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Year 2000

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"The messages are saying that this will most likely happen in my lifetime," said Leary, 55, referring to messages he claims to receive from Jesus, the Virgin Mary and saints after Eucharist at daily Mass. The messages form the basis for his books, which regularly place in the top 10 on the national Catholic bestsellers' list for paperbacks.

Dr. John Halligan, religious studies professor at St. John Fisher College, said many of his students seem to be paying close attention to various reports of an apocalyptic year 2000.

However, Halligan strongly dismissed notions that we're living in the end times.

"Why 2000? Why not 1999? Who made up the year 2000?" Halligan remarked, saying that Scriptures never stipulated a specific year for apocalyptic events.

Dr. Christopher Bellitto, author of the 1998 book *What Every Catholic Should Know About the Millennium*, also noted the absence of biblical evidence that an apocalypse will occur next year.

"There is no one clear formula for calculating the End, though people claim to have it," Bellitto wrote.

What's in a number?

Pope John Paul II has opted for a positive spin on the year 2000, using that round number as a motivator for celebration and renewal.

"The 2,000 years which have passed since the birth of Christ represent an extraordinarily great jubilee, not only for Christians but indirectly for the whole of humanity, given the prominent role played by Christianity during these two millennia," the pope stated in his 1994 apostolic letter, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* ("As the Third Millennium Draws Near").

Yet the approaching of the year 2000 has also given rise to millenarianism, a concept based on Rev. 20 that predicts the souls of Christian martyrs will reign with Christ for a 1,000-year period while Satan is locked in an abyss. These 1,000 years are to be a time of peace and prosperity, concluding with the Final Judgment and the End of the World.

Millenarianism has apparently gripped a Denver-based cult, Concerned Christians, who were deported from Israel this month amid concerns they were planning violent demonstrations to further Jesus' return.

Halligan and Bellitto asserted, however, that such beliefs are misguided. They pointed out that no apocalyptic events occurred in the years 1000 or 1033 — the millennial acknowledgements of Christ's birth and

"But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the son, but the Father alone."

The Unknown Day and Hour, Matthew 24

death. Likewise, they said, no basis exists for the year 2000 marking an end or beginning of a 1,000-year reign.

"The wisest person I know is my mother, who says, 'Do you think God would be so obvious as to end the world on Dec. 31, 1999? God rarely is so obvious,'" said Bellitto in a telephone interview from Yonkers, where he serves as assistant professor of church history at St. Joseph's Seminary.

Lindsey agreed on this point in *Planet Earth - 2000 A.D.*, writing, "God clearly wants certain knowledge obscured from mankind. We should never try to outsmart our Heavenly Father."

Signs of the times

Lindsey, however, won't rule out the possibility that we're headed for the end times.

"Think about it. What in the world is happening to us?" Lindsey wrote. "Pre-teen pregnancies ... free condom distribution in the public schools ... drive-by shootings ... kiddie porn ... abortion on demand ... suicide machines ... rampant child abuse." He also cited AIDS.

Falwell, a bitter critic of President Bill Clinton, added Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky to the list, saying the scandal has only served to "lower the moral bar" of our country.

"I believe the moral state of this nation is the lowest it's been in my lifetime," commented Falwell, 65.

Lindsey pointed out that Jesus may not have predicted a precise day or hour for the apocalypse, but "he commanded us to know the general time."

"We are there, folks. We are living in that general time," Lindsey declared.

Further clouding these gray skies is Y2K, an intriguing subject because it's unquestionably linked to the year 2000. Millions of computers — responsible for such vital functions as air traffic control, financial transactions and nuclear power-plant operation — are only programmed to process the last two digits of a year. So if the computers mistakenly interpret the year 2000

as 1900, widespread malfunctions could occur.

"Perhaps this is God's way of humbling us," Falwell told the *Catholic Courier*. "Y2K may be the Lord's way to get our attention."

