

## Chapter One

# —Be Not Afraid—

## The Bishop as Messenger of Hope

by Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold . . .  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Written in 1920, only two years after the close of a terrible war, these words are from the heart of William Butler Yeats' darkly brilliant poem, "The Second Coming." Yeats sensed, as maybe only artists can, that "surely some revelation [was] at hand," and that much of the world as he knew it would be swept away by change. He was right. But not even Yeats could have known just how great and violent our century would be.

Like Yeats, Karol Wojtyla was a poet and also a playwright. Unlike Yeats, he experienced the bitter cost of this century directly. And also unlike Yeats, he was—and is—a voice of confidence in a world overwhelmed by fear. Yeats wrote from melancholy and helplessness. Wojtyla, now Pope John Paul II, speaks of "crossing the threshold of hope" and a new springtime in the coming century not just for religious faith, but for all humanity.

So much separates the lives of these two men that any connection seems unlikely. But comparing them is more than just an academic exercise. Both knew the soul of our age. Only one chose hope. And therein lies the key

to understanding this Pope's entire pontificate, and especially the Synod on the role of bishops, scheduled for the Jubilee Year 2000. With the Synod still more than a year away, the Vatican issued the *lineamenta*, or preparatory document, which set the gathering's direction and tone for discussion. And the theme should surprise no one: "The Bishop: Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World."

### Why This Topic? Why Now?

We can best answer these questions just by browsing through a newspaper any day of the week. We live in a culture which still has a memory of God, but worships at the altar of practical materialism. As a result, we are pulled between two great polar sins: *pride* in our economic, political, financial, and technological power over the world around us; and *despair* over the limits of our power and the constant threat of losing the limited power we have.

In the developed countries especially, but also throughout the world, it is a time of immense anxiety, excess, and coarsening of attitudes toward the sanctity of life. One small example: American news media recently reported that legislators in Belgium have demanded that the government should end its ban against euthanasia . . . because doctors and patients routinely ignore it anyway. This is taking place in an overwhelmingly "Catholic" nation—a nation where the standards and satisfactions of living are envied by much of the world.

To paraphrase Scripture: Without hope, the people perish. Against this culture of emptiness and self-destruction, Pope John Paul II has fixed his eye on the Great Jubilee since the day of his election over twenty years ago.

Preparing the Church to better serve God as a beacon of hope in the new millennium has always been one of his goals. To do that, he has systematically submitted every aspect of Catholic life to review and renewal in light of Vatican II—a council whose heart he knows from personal experience. As the *lineamenta* document suggests, the Synod in 2000 will conclude a profound and comprehensive review of Church life *as a communion in Christ for the evangelization and salvation of the world*.

The process began in 1987 with the Synod on the laity. It continued through 1990 and 1994 with Synods on the priesthood and consecrated life, respectively. Now it reaches completion in examining the vocation of the bishop, who “is the principle and visible source of unity in the Church entrusted to his pastoral service” (*lineamenta*, no 4; cf. Catechism, no. 886). Over the past decade, then, the Holy Father has carefully affirmed the dignity—and explained the role—of each state of life in the Church. Or to say it another way, he has put our family affairs in order, the better to accomplish the work we are all called to do, as a family of faith, in the new age before us.

Every bishop is the “father” of his local family of faith. It makes sense, therefore, that the Pope’s review should finish with a reflection on the vocation of bishops, who bear a special responsibility for the mission of the Church. In that regard, the Synod’s official theme is itself a small catechesis. The bishop is first of all a *servant*. His authority does not come from power, personal achievement, or popular acclaim, but from service to Someone else who confers it on him. He serves the *Gospel*, which is a message of good news and great joy. (Remember that joy is the surest sign of the presence of God. Dissension also suggests a presence . . . but of a different kind.) Moreover, it is

a message rooted not in ideas, programs, or ideologies, but in a real, flesh and blood Person whom we can meet and love, *Jesus of Nazareth*. This Jesus is also the eternal *Christ*, the Anointed One, the only Son of God. Finally, the Jesus Christ proclaimed by every bishop has come to save every human being, not just a nation or sect. He is therefore *the hope of the world*. In fact, He is the only hope of the world.

Every bishop must be a messenger of hope to his people and to his culture, even when the message is unpopular. Every bishop must be, above all, a preacher, teacher, and missionary of Jesus Christ—by direct leadership and personal example. After all, the Lord did no less. Neither did the apostles, to whom bishops are the successors. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19) cannot be delegated.

Renewing this missionary spirit is at the heart of the Synod in 2000. It is also the antidote to the anxiety of our age, which Yeats captured so powerfully:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold . . .

The Holy Father answers this despair with the Person, and the words, of Jesus Christ:

“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11:25).

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

“[Y]ou will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn. 8:32).

Yeats was right: “surely some revelation is at hand.”

But if we allow God to do His will through us, it may be a greater and more loving revelation than the poet could have imagined. Pope John Paul II is a centripetal man in a centrifugal age: the voice of communion and hope; a force for unity in an era of loneliness and confusion.

As his brothers in the Lord, bishops are called to the same task.

*Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., is the Archbishop of Denver, Colorado, and a member of the episcopal advisory council of Catholics United for the Faith.*