

The New Millennium: The End Of The World Or A New Springtime?

By Jim Seghers

"Be Not Afraid!" These were the first words Pope John Paul II addressed to the Catholic Church and to the world. This expression has great biblical resonance. In the Old Testament each of the three great prophets Isaiah (10:24), Jeremiah (1:8; 10:5), and Ezekiel (2:6) proclaimed "Be not afraid."

Isaiah, whose name means "Yahweh is salvation," was charged with announcing the downfall of Israel and Judah because of their unfaithfulness and their refusal to repent. He suffered greatly because of his prophetic role. Yet he says, "Be not afraid." The political situation in Israel was ominous. Assyria had defeated the Northern Kingdom and Judah was Assyria's vassal. The threat of Syria loomed on the horizon. Isaiah proclaimed God's transcendent holiness and, thus, God's detestation for sin. He warned that men must rely on God, and not depend on political systems, military or economic might, or anything created. He predicted that from a faithful remnant the Messiah would come.

The meaning of Jeremiah's name is uncertain. Acting as God prosecuting attorney, he was called to prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Jeremiah lived in a time of war, intrigue, and great turmoil. It was a time of darkness and despair. Still he affirmed, "Be not afraid." Jeremiah proclaimed the devastating consequences of sin by which men bring suffering upon themselves. He foresaw the era of the new covenant when God's law would be written on man's heart.

Ezekiel name means "God strengthens." He was a member of a priestly family. Ezekiel was the prophet in darkness of exile. To many Jews all seemed lost. Like the two great prophets before him he also announced, "Be not afraid." There is a remarkable parallel between the Book of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation that allows a step-by-step pegging of these two books as a lectionary for use in the Christian liturgy. In both books there is a powerful message of vindicating hope amid God's chastisement. Ezekiel proclaimed Israel's unparalleled infidelity. He taught the need for inner conversion, putting on a new spirit and acquiring a new heart. He affirmed that God allows punishment to purify his sinful people, which saves them from themselves. He prophesized that in messianic times God will seek out individuals as a shepherd seeks his sheep.

This same expression, "Be not afraid," has great meaning in the New Testament. Zachariah was told not to fear (Lk 1:13) when the angel appeared to announce the conception of John the Baptist. The angel told Joseph "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife" (Mt 1:20). The angel Gabriel said, "do not be afraid, Mary" (Lk 1:30). At Bethlehem the angels reassured the shepherds "fear not" (Lk 2:10).

When Peter first became aware of his sinfulness, Jesus reassured him: "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). Jesus said to the man whose daughter had just died, "Do not fear" (Lk 8:50). Jesus told the apostles before he sent them on their first mission: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Mt 10:28). Then he added, "Fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt 10:31; Lk 12:7).

During the terrifying storm at sea on his way to Rome, Paul was reassured by an angel: "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar" (Acts 27:24). Eventually, Paul was beheaded in Rome. Lastly John wrote how he fell like a dead man at the feat of the glorified Jesus only to hear the Master say, "Fear not" (Rev 1:17).

One might be inclined to state that this is interesting information, but speculate about its relevancy to our daily lives. After all aren't we experiencing unprecedented prosperity as we near the end of this millennium? Yet in spite of our apparent prosperity, there is a deep sense of foreboding that is very prevalent in our society. From where is this coming?

On a superficial level it seems to originate with the forecasters of Doom and Gloom. We have been inundated with predictions of economic disaster, a Y2K catastrophe as the computers of the world come crashing down like humpty-dumpty, the great tribulation with the advent of the anti-Christ, the three days of darkness, the end of the world and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. I was in California with Fr. Groeschel when he was asked the question, "Father, what do you think about the three days of darkness?" This question was asked a few days after Mr. Clinton was first elected President. Fr. Groeschel replied, "This isn't dark enough?"

Personally, I discount the naysayers - even though I have read many of their predictions. People have been guessing the nearness of the second coming and the end of the world since the first century. The truth is that no one knows when the world will end or when Jesus will come again. So why be anxious? In the first place it's something over which we have absolutely no control. Additionally, what's so terrible about Jesus coming again - unless, of course, one is not on his side. Finally, why should we waste time in a state of panic about the end of the world, when our world might end on our next drive or in bed tonight?

On a deeper level many people experience a gnawing spiritual hunger that comes from unfulfilled love in a world that is increasingly self-absorbed. In the words of St. Augustine: "our hearts are made for thee, O Lord, and in thee alone can they find rest." There is also a sense of foreboding that comes from personal sin and the fact that we live in a society that has rejected God. This situation is much more serious than all the doomsday predictions. For there comes a time when evil reaches a level that God intervenes by withdrawing his blessings - then that civilization is doomed.

