



Inaugurating a Millennium of Mercy

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A PROPOSAL TO HAVE THE POPE GRANT GENERAL ABSOLUTION TO ALL REPENTANT CHRISTIANS ON JANUARY 1, 2000 OR EARLY IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

It is a rare moment. It occurs only once every thousand years. It is a psychological moment. It is a spiritual moment. It is a moment when persons and communities naturally ponder what was, what is and what will be. It is a moment when past and future linger in the present in a unique way. It is the moment when a new millennium opens before humanity.

The spirit in which a project begins determines to a large extent what it will become. It can be fairly said that as one looks at the panorama of activities being planned to welcome the Third Millennium, one sees nothing that can be reasonably expected to make the Third Millennium much different from the Second Millennium. No new spiritual North Star appears to be on the horizon. No new guiding light is being offered to humanity. So, it is morally certain that January 1, 2000 will be governed by the same spirits as December 31, 1999. It is equally morally certain that if the spirits with which the Third Millennium begins are the spirits with which the Second Millennium ends, then an avalanche of tragedy awaits humanity.

This should not happen. Dare I say, it must not happen. However, the only entity on earth that can prevent it from happening is the Church. If the Church cannot bring a new spirit to the Third Millennium, then no new spirit will be brought to the Third Millennium. Beyond this, it would seem that the Church not only has the possibility of planting a new spirit in the new millennium, but she also has the responsibility for doing so.

THE TIME OF THE FATHER

When we speak of the Third Millennium, we are of course speaking about a measure of time. It is quite clear, however, where the measuring stick begins. January 1, 2000 is January 1, 2000 AD, *anno Domini*. We are in a new time: a time when God has become incarnate in Jesus Christ, a time when the Sermon on the Mount has been proclaimed by Jesus Christ, a time when sins are forgiven by Jesus Christ, a time of redemption through the Cross of Jesus Christ, a time of

the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Human existence is not as it was before Christ, BC Above all, in this new time the true God is made known and visible by Jesus Christ and by His Church (JN 14:9, COL 1: 15). And, what is the visible image of the invisible God that Jesus has revealed to us, that the Church is entrusted to reveal to us? “It is God, who is rich in mercy whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us as Father” (ENCYCLICAL, **DIVES IN MISERICORDIA**, *RICH IN MERCY*, P.1, JOHN PAUL II).

This new time, this AD, is the time of the Father, who is rich in mercy. Therefore the New Millennium from its first day should be recognized as the time of the Father, who is rich in mercy. From the first tick of the clock on January 1, 2000 AD, the Church should proclaim that all time belongs to this Father, who is rich in mercy, and therefore this Third Millennium must be a Millennium of Mercy. From that second on she should strive with all she has to make it a Millennium Rich in Mercy.

John Paul II states, “The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy” (**DIVES IN MISERICORDIA**, 13). In a world drenched in normalized mercilessness, however, such a proclamation would be experienced as a mere platitude, if it were not reinforced by a program of mercy, by deeds of mercy. Mercy in a world saturated by mercilessness is a risk. A “do as I say, not as I do” proclamation of a Millennium of Mercy would be effete. The Word of Mercy is communicated to humanity most powerfully and most authentically when it issues from the mouth of mercy enfleshed. But, in a world where the power of evil is so entrenched, doing mercy can be costly—as is made so clear on Golgotha.

So what great act of mercy does the Church have within its powers to bring to the beginning of the Third Millennium that will engender in it the Spirit of mercy? In order to answer this question, we must go to the Cross of Mercy. What mercy was Jesus bringing to the world on that first Good Friday? Was it not the forgiveness of sins, the conquest of evil and the reconciliation of humanity with God—Divine merciful love (*agapē*). The source of the pandemic of mercilessness that plagues humanity is sin, sin catalyzing further sin. Unless sin can be forgiven, unless evil can be conquered by self-sacrificing, suffering love, the human situation remains an endless blood bath. But, if sin can be forgiven, if evil can be conquered and reconciliation with God can take place by way Christlike *agapē*, then unimaginable good is possible.

The Ultimate Mercy

The crucified Christ, by word and deed, brought to the world the ultimate mercy, God's free gift of the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with Himself. It was a free gift in that the price paid for redeeming humanity from the abyss of sin and from alienation from God was paid entirely by God. This gift came forth from the mercy of the Father, who is rich in mercy.

