Encyclical Letter
of the Supreme Pontiff
Francis

THE LIGHT OF FAITH

Lumen Fidei

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To the Bishops, Priests, Deacons,
Consecrated Persons, and the Lay Faithful

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Chapter One

We Have Believed in Love

(cf. 1 Jn 4:16)

Abraham, our father in faith

8. Faith opens the way before us and accompanies our steps through time. Hence, if we want to understand what faith is, we need to follow the route it has taken, the path trodden by believers, as witnessed first in the Old Testament. Here a unique place belongs to Abraham, our father in faith. Something disturbing takes place in his life: God speaks to him; he reveals himself as a God who speaks and calls his name. Faith is linked to hearing. Abraham does not see God, but hears his voice. Faith thus takes on a personal aspect. God is not the god of a particular place, or a deity linked to specific sacred time, but the God of a person, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, capable of interacting with man and establishing a covenant with him. Faith is our response to a word which engages us personally, to a "Thou" who calls us by name.

9. The word spoken to Abraham contains both a call and a promise. First, it is a call to leave his own land, a summons to a new life, the beginning of an exodus which points him toward an unforeseen future. The sight which faith would give to Abraham would always be linked to the need to take this step forward: faith "sees" to the extent that it journeys, to the extent that it chooses to enter into the horizons opened up by God's word. This word also contains a promise: Your descendants will be great in number; you will be the father of a great nation (cf. Gen 13:16; 15:5; 22:17). As a response to a word which preceded it, Abraham's faith would always be an act of remembrance. Yet this remembrance is not fixed on past events but, as the memory of a promise, it becomes capable of opening up the future, shedding light on the path to be taken. We see how faith, as remembrance of the future, *memoria futuri*, is thus closely bound up with hope.

10. Abraham is asked to entrust himself to this word. Faith understands that something so apparently ephemeral and fleeting as a word, when spoken by the God who is fidelity, becomes absolutely certain and unshakable, guaranteeing the continuity of our journey through history. Faith accepts this word as a solid rock upon which we can build, a straight highway on which we can travel. In the Bible, faith is expressed by the Hebrew word *'emûnāh*, derived from the verb *'amān* whose root means "to uphold." The term *'emûnāh* can signify both God's fidelity and man's faith. The man of faith gains strength by putting himself in the hands of the God who is faithful. Playing on this double meaning of the word—also found in the corresponding terms in Greek (*pistós*) and Latin (*fidelis*)—Saint Cyril of Jerusalem praised the dignity of the

Christian who receives God's own name: both are called "faithful."[8] As Saint Augustine explains: "Man is faithful when he believes in God and his promises; God is faithful when he grants to man what he has promised."[9]

11. A final element of the story of Abraham is important for understanding his faith. God's word, while bringing newness and surprise, is not at all alien to Abraham's experience. In the voice which speaks to him, the patriarch recognizes a profound call which was always present at the core of his being. God ties his promise to that aspect of human life which has always appeared most "full of promise," namely, parenthood, the begetting of new life: "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac" (Gen 17:19). The God who asks Abraham for complete trust reveals himself to be the source of all life. Faith is thus linked to God's fatherhood, which gives rise to all creation; the God who calls Abraham is the Creator, the one who "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17), the one who "chose us before the foundation of the world . . . and destined us for adoption as his children" (Eph 1:4–5). For Abraham, faith in God sheds light on the depths of his being, it enables him to acknowledge the wellspring of goodness at the origin of all things and to realize that his life is not the product of non-being or chance, but the fruit of a personal call and a personal love. The mysterious God who called him is no alien deity, but the God who is the origin and mainstay of all that is. The great test of Abraham's faith, the sacrifice of his son Isaac, would show the extent to which this

8. Cf. *Catechesis V*, 1: *PG* 33, 505A.
9. *In Psal.* 32, II, s. I, 9: *PL* 36, 284.

primordial love is capable of ensuring life even beyond death. The word which could raise up a son to one who was "as good as dead," in "the barrenness" of Sarah's womb (cf. Rom 4:19), can also stand by his promise of a future beyond all threat or danger (cf. Heb 11:19; Rom 4:21).

