

Year of Faith – A Reflection for St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church’s “Mission Monday”
February 18th, 2013 by Kurt Schreyer

READING: The Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

13 Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, 14 and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. 15 And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, 16 but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. 17 He asked them, “What are you discussing as you walk along?” They stopped, looking downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?” 19 And he replied to them, “What sort of things?” They said to him, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. 21 But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. 22 Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning 23 and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. 24 Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see.” 25 And he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. 28 As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. 29 But they urged him, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them. 30 And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. 31 With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. 32 Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” 33 So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them 34 who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” 35 Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

“To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.”

We don’t need to be great criminals like Shakespeare’s Macbeth to relate to his experience of sin and despair. We encounter spiritual darkness when the “brief candle” of our faith is extinguished. And when we live in spiritual darkness, life becomes a monotonous toil. It loses its meaning. Absorbed in our selfishness yet constantly accusing ourselves in guilt for our sins, the world is lost to us and we are no more able to be in it than Banquo’s ghost.

But Mother Church has never had much use for linear time, day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year. Rather, she bends time into cycles, like Mother Nature. The Church gives us a cycle of liturgical seasons, like Lent, not so that we do the same thing over and over again, but so that we may be renewed. She gives us the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist for the same reason. Sometimes, though, the Church makes an extraordinary effort to break us out of the monotonous chain of sin and guilt and despair, as when Blessed John Paul II called a Jubilee in the year 2000. And

now, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his role as Shepherd of the Faithful, invites us out of the toil of secular time to an oasis of prayer and spiritual renewal. Assuming the role of Christ in the Emmaus story, he has sought us out, has overtaken us on the road of our busy lives and tries to get us headed in the right direction. In the letter entitled “The Door of Faith,” which he wrote last October, he sends us an invitation to go on an adventure: “I have often spoken of the need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ.... Therefore, I have decided to announce a Year of Faith.” It is those two images of faith—as a journey and as a light—that I want to reflect upon with you in the context of the Emmaus story. In doing so, I will also draw from one of the principle documents of the Second Vatican Council on the role of the church in the modern world. As is customary, it is known by its first words, “Lumen gentium,” which in Latin means “light of the nations.” In his letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict writes that it seemed to him, “that timing the launch of the Year of Faith to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council would provide a good opportunity to help people understand” its teachings.

First, a word about what this year is NOT. The Year of Faith is not intended to be a year of self-absorbed navel gazing where our thoughts are directed inwardly toward ourselves and we ceaselessly question whether we have faith in the first place. Rather, it is a time—an opportunity—to become the door of faith for others. It is a year in which, with our hearts aflame with God’s Word and having been fed by the Eucharist, we step into the role of Christ in the Emmaus story. We take a walk with our loved ones, our friends, and, yes, perfect strangers—whoever it is that we find lost, or lonely, or

confused—and we share with them all the good things that God has done for us. As the Second Vatican Council explains in *Lumen gentium*: “God...does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another.” Or, as the poet famously said, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” “The Year of Faith will,” Pope Benedict urges us, “be a good opportunity to intensify the witness of caring for those who are vulnerable, hungry, and in need of justice. Faith without charity bears no fruit. Through faith, we can recognize the face of the risen Lord in those who ask for our love.”

This message from the Second Vatican Council’s *Lumen gentium* is also, I think, the message of the beautiful story of the Road to Emmaus. Now, I am neither a priest nor a theologian. I am a professor of literature, and as such, I’m going to draw-out a few key elements of this story that I think may help to get us started down the right path for the Year of Faith.

Like all great stories, it has a wonderful beginning: “Now that very day two of [the disciples] were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus...” It is the day of the resurrection, and the first day of the week—recalling the first day of creation in Genesis. Luke is signaling to his readers that God is about to do something new. Scholars debate the exact location of Emmaus and, in one fascinating account, it was said to be the place of a Roman garrison. That is significant because in Luke’s gospel Jerusalem is the center of all the important events in the story of Jesus—the passion, the cross, the resurrection. People try to stop Him from going there, but He insists. But as this story opens, the two disciples are leaving Jerusalem, and as we learn later, they are bitterly disappointed and downcast. They are leaving the Holy City, which, for Luke,

means that they are headed in the wrong direction; they are going the wrong way. It's a metaphor for the wayward church: we want to be disciples, but we are afraid of the cross. We want God on our terms. If Emmaus was a Roman garrison, it would symbolize a rival power to the power of Christ's death and resurrection. I am only speculating, but if these two disciples had been zealots like the apostle Simon (not Simon Peter), then perhaps they are feeling disillusioned now that their political messiah has been put to death. Are they headed to Emmaus to take up arms, to take matters into their own hands and not wait for God any longer? The Year of Faith is an opportunity to ask, "What do I put my faith in?" "Am I, like these two disciples, headed the wrong way in my spiritual life?" Are we tired of waiting for God, tired of listening, tired of disappointed dreams? Are we putting our hopes in political messiahs? Are we trapped into thinking that, through political or financial, or other earthly forms of power we can fix all our problems? "If we just elect this person...!" "If only we can pass such-and-such law...!" "If only I had X amount of money saved..." I think this story from Luke quietly but powerfully tells us that this sort of thinking is all wrong.

