

## Jubilee Spirituality

Near the end of December of this year, Pope John Paul will go to the entrance of St. Peter's basilica and strike the "holy door" with a small silver hammer. This will signal the official opening of Jubilee 2000, the holy year commemorating the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus. This jubilee, marking the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, lasts the whole of 2000, until 2001 when the Third Millennium begins. In the pope's mind, this is "the Great Jubilee" (TMA 16),<sup>1</sup> "an extraordinarily great jubilee" (TMA 15), the highlight of his whole pontificate. He hopes the year will be a unique moment of grace for the church, a "new springtime" (TMA 18), a "new Pentecost." Why is John Paul giving such importance to Jubilee 2000?

The transition between the two millennia is perceived as a time of immense energy. The tabloids see it as "apocalypse," and they foment "millennium fever" by dire predictions of the end of the world, the coming of the anti-Christ, Armageddon, the Rapture, and alien abductions. The pope eschews any kind of millenarianism (TMA 23). For him the jubilee year is indeed the celebration of the final age because Jesus Christ is the final age. The jubilee looks back in joyful thanksgiving for what God has done through Christ in the church and in the world. At the same time, the jubilee fosters repentance for mistakes, both personal and societal, and calls for deeper conversion and new beginnings in living out the gospel.

### Biblical Origins of Jubilee

What is the origin of the jubilee year? The concept comes from ancient Israel, from the time of the Exile of the people of Judah in Babylon in the 6th century before Christ (587 B.C.E.). The situation in the Exile was disastrous. The chosen people, uprooted and

deprived of their freedom and culture, languished in a foreign land. God seemed to have abandoned them. Instead of losing hope and despairing, the leaders dreamed of restoration and better times ahead. They planned for the future by perfecting the Torah, the law of Israel, and by preparing a new code to guide the people when they returned to Jerusalem.

The point of departure in their thinking was "Sabbath" and the holiness associated with it. This was God's day, God's time, in the same way as Sunday is "the Lord's day." Sabbath was the time to remember and celebrate God's place in the universe, a recognition that would spill over into the mundane affairs during the rest of the week. Sabbath was time out and time for regrouping.

As part of their plans for the restoration of Israel, the religious leaders expanded the times of Sabbath. They would set aside a whole year, a "sabbatical year" that was to take place every seven years, and "jubilee years" that were to take place after seven seven-year cycles or the fiftieth year (Lv 25:2-12). These special years were extensions of the Sabbath day, like year-long retreats, when people concentrated on the things of God and the implications of being God's people on this earth.

These farming people were to stop planting and harvesting, to let their land lie fallow in order to give full attention to God. They were to reach out to their neighbors by forgiving debts and returning alienated property to the original owners, by liberating people from imprisonment and slavery, and by having a great celebration of rejoicing and thanksgiving. All this is described in Leviticus 25. These themes are picked up in later biblical books, notably in the passage from Third Isaiah, which Jesus quoted in Luke 4.

## Understanding Jubilee

Sabbath is the key to understanding jubilee.<sup>2</sup> Jubilee and Sabbath connote the overarching reality of God in all creation. They affirm God's moment in time by discouraging secularistic thinking and promoting a divine perspective on all of life. (This vantage point suggests much of the agenda of the jubilee year.) The very name jubilee highlights conversion and renewal since the word comes from the Hebrew word *yobhel*, meaning the ram's horn that is to be blown on the day of Atonement to call to repentance and to announce the jubilee year (Lv 25: 9).

Jubilee is a time to remember that all life, all creation belongs to God, and that people are stewards of God's gifts. In ancient Israel, God is the landowner and the people are its caretakers. Let the land lie fallow for the year for the benefit of both the land and its caretakers. For an agricultural people, this work stoppage was a leap of faith and a declaration of priorities. God would provide for them because of their trust. The jubilee is a year sacred to the Lord; secular business is reduced to a minimum.

The people, moreover, are a corporate reality—one family of God—and, therefore, the injustices and mistakes of the past are to be addressed in this context. Jubilee year is a time for forgiving debts, for releasing indentured slaves, and for returning property to people who had lost it through bad management. Jubilee is a time to help one's neighbor get a fresh start. Everyone is invited to come home. The "Holiness Code" (Lv 1:1-25:55) affirms God's ultimate ownership of the land and the solidarity of Israel, a oneness that extends to all peoples in the New Testament.

