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WITNESSING TO OUR FAITH

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Dear Editor:

In Sunday's editorial, Eugenio Scalfari acutely grasped that the theme of Pope Francis' encyclical is "the central point of Christian doctrine: what faith is," and concluded with the question, "What is the answer, most reverend Pope?" (*la Repubblica*, July 7, 2013). In rereading the encyclical *Lumen fidei*, stimulated by these words, I could not help but mentally return to this image with which Jesus describes the mission of His followers in the world: "Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house" (*Mt* 5:15).

What better response could Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have given to the widespread perception that associates faith with darkness, or rather with "a subjective light, capable perhaps of warming the heart and bringing personal consolation, but not something which could be proposed to others as an objective and shared light which points the way," thus causing it to be regarded as "a leap in the dark, to be taken in the absence of light, driven by blind emotion" (3)?

One cannot respond to an objection of this nature with just a line of reasoning. One does not defeat darkness by talking about light, but by lighting a lamp. Darkness can only be defeated by light. Only the radiant witness of the faith that illuminates the lives of those who embrace it can respond to such an objection.

This is how the Christian faith was born. Those who met Jesus were struck by the light that He shed on the reality in which they were immersed—so much so that one of them, the evangelist Matthew, describes the meaning of Jesus' presence in history with these words, harkening back to one of Isaiah's prophecies: "The people who sit in darkness have seen a great light; on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen" (*Mt* 4:16). For those who want to illuminate, there is no other path but to "shine." Even Jesus conceived of Himself in this way: "I came into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in Me might not remain in darkness" (*Jn* 12:46).

The challenge in which the Christian faith finds itself today is no different than the challenge of yesterday. As T.S. Eliot reminds us, contemporary man seeks frantically "to escape / from the darkness outside and within / by dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good." Thus, it is difficult to find a more adequate image than that of the lamp: the event of Christ proposes itself, here and now, as a unique and unexpected response to the profound obscurity in which today's man struggles, powerless.

Faced with the testimony of the two pontiffs that is contained in these pages, each one of us can then judge if, as Nietzsche maintained, the Christian faith diminishes "the full meaning of human existence," thus preventing man from "boldly setting out in quest of knowledge" (2), impeding his capacity to seek the truth, or rather if "faith enriches life in all its dimensions" (6), making it a truly human, personal, and fascinating adventure, while showing 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" (35). Of course, the necessary condition for accepting the challenge that their testimony represents is an open reason, which is only fulfilled in love, through an authentic affection for oneself. In fact, only a person who is loved

and, therefore, truly loves himself, can be interested in truth, and start with recognition when he intercepts a ray of its light on the road of life.

With their witness, Benedict XVI and Pope Francis remind all of us, who have received the gift of faith, of the task that was entrusted to us in the world—to let the light of Christ shine in our faces. “Faith is passed on... from one person to another, just as one candle is lighted from another” (37). We all understand what kind of responsibility such a task entails, and we will be able to carry it out only if we, first of all, allow ourselves to be constantly illuminated by the light of Christ. Therefore, “the Church never takes faith for granted, but knows that this gift of God needs to be nourished and reinforced so that it can continue to guide her pilgrim way” (6).

All of the faithful need to let themselves be transformed by the love “to which they have opened their hearts in faith. By their openness to this offer of primordial love, their lives are enlarged and expanded.” By agreeing to participate in the “we” of the communion of the Church, “the self-awareness of the believer now expands because of the presence of another; it now lives in this other and thus, in love, life takes on a whole new breadth” (21).

The men of our time will be able to take an interest in Christ and faith once more only if they find people on their journey who, because of faith, are able to face the challenges of living; only if they see, through these people, the pertinence of faith to life’s needs, that is, its profound reasonableness. Then they will see that what makes Christians so different is not a story or a good feeling (cf. 24), but a fact that has within it the reasons of humanity. Only the provocation of such a luminous and concrete witness is able to touch “the core of our being” (40); it is the only witness capable of being at the height of our fundamental needs for truth, beauty, justice, and happiness. Yes, as it was yesterday, today “faith is born of an encounter which takes place in history and lights up our journey through time” (38).

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