

A Commentary On Novo Millennio Ineunte  
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A few comments by Fr. Dominic Borg, ocd, on the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, January 6, 2001 - NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE [At the Beginning of the New Millennium]. This was a talk given to the Secular Order at St. Andrew the Apostle Church in London, on April 21, 2001, during the Day of Recollection and was typed ad verbatim.

I am going to speak to you this morning on a very important document, "Novo Millennio Ineunte", which came out on the 6th of January this year. It is a document in which the Pope explains to us and sets in front of us the road, the plan that the Church is asked to take. The more I read it and the more I try to understand it and go into the meaning of it, the more I see how Carmelite in Spirit it is. In this document the Pope himself quotes St. Teresa of Jesus, (of Avila), our Holy Mother, St. John of the Cross and St. Thérèse, and he refers to them by name. St. Thérèse is quoted twice. She is referred to by name and there is one place where it speaks about witnesses of love. He quotes St. Thérèse as being the expert on "scienza amore", the science of love. He addressed her in that way. He said that he is proud that he was the one to declare St. Thérèse Doctor of the Church.

The document is very interesting right from the beginning. As soon as we open it we encounter the introduction, and then there are four parts, followed by the conclusion. In the introduction, the first quote that we find in this document is interesting. It is a saying that the Church, the Diocese of Toronto has picked up to use on the 27th of May where the different groups, associations and movements are going to meet in Marylake, in order to express their unity and revive their spirituality. I would like you to learn this saying in Latin. It is very beautiful. It only takes two words. In English it takes more words. The saying is "Duc in altum", which means cast into the deep.

When Jesus Christ met the disciples and they had passed the whole night fishing, but catching nothing, he told them to go out again. Peter said to Him, "Lord, we have passed all night, and we have caught nothing. But, because you say so, I will obey." And he cast the nets. The advice was not only to cast the net, but to cast them into the deep. To live a spirituality which is not as superficial, but a spirituality that goes into the depth. Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 21st century says that the problem of modern Christianity is not sex or drugs, or permissive society, the problem is that we live our Christianity skin deep, superficially. He says "modern man has lost the capacity to go into the depth of things". In each one of us there is a heart that is beautiful. In each one of us there is the image of God which is beautiful. But we remain skin deep, and that is one of the main problems. The Pope said it in different words. In His speeches on Wednesdays, not once or twice he said that the problem with Catholicism nowadays is that we are living it without enthusiasm. If people meet us, and they don't see the zest of life in us, and we say to them "why don't you become a Carmelite, why don't you come and see whether the Lord is calling you", in the meantime you are monotonous, down, depressed, you have been grumbling, or gossiping left, right and centre, judging people - that person will obviously say "I

don't want to join this group. No way", because we will not be true witnesses. So the first thing that the Pope presents in front of us in this document, is "put out into the deep for a catch". It's not in vain, there is a promise, the promise which is given with the precept of prayer. As Pope Paul VI said "prayer is not just a precept, but it is a precept tied to a promise. The precept to pray, the promise you will receive." Ask, you will receive. Knock, the door will be opened. Seek and you will find. On one side there is the commandment on the other side, there is the promise. The one who is making the promise to us is strong enough to fulfil it. However, brothers and sisters, there needs to be this constant dialogue with the one who gives us this command: "Cast into the deep."

The first part is dominated mainly by this saying that the Pope picked up from the Gospel.

The second part is called "Meeting Christ, the Legacy of the Great Jubilee". The first part consists mostly in the Pope relating his own personal experience and the experience of the Church in general through the different events that the Church has passed through, throughout the year of the Jubilee.

Some people are still confused between the Jubilee and the Millennium. We are at the beginning of the third millennium. The year of the Jubilee, we have just left behind us. It was closed on the 6th of January of this year. It was closed to a certain extent, because as the Pope himself said, both in the introduction and in the conclusion of this document that the Door of the Jubilee was closed, but now a new door, much wider, has been opened for each one of us. That door is Jesus Christ. Each one of us has to learn how to pass through this door. Jesus Christ says in the Gospel of St. John "I am the door", "I am the gate, the door of the sheepfold". Some sheepfolds were an open area without any ceiling, but there was an entrance. The entrance had no door. The shepherd himself would lie down to block the entrance to that surrounded area, to that area which was with a boundary wall. That is why the shepherd becomes the door to the sheepfold. Anyone who wants to pass has to come through, over the shepherd. Jesus Christ is the one who guards the evil one from coming in and snatching, taking away, these sheep that belong to the Father. As Jesus Christ himself said in the Gospel of St. John, "Of those that the Father has given me, none of them has been lost, except the son of perdition so that scripture would be fulfilled."

