

Novo Millennio Ineunte: Guidance for the New Millennium

Ralph Martin

The Jubilee year was a very important event in the life of the church. Pope John Paul II called it the greatest Jubilee the church has ever celebrated. He pointed out that he had been anticipating the Jubilee of the Year 2000 ever since the very first encyclical letter of his papacy more than 21 years ago. He spoke of the Jubilee in very significant terms as “a meeting with the Spirit,” as the occasion for revealing “that new springtime of Christian life,” which he believes God is preparing for the church and the world.

Now that the Jubilee year is over how does the Pope assess its fruits and significance? In a series of end of the year addresses and in an important new document (*Novo millennio ineunte*, “At the beginning of the new millennium”) published at the close of the Great Jubilee the Pope makes some very significant observations.

He wants to reflect on the experience of the Jubilee year in order to “decipher” “what the Spirit has been saying to the Church (cf. Rv 2:7, 11, 17, etc.) during this most intense year.” (2)¹

He writes in order to help us all reflect on what the Spirit has been saying not only in this special year of grace, but “indeed in the longer span of time from the Second Vatican Council to the Great Jubilee.” (3) The Pope sees the Jubilee year as the culmination of a lengthy providential preparation of the church for the new millennium that began forty years ago with the Second Vatican Council.

General Assessment

Knowing that it is impossible to fathom the vast work of grace in people’s hearts around the world, the Pope nevertheless affirms that “‘a river of living water’...has been poured out on the Church” during the Jubilee year.

From what he himself observed he was encouraged by the general spirit of devotion that characterized the very large crowds- an estimated 25 million - that came on pilgrimage to Rome during the Jubilee year. The Pope speaks movingly of looking out his window to see the crowds moving towards St. Peter’s, ready to pass through the Holy Door.

“As if following in the footsteps of the Saints, countless sons and daughters of the Church have come in successive waves to Rome, to the Tombs of the Apostles, wanting to profess their faith, confess their sins and receive the mercy that saves. I have been impressed this year by the crowds of people which have filled St. Peter’s Square at the many celebrations. I have often stopped to look at the long queues of pilgrims waiting patiently to go through the Holy Door. In each of them I tried to imagine the story of a life, made up of joys, worries, sufferings; the story of someone whom Christ had met and who, in dialogue with him, was setting out again on a journey of hope.” (8)

Key Events

¹ All references are to *Novo millennio ineunte* unless otherwise noted.

There are certain events of the Jubilee year that the Pope singles out for special mention. Among them is the special focus on repentance that culminated in the solemn request for pardon on March 12, 2000.

“To purify our vision for the contemplation of the mystery, this Jubilee Year has been strongly marked by the *request for forgiveness*...How could we forget *the moving Liturgy of 12 March 2000* in St. Peter’s Basilica, at which, looking upon our Crucified Lord, I asked forgiveness in the name of the Church for the sins of all her children” This ‘purification of memory’ has strengthened our steps for the journey towards the future and has made us more humble and vigilant in our acceptance of the Gospel.” (6)

The Pope also mentions, among other events, the World Youth Day, which 2 million young people from all over the world attended, and his pilgrimage to the Holy Land as special high points, as well as the unprecedented opening of the Holy Door of St. Paul’s Basilica by an ecumenical delegation for the first time in history. He also expresses joy at the fact that billions of dollars in international debt to third-world countries was forgiven during the Jubilee year.

The Encounter With Christ

The Pope makes clear though that what gave significance to all the events of the Jubilee year and what is important now as we enter into the new millennium is the encounter with the person of Christ.

“These are only some of the elements of the Jubilee celebration. It has left us with many memories. But if we ask what is the core of the great legacy it leaves us, I would not hesitate to describe it as the *contemplation of the face of Christ*...” (15)

And this is the theme that the Pope develops most fully as he provides some guidance for the Church to consider as on every level it begins the task of “drawing up an effective post-Jubilee pastoral plan. It is important however that what we propose, with the help of God, should be profoundly rooted in contemplation and prayer...the mystery of Christ, the absolute foundation of all our pastoral activity.” (15)

Starting Afresh from Christ

As the Pope shares his vision of the foundations of our post-Jubilee activity he brings out clearly how foundational, how providential, the Second Vatican Council was in preparing the Church for the third millennium.

“What a treasure there is, dear brothers and sisters, in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council!...With the passing of the years, *the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*...Now that the Jubilee has ended, I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.” (57)

The Pope draws our attention to how the Council powerfully communicated the biblical call to holiness for all Christians.

“First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*... Once the Jubilee is over, we resume our normal path, but knowing that stressing holiness remains more than ever an urgent pastoral task.” (30)

John Paul II points out that “The rediscovery (at the Second Vatican Council) of the Church as ‘mystery,’ or as a people gathered together by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was bound to bring with it a rediscovery of the Church’s ‘holiness’, understood in the basic sense of belonging to him who is in essence the Holy One, the ‘thrice Holy (cf. Is 6:3). To profess the Church as holy means to point to her as *the Bride of Christ*, for whom he gave himself precisely in order to make her holy (cf. Eph 5:25-26). This as it were objective gift of holiness is offered to all the baptized.” 30

The Pope then draws our attention to one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Church, and one of the most important chapters which deals with the universal call to holiness.

