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Deacons in the Year of Faith: Toward a Lifetime of Faithful Service
Retreat for the Diaconal Candidates for the Archdiocese of Kansas City, KS
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The Hunger to Grow in Faith During this Year of Faith and Beyond as Faithful Servants (*Diakonoí*) of the Lord

- Introduction
 - It's a great joy to be with you for this retreat as you prepare prayerfully to be accepted as candidates for the diaconate on Sunday and for all the work that will follow. As I begin I am filled with the same sentiments that now Blessed John Paul II said in 1987 to permanent deacons from throughout the United States who had come to be with him in Detroit:
 - “It is a special joy for me to meet you because you represent *a great and visible sign of the working of the Holy Spirit* in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which provided for the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Church. The wisdom of that provision is evident in your presence in such numbers today and in the fruitfulness of your ministries. With the whole Church, *I give thanks to God for the call you have received and for your generous response*. For the majority of you who are married, this response has been made possible by the love and support and collaboration of your wives. It is a great encouragement to know that in the United States over the past two decades [so many] permanent deacons have been ordained for the service of the Gospel.”
 - The permanent diaconate is a “great and visible sign of the working of the Holy Spirit,” to which you and for those of you who are married your wives have generously responded up until now and that's a great sign of encouragement for the whole Church. So it's a real honor to be with you, to try to help you, who have been saying yes to the Holy Spirit, continue to say that yes with even greater intensity and resolve.
 - The theme of this retreat is “Deacons in the Year of Faith: Toward a Lifetime of Faithful Service.” I chose that theme because we are in the heart of the Year of Faith begun last October 11 by Pope Benedict and set to be concluded by Pope Francis on the Solemnity of Christ the King this Year. An ecclesiastical holy year is meant to influence everything we do throughout that year, the way we do our private prayer, the way we celebrate Mass, the way we live our Christian life, the way we mark the liturgical seasons and feasts, the way we celebrate baptisms and weddings, but also funerals and anointings. It's certainly supposed to flavor the way we make a retreat.
 - And I think it's a very important subject to ponder as you prepare to become candidates on Sunday. God is calling none of you merely to be a deacon. If he's calling you, and I pray he's truly calling each of you, then your vocation is to be a faithful deacon, a holy deacon, a deacon in the line of Stephen, Lawrence, Vincent, Francis of Assisi and so many others who have been true servants in the image of the one who made himself the Servant of all.
 - In 1995, when John Paul II met with a group of deacons and experts on the Diaconate in Rome, he said that the whole meaning and service of the diaconal vocation is faith:
 - “What is specific to the life and ministry of deacons could be summarized in a single word: *fidelity*—fidelity to the Catholic tradition, especially as witnessed to by the *lex orandi*, fidelity to the Magisterium, fidelity to the task of re-evangelization which the Holy Spirit has brought about in the Church.”
 - The National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States called deacons to be “firmly rooted and grounded in faith” and to “hold the mystery of faith with a clear conscience” and profess it by their lips and lives:
 - Like those once chosen by the Apostles for the ministry of charity, you should be men of good reputation, filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit. Firmly rooted and grounded in faith, you are to show yourselves chaste and beyond reproach before God and man, as is proper for the ministers of Christ and the stewards of God's mysteries. Never allow yourselves to be turned away from the hope offered by the Gospel. Now you are not only

hearers of this Gospel but also its ministers. Holding the mystery of faith with a clear conscience, express by your actions the Word of God that your lips proclaim, so that the Christian people, brought to life by the Spirit, may be a pure offering accepted by God. Then on the last day, when you go out to meet the Lord you will be able to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.”

