sections Pope Francis added. It would be very tempting to submit *Lumen Fidei* to the kind of text-critical analysis modern biblical scholars apply to the canon of the Holy Scriptures. Such a move would, however, be a grave mistake, for not only would the reader sidestep the encyclical's teaching and instead turn an act of the Pope's ordinary magisterium into an object of higher (or more likely lower) criticism. But such a move would also and more importantly miss the first important occasion of enlightenment *Lumen Fidei* offers—the remarkable example of humility and self-effacement the pope emeritus and the new pope display. They both disown themselves as “authors” in the modern sense by referring and deferring to each other. The pope emeritus “gives up” his last encyclical letter, his theological patrimony, to his successor, and Pope Francis returns the encyclical to his predecessor by publicly giving credit to him. In a world suffused by celebrity worship and narcissistic self-referentiality, Benedict XVI and Francis point out that the Catholic Church is not theirs but Christ's and that they both together are claimed by and stand in service of the truth of the one faith, and that their teaching is informed by the self-same light of faith.

Scope and Structure

The wide and welcoming horizon of the encyclical's scope and structure is reminiscent of the inviting and embracing gesture with which Bernini's colonnades embrace St. Peter's square. Just as the colonnades welcome the pilgrims and guide them forward into St. Peter's Basilica and eventually to its center, the high altar, so does each of the encyclical's four parts invite the readers from a wide open horizon and guide them to the core and center of the faith: Christ and his body, the Church. Similarly, at the beginning of the encyclical's first part, the reader encounters Abraham, “our father in faith” (*noster in fide pater*), and at the conclusion of its fourth part, the reader encounters Mary, “the perfect icon of faith” (*perfecta fidei icona*). As the encyclical in each of its four parts leads the reader from God's all-embracing salvific purpose to the concrete historical *Gestalt* of Christ's body, the Church, so does the encyclical as a whole move from Abrahamic promise to Marian fulfillment—a fulfillment, though, that through Christ's resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven issues in a hope that transcends the horizon of human and cosmic history.

The first chapter of *Lumen Fidei*, “We have believed in love,”² highlights the fundamentally communal character of the Christian faith, embedded in

² The title of the encyclical's first chapter echoes 1 Jn 4:16 which is explicitly referenced: “So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (RSV).

God's history of call, promise, and fulfillment, a history in which the reference point never is the isolated individual per se but rather always is God's people. The consideration of the "we" of faith moves from the origin of the "we" of God's people, the Abrahamic paradigm of "hearing and following God's voice"—"Faith is our response to a word which engages us personally, to a 'Thou' who calls us by name" (§8)—to the communal specification: "Faith is necessarily ecclesial; it is professed from within the body of Christ as a concrete communion of believers" (§22). The theological center of the encyclical's first part is the consequence of believing in love—filiation: "In accepting the gift of faith, believers become a new creation; they receive a new being; as God's children, they are now 'sons in the Son.' The phrase 'Abba, Father,' so characteristic of Jesus' own experience, now becomes the core of the Christian experience" (§19). "The Christian can see with the eyes of Jesus and share in his mind, his filial disposition, because he or she shares in his love, which is the Spirit. In the love of Jesus, we receive in a certain way his vision" (§21).

The second chapter of *Lumen Fidei*, "Unless you believe, you will not understand," emphasizes the epistemic nature of faith. Faith is essentially ordered to the Truth and conveys a reliable and transformative knowledge of God's truth and love. The chapter moves from emphasizing at the beginning that "precisely because of its intrinsic link to truth, faith is . . . able to offer a new light" (§24) to drawing out at its end the important implication that "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" (§36). The second chapter closes by unequivocally pointing to that very light on which the Catholic theologian depends in order to contribute authentically to the enlightenment that faith affords:

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. (§36)

