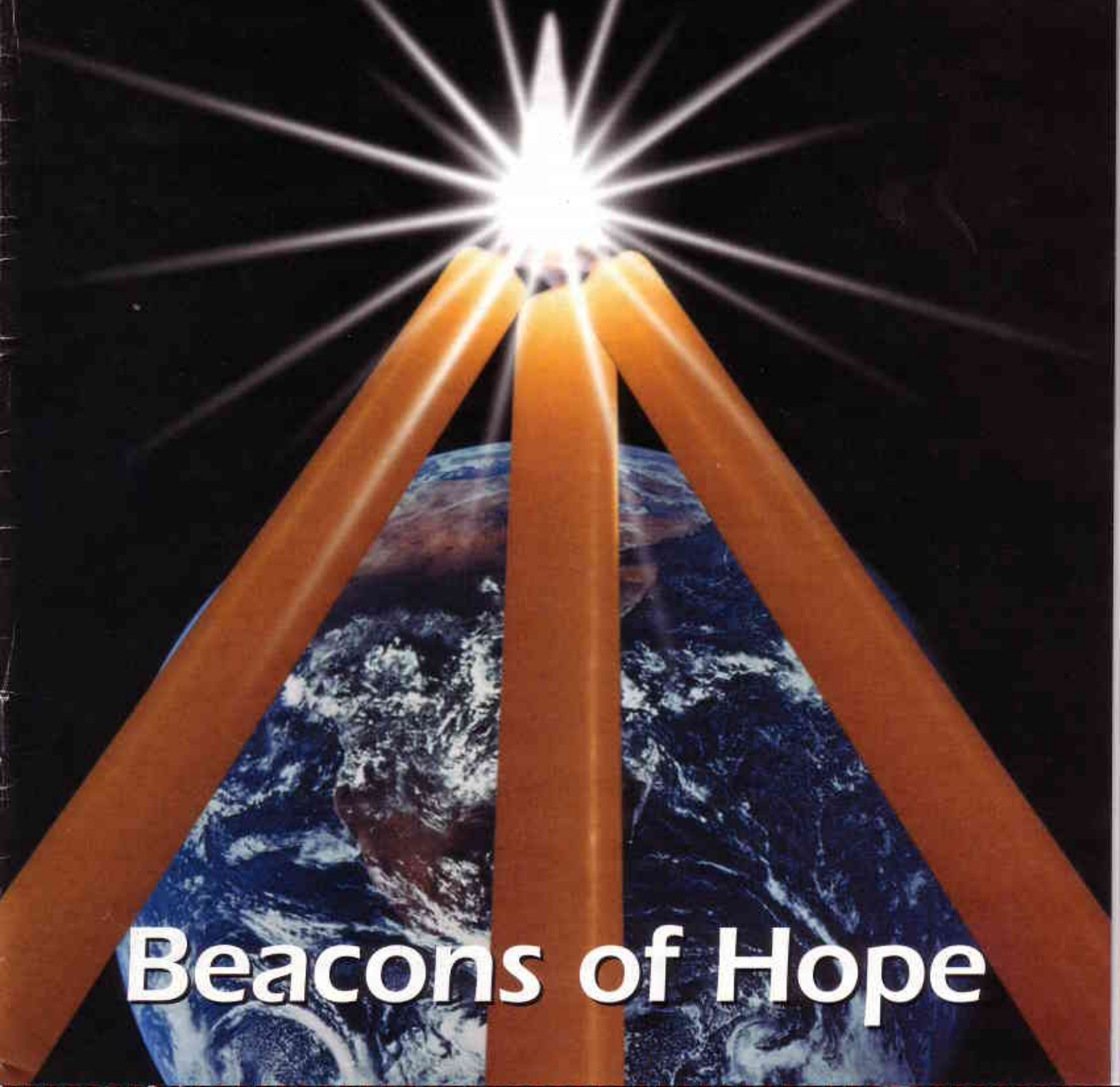


February 2000

Spiritana NEWS

MISSIONARY



Beacons of Hope

Pinpoints of Light

“Darkness visible”. Milton’s words describing hell came instantly to mind. The darkness was tangible, it was everywhere. I seemed to be suspended in a black sphere. There was no up or down, left or right. There was no horizon. There was only blackness, darkness visible.