- We should never take such faith for granted. We know from the history of the papacy, not to mention bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and lay faithful, too, that many are faithful to their vocation, but many are also lukewarm and some, sadly, are unfaithful even to the commandments not just to the particular requirements of their state of life. As you have written your letter in your own unique handwriting asking to be admitted as a candidate for the diaconate, and as you prepare for the Church to respond affirmatively to that request, it’s a time for you to pray, to ponder about the total fidelity to Christ to which you’re now being called even more.
- Neither Pope Benedict nor Pope Francis has chosen an official theme for this Year of Faith, but if were nominated, I am rather certain it would be “*Audage nobis fidem*,” Lord, increase our faith, that plea of Jesus’ first followers who already had faith but knew they needed more. In response to that petition, Jesus replied that if they had the faith the size of a mustard seed, they could do great things, they could move mountains, because then the Lord would be able to work through them to bring the greatest gifts of all to the world.
- While “Lord, increase our faith,” is not the official theme of the Year of Faith throughout the Church, it constitutes the underlying theme and petition of this retreat.
- The Lord tells us that if we have the faith the size of a tiny mustard seed it’s already something far more powerful than big backhoes. But he doesn’t want our faith to remain the size of a mustard seed. He wants it to grow.
 - Prophecy of Ezekiel 47.
 - So our faith is meant to grow, as we progress in the living relationship with Jesus. I pray that your faith has been expanding greatly during the Year of Aspirancy, and I hope that you will make the resolution to respond to God’s graces to have it grow during the upcoming years of preparation, through ordination and beyond.
- It’s important for us to be humble enough to admit that each of us here is a little like the father who met Jesus after he had come down the mountain of the Transfiguration. He son was possessed with a spirit that made him mute. He went to the disciples and asked them to expunge it, but they couldn’t. He turned to Jesus and said, “If you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus’ response is lapidary: “If you can!” Then he said, “Everything is possible to one who has faith.” That’s when the father exclaimed, “I do believe, help my unbelief!”
- We do have faith. It’s what has led us to discover our vocations and to say yes to the Lord. But often, rather than feeling powerful in faith, we sense our weakness. We’re all too aware of the ways we don’t live by faith. In the midst of a world and even many parts of the Church that are becoming increasingly secular, where people are living as if God doesn’t exist, as practical atheists, it’s becoming more challenging, more heroic, to live by faith. That’s why we cry out, “Lord, I do believe. But help my unbelief!”
- We know that in the Gospel the greatest compliments Jesus ever gave were about faith. “O Woman, great is your faith,” Jesus said to a pagan woman in Tyre after she with beautiful perseverance begged Jesus to heal her daughter. Jesus publicly marveled about the deep faith of a Roman centurion who showed total confidence that Jesus could heal his servant simply by saying a word a great distance away. He likewise praised the faith of his own mother as one who heard, believed into practice the Word of God (Lk 11:28), indicating, as the early saints of the Church beautifully noted, that before she had conceived the Word of God in her womb, she had already conceived him in faith in her heart.
- In contrast to these great icons of faith, there are also figures of little or no faith. Jesus reproved the apostles on *four occasions* because of their “little faith.” Jesus wasn’t able to work miracles in various places, including his hometown of Nazareth, because he was amazed at their lack of faith. He candidly called out many of his contemporaries for being a “faithless and perverse generation”

(Mt 17:7). And forebodingly, Jesus wondered aloud about his second coming: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8).

- In this retreat during which it’s common for us to meditate on our life and on our death, on the gift of time and how we are called to make the most of it, about who we are, what we seek, and where we’re going, it’s important for us, during this Year of Faith, to focus on what we hope Jesus would say to us if he were to come right now, if he were to come at the end of this Year of Faith, or whenever he comes: Would he compliment us for our “great faith” or reprove us for our “little faith”? If he were to come today, would he find faith in us? All of us this year in the Church — whether we’ve got faith the size of a mustard seed or smaller, whether we, by his mercy, have been living by faith for years — we need to imitate the apostles and beg, “Lord, increase our faith!”
 - In 1993, in a series of three catecheses on the diaconate, John Paul II implied that deacons, because of their office (like priests and religious), should go far beyond others in faith: “JP II 1993: In the document <Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem>, cited above, Paul VI called attention to this responsibility and the obligations it entails: "Deacons serve the mysteries of Christ and the Church, and must abstain from any vice, strive to please God, and be 'ready for any good work' for the salvation of men. Therefore, because of their reception of this Order, they should far excel others in their liturgical lives, in devotion to prayer, in the divine ministry, in obedience, charity and chastity." These are all expressions of faith in action.
 - Growing in faith so that we can excel in faith what this retreat is about, precisely to help us focus on our faith and grow in our faith, and make us capable of being the Lord’s contagious instruments to help others grow in faith.
 - This morning’s talk is, as an introduction to the importance of the Year of Faith, dedicated to the hunger to grow in faith, which is the starting point of our entire discussion. It’s our desire to grow in faith. God’s grace is all powerful but the one thing he doesn’t do for us is to respond for us. He proposes, He calls. He summons. He knocks. But he doesn’t take away our free response. That’s for us. If we wish to grow in faith, and turn to him in prayer, he will not give us a stone when we ask for this bread.
 - Tomorrow we will begin with an analysis of the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* written by Popes Benedict and Francis and published last month to give all of us in the Church some light to help us grow in faith in this year and next all the way to eternity. Then we will take the eight different descriptions of faith in the encyclical and apply them to our prayer and to the way we approach the most important prayer of all, the source and summit of any life that is Christian, the Eucharist. And we will also examine the themes of Faith and the *Diakonia* of loving service and Faith and Spreading the Faith in the New Evangelization.
- Hunger to Grow in Faith
 - Before we delve into the topic of the hunger to grow in faith, we need to understand better the two aspects of faith, because during this Year we’re called to grow in both.
 - When we talk about faith, we mean both the things we believe — like what we profess in the Creed, like our belief in Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist, like our faith in the possibility of heaven, etc. — and the trust we have in God.
 - The CCC tells us, “Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God. At the same time, and inseparably, it is a free assent to the whole truth God has revealed.”
 - We believe in something on the basis of a belief in someone.
 - CCC 156 What moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason: we believe "because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived".
 - You believe I’m 43 because you trust in me to tell you the truth.
 - Likewise, we believe in the truths of the faith because we believe in God, who sent his Son, who founded a Church, who sent the Holy Spirit to guide her into all truth and prevent her from being wrong about what we need to believe or do in order to please God and enter into his life.
 - We see this type of faith in St. Peter.

