

Inaugurating a Millennium of Mercy

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

It is precisely because sin exists in the world, which God so loved, that He gave His only Son, the God who is love, cannot reveal Himself otherwise than as mercy.


Encyclical Dives in Misericordia

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 is begun determines to a large extent what it will become. 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 better than the Second Millennium, which has been a Millennium of brutal mercilessness. No new spiritual North Star appears to be on the horizon. No new guiding light is being offered to humanity. No new telescope for the spirit is being unveiled by which people can see the Light presently shining in the human darkness. So it is morally certain that January 1, 2000 will be governed by the same spirits as December 31, 1999. It is equally certain that if the spirits with which the Third Millennium begins are the spirits with which the Second Millennium ends, then an avalanche of unimaginable tragedy awaits humanity.

This should not happen. 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 the mustard seed of a new spirit in the new millennium but that She also has the responsibility for doing so. Only the spiritually novocained are unable to hear the anguished cries from a future dominated by the ugly spirits of the past.

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 A.D., anno Domini. We are in a new time: a time when God has become human 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 when redemption through the Cross of Jesus Christ is available, a time when the resurrection of Jesus Christ



makes the word "impossible" obsolete in the Christian dictionary. Human existence is not as it was before Christ, B.C. Above all, in this new time the true God is made known and visible by Jesus Christ through His Church (Jn 14:9, Col 1:15). And, what is the visible image of the invisible God that Jesus reveals 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," writes Pope John Paul II. (Dives in Misericordia, 1) This new time, this A.D., is the time of the Father, who two thousand years ago was revealed to be rich in mercy. Therefore the New Millennium from its first day should be recognized as a time that is to be made blessed by being made mercy-full. The Third Millennium must be a Millennium of Mercy.

John Paul II states that, "The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy" (Dives in Misericordia, 13). However, in a world drenched in normalized mercilessness 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. "Christ's messianic program, the program of mercy, becomes the program of His people, the program of the



Church,” explains John Paul II. (Dives in Misericordia, 8) But, in a world where the power of evil is so entrenched, an irreversible commitment to mercy can be costly — as is made so clear on Calvary, the Mount of Mercy Eternal.

So what great act of mercy does the Church have within Her power to bring to the beginning of the Third Millennium that could engender in this new time 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? The source of the pandemic of mercilessness that plagues humanity is sin. Unless sin can be forgiven, unless evil can be conquered and not just coped with, then the human situation is hopeless. But, if sin can be forgiven, if evil can be vanquished, if reconciliation with God can take place, then unimaginable good is possible.

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 commence-

ment 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 Vicar of Christ, John Paul II, at some appropriate time early in the year, e.g. Mercy Sunday, Good Shepherd Sunday, grant the mercy of general absolution to all Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics, provided they believe in the power of the keys and repent of their sins. Everything would be forgiven by God through the Church. There would be no need to ever 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, reconciled with God and filled with a zeal for being merciful. 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 this mustard seed of mercy at the dawn of the Third Millennium by granting universal 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, noble and realistic. 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 longs to know — the 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 “lost-ness.” 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 15:4-7, Mt 18:12-14). This is exactly what the good shepherd does. Indeed, a good shepherd will do all he is capable of doing to save his sheep, even unto laying down his life for them (Jn 10:10,11). The ordinary routine is broken by the shepherd because he has an extraordinary event occurring, that is, a sheep is lost, and he 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 lucidly see and to intensely experience Jesus and by extension the Church as they were predominantly 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 urban France it is 9%. In rural France it is only 20%. 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 Penance. The percentage of Catholics participating in this Sacrament is in the single digits of the entire Catholic population. Why the psychiatrists’ offices are full and the confessional boxes are empty is one of the three or four most critical questions the Church has to face. However, it is a question beyond the scope of this article. My only point is that the Good Shepherd makes every effort to bring the sheep back to the fold with a superabundance of mercy, with instant and total forgiveness for the contrite heart! The beginning of the Third Millennium is an opportunity to unreservedly invite home all those who have left and to welcome them



in the same fashion that the Father welcomes 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 mediate to 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 paralyzed lost sheep remains lost, if the Prodigal Son cannot surmount the humanly-created impediments, obstacles and embarrassments that prevent him from reaching his Father and experiencing his Father’s superabundant 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). No

more is needed! Instantly the Father exclaims to his servants, “Prepare a feast, a celebration, 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 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). 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 the desire to control or rule others. The imitation of the true God is the imitation of a God who “is kind to the wicked and ungrateful” (Lk 6:27-38, Mt 5:40). 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 the son and daughter as the prodigal heavenly Father forgives?

