

*A THEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT OF
THE SECOND MILLENNIUM*
JUBILEE
FOR THE BIRTH OF CHRIST
AND THE SECOND ADVENT

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THE SECOND MILLENNIUM JUBILEE AND CHRIST'S SECOND ADVENT

Preparations are currently underway by various Eastern and Western Churches to celebrate **the second millennium jubilee for the birth of Jesus Christ**. At the same time, there is an increasing feeling in the world's communities that **Christ's Second Advent is approaching**. We thus repeat with the apostle, "This is the last hour! These are the last moments!"

These are two complementary feelings; we rejoice in His first coming for our salvation, while we anticipate His second coming with great joy, saying, "Come O Lord Jesus!"

Our celebration of the jubilee constitutes of a spiritual preparation that enables every soul to anticipate the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus as her Groom, to share with Him His glory.

THE SECOND MILLENNIUM JUBILEE FOR THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

Celebrating the second millennium jubilee does not constitute a simple celebration of a historical event that occurred and ended two thousand years ago. Rather, it represents a renewal of our thinking process, to trigger a perception of that occurrence in the light of its effects on humanity in general; this, in turn, should **illuminate our thoughts and brighten the paths of our lives as we enter into the third millennium.**

The birth of Christ is a unique event; God started preparing humanity for it since the fall of man, and the subsequent divine promise for salvation. There are numerous references to this event in the scriptures; prophets have foretold it over the ages, and it continues to touch the soul of every believer who has experienced communion with God, the incarnate Word. The apostle Paul has addressed this occurrence by saying, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.” (Hebrews 1: 1, 2)

Let us now look closely at **the meaning of incarnation for us**, and at the meaning of **the Jubilee in the Old Testament**; the latter is furthermore necessary for proper celebration of the Jubilee, to perceive not only its extension, but also its powerful realisation through the divine incarnation.

INCARNATION AND TWO THOUSAND YEARS

Almost two thousand years ago, the Word of God came into our world, and became as one of us; what then, has He offered to humanity over the centuries, through His incarnation?

1. INCARNATION AND THE ADVENT OF ESCHATOLOGY TO OUR WORLD:

First: The Jubilee and time. “Time” is one of God’s gifts to man: He created day and night, as well as the four seasons, for man’s benefit and comfort. God also offered time to man, to enable his growth therein, and to enable him to cherish God’s dealings with him. However, after man’s fall, we started suffering from time; we regarded the past as an irrecoverable loss, the present as a grant that quickly escapes our grasp, and the future as an unknown whose contents we ignore. God’s love for us, though, has resulted in His giving time a special sanctity and certain sweetness; He thus divided time into three stages:

a- **Historical time**, with all its happy and sad occurrences: we appreciate the work that God’s hand wrought throughout history, preparing us for salvation. Faith enables us to realize that God, the Lord of all ages, while sanctifying human liberty and allowing events to appear to occur in a normal or logical fashion, has directed the flow of events to help us perceive His plan for our salvation.

b- **Fullness of time**: Incarnation of the Word materialized in the fullness of time, or at the beginning of the last days; in Jesus Christ our Savior, we see the fulfillment of all the events in our history as believers - we thus say: “But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” (Galatians 4: 4, 5) “God... has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son...” (Hebrews 1: 1, 2) “Little children, it is **the last hour**!” (1 John 2: 18)

The Church thus, while rejoicing in her Christ who, by transporting her to the last days has helped her prepare for His second coming, chants: “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come... Come, Lord Jesus.” (Revelation 22: 17, 20) The age of the Church therefore became “the last and holy age.”

c- **The end of time**: or, the great **Day of the Lord**, when our Christ seals our time to transport us to “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21: 1); through that day, we look back to times past as a golden bridge on which we crossed over to communion with eternal glory.

Within this framework of time, we rejoice in our present life, and in our submission to the time whose Lord manipulates in our favour. This belief and these feelings transform the second millennium Jubilee for the birth of Christ into a joyful celebration. In this celebration, we feel God’s work in us throughout the ages, offering Him unending thanksgivings, and confident in his marvellous divine love for humanity.

In summary, time in its entirety has become cause for happiness. The past and all its happenings is in God’s hand, and God transforms it to our well-being and our salvation. The present represents to us the fullness of time where we acquired the right to enjoy our Saviour the Lord Jesus. And the future is bright,

since the last hour will then end and our Christ will come to end time, and to let us enter into communion with eternal glory.

SECOND: THE JUBILEE AND ESCHATOLOGY

Our celebration of the second millennium Jubilee for the birth of the Lord Jesus with our subsequent launching into the third millennium, implies that the introduction of the Eternal into our history, in our name, is nothing but the advent of eschatology to the world of man. Since He is the First, with no beginning, and the Last with no end; He bestowed eternity not only on all the years, but also on every month, week, day and moment of our lives. Our lives are thus transformed to an enjoyment of the pledge of heaven and a crossover to eternity. He has assured us that He is the Resurrection that can neither be confined by the grave nor captured by death. By acquiring Him we acquire, every day, the experience of the eschatological life.

