

NEW YORK ENCOUNTER
“Faith, Soul of Life”
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Presenter: Fr. Peter John Cameron, O.P.

MY MAIN WORK AS A PRIEST is as a teacher and an editor. Priests like me who are not assigned to a parish often help out somewhere on weekends. For the past four years the parish where I have been celebrating Mass each Sunday is St. Rose of Lima Church in Newtown, Connecticut.

I’ve been asked to speak about the relevance of the Year of Faith for the current situation of the Church in America. I would propose to do so from the perspective of the horrific events that took place in Newtown last December 14th.

I. Faith Is Not Optional

In his Apostolic Letter announcing the Year of Faith entitled *Porta Fidei*, our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “Ever since the start of my ministry as Successor of Peter, I have spoken of the need to rediscover the journey of faith.... The Church as a whole...must set out to lead people out of the desert...towards friendship with the Son of God” (2).

On the evening of the massacre, there was a Mass offered at St. Rose of Lima. The church holds maybe 650 people. No question there were close to a thousand people packed into the church and another thousand standing outside. It was clear that not all who came were Catholic—some were not even Christian. But they were there at St. Rose. Why?

They were people in a desert of desolation, and they wanted to be led out of it. As I gazed at their faces, I could tell that they were looking for something. Thousands had come to St. Rose of Lima—and *stayed* even when they couldn’t get inside the church—because they needed to be given something so that they would have the strength to face another day.

Pope Benedict speaks about this phenomenon in *Porta Fidei* where he says:

We must not forget that...very many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world. This search is an authentic ‘preamble’ to the faith, because it guides people onto the path that leads to the mystery of God. Human reason...bears within itself a demand for ‘what is perennially valid and lasting.’ This demand constitutes a permanent summons...to set out to find the One whom we would not be seeking had he not already set out to meet us (10).

Thousands of people came to Mass that night at St. Rose of Lima Church because the One they were seeking had first set out to meet them.

The people came as beggars; they were the poor in spirit of whom Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes.

The Founder of Communion and Liberation, Monsignor Luigi Giussani, Servant of God, once wrote: “The poor in spirit are those who have nothing, except one thing, through which and by which they are made: an endless aspiration...a boundless expectant awaiting.”¹

And Father Julián Carrón, in a talk he gave in August of 2008 commenting on this insight of Monsignor Giussani, said, “The originality of the human being is the expectant awaiting of the infinite: man entirely outstretched, intent on something.... [For someone who experiences this degree of need,] *faith is not optional*; reaching the point of acknowledging [Jesus] is indispensable, because it is there, in the acknowledgment of Christ, where you can find the answer to this endless need, to this expectant awaiting of the infinite.”²

Before the Mass began that Friday evening, the governor of Connecticut, Governor Dannel P. Molloy, addressed the congregation. And in his remarks he said this: “Many of us today and in the coming days will rely on what we have been taught and what we believe, that **there is faith for a reason.**”

Please note: it is not the pope but a governor of one of the United States of America who is telling the world that faith is not optional.

The Sunday after the Sandy Hook School shooting, I was in the sacristy of the church, getting ready for the 7:30 AM Mass. A man walked into the sacristy. I had never seen him at St. Rose before, but something told me he was involved with what had happened. And, sure enough, he introduced himself as Michael Murphy, the husband of Anne Marie Murphy, the special ed. teacher who had been killed. He told me: “Anne Marie was so devoted to her students that the shooter would have needed to go through her to get to them.” And, as the press would later report, Anne Marie Murphy was found with her arms wrapped around her pupil, six-year-old Dylan Hockley.”

But why was Michael Murphy in the sacristy at that very early hour of the morning? “I have four grown children,” he told me, “and they are taking their mother’s death very hard. So could you please say something at Mass that might help them?”

Why did Michael Murphy come in search of a priest, instead of a counselor, or a therapist, or a psychiatrist? Because of an endless aspiration...a boundless expectant awaiting for which only Jesus Christ can suffice.

The following Sunday Michael was at Mass again, and this time he was accompanied by his son Thomas.

So the first duty of the Year of Faith is *to be ready*: ready with a renewed and absolute conviction of the truth that *faith is not optional*. It is what *everybody* needs!

¹ *Faith: The Ultimate Expression of an Affection for Oneself—International Assembly of Responsibles of Communion and Liberation*, La Thuile: Traces Booklets, August, 2008, p. 6

² *ibid.* p. 7.

