

# THE HOLY YEAR AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM

October 26th, 1999 - Letter - Rome

Dear Fellow Oblates and Lay Associates,

It only happens every thousand years! Millennium clocks around the world are already ticking down to zero time, midnight, December 31, 1999, the end of one millennium and the start of another. Celebrations will break out around the world.

What might be our attitude, as Oblates, toward all of this? Should we let the millennium year be just another year? Business as usual? Allow us to share some reflections.

We begin by acknowledging that there is no Christian doctrine of millenniums. The turn of a century, in the end, means nothing special in terms of God's revelation. For a Christian, there is no magic in numbers. In that sense, January 1, 2000, will indeed be just another day. Don't expect fire from heaven on that day, or destroying angels, signs in the moon or the sun, or beams of light from the other world. The Lord could of course come at any time, but most probably January 1, 2000, will dawn and end like every other day. You will still have to do your ministry, take care of your domestic duties, brush your teeth, and have business as usual the day after.

On the other hand, while there is no magic in numbers, an anniversary of this magnitude - Jesus' two thousandth birthday, the two thousandth anniversary of the event by which we measure time on this planet - should not be ignored either. To let this event slide by without proper celebration would constitute a virtual fault against Christianity. (cf. TMA 16) 1 To celebrate the millennium is to celebrate a birthday, except that in this case it is a very big birthday indeed. Moreover, as with all birthdays, while there is nothing magical about celebrating it on the particular day upon which you were born - you can celebrate it anytime or not celebrate it at all - highlighting the actual day heightens its meaning and fires the imagination, thereby offering a rich opportunity for remembrance, for grounding yourself, for a grace-filled time, *kairos* in the biblical sense.

That is essentially what the year 2000 and the celebrations surrounding it are meant to be, a year of *kairos*, a special time of grace. Biblically we call this a Jubilee, a year of Sabbath. What precisely is this? A Jubilee has to do with the biblical understanding of time. The bible tells us that God created the world in six days and then rested on the Sabbath from all the work of creation. That original seventh day was the first Jubilee, the first sabbatical, and it was God who celebrated it. According to the Word of God, this time of rest does not apply only to the week; all our time is meant to have a certain rhythm which works this way: You work for six days, then have a one-day sabbatical; you work for six-years, then have a one-year sabbatical; you work for a lifetime, then have an eternity of sabbatical.

To celebrate a Jubilee therefore is to be on sabbatical in the biblical sense. We already have a miniature experience of this since we have one day of Jubilee every week, Sunday. But we are also meant to have the occasional whole year of Sundays. That is what a Jubilee year is meant to be, a year of sabbatical, a year of Sundays. Accordingly what we are invited to do for the Jubilee year, 2000, is to "go on sabbatical" for a whole year, not necessarily as this is understood in the world, but as it is defined in ure, namely, as having a year of "un-ordinary time," time set aside from normal activities to forgive debts, reconcile with enemies, give away surplus goods, focus on things beyond work and making a living, and to rest and celebrate in God. "The Holy Year must therefore be one

unceasing hymn of praise to the Trinity" (IM 8)2. That is the agenda for the Jubilee year, the agenda for a true sabbatical. It is a time to practice for the life of heaven since heaven is reconciliation and resting in God.

As we know, His Holiness, Pope John-Paul II has already led us through a long advent preparation for this jubilee. During each of the past three years we have focused on one of the divine persons within the Trinity (cf. TMA 39-53). The Pope has also published another letter, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, offering a number of suggestions regarding what and how we might celebrate, faith-wise, during this next year. Our own General Chapter of 1998 said: "the Jubilee year is the proclamation of a year of favor from the Lord (Luke 4, 19). As Oblates, we want to appropriate as fully as we can this special grace, namely, this opportunity for conversion, for penance, for universal reconciliation, for a deeper living of justice and peace" (EPM 40).

We, at the General House, have committed ourselves to a project within which we will invite youth to stay at the General House while on pilgrimage in Rome. We are also exploring other things, both collectively and individually, vis-a-vis how we might help make this year a genuine time of jubilee.

This letter is an invitation to us all, as communities and as individuals, to commit ourselves to doing something very concrete in terms of marking and celebrating this special year. What might we do practically? The Pope's letter on the Jubilee, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, offers a number of rich suggestions. Given the biblical theology of Jubilee, the Holy Father singles out the following areas for special prayer and for possible communal projects:

- Centrality of Christ and Baptism (cf. TMA 41)
- Special prayer services that celebrate Trinitarian life (cf. TMA 39, 55)
- Reconciliation (cf. TMA 14, 21, 32) - Purification of memories (cf. TMA 34)
- Indulgences (cf. TMA 14)
- Greater emphasis on the Church's preferential option for the poor (TMA 51)
- Special charity towards poor, forgiving debts, restoring equality (cf. TMA 13)
- Ecumenism (cf. TMA 16, 34) and interreligious dialogue (TMA 53)
- Affirmation of devotion to Mary ( cf. TMA 26, 43, 48, 54, 59)
- Memory of our martyrs in the faith (cf. TMA 37)
- Affirmation of the family (cf. TMA 28)
- Affirmation of young people (cf. TMA 58)
- Pilgrimages to Shrines (cf. TMA 24)

By way of suggestion, perhaps we might look at doing a very concrete project within one or several of these areas:

- Having special services of reconciliation
- Having a dinner with the poor
- Giving away some material goods directly to the poor, or perhaps ad intra within the Oblate congregation.
- Having special ecumenical projects, or an interreligious dialogue
- Committing ourselves to a simpler lifestyle
- Giving a missionary or two from our Province or Region to work ("sans frontières") within the Congregation.
- Organizing pilgrimages, going on a pilgrimage, gaining an indulgence
- Having a special "healing" service to admit to our "dark past" (e.g., the Pope's apology regarding

Galileo)

- Having a special service for or giving special gifts to the people whom we employ for domestic services
- Holding special services for (Oblate) "martyrs" of faith.

Perhaps many of us are already involved in a number of Millennium projects within your local church communities and neither need, nor want, further suggestions. We commend you for that. This Jubilee is, after all, a feast for the whole church, not something specifically Oblate. Could we, nonetheless, as Oblates, in community, mark this Jubilee in a special way on one particular day - perhaps the Founder's feast day, - so we could be united in one heart on that day? St. Eugene may open us up to some special grace for our Oblate family, inspiring in us the same attitude of humility he expressed in his Roman Diary during the Jubilee of 1825: "I eagerly seized the opportunity to gain the Jubilee once more... It is not possible to be too anxious to gain spiritual riches, especially when one is as poor as I am in this respect" (December 22, 1825, *Écrits oblats* 17).

A year of Sabbaths! The Holy Doors open! A time for special grace! Jesus' two thousandth birthday! Together with the whole Church, let us celebrate in a way befitting such an event, in a spirit of reconciliation and joy. In concluding this letter, the members of the General Council and myself want to send you our best wishes for Christmas, the first feast day of the Holy Year. To express those wishes we use the words of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II: may Mary, "the unassuming young woman of Nazareth, who 2,000 years ago offered to the world the incarnate Word, lead the men and women of the new millennium toward the one who is the true light that enlightens everyone" (Jn. 1:9) (TMA 59).