This legislation was idealistic. It was for the full liberation of the people, a time when they could shake off shackles and mend the gap between the rich and the poor. Jubilee promised freedom for those who had lost it,

for those who had given away their birthright or lost everything. It was a time of forgiveness, not a time to convict others or to intimidate people. It was a time of grace for the renewal of the covenant.

## Jubilee Comes into the New Testament in the Person of Jesus.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus appropriates the ideal of jubilee to himself. In Luke's gospel, Jesus comes home to Nazareth, goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath "as he was in the habit of doing" and reads a jubilee text from Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord. (Lk 4:16-19, citing Is 61:1-2)

The mission of Jesus and the main content of biblical jubilee coincide. Anointing by the Holy Spirit, sharing the good news with the poor, bringing healing and liberty—all these are the heart of jubilee and the *raison d'être* of Jesus' life. He is the fulfillment of the jubilee ideal: "Today," he says, "this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21). Jesus is the perfect exemplar of jubilee spirituality. The ideals of his ancestors are the program of his life. Through him that program becomes jubilee spirituality for us.

Besides appropriating these programmatic ideas, Jesus also declares the jubilee year as part of his own ministry: This is the "year of favor from the Lord." In announcing the year of the Lord's favor, Jesus was following the tradition of Leviticus but with his own personal stamp on the laws. Jesus humanized, for example, the practice of Sabbath. Jesus worshiped with the community each week. He was also a person of profound prayer, walking in the strength of his experience of God as Abba, spending long hours at night or in the mornings in communion with his father, and calling his

disciples to periods of rest and retreat. He also reached out to those in need, even on the Sabbath.

We are to construct a jubilee spirituality based on both Sabbath and the works of mercy, recognizing “the first and greatest commandment,” yet like Good Samaritans committing ourselves to the poor and oppressed. We keep the Sabbath by our contemplative activity and our letting go of workaholic, consumerism, and anxious busyness. We are to bring glad tidings to the poor, to liberate those who are bound—beginning with ourselves—to forgive injuries and debts, as well as to receive forgiveness for our mistakes. We are to share gifts and goods. Furthermore, we are to celebrate liturgically this new life by holding a great feast that for us will be a Eucharistic feast in thanksgiving and joy for God’s gifts. In this way, we recognize the Incarnate Word as Lord of the universe and ourselves as a Sabbath people in this Sabbath of Sabbaths, Jubilee Year 2000.

## Patterns for Jubilee from John Paul II

The Catholic Church has been celebrating jubilee years since the fourteenth century, the first one being declared by Pope Boniface VIII for the year 1300. The most recent holy years were in 1950, 1975, and 1983. There have been other special years as well, such as the Marian year of 1986-87 (TAU 14, 26). For John Paul II, the present jubilee year 2000 has been a long time coming. He has been planning it since the beginning of his pontificate in 1978. Cardinal Wyszynski, leader in the postwar struggle of Poland against Communism, told the Holy Father at his election in Rome, “You must lead the church into the third millennium.”<sup>3</sup> This thought has been a guiding motif in John Paul’s teaching these past twenty years. He writes, “Preparing for the year 2000 has become as it were an interpretive key of my pontificate” (TMA 23).

You will find John Paul referring explicitly to the millennium in every major document he has written. His letters are a blueprint for life in the twenty-first century. When he announced the jubilee in his apostolic letter *As the Third Millennium Draws Near* (TMA), he saw the history of the church in the twentieth century as one long preparation for the jubilee year. The religious stirrings in the fifties, the Vatican Council in the sixties, and the ferment of the post-Vatican II years in the seventies and eighties were all preparations for the year 2000. His letter asks for three years of deepening awareness of the importance of jubilee (1994-1996) and three years of special study and devotion addressed to Christ in 1997, the Holy Spirit in 1998, and the Father in 1999. This amount of preparation gives some indication of how important the jubilee year is to John Paul.