The Church can do no better than to bring to the commencement of the Third Millennium that mercy that Jesus brought to the world on Calvary, namely the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

The specific proposal here offered for accomplishing this is that the Successor of Saint Peter, Vicar of Christ, John Paul II, at 3 p.m. on January 1, 2000 AD or at some other appropriate time early in the millennium, e.g., Mercy Sunday, grant the mercy of general absolution from all the sins of one's life to all Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics who so desire and wish to live a more faithful Gospel life. Everything would be forgiven by God through the Church. There would be no need ever to mention these sins in future confessions—forgiveness would be total and final. The slate would be wiped clean so that people could enter upon this new millennium liberated from sin and reconciled with God. It would be a mass "second baptism" where the mercy of the Father would be individually and communally experienced in a way and on a scale it has never before been experienced.

The planting of a mustard seed of mercy at the dawn of the Third Millennium by granting universal, total, general absolution would be the beginning of a new era, the Era of Mercy! It would also be the beginning of the end of the old era, the Era of Mercilessness propagandized as normal and noble. It would raise up Divine Mercy before the world as the Reality at the heart of reality. It would inspire mercy unto the third and fourth generations in those who have received mercy. It would reveal to humanity, as nothing has in the past, the God that Jesus came to reveal and the God that humanity so desperately needs to know: a Father, who is rich in mercy.

It can only be imagined what new depths of meaning the world would see in the Gospel, what new depths of understanding the world would reach about Jesus and about the Church by such an act of gratuitous absolution. The sheep that is lost can almost never find his way back. He literally becomes paralyzed in his "lostness."

If he is ever to return to the fold, the shepherd has to do just about all the work. He must go out and find the lost sheep and carry him back (LK 15:7, MT 18:12-14)—but, this is what the good shepherd does; indeed, a good shepherd will do all he is capable of doing for his sheep, even unto laying down his life for them (JN 10: 10-11). The ordinary routine is broken by the shepherd because a sheep is lost, and the shepherd desires with his whole heart to bring this lost sheep back into the fold.

A day of universal and general absolution would again allow the world to see lucidly and to experience intensely Jesus and by extension the Church as they were predominately experienced in the first two centuries of Christianity—through the image of the Good Shepherd.

Today in the United States only 26.7% of the Catholics are going to Mass on Sunday. In England it is 14%. In rural France it is only 20%. In urban France it is 9%. In Latin America and South America the figures are no better. As bad as these statistics are, what is even more shocking is how few of the few who are still attending weekly Mass are availing themselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The percentage of Catholics participating in this Sacrament is in the single digits for the entire Catholic population.

My only point is that the Good Shepherd makes every effort to bring the sheep back to the fold with a superabundance of gratuitous mercy—with *instant* and total forgiveness, joy and celebration! The beginning of the Third Millennium is an opportunity to bring home unreservedly all those who have left and to welcome them in the same fashion that the Father welcomed the Prodigal Son.

Once a brother and sister have returned home and are settled, we can talk with them, care for them, nurture them, catechize them, pray with them and exemplify for them a continuing stream of that Divine Mercy that brought them home in the first place. However, all of the above are impossible if the lost sheep stay lost, if the Prodigal Son cannot surmount the humanly-created impediments that prevent him from reaching his Father and experiencing his Father's forgiveness and mercy.

We are explicitly called by Jesus to the imitation of God: "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful" (LK 6:35). And how is the heavenly Father merciful? We need look no further than the parables of the Prodigal Son and of the Publican. "Father," says the Prodigal Son, "I have sinned against heaven and against you" (LK 15:21). *Instantly* the Father exclaims to his servants, "Prepare a feast, a celebra-

tion, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life, he was lost and is found..." (LK 15:22-24). The Publican feels himself to be such a terrible sinner that he cannot even raise his eyes but can only say, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner" (LK 18: 13). Again, *instantly* the Father forgives everything, for Jesus tells us, "I assure you this man goes away justified" (LK 18:14). And again, *instantly*, after the criminal on the cross says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom," Jesus forgives totally, "I promise you, this day you will be with me in Paradise."

The Most Wonderful Gift

The imitation of the true God is not the imitation of a god, who is miserly in mercy or who uses the word mercy, as so many human beings do, as a euphemism to disguise what is in fact revenge, score-settling, manipulation or control over others. The imitation of the true God is the imitation of a God who "is kind to the wicked and ungrateful and lets His rain fall on the unjust and the righteous" (LK 6:27-38; MT 5:45).