There is a sharp distinction between an evil society and a society in which evil occurs. In the latter case evil happens, but society holds the offender accountable because its laws are just. However, a society becomes evil when it so perverts truth that the distinction between good and evil is distorted as mere opinions. When this happens evil is promoted by that society as a good and defended by its unjust laws. How can a civilization survive that promotes divorce, contraception, social injustices, promiscuity, materialism, and the rejection of God, the murder of the unborn and the killing of the long born? What do we say about a society that twice elects a president who says he prayed before he vetoed the bill that would ban partial-birth abortion? To whom does one pray to approve this barbaric form of murder?

Rather than focusing on the end of the world, we should concentrate on the moral decay that could bring about the end of a world - our society! These are indeed serious times. They are also wonderful times that call for the best that we have to give. Thus in a very real sense the reassurance, "Be not afraid" does apply to us just as it did to earlier ages. Let me relate incidents from the life of a saint who faced more than a few hardships in his life - without fear - someone who, like all the saints, made a difference. That hero is St. John of the Cross. He was a spiritual giant although he was only five feet in stature - if that.

St. John of the Cross was a newly ordained priest of twenty-five when he became the spiritual director and confessor of St. Teresa of Avila age 52. Meeting St. Teresa began his involvement with reforming the Carmelite order. Prophets are often unwelcome and persecuted. He was well named for there was much of the cross in his life. On December 2, 1577 a group of Calced Carmelite Fathers, men-at-arms, and others seized Fray Juan and brought him under force to a Calced monastery. He was subsequently taken to Toledo where it was demanded that he renounce the reform. He refused. His sentence was imprisonment.

His prison cell was a room 6' wide and 10' long. It was originally intended as a closet. There was no window, only a slit high up in the wall. His cell was frightfully cold there in winter, and suffocatingly hot in the summer. He was deprived his hood and scapular. His food was bread, sardines, and water. Three evenings a week he had to eat kneeling on the floor in the middle of the refectory. Then when the friars were finished their supper, his shoulders were bared and each member of the community struck him with a lash, some very vigorously, for the wounds he received would not heal properly for years. When he refused to renounce the reform, he was led back to his cell.

After 6 months of these terrible conditions he was given a change of clothes and furnished with paper and ink. However, the beatings continued as before. Yet, amid these dreadful surroundings he wrote his great lyric poems. He never complained, nor did he hold any bitterness towards his tormentors. He finally escaped after nearly nine months of this painful ordeal. The following are two of the poems he wrote during his imprisonment.

Endeavor to be inclined always:
Not to the easiest, but to the most difficult;
Not to the most delightful, but to the harshest;
Not to the most gratifying, but to the less pleasant;
Not to what means rest for you, but to hard work;
Not to the consoling, but to the unconsoling;
Not to the most, but to the least;
Not to the highest and most precious, but to the lowest and most despised;
Not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing;
Do not go about looking for the best of temporal things, but for the worst, and
Desire to enter for Christ into complete nudity, emptiness, and poverty in Everything in the world"¹

To reach satisfaction in all
Desire its possession in nothing
To come to possess all
Desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all
Desire to be nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all
Desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to the pleasure you have not
You must go by the way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not
You must go by a way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not
You must go by a way in which you possess not.
To come to be what you are not
You must go by a way in which you are not.
When you turn toward something
You cease to case yourself upon the all.
For to go from all to the all
You must deny yourself of all in all.
And when you come to the possession of the all
You must possess it without wanting anything.
Because if you desire to have something in all
Your treasure in God is not purely your all.
In this nakedness the spirit finds
Its quietude and rest.
For in coveting nothing,
Nothing raises it up
And nothing weighs it down,
Because it is in the center of its humility.

¹ The Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book I, Chapter 13, # 6.

When it covets something
In this very desire it is wearied.²

The final episode in the saint's life is profoundly moving. His last journey was to the monastery in Ubeda. When the very ill John of the Cross arrived at the monastery the Prior, Francisco Crisostomo, assigned him the worst cell in the monastery. The prior was a harsh, mean-spirited man who resented St. John of the Cross' reputation for holiness and was greatly annoyed by the trouble of caring for the very ill saint whose condition grew progressively more painful and serious. His legs became ulcerated. As that condition grew worse the disease spread to his back.