The faith of Israel

12. The history of the people of Israel in the Book of Exodus follows in the wake of Abraham's faith. Faith once again is born of a primordial gift: Israel trusts in God, who promises to set his people free from their misery. Faith becomes a summons to a lengthy journey leading to worship of the Lord on Sinai and the inheritance of a promised land. God's love is seen to be like that of a father who carries his child along the way (cf. Dt 1:31). Israel's confession of faith takes shape as an account of God's deeds in setting his people free and acting as their guide (cf. Dt 26:5–11), an account passed down from one generation to the next. God's light shines for Israel through the remembrance of the Lord's mighty deeds, recalled and celebrated in worship, and passed down from parents to children. Here we see how the light of faith is linked to concrete life stories, to the grateful remembrance of God's mighty deeds and the progressive fulfillment of his promises. Gothic architecture gave clear expression to this: in the great cathedrals light comes down from heaven by passing through windows depicting the history of salvation. God's light comes to us through the account of his self-revelation, and thus becomes capable of illuminating our passage

through time by recalling his gifts and demonstrating how he fulfills his promises.

13. The history of Israel also shows us the temptation of unbelief to which the people yielded more than once. Here the opposite of faith is shown to be idolatry. While Moses is speaking to God on Sinai, the people cannot bear the mystery of God's hiddenness; they cannot endure the time of waiting to see his face. Faith by its very nature demands renouncing the immediate possession which sight would appear to offer; it is an invitation to turn to the source of the light, while respecting the mystery of a countenance which will unveil itself personally in its own good time. Martin Buber once cited a definition of idolatry proposed by the rabbi of Kock: idolatry is "when a face addresses a face which is not a face."[10] In place of faith in God, it seems better to worship an idol, into whose face we can look directly and whose origin we know, because it is the work of our own hands. Before an idol, there is no risk that we will be called to abandon our security, for idols "have mouths, but they cannot speak" (Ps 115:5). Idols exist, we begin to see, as a pretext for setting ourselves at the center of reality and worshiping the work of our own hands. Once man has lost the fundamental orientation which unifies his existence, he breaks down into the multiplicity of his desires; in refusing to await the time of promise, his life story disintegrates into a myriad of unconnected instants. Idolatry, then, is always polytheism, an aimless passing from one lord to another. Idolatry does not offer a journey but rather a plethora of paths leading nowhere and forming a vast labyrinth.

10. M. Buber, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*, Zürich, 1949, 793.

Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: "Put your trust in me!" Faith, tied as it is to conversion, is the opposite of idolatry; it breaks with idols to turn to the living God in a personal encounter. Believing means entrusting oneself to a merciful love which always accepts and pardons, which sustains and directs our lives, and which shows its power by its ability to make straight the crooked lines of our history. Faith consists in the willingness to let ourselves be constantly transformed and renewed by God's call. Herein lies the paradox: by constantly turning toward the Lord, we discover a sure path which liberates us from the dissolution imposed upon us by idols.

14. In the faith of Israel we also encounter the figure of Moses, the mediator. The people may not see the face of God; it is Moses who speaks to YHWH on the mountain and then tells the others of the Lord's will. With this presence of a mediator in its midst, Israel learns to journey together in unity. The individual's act of faith finds its place within a community, within the common "we" of the people who, in faith, are like a single person—"my firstborn son," as God would describe all of Israel (cf. Ex 4:22). Here mediation is not an obstacle, but an opening: through our encounter with others, our gaze rises to a truth greater than ourselves. Rousseau once lamented that he could not see God for himself: "How many people stand between God and me!"[11] . . . "Is it really so simple and natural that God would have sought out Moses in order to speak to Jean Jacques Rousseau?"[12] On the basis of an individualistic

11. Émile, Paris, 1966, 387.

12. *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont*, Lausanne, 1993, 110.

and narrow conception of knowledge one cannot appreciate the significance of mediation, this capacity to participate in the vision of another, this shared knowledge which is the knowledge proper to love. Faith is God's free gift, which calls for humility and the courage to trust and to entrust; it enables us to see the luminous path leading to the encounter of God and humanity: the history of salvation.

The fullness of Christian faith

15. "Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56). According to these words of Jesus, Abraham's faith pointed to him; in some sense it foresaw his mystery. So Saint Augustine understood it when he stated that the patriarchs were saved by faith, not faith in Christ who had come but in Christ who was yet to come, a faith pressing toward the future of Jesus.[13] Christian faith is centered on Christ; it is the confession that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised him from the dead (cf. Rom 10:9). All the threads of the Old Testament converge on Christ; he becomes the definitive "Yes" to all the promises, the ultimate basis of our "Amen" to God (cf. 2 Cor 1:20). The history of Jesus is the complete manifestation of God's reliability. If Israel continued to recall God's great acts of love, which formed the core of its confession of faith and broadened its gaze in faith, the life of Jesus now appears as the locus of God's definitive intervention, the supreme manifestation of his love for us. The word which God speaks to us in Jesus is not simply one word among many, but

13. Cf. *In Ioh. Evang.*, 45, 9: *PL* 35, 1722–1723.