

LUMEN FIDEI AND TAKING THE RIGHT STAND

David Cloutier July 5, 2013

If you do not take a stand, you will not understand. Understanding requires standing. These are the culminating themes of the account of the concept of faith in Joseph Ratzinger's 1968 Introduction to Christianity, in which faith is named as "taking up a position" and "to take one's stand on something." Ratzinger is trying to identify faith with a certain type of stance toward reality, rather than with any formulae, claiming that faith is the prerequisite of all real human understanding. Without faith, he suggests, all understanding eventually is reduced to "making" – that is, not to standing somewhere, but to remaking the world in one's own image.

Chapter 2 of Lumen Fidei quotes Isaiah 7:9, "Unless you believe, you will not understand," the very verse on which Ratzinger bases his reflection in his 1968.

The hand of Benedict is very much present here, weaving a complex reflection on how love, the senses, and reason all work together in fruitful concert when grounded in faith, a faith that itself must be embodied in the community of the Church (chapter 3) and in service to the common good (chapter 4).

Key ideas:

- to believe inevitably involves taking a stand
- faith must be embodied in the community of the Church and in the service to the common good
- faith is a relationship with Christ
- faith leads to openness

Faith enlightens our whole being

The overall outline of the document suggests its central concern, set out in the initial paragraph, to counter the idea that religious faith is in fact a form of "darkness." Rather, faith means standing somewhere, taking a stand, one that illuminates rather than darkens. In the first chapter, the existential or dynamic (rather than propositional or doctrinal) aspect of what faith means is vividly described, in particular using Abraham. The first chapter is filled with an exploration of these dynamic experiences – call, response, promise, love – and all of this oriented toward the salvific communion with God and others that is the Church. The second, third, and fourth chapters then extend this experience of faith into the areas of intellect (chapter 2), ecclesial community (chapter 3), and social community (chapter 4).

A faith centred on Jesus Christ

I have always thought that there is no necessary conflict between a strongly Christocentric conception of faith and a conception that appreciates the broad experience of non-Christians. Ultimately, this is a false dichotomy that leads to a real dead end for both Christians

and non-Christians. We need to figure out ways of speaking, and more especially acting, in which "taking a stand" does not somehow mean "standing against" - and in particular, standing against those who really do live out a dedication to love, service, and beauty. The encyclical nicely weaves these affirmations:

"The more Christians immerse themselves in the circle of Christ's light, the more capable they become of understanding and accompanying the path of every man and woman towards God."

It insists that maintaining the distinctive faith in Jesus in fact allows recognition of the content of those who are not "believers."

"Because faith is a way, it also has to do with the lives of those men and women who, though not believers, nonetheless desire to believe and continue to seek. To the extent that they are sincerely open to love and set out with whatever light they can find, they are already, even without knowing it, on the path leading to faith. They strive to act as if God existed, at times because they realize how important he is for finding a sure

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compass for our life in common or because they experience a desire for light amid darkness, but also because in perceiving life's grandeur and beauty they intuit that the presence of God would make it all the more beautiful. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons tells how Abraham, before hearing God's voice, had already sought him "in the ardent desire of his heart" and "went throughout the whole world, asking himself where God was to be found", until "God had pity on him who, all alone, had sought him in silence." Anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by his help, for it is characteristic of the divine light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love." (35)

I am believed because I believe

Faith enables us to take the right stand

On the one hand, we can only "take a stand" on love, beauty, and peace insofar as we recognize that it is Christ who manifests this content. We can only know that the "object of faith" is not an object, but a subject, because we have encountered God in the face of Christ. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that Christocentrism often expresses itself in exclusivist ways. What Christocentrism should make clear is the anti-deistic claim that we encounter God as love

because God acts in history:

Our culture has lost its sense of God's tangible presence and activity in our world. We think that God is to be found in the beyond, on another level of reality, far removed from our everyday relationships. But if this were the case, if God could not act in the world, his love would not be truly powerful, truly real, and thus not even true, a love capable of delivering the bliss that it promises. It would make no difference at all whether we believed in him or not. Christians, on the contrary, profess their faith in God's tangible and powerful love which really does act in history and determines its final destiny. (17)

The claim that "God acts in history" has been misused, by Christians and by other religions alike. But the response – to remove God from history – is not an answer. Rather, the key argument must be how we recognize God acting in history. For this, it seems to me, we must always place our trust in Jesus as the revelation of the nature and intent of God's activity. To focus on Jesus is, I think, to be able to have a trustworthy standard for where and how God is acting, in all people. The "Christian difference," such as it is, might be captured in this notion of "radical openness":

Faith opens us to wonder, love and commitment

"Faith's new way of seeing things is centered on Christ. Faith in Christ brings salvation because in him our lives become radically open to a love that precedes us, a love that transforms us from within, acting in us and through us." (20)

While this openness to all that precedes us is seen in the broad human experiences of wonder, love, and commitment, Christians are called to radicalize this openness. Do we manifest this? Do we allow this love to be active in and through us? The encyclical suggests that, if and when we do, we are indeed the light of the world. But if not, perhaps we contribute to the darkness.

Questions for personal reflection:

- When was the last time that I took a stand on a particular issue?
- To what extent does my relationship with Christ enlighten my take on values?
- Does my lifestyle witness what I believe in, such that others may be moved to do similar choices in life?

Adapted from:

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/lumen-fidei-and-taking-right-stand>

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hajja
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