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FOUNDATIONS OF THE DEFINITION
OF FAITH IN DIALOGUE WITH *PORTA FIDEI*
BY BENEDICT XVI

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A b s t r a c t. Faith is closely linked with love. Acts of charity are what proves that we are believers and they can also serve as arguments for unconscious faith among the non-religious. If the Creator himself is the source of all such acts, in each act of charity we have to do with human consent and a manifestation of God's power. Through its various functions and dimensions, the Church is a signpost in the process of faith-building. Membership in the Church helps us open ourselves to this grace as it is a room for evaluative reflection on human deeds and thoughts, an environment in which hearts receive God's support in a special way, and a place which gives us a chance to confront ourselves with other believers, whose testimony motivates us in times of spiritual dryness. Signs of the times are certain events in which man is able to see hints for his life more by asking about the reason for which they occur than about their nature.

Key words: Faith, Benedict XVI, Church, Signs of the times.

“Reflection on the faith will have to be intensified, so as to help all believers in Christ to acquire a more conscious and vigorous adherence to the Gospel, especially at a time of profound change such as humanity is currently experiencing”¹. With these words pope Benedict XVI characterized the main

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¹ *Meditatio de fide confirmetur oportet ut omnes in Christum credentes fulciantur ad suam Evangelio adhaesionem magis consciam reddendam eamque corroborandam, potissimum hac aetate profundae mutationis, cui nunc humanum subicitur genus; BENEDICTUS PP. XVI. Litte-*

aim of the Year of Faith that began on 11th October 2012. I would like to draw your attention to the adjective “conscious”² as it will be the key to my further analysis. Therefore I am going to focus on a search for these elements in the definition of faith that, on the one hand, enable Christians to confess it intentionally and on the other hand, help us search for “grains of truth” in the life of non-Christians and non-believers.

I am going to search for answers to the most basic questions: What does it mean to believe? What helps us in a more conscious confession of faith?

As an inspiration for my research I am going to use the text of pope Benedict’s Apostolic Letter *Porta fidei*, with which he indicated the Year of Faith. In the title of my paper I described the relation to the source as “in dialogue with”, therefore I am not going to summarize the papal document, but I will treat it as a starting point to my own reflection that I am going to present in three steps. First, I will try to outline the definition of faith and then, within it, I will place the Church and signs of the times as particular helping means for believers.

It is not going to be a complex and multidimensional theological picture. What I want to do is to draw your attention to a given aspect of the discussed issue. As we are at the Airport Chaplains’ Congress and not an academic conference, I will try to take into account the pastoral context of the undertaken issue.

1. THE NATURE OF FAITH

Benedict XVI very often used to link faith with charity, suggesting that the second is a criterion for the expression, growth and reinforcement of the first. For example, in point 7 he says:

Only through believing, then, does faith grow and become stronger; there is no other possibility for possessing certitude with regard to one’s life apart from self-abandonment,

rae Apostolicae Motu Proprio Datae Porta Fidei, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu_proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_lt.html, (17.04.2013) 8. Transl. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html (hereinafter PF).

² See: B. SESBOŨÉ. *Władza w Kościele*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo M 2003 s. 298.

in a continuous crescendo, into the hands of a love that seems to grow constantly because it has its origin in God³.

The analysis of the above-mentioned text shows that the pope not only sees a clear relation between faith and charity, but that for him charity serves as the source of certainty as to the shape of life. Taking into consideration the special character of the relation between God and a human being it is not easy to find any definite symptoms of progress in this relationship. That is why charity becomes this tangible symptom that manifests itself in daily deeds.

By saying “there is no other possibility” the pope stresses the necessity of verifying faith through acts of charity. He also points to their source – where love is, there is God.

It is even more visible in point 14. Firstly, Benedict XVI quotes a classical biblical text commonly used to illustrate this theme:

With even stronger words – which have always placed Christians under obligation – Saint James said: “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled’, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works’. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” (Jas 2:14-18)⁴.

