

## **The Coming of the Third Millennium**

Letter to all Australians marking "The Coming of the Third Millennium"  
The Catholic Bishops of Australia have released a Letter to all Australians to mark the coming of the Great Jubilee in the Year 2000.

The Letter entitled, "The Coming of the Third Millennium" is the official statement of the Catholic Church in Australia as it builds up to the celebration marking the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Significantly, the Letter is being released in the week the Catholic Church in Australia celebrates its first Aboriginal and Torres Islander Sunday. Over the next three years the Bishops have expressed a desire to "further the cause of reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and those whose forebears have come from other countries". "We believe that we cannot celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ with authenticity if we cannot be reconciled with one another", say the Bishops.

They also make a commitment to participate in the elimination, or reduction of, third world debt; to reflect on the Church's failings in the last 1000 years; to work with other Christians to overcome division; and to continue to strengthen the Catholic Church's relationship with non-Christian religions.

The Bishops acknowledge that here in Australia the Church's celebration of the Great Jubilee coincides with two other great events for all Australians, the Centenary of Federation and the Olympic Games in Sydney and ask that the Christian dimension of Australian culture be "allowed to find expression" and "given a place in Australian social and cultural life".

### **The Coming of the Third Millennium**

A Letter to All Australians from the Catholic Bishops of Australia  
Preparations are well underway in Australia for the Olympic Games in Sydney in the Year 2000. This important and exciting event is capturing the imagination of many Australians. We are also preparing to celebrate the centenary of Federation in the Year 2001, recognising that this is an historic moment in which the nation is called to take stock of its history and to prepare for its future. Some are excited by the possibilities of a new millennium with the prospect of farewellling the past and moving into a whole new era. Others are becoming anxious because such a point of history generates in many a concern about the world and the security of its institutions, its ecology, and its political relationships.

Inspired by an Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II entitled Tertio Millennio Adveniente (The Coming of the Third Millennium), the Australian Catholic Bishops wish to make public their commitment to celebrating in the Year 2000, a Year of Jubilee, indeed, a Year of Great Jubilee. According to our calendar, the year 2000 will mark the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. For Christians, the birth of Jesus Christ initiates the central events of our salvation, establishing for us a relationship with God which became the foundation of our lives and our history from that point on.

The Catholic Church is preparing over these three years for the celebration of this momentous anniversary. To that end, Pope John Paul II has called us to find ways of being renewed as a Church. Each year has a particular agenda for renewal and in each year we are invited to reflect upon the mystery of God by focussing in turn on

one person of the Holy Trinity. The year 1997 calls us to reflect upon Jesus Christ. The year 1998 calls us to discover the mystery of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The year 1999 draws us into a new relationship with God whom we call Father. Moreover, in 1998, Catholic bishops from all the countries of Oceania will participate in a Synod in Rome on the theme Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania: Walking His Way, Telling His Truth, Living His Life, which will be prepared for by a wide-ranging consultation throughout the region.

In the year 2000 itself, we will not simply be celebrating a great anniversary. We will also, at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, be celebrating a Year of Great Jubilee. This greatest of jubilees is perceived as part of a long tradition of jubilees beginning in the history of God's people described in the Old Testament. It is a year like the one described in Leviticus 25:10: "You shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family". In such years equality was to be recovered, freedom, property and land were to be restored to the dispossessed, and so the poor were to be protected and cared for.

For this new jubilee Pope John Paul calls us to the same goals as did the prophets. He suggests, for example, that in the spirit of the Book of Leviticus: "Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not cancelling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations" (51, Tertio Millennio Adveniente).

But more even than this, the coming Jubilee stands in the tradition of the "year of the Lord's favour" (Isaiah 61:2) which Jesus proclaimed as happening in his life, when he spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Just as all previous jubilees looked forward to this fulfilment so all Church holy years or years of jubilee since then have looked back to the incarnation. They also celebrate the whole mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection. So it is that Pope John Paul can speak of this coming celebration as one demonstrating that "the Church rejoices in salvation. She invites everyone to rejoice, and she tries to create conditions to ensure that the power of salvation may be shared by all. Hence the Year 2000 will be celebrated as the Great Jubilee" (16, Tertio Millennio Adveniente).