Since the year A.D. 2000 has been declared a Jubilee Year by the Church what action is it that the Church could take that would be more spiritually fitting than the general absolution of all sins for all Catholics who are repentant and for all other Christians who

believe in the power of the keys and 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 is effected is the liberation from the slavery of sin and death. 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 15:1ff; 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 times B.C. and is what it can be about in times A.D. The only difference being that the former is concerned with monetary and property matters while the latter is concerned with sin and salvation. The unbound general absolution from all sins for those who wish to be freed, forgiven and restored to spiritual wholeness at the beginning of a new millennium, whose first year has been declared a Jubilee Year, would be biblically and pastorally sound and perhaps world altering. In any case, it certainly would be a time of jubilation.

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 love of enemies. But, is He only petitioning the Father on behalf of those 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. 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 requesting 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 of the Father of Mercies. Would it not be proper and right 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 Calvary and grant

by the grace of God universal general absolution to all repentant Christians who desire it? Would it not be Christ-like?

This is an extra-ordinary moment in time and hence extra-ordinary means must be employed. It is therefore obvious that an extra-ordinary canonical option for administering the Sacrament of Penance is pastorally in order. In the name of mercy, the authority and universal jurisdiction of the Pope could readily make the necessary adjustments in the rubrics of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Canon Law tells us that, "(T)he salvation of souls is always the supreme law of the Church." (Canon # 1752) As John Paul II makes clear in "Dives in Misericordia", "(L)ove 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 a year of universal catechesis on Divine Mercy in which "Dives in Misericordia" is the basic, and perhaps, the exclusive pedagogical text should precede universal general absolution. A year of catechesis by the Church on Divine Mercy 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)

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. Neither economics, nor government nor multi-national corporations have any interest in it nor do they have any

(continued on page 29)