Commenting on this fragment, the pope says:

Faith without charity bears no fruit, while charity without faith would be a sentiment constantly at the mercy of doubt. Faith and charity each require the other, in such a way that each allows the other to set out along its respective path. Indeed, many Christians dedicate their lives with love to those who are lonely, marginalized or excluded, as to those who are the first with a claim on our attention and the most important for us to support, because it is in them that the reflection of Christ’s own face is seen. Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love. “As you did

³ *Itaque credendo tantum fides crescit et roboratur; nulla alia datur facultas de propria vita habendi certitudinem nisi quis plus plusque amoris manibus se committit, quem maiorem usque experitur, quandoquidem ex Deo oritur* (PF 7).

⁴ *Acutiore quoque sententia, quae per saecula christianos perurget, apostolus Iacobus affirmat: “Quid proderit, fratres mei, si fidem quis dicat se habere, opera autem non habeat? Numquid poterit fides salvare eum? Si frater aut soror nudi sunt et indigent victu cotidiano, dicat autem aliquis de vobis illis: «Ite in pace, calefacimini et saturamini», non dederitis autem eis, quae necessaria sunt corporis, quid proderit? Sic et fides, si non habeat opera, mortua est in semetipsa. Sed dicet quis: «Tu fidem habes, et ego opera habeo». Ostende mihi fidem tuam sine operibus, et ego tibi ostendam ex operibus meis fidem”* (Iac 2,14-18) (PF 14).

it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). These words are a warning that must not be forgotten and a perennial invitation to return the love by which he takes care of us. It is faith that enables us to recognize Christ and it is his love that impels us to assist him whenever he becomes our neighbour along the journey of life. Supported by faith, let us look with hope at our commitment in the world, as we await “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13; cf. Rev 21:1)⁵.

On the basis of the above-mentioned fragment we can say that the life of faith is about systematic sharing of love that was given to us. True and fruitful believers are those who sacrifice themselves for others and notice those in need around them.

A certain difficulty arises in this field, when we treat faith simultaneously as human activity and a gift from God. According to the pope “the first act by which one comes to faith is God’s gift and the action of grace which acts and transforms the person deep within”⁶.

In order to explain this seeming divergence I suggest that we define grace as self-communication of God – it is, then, the self-giving of God in his attributes. Therefore we can say that being a believer means that we allow God to act through our human words and deeds. We give him ourselves in fullness and say: use me as a channel for your grace. There is a possibility, then, of linking human deeds and the power of God that manifests itself in them. Although such a definition evokes, at the first glance, a vision of the heights of mystical life, it can be defined in the context of daily and common challenges.

“God” is a name for an Absolute that does not say much about his nature. Much more precise are certain attributes that in the history of theology were linked with divine Subject in faith relationship. One of the most commonly

⁵ *Fides sine caritate fructum non fert, et caritas sine fide est veluti animi impulsio constanter dubio subiecta. Fides et caritas invicem se requirunt, ita ut altera alteri cuiusque iter peragere sinat. Etenim haud pauci christiani vitam suam cum amore impendunt pro eo qui in solitudine vivit, recusatus seu exclusus, ac si primus esset cui esset occurrendum ac potissimum subveniendum, quoniam in eo Christi vultus re ipsa resplendet. Propter fidem vultum resurrectionis Domini agnoscere possumus in iis qui nostrum requirunt amorem. “Quamdiu fecistis uni de his fratribus meis minimis, mihi fecistis” (Mt 25,40): haec enim verba constituunt monitum non obliviscendum et perennem invitationem ad rependendum hunc amorem quo ipsemet curam de nobis adhibet. Fides sinit ut Christus agnoscat eisque amor nos impellit ut succurramus ipsi quoties in vitae itinere proximus noster efficitur. Fide confirmati, nostrum munus in mundo spe conspicimus, exspectantes “novos vero caelos et terram novam ... in quibus iustitia habitat” (2 Pe 3,13; cfr Apc 21,1) (PF 14).*

⁶ [...] *primum actum, quo ad fidem perducitur, donum Dei esse et actionem gratiae agentis et transformantis personam usque ad eius intimum* (PF 10).

used attributes of God is love as we read in Saint John: “God is love” (*1 Jn* 4:16a). When we put together our previous definition of faith (let God act through us) and his “name” – love, we can see many opportunities to show that we are believers. We confess our faith every time when love expresses itself through us, as then we let God described as love manifest himself in our lives.

