

Editorial: A Century's End

During this last year of the 20th century, the world is celebrating a number of important events. The Church celebrates the Year of God the Father. The people who follow the lunar calendar celebrate the Year of the Rabbit, and the United Nations has designated 1999 as the International Year of the Elderly. In addition China celebrates the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, and the world remembers that 1999 marks the 10th anniversary of the June 4th incident. These commemorations all speak to us of the century that is about to end.

In the run up to the Great Jubilee in the Year 2000, when we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, the Church has focused on the Trinity. In 1997 we celebrated the Year of Jesus Christ, in 1998, the Year of the Holy Spirit, and 1999 is the Year of the Father. Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has called these three years of preparation 'a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father', (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, #491). While, in certain circles, the use of the word Father to designate the first Person of the Trinity may evoke mixed emotions, there is no name given to God so central to Christian thought and worship. We begin every prayer, 'In the name of the Father...' We repeat thousands of times, 'Our Father who art in Heaven...' With but one exception, the cry of agony on the cross, Jesus addressed God as 'Abba, Father'. Jesus uses the term at least 170 times in the New Testament. Jesus' 'Abba' is always loving, indulgent towards wayward children, and humbly desirous of our love.

In Chinese culture and religions, especially in Buddhism, the father holds a high and esteemed place. While Confucius spelled out the obligations of children towards their parents in the rules of filial piety, Buddhism stresses the mercy existing between a father and his child. For Buddhism, the relationship is one of kindness, one in which there can be nothing false between the two. Such a concept is not far from the Christian belief of the affective and intimate relationship between God the Father and the children of the earth.

1999 is also the Year of the Rabbit. According to tradition, the year of the Rabbit heralds in peace, calm and harmony. This is a welcome relief after the last Year of the Tiger, that has brought such havoc to Asia and to the rest of the world.

In Chinese mythology the Year of the Tiger tends to be characterized by struggle and stormy personal, political and international relations. The tiger has certainly lived up its reputation in 1998.

1999 is also the United Nations International Year of Older Persons. In setting aside a special year for the Elderly, the United Nations wishes to call the world's attention to the fact that the large number of elderly throughout the world is substantially changing the demography of humanity.

In 1900, only 4% of the population reached the age of 65. This was one person in every twenty-five. In the year 2000, this figure will reach 13%. Those who are presently approaching their 65th birthday can expect to live at least for sixteen more years. The United Nations is eager to point out the positive aspects that can accompany this phenomenon such as the wisdom that a mature population can bring to the world's 'social, economic, cultural and spiritual undertakings'. The UN sees in this new phenomenon a hope 'for global peace and development in the next century'.

In China the elderly people (60 and above) account for 9 per cent of the 1.3 billion population. This figure is expected to rise to 13 percent by the year 2030. This will constitute a massive economic problem, especially when compounded by China's One-Child policy. Still, the Chinese's respect for their elderly and the veneration of their ancestors will go a long way towards facing the issue creatively.

This is also the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. Obviously, China is eager to celebrate this event in calm and stability. There are already signs that this anniversary, coupled with the anniversary of the June 4th incident, is worrisome to the leadership. They are taking measures to suppress any act that might be construed as a destabilizing influence on the country.

The end of any century has always triggered fear and omens of doom. It also provides opportunities for the proliferation of cults and other bizarre behavior.

Pope John Paul II, in the effort to quell unwarranted fear and excesses brought on by the superstitions that accompany the change of century, urged people on Sept. 6, 1998, to turn to prayer rather than horoscopes and lucky lottery numbers when they're looking for guidance. 'If we want to plan our lives well, we must learn to decipher the design written in the mysterious signals that God has put in our daily stories. For this, neither horoscopes nor magic forecasts work. What works is prayer...' (BAM)