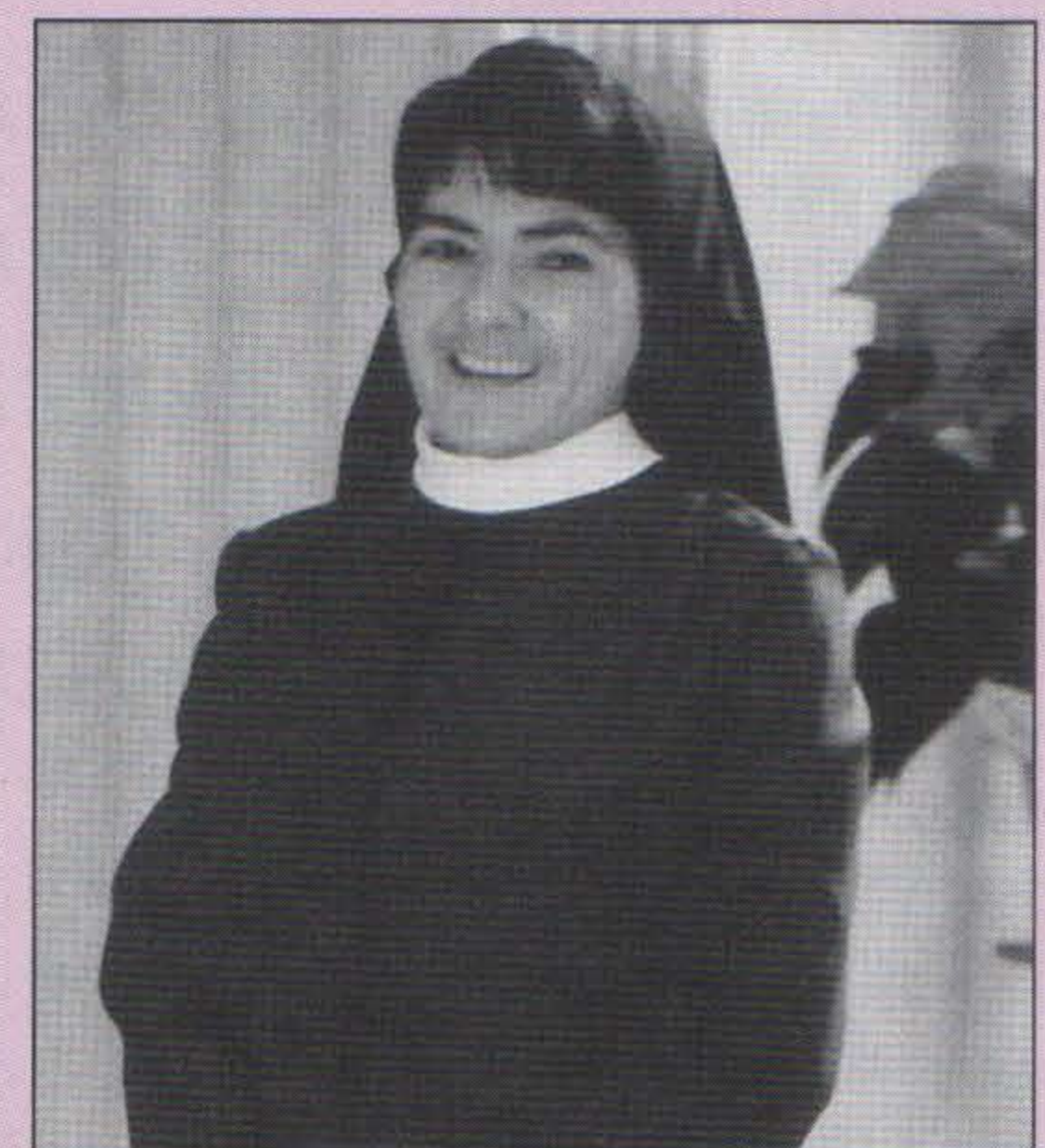


**FRANCISCAN JOY
IS BECOMING A LIVING PRAYER
IN CEASELESS ADORATION FOR GOD.**

Celebrating Jesus' Eucharistic presence,
the Sisters of St. Francis of Perpetual Adoration
unite prayer and action through adoration and works of
mercy in healthcare, education and other ecclesial ministries.

Come, share our joy!

Contact:
Vocation Director
St. Francis Convent
P.O. Box 766
MISHAWAKA, IN 46546
Tel (219) 259-5427
www.ssfpa.org