- Putting out into the deep to lower his nets. He trusts in Jesus enough to do what he says. We know what happens.
- His words about Jesus' teaching with regard the Eucharist. "To whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life."
- We see it in Mary.
 - She believes immediately in the miracle of the Virginal Conception and acts on the other information, that her elderly post-menopausal cousin Elizabeth has conceived a son, going immediately to help her.
- We see it in Martha of Bethany, when Jesus asks her if she believes that everyone who lives and believes in him will never die. She replies, "Yes, Lord! I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world!"
- This is the first way we're called to grow in faith in this Year of Faith, to grow in our total trust of God, in our personal adherence to him with confidence and love.
- Abraham as a real model for this type of trusting faith.
 - We know well the story of Abraham, who to this day is called the Father of Faith by Christians, by Jews and even by Muslims. He shows us very clearly what real faith is, the type of faith God calls each of us to. When he was 75 years old — well past retirement age for people today — the Lord called to him while he was in Ur of the Chaldeans (modern-day Iraq) and told him to leave the land of his kinfolk and go to a land he would show him. God was asking him to pack up his bags completely and leave everything behind, his language, his land, everything. And he was 75. But he did it. And God gave him a promise, one that would have sounded crazy to Abraham and his wife, Sara, who were childless at the time. "I will make of you a great nation." Eventually God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means "Father of many nations." How could Abraham become a great nation if he and his wife had been unable to have children for the very likely fifty-plus years of marriage? Yet Abram believed again. They took all of their possessions and left going to whatever place the Lord would show them. The Lord led them to Canaan, where he said, "to your descendants I will give this land." But little did Abram know that he was going to have to fight for the land, against several kings. After they were settled, Abram and Sara tried for 10 years to have a child but were unsuccessful. But he continued to believe, even though it wouldn't make much sense. And when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 91, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, who was destined, Abraham thought, to be the one through whom God would make Abraham the father of many nations. Fast-forward 13 years, when Abraham is 113. God decided to test Abraham's faith to the utmost. God asked Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah, which is a hill in Jerusalem, and there sacrifice his son, the son for whom he had waited for a century, his hope, pride and joy. Abraham did what the Lord wanted, even though it would have seemed so contradictory. He did hoping that God himself would provide the lamb for the Holocaust. Isaac the Son carried the wood. Abraham built the altar and then was prepared to sacrifice his own son to the Lord — something that the Canaanite pagans were accustomed to do — before the angel of the Lord held his hand and told Abraham not to harm the boy in the least. But Abraham was willing to sacrifice everything, even the one he loved most, because of his faith in God, because he loved God even more than he loved his son.
 - The reason is because of what we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, which focuses beautifully on the faith of Abraham and calls us to imitate it: "He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead."
 - Faith means that we're able to trust in God, we're willing to do even what at a worldly level seems inexplicable because we trust in God and in his goodness. This is the first way God wants us to grow this Year of Faith and over the course of this retreat.
 - This faith, understood as total entrusting of ourselves to God and because of that commitment, to what he said and said, is in crisis today. Many people who know what Jesus has done and taught just don't believe.