It can be done in a conscious way as a result of religious motivation and that is what happens in the case of declared believers. However, if – as pope Benedict XVI says – God is the source of all love, religiousness included in an intention does not seem necessary to talk about faith. I want to show to somebody that I love them and I do so – God-love acts through me and this is my confession of faith! In my opinion in this way we can expand the notion of the “preamble” to the faith mentioned by the pope:

On the other hand, we must not forget that in our cultural context, very many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world. This search is an authentic “preamble” to the faith, because it guides people onto the path that leads to the mystery of God. Human reason, in fact, bears within itself a demand for “what is perennially valid and lasting”. This demand constitutes a permanent summons, indelibly written into the human heart, to set out to find the One whom we would not be seeking had he not already set out to meet us. To this encounter, faith invites us and it opens us in fullness⁷.

The text quoted above describes the preamble to the faith mainly as a search for the meaning of life and the truth about human existence and the world. It includes, however, also a mention of “what is perennially valid and lasting”. If we link intuitions included herein with a different text by Ratzinger – an article about the possibility of salvation for non-Christians – it seems justifiable to equate these values with love. In that post-counciliar text (published in 1965) – which is a reinterpreting commentary on the formula: “There is no salvation outside the Church” – German theologian points to *agape* as an expression of faith for those who remain outside the structures

⁷ *In culturali autem nostro contextu oblivisci non possumus complures homines, etiamsi fidei donum in se ipsis non agnoscentes, sincero tamen animo novissimum sensum et consummatam veritatem de existentia et de mundo exquirere. Haec exquisitio verum est ad fidem “praeambulum”, quia personas ad semitam impellit, quae ad Dei mysterium ducit. Etenim in ipsa hominis ratione exigentia inest “illius quod valet semperque manet”. Haec exigentia est perenne invitamentum, in hominis corde indelebiter insculptum, ad iter suscipiendum ut Is inveniatur quem non requireremus nisi iam nobis obviam venisset. Ad hunc ipsum occursum fides nos invitat et in plenitudine nos aperit* (PF 10).

of the Catholic Church. He claims that being a believer is about reaching beyond ourselves and our egoism and approaching the other man in whom God comes to us⁸.

Faith understood in such a way suits the motif of the road that is usually associated with it. In *Porta fidei* we can read that:

The “door of faith” (Acts 14:27) is always open for us, ushering us into the life of communion with God and offering entry into his Church. It is possible to cross that threshold when the word of God is proclaimed and the heart allows itself to be shaped by transforming grace. To enter through that door is to set out on a journey that lasts a lifetime⁹.

Therefore faith has a dynamic character. It is an open offer that we respond to by entering its “door”. Entering the door of faith is not a one-time decision, because it means only the beginning of a certain road and entails making a constant effort of moving forward. We can say that there is no sufficient number of charity acts that decide whether we can describe someone as a believer, but crossing the threshold of faith calls for a constant confirmation.

Summing up the first part of our reflection, we can say that faith is closely linked with love. Acts of charity are what proves that we are believers and they can also serve as arguments for unconscious faith among the non-religious. In the context of these considerations, we can ask about the place and role of the Church. If love, and not membership in the structure, decides about our faith, we have to explain the need and sense of belonging to the ecclesiastical community.

2. THE VALUE OF THE CHURCH

Pope Benedict mentions the functions and dimensions of the Church when he outlines certain objectives for the Year of Faith:

⁸ See: J. RATZINGER. *Salus extra ecclesiam nulla est*. „Znak” 1965 nr 131 p. 613-617.

⁹ *PORTA FIDEI* (cfr. Act 14,27) *semper nobis patet, quae in communionem cum Deo nos infert datque copiam eius Ecclesiam ingrediendi. Limen illud transiri potest, cum Dei Verbum nuntiatur atque cor informante gratia fingitur. Quidquid est, illam portam transire idem est ac iter facere, quod tota vita producitur* (PF 1).

It will also be a good opportunity to intensify the celebration of the faith in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, which is “the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; ... and also the source from which all its power flows”. At the same time, we make it our prayer that believers’ witness of life may grow in credibility¹⁰.

In the excerpt quoted above we can see two dimensions of ecclesiastical life: liturgy and community. The first of them is connected with the power that fills the believers, whereas the second one is connected with testimony which decides about credibility. Without a doubt, both issues are basic aspects determining the place of the Church in the life of faith. Another aspect can be added – the Church as a space that gives the believers a chance for self-reflection. For a follower of faith all these dimensions are not an aim in itself, it is not about being a part of the Church for the sake of it and making it a reason for which we participate in liturgical celebrations and observe other believers.