This is salvation in our Christian understanding! It is not simply a matter of obtaining the forgiveness of sins, rather, it is the enjoyment of the pledge of eternal heavenly glory, through our union with the Heavenly One who carries us with the power of His resurrection to the bosom of His Father.

The Heavenly One has descended to our earth and, in so doing, He has converted it to heaven for those who believe in Him. He therefore raised His Church - a procession not only destined for, but also established in, heaven. For this reason, the apostle Paul said, "And has raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:" (Ephesians 2:6)

In addition to our hearing the divine mouth says, "You are dust and unto dust you will return," we hear Him telling us, "You are heaven and unto heaven you will return." We have previously been tied to the earthly Adam; now, we are tied to the spiritual Adam, the heavenly Christ.

By descending to us, He offered salvation through the cross, thus opening the gates of Hades, to lift those who preceded us and departed in hope, and to carry them in a heavenly procession to Paradise. *Throughout these two millennia, He prepared countless multitudes of all tongues and nations to practice the heavenly life here on earth, and many have entered Paradise. And He will continue to attract many others until the day of His coming, then we will see, on the clouds, the heavenly hosts honouring with heavenly crowns those mortals who became victors.*

In our quest for eternal life, our beliefs used to be dominated with the idea of *re-incarnation* whereby, after a person's death, it was believed that the soul would be re-incarnated in another body. The incarnation of the Heavenly Eternal One though, changed our ideas; we now believe that each person has but one life on this earth - communion and close association with the Eternal One enable us to live with Him in Paradise until the great Day of the Lord.

2. INCARNATION HAS REVIVED OUR DIGNITY:

From man's fall until the incarnation of the Word of God, man has lamented life on an earth which brought forth "thorns also and thistles" (Genesis 3: 18), and has considered the body as being dust that will return to the ground whence it came (Genesis 3: 19). But now that God the Word has become a true Man, sharing humanity's existence in all its fullness and living with us on earth, He has given us a sense of dignity!

- We honour our bodies as well as those of our brothers and sisters, because our Christ acquired the same body.
- We honour our thoughts, emotions and sensations, because our Christ had the same attributes as a perfect human.
- We rejoice in work, since our Christ stretched forth His hand to work.
- We use the various tools of the world in which our Christ dwelt.
- The Eternal One yielded to time by sanctifying and fulfilling it.

Before the incarnation, many (such as the Agnostics) considered matter to be an element of darkness, the body to be the prison imprisoning the soul, and the sensations to be unclean - they even believed that childbirth was a satanic act!

Blessed is the Incarnate Son of God for offering to humanity, throughout the centuries, a new joyous outlook towards the world and everything therein, towards mankind with all its energy, and towards time itself. In the Incarnate One, we have discovered the truth within ourselves, and we have perceived the greatness of our mission.

3. INCARNATION HAS PROCLAIMED THE DIVINE LOVE:

Throughout the ages, mankind thought that God should be sought only in order to please Him, and to avoid His wrath. Incarnation, though, has proclaimed the true relationship between humans and God. God is the Father seeking the well-being of His children; He descends to them and to their world, He speaks to them directly to carry them to His heaven through His Spirit, and He reveals to them His abundant mysteries. This is what St. John clarified to us in the introduction of his Gospel: “No man has seen God at any time; the Only Begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” (John 1: 18)

Mankind’s expectations, as well as the expectations of all the heavenly creatures, were exceeded by what the incarnation offered; it is through the mystery of the divine love that God seeks His reunion with His creation, no matter what the cost! “But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Philippians 2: 7, 8)

God the Father proclaimed His love, through the coming of the Divine Word - who is one with the Father in His essence, and with whom He is equal - who spoke to us in terms of His practical love. He offered us a new covenant carved with His blood on the cross.

On our behalf, and in our name, He speaks to His Father and He proclaims our love for Him; through Him, we speak with the Father to confirm our positive response to the divine love. In other words, the Father views us through the incarnate Word, as children worthy of His love and satisfaction, as obedient children, accept even the death of the cross.” On our part we see in Him our right to enjoy God’s fatherhood, and our right to enter unto the Father’s bosom to inherit and to be glorified forever! This is how our reconciliation with the Father was fulfilled through His precious blood! In this regard, Paul the apostle says: “But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” (Galatians 4: 4-6)

In his reply to Celsus, the second century anti-Christian philosopher, Origen said, "While the Word remained unchanged in substance, He descended (to us) because of His divine Providence and His regard for human affairs."

4. INCARNATION HAS ELEVATED US TO A SUPERIOR LIFE:

Similarly to other Fathers of the Church, the thoughts of Origen concentrate on Jesus Christ, the Lover of mankind, who descended to us to elevate us to Him. In so doing, He granted us union with the Divine nature, and triumph and victory over all the forces of darkness. Benjamin Drewery summarized Origen's viewpoint on the purpose of incarnation as follows:

"Christ became like humans, in order for them to become like Him;

"He made possible all good things which point and lead the way to God;

"He warned us of judgement;

"He offered Himself as an example of the righteous life;

"He changed His followers, He cleansed them from mankind, and granted them joy;

"He planted the seeds of the Word of God;

"He opened the kingdom of heaven for the entire world, to the unworthy as to the worthy, even to the unwilling."