The first part, as I was telling you, consists of meeting Christ, the Legacy of the Great Jubilee, where the Pope relates his experiences with the families, with the youth, with the children, with adults, with people of entertainment. It's amazing when you notice that when he speaks about youth, he takes quite a long section, when he speaks about the children, he also takes a long section to explain. When he speaks about families, again there is quite a long section. But then, when he comes to the experience of the entertainers, there is only a very short paragraph, quickly dismissed, where he tells them that they have the obligation to present good morals and ethics to those people who are watching them, and then he continues on. I found the comment on the artists and people who entertain very dry, where he tells them that they have great influence on those people who watch them on the media, TV or the radio.

After he speaks about his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, we come to the second part entitled A Place to Contemplate. It is from here that we begin to find food for ourselves. The first part, the Legacy of the Jubilee, seems to be a bit of a history, a narrative. It is a personal experience of the Pope. The Pope is speaking in the name of the Church, and he is speaking from his own personal experience. One thing that we should not lose sight of is a statement that he makes later on in this document, where he says that each one of us has his own particular call. God enters into the life of every individual through a private door - which means that your experience of God cannot be the same experience of God that I have. That is why sometimes it is dangerous when we are talking to each other - you will say I know exactly what you mean because I had the same experience - no, you did not have the same experience. There might be a comma, a period, that will alter the experience completely. You might miss a comma, because you are centering on the word so much that you think that it is the same. A classic example is what you find in the bible. A voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord. A voice crying, in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. You have the same words, they are punctuated differently, and the meaning is absolutely different. It is the same with us. That is why not as much importance might be given to the first part of this document, but when we come to the second part, and the third part - the third part really speaks very much to us. You think that you are reading the Rule of Life of the Secular Order.

One thing that comes to your mind as soon as you open the Rule of Life is a "call to holiness". This is what the Pope speaks about in the third section. The third section of this document speaks about starting afresh from Christ. What is the basis for this third part? The second part has finished with the Pope speaking about the Feast of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Resurrection, Easter. He says that this Easter experience is to be prolonged. Each Easter comes to you and to me with an invitation to start anew. And so, the third part is very beautiful when he says here "Starting afresh from Christ". Notice some of the words. I have gone through it myself and I tried to point out what is important, but I ended up highlighting all of it, I will be reading certain parts of it to you, but I encourage you to have this in your hands, and read it and re-read it.

Here, notice what he says "We put the question with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems which we face. We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that faced with the great challenges of our times, we shall find some magic formula. There is no magic formula for holiness." There is no magic formula to live a good spiritual life. He says "No. We shall not be saved by a formula, but by a person." Many are those people who come to me and tell me - What should I do to understand the bible better? What should I do in order to be able to get a message from what I read? The answer is to fall in love with Jesus Christ. Unless we have a love relationship with the Word of God, the Word cannot speak to us properly. The Word of God is a person. The Word of God is Jesus Christ. He is the fullness of the revelation of God the Father. When Philip told him "Show us the Father and it will be enough for us.", Jesus Christ answered "Don't you know Philip that he who has seen me has seen the Father also? How can you dare to ask me to show you the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?" The Pope tells us that we have to fall in love with this person Jesus Christ. As soon as he tells us this, notice what he says "It is not therefore a

matter of inventing a new program. The program already exists. It is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living tradition. It is the same as ever." Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is not a matter of finding a new formula, a new program to live. It is a matter of living the Gospel in a very radical way, without compromise living this commitment, this perseverance, otherwise brothers and sisters, we will not be able to enjoy the tasty food of the banquet that Jesus Christ has in store for us. He says in the Gospel "Those who stand by me to the end will eat with me on the table that my Father has prepared for me since the foundation of the world."

The Pope makes it explicit that here we are not speaking about something new, he says that this program, which is the gospel, is our program for all time, and it is the program for the third millennium. Then he exhorts the pastors of the Church to help the people so that they will live this journey and take as a guide the Gospel. And now he says "What awaits us therefore is an exciting work of pastoral revitalization." It's not re-evangelization, which he does use later on. He also uses the word "new evangelization" and he says that Mary is the Star of the New Evangelization, and he has placed the third millennium under her guidance. It is beautiful how, in the conclusion, the Pope takes the words of Jesus Christ on the Cross, where he said to John "Behold your mother" and he switched them to the plural. "Behold our mother." It is not just in the singular, but also in the plural. Here the Pope says "What awaits us therefore is an exciting work of pastoral revitalization, a work involving all of us." There is the individual aspect and the communion aspect of spirituality.

