

1999: The Year of God the Father

By Rev. Francis J. Peffley

Soon we will begin the year 1999, and as the Third Millennium dawns, I know many Catholics who are discouraged and downhearted about the state of our culture. The social ills that plague us seem to grow ever worse—abortion, divorce, crime, immorality and violence in the media.

Yet the Holy Father assures us that the year 2000 can be a “springtime” for Christianity. Why is he so optimistic?

The answer is that no matter how corrupt the surrounding culture, the Church always has the power of spiritual renewal. And in his encyclical *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (the advent of the Third Millennium), the Holy Father tells us how to tap into that power. He has outlined a three-year-plan leading up to the millennium, and has asked Catholics around the globe to actively participate in that plan.

In each of the three years, the Holy Father focuses our attention on one of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, one of the three cardinal virtues, and one of the sacraments. The first, 1997, was designated the year of Jesus Christ. The featured virtue was faith, and the sacrament was baptism. The year now ending was the year of the Holy Spirit; the featured virtue was hope, and the sacrament was confirmation. In the year 1999 we are asked to give special attention and devotion to God the Father; to focus on the virtue of love, and to make use of the sacrament of penance.

As the whole Church follows the leadership of the Holy Father in making this year a time of prayer, penance, and preparation, we can indeed hope for a tremendous Jubilee Year at the dawn of the millennium. For some practical steps you can take, in order to play your own part in this time of purifying and strengthening of the Church, let me recommend the following practices:

1. Read the Catechism of the Catholic Church. All true devotion begins with doctrine. The better we know God, the better we can worship Him. The Catechism contains an excellent section on God the Father, the source and goal of all things. You should also read the sections on Jesus, who came from the Father and takes us back to the Father. Without Christ the Father is unknowable. “The Father and I are one,” Jesus told Philip; “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” Read the Scriptures as well, especially the life of Christ, so you may know the Father through knowing the Son.

2. Meditate on the Lord’s Prayer. Our devotion ought to begin with the Our Father, the prayer taught by our Lord Himself. Pray it slowly, meditating on every word, every phrase. When St. Teresa of Avila was asked for advice on how to pray, she replied, “Say the Our Father, but take an hour to say it.” Mediate on what it means to address God as our Father. Or on why we say, “Our Father,” not “My Father,” taking the opportunity to pray

for our brothers and sisters.

The word Jesus uses for “Father” is “Abba” which in the original Aramaic is the term little children use, akin to our word “Daddy.” Once on a trip to the Holy Land I was in a bakery in Jerusalem and heard a little boy say, “Abba.” I turned around and was touched to see a little three-year-old child reaching up to his daddy to be held. So when we pray the Our Father, in our hearts we could say, “Our Daddy.” Jesus is teaching us that our relationship with God the Father is to be the most intimate and tender of relationships.

3. Develop a devotion to St. Joseph. St. Joseph is the head of the Holy Family, the earthly reflection of God the Father. He is the greatest saint next to Our Blessed Mother. St. Teresa of Avila writes that whenever she had a difficulty she would pray to St. Joseph, because he never failed to help her. He is the patron saint of the universal Church, of a happy death, of husbands and workers. The Church applies to St. Joseph the words from the story of Joseph and his brothers in the Old Testament: “Go to Joseph” in time of need. During this coming year, especially during the month of March (the month of St. Joseph), read, study, and pray to develop an intense love for this great saint.

4. Participate in the Mass as an offering to God the Father. Our private prayers are perfected in our corporate worship in the Church. Did you ever notice that all the Eucharistic prayers are directed to God the Father? For example, we say, “We come to you, Father, with praise and thanksgiving through Jesus Christ Our Lord.” As you participate in the liturgy this year, remind yourself that in it we join Jesus in offering Himself to God the Father.

5. Meditate on the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Pope has chosen penance as the sacrament most closely connected with God the Father, and this parable shows us why. A better title would be the parable of the Merciful Father. The son wastes his inheritance and hits rock bottom, but he comes back in sorrow and repentance to find that his father was always there, waiting and watching for him to return. This is the image we should have of God the Father. Focus your attention on this story throughout this coming year, praying that you may come to realize fully the kind of love God the Father has for each of us: unconditional and everlasting.

6. Participate often in the sacrament of penance. We ourselves are “prodigal sons”, and as we meditate on the parable, we will feel the need to make things right with our Heavenly Father. This is the purpose of confession. In this sacrament the priest prays, “God the Father of Mercies, through the death and resurrection of His Son, has reconciled the world to Himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.” In short, the heart of this sacrament is the forgiveness and mercy of the Father.

We should make a good examination of conscience before going to confession. Some people tell me that they don’t have any sins to confess, or that they say the same things again and again. If you find yourself in that position, make a resolution this year to sensitize your heart by praying to the Holy Spirit and reading through a good examination of conscience.

If you haven't gone to confession in years, why not try for seasonal confessions—summer, fall, winter, and spring. If you're already in the habit of regular confession, why not try making it monthly? Perhaps as part of First Friday/First Saturday devotions. You owe it to yourself as well as God to balance your "spiritual checkbook" regularly.

7. Encourage others to participate regularly in the sacrament of confession, especially those who have been away for a long time. Get several extra copies of a booklet on how to make a good confession (such as a Guide to Confession by the World Apostolate of Fatima) and give them out during the course of the year. Encourage fallen-away Catholics to come back to this sacrament. If a relative is coming over, leave the booklet on the table or around the house where they will see it. Think of all the ways you can evangelize your family and friends.

8. Promote good Christian Fatherhood. There are wonderful movements in the Church devoted to promoting the biblical practice of fatherhood, such as St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers. Groups like these help fathers to be the spiritual leaders in the home that God intends them to be. Fathers should set an example of prayer, church attendance, and virtue, being imitators of St. Joseph. In the year 1999, pray for a renewal of Christian fatherhood—that fathers and grandfathers will take responsibility for sanctifying the home and bringing children and grandchildren closer to Jesus Christ.

9. Grow in the virtue of love. All our religious observances, all our acts of obedience, are nothing unless they are motivated by love. Pray for a clear vision of God's fatherly love for you personally, that you may respond in the Spirit of His Son and learn to love others as God has loved us. How can we grow in the virtue of love? The best and most known description of love is found in St. Paul's letter (1Cor 13.) Read this passage and meditate on it often; write it out on the back of a holy card and put it on your mirror so you will read it every day.

10. Increase your personal devotion to Mary. As always, Mary is our model of love. Her Immaculate Heart is on fire with love for God. We should see Our Lady as the chosen daughter of God the Father, and try in this coming year to grow in tender devotion to her as we develop our own virtue of love. For too many Catholics, love for God the Father has grown cold. Our Blessed Mother will rekindle the flame, will fan each spark of love into a fire so that we will once again love God as we ought, responding to Him as our Heavenly Father.

As we enter the final year before the millennium, let's be inspired by the Holy Father's vision to make the year 1999 a stepping stone to renewal and restoration of our faith. The culture around us may be sliding into ever-deeper moral degradation, but as Catholics we can not let ourselves be overcome by pessimism. Instead let us take this opportunity to join the Church, led by the Holy Father, in making the year 2000 a "springtime" of Christianity.