“But the gift (of holiness in baptism) becomes a task, which must shape the whole of Christian life: ‘This is the will of God, your sanctification’ (1Thes 4:3). It is a duty which concerns not only certain Christians: ‘All the Christian faithful, of whatever state or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity.’ (*Constitution on the Church*, 40)” (30)

The pope insists that such a call to holiness isn’t an optional extra for some, but is intrinsic to Christian life. “To ask catechumens: ‘Do you wish to receive Baptism?’ means at the same time to ask them: ‘Do you wish to become holy’” It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mt 5:48)

As the Council itself explained, this ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few ‘uncommon’ heroes’ of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual. I thank the Lord that in these years he has enabled me to beatify and canonize a large number of Christians, and among them many lay people who attained holiness in the most ordinary circumstances of life. The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction.” (31)

Training in Holiness: the Importance of Prayer

The Pope points out that one of the “signs of the times” is that in the midst of secularism there is a hunger for spirituality that is sometimes met by turning to non-Christian religions. In this regard he points out how important it is in these circumstances that those of us who believe in Christ “show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead.” (32) He draws our attention to the great mystical tradition of the Church.

“The great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West has much to say in this regard. It shows how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit’s touch, resting filially within the Father’s heart. This is the lived experience of Christ’s promise: ‘He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and

manifest myself to him' (Jn 14:21). It is a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications (the 'dark night'). But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by the mystics as 'nuptial union'. How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila?" (32)

The Pope also mentions Therese of Lisieux and Catherine of Siena in this new document. (On a personal note, I was thrilled to see this, as these are the four saints that I have taught the last two summers at the Franciscan University of Steubenville in the graduate theology program, and the saints that I am trying to share with all of you through the audio tapes of retreats I am doing on their teachings. The retreat on the teachings of Teresa of Avila is currently available and a new retreat based on the teachings of Catherine of Siena will be ready in another month or two)

This important new document emphasizes that we can't take prayer for granted, that the Church needs to provide a "training in holiness," and that "our Christian communities must become *genuine 'schools' of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly 'falls in love'." (32)

Even as he directs our attention to the importance of a deep life of prayer and recommends to us the Doctors of the mystical tradition, in keeping with the truths of the universal call to holiness, he reminds us that "it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life."

It is important to note the great significance of what the Pope is saying here. He is saying, in effect, that the normal Christian life is intended to be a life of real holiness and genuine prayer. He relates the timeliness of this truth to the changing situation of the Christian people that in many places around the world are again becoming an ill-tolerated minority.

"We are entering a millennium which already shows signs of being marked by a profound interweaving of cultures and religions, even in countries which have been Christian for many centuries. In many regions Christians are, or are becoming, a 'little flock' (Lk 12:32)." (36)

The Pope speaks of the need not just in religious communities but in ordinary parishes for there to be "an all-pervading climate of prayer," asking for consideration of the possibility of daily Eucharist and even a recitation of Lauds and Vespers.

He, of course, emphasizes the important of the Sunday Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation as essential for the life of holiness and prayer, and for maintaining Christian identity amidst the collapse of Christian culture.

The Primacy of Christ, of Prayer, of Holiness

In our post-Jubilee life and plans the Pope is urging us to give primacy to Christ, to prayer and to holiness.

"If in the planning that awaits us we commit ourselves more confidently to a pastoral activity that gives personal and communal prayer its proper place, we shall be

observing an essential principle of the Christian view of life: *the primacy of grace*...it is fatal to forget that 'without Christ we can do nothing' (Jn 15:5)

It is prayer that roots us in this truth. It constantly reminds us of the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness." (38)

The Pope goes on to point out that this primacy of holiness and prayer "is inconceivable without a renewed *listening to the word of God*." (39)

Holiness of course leads to love and the Pope points out the various ways in which love needs to be expressed: in our relationships with one another in the Church, in the diversity of charisms and vocations, in works of charity, in our attitudes towards our fellow Christians from whom we are presently separated, in our respectful dialogue with members of other religions, in martyrdom which is not a memory of the distant past but a present possibility. Most especially the Pope points out the great call we have received and which needs to be activated in the new millennium to carry out a *new evangelization*.

A New Evangelization in a New Millennium

"To nourish ourselves with the word in order to be 'servants of the Word' in the work of evangelization: this is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium. Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a 'Christian society' which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone. Today we must courageously face a situation which is becoming increasingly diversified and demanding, in the context of 'globalization' and of the consequent new and uncertain mingling of peoples and cultures. Over the years, I have often repeated the summons to the *new evangelization*. I do so again now, especially in order to insist that we must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel"(1 Cor 9:16)

This passion will not fail to stir in the Church a new sense of mission, which cannot be left to a group of 'specialists' but must involve the responsibility of all the members of the People of God. Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves, they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as *the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups*." (40)

"The missionary mandate accompanies us into the Third Millennium and urges us to share the enthusiasm of the very first Christians: we can count on the power of the same Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost and who impels us still today to start out anew, sustained by the hope 'which does not disappoint' " (Rom 5:5) (58)

Put Out into the Deep!

If 'Open wide the doors to Christ' has been a key saying of the Pope for many years, he has added another one to begin the new millennium: 'Put out into the deep!'

"As a new stage of the Church's journey begins, our hearts ring out with the words of Jesus when one day, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, he invited

the Apostle to 'put out into the deep' for a catch: '*Duc in altum.*' '*When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish*' (Lk 5:6).

Duc in altum! These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13:8)" (1)

"The symbol of the Holy Door now closes behind us, but only in order to leave more fully open the living door which is Christ...The Risen Jesus accompanies us on our way and enables us to recognize him, as the disciples of Emmaus did, 'in the breaking of the bread' (Lk 24:35). May he find us watchful, ready to recognize his face and run to our brothers and sisters with the good news: 'We have seen the Lord!' (Jn 20:25). (59)