Ecclesial faith and faithfulness to the Church's magisterium are indispensable presuppositions for the authenticity and integrity of Catholic theol-

ogy and are constitutive of the theologian's freedom in service of the enlightenment that issues from "the word of Christ in all its integrity." The second chapter's concluding specification follows directly from what constitutes faith's center. At the heart of the faith stands a knowledge conveyed by love, a knowledge of touch, of intimacy, of connaturality:

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. . . . Only when we are configured to Jesus do we receive the eyes needed to see him. (§31)

According to *Lumen Fidei* it seems indispensable for the authenticity of Catholic theologians that they not only constantly stay in touch with Jesus through faith and the sacraments but also remain connected through constant fidelity to the Church's magisterium.

The third chapter of *Lumen Fidei*, "I delivered to you what I also received," insists on the oneness of faith and moves from considering the Church as the mother of faith to considering the unity and integrity of faith. The motherhood of the Church is absolutely indispensable for each believer to become contemporaneous with Jesus:

The Church is a Mother who teaches us to speak the language of faith. . . . The love which is the Holy Spirit and which dwells in the Church unites every age and makes us contemporaries of Jesus, thus guiding us along our pilgrimage of faith. (§38)

As the mother is the child's first teacher of his or her "mother tongue," so is the Church the mother who teaches the faith's semantics and syntax. Learning the language of faith does not happen by picking up a book called "The Bible" and learning it by heart or by coming up with one's own "private language" of faith. Rather, from its first instantiation as the confession of Peter and subsequently as the apostolic faith in the risen Christ, the faith is communicated and taught by the Church. It is the Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church Who is the divine source of her motherhood, through Whom, by way of the Church's motherhood, believers are made contemporaries of Jesus. It does not happen otherwise. The third chapter ends fittingly with a reflection on the oneness of faith:

If faith is not one, then it is not faith. . . . What is the secret of this unity? Faith is "one," in the first place, because of the oneness of the God who is known and confessed. . . . Faith is also one because it is directed to

the one Lord, to the life of Jesus, to the concrete history which he shares with us. . . . Finally, faith is one because it is shared by the whole Church, which is one body and one Spirit. (§47)

Last but not least, *Lumen Fidei* does not hesitate to commit the sin of “political incorrectness” (another testament of the pope emeritus) by challenging the contemporary “dictatorship of relativism” that has invaded certain superficial interpretations of the “hierarchy of truths” that characterizes the one faith:

Since faith is one, it must be professed in all its purity and integrity. Precisely because all the articles of faith are interconnected, to deny one of them, even of those that seem least important, is tantamount to distorting the whole. (§48)

The “hierarchy of truths” does not mean that some articles of the faith are more true and others less true, so that those at the top of the hierarchy would require an unconditional assent of faith while those at the bottom of the hierarchy would require only a weak or conditional assent. But as Bl. John Henry Newman rightly pointed out in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, it is the very nature of the act of assent to be unconditional. While some articles are more central to the faith’s identity than others, denying any one of them would distort the whole faith. The assent of faith (and it might very well be implicit faith) is an unconditional act of assent to all the articles of the faith. *Lumen Fidei* restates in succinct and plain terms what St. Thomas Aquinas taught in the *Summa theologiae* and what has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church regarding the oneness of the faith:

Obviously one who holds fast to Church teaching as to an infallible rule of faith gives assent to all that the Church teaches. Conversely, anyone who from among the many things taught by the Church picks some and not others as he chooses, no longer holds fast to Church teaching as an infallible rule, but to his own will (*ST* II–II, q. 5, a. 3). Faith, however, holds to all the articles of faith on the basis of the one single motive, the divine truth set before us in Scripture understood, rightly, i.e. in conformity with Church teaching (*ST* II–II, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2).³

The true supernatural enlightenment that the faith affords depends on the oneness of the faith accepted by a comprehensive act of assent to all the articles of the faith as taught by the Church. The Church’s mother-

³ Translation by T. C. O’Brien, O.P., St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Volume 31 (2a2ae 1–7): *Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 rpt.).

hood, the oneness of the faith, and the comprehensive act of assent to all the articles of the faith are of one piece.