In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, it is a people that God calls for life, it is a people that God calls for holiness, it is not individuals, but it is a community. Here we see the beauty and importance of the community. Certain experiences that a person can experience in a community, he would never be able to experience on his own. There is a classic example in the gospel where Thomas was waiting to see Jesus Christ by himself. Jesus Christ had appeared to the apostles, and the apostles tried to explain to him what they had seen. Thomas said "Unless I see him with my eyes, and I put my finger into the marks of the nails and my hand into his side, I will not believe." Six days later the disciples were together and Thomas was with them. Jesus entered. Who is the person to be addressed? It is Thomas. Thomas now is not alone, but he is a member of a community, and because he is with the community, he can experience the same experience that the community passed through. If he tried to get the same experience alone, he would not be able to succeed. That shows how this call to holiness is a call to the people of God, and also it is an individual call, to be taken very seriously. The Pope makes a statement here, he says "It is necessary therefore, to rediscover the full practical significance of chapter five of the dogmatic constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium, dedicated to the universal call to holiness." A chapter which I encourage you to read, and rediscover the significance of the words which you will find there. Chapter 5 from the Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium, which means the Church, the Light of the World.

After speaking about the call to holiness, he speaks about prayer. There is a very long section on prayer. He says "This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer." Without prayer, silence, scripture and the Eucharist, there is no Carmel. Here

the Pope is telling us that we are called to be distinguished in the art of prayer. He says "Is it not one of the "signs of the times" that in today's world, despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in large part as a renewed need for prayer?" We are drawing this distinction. Nowadays in theology it is becoming very popular terminology to draw a distinction between religion and spirituality. Religion is very superficial and it is also clannish. Spirituality is common to the different denominations. Spirituality fills the emptiness that every human being, whether he is a catholic or non-catholic experiences. The doctrine of the Church tells us that if a person is really convinced of his spirituality, that person can experience salvation because he will experience that God will fill the emptiness that he possesses through the spirituality in what he believes. This is not religion. Religion does not fill emptiness. Religion quite often comes from fear. The Pope tells us that if we do not take prayer seriously, we might fall into a lot of magic and superstitions. Those are the terms which the Pope himself uses.

Then he speaks about the need for schools of prayer. If you and I, as Carmelites, are not going to be on the forefront in this mission, I do not know who can be at the forefront. With St. Teresa of Jesus, the Doctor of Prayer, St. John of the Cross, the Mystical Doctor - I don't know who can be at the forefront if not you and me as Carmelites. When the Pope speaks about the great mystical tradition of the Church, it is there, in this section that he says "How can we forget here, among the many shining examples, the teachings of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila", when he speaks about this section on prayer. He says "Yes, dear brothers and sisters, our Christian community must become genuine "schools" of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed, not just in imploring help, but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion until the heart truly "falls in love"." Do you remember how St. Teresa speaks about prayer as a conversation, a dialogue, with the one who we know loves us? It is here that we see that love can only be repaid by love. Here the Pope says, notice the different forms of prayer that he is placing in front of us. He tells us that "it is not only when we implore the prayer of petition, but there is the prayer of thanksgiving", the Eucharist is the prayer of thanksgiving, the prayer of praise. The highest form of prayer is the prayer of praise, "adoration, contemplation, listening, and ardent devotion" not superficial devotion. This is one of the dangers which I see around me, how the devotion of some people is superficial, how when they enter into a crisis, they quickly forget everything, they are very hard on others, they don't forgive easily, and you begin to wonder, where is their spirituality? Where is their devotion? They will be in the Church, not to listen to what the priest has to say to them in the homily, but to scrutinize the priest as to whether he is going to say a heresy or not. They do. I know for sure, because, not once or twice people have come to me in the sacristy to say "Father, I want to check the statement you made, because I was in the other church and the priest said these words, I know, I went to check him." Brothers and sisters, we have to learn how to have a listening ear, how to be receptive, and if the priest, in his humanity, or fragility, says a heresy, God will look after it. Either you were not attentive to what he was saying, or he will send someone to help you quickly in correcting what was said wrong - God will provide. This attitude of ardent devotion, a devotion that is deep and not superficial is important. I find myself, as I said, surrounded with a lot of these people, just saying the rosary, a novena here and there, which is good, I am not discouraging you from saying the rosary, or praying novenas. What I am

telling you is that the rosary has to show itself in your actions, that our novena has to be made manifest in our behaviour, in our words when we speak about other people, otherwise it will be of no profit whatsoever.