- Many who know, for example, that Jesus speaks about forgiving 70x7 and yet to hold grudges and seek revenge.
 - Many know that he eagerly desires to eat the Passover of the Eucharist with us at least each Sunday put work, sports, sleep and so many other things above Sunday Mass.
 - Many know that Jesus identifies with every stranger and will say to us either “When I was a stranger you welcomed me” or “When I was a stranger you gave me no welcome,” and yet so many who would never ask to see Jesus’ green card or seek to kick Jesus out of their country, who would never insist on doing that to any family member or person they can care about, say it to immigrants.
 - Many know that he established the Sacrament of Penance on Easter Sunday Evening, still nevertheless avoid the Sacrament of Penance for years.
 - Many know that he and the Church speak very forcefully about the meaning of marriage as an indissoluble union of one man and one woman from the beginning and yet divorce and remarry or support husbandless or wifeless pseudomarrriages.
 - Many know that he ordained only men even though he exalted so many woman way above the cultural customs of the time — from his Mother, to Mary Magdalene, to Mary and Martha of Bethany, to the women who cared for him and the apostles — but they still insist that women should be ordained priests. They imply, of course, that in not ordaining women, Jesus was either a mysoginist discriminating against women, or too weak to do something extraordinary, or that he simply didn’t know what we was doing as well as they are.
 - And many are doing this not out of weakness but out of deliberate choice. They’re not doing this out of ignorance of what Jesus has taught, but they just do not trust in him enough to recognize that to believe in him means to believe in what he said and did.
- The second aspect of growth in faith is growth in our knowledge of the faith.
 - The Directory on the Life and Ministry of Deacons calls this hunger to grow in the *fides quae* a characteristic of a deacon’s fidelity:
 - Continuing formation should be informed with the characteristics of fidelity to Christ, to the Church and to “continuing conversion” which is a fruit of sacramental grace articulated in the pastoral charity proper to every moment of ordained ministry. This formation is similar to the fundamental choice, which must be reaffirmed and renewed throughout the permanent diaconate by a long series of coherent responses that are based on and animated by the initial acceptance of the ministry.
 - There is a widespread religious illiteracy among Catholics that has been much commented upon. Even though so many Catholics now receive a very long education, not just elementary and junior high schools, but finish high school, finish college and many go on to graduate school and doctorates, few know their faith adequately. So many Catholics know far more about sports statistics or celebrity trivia than they know about our faith. So many know much more about their profession than they know about the faith, even though the faith is the most important reality of all.
 - I’ve seen this in several areas, as I’m sure you have:
 - How many people define the Immaculate Conception as Jesus’ conception rather than Mary’s?
 - How many people think that those who are divorced can’t receive Holy Communion? Or that everyone can?
 - How many think that “everybody” gets to heaven no matter what they do on earth?
 - How many have no idea what the Church teaches about vasectomies and IVF?

- This is a failure in our catechesis. But it's also a personal failure on the part of many not to hunger to learn the faith, to get to know the answers.
- It's key that as you prepare to being your studies in preparation toward the diaconate that you take this intellectual formation seriously because you will be called to teach the faith in so many different ways. Many will come to you in your work places, because you're a deacon, with questions and they have a right to the right answer, they have a legitimate expectation that you will know the answer with precision or at least know exactly where you need to go to find it out.
- John Paul II addressed this in 1993 in his catecheses on the diaconate:
 - “Whoever receives the diaconate is obliged to ongoing doctrinal formation, which continually improves and updates that required before ordination: Deacons should not slacken in their studies particularly of sacred doctrine, they should carefully read the Scriptures; they should devote themselves to ecclesiastical studies in such a way that they can correctly explain Catholic doctrine to others and day by day become better fitted to train and strengthen the souls of the faithful.”
- Just how bad the situation we face as a Church in our country is was revealed in a way no one could dismiss a few years ago in the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. It showed that atheists and agnostics proved they had a greater comparative religious knowledge than Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Mormons. The survey polled 3,412 Americans 18 and older and asked 32 questions about their own faith and other religions. Atheists and agnostics scored the highest, correctly answering on average 20.9 questions; they were followed by Jews at 20.5, Mormons at 20.3, and Protestants at 16.0 and Catholics 14.7.
- These results should be embarrassing to U.S. Catholics and particularly to all those involved in Catholic education. It's true that there may not be a reason to panic that those of other religions or no religion at all are more easily able to recognize the Hindu figures Vishnu and Shiva or to identify famous religious figures such as Jonathan Edwards, the Dalai Lama, Joseph Smith, and Martin Luther. But there is clearly reason for serious concern when atheists show a much greater grasp of the books of the Bible and key Bible figures than Catholics do.
- Of the 32 questions on the survey, nine were those that every adult Catholic legitimately should have been able to answer. I'd encourage you to see if you know these answers as we go forward and to see if your spouse or your kids or your friends would likely know them:
 - What is the first book of the Bible?
 - What are the names of the first four books of the New Testament, that is, the four Gospels?
 - Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born? Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Jericho?
 - Which of these is *not* in the Ten Commandments? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; or keep holy the Sabbath day?
 - Which figure is associated with remaining obedient to God despite suffering? Elijah, Moses, Job or Abraham?
 - Which figure is associated with leading the exodus from Egypt? Elijah, Moses, Job or Abraham?
 - Which figure is associated with willingness to sacrifice his son for God? Elijah, Moses, Job or Abraham?
 - What is Catholic teaching about bread and wine in Communion? The bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ? Or the bread and wine are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ?