So, the Emmaus story opens in a powerfully symbolic way. Next, I think it is absolutely crucial that on two separate occasions in the account (at verse 15 and at verse 30), Luke uses a very peculiar syntactical formula. Some translations simply use the word "While...", but I prefer the phrase "And it came to pass that..." ["et factum est dum..."]. It is conspicuous because it removes the human agency from the event that is about to occur. That does not mean that it is mere "chance"; the writer isn't saying, "it just so happened that..." Rather, it is Luke's subtle way of describing the gentle hand of Providence—God Himself is about to do something. More importantly, it calls attention

to the fact that human beings are in the middle of doing one activity, and God has other plans that disrupt them. What is about to happen in each case? Jesus is about to appear!—first “in disguise” on the road and then in the Eucharistic meal. Notice: “And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them...” The Author of the story, that is to say, God, The Author of the Universe, enters the story. That is the point of Jesus’s subsequent unfolding of the scriptures to them: namely, to explain that He has entered our story. We shouldn’t fool ourselves into thinking that just because the incredible event of the incarnation happened a long time ago in the bible, that Jesus has now left the story again. For He has sent us His Spirit, and the Year of Faith is an opportunity to look for His little intrusions in our daily lives.

If we are approaching this Year of Faith a little confused about what we’re supposed to be doing, perhaps we can start with this—by praying and accepting in our hearts that it is not all up to us. We have a God, who is so in love with us that he chases after us when we are going the wrong way. The Emmaus story tells us that He seems to have a special affection for the lost and the confused. Perhaps we should begin this holy time by doing nothing! Now don’t go running up to Monseigneur and tell him “Dr. Schreyer said I didn’t have to do anything for the Year of Faith.” No-no. What I mean by “doing nothing” is avoiding the spiritual trap of planning our future for ourselves instead of letting God go before us into the future. The Gospel of Luke gives us the supreme example of God’s intrusion in human events, the incarnation. And in the great “fiat” or “let it be” of the Mother of God, we learn how to respond. In this holy time, let’s learn to recognize and accept God’s little intrusions—to accept, in other words, that God starts with us where we are. He never says, “You must do this and then I’ll love you.” Just the

opposite: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8) and in 1 John 4:10, “in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son.”

Like all great stories, the Emmaus story has memorable lines that bring its major theme to the surface. In this case, it is the beautiful expression in verse 32 that every one of us can relate to: “Were not our hearts burning inside us while he spoke to us on the way?” When asked what makes a good story, the great twentieth-century novelist, J.R.R. Tolkien, said that “however fantastic or terrible its adventures,” a good story causes us to catch our breath and gives us “a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears.” “It is a sudden and miraculous grace,” Tolkien further explains, “it does not deny the existence of sorrow and failure; it denies universal final defeat...giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.” I think what Luke succeeds in capturing in the words of verse 32 is the experience of meeting the person of Jesus Christ: “Were not our hearts burning inside us when he spoke to us?” As we read this line, we share the joy of the two men in the story—a joy “beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.” Their hearts aflame, they now understand why Jesus had to suffer and die: he has come “so that we may have joy and our joy may be complete” (John 15:11). Prior to this, the two disciples know all the data about Jesus’s life, but they don’t know Him. They don’t understand his passion and death. From the standpoint of our modern, post-Christian, information-driven society, we quite easily recognize the skepticism, perhaps even the cynicism in the previous comments of Cleopas: “...some women of our group...” But God is not a pragmatist; he doesn’t care about data and facts: He’s in the business of miracles, of eleventh-hour rescues, of Hail

Mary passes. He cares about the language of our hearts, not our rational minds. What do our hearts tell us? Just ask the great saint who spent much of his life headed down the wrong road, St Augustine, who begins his *Confessions*: “You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