Falwell said that on one extreme, Y2K is spurring "prophets of doom saying this will bring down Western civilization. Other people say it's nothing more than a bump in the road. I think it's somewhere in between."

Halligan doesn't buy into Y2K as a disaster of epic proportions, noting that many potential problems are already being corrected by computer experts.

But a message Leary claimed he received from Christ on Oct. 12, 1998, predicted tough times because of Y2K: "You have built in an Achilles' heel of a two place date code that will be your undoing. You have neglected to fix the obvious until now it is almost too late to repair all of the problems ... do not depend on your electronic marvels, for they will all be reduced to sand from which many of them were derived."

Leary, a parishioner at Holy Name of Jesus Church in Greece who frequently lectures across the country, said he has sold more than 200,000 copies of his *Prepare for the Great Tribulation* books. His views are not, however, affirmed by Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

"Private revelation, even those recognized by the Church, do not belong to the deposit of faith. Accordingly, the diocese does not endorse Mr. Leary's writings," Bishop Clark stated.

Overreacting?

Bellitto discounted such dramatic predictions as well, noting that great sufferings in history — such as the Black Death of the Middle Ages and African slavery — may also have been viewed as the end times by those who were affected.

"Since the Black Death wasn't the End, why should people point with great certainty to AIDS as a sign of the End, as some are doing?" Bellitto queried.

Bellitto ventured that many people hope to be proven correct: "They're saying that the years of their life are the most important years in the history of the universe. That's a narcissistic view," he commented.

Opportunists are also thriving on this notion, Halligan stated.

"They're going to use the fears of the people. There are going to be a lot of salvation sellers, the quick-fix people," he said.

Even so, Bellitto and Halligan said that such hype will find a wide audience and ignite fear, panic and perhaps even suicides.

"I have tremendous fears about this happening," Bellitto said.

"I think you will have a lot of people rationalizing that this is the year God wants

them to join him," Halligan added. "I think you will see a significant rise in the number of suicides — if the world doesn't take them out, they'll take themselves out."

And all the logic in the world may not change these beliefs, Bellitto said.

"You can't fight an emotional argument with a scholarly argument," he remarked.

Bellitto explained that a well-publicized notion, no matter how radical, carries the potential to grow like wildfire. For example, he said, Adolf Hitler gained enough public support that he could facilitate the killing of 6 million Jews.

"In this age of the Internet, instant communication, and tabloid television ready to make a buck by selling garbage to the gullible, the lunatic fringe can quickly seem like the powerful, loud majority," Bellitto remarked. "At that point, the feeding frenzy of fear rapidly takes over and what ordinarily seems ridiculous begins to appear reasonable."

Proper preparation

Rather than get caught up in a wave of fear, Halligan suggested that Catholics stick close to their faith as they've known it.

"Stay with what is stable," he advised. "If the faith community that you're in is really grounded in the truth, why abandon that?"

Bishop Clark agreed, stating, "My own view of such apocalyptic predictions concurs with that of Pope John Paul II, who has strongly encouraged us to consider the Millennium not as a time of dire events, but as a call to renewed faith and to living faithfully."

Whether or not the end times are upon us, Halligan said that Catholics should always be prepared — not just because the year 2000 is coming up.

"The Scriptures focus not on a specific moment at which the world will come to an end, but rather on our moral need to be ready when it does," Halligan remarked.

Lindsey wrote that Christians should view Jesus' return with hope: "We should not be pessimistic and drop out of the world out of despair for its travails. We should be rejoicing in the knowledge that Jesus could return at any moment. This should and must spur us on to share the good news of salvation in Christ with as many as possible."

Bellitto said that it also wouldn't hurt to lighten up a bit when Dec. 31, 1999, passes into Jan. 1, 2000. Judging from the pope's jubilee agenda, and elaborate galas planned in many countries — not to mention the already high rate of hotel and party house reservations for Dec. 31, 1999 — public sentiment indeed seems to favor celebrating, not fearing, the year 2000.

"I'm pleased to find people reasonably sane," Bellitto quipped.

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