In practice this will mean many things. A Jubilee is a time of rejoicing and thanksgiving for the graciousness of God. In this case we will give thanks for the gift of Jesus Christ and for two thousand years of Christian history. But in order to celebrate a Jubilee, the Church is called to look back on this last millennium and see where it may have failed in its fidelity to Jesus Christ and to his call.

Where the members of the Church are found to have been at fault throughout history and in the history of our own country, the Jubilee will be the occasion for an expression of our sorrow and a commitment to avoid such failures in the future.

We commit ourselves to furthering the cause of justice in this country in the spirit of Jubilee. We especially commit ourselves to furthering the cause of reconciliation between Indigenous Australians and those whose forebears have come from other countries. We believe that we cannot celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ with any authenticity if we are not reconciled with one another.

We recognise that many Australians in our cities and in rural Australia are bearing the heavy burden of unemployment and poverty and we will play our part as a Catholic community in finding ways of alleviating their suffering. Last year a national

conference on the theme People First! carried one step further our attempt to find practical strategies which will assist in the "eradication of poverty", as part of the decade dedicated to this goal by the United Nations. We will participate, to the best of our ability, in Pope John Paul II's own project to eliminate, or at least to reduce substantially, the debt of the Third World in the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee is also an occasion to remove from our natural environment any unnecessary burdens which are sometimes laid upon it by developments designed to serve the interests of the human community.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Pope John Paul II's own letter on the Third Millennium was his commitment to work with other Christian Churches to overcome one of the great failures of the Second Millennium, namely, the divisions among Christians. He said: "The approaching end of the Second Millennium demands of everyone an examination of conscience and the promotion of ecumenical initiatives, so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the Second Millennium" (34, Tertio Millennio Adveniente).

Therefore, we reaffirm our commitment to working with other Churches through State ecumenical bodies, local ecumenical committees and through the National Council of Churches in Australia. We will celebrate with other Churches this great anniversary and we will work with ecumenical bodies to prepare the actual celebrations in the Year 2000 itself, as is already happening nationally and on many other levels. While each Christian communion will no doubt have its own way of keeping this anniversary, we hope that all Christians could join together for this extraordinary moment of history, to acknowledge to each other and to the world our gratitude to God for the great gift of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, we do not wish members of other world religions to perceive in our preparations or our celebration any intention on our part to jeopardise the cordial relationships that have developed in recent years, and the level of collaboration we have achieved in working together for justice and peace in our world. We will continue our dialogue with them about God and the future of humanity. We would be happy if they were able to appreciate the significance of this anniversary for us, and were in some way able to work with us to achieve some of the goals of a Year of Great Jubilee.

We ask the Governments of Australia on all levels, as they prepare for celebrations in years 2000 and 2001, to recognise that the Australian people are a spiritual people, the majority of whom are Christians. For them the Jubilee Year of 2000 has a special significance.

We hope that in the major events organised in those two momentous years, this Christian dimension of Australian life will be allowed to find expression, and that the Christian anniversary in the Year 2000 will be acknowledged and given a place in Australian social and cultural life.

We invite all exponents of the Arts to realise the significance of this year for so many of us and to find a place in their programs for performances or exhibitions which would respond to this particular anniversary being celebrated in the year 2000.

This Year of Great Jubilee is not only an occasion for the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches to rejoice in the great gift it has received from God, the gift of Jesus Christ, and two thousand years of Christian history. It is also an occasion for us to reaffirm our commitment to serve our brothers and sisters in Australia and to

pray to be renewed by the Holy Spirit so that we might serve them with greater integrity and with greater generosity. We approach this anniversary with real humility. We make no claim to be perfect, and indeed we never have been. On an occasion like this, we become even more conscious of our responsibility to live the gospel that we have received and to celebrate joyfully the great gift we have been given in Jesus Christ.

We commit ourselves at the turn of the millennium, in the Year of Great Jubilee, to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, to strive for personal holiness, to live and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, to promote the unity of all Christians, and to work with all Australians for peace and justice and to protect the world that God has created, a world so loved by God that the Son took flesh two thousand years ago and dwelt among us - Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever!