
THREE

Guide to the Introduction: Faith Lights Our Way

Summary

In the short introduction to *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis states the reasons that both he and Pope Benedict XVI before him focus on the topic of faith, especially during the Year of Faith and the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. There is an urgent need today to understand the value and importance of faith—not just to Christians but all humankind. The metaphor Pope Francis introduces and expands upon throughout the encyclical is that of light. Faith is the light that illumines our journey in life and provides clarity to all aspects of human existence. This understanding is critical today, because modern society rejects faith as subjective and infused only by fleeting emotion. In other words, living by faith is a dark, unenlightened pursuit. Pope Francis, on the other hand, hopes that his encyclical will help the light of faith “grow and enlighten the present, becoming a star to brighten the horizon of our journey at a time when mankind is particularly in need of light” (*LF*, 4).

Key Points

- Faith is a light that illumines our entire life journey as Christians.
- Faith is a light that illumines not just the lives of Christians but all humankind.
- There is an urgent need today for us to once again see faith as a light for every aspect of human existence, because the light of reason without faith that modernity has exalted will lead us into darkness, fear, and uncertainty.

Commentary

Faith Lights Our Journey (1)

Have you ever taken your car out on a drive just before the sun has set, only to realize a short time later that you had forgotten to turn on your headlights? As you drove, you slowly started to notice the road getting darker and darker until you finally realized you needed light to see the road ahead of you.

Or, have you ever been at home during a storm when the power went out? Without power and without lights, you had to pull out the candles or the flashlights to be able to make your way around the house or apartment.

The application of these memories is perhaps obvious. Without light, we cannot see. Without light, we cannot see where we are and we cannot see where we are going. Many of us go through life unable to see the road ahead because we have no light to show the way. Or we are unable to see the world around us when the lights we have relied on fail. Just as we need headlights and flashlights to see in the darkness, we need faith to guide us through the darkness of life.

Light is the image Pope Francis uses throughout his first encyclical to describe the importance of faith in our lives. His hope, which he shares with his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, is to reestablish the value of faith in the modern world. He proposes that faith not only is essential to light the way of the Christian journey but illumine every aspect of human existence.

So, why does Pope Francis use the image of light? What is so special about light? In his opening paragraph, he cites passages from sacred scripture that deal with light, darkness, and sight. He reminds us that Christ came as the “light of the world” so that we who believe in him “may not remain in darkness” (Jn 12:46). He points to St. Paul who uses the same image, appealing to God’s creation as he writes that “God . . . has shone in our hearts” (2 Cor 4:6). And finally, he quotes Jesus’ words to Martha: “If you believed, you would see the glory of God” (Jn 11:4). The light of faith, which comes from the risen Christ, enables those who believe in it to see their entire journey with new eyes.

Light allows us to see. The light of faith allows us to see our journey through life in a new light with new eyes. The source of this light is Jesus Christ.

Why Faith? Why Now? (2–7)

What happens when we do not have light? We can’t see. What happens when we do not have the light of faith? According to Pope Francis, “In the absence of light, everything becomes confused; it is impossible to tell good from evil, or the road to our destination from other roads which take

us in endless circles, going nowhere” (*LF*, 3). Without faith, we go through life lacking purpose and direction.

Modernity has made dim the light of faith. Modern philosophers and thought leaders have influenced our society to downgrade faith as something that is subjective and emotional. To modern society, which accepts the light of reason alone, faith is seen to be darkness rather than light.

The pope mentions Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century philosopher who is probably best known for stating, “God is dead.” His ideas have heavily influenced the thought of atheists throughout the last century.

Nietzsche is just one example of a number of prominent thinkers who rejected religion in the last few centuries. In 1927, Sigmund Freud, for example, wrote a book titled *The Future of an Illusion*, which proposed that religion was a false system of belief that could be understood objectively in terms of psychoanalysis. He, like others of his time, hoped that a society of people made more self-aware of the real source of religion could build a better society relying upon reason alone. Karl Marx, the father of socialism and communism, shared a similar view.

What is the proper response to these challenges toward faith? Some, as Pope Francis points out, have tried to save faith as a *supplement* to reason. When people could not find answers by reason alone, they turned to faith as a “leap in the dark” (*LF*, 3). The problem with this line of thinking is that faith is still associated with blindness and darkness as opposed to light.

So, in modern times we are up against two views of faith:

1. Faith is an illusion.
2. Faith is relevant only as a back-up plan for reason, when reason cannot provide us with clarity and sight.

Pope Francis wants to offer another, third way to view faith. Instead of turning to faith as a back-up plan when our objective reason can’t find the answers to life’s questions, we should consider that faith is the light that illuminates every aspect of our lives—including reason.

Faith comes from outside of ourselves. Its source is not found within us through deep introspection, and it is not something purely subjective. It comes from God. It is born out of an encounter with a living God, a God who gives us a light to guide us through our journey. It is a light that comes from Jesus, the Son of God, who conquered death.

What Comes Next?

Like any good introduction, these paragraphs only set the stage for the further development of the argument for the need for faith in our lives and our society today. There are still a number of

questions that the Pope raises and must address. For instance: “What is the origin of faith?” and “What is life like when illumined by faith?”

Comprehension Questions

1. What does *lumen fidei* mean?
2. How do modern philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche view faith?
3. Why is there an urgent need to understand faith as light?
4. When was the Year of Faith inaugurated?
5. Who wrote the first draft of the encyclical and who completed it?

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. Would you say that faith lights up every aspect of your life? What are the areas in your life that seem disconnected from your faith? In what areas of your life do you constantly turn to God for help and guidance?
2. Have you encountered atheist arguments against Christianity in your personal life or through the news? As far as you can tell, what are their main points?
3. Why do you think people fail to see the relevance of faith in their lives today?