



## HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE

*Séamus Cunningham*  
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### Year of Faith – Opening Mass Homily

When Pope Benedict announced the year of Faith he said, “The renewal of the Church is achieved through the witness offered through the lives of believers.”

Pope Paul VI also said, “Most people will listen to witnesses before they listen to teachers and if they listen to teachers they do so because they are witnesses.

This is an opportunity for us to thank God for the faith we have received and to grow stronger in it.

It also calls us to look again at our faith – not just in the sense of exploring the doctrines of the Church (important though that is) but above all as an opportunity to develop and deepen our relationship with Christ.

When I was growing up, priests and religious flocked to different parts of the world to bring God’s love to the people in the foreign missions, but now the emphasis has changed thanks to the Second Vatican Council. We are all in this together – clergy and laity alike.

One reason for the Year of Faith is to commemorate this Council which highlighted in a new way the importance of the lay person in the Church. The Church recognised that God is calling each person – young or old, married or single to bring the good news of his love and forgiveness to everyone in their

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lives. God is calling you to bring that good news to your family, the people at work, the people in the queue in the supermarket and the banks, the people you meet in the streets, on the bus, on the plane, on the football field, the people you meet coming to and going away from Mass.

This means that lay people have a special vocation – they are now the ones mainly responsible for evangelising – that is to introduce people to the love and goodness of God who is at work in their lives and ours – to touch the world with our lives and transform it. At times, we may feel very inadequate – that our knowledge of scripture and theology is poor. But it is the love of God and of neighbour rather than academic degrees which touches the lives and hearts of people. We are called without exception to take seriously the great responsibility of making Christ known in the world.

Each and every one of us is unique – each of us is essential to do God's work among his people. Our starting point, though, must be to become aware of God's love, to get to know him and to experience the power of his love in our own lives.

Many events are planned this year to celebrate and strengthen our faith and I encourage/ urge you to look at posters in your churches and on the website to find out more. But none of these will be effective if you do not also take time to deepen your personal relationship with Jesus. This relationship is what inspired



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the Northern Saints – like Aidan, Cuthbert, Hilda, Bede, John Boste and many others. During this year, we will recall the faith they brought to us – and reflect on how we are continuing to live that in the twenty-first century. Just as they walked this land, we too will have opportunities to make local pilgrimages to the places connected with some of our well-beloved saints.

Like those saints, we are called to make our faith visible – to share it with others – and to be credible witnesses. From early in the life of the Church, Christians have used the cross as a symbol of their identity. It is a symbol that speaks of the cost – but also the promise of being a follower of Christ. Many people still wear a cross but, as part of the Year of Faith, I am encouraging you to wear a lapel cross so that, as a diocese, we are giving common witness to our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. I ask you to take these crosses back to your parishes and encourage people to wear them. Please don't leave them lying around the back of church.

Finally, can I commend that we place this Year of Faith under the patronage of Mary, one of the patrons of our Diocese. She believed that the Word would become flesh in her and lived that faith with all her mind, heart, soul and strength.



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Let us make this Year of Faith an opportunity to thank God for his gift of faith to us, to rejoice and to accept the challenge of living it out in our present circumstances.

And, with St Paul, I pray that, *"Out of His infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen"* (Eph. 3:16-21).