Joseph C. McLelland summed up Origen's writing on the divine incarnation in one sentence: "Christ's life on earth has played a great symbolic role: a mysterious divine role for enlightening mankind."

Our Christ has planted in us His heavenly kingdom, since He says: "The kingdom of God is within you." Origen says: "The kingdom of God will only be established in the soul wherein Jesus Christ - the true Word who was with God since the beginning - abides. In any case, the kingdom of God draws nearer to, and approaches the right side of, that person who is preparing to accept the Word."

Christ grants us union with the divine nature, which is known otherwise as "deification;" this is because we carry the image of our Christ, and we enjoy His features working within us. In this regard, Origen said, "The Son in His tenderness and generosity, granted others the likeness to God; those who, through Him, are transformed into gods, become images of the origin: the Word is thus the origin for many images."

Christ elevates us to His heavens; here again Origen says: "Since my Lord and God willed to raise that which had fallen to earth, He adopted an earthly body, in order to raise and establish it from the earth to heaven."

Our Christ offers us the spirit of victory: "Jesus crushes the abominations residing within us, and conquers the most evil of the kingdoms of sin." (Origen)

Christ presents Himself as the heavenly Groom for the soul: "Christ is called the soul's groom, with whom the soul unites when she comes to the faith." (Origen)

Finally, Christ descended to us to offer to the human soul all her needs. She finds in Him the Bread descending from heaven. He is the living Spring that quenches thirst, the Resurrection that crushes death, the Royal Way which leads us to the bosom of the Father. He is the Truth which illuminates our thoughts, the Shepherd who gives Himself to save His living sheep, the High-Priest who intercedes with His blood for the atonement of our sins, and the unique Victim who he offers in our name as perfumed incense and reconciliation with the Father.

Christ is the First-fruit Brother, the unique Friend, and the Saviour who forgives sins and who saves souls from corruption.

A UNIQUE JUBILEE

The jubilee represents, at the individual, family and social levels, a special form of rejoicing. This is analogous to celebrating the fiftieth anniversary, or the golden jubilee, of a marriage or the establishment of a business. The Holy Bible has shown the importance it awards the jubilee by making it an inseparable part of the Divine commandment, or the scripture; it thus has its rites, its joyousness, and its enjoyment of certain privileges.

This jubilee is over-shadowed by a larger one offered by the Lord Jesus Christ to all believers, to enable them to experience the joy of living in Paradise. Believers do not celebrate this jubilee periodically, such as once every twenty-five years, rather, with every breath they take. This is the reason why I will now present the jubilee from the biblical viewpoint - a viewpoint that is more fitting for our quest to live the jubilee in Jesus Christ all the days of our lives. This jubilee will also constitute our celebrating the passage of two thousand years since the incarnation of the Son of God, which an event we should experience throughout our lives.

“**Jubilee**” is from a Hebrew word meaning “ram, or ram-horn trumpet;” the original meaning is “blowing the trumpet,” since that was the Hebrew practice on the Day of Atonement in the year of the jubilee.

THE JUBILEE IS THE HAPPINESS OF A FUTURISTIC LIFE

In the Old Testament, the jubilee did not signify simply the celebration of the passage of fifty years; its significance was in fact much greater. It represented the launching of a new direction in the lives of the believers to welcome the advent of a new fifty-year period, founded on new bases, and bearing new features.

The jubilee not only bears thanksgiving to God for His dealings with us during the past fifty years, but also carries in its depths our yearnings for a new beginning. A new beginning that would enable us to renew our covenant with God and to practice a new life embracing new relationships with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Our entering, through Jesus Christ, into a joyful jubilous life means that we do not experience a new beginning only once every fifty or thousand years, rather, we experience a new life of joy with every breath we take. We thus chant: “Blessed is the nation that knows praise.” In this way, we truly experience the divine promise: “He renews your youth as an eagle.”

We should therefore, while celebrating the second millennium for the Divine incarnation, look forward to the start of the third millennium! How do we welcome it? How do we start it? And, how do we launch a truly jubilous life?

We should therefore wonder: “What is the jubilous life that God wants us to lead?”

THE JUBILEE IS A SABBATICAL LIFE

In the Old Testament, the jubilee consisted solely of the practice of the sabbatical life, which is practised one day a week, one year out of every seven years (the sabbatical year), and one year every seven times seven years, that is every fiftieth year!

The Jubilee was the Crown of the Sabbatical System

- Sabbaths were meant for man's rest, and for the development of his spiritual senses.

- The intent of the sabbatical years was for the earth to rest along with the human beings.
 - In this regard, the prophet gave the sabbatical year four titles:
 - a) “*Shebath Shabbathon*,” or the “Sabbath of Sabbaths” (Leviticus 15: 4), the earth thus gets to rest fully and is not cultivated.
 - b) “*Shenath Shabbathon*,” or the year of rest, since the period of rest extends for a year.
 - c) *Shenittah*,” or “the Lord's release” (Deuteronomy 15: 1, 2), since this is the year when all debts are forgiven.
 - d) “*Shenath Hashsheba*,” or “The seventh year” (Deuteronomy 15: 9) - since it is celebrated every seventh year.
- Finally, the jubilee was for **the collective rest of society** from all aspects.