Then the Pope continues on, and he says, "It is therefore essential that education in prayer should become in some way a key point of all pastoral planning." We speak about how we are going to bring people back, what we are going to organize, parties, socials, dances ... the thing we speak least about is prayer. It is education. And do you know what education is? Once I was present for a ceremony at the Seminary, where Cardinal Ambrozic was presiding. He quoted Albert Einstein when he said that "Education is what remains in you when you have forgotten everything that you have learned". Some people sometimes come and to impress you on how proficient they are in prayer, they begin using terminology like "mansions", and in which mansion they are, and how they read the Interior Castle, and how they know it step by step. Now, when you have forgotten all the terminology, can you tell me what kind of education on prayer remains in you? Can you tell me what is prayer? We are not called to pray. We are called to become a prayer - that with our actions, and our thoughts, people will sense us. We can say beautiful words, but each one of us is constantly being scrutinized. People will see whether we are convinced of what we are saying, or if we are speaking empty words. I hope brothers and sisters, that when we speak about prayer, first and foremost we speak about it with our actions, and then with our words. The words of Emerson are very realistic - "What you are speaking so loud that I cannot hear what you are saying." The words of St. Francis when he used to send the brothers to evangelize - he said to them "go and evangelize, and if need be, use words" that is, if people misinterpret your behaviour or your actions, use words to help them to interpret it rightly.

When the Pope speaks to us about education in prayer, he says "I myself have decided to dedicate the forthcoming Wednesday catecheses to reflection upon the Psalms." When I read that verse, I said, thank God, because a few weeks ago, in our Parish, we finished studies on the Psalms. It took us three years to finish the psalms, studying each one, Psalm by Psalm every Tuesday evening and they said "oh, I didn't know that we were on the right track" it's amazing how the Lord helps us.

The first section is A Call to Holiness, the second is Prayer, the third section that the Pope speaks about is The Sunday Eucharist. The Pope says, "It is necessary to continue in this direction, and to stress particularly the Sunday Eucharist and Sunday itself experienced as a special day of faith, the day of the Risen Lord and of the gift of the Spirit, the true weekly Easter." The Pope calls the Sunday Eucharist "the true weekly Easter". Easter is prolonged through the Sunday Eucharist, one Sunday after another. There again, I hope that we, as Carmelites, will not be among those people who want to zip through the Liturgy. Some people are very much conditioned, I have had people tell me that the Eucharist during the week should not exceed half an hour, and the Eucharist on Sunday should not exceed an hour - forgetting that we should be like cowboys. When cowboys enter a bar, they leave their guns behind. When we enter the Church, we should leave our watches behind, because God is going to give you eternity. If you hold on to your watch, you are going to continue to live in time. If you continue to

look at your time, how can you live in eternity? You cannot convince me otherwise, brothers and sisters, the words of God are eternal life. Sometimes we forget that what makes the Eucharist is not only the priest. As the congregation you are not passive spectators, but active participants. It is not the Eucharist or the sacrifice of the priest, it is the Church. The beautiful words of St. Augustine are words recalling "What the church makes, makes the church." It is the Church that makes the Eucharist, and it is the Eucharist that makes the Church. The Church is where we come together to worship. Sunday Liturgy should have a special meaning for us, and we should show great reverence toward it.

Then he speaks about the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He tells us that it has to be rediscovered. The letter that the Pope wrote for Holy Thursday to the priests speaks about rediscovering the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I am sure that for those who have the Internet, you can download it. For those who receive the "Origin" magazine, it has already arrived. The letter is very beautiful. It speaks about the importance of helping people to discover, not so much their sins, as the compassion and sympathy that God has for his lost sheep. Here it says that the world around us is losing the sense of sin. It does not want to hear the word "sin". You have no idea how many fights I have had to fight. Good job I was not alone, I had a couple of parishioners helping me in this fight to try to make the children in grade two go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation before they come for First Communion. Mostly teachers, but also a few parents asked "why do they have to go to confession?" The answer is, because it is the doctrine of the church. It is in the canon law that they should go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation before they receive the Sacrament of First Holy Communion. Not only, the excuse that they were giving me is something incredible, "because the children do not understand what sin is", "the children do not understand what is good and bad". I said "look here, if I had doubts, my doubts should be about the Eucharist. It is more difficult to explain the Eucharist to them, you need more faith to understand the Eucharist". The child, from one or two years of age, as soon as they do something wrong, they quickly understand - when I grabbed a cookie, and I heard my mother coming, I quickly hid it - she didn't need to tell me to put it back. It is innate in us - good and evil, good and bad, right and wrong. It is amazing brothers and sisters, there I was with the children of grade two, with one of the teachers who was telling me that they had no notion of sin, I asked the children "can any of you mention some sins", one of them immediately said "breaking the ten commandments", another one said "adultery", another said "murder". The teacher was stunned, even myself, my hair was growing. These children can hardly read. And yet we are afraid to talk about the notion of sin, and the Pope tells us "because the world around us wants to suffocate".