I was in a small plane flying at night over the vast East African grasslands. The darkness of the tropical night had been total as we set off but now I began to discern thousands of pinpoints of light dotting the surface of the dark sphere which enveloped me. The ones above, the pilot told me (where is above?) were stars, the ones below (where is below?) were cooking fires. The ones above 2,000 million light years away, the ones below 2,000 feet. And yet without a horizon, I couldn’t distinguish one from the other.

A candle
loses nothing
by lighting
another
candle

And as I hung suspended in this space with no sense of motion, no sense of direction, no sense of distance, I began to realise that what I was experiencing was a graphic image of the world in which I live; the world at the start of the new millennium. Two thousand years ago Christ came as a light into our world. One of the stars which dotted the sky above me announced His arrival and shone over Bethlehem. And yet after two thousand years why so much darkness in our world?

As I mused about this question, suspended between sky and earth, I came to realise that it had taken thousands of millennia to create this universe

of ours. Is it not reasonable to expect that it will take many more millennia before the light of Christ banishes the last vestiges of darkness?

And the signs of this ultimate triumph are already present today. Just as the East African night is punctuated with a myriad of tiny lights, so in our world tens of thousands of individuals light candles rather than curse the darkness.

The stars of the end time, when the Christ will present a redeemed and enlightened creation to the Father, are all around us. This issue of *Spiritan Missionary News* highlights a handful of these lights in the hope that our readers will become even more involved in this process of illumination. A candle loses nothing by lighting another candle.

Among the beacons of hope we record are the people and groups who help to break the bondage of those incarcerated in our prisons or who have been released from jail lacking the skills and support organizations to survive in our materialistic society. We look at one chapter in the story of Francis Libermann who devoted his life to the emancipation of those oppressed by ignorance, disease, racism and slavery. We see those who assist the sick and dying as sources of light for all and listen to the words of Dom Hélder Câmara, a prophet of hope. We examine a parish in Toronto and the beacons of hope that shine there.

A new millennium. Another small step forward. In that mission plane, suspended in the African night I came to realize that God’s ways are slow by our standards. The creation of the world took time; a series of millions of tiny steps. The illumination of the world will also take time; a series of millions of tiny lights.

Gerald FitzGerald CSSy

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She Straightened Up and Glorified God

Kathy Murtha

At the end of the last century Alexander Carmichael travelled through the Western Highlands and the islands of Scotland and lovingly preserved some of the songs, prayers and blessings of the isolated Celtic communities he found there.

In his collection of this oral tradition are the words of the wife of a simple crofter in the Outer Hebrides:

"My mother taught us what we should ask for in prayer, as she heard it from her mother, heard it from the one who was before her. My mother would be asking us to sing our morning song ... giving glory to the God of the Creatures for the repose of the night, for the light of the day, and for the joy of life. She would tell us 'Every creature on the earth here below and in the ocean beneath and in the air above was giving glory to the Great God of creation. Would we be dumb?'"

This invitation to join in the whole universe's song of praise is echoed throughout the entire Celtic world. The Celts were not a people that neatly separated the religious world from the secular world. They were highly sensitized to the rich changing hues and textures of the created world, which they experienced as a resounding hymn of praise that beckoned them to join in a harmony of song transcending time and space. We are fully alive and realize our full humanity when we give glory to the Creator who so "gently and generously" bestows such an abundance of gifts upon us. This is what it is all about. And yet how easily we get side tracked. How difficult it is to raise our voices in gratitude and praise when we feel so bent over with burdens.

