



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC LETTER
NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE
OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS
CLERGY AND LAY FAITHFUL
AT THE CLOSE
OF THE GREAT JUBILEE OF THE YEAR 2000

*To my Brother Bishops,
To Priests and Deacons,
Men and Women Religious
and all the Lay Faithful.*

1. At the beginning of the new millennium, and at the close of the Great Jubilee during which we celebrated the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus and 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*" (Lk 5:4). Peter and his first companions trusted Christ's words, and cast the nets. "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 for ever" (Heb 13:8).

The Church's joy was great this year, as she devoted herself to contemplating the face of her Bridegroom and Lord. She became more than ever a pilgrim people, led by him who is the "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20). With extraordinary energy, involving so many of her members, the People of God here in Rome, as well as in Jerusalem and in all the individual local churches, went through the "Holy Door" that is Christ. To him who is the goal of history and the one Saviour of the world, the Church and the Spirit cried out: "*Marana tha* — Come, Lord Jesus" (cf. Rev 22:17, 20; 1 Cor 16:22).

III

STARTING AFRESH FROM CHRIST

29. "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*). This assurance, dear brothers and sisters, has accompanied the Church for two thousand years, and has now been renewed in our hearts by the celebration of the Jubilee. From it we must gain *new impetus in Christian living*, making it the force which inspires our journey of faith. Conscious of the Risen Lord's presence among us, we ask ourselves today the same question put to Peter in Jerusalem immediately after his Pentecost speech: "What must we do?" (*Acts 2:37*).

We put the question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face. We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: *I am with you!*

It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new programme". The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This programme for all times is our programme for the Third Millennium.

But it must be translated into *pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community*. The Jubilee has given us the extraordinary opportunity to travel together for a number of years on a journey common to the whole Church, a catechetical journey on the theme of the Trinity, accompanied by precise pastoral undertakings designed to ensure that the Jubilee would be a fruitful event. I am grateful for the sincere and widespread acceptance of what I proposed in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. But now it is no longer an immediate goal that we face, but the larger and more demanding challenge of normal pastoral activity. With its universal and indispensable provisions, the programme of the Gospel must continue to take root, as it has always done, in the life of the Church everywhere. It is *in the local churches* that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified — goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources — which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture.

I therefore earnestly exhort the Pastors of the particular Churches, with the help of all sectors of God's People, confidently to plan the stages of the journey ahead, harmonizing the choices of each diocesan community with those of neighbouring Churches and of the universal Church.

This harmonization will certainly be facilitated by the collegial work which Bishops now regularly undertake in Episcopal Conferences and Synods. Was this not the point of the continental Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops which prepared for the Jubilee, and which forged important directives for the present-day proclamation of the Gospel in so many different settings and cultures? This rich legacy of reflection must not be allowed to disappear, but must be implemented in practical ways.

What awaits us therefore is an exciting work of pastoral revitalization — a work involving all of us. As guidance and encouragement to everyone, I wish to indicate *certain pastoral priorities* which the experience of the Great Jubilee has, in my view, brought to light.

Holiness

30. First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*. Was this not the ultimate meaning of the Jubilee indulgence, as a special grace offered by Christ so that the life of every baptized person could be purified and deeply renewed?

It is my hope that, among those who have taken part in the Jubilee, many will have benefited from this grace, in full awareness of its demands. Once the Jubilee is over, we resume our normal path, but knowing that stressing holiness remains more than ever an urgent pastoral task.

It is necessary therefore to rediscover the full practical significance of Chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, dedicated to the "universal call to holiness". The Council Fathers laid such stress on this point, not just to embellish ecclesiology with a kind of spiritual veneer, but to make the call to holiness an intrinsic and essential aspect of their teaching on the Church. The rediscovery of the Church as "mystery", or as a people "gathered together by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit",¹⁵ 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.

But the gift in turn becomes a task, which must shape the whole of Christian life: "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (*1 Th* 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".¹⁶

31. At first glance, it might seem almost impractical to recall this elementary truth as the foundation of the pastoral planning in which we are involved at the start of the new millennium. Can holiness ever be "planned"? What might the word "holiness" mean in the context of a pastoral plan?

In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity. 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. It is also clear however that the paths to holiness are personal and call for a genuine "*training in holiness*", adapted to people's needs. This training must integrate the resources offered to everyone with both the traditional forms of individual and group assistance, as well as the more recent forms of support offered in associations and movements recognized by the Church.

Prayer

32. This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in *the art of prayer*. The Jubilee Year has been a year of more intense prayer, both personal and communal. But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray!" (*Lk* 11:1). Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: "Abide in me and I in you" (*Jn* 15:4). This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all true pastoral life. Wrought in us by the Holy Spirit, this reciprocity opens us, through Christ and in Christ, to contemplation of the Father's face. Learning this Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer and living it fully, above all in the liturgy, the summit and source of the Church's life,¹⁷ but also in personal experience, is the secret of a truly vital Christianity, which has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and finds in them new life.