The jubilee represents the peak of enjoyment of the Sabbath (rest); it is lived and celebrated for many reasons:

a) The social side: The Sabbath constituted full bodily rest for the entire family, as well as for the slaves, hirelings, and strangers, even the animals rested!

b) The agricultural side: The Jews had no experience in agriculture. Furthermore, because the land's fertility in Canaan was not renewed with silt in the same fashion as in the Nile Valley, it was necessary to leave the land uncultivated every seventh year, to give it rest, thereby allowing it to regain its fertility.

Man does not derive rest from the earth, which was created for man to till, therefore, halting all work completely in the seventh year, especially agricultural work, enables man to ponder that which is greater and more lasting.

From another standpoint, man needs to realize that God did not give the earth to mankind to promote strife and greed, rather, in order that all might share its produce. God gave the earth with all its plentiful produce to humanity in its entirety; this is common property which mankind is expected to oversee with all honesty, while filled with love for one another.

c) A return to the blessings of the wilderness: Observing the Sabbath has been tied to the gift of Manna, which God gave to His people. On the day preceding the Sabbath He gave them double the daily ration, and He allowed that the Manna remain unspoiled till the following day (Deuteronomy 16: 22 - 30); this in turn enabled the believer to appreciate God's free gifts.

On the Sabbath the Jews cease working, and take their lives back in time to their ancestors' experience in the wilderness, where they received the commandments, and where they refrained from gathering Manna on the Sabbath. They experienced the divine blessing, manifested in God's offering to them a double portion on the previous day, which would sustain them during their worship on the Sabbath. The Sabbath thus represents, as it were, a savouring of God's blessing at work in our lives, if we obeyed His commandment. We feel the generosity of His hand, and our entire week is blessed by our sanctifying the day of the Lord.

d) A commandment of brotherly love: On each Sabbath, believers remember the hand of God which liberated their fathers from the bondage of Pharaoh, and which offered them rest (Deuteronomy 12: 12; 15: 15). For this reason, they do not oppress God's creation, rather, they offer rest to His servants and to the hirelings, recalling that, one day, they too were slaves and the Lord set them free. As God relieved them

from Pharaoh's bondage, they likewise offer relief to their brothers through love and compassion, and relief to themselves from the sins of oppression and exploitation.

None was permitted either to carry a bed (John 5: 10), or to travel long distances (Acts 1: 12), on the Sabbath. These prohibitions symbolized the believers' enjoyment of freedom from the weight of sin, from the bed of laxity and contempt, and from the anxieties posed by the yoke of time.

e) Practising divine life through experiencing the sabbatical life: This is the greatest of all reasons for celebrating the jubilee as the peak of enjoyment of the Sabbath. It is what God wants us to do on a weekly basis (Leviticus 23: 3; Numbers 28: 9 & 10). The Holy Bible has concentrated on the observance of the Sabbath as a feast of joy and rest in the Holy Lord. The Sabbath was a day of continuous unceasing work in the Temple, as well as in the private and family worship; grief and fasting were prohibited on the Sabbath. The Jewish forefathers used to adorn themselves on the Sabbath, and rejoice as they would for a wedding; it was as if with the advent of the Sabbath they could see the Messiah in their midst, the heavenly Groom who takes them into the new heavenly life.

In addition to the special sabbatical offerings (Numbers 28: 9, 10), the liturgies, the teachings and the songs of praise, **the Sabbath had the following characteristics:**

First: The start of the celebration was enunciated by the priests' sounding their horns three times, signalling that all work should cease and that the Sabbath's lanterns should be lit. Those horns represent the word of God urging us to stop worrying about time-related problems thus clearing the way for our acceptance of the light of the Holy Spirit which reveals to us the royal joyous heavenly path, the path of union with God. Those horns also represent the prophesies which announce the coming of Christ, our true Sabbath and our eternal Feast, and our acceptance of the light of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies our lives thus preparing us for meeting with Him.

Second: Everyone removed their old clothing and put on their best; this symbolizes abandoning the deeds of the "old man" and enjoying the new one. It may also be interpreted as becoming attired in Jesus Christ Himself as the new gown within whom we seek refuge.

Third: The unleavened bread that was only for the priests' consumption was changed (Leviticus 23: 3), as though we realize, every Sabbath, that we are God's priests enjoying the living Bread for the satisfaction of our souls' hunger.

Fourth: On the Sabbath also, the royal guard most probably was changed (2 Kings 11: 5); here we see ourselves as kings guarded by God's angels.

Fifth: The conclusion of the Sabbath's celebration consisted of Moses' song of praise (Exodus 15). This is a proclamation that the Sabbath is a passage from Pharaoh's bondage (Satan), and a spiritual triumph over Satan's hosts, that will propel us through the wilderness to the Promised Land, or the heavenly Jerusalem.

The Day of Atonement was called "*Shabbat Shabbathon*," or the Sabbath of Sabbaths; in it we come in close contact with its act of atonement, to find rest in the sacrifice of Christ.

Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, considered the Sabbath to pertain to God Himself; this is because Moses frequently repeated the phrase "God's Sabbath," rather than "mankind's Sabbath." God Himself therefore rests in us, but divine rest does not mean stagnation, rather, an unflinching energy for work.

God who rested on the seventh day after the creation, wants us to rest with Him (Exodus 20: 11). God did not stop working by venturing into the Sabbath's rest; in this regard, Christ said, "My Father works hitherto, and I work." (John 5: 17). God's rest should not be taken in a negative sense; on the contrary, His pleasure lies in offering the works of His grace for our salvation, in order for us to find rest through Him and in Him. God's pleasure also lies in our sharing with Him His works, which manifest His love for us.

St. Jerome commented on Psalm 92 "A psalm or song for the Sabbath day," saying, "There cannot be a Sabbath that is not preceded by six days. We work for six days and rest on the seventh. We can only praise the Lord on the Sabbath. As long as we are preoccupied with worldly matters, that is, as long as we are in the six days, we cannot sing unto the Lord... On the Sabbath, rather than worry about worldly affairs or commit any unrighteous deeds, we should do only that which pertains to the Sabbath. We should bear in mind that the priests work in the Temple of the Lord on the Sabbath, and none is allowed during that time to cut firewood, to kindle a fire, or to do work of any kind. The man who was found gathering firewood in the wilderness on the Sabbath was stoned to death (Numbers 15:32-36). It is therefore meet for us to praise God on the Sabbath when we refrain from worldly chores."

During their sojourn in the wilderness, the Israelites gathered enough Manna, on the day preceding the Sabbath, for their sustenance during the Sabbath; many of our forefathers considered that to be a reference to the hard work that is a pre-requisite to the enjoyment of the heavenly eschatological food. **St. Gregory of Nyssa** says, "This day is but our present life, during which we prepare ourselves for solidly-founded matters." **Origen** furthermore says, "That which was stored for the Sabbath remained fresh and did not rot (the Manna); but worms will infest you if you were to horde for the present life and cling to this world."

Our Sabbath thus means participating with our God in His rest which, in turn, is the unceasing divine work as in His Holiness (Exodus 31:12-17). It is for this reason that the expression "sanctify the Sabbath" is used frequently in the Holy Bible. In other words, observing the Sabbath is a union with God through holy worship and sacrifice. Not simply to honour God through our worship, rather for the greater purpose of revelling in God's work in us with which He grants us union with Him, so we may enter into His Holiness.

The "Sabbath" was the means whereby God's chosen people savoured the enjoyment of His Holiness one-day each week, one year every seven years and, finally, every fiftieth year. They used to shed all time-related work, not in order to live lazily, but in order to live a holy life, and to experience the flavour of heaven!

The Sabbath was a sign of being a member of the divine family, and of being related to heaven; for this reason, breaking the Sabbath was punishable by death (Exodus 35 :1-3).

f) A day of meditation: In **Philo's** view, the commandment of the Sabbath was given to man so that he may work for six days and dedicate the Sabbath to philosophy, meditation and character improvement. On that day, man would enjoy his God in solitude, contemplate on whether he is satisfying God's purpose, and determine if his life's objective lies indeed in following God. The Sabbath is also a suitable day for learning.

In the psalm of praise for the Sabbath (Psalm 92), the psalmist contemplates the works of God saying, “O Lord, how great are Your works! And Your thoughts are very deep.”(Psalm 92: 5)

Upon realizing success in the Lord, the believer says: “The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age;” (Psalm 92:12-14). In this way, the believer's soul is filled with joy, and sings: “Upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound. For You, Lord, has made me glad through Your work. I will triumph in the works of Your hands.” (Psalm 92: 3, 4)

Origen also says: “A believer's life does not become sabbatical through abstinence from righteous deeds, rather, through meditation in God, in His work and in His heavenly glory.”

g) The Sabbath is a divine gift: A certain religious sect used to consider observing the Sabbath as being an onerous commandment, which carried with it certain orders and prohibitions that were difficult to realize properly. However, we find in Ezekiel 20: 11-13 that observing the Sabbath constitutes a divine gift, which God gives to His beloved ones. We thus observe the Sabbath in order to receive this divine gift, that was set aside for God's people, so that He may work in them, offering them His Holiness that would make them special and that would distinguish them among all people.

h) The Sabbath was a sign of the existence of an eternal covenant between God and His people (Exodus 16: 22-30). Those who failed to observe it fell under the penalty of death (Exodus 31: 14, 15).

i) The Sabbath is an entrance into the eschatological life: The Sabbath is the feast of enjoyment of rest in the heavenly Lord. In it we remember God's rest on the seventh day, as a symbol of the Lord's eternal day. In this regard, **St. Augustine said**, “In the Sabbath we rest and see and love, we love and praise; thus shall it be in the end that has no end.”

j) The sabbatical life is a crossing over to the Messianic life: The true Sabbath is our Lord Jesus Christ; He is our Feast, our Joy and our Rest. In Him we celebrate our union with the Holy Father; in Him we also find rest in being the children of God, in having His Holy Spirit within us, and in enjoying our being members in the body of Christ. Finally, His sacred blood relieved us from the bondage of sin, and liberated us from Satan (Pharaoh). We rest on the Sabbath, and so does the Father; we are the Father's children, in Christ Jesus, who were saved through His blood on the cross, thus pleasing Him. As a whole, we can say that the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth was the realization of the sabbatical life; our union with Him enables us to enjoy the new holy life; outside Him there can be no rest.