Jesus' ministry calls us back to our original purpose and leads us in the

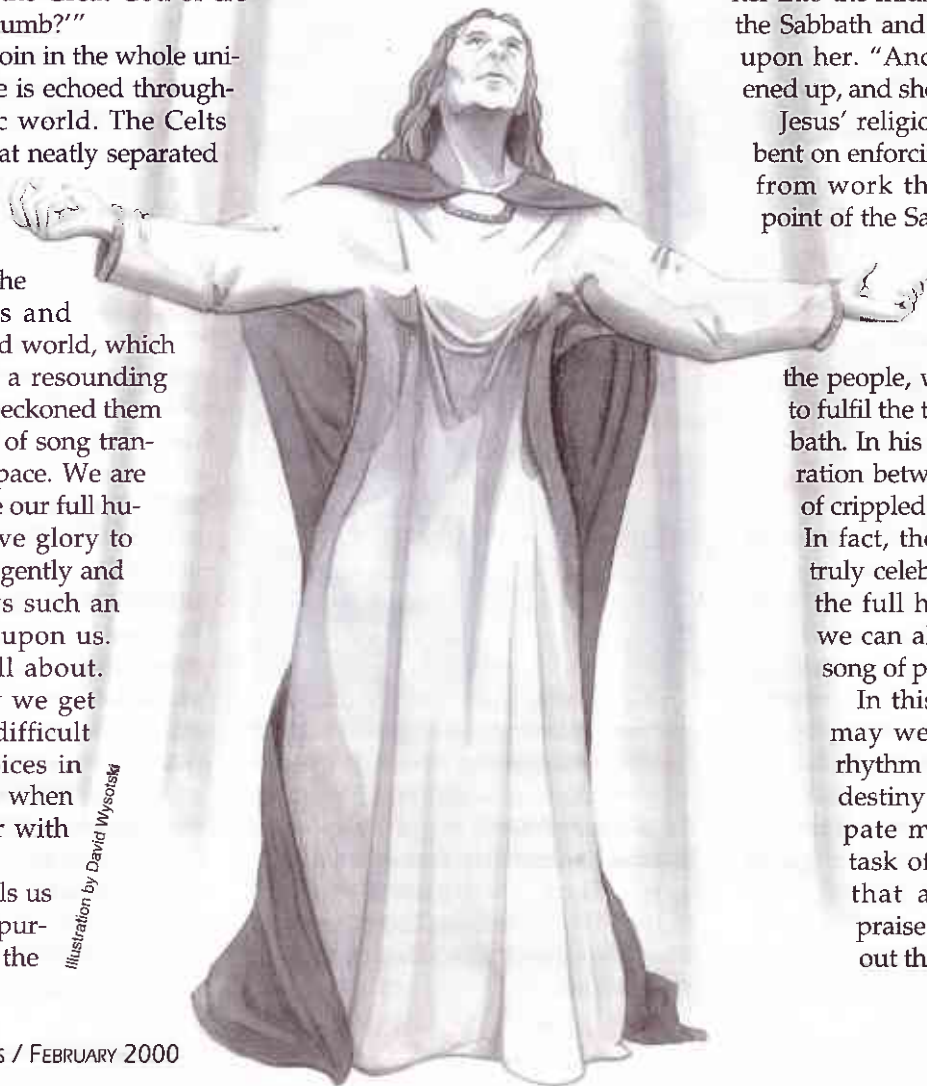


Illustration by David Wycosky

direction of our ultimate destiny. His healings on the Sabbath are an example of this. At first glance these seem to be a deliberate and even unnecessary breaking of the Sabbath law. But it is hard to believe that Jesus intended to cast aside the deeply held religious traditions of his people and shock his opponents. Something deeper must be at stake here. Something worth defending in the face of the growing controversy that led to his persecution.

The Bent Over Woman

The story of the bent woman (Luke 13:10-17) sheds light on Jesus' ultimate intention. Here was a woman who for eighteen years had been bent over double unable to stand upright. Jesus brought her into the midst of the community on the Sabbath and laid his healing hands upon her. "And at once she straightened up, and she glorified God."