The Pope has put his own emphases on Jubilee 2000. In his apostolic letter, he ranges far and wide on issues the Church needs to face at this time. He places immense importance, for example, on ecumenism (TMA 16, 34, 46-47) and on the new evangelization (TMA 21, 45, 57). The Church needs to examine its conscience for sins against the unity of the body of Christ and to ask forgiveness for historical failures like the religious wars, the excesses of the Inquisition, and the treatment of native peoples. We need to stand accused of our sins, such as complicity in anti-Semitism over the centuries and our failure to be a light in a world of moral decadence. These challenges transcend the individual, but all of us can respond to them in our own ways.

## Personal Renewal

Personal renewal is the item of first importance. Speaking of “strengthening of faith and of the witness of Christians” as the “primary objective of the Jubilee,” John Paul writes as follows:

It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbor, especially the most needy. (TMA 42)

Once again the call is to personal prayer and social action, with a special reminder of the importance of the "preferential option for the poor" (TMA 51).

The umbrella that includes everything is Vatican II. "The best preparation for the new millennium," the pope writes, "can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole church" (TMA 20). The perspectives of Vatican II constitute the objectives and the agenda for a Third Millennium spirituality. The pope provides an "examination of conscience" to single out certain important building blocks for the construction of this spirituality (TMA 36). These principles are not single moral issues, like the right to life or human rights in general, important as these matters are in the pope's day-to-day preaching. They are, rather, the spiritual foundations for living the Christian life as developed in Vatican II. One such principle is the Scriptures: Have they become "the soul of theology and the inspiration of Christian living?" There is the liturgy, especially the Eucharist: Is it in fact "the summit and source of ecclesial life?" There is the vision of the church as "communion": Is the church a real *koinonia* (community) and does it leave room for "charisms, ministries and different forms of participation by the people of God?" There is the whole new attitude to the world and to human development: Is there engagement, "open, respectful and cordial dialogue" with the world and are Christians making their contribution to human progress? These papal questions are pointers for a Jubilee 2000 spirituality.

The building of this spirituality calls for re-reading the documents and struggling for authentic understanding. The pope is challenging the church to own the council, not selectively, not picking and choosing according to our own prejudices—whether conservative or liberal—but striving to be open to the Spirit and to be guided by the mind of the church. This is not a new task. It has been going on since the close of the council in 1965, but it takes on a new urgency now. We are at a moment of grace, a *kairos*, a challenge to ransom the best of the recent thinking on Vatican II's spirituality and forge it into a blueprint for the New Millennium. Jubilee spirituality is the living out of the biblical, liturgical, ecclesial, and humanistic theology of the twentieth century in new and fresh formulations for the twenty-first century.

### Spirituality for Our Time

We are looking for a spirituality for our time. It will come out of experience as well as study and prayer. We need images and metaphors to grasp its elements. One such metaphor is that of journey, which the pope uses to describe the final year of preparation. We are invited to see our lives as a journey back to God. In an eloquent passage, John Paul pulls together much of what he has been saying in the letter. Commenting on John 17:3, that eternal life is to know God and to know the Son, Jesus, he writes,

The whole of Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the "prodigal son" (cf. Lk 15:11-32) we discover anew each day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and reaches the whole of humanity. (TMA 49)

This is the journey from sin and selfishness to the double law of charity (TMA 50), a journey that includes the works of mercy in our own community and beyond. Today, "in this world of conflict" and

“intolerable social and economic inequalities,” the journey has to include a commitment to working for peace and justice (TMA 51). These are the parameters; it is for us to develop the content. Such are the grand and heartfelt hopes and desires of John Paul II for this jubilee. He ends his letter with a father’s plea:

One thing is certain: Everyone is asked to do as much as possible to ensure that the great challenge of the year 2000 is not overlooked, for this challenge certainly involves a special grace of the Lord for the church and for the whole of humanity. (TMA 55)

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Apostolic Letter for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, dated November 10, 1994, and abbreviated in this article as TMA with paragraph numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Harris has developed this thought extensively in two excellent books: *Jubilee Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985) and *Proclaim Jubilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks for Forgiveness* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1998) p. xxiv.