- Which group traditionally teaches that salvation is through faith alone? Protestants, Catholics, both or neither?
- What were the results? With regard to the seven Biblical questions:
 - Only 42 percent of Catholics could name Genesis as the first book of the Bible (compared to 71 percent of atheists and agnostics, 85 percent of Mormons, 76 percent of Protestants and 65 percent of Jews).
 - Just 33 percent of Catholics could name the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (compared to 39 percent of atheists and agnostics, 73 percent of Mormons, 57 percent of Protestants and 17 percent of Jews).
 - Only 54 percent of Catholics could name Bethlehem as Jesus' native place (bested again by 70 percent of atheists and agnostics, 78 percent of Protestants, 83 percent of Mormons and 61 percent of Jews).
 - 57 percent of Catholics knew that the Golden Rule wasn't one of the Ten Commandments (which compared to 62 percent of atheists and agnostics, 56 percent of Protestants, 81 percent of Muslims, 62 percent of Jews).
 - Only 25 percent of Catholics could identify the sufferings of Job (in comparison with 42 percent of atheists, 70 percent of Mormons, 48 percent of Protestants and 47 percent of Jews).
 - 65 percent of Catholics correctly identified Moses as the leader of the exodus (which was still far less than the 87% of atheists and agnostics, 92 percent of Mormons, 74 percent of Protestants and 90 percent of Jews).
 - 55 percent of Catholics identified Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (compared to 68 percent of atheists and agnostics, 87 percent of Mormons, 63 percent of Protestants and 83 percent of Jews).
- In terms of the knowledge of the Old Testament and New Testament, Mormons overall correctly answered 5.7 of the 7 questions, white evangelical Protestants got 5.1, atheists and agnostics 4.4, black Protestants 4.4, Jews 4.3 (including 14 percent of Jews who got both New Testament questions correct), white mainline Protestants 3.9, white Catholics 3.8, and Latino Catholics (who could take the survey in either Spanish or English) 2.4. Overall Catholics answered 3.4 questions correctly.
- The Biblical questions posed on the Pew Survey did not concern trivial matters that those who might have a strong grasp of the content of the Bible could easily miss. They were designed so that those familiar with the central content should readily have gotten them. Failure to be able to identify the Book of Genesis implies an ignorance of the revealed truths about the creation of the world and of the human person. The inability to name the Gospel writers seems to indicate a general lack of familiarity with what they wrote of Jesus. Anyone who has ever read the book of Job could never forget the story or the name of the central figure. The inability to identify the most dramatic moment in the life of Abraham points implies a general ignorance of the common father of faith of Christians, Jews and Muslims. And the incapacity of more than a third of Catholics to recognize Moses from a line-up suggests that they have never spent much time thinking about the central event of the Old Testament or seen one of many movies that depict it. From the point of view of faith formation, these failures are the equivalent of Americans' failing to know the first letter of the alphabet, the names of the four seasons of the year, and the location of the nation's capital — not to mention being unable to identify George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King from a multiple-choice lineup.
- The poor results in terms of Biblical literacy extended into the realm of Catholic theology. With regard to the specifically Catholic question about the Eucharist, only 55 percent of Catholics knew Catholic teaching, that the bread and wine become Jesus' body and blood. Although Catholics did recognize this belief more than other groups (which ranged from 33-41 percent), it's hard to take much comfort when 41 percent of Catholics thought that Church teaching was that bread and wine were merely symbols and four percent had no

answer. With regard to the famous Protestant Reformation battle cry of *sola fides*, only nine percent of Catholics recognized it as Protestant alone (compared to 22 percent of atheists and agnostics, 22 percent of Mormons, 16 percent of Protestants and ten percent of Jews).

