

Opening for the Year of Faith
Evening Prayer and Eucharistic Adoration
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament
Tuesday, October 16, 2012

(Reading: Hebrews 11:1-12; 2:1-2)

Did you hear about the man who jumped out of a capsule 24 miles above the earth, broke the sound barrier, and safely parachuted to the ground in New Mexico? It happened just a couple of days ago.

Felix Baumgartner was interviewed following that historic event. He said that just before he jumped out of the capsule, he wasn't thinking about breaking any records or about gaining scientific data that could be very helpful for future space exploration.

Baumgartner said that at that moment he felt rather humble and the only thing he thought about was coming back alive. But as he began his freefall, the worse thing that could go wrong actually started to occur. He began spinning wildly out of control.

While he was spinning out of control, Felix Baumgartner said it was like hell and that he did not know if he would get out of that spin or not. He said it was terrifying.

During this amazing experience, Felix Baumgartner was being helped on the ground by an 84 year old man, Joseph Kittinger, who first tried to break the sound barrier with a similar jump from 19 an ½ miles above the earth. That was in 1960.

On the way up to his final height of 24 miles, Baumgartner received a message via radio from Kittinger who told him that his guardian angel will take care of him.

When Baumgartner landed on the ground, he told news reporters that "Sometimes we have to get really high to see how small we are."

Hearing about this extraordinary jump from 24 miles above the earth made me think of the expression, “a leap of faith.” Actually, a number of news stories used that expression in the reports on Felix Baumgartner’s record-setting experience.

The expression, “leap of faith,” is most commonly used to describe an act of believing in or accepting something that is intangible, unprovable, or without empirical evidence. It involves taking a risk, and sometimes there is a real danger associated with it; like jumping out of capsule 24 miles above the earth with just a parachute.

“Leap of faith” may be used to describe doing something that may not be dangerous, but there is a risk involved because the outcome is not certain. For example, you drive to Pittsburgh on a Sunday because you heard on the radio that 50 seats are still available for the Steelers game, but there is no guarantee that any tickets will be available by the time you arrive at the stadium.

Did you notice that without ever mentioning God, and without ever using the word faith, Felix Baumgartner and his mentor Joseph Kittinger used a lot of “faith” language as they talked about Baumgartner’s extraordinary experience?

Baumgartner describes feeling humble as he looked toward outer space above and the earth below. And he described himself as being very small in relation to what he saw.

As he was about to leap from the capsule 24 miles above the earth, Baumgartner said he was thinking about only one thing; coming back alive.

Baumgartner describes the experience of spinning out of control as feeling like hell, and it was terrifying. And his mentor Joseph Kittinger told Baumgartner that his guardian angel would take care of him.

Our faith, our Catholic faith, which has been handed down to us from the apostles through the Church, is all about things like being humble and being small before God who created the earth and the whole universe and who is much greater than all that he created.

Our faith, our Catholic faith, is all about things like the terror of a place like hell, where Jesus descended after his death on the cross.

Our faith, our Catholic faith, is all about going through the terror of hell, and coming back alive; as Jesus did when he rose on the third day.

Our faith, our Catholic faith, is all about angels who guard, and protect, and guide us.

Our faith, our Catholic faith, is all about these things and so much more. This Year of Faith that we have just begun is all about discovering and rediscovering the height, the breadth, and the depth of that faith.

Before I go further with that, you might be thinking, I have faith and I consider my faith strong and secure. I truly believe in God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So what's this all about?

In his Apostolic Letter in which Pope Benedict XVI announced the Year of Faith, our Holy Father explains that not everyone has that same conviction. He says, "We want this Year of Faith to arouse in every believer the aspiration to profess with confidence the faith in its fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and with hope."

Our Holy Father also says the Year of Faith is a time for all believers to give witness to their faith with greater credibility.

And, Pope Benedict XIV says that this Year of Faith is a time for us to rediscover the content of the faith that is professed, celebrated, and prayed.

Finally, Our Holy Father says that each one of us needs to reflect on our personal act of faith.

It's not enough for us to stand with our brothers and sisters and say the words, "I believe in one God..." What we know about our faith, what we say about our faith, what we celebrate about our faith, and what we pray about our faith must become our personal conviction.