33. Is it not one of the "signs of the times" that in today's world, despite widespread secularization, there is *a widespread demand for spirituality*, a demand which expresses itself in large part as *a renewed need for prayer*? Other religions, which are now widely present in ancient Christian lands, offer their own responses to this need, and sometimes they do so in appealing ways. But we who have received the grace of believing in Christ, the revealer of the Father and the Saviour of the world, have a duty to show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead.

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 Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila?

Yes, dear brothers and sisters, 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". Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan.¹⁸

34. Christians who have received the gift of a vocation to the specially consecrated life are of course called to prayer in a particular way: of its nature, their consecration makes them more open to the experience of contemplation, and it is important that they should cultivate it with special care. But it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but "Christians at risk". They would run the insidious risk of seeing their faith progressively undermined, and would perhaps end up succumbing to the allure of "substitutes", accepting alternative religious proposals and even indulging in far-fetched superstitions.

It is therefore essential that *education in prayer* should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning. I myself have decided to dedicate the forthcoming Wednesday catecheses to *reflection upon the Psalms*, beginning with the Psalms of Morning Prayer with which the public prayer of the Church invites us to consecrate and direct our day. How helpful it would be if not only in religious communities but also in parishes more were done to ensure an all-pervading climate of prayer. With proper discernment, this would require that popular piety be given its proper place, and that people be educated especially in liturgical prayer. Perhaps it is more thinkable than we usually presume for the average day of a Christian community to combine the many forms of pastoral life and witness in the world with the celebration of the Eucharist and even the recitation of Lauds and Vespers. The experience of many committed Christian groups, also those made up largely of lay people, is proof of this.

The Sunday Eucharist

35. It is therefore obvious that our principal attention must be given to the liturgy, "the summit towards which the Church's action tends and at the same time the source from which comes all her strength".¹⁹ In the twentieth century, especially since the Council, there has been a great development in the way the Christian community celebrates the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. It is necessary to continue in this direction, and to stress particularly *the Sunday Eucharist* and *Sunday* itself experienced as a special day of faith, the day of the Risen Lord and of the gift of the Spirit, the true weekly Easter.²⁰ For two thousand years, Christian time has been measured by the memory of that "first day of the week" (*Mk* 16:2,9; *Lk* 24:1; *Jn* 20:1), when the Risen Christ gave the Apostles the gift of peace and of the Spirit (cf. *Jn* 20:19-23). The truth of Christ's Resurrection is the original fact upon which Christian faith is based (cf. *1 Cor* 15:14), an event set *at the centre of the mystery of time*, prefiguring the last day when Christ will return in glory. We do not know what the new millennium has in store for us, but we are certain that it is safe in the hands of Christ, the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (*Rev* 19:16); and precisely by celebrating his Passover not just once a year but every Sunday, the Church will continue to show to every generation "the true fulcrum of history, to which the mystery of the world's origin and its final destiny leads".²¹

36. Following *Dies Domini*, I therefore wish to insist that *sharing in the Eucharist* should really be *the heart of Sunday* for every baptized person. It is a fundamental duty, to be fulfilled not just in order to observe a precept but as something felt as essential to a truly informed and consistent Christian life. 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). This presents them with the challenge, often in isolated and difficult situations, to bear stronger witness to the distinguishing elements of their own identity. The duty to take part in the Eucharist every Sunday is one of these. The Sunday Eucharist which every week

gathers Christians together as God's family round the table of the Word and the Bread of Life, is also the most natural antidote to dispersion. It is the privileged place where communion is ceaselessly proclaimed and nurtured. Precisely through sharing in the Eucharist, *the Lord's Day* also becomes *the Day of the Church*,²² when she can effectively exercise her role as the sacrament of unity.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

37. I am also asking for renewed pastoral courage in ensuring that the day-to-day teaching of Christian communities persuasively and effectively presents the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As you will recall, in 1984 I dealt with this subject in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, which synthesized the results of an Assembly of the Synod of Bishops devoted to this question. My invitation then was to make every effort to face the crisis of "the sense of sin" apparent in today's culture.²³ But I was even more insistent in calling for a rediscovery of Christ as *mysterium pietatis*, the one in whom God shows us his compassionate heart and reconciles us fully with himself. It is this face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is "the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism".²⁴ When the Synod addressed the problem, the crisis of the Sacrament was there for all to see, especially in some parts of the world. The causes of the crisis have not disappeared in the brief span of time since then. But the Jubilee Year, which has been particularly marked by a return to the Sacrament of Penance, has given us an encouraging message, which should not be ignored: if many people, and among them also many young people, have benefited from approaching this Sacrament, it is probably necessary that Pastors should arm themselves with more confidence, creativity and perseverance in presenting it and leading people to appreciate it. Dear brothers in the priesthood, we must not give in to passing crises! The Lord's gifts — and the Sacraments are among the most precious — come from the One who well knows the human heart and is the Lord of history.