- Over the last few years of his pontificate, Pope Benedict spoke quite a bit about what he calls an “educational emergency,” a large component of which comes from Catholic illiteracy about the basics of the faith. On February 23 last year, meeting with the priests of Rome at the beginning of Lent, Pope Benedict said,
 - Faith is not only a personal act of trust, but an act that has a content. The *fides qua* demands the *fides quae*, the content of faith. ... Faith has a content and it is not sufficient, it is not an element of unification unless this content of the one faith is lived and professed. Therefore “The Year of Faith”, the Year of Catechism — to be very practical — are linked inseparably. We shall renew the Church only by renewing the content — later summed up again — of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. A serious problem for the Church today is the lack of knowledge of the faith, “religious illiteracy, and with this illiteracy we are unable to grow, unity is unable to grow. We ourselves must therefore recover this content, as a wealth of unity, not a packet of dogmas and orders but a unique reality that is revealed in its depths and beauty. We must do our utmost for a catechetical renewal, so that the faith may be known and in this way God may be known, Christ may be known, the truth may be known, so that unity may develop in truth.
 - As the Pew Survey confirms, many U.S. Catholic “schools” — from parishes, to homes, to educational institutions — are failing badly in fulfilling their duty to pass on the faith. They’re not remedying religious illiteracy. Catechetical programs for young children that cumulatively take up about one day a year of instruction are obviously inadequate. Parishes that offer little or no adult education, or where parishioners do not take advantage of what is offered, are clearly deficient. Families and individuals who fail to read the Bible are neglecting one of their most basic responsibilities.
 - As St. Jerome said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” It’s therefore a sad day, and one that must lead to individual and ecclesial conversion, when atheists know the basics of Sacred Scripture better than those who say they not only know but follow Christ.
 - One of the goals of this Year of Faith — called to mark the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church — is precisely to increase our *fides quae*, our knowledge of the faith, so that we can begin as a Church to address this religious illiteracy and begin to overcome it.
 - And we have to admit that while among priests, deacons and religious there’s not a religious illiteracy there is among many far less a knowledge of the faith than what there ought to be. Relatively few of us study our faith as we should. When a papal encyclical or exhortation comes out, very few read it. Among those ordained or professed prior to 1992, very few have read the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Most have never read the whole Bible. Few have read, and even fewer re-read, the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Many priests and deacons are simply not growing in their *fides quae* anywhere near as much as the Church would want. And that’s because of a lack of hunger, which brings us back to our theme.
- Hunger to grow in faith
 - The Lord desires to increase our faith this year and beyond, both in terms of our trust in him like Abraham and so many of the saints as well as in terms of our knowledge of the truths of our faith so that we can live by them and pass them on.
 - But we need to ask whether we have the same desire to grow in faith. The Lord fills the hungry with good things, but in order to be nourished, we must have an appetite. And Catholics should have a ferocious appetite.

- One of the main crises facing the Church today, the laity, the priesthood, and religious life, is the crisis of tepidity. People are going through the motions of faith. They show up but they're not all there.
- Pope Benedict focused on it last October 7 in a talk in preparation for the Year of Faith. He said, "There's a passion of ours that must grow from faith, which must be transformed into the fire of charity. Jesus said: I came to cast fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. Origen has conveyed us a word of the Lord: "Whoever is near me is near the fire." The Christian must not be lukewarm. The Book of Revelation tells us that this is the greatest danger for a Christian: not that he may say no, but that he may say a very lukewarm yes. This being lukewarm is what discredits Christianity. Faith must become in us flame of love, flame that really fires up my being, becomes the great passion of my being, and so it fires also my neighbor."
- Many of us don't have this fire. One of the reasons is because we don't have anywhere near the real relationship with God that he desires for us. We don't live in the mad, passionate love he has for us. We don't really love him back, in the sense that we make sacrifices for him.
- A second reason we don't have this fire is because we displace our passions for too many things of this world. So many in the world squander that fire rooting for their favorite sports teams, for the music of a particular singer, for details and photos of the life of some reality star or Hollywood celebrity, for high tech video games, and supporters of particular political candidates, or for work, for food or drink, for their cars, for their clothing or jewelry, or for exercise, or for other worldly pursuits, and these more immediate passions can make them apathetic to the things that matter most. Priests and religious are not immune from the squandering of these passions, putting more passion into a particular hobby than we do our study or even on occasion our prayer.
- Jesus talked about tepidity in the Book of Revelation. He gave a message to the Church of Laodicea which said, "To the angel of the church in La-odicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. 'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.'" Then he says why, "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.'"
 - Pope Benedict focused on how materialism and this-worldly obsessions can rob us of our passion for God in his 2007 encyclical "Saved by Hope." He noted that faith and hope are very closely related and he said one of the reasons why we love the "Great hope" for God, for heaven, for holiness, is because we spend so much of our time focuses on this worldly lesser hopes. "We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain.."
 - So we need to focus on our desires, on the real passions of our life, on our loves, in order to be able to live by faith. Jesus tells us, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be," and if our treasure is in this worldly stuff, our heart will necessarily be tepid toward the things of God.
 - The Directory on the Life and Ministry of Deacons talks about seeking to keep this fire going throughout their formation and their entire life as deacons:
 - The basis and motivation of this formation, therefore, "is the dynamism of the order itself," while its nourishment is the Holy Eucharist, compendium of the entire Christian ministry and endless source of every spiritual energy. St Paul's exhortation to Timothy can also be applied, in a certain sense, to deacons: "I remind you to fan into a flame the gift of God that you have" (2 Tim 1:6; cf. 1 Tim 4:14-16).
 - Over the other conferences in this retreat, we will ponder how to grow in passion, in fire, in faith, in our prayer, in our approach to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, in our sacrificing ourselves for others, in our passing on the faith. Over this retreat, I'd urge you to remember what Jesus said to

