

THE YEAR OF FAITH

On holiday last year in Scotland, I saw an amazing sight: thousands of wild salmon in a river, swimming upstream, racing ahead, even jumping in the air to get past the rocks and boulders. Salmon, I am told, lay their eggs upstream, and once hatched, the new salmon swim down to the sea on a huge journey to their feeding-grounds in Greenland. They then have two months to get back to the river they were born in, to lay their own eggs and after to die. How on earth they know their home-river is a mystery, but that's why you can see the amazing sight of fish swimming upstream, jumping in the air, racing against the tide. It made me think of two things. That first, WE are a bit like salmon in that deep down in every human heart is a spiritual homing-device. We are made for God and for heaven. Our home is in him, and our hearts are restless until we find him. But secondly, to do this in today's busy, secular culture, to find God, very much means swimming upstream against the current. Of course, in a river the only things that float downstream are dead things: branches, flotsam, jetsam. This is why as Catholics we have to swim against the tide. We have to be counter-cultural people. To find God, to develop a relationship with him, to reach heaven our true home, we have to swim upstream, to stand out, to make space, time and effort.

We begin today the Year of Faith and I am very excited that this Year coincides with my arrival as your new Bishop. For I see this Year as an opportunity for us all to reach-in and to reach-out. Reaching in and reaching out go naturally together, like a beating heart or breathing. In other words, what the Holy Father is asking us to do, is to pray, and work for a deeper faith. This means first reaching in to the sources of faith, to the Gospels, the Creed, the Catechism, to a greater awareness of God's presence, and like Peter in the Gospel, to draw closer to the Heart of Jesus. This reaching in will lead, we pray, to a renewal of our faith, to a deeper knowledge and understanding of its meaning for us, and to a more effective practice of faith, especially in our care of the needy. But reaching in will also spur us to reach out, to reach out in love to others, to reach out with the Gospel of Life to those who do not know it, and especially to those who DO know it but don't practice it. The Year of Faith is not a cynical exercise, as some people think: it's not about filling up the pews or regaining lost ground. No, it's a positive exercise. For what the Catholic Church is offering the world is exactly what deep down, however agnostic, it yearns for: the Truth, salvation, eternal life and happiness. This can be found in God alone.

IF ANYONE WANTS TO BE A FOLLOWER OF MINE, LET HIM RENOUNCE HIMSELF, TAKE UP HIS CROSS EVERY DAY AND FOLLOW ME. In today's secular culture, to be a disciple is not easy. There are many tempting options and many things competing for our attention. To be a disciple requires effort. Like those salmon swimming upstream, we will find ourselves to be counter-cultural, and this will cost us dear. We will have to suffer. Yet we know that Christ is the Way. We know from the spiritual homing-device in our heart that Christ is the Truth. We know that Christ is our Life and that we must do all we can to find him, to sit at his feet, to imbibe his Word, and to draw Love from his Heart. For it is in Him alone that we find the true, genuine, lasting human happiness and fulfilment for which we long.