It is tragic that so often it takes a crisis or a catastrophe like that of Newtown to make people realize that they need the Infinite. But something always happens to stir up in a person the preamble to faith...the need for ultimate meaning and definitive truth...the aching expectant awaiting. And when it does, your presence will convince that person that appealing to faith is not a foolish thing to do—rather, it is the only reasonable thing.

II. Conversion

A second charge of the Year of Faith is “a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord” (PF 6).

Not conversion to a lofty idea, or to an ethical choice, or to a theory or code of conduct, but to a Person.

Monsignor Giussani writes, “Just as our every move starts off not from an analysis of what the eyes see, but from an embrace of what the heart is waiting for, in the same way perfection is not the keeping of rules, but adhesion to a Presence.”³

Repeatedly in his writings Pope Benedict reminds us that the essence of faith is that something meets us which is greater than anything we can think of for ourselves.

He writes, “Faith is the finding of a ‘You’ that upholds me and, amid all the unfulfilled...hope of human encounters, gives me the promise of an indestructible love.... Christian faith lives on the discovery that not only is there such a thing as objective meaning but that this meaning knows me and loves me, that I can entrust myself to it like [a] child [to his mother].”⁴

For this reason, says the pope, “having faith...is a change that involves our life, our whole life: feelings, heart, intelligence, will, bodiliness, emotion, and human relationships.... [Faith] is not an encounter with an idea or with a project of life, but with a living Person who transforms our innermost selves, revealing our true identity as children of God.”⁵

This is why the Holy Father can make the assertion in *Porta Fidei* that “faith becomes a new criterion of understanding and action that changes the whole of man’s life” (PF 6).

An amazing verification of this came in the aftermath of the shooting. A young reporter for the *New Haven Register* named Michael Bellmore wrote an article entitled “Lapsed Catholic has a confession to make.”⁶ The story is about himself. I think his experience is fairly representative of the current situation of the Church in America. The pattern is familiar: raised Catholic, church every Sunday, went to Catholic school. But in high school, Mass attendance became less and

³ *Generating Traces in the History of the World*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010, p. 62.

⁴ *Introduction to Christianity*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, p. 48.

⁵ General Audience, October 17, 2012.

⁶ <http://www.nhregister.com/articles/2012/12/23/opinion/doc50d7d3d777ff7520330562.prt>

less, and was eventually reduced to basically Christmas and Easter. In more recent years he had abandoned even the holidays, leaving him, as he puts it, “agnostic at best.”

But then he was assigned to cover a Saturday evening vigil Mass at St. Rose of Lima the day after the shooting. He writes:

Pulling into the parking lot, I was anxious.... But I was mostly anxious because I hadn't set foot in a Catholic church in ages. When I entered the foyer, I loitered. I was early, so I picked up the bulletin and thumbed through its pages. It was then I noticed a clergyman...in the crying room. I thought he might have been the St. Rose priest, so I introduced myself. It turned out he was a parochial vicar for the church [Fr. Ignacio], and he was in the crying room to hear confessions.... I hadn't confessed my sins since middle school, but when the vicar offered, it felt like the right thing to do.... I won't get into the details of my confession, but I will say that it felt good. It felt good to enter a quiet room with a closed door and talk to someone about the events of the week. The vicar was there to hear my confession, but he also helped put things in perspective for me. It felt good to hear someone say that everything would be OK, and hearing it from a man of the cloth gave the words a certain clarity. I felt welcome. So when I knelt beside the pew and made the sign of the cross, I didn't feel like I was faking it. I was a lapsed Catholic when I entered the church, but when I sang the processional hymn with the rest of the congregation, I guess you could say I became a relapsed Catholic. I think it's true that there's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole. The killings in Newtown shook me, as they have shaken everyone.... When I drive through the town center, I don't know whether to cry from sadness for the victims, or to cry for the hope I see in the defiant signs and banners, the hope in the mountains of flowers and stuffed animals and candles — tokens of love that good people gave Newtown, to say, “We're here for you.” And that's how I felt in church. I felt sadness for those who were lost, and I felt hope too, for the lost and for us in the pews. I felt like St. Rose of Lima Church was there for me and everyone else, and that everyone inside was there for each other. The woman to the right of me in the pew had a beautiful singing voice, and when it was time to offer the sign of peace...it wasn't just her words that said that, it was her warm smile. The penance the vicar gave me after confession was to say a prayer for the families of those killed in Newtown. During Mass, I prayed for them again, in unison with hundreds of people beneath a Crucifix, surrounded by stained glass. It felt right. In all honesty, I don't know how long my status as a relapsed Catholic will last. But I can say that the first thing I did after leaving Mass was to call my mother. I asked her if she wanted to go to church with me on Christmas morning, something we haven't done together in a long time — something I know she's wanted for a long time, too. It felt like the right thing to do.