When the Church becomes an aim in itself, and not a way of achieving an aim, it can close up in itself, become “churchy”¹¹. H. Küng warns us against such a situation in his text published in 1960. He writes: “The danger of becoming “churchy” can take innumerable forms. It is there when piety gives way to external Church practices; the care of souls to ecclesiastical administration; the Pope and bishops to bureaucracy; the missions to religious propaganda; the apostolate to a struggle for social position and spheres of influence; charismatic gifts to unimaginative, routine administration; spiritual leadership to petty paternalism; preaching to dry rationalism or false rhetoric; the Sermon on the Mount to spiritual juridicalism; ecclesiastical discipline to the legalism of the Talmud; the sacraments to commercialized rites; the liturgy to empty ceremonies; zeal for the Lord to “getting result; spiritual growth to Church statistics; ancient tradition to established custom; the Word of God to current ideas; the Gospel to a theological system; orthodoxy in doctrine to denunciation; unity to uniformity; faith in the Church to faith in a machine: in a word, when letter replaces spirit¹².”

¹⁰ *Opportuna erit occasio fidei in liturgia celebrationem studiosius agendi, atque potissimum in Eucharistia quae “est culmen ad quod actio Ecclesiae tendit et simul fons unde omnis eius virtus emanat”.* Eadem ratione, optamus ut vitae credentium testificatio crescat in credibilitatem (PF 9).

¹¹ See: D. WĄSEK. *Nowa wizja zarządzania Kościołem*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM 2014 s. 42-56.

¹² H. KÜNG, *The Council, Reform and Reunion*, New York: Sheed & Ward 1961 p. 23.

The purpose behind the aspects of the Church mentioned before is to help us in the process of gathering acts of charity.

Now I would like us to have a closer look at each of the dimensions.

The first step is **self-reflection**. It is impossible to become a better and spiritually richer person, impossible to grow, if someone does not think about their life. It is necessary to make a balance of successes and failures from time to time, to analyse our decisions and their consequences, to assess how we fulfil our vocation in life. It can be done in various places, but the church, even in its material sense, provides certain comfort of thinking. Thanks to the atmosphere, décor, it is much easier to calm down, listen to our thoughts and ask about the amount of love in our lives.

Church as a space makes it easier to think, also because we need certain criteria for the assessment of our present actions and plans for the future. Sometimes a man himself does not know whether his idea will lead to something good or to a failure; whether his deeds have some features of love or rather egoism, whether they will give him happiness or only appearances of happiness. Objective grounds for assessment are given to us in the images of Christ, the Mother of God, saints. Looking at them, I can ask myself how far I am from these ideals, I can compare and confront myself with them. On the other hand, there are words preached by priests and the Church's Magisterium that should point into certain directions, warn and shape my sensitivity.

Honest self-reflection is bound to let every man see some successes but also a lot of imperfections in himself. He will find out that he does not always act as he should, that sometimes weaknesses, the influence of the people around, being tangled up in human relationships and interests are stronger than his good will. In many cases we are just helpless in the face of our fate.

God is aware of human limitations and therefore he wants to help, he wants to strengthen what is weak, heal what is sick. That is what happens during every prayer and especially when we receive sacraments. Thus we come to the next step: **liturgy – a transforming grace of God**.

There are not many channels for grace outside the Church, as through God's providence it was given the right to distribute this special support. Churches house the Holy Sacrament. Every participation in the holy mass, every confession and other sacrament let us benefit from this godly help. God wants to share his omnipotence and he does it through the Church.

Sometimes God's intervention is perceived by human senses or intuition. Man notices that a superhuman power acts in his life and then it is easier for him to find motivation e.g. to receive sacraments systematically. It seems that far more often God's interventions are not registered by sensory or intellectu-

al powers, which can result in discouragement and lead to resignation from religious practices and at the same time from God's help. In such situations **the aspect of the Church as a community and the role of testimony** become clearly visible.