Tumors appeared on the saint's body that were larger than a fist. Realizing that he was dying, the saint painfully hobbled to Fray Crisostomo to ask his pardon for all the trouble and expense he caused him and the monastery. The humility and sincerity of the dying saint radically changed the prior who begged the saint's forgiveness. From that point Francisco Crisostomo lived differently and died a holy man. St. John of the Cross was only forty-nine years old when he died. In his declining years St. John of the Cross asked God for three favors. All three were granted: "not to die as a superior; to die in a place where he was unknown; and to die after having suffered much"³

"Be not afraid!"

Saints like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila function in like the Old Testament prophets in that they make us face our unfaithfulness. The biblical idea of a prophet is not that of a spiritual fortune teller, but someone who is called to a special mission as conduit of truth. The Holy Spirit has raised two unique prophetic voices, a man and a woman, to lead the world to truth during the second half of this century. They are Pope John Paul II and Mother Theresa of Calcutta.

Mother Teresa's life was a prophecy in action that uniquely exemplified Jesus' declaration: "By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). Summarizing her motivation she said: "At the end of our lives, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat. I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless and you took me in.' Hungry not only for bread - but hungry for love. Naked not only for clothing - but naked of human dignity and respect. Homeless not only for want of a room of bricks - but homeless because of rejection. This is Christ in distressing disguise."⁴

Imagine yourself in a small boat during a life-threatening storm at sea. The sky is dark and forbidding. Visibility is greatly limited by what appears to be a wall of black ink. Rain lashes across the deck, while wind and waves crash against the hull. The situation is deteriorating rapidly as the wind and sea builds in intensity. However, there is one possibility of a safe haven - if only you can reach the protected harbor somewhere ahead. It all depends on seeing the beacon to the immediate right of the harbor entrance. Imagine the relief when the first dim glimpse of that light is spotted in the darkness. You can be certain from that moment all eyes will be fixed in that one direction.

We are living in a spiritual tempest. As we plow ahead in the journey of life there are only two possibilities: the safe haven of heaven or eternal damnation. In the towering figure of John Paul II we have a beacon that can lead us to safety. In these dangerous times it is wise to keep your eyes open. With your right eye pay attention to the Holy Father. Listen to what he teaches. With your left eye pay attention to

² bid., # 11.

³ Kozlowski, *Spiritual Direction & Spiritual Directors*, p. 335..

⁴ *Works of Love are Works of Peace: Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the Missionaries of Charity*, by Michael Collopy, p. 35.

bishops, priests, theologians, family and friends, and the world around you. However, when there is a conflict between the left eye and the right eye, close the left eye and only look out of the right eye - obey and follow Pope John Paul II. For the days ahead, I can give you no better advice. This Pope, more than any other man on earth, has traveled the world to proclaim the truth. Pope John Paul II is the prophet of truth to our confused age!

What, then, is the Pope saying? "Be not afraid!" John Paul II is wonderfully optimistic. He calls us to join in a new evangelization that will result in a new springtime in the Church. It's important to realize that John Paul II is not naive or simplistic. This is a man who has experienced great tragedy and suffering - the result of our culture of death. He experienced the horror of Nazism and the brutal oppression of Communism. He has a perspective of the spiritual state of the world that is equaled by no other man on earth. No wonder he walks with a bent! He is on record as affirming that if the current moral crisis deepens there is a danger of "a new era of barbarism that will follow this century of tears."

John Paul II is also painfully aware of the defections and sinfulness in the Church. He grieves over the priests and religious who are being killed with ever greater frequency. As I see him old, bowed, and weary as he travels around the world calling men to God, I envision Jesus staggering through the streets of Jerusalem on his way to calvary. No, John Paul II is anything but naive. Yet he is not anxious, timid or pessimistic. He knows the challenge is great, but he tells us "the time is right." He reassures us, "Be not afraid!"

Like John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus during the first Advent he calls us in the first place to repent - the challenge of personal conversion. During the precious days ahead let us respond to this call by our surrender to Christ. The Pope reminds us that our response to God's call to holiness is our most important preparation for the future.

A divided heart is a painful trial in any loving relationship. Which of us would think we had an ideal marriage if our spouse was faithful in the big things, but whose behavior toward you in every other way said my heart is elsewhere - I don't love you? Do we think the heart of Jesus is any less sensitive or less demanding?

Let me share the secret of how to be prepared for any contingency in the new millennium. Fall in love with Jesus. Surrender to Jesus with an undivided heart. Then we will discover the great secret of Mother Teresa and John Paul II, namely, love has a far greater potency than the greatest power of destruction!