The primacy of grace

38. 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*. There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that "without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. *Jn* 15:5).

It is prayer which 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. When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration? We then share the experience of the disciples in the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish: "We have toiled all night and caught nothing" (*Lk* 5:5). This is the moment of faith, of prayer, of conversation with God, in order to open our hearts to the tide of grace and allow the word of Christ to pass through us in all its power: *Duc in altum!* On that occasion, it was Peter who spoke the word of faith: "At your word I will let down the nets" (*ibid.*). As this millennium begins, allow the Successor of Peter to invite the whole Church to make this act of faith, which expresses itself in a renewed commitment to prayer.

Listening to the Word

39. There is no doubt that this primacy of holiness and prayer is inconceivable without a renewed *listening to the word of God*. Ever since the Second Vatican Council underlined the pre-eminent role of the word of God in the life of the Church, great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture and attentive study of it. Scripture has its rightful place of honour in the public prayer of the Church. Individuals and communities now make extensive use of the Bible, and among lay people there are many who devote themselves to Scripture with the valuable help of theological and biblical studies. But it is above all the work of evangelization and catechesis which is drawing new life from attentiveness to the word of God. Dear brothers and sisters, this development needs to be consolidated and deepened, also by making sure that every family has a Bible. It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.

Proclaiming the Word

40. 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*. This should be done however with the respect due to the different paths of different people and with sensitivity to the diversity of cultures in which the Christian message must be planted, in such a way that the particular values of each people will not be rejected but purified and brought to their fullness.

In the Third Millennium, Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this *need for inculturation*. Christianity, while remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root. In this Jubilee Year, we have rejoiced in a special way in the beauty of the Church's varied face. This is perhaps only a beginning, a barely sketched image of the future which the Spirit of God is preparing for us.

Christ must be presented to all people with confidence. We shall address adults, families, young people, children, without ever hiding the most radical demands of the Gospel message, but taking into account each person's needs in regard to

their sensitivity and language, after the example of Paul who declared: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22). In making these recommendations, I am thinking especially of *the pastoral care of young people*. Precisely in regard to young people, as I said earlier, the Jubilee has given us an encouraging testimony of their generous availability. We must learn to interpret that heartening response, by investing that enthusiasm like a new talent (cf. Mt 25:15) which the Lord has put into our hands so that we can make it yield a rich return.

41. May the shining example of the many witnesses to the faith whom we have remembered during the Jubilee sustain and guide us in this confident, enterprising and creative sense of mission. For the Church, the martyrs have always been a seed of life. *Sanguis martyrurum semen christianorum*:²⁵ this famous "law" formulated by Tertullian has proved true in all the trials of history. Will this not also be the case of the century and millennium now beginning? Perhaps we were too used to thinking of the martyrs in rather distant terms, as though they were a category of the past, associated especially with the first centuries of the Christian era. The Jubilee remembrance has presented us with a surprising vista, showing us that our own time is particularly prolific in witnesses, who in different ways were able to live the Gospel in the midst of hostility and persecution, often to the point of the supreme test of shedding their blood. In them the word of God, sown in good soil, yielded a hundred fold (cf. Mt 13:8, 23). By their example they have shown us, and made smooth for us, so to speak, the path to the future. All that remains for us is, with God's grace, to follow in their footsteps.

IV

WITNESSES TO LOVE

42. "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). If we have truly contemplated the face of Christ, dear Brothers and Sisters, our pastoral planning will necessarily be inspired by the "new commandment" which he gave us: "Love one another, as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34).

This is the other important area in which there has to be commitment and planning on the part of the universal Church and the particular Churches: *the domain of communion (koinonia)*, which embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church. Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the Eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit which Jesus gives us (cf. Rom 5:5), to make us all "one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32). It is in building this communion of love that the Church appears as "sacrament", as the "sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race".²⁶

The Lord's words on this point are too precise for us to diminish their import. Many things are necessary for the Church's journey through history, not least in this new century; but without charity (*agape*), all will be in vain. It is again the Apostle Paul who in the *hymn to love* reminds us: even if we speak the tongues of men and of angels, and if we have faith "to move mountains", but are without love, all will come to "nothing" (cf. 1 Cor 13:2). Love is truly the "heart" of the Church, as was well understood by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, whom I proclaimed a Doctor of the Church precisely because she is an expert in the *scientia amoris*: "I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was aflame with Love. I understood that Love alone stirred the members of the Church to act... I understood that Love encompassed all vocations, that Love was everything".²⁷