But that conviction is not simply made alone, each one of us makes it in communion with the whole Church.

During the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI recommends that we become acquainted or reacquainted with the constant teachings of the Church as it was expressed in the Second Vatican Council. As a resource, the Holy Father recommends that we make use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which is one of the fruits of that historic council.

In the *Catechism*, faith is described as a dialogue which begins with God placing a disquiet in the human heart. This disquiet is the basic human need for meaning. God moves us and invites us to ask questions in our search for meaning.

This disquiet is evident in the thoughts and feelings of Felix Baumgartner during his historic jump from 24 miles above the earth. He felt humble; he experienced a kind of hell and the terror that goes with it; he thought about whether he would be alive when his experience was completed. These thoughts and feelings had to do with things of important meaning; especially one of the ultimate issues for all of us: life and death.

The search for meaning for every person takes us on a journey; a journey of faith through which we are invited and encouraged to engage in a dialogue with God who is the only One who can answer the ultimate questions.

To help us on that journey during this Year of Faith, we are providing weekly reflections in our diocese on the content of our Catholic faith, especially in regard to the sacraments. Why did we choose that approach? As the Holy Father mentioned this is a time for a renewal of the faith that is professed, celebrated, and prayed.

It would be an enormous task to cover everything in the documents of the Second Vatican Council or in the *Catechism*, for example. But by paying more careful attention to the sacraments, we have a wonderful opportunity to review what it is we profess about the sacraments. And this is reinforced as we celebrate the sacraments and as we come together in prayer.

That is what inspired us to celebrate this Evening Prayer of the Church in the presence of the sacred mystery of Christ's real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Right here and now we have the opportunity to do what we can do throughout this entire Year of Faith. What do I mean?

Obviously, we are doing what the Holy Father urges to do by gathering in prayer. In this prayer we are celebrating our faith in the Word of God, as we prayed together in the psalms and as we heard in the reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, which reminds us so clearly and directly that it is by faith that we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God.

Imagine that! It is by faith that we understand the universe that Felix Baumgartner experienced 24 miles above the earth just a couple of days ago.

It is by faith that we discover and rediscover that we are part of that universe created by God, just as Felix Baumgartner observed how he immediately recognized how small and vulnerable he is as a part of that universe.

It is by faith that we come to appreciate what it means to be humble before the One who made the universe, just as Baumgartner experienced a sense of humility in during his recent adventure.

It is by faith that we come to recognize that even when we are small and vulnerable before the awesome universe in which we live, we are guarded and cared for by God's holy angels, just as Joseph Kittinger reassured his friend who was out there on the edge of space.

It is by faith that we recall the meaning of the sacred mystery of the Holy Eucharist through which we adore God who is present to us not in a completely invisible way, but through sacramental signs; bread and wine which have become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

It is by faith that we understand and confront sin and evil and terror in our world and in our own lives, not by spinning out of control as Felix Baumgartner did as he began to fall to the earth, but by placing our faith in Christ Jesus who descended into hell and confronted the terror of sin and evil and rose from the dead so that we can live within a new horizon that is farther than all the stars and closer than the heart beating inside us. Our unlimited horizon is the horizon of hope as it says in the Letter to the Hebrews.

All of this is not some meaningless or foolish leap of faith in the sense that we believe in and accept something that is intangible, unprovable. No! Look; here on this altar. As the psalm reminds us, we can taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Or as the great Eucharistic hymn reminds us, what our senses ever fail to understand, we can grasp through faith.

I am grateful for our Holy Father's vision to have this Year of Faith. We need it in our world for two important reasons.

We need it for ourselves who are challenged everyday by new questions and issues and ideas that run contrary to the truth that has been revealed to us in Christ.

We also need this time for the sake of others who do not believe or whose faith has been so weakened that they don't know what to do, or where to go to find the truth; the answer to their questions; the answer to the disquiet in their minds and hearts.

Please, take part in this Year of Faith. Please read and participate in the events that we will observe during this special time. And please, share the grace that you receive from this journey with others.

If the whole world can get so excited about one man jumping out of a capsule 24 miles above the earth, don't you think it is time for us, for all of us, to get the world excited once again about the one who did not fall, but who rose from the dead so that we don't ever have to worry about being alive?