The devil wants to destroy things slowly, so he is not going to tell us to break the ten commandments. He will say "everyone does this, it is something small" ... he says, "do you want a worm, I will give you a worm, but first you have to give me one of your feathers". There was a fox who went to a bird and said "I will provide worms for you, if every time I give you a worm, you give me one of your feathers." The bird said "That's a good deal." So the fox brought the bird a worm and the bird took one of his feathers and gave it to him. The second day the same thing a feather for a worm. Days passed by and this bird, took out so many feathers that he was unable to fly. Then the fox ate the bird. That is what the devil does. He comes slowly ... "why do

you need to go to confession once a month, many people only go to confession twice a year ... and most, only once" . The law of the church is that you should go at least once a year. And so you begin procrastinating. Nothing is sin. Gossiping, creating a division in the community, not showing respect to everyone in the community - these are small things - soon the building will collapse. It is no wonder that the Pope in this document speaks explicitly. There is a section here, paragraph 37 which speaks exactly about the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Then, he speaks about the primacy of grace. On the primacy of grace he says that we should remember that "without Him we can do nothing". Without Jesus Christ, we can do nothing. He speaks about the importance of listening to the word. Here again the Pope quotes St. Jerome where he says "ignorance of the Scripture is ignorance of Jesus Christ. The classic saying of Tertulianus is very, very serious. Tertulianus used to say "The number one enemy of the church is ignorance." Ignorance is the number one enemy of the church. We don't know our doctrine. We don't know the catechism. We don't know the Word of God. Last Tuesday I had this very young altar server attending the Bible Group. She just made her first communion, and she wanted to come with her mother. I said "Book of Numbers", and she recognized the Book of Numbers. She was beside me, and I looked at her and I said "Look here, you know the Bible more than some of the nuns that I know." Once I remember I was with a group of nuns and I said to them go to the Book of Genesis, and they were looking for it in the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible. Once, in Malta, I gave a nun penance from the Letter of James. This nun came to me afterwards and said "Father we could not find it." I said to her "It is there in the Bible." Afterwards she came to me and said "Father I didn't do the penance because I couldn't find it, and I asked a Sister who is an expert and she said "We don't have it in our Bible." I am not saying this to undermine the nuns, but to show you what ignorance of the Word of God can do in our lives.

The fourth part speaks about Witnesses to Love. The Pope quotes St. Thérèse twice, once when he speaks about suffering and the meaning and the joy that there is in this paradox of suffering and pain and sorrow. He talks about Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane where St. Thérèse, in her Last Conversations, speaks about this experience. The other place where St. Thérèse is quoted in this section is where it speaks about witnesses to love. He says "Love is truly the heart of the Church as was well understood by St. Thérèse of Lisieux whom I proclaimed a Doctor of the Church precisely because she is an expert in the scienza amore. She says 'I understood that the Church has a heart and that this heart was aflame with love. I understood that love alone stirred the members of the church to act. I understood that love encompasses all vocations, that love was everything.'"

After this the Pope speaks about the Diversity of Vocations, and here again there is a warning that unity does not mean conformity. When we speak about ecumenism, we should not confuse it with conformity. Yes, we pray together, but it doesn't mean that because they don't believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, that for them it is metaphorical, it is only symbolic, then I go down to that level too - that is conformity. The Pope speaks about unity. When we come to discuss ecumenism, it is good to pray together, it is good to study together, but let us keep in mind that unity is not conformity.

Then, the Pope concludes by speaking again about the "Duc in Altum". It is amazing how he mentions this expression in the beginning, in the middle of the document and in the conclusion. The title of the conclusion is "Duc in Altum", cast into the deep. There he invites each one of us to live our official life under the protection of Mary, and to live it with enthusiasm.

I hope brothers and sisters, that we, as Carmelites, will study this document very intensely, even in our communities, especially the call to holiness, prayer, listening to the Word of God, the Eucharist. These are things that are written in black and white in the Rule of Life. You will see how much, in those short sentences in the Rule of Life, there is a mine, a mine of precious jewels. Now it remains up to you and to me to learn how to discover them and how to share them with others.