Would it not be the most wonderful gift that the Church could offer to the next thousand years if at the beginning of the new millennium she placed before the world the spiritual North Star of Divine Mercy by being merciful as the heavenly Father is merciful, by forgiving as the heavenly Father forgives as Jesus forgave the repentant Prodigal Son, the Publican and the Thief on the Cross—*instantly!*?

Since the year AD 2000 has been declared a Jubilee Year by the Church, what other action is it that the Church could take that would be more spiritually appropriate than the general absolution of all sins for all Catholics who are repentant and for all other Christians who are repentant? The Jubilee Year (LV 25:8-17, 29-31) in the Old Testament is a time for canceling of debt and for liberating from slavery. It is a time of restoration, not harvesting. In the context of Jesus' Messianic mission the debt that is canceled by the mercy of God is the debt due to sin and the liberation from slavery that occurs is the liberation from the slavery of sin in all its manifestations.

It is remarkable that at the point in the *Pater Noster* where Jesus prays, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," the verb used is "*aphiemi*" which means remit, send away, liberate, forgive a debt. This is remarkable because "*aphesis*," the noun form of the same verb, is the term regularly used by the Septuagint for the Jubilee Year (LV 25:28,54; DT 15:1 FF; IS 61:2; JR 35:8).

In other words, the general absolution from debt, the general liberation from slavery and the general restoration of the community is what the Jubilee Year is about in time BC and is what it can be about in times AD. The only difference is that the former is concerned with Jewish monetary and property matters while the latter is concerned with sin and salvation. Therefore the magnanimously merciful general absolution of all sins at the beginning of a new millennium, whose first year has been declared a Jubilee Year, would be consistent and proper.

On the cross Jesus prays, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). These words of Jesus certainly mean that He is petitioning the Father to forgive those persons of His time who are responsible for His suffering and death. It is the ultimate example of His teaching of Nonviolent Love of enemies. But, is He only petitioning the Father on behalf of those few Romans and Jews who killed Him or does His prayer go beyond that? Our Faith tells us it does.

It is the sins of all humanity that He took upon Himself and for which He was crucified. Each one of us and all of us were the cause of this crucifixion, and all crucifixions. As Isaiah says: *“Yet he was pierced through for our faults, crushed for our sins. On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed. We had all gone astray like sheep each taking his own way, and Yahweh burdened him with the sins of all of us”* (Is 53:5-6).

Since this is so, Jesus’ petition from the cross is a prayer that all people in all times and in all places be forgiven. It is a prayer to the Father, who is rich in mercy, for those who are loved but who have failed to love. In our language it is a prayer for universal general absolution made by the One whose prayers are infinitely efficacious. In other words, Yahweh’s chosen Servant, the Mediator between God and humanity at the most costly moment of His fidelity to the will of God makes a request for mercy of the Father of Mercies on behalf of those who are His lethal enemies.

Would it not be appropriate at the beginning of the new millennium, at the beginning of the Jubilee Year, for the Church to unite Herself with the spirit and reality of that petition on Golgotha and grant, by the superabundant grace of God, universal general absolution to all repentant Christians who desire it?

A YEAR OF CATECHESIS

There are of course innumerable ways in which universal general absolution could be administered. The Pope himself could administer it from the balcony of St. Peter's at 3 p.m. on January 1, 2000 AD, or at 3 p.m. on Mercy Sunday that year. Or, it could be granted by bishops and priests at 3 p.m. in their respective time zones in all the churches of each dioceses as part of a communal penitential service with appropriate adjustments for those who cannot get to a church—e.g., invalids who desire that their sins be forgiven may be able to make an act of contrition at 3 o'clock and just say "Amen" to the absolution administered by the bishop in his cathedral.

These are but two suggestions and neither may be the best method to implement universal general absolution at the beginning of the Third Millennium and Jubilee Year. What they do recognize is that this is an extra-ordinary moment and an extra-ordinary event and hence extra-ordinary means must be employed. It is therefore assumed that other than the ordinary canonical means for administering the Sacrament of Penance would be necessary for the good of souls. However, the authority and universal jurisdiction of the Pope, when coupled with the fact that "the supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls," would readily make possible the pertinent adjustments in the name of Mercy. As John Paul II says in *Dives in Misericordia*, "Love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice—precise and often too narrow."