He came to bear humanity in its entirety on His shoulders, through His blood, in order for us to experience the true Sabbath, or the true rest.

Saul of Tarsus used to observe the Sabbath meticulously, thinking that he was righteous as far as the scriptures were concerned; but when he experienced his new life in Christ, he appreciated the true sabbatical life. He proclaimed that without Christ, complete rest could not be possible. He thus said, “For we which have believed do enter into rest... For he that is entered into His rest, He also has ceased from His own works, as God did from His. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” (Hebrews 4: 3, 10, 11)

A quick scan of the Gospels will show that most of the dialogues between the Lord Jesus and the Pharisees revolved around observing the Sabbath. Christ also delivered most of His important sermons, and performed most of His miracles and healings on the Sabbaths. When He healed the bowed woman on the Sabbath, He spoke to the ruler of the synagogue about His ministry as a sabbatical ministry. In other words, His ministry is that of rest and freedom from the ties of Satan. He thus said, “You hypocrite, do not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering? And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” (Luke 13: 15 & 16)

When Christ came to Nazareth, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath to read from Isaiah the prophet, who speaks about the Messianic Age as a true sabbatical life, or as the finest form of practising the Jubilee. We thus read in Luke 4: 17-19 & 21, “And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord...” And He began to say unto them, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”

Christ, in coming to our world and realizing these divine deeds for our sakes, has gone beyond transforming the period of our estrangement to a joyful Sabbath. He has died before the commencement of the great Sabbath, to spend the entire Sabbath with the reposed, thus offering them a new sabbatical life and a unique Jubilee. He releases those who have died in hope, from the captivity of Hades, and enters with them as holy flocks to Paradise!

Origen said, “Everyone who lives in Christ lives the Sabbath, and rests in peace from evil deeds, and practices righteousness without ceasing. But many who bear the name of Christ without His grace, live in sabbatical holidays from righteousness and practice evil.”

Origen sees life in Jesus Christ as a life that is wholly sabbatical, filled with rest and happiness; he thus says: “Every day is the day of the Lord.”

THE JUBILEE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT OVERSHADOWS THE NEW JUBILEE

Believers considered the “Sabbath” as a weekly celebration. Breaking it, results in loss of membership in the holy society which rejoices in the Lord as an icon of heaven. Every fiftieth year, the jubilee was celebrated as a joyful Sabbath for the entire congregation. In this happy feast we enjoy the following:

1. A year that is acceptable to the Lord (Luke 4: 19): The Lord Jesus Christ looked up to His ministry as a true, acceptable year of the Jubilee. This is the reason for His frequently quoting prophecies from Isaiah, related to the year of the Jubilee, emphasizing that it has been realized through His life and works (Matthew 11: 2-6; Luke 1: 77; 4: 21). The Lord Jesus Christ has proclaimed, through actions as well as words, that the Jubilee or, “the Lord's acceptable year,” is not a simple commemoration of a recurring occasion with time, rather, it is a continuing divine act, experienced by each believer with every breath of life.

Now, that we are at the point of starting the second millennium jubilee for the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, we need to enter into the “life of the Jubilee,” by virtue of which all the years of our lives would be transformed into “the Lord's acceptable year.” We would thus enjoy, and bear witness to, the happy evangelical life, through which we may see humanity in its entirety entering into the circle of true happiness, and enjoying the good evangelical news. In this way, the whole earth will be transformed into a heavenly icon, wherein all human beings will rejoice in a new life and in communion with their brothers and sisters in the Lord.

2. Good news for the meek who are enriched with the divine presence. Isaiah the Prophet has described the Messianic age as a year of the jubilee (Isaiah 61: 1-3), when the horns will be sounded so that we may receive unsurpassed divine gifts. He thus says, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me; because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He has sent Me to bind up the broken-hearted.” (Isaiah 61: 1) Let us receive Him within us, and let us find all the riches in Him who enriched us through His poverty. Love will enable us to impoverish ourselves with Him, so that many may be enriched through giving, and through selfless love. We can thus say: “As though nothing is to our name, while we own everything.” Our true jubilee is the joy of selfless giving, and of offering good and filling tidings to the meek.

3. Liberating the captives and the shackled: The call to celebrate the jubilee was, in essence, a call for liberation and redemption. In this regard it was said, “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and you shall return every man unto his possession, and you shall return every man unto his family... For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt. They shall not be sold as bondmen.” (Leviticus 25: 10, 42) In other words, belongings are returned, so that believers may resume their guardianship over the land that God granted them, and reclaim their personal freedom.

