

SIGNS
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THE
TIMES

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The Millennium Blues

This column is appearing in the first issue of the journal for 1999. It will be a year in which many of us will grow weary from hearing and reading about the millennium.

We are likely to see oodles of lists. Magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek* will give us the one hundred most important people or the fifty most influential events of the past one thousand years. Surely *People* magazine's variation on the theme will be the one hundred most beautiful people of the millennium. *Martha Stewart Living* may offer the ten perfect recipes of the millennium, while *Cosmopolitan* might suggest the sexiest romances of the millennium. And one shudders even to contemplate what Fox TV will produce! Much of this will be insulting in its foolishness or harmless in its silliness. We may glance at a few such lists and skip most of the rest but the net effect will be to "dumb down" an already impoverished popular culture.

One reaction concerning the millennium is to debunk the whole thing. After all, outside the Christian world what does it mean? What exactly does our year 2000 mean for a devout Jew or a Chinese person? And even within those regions under the influence of Western Christianity there is a problem. Scholarly study has made it pretty near certain that the millennium has already passed since Jesus of Nazareth most likely was born in a year we designate as B.C.E.! And to add even more scorn to the millennial project let us not forget that the new millennium begins in 2001 not 2000, since the two-thousandth year closes the old millennium rather than initiates the new one.

As the big millennial day approaches the apocalypticists among us may huff and puff but the safe wager is that our house will not blow down. Nor will the world be appreciably different when the millennium comes and goes. Indeed, the one thing which can be said with some confidence is that January 1, 2000, will look an awful lot like December 31, 1999.

Despite the silly prognostications and the commercial hype there is something very elemental, something very human in the felt need to note the millennium. It is more than just the roundness of the number, although that provides the simplest explanation. We are creatures of time, deeply shaped by that fact, and how much of it we have left, how we use it, and our sense of its passing are all of vital concern to us.

What is it about time that we feel the need to divide it, commemorate it, name it, and theorize on it, or, for that matter, name a column to talk

about its characteristics? We speak of the Middle Ages or modernity or the age of absolutism or the Middle Kingdom or cocktail hour. We sing "Auld Lang Syne" and mark birthdays, we proclaim liturgical seasons and the passing of the four seasons of the year as the climate changes, and we note the earth has taken another trip around the sun to constitute a year. We celebrate anniversaries and host academic conferences to examine a particular era, the Cold War, or the Victorian period. Yet, did the people living in the 800s know they were in the so-called "Dark Ages"? Was Thomas of Aquino aware he was living in the age of high scholasticism? Did the parents of Mary and Joseph know they were born in the intertestamental period? Still, many of us did know we were in the Atomic Age or the "Me-Decade." Some of us in the West now think we are in post-modernity or the post-communist era.

We are the markers of time. It is we who do the division of time, the naming of it, the assessing and theorizing concerning it. We cannot grasp infinity and are reduced to mumbling when trying to say anything about it. But give us a defined period of time and we can wax eloquent: "Let me tell you about the sixties" or "You should have seen life during W.W.II." The millennium will give us an excuse to try to make sense, to construct a narrative of our experience during what we judge to be a significant chunk of time. But how significant is a thousand years if one thinks like a geologist or an astronomer or . . . God?

Human beings tend to create times of waiting, of preparation for some impending new age. The difficulty is that frequently the time of preparation becomes simply a time of anticipation; we whittle away the days dreaming of what the future will be without doing anything much in the way of serious effort at preparation. Children during Advent do not use those weeks for preparation as much as they wish them away so that Christmas will come sooner. Adults, too often, do little better.

One danger of all this millennium talk is that we will treat 1999 as just so much time delaying the arrival of the real thing, the year 2000. But is the lifetime lived between the passing of centuries or millennia less significant than those years lived across such boundaries? Is a life lived from 1910 to 1990 less significant than a life lived from 1930 to 2010? Put that way the answer is obvious, yet we do not always act or talk as if each span of time is significant. We like to invest certain time periods with special meaning. Just as too much attention to Easter undercuts the time of Lent, too much focus on the hoopla of the millennium overlooks the time we have now to live the demands of the gospel.

The simple truth is that we all have our time, limited and precious. The year 2000 is no more significant in the eyes of God than the months of 1999. Nor should it be in our eyes. Jesus Christ is the same—yesterday, today, and forever—and is present within each moment of time.

When thinking about time we do well to recall a saying of John XXIII: "Time is God's gift to us. What we do with it is our gift to God."

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Immigration and Migration Resources

The following materials are available from the NCCB/USCC Publishing Office. To purchase, call 1-800/235-8722.

Who Are My Sisters and Brothers? A Catholic Educational Guide for Understanding and Welcoming Immigrants and Refugees — This manual is designed to encourage and help parents, educators, and catechists to shape knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills so that all will understand and more warmly welcome immigrants and refugees. The guide is invaluable for teachers in Catholic schools (K–12), religious education programs (K–12), youth groups, and for teacher in-service and parent/other adult groups. No. 5-006. \$14.95

Who Are My Sisters and Brothers? Reflections for Understanding and Welcoming Immigrants and Refugees — This is a companion publication to the manual of the same title geared for personal and group discussion and reflection. The reader has broad appeal for parents, educators, and all who work with and are concerned about issues involving immigrants and refugees. No. 5-057. \$6.95

Who Are My Sisters and Brothers? Understanding Immigrants and Refugees — This video provides an up-close and personal look at some of the human faces behind the immigration debate in our nation. Parishes in Miami, Fla., Green Bay, Wis., and Greensboro, N.C., demonstrate how their communities are reaching out to people on-the-move around the world. No. 5-053. \$19.95

Yo Trabajo la Tierra (I Work the Land) — This beautiful video portrait of a migrant family is a visual meditation on the dignity of work and faith. Minimal dialogue in Spanish with English subtitles, the program includes a bilingual study guide. No. 472-4. \$14.95

Beyond the Dream — This video dramatizes the hopes and struggles of Irish, German, and Italian Catholics who came to America during the immigration wave of 1840 and 1920. Narrated by the late Msgr. John Tracy Ellis and entertainment celebrities. The program includes a discussion guide. No. 411-2. \$29.95

People on the Move — A compendium of church documents on the pastoral concern for migrants and refugees from the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation and the Committee on Migration. No. 201-2. \$8.95