That is conversion. And it all happened because of the presence of a person—Another Christ.

III. Witness

And a third expressed desire of the Holy Father for the Year of Faith is this: “We make it our prayer that believers' *witness* of life may grow in credibility.... What the world is in particular

need of today is the credible witness of people...capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life” (PF 15).

What makes a witness “credible?” I suppose credibility is something you recognize when you encounter it.

Just days after the shooting, St. Rose parishioners Lynn and Chris McDonnell gave a television interview to Anderson Cooper about their slain, six-year-old daughter Grace. Lynn McDonnell—totally composed, and even radiant—said: “Grace did not have an ounce of hate in her. Hate is not how our family is. We won’t go down that road. We have to live through Grace.”

A great evangelizer of the twentieth century, Madeleine Delbrel, Servant of God, once wrote: “Each time that we are torn apart because we choose to be faithful to God’s faithfulness to us, we become as it were breaches in the world’s resistance.”

A credible witness is someone who is faithful to God’s faithfulness to him or to her...even if it tears the person apart.

Last week, at the one month anniversary of the shooting, St. Rose of Lima sponsored a series of talks for the parents of the children in the parish religious education program. Some of the children were fearful; some were mourning their murdered teachers; some parents were dealing with survivors’ guilt.

One of the mothers who had lost a child—Jen Hubbard, whose red-headed, six-year-old daughter Catherine had been killed in the rampage—decided that she wanted to come in person and speak to the assembled parents.

I asked her before the session how it was ever possible for her to do something most of the world would consider completely impossible to do. In the closing lines of *Porta Fidei*, Pope Benedict says, “We believe with firm certitude that the Lord Jesus has conquered evil and death. With this sure confidence we entrust ourselves to him: he, present in our midst, overcomes the power of the evil one.” And in answer to my question, Jennie said: “There is a Presence that is so much better than us, and we have to acknowledge it.”

So she stood in the pulpit of St. Rose of Lima and said to the parents:

When I could not find [Catherine], I felt a calm fill my heart and I knew in that moment she was with God.... Each time I feel that my tears will not stop, I am pulled back to a place of peace and find comfort that Catherine was called to a job much bigger than I can even fathom. I know that God has a specific purpose for us and while I may not understand right now how I will muster the strength to fulfill His purpose, I must remain centered on His face. He will provide what I need to move forward. He will provide the soft nudges to help me feel confident that I am doing what He intended.... We are bound to this place and must bring our children’s understanding of faith to a new level.... I pray that we do not go back to normal. I pray that we find a new normal that is restored in faith.... I pray that you know that you are exactly where you need to be.... I pray that we

find comfort and solace knowing that God loves each one of us and will wrap each one of us in his arms when the days become too much. I pray that the world returns to their faith.

And thanks to the awesome witness of Jen, the other mothers in the parish who had lost children in the killing *also* volunteered to attend the others sessions and give a personal witness to the parents.

Conclusion

At the end of the religious ed. session last Monday, a young mother walked up to me holding the hand of her blond-haired son, a first-grader. His name was John; he was six-years-old; he was wearing a maroon Fordham University hooded sweatshirt. And he was perfectly adorable.

His mom said John was wondering if I would be willing to bless for him his medal of Saint Michael the Archangel. I told him of course I would. And as John reached into his hoodie to pull out the religious medal he was wearing on a chain around his neck, his mother—in a low voice—confided to me that John had been in Sandy Hook School that day; that he had witnessed everything that happened. And that, only because the shooter stopped to reload, had John been able to run out of the school.

So now John had a lot of fear. But his faith told him that fear is only a desert, and he had a heavenly friend to lead him out of that desert—a friend Who Is Like God—and all he needed to do was trust, and believe in him and in God's indestructible love.

I blessed John's medal and I blessed him. And—thank God!—with *a smile*, off walked that seraphic little boy into a brand new year, the Year of Faith.

Let's go with him. Thank you.