The Hebrew, as a member of the free people, practised this freedom at least every Sabbath, and regained full redemption from bondage in the year of the jubilee. In practice, though, Jews frequently ignored this commandment (Jeremiah 34: 9-17).

The entire nation comprises free servants of the Lord. Enslaving one of them lasted only till the sabbatical year. Slaves who, of their own free will, accepted to remain in the service of their masters, had their ears pierced. Liberation was compulsory though, in the year of the jubilee.

Even before the abolition of slavery, Christians offered a new outlook towards slaves. It raised their esteem and granted them a type of freedom, and equality with their masters, on a living plane of faith. Several of our Fathers expressed Christianity's views on slavery; the following are examples.

St. Clement of Alexandria: "Slaves are people like us."

Fr. Lactantius: "Slaves are not slaves in our service, rather, they are our brothers and sisters in the Spirit, and they are fellow-servants in religion."

St. Ignatius of Antioch: "Neither despise slaves nor let them boast in pride; rather, they should humble themselves for the glory of God."

Furthermore, **St. Augustine** and **St. John Chrysostom** assert that slavery was one of the results of the advent of sin into the world; this is because the divine goal renders unacceptable, the practice of human beings owning and controlling one another.

Despite the abolition of slavery from the civilized world, the concept continues to exist in several alarming forms; exploitations within the human race are still manifest at the individual, family and society levels. Our celebration of the jubilee constitutes the liberation of the captives and the shackled. We remember the shackled as though we were shackled with them; hence, we feel for their weaknesses and sufferings. We celebrate truth and we are filled with joy when we dissolve in love not only emotionally, but also through actions, thus following the example of our Saviour "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame." (Hebrews 12: 2)

4. Emphasizing equality: The earth belongs to God. Man, therefore, does not have the right to buy or sell it; rather, man may sell what the earth produces, until the sabbatical year, when the earth is returned to its owners or, more precisely, to its creditors (Deuteronomy 15: 1-14). It is as though the objective is to avoid the concentration of land ownership in the hands of the wealthy, to the extent that there would be no place among them for those from the lower or middle classes. The prophets frequently admonished the greedy rich who did not want to return land to its owners. "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!" (Isaiah 5: 8) Believers, when looking forward to the jubilee, will remember that equality is universal, since the day will come when the slave will be set free, and the land will be returned to its rightful owner. It is therefore not meet for the rich or powerful to boast in vain glory, rather, their aim should be to please God's heart, who relates to the weak, the widows, the orphans and the banished.

He is the God of the despised and the needy! At the head of those rich and powerful is the king who should follow the example of the King of kings: "For He shall deliver the needy when he cries; the poor also, and him that has no helper. He shall spare the poor and needy, and shall save the souls of the needy. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence; and precious shall their blood be in His sight." (Psalm 72: 12-14)

Contrary to the shortcomings which led to failure of the Jewish jubilee celebrations, the advent of Jesus Christ has offered an endless jubilee. It is based not

on returning land to its owners, but is founded on the universal race to give, on refraining from earthly possessions, and on contemplating the heavenly motherland.

5. Renewal: Renewal was one of the main features of the celebration. Everyone rested, land was returned, slaves were redeemed, and there was a general feeling of a new beginning of enjoyment of divine blessings that were sure to come. King Solomon said, “and there is no new thing under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1: 9). That is what the world offers us; as for our Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, He offers us His Holy Spirit who “renews our youth as an eagle.” Every morning we see new elements of the divine love, which lead us to sing: “because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning:” (Lamentations 4: 22 & 23)

Although external circumstances may not change, the internal perception is renewed: to see God’s mysteries, and to learn His eternal plan, and thus to enjoy a new life every morning which, in turn, creates endless internal happiness.

Renewing the heart and mind continually, through God’s Holy Spirit, reflects inner peace on the soul and outward serenity on the complexion; these features distinguish the person as someone not of this world - everyone longs to acquire the Lord’s blessings by dealing with such a person.

In other words, inner renewal manifests its blessings not only in the lives of that individual and those who are close to him or her, but also in the life of the society as a whole.

6. Understanding the wider meaning of rest or the Sabbath.

7. Inner happiness expressed as outer glorification: St. Clement considers Christian life to be a continuous feast; he requires us to “practice the feast all the days of our lives.”

St. Athanasius says in his epistle on the Christian Passover, that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is our Passover, in other words, our permanent Feast.

Origen spoke about life within the teachings of the Church as a life of permanent joy and glorification of the Lord. He comments on the Psalmist’s words: “Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound” (Psalm 89: 15) saying, “He does not say “Blessed is the people that practices righteousness,” or “that possesses a knowledge of heaven, earth and the planets,” rather, “that know the joyful sound.” The fear of the Lord sometimes grants happiness... if you will, you can become the joy of your mother, the Church.”

The Church’s task is to instil in everyone the spirit of happiness. The Word could be seen through incarnation. We can thus say with John the apostle, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life... And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.” (1 John 1: 1, 4)

It is meet for us to bear all the signs of happiness for the incarnation not only inwardly within ourselves, but also outwardly. This is because our Christ sanctified the incarnation and became apparent. The Church’s task in the jubilee, as in our lives, is to do its utmost to bring each person into the joyful life. All would then realize that our Bible is good tidings, and the world would then feel the power of salvation both in the joy of the Church, and in its spread of the true joyful spirit.