Jesus' religious opponents were so bent on enforcing complete abstinence from work they missed the whole point of the Sabbath — to give praise to the Creator of all good things. Jesus made it possible for the bent woman and the people, who became overjoyed, to fulfil the true purpose of the Sabbath. In his life there was no separation between untying the bonds of crippled people and being holy. In fact, the Sabbath can only be truly celebrated when we restore the full humanity of people so we can all join in the universal song of praise.

In this great year of Jubilee may we learn to fall into the rhythm of our ultimate human destiny. And may we participate more fully in the holy task of unbinding people so that a joyful harmony of praise will resound throughout the universe. ❖

Two Thousand Years Young

Michael Doyle, C.S.Sp.

The period leading up to the year 2000 generated an outpouring of articles, books, films, videos, prophecies, forebodings, anticipations, hopes, plans, pilgrimages and celebrations; not to mention Y2K-engendered nervousness. There was much nonsense, even hysteria, but the quasi-sacral nature of the event was also an occasion for thoughtful and mature reflection. If nothing else, the beginning of the Third Millennium was an opportunity for stocktaking, critical assessment of the past together with visioning for the future. This was particularly so for Christians since this millennium is a peculiarly Christian yardstick, measuring, as it does, modern time from the infancy of Christ.

I dream of a church that will truly opt for the poor — through its actions, persons, structures, programs, and life. This church will understand that option as the essence of the gospel and the trademark of the true church.

*Dom Pedro Casaldáliga,
Bishop of Sao Felix do Araguaia, Brazil*

The Church has a tendency to speak of 2000 as the culmination of an extensive period of history embodying “long standing practices”, “immemorial customs”, “constant traditions” — all unchangeable! Yet when one examines it contextually, 2000 years is an extremely brief period in the life span of the universe. To help illustrate this Carl Sagan developed a model in which he compressed everything since the origin of the universe (15 billion years more or less) into the space of a single year. In this format recorded history occupied the last ten seconds of New Year’s Eve

while the birth of Christ took place just two seconds ago! Brief as this may be 2000 is even briefer when considered in the light of eternity, the natural milieu of Christian reflection.

Although the Christian Church legitimately celebrates two thousand years of existence with a special Jubilee, in fact, only a small portion of the Christian community can claim to have reached the full term — specifically those churches established during the Apostolic era in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. To the rest the Good News came later, often much later, while for huge portions of the world’s population it has not yet arrived. Alluding to this, when addressing the Conference of Asian Bish-

ops at Manila in 1994, Our Holy Father claimed that the first millennium saw Christianity spread through Europe, the second was the turn of the Americas and Africa, while the third would belong to Asia. Even here the divisions are very relative; the Gospel reached the Americas half way through the second millennium while many parts of the African church are just now celebrating centenaries rather than millennia. Thus, apart from sections of Europe, the Christian community is relatively young even when measured against 2000.

Mixed Results

Although it may sound preposterous, a case can be made for claiming that we are still very much at the beginning of the Christian era. Much of the two millennia that we have toasted was spent sorting out the message of Christ and searching for effective means of communicating it. There was much trial and error; one thinks for instance of the religious wars fought to enforce particular interpretations of the Gospel, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the struggle for the Papal States, missionary efforts in the shadow of sometimes brutal colonial conquests, warrior bishops, the oppression of women and the abuse of ecclesiastical power (the list is partial). One can only breathe a sigh of relief that most of this seems to be behind us.

It goes without saying that not all or even the greater part was negative. There was also much trial and success; the spread of the Good News brought peace in its wake, raised up men and women known for their love of God and neighbour, generated a passion for justice, humanized barbarous customs, promoted learning, produced martyrs, gave adherents a sense of purpose for this life and the next, inspired the foundation of religious orders and congregations which in turn drew thousands to lives of intense commitment, and on and on.

It may be noted, too, that some very significant insights have come only in the waning days of the second millennium. These include ecumenism (other Christians went from heretics to “separated brethren” almost overnight), freedom of religion, the importance of inculturation, justice as a “constitu-