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## Millennium

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at St. Bernard's Institute, added that part of the pope's millennium-related fervor can be traced to his "Polish consciousness."

Father Hart explained that the first Christian hierarchy in Poland — the pope's homeland — was established in the year 1000 and paved the way for Poland's incorporation into Western Christianity. Thus the idea of the significance of "millennia" is part of the consciousness of many Poles, including the pope.

For the year 2000, the pontiff is promoting the idea of a worldwide ecumenical celebration. He also plans to tour biblical sites such as Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments; and Damascus, the city in which Saint Paul underwent his conversion.

In the three years prior to 2000, the pontiff will focus on devotion to the Holy Trinity. He has slated 1997 as the year of contemplation on Christ; 1998, on the Holy Spirit; and 1999, on God the Father.

These reflections will complete the pope's two-phase preparation process for the millennium celebration. The first three-year phase, which concludes this year, has been termed by the pontiff as a time of "awareness."

He refers to the current reflection period as a "call to conversion" that is "particularly important in contemporary society, where the very foundations of an ethically correct vision of human existence often seem to have been lost."

Much of the pope's emphasis during this first phase has been on reconciliation, both within the Catholic Church and among Catholics and other faiths.

"The approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an examination of conscience and the promotion of fitting 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," the pope stated.

One bothersome breach the pope cites occurred almost at the second millennium's very beginning. In the early 11th century, the Byzantine Church broke from the Western Church.

"In the course of the 1,000 years now drawing to a close, even more than in the first millennium, ecclesial communion has been painfully wounded ... such wounds openly contradict the will of Christ and are a cause of scandal to the world," the pope stated.

The pope's far-reaching focus on the year 2000 has been influenced not only by church developments, but also by recent world history. In his apostolic letter, he referred to "the profoundly disturbing experiences of the 20th century, a century scarred by the First and Second World Wars, by the experience of concentration camps and by horrendous massacres. All these events demonstrate most vividly that the world needs purification; it needs to be converted."

As far back as 1948, the late Etienne Gilson — former philosophy professor and medieval history expert from St. Michael's College in Toronto — referred to some of these same events when he published "The Terrors of the Year 2000."

Gilson noted in his essay that two world wars and the introduction of nuclear bombing all occurred within the first half of the 20th century. These catastrophic events, Gilson pointed out, led many people in the 1940s to fear that the world's end seemed imminent.

"If the terrors of the year One Thousand are not a certainty for today's historians, those of the year Two Thousand will surely be so for future historians," Gilson stated.

Gilson's uncertainty regarding Christian perspective around the year 1000 is typical, Father Mark A. Miller noted.

"We have very little of what the common people thought," stated Father Miller, pastor of St. Theresa Church in Stanley and St. Mary Church in Rushville.

The Catholic hierarchy's view of the first millennium's conclusion is also unclear, added Father John E. Lynch, CSP, a vice president of graduate studies at Catholic University of America.

"It doesn't appear in any papal letter or documents," said Father Lynch, who specializes in church history from the fourth to the 15th century.

Father Lynch explained that cultures in the Middle Ages thought more in terms of *eras* than precise *years*. For instance, he

said, Christians of that period may have viewed the end of the first millennium as an observance of Christ's death and resurrection, even though the 1000th-anniversary year for those events would have been 1033.

On the other hand, the pope is clearly designating the year 2000 to dwell upon the significance of modern historic events. In his 1994 apostolic letter, he cited the two world wars as prime catalysts for the convening of the Second Vatican Council.

More recently, during a planning meeting for the jubilee year held Feb. 15-16, 1996, in Vatican City, the pope described the millennium celebration as a continuum of Vatican II's intent.

"The state of disorientation and uncertainty in which the modern world often lives should push us to understand how urgent it is for Christians to give witness together to a free and full adhesion to Christ, the truth of humanity," he observed during the mid-February meeting.

John M. Halligan, professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College, believes that the pope's concerns will serve as a good wake-up call for Christians living in a nuclear age.

"We're in a much more precarious state in terms of our capacity to destroy ourselves," Halligan said.

"Because we have that power to destroy, the pope has been emphasizing that we have the power to create."

Even without the potential for atomic warfare, Halligan noted, the year 2000 would still be viewed by some as a time for an apocalyptic or catastrophic event.

Halligan said that these extremists link visions of an apocalypse — an ultimate destruction of evil and triumph of good — to Revelation 20:4. This verse describes the souls of the Christian martyrs who are to reign with Christ for a period of 1,000 years while Satan is locked in an abyss.

However, Halligan said Christians should place greater emphasis on Matthew 24:35-36, in which Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my

word will not pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

The Gospels, Halligan said, "are primary, and the Book of Revelation should be supplementary." He added that Revelation passages contain "arrange codes," owing more to imagery than certifiable data, and therefore should not be taken literally in regard to time periods.

Halligan further noted that Christ's birth cannot even be documented with precision.

"Those are really inaccurate calculations. It could really be two to six years off," Halligan said.

Still, Halligan says that the pontiff is wise to avoid these technicalities for the sake of the bigger picture.

"The pope tries to use what history gives him — to look beyond the year 2000; to focus on the fact we're not permanent here; to get people to turn into themselves and ask if they're ready," Halligan said. "It's a motivation, and he's very good at that."

Father Miller pointed out that the pope brings a futuristic viewpoint — to both this life and the afterlife — that's rarely found in modern society.

"The world has become so secularized that the next world is the farthest thing from their minds," he commented.

At the same time, Halligan said, the pope is going about his preparations "in a non-hysterical way."

This approach was also acknowledged by Father Avery Dulles, SJ, a professor at Fordham University and author of the 1994 book *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith*. In a Nov. 16, 1995, address at Fordham, Father Dulles noted, "Aware that we live today in a highly charged atmosphere in which the flames of mass hysteria can easily be ignited by fanciful speculations, the pope provides no basis for either utopian prognostications or dire apocalyptic premonitions."

The pope's air of optimism, rather than fear, is the perfect approach, said Father Brian Cool.

"I think what (the pope) sees are the great strides that have come to fruition in the last 30 years (since Vatican II)," said Father Cool, parochial vicar at St. John of Rochester Church in Perinton. "The year 2000 will be a vehicle for us to continue the good things that have been happening."

"It will be a bench mark for a lot of people — what have we achieved in the last 1,000 years, and where will we be 1,000 years hence," Halligan added. "It's staggering beyond the imagination."

Because we have (the) power to destroy, the pope has been emphasizing that we have the power to create.

— John M. Halligan, professor St. John Fisher College

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