us in the Gospel on Sunday, that he has come to light a fire on the earth and can't wait for it to be enkindled. HE wants to light a fire in us.

- The purpose and stakes of the Year of Faith
 - I'd like to finish this opening conference by pondering a little the purpose and stakes of the Year of Faith.
 - Pope Benedict stated that the purpose of the Year of Faith was not so that there could be a few added celebrations over the course of the year in the cathedrals of the world, happy birthday parties to Vatican II and the Catechism, but something truly important: the renewal of the Church, beginning with our own interior renewal in faith.
 - Renewal of the Church
 - *Ecclesia semper reformanda* — The Church is always in need of reform.
 - Pope Benedict says that that reform — that restoration of the true shape that the Church ought to have — happens through conversion.
 - LG: The Church ... clasping sinners to its bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.
 - “By the power of the risen Lord it is given strength to overcome, in patience and in love, its sorrow and its difficulties, both those that are from within and those that are from without, so that it may reveal in the world, faithfully, although with shadows, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it shall be manifested in full light.”
 - Conversion to faith working through love
 - The Year of Faith, from this perspective, is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world.
 - Through faith, this new [converted] life shapes the whole of human existence according to the radical new reality of the resurrection. To the extent that he freely cooperates, man's thoughts and affections, mentality and conduct are slowly purified and transformed, on a journey that is never completely finished in this life. “Faith working through love” (*Gal 5:6*) becomes a new criterion of understanding and action that changes the whole of man's life (cf. *Rom 12:2; Col 3:9-10; Eph 4:20-29; 2 Cor 5:17*).
 - Joy
 - It's meant to lead to the rediscovery of the “the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ.”
 - The stakes are huge for us to take this Year of Faith seriously and for us to become leaven in the whole Church to help everyone seek to cry out in sincerity, “*Adauge nobis fidem!*”
 - Faith is obviously a gift and when we ask our Father in heaven for a fish, he will not give us a poisonous eel in return. He will give us his grace to grow in faith — and even in the question there is already present a divine actual grace.
 - But, as with patience, God, in addition to giving us his help, will give us opportunities to put faith into action. He will place us in circumstances that try our faith. And this Year of Faith is a training camp meant to get us ready for those challenges.
 - Just look at the last time the Church dedicated an entire year to faith. It was 1967.
 - It was called to mark the 1900th anniversary of what was believed to be the martyrdom of SS. Peter and Paul in Rome, and it was geared to helping the whole people of God “attest to our unshakable proposition of fidelity to the deposit of faith.”
 - How did it work out?
 - HV controversy in 1968.
 - The hemorrhaging of so many priestly and religious vocations, often together, and many others remaining within but not remaining faithful to their promises and vows.