Thus the third step is connected with the role of community that gathers in the church. When going to the church and participating in the liturgy seems fairly pointless, when God seems not to help and man attends the holy mass only out of habit and because of a tradition, but he doesn't experience any emotions, it is usually only the community that holds him close to God – there are acquaintances that he meets, parental pressure, encouraging friends or a more religious husband or wife. This is also a role of the Church – it is a place where others see me and I see them and we motivate each other. In times of religious dryness; tradition, custom and testimony of other believers are often the only supportive factors on the way to grace that is given to us in liturgy.

Summing up, we can say that through its various functions and dimensions, the Church is a signpost in the process of faith-building. It is a place in which we have a chance to evaluate and reflect on our lives and to make decisions about potential corrections in favor of love. Thanks to the liturgy it is also a special place where we can open ourselves to God's grace and where the testimony of the community makes it possible to benefit from this help, even when we lack personal motivation.

Apart from the Church we can mention yet another means of help in the process of faith-building, namely signs of the times.

3. SIGNS OF THE TIMES

In point 15. of the analyzed Apostolic Letter we can read that:

It [faith] is the lifelong companion that makes it possible to perceive, ever anew, the marvels that God works for us. Intent on gathering the signs of the times in the present of history, faith commits every one of us to become a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord in the world¹³.

¹³ *Ipsa nos comitatur in vita quae permittit ut novo usque intuitu mirabilia percipiamus quae Deus pro nobis adimplet. Intendens contueri signa temporis nostrae hodiernae historiae, fides unumquemque nostrum incitat ut vivum efficiamur signum praesentiae Resuscitati in mundo* (PF 15).

Signs of the times are certain events that the pope describes as modern “marvels” that God works for us. Faith should spot them. Although certain marvelousness is stressed, we do not necessarily have to deal with extraordinary things. The notion of a marvel is not so much about the nature of the described event as about the way of detecting God’s intervention in it. Therefore we may have to do with God’s words, suggestions and cautions contained in situations that happen to us every day, that we witness or that others inform us about, and which are by no means connected with religion. The Creator encodes his message in them and a man attentive to the signs of the times should decode it.

If he manages to do so, if behind common events someone sees a hint from God, he will have a chance to improve something in his life and by doing so contribute to a greater number of charity acts. Reading signs of the times, decoding God’s messages is about looking at what happens in my human world and asking about the meaning of it: Lord, what do you want to tell me through these events? What do I need to change in order to make my life better? What do you warn me against?

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The aim of my paper was to answer two questions: What does it mean to believe? What helps us in a more conscious confession of faith?

To believe is to let God act through man, which results in acts of charity. If the Creator himself is the source of all such acts, in each act of charity we have to do with human consent and a manifestation of God’s power.

Membership in the Church helps us open ourselves to this grace as it is a room for evaluative reflection on human deeds and thoughts, an environment in which hearts receive God’s support in a special way, and a place which gives us a chance to confront ourselves with other believers, whose testimony motivates us in times of spiritual dryness.

Means of help available both to members of the institutional Church and those who do not identify themselves with it, are signs of the times. These are certain events in which man is able to see hints for his life more by asking about the reason for which they occur than about their nature.

Such a view on faith makes it possible to perceive and verify it in our lives and encounters with all men of good will. On the other hand, it helps us appreciate the Church and encourages us to attentively observe the history of our lives.

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FUNDAMENTY DEFINICJI WIARY W DIALOGU
Z PORTA FIDEI BENEDYKTA XVI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W artykule Autor analizuje koncepcję wiary zawartą w *Porta fidei* Benedykta XVI. Skupia się na poszukiwaniu tych elementów definicji wiary, które – z jednej strony – chrześcijanom pozwalają na jej intencjonalne wyznawanie, a z drugiej – pomagają w odnajdywaniu „ziarenek prawdy” u wyznawców innych religii i osób nieidentyfikujących się z żadnym systemem wierzeń. Autor dotyka kwestii relacji między wiarą, rozumianą jako dar, i tą realizowaną w formie uczynków miłości. Jako punkty wsparcia w budowaniu wiary, Autor ukazuje Kościół i znaki czasu. Takie syntetyczne ujęcie pozwala na budowanie podstaw pod szeroko pojętą teologię wiary.

Słowa kluczowe: wiara, Benedykt XVI, Kościół, znaki czasu.