The martyrdom of Padre Pro exemplifies this principle. When Blessed Padre Pro was sentenced to death, the official who unjustly ordered his execution allowed the event to be photographed. He was certain that the sight of the execution would discredit Catholicism. The reality was the opposite. The example of this fearless young priest's death triggered a revival of devotion throughout Mexico. Love has a far greater potency than the greatest power of destruction!

Why is a conversion process necessary at this time? This is an important question. The Vicar of Jesus Christ assures the world collectively and each person individually that God is prepared to pour out superabundant graces on us during the coming jubilee - graces that can transform the whole world! However, our dispositions can hinder the reception of these graces. Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient. We cannot pump an ocean into a swimming pool; neither can we pour an ocean of graces into a closed and divided heart! The following recommendations will dispose us to receive great grace as we enter the new millennium.

Step # 1 - We need to begin with the realization that love, which is expressed in our commitment to Christ, is not an emotion or sentimentality. Feelings are like fool's gold. They glitter, but have no value. True love embraces two qualities. The first component is commitment, which is the unswerving decision to do the right thing in spite of those feelings that pull us in the opposite direction. The second element is

sacrifice, especially the dying to selfishness that enables us to be obedient to God and loving toward others. Commitment and Sacrifice requires real courage. So our Holy Father urges us, "Do not be afraid!" This first step requires a decision for Christ.

Step # 2 - Do not pass Go. Do not collect \$200. Go directly to - no, not jail - but to the confessional. Regular confession is constant reminder that apart from Jesus we can do nothing (Jn 15:5). Confession is a renewal of our commitment to Christ and a source of the strength needed to be faithful to that commitment. The confessional is not only a time for seeking forgiveness. It is also a time for granting forgiveness. Nothing hinders grace like an unforgiving heart. It's worse than clogged arteries. Therefore, it is vital that we forgive those who have trespassed against us.

Step # 3 - The Eucharist. The Eucharist is the source and the summit of the Christian life. In the Eucharistic sacrifice Jesus offers us with himself to the Father. This enables us to proclaim "through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor [notice, all glory and honor], is yours almighty Father." In the Eucharist we receive Jesus into our bodies, but he transforms us into himself. "Full participation" in Mass is our entrance into these two mysteries: the sacrifice on Calvary extended into time and eternity, and our communion with Jesus - the consummation rite of the wedding of the Lamb.

Step # 4 - Visit the hidden Jesus. Few of us are so fortunate that we are not caught up in the noise and the busyness that is characteristic of modern living. Time spent quietly with the hidden Jesus brings peace, order and perspective to one's life. Time spent with the hidden Jesus fosters and sustains the sharing intimacy that is at the core of a truly loving relationship with Jesus. Time spent with the hidden Jesus brings about a change in us so that like St. Paul we may truly say, "I live, no not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). This transformation is seen, for example, in the young life of little Francisco, who spent many hours talking to the hidden Jesus. He was only 9 or 10 at the time of his death in Fatima, yet he will be beatified with little Jacinta during the Jubilee year.

Let us approach the new millennium and the Jubilee year with the renewed confidence and determination to surrender to Christ and to conquer the world for him. That's the goal of our preparation. The Holy Father instructs us that "all Christians must commit themselves to evangelization."⁵ In this the laity play a vital role. The Pope affirms that the success of the new evangelization "will depend in a decisive way on the lay faithful being fully aware of their baptismal vocation and their responsibility for bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to their culture and society."⁶

Where do we find our field of evangelization? We find it in the workplace, science, classroom, medicine, politics, entertainment, sports, print media, TV, movies, music, and radio - in other words, the world. However, according to John Paul II, "the immediate and in many ways most important arena of the laity's Christian witness is marriage and the family. . . The family is placed at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love."⁷ It is essential that we make our families centers of self-sacrificing love. I've seen miracles occur in families once Jesus becomes the center of things.

A year ago a divorced women with a ten year old daughter attended a class that explained the Christian concept of marriage. Her heart was so moved that she accepted her responsibility for her broken marriage. She then called her ex-husband who was living in Denver and asked for his forgiveness. He was so stirred by her sincerity that he asked her to send him the class tapes. This began a dialogue that rekindled their friendship and love. He gave up his career in Denver to move back to the New Orleans area to be near his ex-wife and daughter. Subsequently, they were remarried in the Catholic Church. They are

⁵ John Paul II, *Springtime of Evangelization*, p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

now expecting their second child! Miracles happen when Jesus becomes the center of married relationships.

In the refrain of a popular hymn Jesus says to us: Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest. Let's boldly enter the new millennium committed to Christ with a contrite heart and the determination to conquer the world for Jesus Christ as we prepare for and await a new springtime.