This story from Luke is one of my favorites because it teaches us that the language of faith is a language of the heart. It is a manner of communicating with God in which our chief role is not to speak, but to listen. If I can manage to turn off my anxious, muttering brain, the Holy Spirit descends into the depths of my heart and draws-out what I can’t even put into words. “For we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the One who searches hearts knows what is the intention” (Romans 8:26-27). I think sometimes the two disciples in the story get a bad rap (like Doubting Thomas the apostle), but it is important to note that they do humble themselves and listen and open their hearts. And notice what happens when the disciples listen—they learn how to love. Luke writes: “As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over’.” Notice, that they are no longer self-absorbed. They see this strange wayfarer as a fellow traveller, and they offer him food and shelter. If we step back from the story we see the pattern that Luke is getting at: Spiritual renewal begins with God stepping into the daily course of our lives. And if we listen and open our hearts to Him, we learn to move out of ourselves and see the needs of other people. In the words of Vatican Two, we become *Lumen gentium*, a light of the nations—we become Christ on the road to others. The old saying, “Seeing is believing,” has got it all wrong. According to St. Luke, believing is seeing. Faith is a kind

of knowledge. If I believe, then I will see. I will perceive. Perceive Him in other people. And my faith will then be a light to others.

The Year of Faith is an invitation to see things anew: to recognize the foolishness of all our pre-conceived notions about Who God is and what He is supposed to be doing for us. The invitation the disciples in the story opened their hearts to receive is that God's ways are not our ways. What they didn't understand until He spoke to them in their hearts was the pattern throughout all the scriptures of God's self-emptying love—love even unto death, death on a cross. God's willingness to journey into the dark country of sin and pain and death in order to bring us His love.

For me, the most beautiful element of this story, and the chief reason I asked it to be read this evening, is its setting—the time of day. It takes place during the long shadows of the early evening. “But they urged him, ‘stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them.” Notice that when they invite Him to stay, He gladly does, and He gives them a great gift—the gift of Himself. He has promised each and every one of us that He will do the same thing if we ask. If we pray, like these two disciples, “*mane nobiscum, domine* [Stay with us, Lord]”. He will!

Nighttime in the ancient world was no time to be out traveling on the roads. It was a dangerous time. Yet once these two disciples recognize Jesus they take the risk—they risk everything to head back to where they are supposed to be, back to Jerusalem. And they announce the good news of the risen Christ to others in despair. I think that Luke gives us an excellent model for the Year of Faith here. In *Lumen gentium*, the Church teaches that it is we, the laity, who must let the power of the Gospel shine forth in our daily social and family life by a continual conversion and by wrestling against spiritual

darkness. In his letter announcing the Year of Faith, the Holy Father emphasizes this same message: “The Church...by the power of the risen Lord...is given strength to overcome, in patience and in love, its sorrow and its difficulties, both those that are from within and those that are from without, so that it may reveal in the world, faithfully, although with shadows, the mystery of its Lord.”

A light amid the darkness. A glimmer of hope in a world where the cold chill of evening shadows seems to close about. Just when it seems that all hope is lost and that humanity has forgotten Christ. One of my favorite passages from Tolkein’s great trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, sheds light on the Emmaus story. The two main characters are sent on a great mission that will save the world, but the task is a desperate one and appears hopeless, and they are surrounded by darkness when suddenly: “There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.” Luke sets this story at evening time to send us the same message: though the Messiah has been put to death—or rather, because our Messiah has been put to death—the Shadow is only a small and passing thing. Despite all indications to the contrary, our God has cast out the ruler of this world and is victorious.

Why should we embrace the call of the Year of Faith—why should we bring the light of Christ to others as *Lumen gentium* urges? Because we have Good News to tell! The Good News, my brothers and sisters, is that the Almighty God of the Universe is personally, intimately in love with you and with me. “For I know well the plans I have in

mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not your woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope” (Jer. 29:11). What news, what incredible news! And never has the world be more in need of that news.

The Holy Father’s goal—our goal—is that a Year of Faith might become a journey of faith, a lifetime of talking and walking with Christ and sharing with him all our hopes and our fears. “We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel...” Tell Him what is in your heart. If we do this, then the apparent futility and hopelessness of our lives—Macbeth’s “tale told by an idiot”—becomes instead an ADVENTURE in which we pray in the words of another Shakespeare character: “Let He that hath the steerage of my course direct my sail!”

I will close with this prayer: As evening shadows lengthen, as the darkness and the gathering gloom of our modern world closes in around us and we are afraid, help us look to the stars—the Morning Star, Our Lady, so strong and bright! And the Day Star that is Her Son, Our Lord and Our Savior, Jesus Christ. *Mane nobiscum Domine.*