It is my personal pastoral opinion, however, that if the desire is to imbue the Third Millennium at its inception with a spirit of mercy, that if the desire is to make mercy the spiritual North Star of this Millennium, then the merciful forgiveness of all sins by the Father who is rich in mercy, at the beginning of the new millennium should be preceded by a time of universal catechizing and evangelizing on Divine Mercy in which *Dives in Misericordia* is the basic, and perhaps, the exclusive text. This time of catechesis and evangelization by the Church on the Mercy of God followed by universal general absolution to all Christians who desire forgiveness would be the Church doing exactly what Pope John Paul II says Jesus did: "Making the Father present as love and mercy is, in Christ's own consciousness, the fundamental touchstone of His mission as the Messiah." (*DIVES IN MISERICORDIA*, 3). It would be the Church being what Saint Augustine says it is and should be, namely, "an extension of Christ in time and space."

One can go for months or even years in modern secular society without ever seeing the word mercy written or hearing the word mercy spoken. Yet, each heart is

waiting silently to be touched by mercy, Divine and human. The Church's opportunity is here. She has the means. She has the power. She has the ability. If this opportunity is missed, it may never come again. The paralyzed lost sheep of the Twenty-First century wait to hear the merciful voice of the searching shepherd. So many, so very many wait—indeed long for—that joy that can only come from the mercy of total unconditional forgiveness.

How many souls have withered away, how many souls have shriveled up because no one would take the risk of mercy on their behalf? We know that the risk of mercy can only be taken if one can say “Jesus I trust in you,” for we do not choose the risk of mercy as a consequence of mere rational analysis and deduction. We choose it because of our faith in Jesus, our Lord, God and Savior, who made mercy a conversion demand: “I want mercy not sacrifice” (MT 9: 13); who proclaimed it to be the norm of judgment at the end of time: “I was hungry and you gave me to eat...” (MT 25:31-46); who said that the merciful are blessed: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy” (MT 5:7); who revealed that the Father was “rich in mercy” (EP 2:4); who commanded that we imitate the Father of Mercies: “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (LK 6:35).

To risk mercy is to trust in Jesus in a world where mercy has little standing and less support. It is this very world, however, that must be shown that mercy is trustworthy, that Jesus is trustworthy. This cannot be done by words alone. Nor, can it be done by continuing down avenues for the disposition of mercy that few now even consider approaching. The Church must risk doing creative merciful deeds where merciful deeds are needed if the power of mercy is to be revealed to the world, if the trustworthiness of Jesus is to be seen and experienced by the world.

“Mercy is the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and the Redeemer,” proclaims John Paul II in **Dives in Misericordia**. It is the mercy of God that is the motive of His saving will—not the merits of men and women. Mercy is antecedent to any deed of the person. Mercy initiates and consummates the process of salvation in Christ. Divine Mercy never proceeds from obligation. It always issues from generosity. It is always gift. It is always love (*agapē*).

A day of universal absolution from sin and reconciliation with God at the beginning of the Third Millennium, the Jubilee Year, would set before humanity the gift of Divine Mercy as it never before has been encountered. It would also set before humanity a truth and a task. The truth would be the truth about what kind

of God God is: He is a Father, who is rich in mercy. The task would be doing what the God of Mercy expects—that we “be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful” (MT 18:23-25, MT 25:31-46, MT 9:13, LK 6:35).

“The genuine face of mercy has to be ever revealed anew,” says John Paul II. A day of universal absolution and reconciliation would inaugurate the new millennium by revealing anew to the hearts and minds and souls of people that “mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of His mission” (DIVES IN MISERICORDIA, 6) and that God is a Father “who is rich in mercy.”

Let us then leave the last word on this matter for Pope John Paul II:

Modern man often anxiously wonders about the solution to the terrible tensions which have built up in the world and which entangle humanity. And if at times he lacks the courage to utter the word “mercy” or if in his conscience empty of religious content he does not find the equivalent, so much greater is the need for the Church to utter this word not only in her own name but also in the name of all the men and women of our time (DIVES IN MISERICORDIA, 5).

May Mary, the Mother of Mercy and the Refuge of sinners, bring us the grace to be in this world the feet, the hands, the arms, the shoulders, the body, the presence of her Son, the Merciful Good Shepherd.

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The Church World | February 25, 1999



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