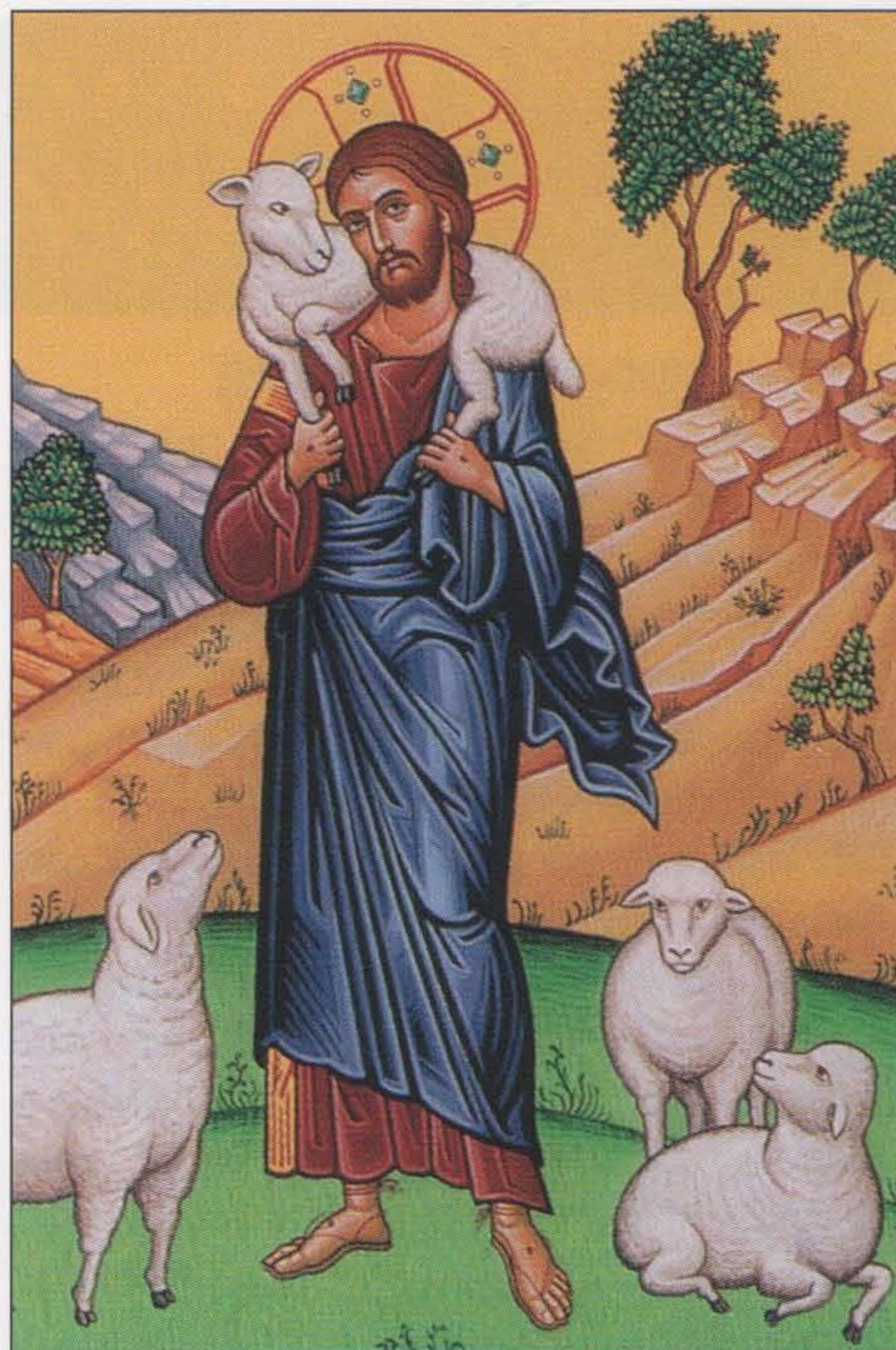
Inaugurating a Millennium of Mercy

(continued from page 7)

interest in ennobling it. 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 wait to hear the merciful voice of the searching shepherd. So many, so very many wait and pine for that joy that can only come from the mercy of total unconditional forgiveness, from hearing those words of Jesus applied to themselves: "Your sins are forgiven."

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 faith in Jesus who made mercy a conversion demand: "I want mercy not sacrifice." (Mt 9:13); who proclaimed it to be the standard 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 is "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 and trusting in Jesus have little standing and less support. However, it is this very world which must be shown that mercy is the power of God, that Jesus is trustworthy. This cannot be done by words alone. 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 experienced by the world.

"Mercy (is) the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and the Redeemer," proclaims John Paul II in "Dives in Misericordia." (p. 13) It is the mercy of God that is the motive of His saving will, not the merits of men and women. It 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 always is a gift. A day of universal absolution and reconciliation 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: He expects mercy (Mt 18:23-35; Mt 25:31-46; Mt 9:13; Lk 6:35). The genuine face of mercy has to be ever revealed anew. 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) Also revealed anew would be the good news that God is a Father, "who is rich in mercy."

Let us then leave the last word on this matter to 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

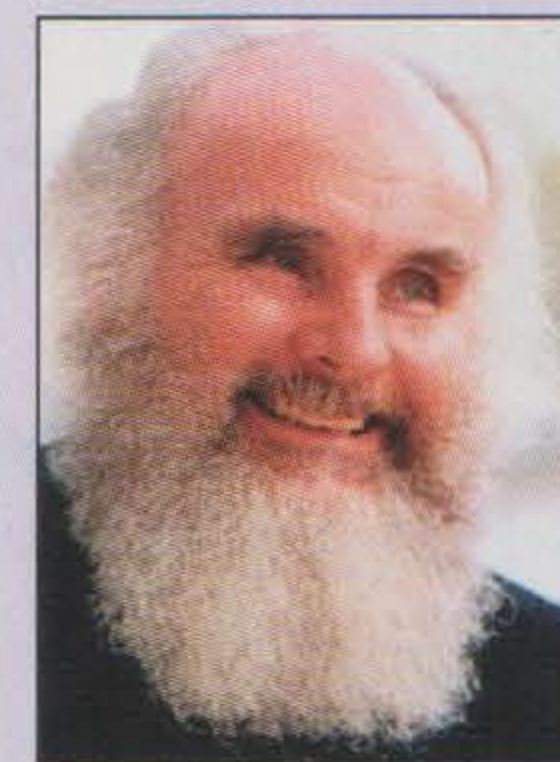
much greater is the need for the Church to utter this word not only in her own name but also in the name of all the men and women of our time.

(*"Dives in Misericordia"*, 15)

May Mary, the Mother of Mercy and the Refuge of sinners, ask her Son, the Good Shepherd, to pour out upon the Church during the Jubilee Year the grace to forgive all, to restore all, to allow all to hear those words of Eternal Mercy and Peace, "I absolve you from your sins." ■

about the author . . .

REV. EMMANUEL CHARLES McCARTHY,



is currently the Acting Rector of St. Gregory the Theologian Melkite Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts. He is internationally known for his retreats. He has also written a booklet entitled: "*Some Guiding Reflections on the*

Icon of the Servant of Yahweh, Blessed Teresa Benedicta of the Cross" while he was in Auschwitz in August of 1992. He is a Catholic Melkite priest and the father of ten children.

Come Now!

Join a small "community" of inquirers. Meet with Sr. Mary Crucifix, to discern together whether the **SISTERS OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST** are right for you!

In making a christian difference in the lives of the poor, the youth and the needy in our world.

- overnights • celebrations
 - prayer experiences
 - and personal interviews included
- You have nothing to lose and ALL to gain!



"Prepare the way for the Lord, straighten out the path where He will walk" Matthew 3:3

Find Out More, Write To:
Sr. Mary Crucifix
Mt. St. John Convent
 22 St. John Drive
 Gladstone, NJ 07934
 (908) 234-0640