8. Forgiveness, pardoning and reconciliation with God and men: The fact that the jubilee is the “acceptable year,” would make it also a year of forgiveness of sins; through true repentance and through reconciliation of differences. Christ frequently emphasized His forgiveness of sins, even when healing the sick. He also

gave the Church His Holy Spirit so that it may continue enjoying a continuous year of the jubilee (John 20: 22, 23).

St. Clement realizing how Christ, the Forgiver of our sins and the bearer of our yokes, has transformed our lives into a real Sabbath and a joyful jubilee, said, “We are steadfast in observing a spiritual Sabbath, until the coming of the Savior, who will relieve us from sin.”

9. Universal unity: The past two millennia, seem to have been part of “the last hour” (1 John 2: 18). We will spend the remaining minutes in happiness and glorification, since we rejoice in our Christ, the source of our joy, and we anticipate meeting with Him face-to-face. The heart of every believer yearns to see humanity, in its entirety, as one bride rejoicing in the one and only heavenly groom. It yearns to see the entire universe, embraced by one united Church, one united faith and one united heart, living in an exalted plane above cultural and ideological differences.

THE IMPORTANCE AWARDED BY THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL OF CHURCHES TO THE SECOND MILLENNIUM JUBILEE FOR THE DIVINE INCARNATION

The Committee on Faith and Unity has shown a special interest in this jubilee's celebrations, the preparations for which should start now, even though it is still over a year away. The birth of Christ in the Middle East should give more of an incentive to churches in that region, than to those in the western hemisphere, to have an interest in these celebrations. It should also be noted that, currently, the states of Israel and the Vatican are co-operating, along with some heads of state in the middle eastern countries, in the preparations for these celebrations.

H.G. Anba Pishoy, leading a special sub-committee to oversee the celebrations, made the following practical proposals:

a) Preparing a high-quality movie (not a video), with the participation of specialized artists, and edited by theologians, that could eventually be the source for several video productions.

b) Producing records.

c) Producing cassette tapes.

d) Creating a Middle Eastern theatrical group that would perform one or more plays on the birth of Jesus Christ.

e) Writing books about the effects of Jesus Christ on humanity, and the effects of Christianity in the Middle East.

f) Producing fine medals and icons that could be sold for a profit (this would be analogous to a specialized factory that was built by the Russian Church to produce specialized ecclesiastical needs).

g) Producing souvenirs such as articles of clothing (e.g. T - shirts), or housewares (e.g. glasses, mugs, etc.).

The other members of the sub-committee added **a second list of suggestions:**

a) The movie could start off by presenting the life of Jesus Christ, giving adequate coverage to the periods of annunciation and birth, and to the escape of the Holy Family to Egypt. A second movie, portraying the "post Christ" era (the era of the apostles), could include references to the monuments and artefacts in Egypt and Syria, as well as an introduction to the churches in the region.

b) On this occasion, a "spiritual renewal" can be created within the churches; the idea in this regard being that the celebration does not constitute a simple "birthday," rather, the emphasis should be on two points:

* The mystery of the divine incarnation in the minds of our forefathers, and our present feelings.

* Highlighting the human virtues that were manifest in Christ, for the purpose of adhering to the Saviour's person.

c) The sub-committee can organize visits to the holy sites.

d) Rather than having the celebrations coincide with Christ's birthday, the entire 1999 can be a year of celebration.

e) This may be an occasion where all our fathers the popes can be gathered in Jerusalem.

- f) Churches can organize local celebrations.
- g) Books can be published.
- h) A series of seminars can be organized to discuss the effects of Christ on our lives.
- i) Care should be taken to ensure that the emphasis of the celebrations in general should not be on vainglory, rather, on repentance and spiritual renewal.
- j) In order to prevent abuse, as far as possible, of the Book of Revelation, efforts should be made to ensure that this Book and the interpretation thereof, are awarded their proper place.
- k) Preparations for these celebrations should not target solely the theological aspects; efforts should be made to cater to the needs of children, hence, appropriate spiritual activities sponsored by the local churches.
- l) The idea of being a “proud Christian” can be put into effect by ensuring that the Christian peoples are focused onto these celebrations.
- m) Exhibitions can be held for the works of artists who specialize in themes related to the Church and to the birth of Christ.
- n) Local sub-committees should be formed to cater to the interests of various age groups.
- o) A sub-committee should be formed, having a horizontal societal cross-section; its members would then include church leaders, artists, housewives, etc.
- p) The Committee on Faith and Unity can be requested to issue publications addressing this jubilee.
- q) Hymns and songs of praise can be written for the occasion.
- r) The Middle Eastern traditions should dominate these celebrations, due to the special status, which that region enjoys, namely, having initially hosted the great event of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the sub-committee emphasized the following:

The “Division of Faith and Unity” would normally initiate this undertaking, since it is mandated with theological matters; we should furthermore participate in all the council's activities, since we represent the council's conscience in these celebrations.