- A terrible epidemic in certain parts of the world of sexual abuse of minors within the Church.
- Publication in Holland of the Dutch catechism, which substituted one orthodoxy for another, with the approval of bishops.
- In so many ways, in the immediate aftermath of the Year of Faith, rather than a palpable increase in faith, the “smoke of Satan,” to use Paul VI’s phrase, had entered the Church. “From some fissure the smoke of Satan has entered the temple of God. There is doubt, incertitude, problematic, disquiet, dissatisfaction, confrontation. There is no longer trust of the Church; they trust the first profane prophet who speaks in some journal or some social movement, and they run after him and ask him if he has the formula of true life. And we are not alert to the fact that we are already the owners and masters of the formula of true life. Doubt has entered our consciences, and it entered by windows that should have been open to the light.” (June 29, 1972).
- Paul VI could see many of these problems on the horizon. It’s not like they came out of nowhere, and he tried to get the Church ready to meet these challenges with faith. Paul VI was ready. But most of the Church was not. When the faith of the Church and so many individuals was challenged, they did not walk or live by faith, they did not renew their trust, but so many went the way of the world.
- I bring this up because even though Pope Benedict announced a Year of Faith in October 2011 and the Year of Faith began in October 2012, in many places, little has happened. Many Catholics still have not even heard of it. Some dioceses haven’t organized anything. Many parishes haven’t either. It’s been business as usual in many places, like it was in most places in 1967. And unless we start to take the faith more seriously rather than for granted, I’m afraid that the consequences might be more devastating than 46 years ago.
 - In 1967 the main problem was fidelity to the teaching of the Church in controversial areas, both at an intellectual and existential level. The issue of whether the Church teaches authoritatively on particular issues. But the Church was generally accepted. Christians had a strong identity. The Church was seen, above all, as a force for good in history and in the present world. Institutionally the Church was still strong in numbers and in social influence. Priests with alcohol problems and people just going through the motions at Mass, not actively participating, were among the major disciplinary and pastoral problems.
 - Now, the Church has been affected to a great deal by secularism. There’s been the sexual abuse crisis. Mass attendance has plummeted. Now Catholic politicians are no longer even saying they’re personally opposed to what God and the Church he founded rejects, but actively supporting the culture of death and even leading the battle to redefine religion and restrict the religious freedom of the Church. Vocations numbers are down in terms of baptisms, sacramental marriages, holy orders, and religious vows. .
- So as we make this retreat in the middle of the Year of Faith, we have to be conscious of the stakes. I tend to think that if faithful Catholics and Church leaders could have foreseen what would follow the 1967 Year of Faith, they would have lived the year with much greater insistence and fervor. A Year of Faith is always a good thing, particularly with regard to those who really respond to the graces of the year to grow in faith; doubtless 1967’s insistence on faith would have lessened some of the damage of the years that were to come. But it was, in some ways, a missed opportunity because it remained fundamentally a thing for some pious events and the publication of Paul VI’s Credo of the People of God, not something that impacted the lives of Catholics across the globe and increased their faith. We need to do what we can to try to ensure that the same thing doesn’t occur this time around.

- I tend to think that the same Holy Spirit that inspired Paul VI to read the signs of the times in 1967 and declare a Year of Faith has inspired Benedict XVI. Both of them had received the mission — with the personal prayers of the Lord Jesus — to strengthen their brothers and sisters in the faith. We doubtless have some intense crises on the way. And this is a year to get stronger in order to be ready for them.
- We may not be able to influence the way the Church universal marks this year, but we can make a real difference in allowing God to buttress our faith and make us leaven to increase the faith of our homes and parishes, of those ones you will always affectionately call your “classmates” and beyond.
- And so I ask you to live this retreat with faith
 - Put out into the deep. Ask God for the grace and respond with gratitude to what he gives you, including the crosses.
 - Work hard to maintain exterior silence so that you can hear God speaking to you in your interior silence. Faith, as we’ll hear about tomorrow, comes through hearing, but God, as Elijah found out on Mt. Horeb, often speaks in a whisper like a gentle breeze. To hear him, we must learn from Mary, our Mother in Faith, how to listen with our heart, treasuring and giving our flesh to the Word and words God speaks to us. If we can’t keep silence on a retreat, it will be nearly impossible for us to do so in life. And if don’t have interior silence in life, it will be hard to be faithful and fruitful to the end. John Paul II said to Deacons in 1995 in Rome, “To fulfill his mission, the deacon therefore needs a *deep interior life*, sustained by the exercises of piety recommended by the Church.” The silence of this retreat is meant to train you in this essential interior silence.
 - Make not only a good and faithful confession but ask the Holy Spirit for the graces to make the best confession of your life, the most faithful confession you’ve ever made. Examine yourself as to whether you live and act by faith and whether your thoughts, words and actions proclaim the faith of the Church with hope and love. John Paul II said in 1993, that deacons should “purify their souls frequently through the sacrament of Penance, having prepared for it worthily through a daily examination of conscience.” Get a start on that during this retreat.
 - But know that the Lord has been waiting since the foundation of the world to respond to the petition we’ll be making to him throughout this retreat, “Domine, adauge nobis fidem!” “Lord, increase our faith!” Let’s open up our hearts to that long-awaited and much-needed gift!