NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# Preparing for a Year of Faith

Richard McBrien | Jan. 16, 2012 Essays in Theology

Pope Benedict XVI recently announced that he would launch a Year of Faith to help Catholics appreciate the gift of faith, to deepen their relationship with God and to strengthen their commitment to sharing faith with others.

The Year of Faith will begin Oct. 11, 2012, the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, and will end Nov. 24, 2013, the feast of Christ the King.

The pope explained his intention in *Porta Fidei* ("The Door of Faith"), an apostolic letter released Oct. 17. The complete text of the letter is available in *Origins*, Oct. 27, 2011, vol. 41, no. 21.

Pope Benedict XVI observed, "It often happens that Christians are more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment, continuing to think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society."

He continued: "In reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is often openly denied" (n. 2). (The pope quoted his own homily in Lisbon on May 11, 2010.)

In light of this and more, he decided to proclaim a Year of Faith. The starting date also marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which the pope described as "an authentic fruit of the Second Vatican Council" (n. 4; and which he described elsewhere as "one of the most important fruits of the Second Vatican Council," n. 11).

One can question whether this is a correct characterization of the *Catechism*, without, however, diminishing its significance in the recent history of the Catholic church. It was, after all, requested by the extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985 and was produced in collaboration with the bishops, even though few of them were actually involved in its production.

This is not the first time the church has been called to celebrate a Year of Faith, Benedict XVI pointed out. His predecessor, Pope Paul VI, announced one in 1967 to commemorate the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul.

Unfortunately, it began almost a year before the lowest point of his pontificate; namely, the publication of his last encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life") in July 1968 -- "last" because Paul VI was so taken aback by the negative reaction to the encyclical that he vowed never to write another one, and he did not.

The encyclical had declared that contraception is always seriously sinful. The central words that Paul VI used were that "each and every marriage act must be open to the transmission of life" (n. 11).

One might also place the publication of Paul VI's *Credo of the People of God*, which concluded the Year of Faith in 1968, as a distant second in relation to *Humanae Vitae* as another low point in his pontificate.

Benedict XVI said the *Credo* was "intended to show how much the essential content that for centuries has formed the heritage of all believers needs to be confirmed" (n. 4).

The *Credo of the People of God* was issued on June 30, 1968, just under a month before the release of *Humanae Vitae*, on July 25.

In my column for July 19, 1968, I wrote: "Insofar as this document allows the views of one particular school of theology (a minority view, let it be added, that was clearly rejected at Vatican II) to intrude itself upon the ground of authentic Christian tradition, the 'Credo' has transformed itself from an expression of common faith binding the whole Church together, into a personal brief on behalf of one party in the current theological debate."

On the other hand, Benedict XVI did well to begin his own Year of Faith on the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II to "provide a good opportunity to help people under-stand that the texts bequeathed by the council fathers 'have lost nothing of their value or brilliance' [John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 308]" (n. 5).

And he concluded his apostolic letter on a very high note. He made it clear, in typically Catholic fashion, that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-18). He also cited Matthew 25:40: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

"What the world is in particular need of today," Benedict XVI wrote, "is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end" (n. 14).

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