The fourth and final chapter of *Lumen Fidei*, “God prepares a city for them,” addresses an inevitable consequence of authentic faith, which is not only a journey but always also a process of building, that is, “the preparing of a place in which human beings can dwell together with one another. . . . The God who is himself reliable gives us a city which is reliable” (§50). In short, living faith, faith formed by charity, always inevitably issues into serving and strengthening the common good: “The hands of faith are raised up to heaven, even as they go about building in charity a city based on relationships in which the love of God is laid as a foundation” (§51). The family is the first and fundamental setting in which faith enlightens the human city. Contrary to the 2013 study “Between Autonomy and Dependence: Strengthening Family as a Reliable Community”⁴ by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) which explicitly denies that marriage should be seen as a normal presupposition of the family, Pope Francis affirms the constant teaching of the Catholic Church regarding marriage and family:

I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage. This union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God’s own love, and of the acknowledgment and acceptance of the goodness of sexual differentiation, whereby spouses can become one flesh (cf. Gen 2:24) and are enabled to give birth to a new life, a manifestation of the Creator’s goodness, wisdom, and loving plan. Grounded in this love, a man and a woman can promise each other mutual love in a gesture which engages their entire lives and mirrors many features of faith. (§52)

A faith accepted and deepened by the family is subsequently capable of illuminating all relationships in society. But the inverse also obtains. When faith in God is removed from the city, the consequences are dire:

When faith is weakened, the foundations of life also risk being weakened, as the poet T. S. Eliot warned: “Do you need to be told that even those modest attainments / As you can boast in the way of polite society / Will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?” If we remove faith in God from our cities, mutual trust would be weakened, we would remain united only by fear and our stability would be threatened. (§55)

⁴ See Michael Root, “Reforming the German Family,” *First Things* 237 (November 2013): 19–21.

Lumen Fidei rightly points out the dynamic of a subtle but steady barbarization of Western secularized culture. When faith in God has been banished from public life and imprisoned within the privacy of the living room, the first principles of truth and goodness begin to fade and eventually the principles of utility and preference are substituted for them. In consequence, the basic human right becomes one of self-realization, the willful rule over one's nature and body, and the concomitant right to the social acceptance of such willful self-realization. Of course, the city of man is never without worship. With faith in God removed from the public life of the city, the worship of God has been replaced by the worship of self. And this idol demands sacrifice and adoration, a demand that finds its telling expression in laws that permit the shedding of innocent blood yet prosecute prophetic acts of witness to faith in God and to God's law as hate crimes.

The fourth chapter guides the reader from considering the indispensability of faith for the common good of the earthly city to considering concretely the consolation and strength that faith affords amid suffering. Furthermore, the reader is invited, indeed, urged to consider the witness of those for whom St. Francis and Bl. Mother Teresa of Calcutta stand as paradigms, that is, of those who "have found mediators of light in those who suffer. . . . They understood the mystery at work in them. In drawing near to the suffering, they were certainly not able to eliminate all their pain or to explain every evil. Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey" (§57). At this very important point of its teaching, *Lumen Fidei* invokes the virtue of hope:

Suffering reminds us that faith's service to the common good is always one of hope—a hope which looks ever ahead in the knowledge that only from God, from the future which comes from the risen Jesus, can our society find solid and lasting foundations. (§57)

This hope is neither a naïve optimism founded on some innate law of progress writ in human history or a virtue that one might acquire as one acquires courage by imitating the acts of courageous persons. Rather, like faith and charity, hope is an infused theological *habitus* that consists in the complete trust in God's mercy and omnipotence and that directs the believer's will to God as the desired final end. No obstacle will defy the God Who is the object of faith's unconditional assent and with Whom the believer is already united in charity:

In union with faith and charity, hope propels us towards a sure future, set against a different horizon with regard to the illusory enticements

of the idols of this world yet granting new momentum and strength to our daily lives. (§57)

The fourth chapter concludes with the following noteworthy lines already cited earlier:

Let us refuse to be robbed of hope, or to allow our hope to be dimmed by facile answers and solutions which block our progress, “fragmenting” time and changing it into space. Time is always much greater than space. Space hardens processes, whereas time propels towards the future and encourages us to go forward in hope. (§57)

The rule over space—as much space as possible—is the characteristic of an empire. The only way for an empire also to rule over time is to break it up, to fragment it and thus turn time into quantified “spaces” of time—in short, into a strict regime of time-management. Whereas space is exhaustible, time remains inexhaustible. No space is in principle immune from imperial conquest. But time outlasts every empire. As “chronos” time might be submitted to the regime of “spacing,” but as “kairos” time remains inexhaustibly new, uncontrollable, and invulnerable to the imperial *libido dominandi*. Modern technological and managerial reason, arguably a strategy of empire, quantifies and thereby hardens all processes. By contrast, a reason informed and perfected by faith is always ordered to a future that remains the uncontrollable and hence freeing gift of God’s providence—the only source of genuine progress.

The Leitmotif

In the very first sentence, after the opening two words that make up the encyclical’s title, “*Lumen fidei*,” “the light of Faith,” the encyclical’s leitmotif is established: “In John’s Gospel, Christ says of himself: ‘I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness’ (Jn 12:46)” (§1). The encyclical’s intention is to offer the true answer to the famous academic prize question in response to which Kant wrote his prize-winning essay “What Is Enlightenment?” *Lumen Fidei* is unequivocal about the nature of true enlightenment: “Those who believe, see; they see with a light that illumines their entire journey, for it comes from the risen Christ, the morning star which never sets” (§1). Without wasting any time, the encyclical names the objections advanced both by those who assume that the “Enlightenment” program of modernity announced in the eighteenth century still obtains and by those who in a postmodern skeptical turn dismiss not only the Christian Enlightenment but also the secular Enlightenment. But, as is all too obvious, the

light that autonomous modern reason and the various postmodern subjective lights of emotive and existential affect promise to shed turn out to be unable to illumine the future. Consequently, “in the absence of light everything becomes confused; it is impossible to tell good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which take us in endless circles, going nowhere” (§3). What stands in urgent need of recovery—or, better, re-discovery—is the one true Enlightenment that faith in Christ affords:

Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfillment, and that a vision of the future opens up before us. Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time. (§4)

Putting forward the leitmotif of a true enlightenment arising from the transformative effect of God’s antecedent Love, *Lumen Fidei* aims at persuading by the attraction of beauty. Far from discursively advancing theological arguments, the encyclical’s infectious persuasiveness lives from its rich biblical and patristic imagery. The underlying conviction is that the beauty of God’s love attracts, a conviction that suffused the holy rhetoric of Augustine, Bernard, and Bonaventure and found a comeback in the vision, if not exactly in the style, of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s trilogy, a conviction that also deeply marked the theological style of the pope emeritus Benedict XVI.

Anyone who expects *Lumen Fidei* to be extraordinary, breathtaking, and worthy of headlines in the news is obviously in need of the very enlightenment to which the encyclical gestures. For what is extraordinary, breathtaking, and worthy of headlines is the Faith to which *Lumen Fidei* gives such eloquent witness by way of a magisterial catechesis that is as profound as it is beautiful. The encyclical’s luminosity comes directly from its subject matter. *Lumen Fidei* simply says: “Come and believe that you are loved and then see, love, and understand.” If this encyclical were to be indirectly responsible for any headlines, they would be headlines referring to contemporary imitators of persons like the martyr Hierax, who was asked by the Roman prefect Rusticus, “Where are your parents?” and who responded: “Our true father is Christ, and our mother is faith in him” (§5).