

# A holy year : merely an old custom?

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electronic control appliances and regulators; it has in fact designed a photo-electronic control system for showers worked by reflection. With this new control system, the water flows only when there is somebody actually under the shower; it stops automatically as soon as he leaves the cabin or moves to one side in order to soap himself. This new automatic shower device completes the wide range of products that this Swiss firm—one of the first to specialise in this field—offers in the sector of photo-electric control devices for sanitary appliances; in fact, it already manufactures electronic washbasins as well as partitions with automatic rinsing control for urinals. (SODT).

## A Holy Year — Merely An Old Custom ?

As head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Paul VI has called upon Catholics throughout the world to celebrate the year from Easter 1974 to Easter 1975 as a Holy Year. This custom goes back to the year 1300, when Pope Boniface VIII first instituted a Holy Year, which was to be celebrated thenceforward every hundred years. But before long the interval was cut down to 25 years. And in fact the last Holy Year was celebrated in 1950.

It is the Pope's wish that the current Holy Year should be a year of reconciliation. This thought is apt enough, for any consecration — and a Holy Year is in a sense a consecration or sanctification of humanity — presupposes a reconciliation with God. If the Pope now proclaims a year of reconciliation, he evidently means, therefore, that above and beyond this general sense of reconciliation with God, the goal of all of us at this time, but particularly of all Christians, should be a reconciliation among men.

If we draw attention in this and the coming numbers of this magazine to the Holy Year of the Roman Catholic Church, it is not only to promote pilgrimages as a modern form of tourism, but to ask with deeper meaning whether every journey, in the air, on land or on water, is not in the last analysis a pilgrimage, and whether every journey ought not to serve the ends of reconciliation. In this sense the objective of the Roman Catholic Holy Year, which is expressly shared and supported worldwide by the other Christians united in the Ecumenical Council, affects and involves us all.

A Holy Year — the term seems out of place and invites criticism. Or at best it awakens memories of the remote past. Even many Catholics well feel that the Pope's appeal to celebrate 1974/75 as a Holy Year is an unreasonable demand or — more probably — will simply ignore it. And it is easy to imagine, in these circumstances, what non-Catholic Christians or even non-Christians will think . . . Yet the idea of a Holy Year contains a certain essence of ancient human wisdom, which perhaps took on its most striking form in old Israel.

Like most other peoples, the Israelites had a seven-day week, the seventh day (the Sabbath) being a day of rest. This division of the days was extended by the Israelites to a corresponding division of the

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years. Every seventh year was accordingly a Sabbatical year. In this year the fields were to remain untilled, crops were not to be harvested, and slaves were to be restored to freedom.

After seven times seven years—every 49 or 50 years—a higher Sabbatical year was celebrated. It was called the Yobel Year (probably meaning the “year of the ram’s horn” because it was ushered in by the sound of horns). In addition to the rulings for an ordinary Sabbatical year, debts were to be cancelled and bought fields returned to the original owner in a Yobel or Jubilee Year.

There is no passage either in the Bible or in other sources suggesting that such a general release from obligations ever took place. It would probably not have been feasible economically. The Yobel Year may therefore have been a piece of social Utopianism. And yet we can see behind it the origin of social legislation which is not meant merely to furnish alms for the needy. According to the Bible the purpose of the Holy Year was to remedy real cases of need on a grand scale and to prevent the consolidation of institutions. The land that provided food and is the chief item of man’s possessions originally belongs to God and must, in accordance with His will, be shared among men in such a way as to prevent some becoming excessively rich while others suffer bitter need. In that way the people can be kept flexible and always prepared for a reversal of their condition.

Anyone who knows how many people today feel exploited by institutions, bullied by Parkinson’s law and the compulsions of the Peter principle, will be loath to deny the presence of some profound humanity and wisdom in the basic concept of the Jubilee Year. The Popes of the Middle Ages took the Jewish Yobel Year as their model for the Holy Year. But they brought its spiritual meaning too much into the foreground at the expense of its socio-political implications. Anyone who makes his way to Rome or elsewhere on the occasion of the Holy Year is certainly a pilgrim and bears witness thereby to the fact that man is a traveller all his days, a pilgrim on his way to his eternal home. Yet the question remains unanswered of whether the pilgrimage of a single person or a group means more than a merely individual aspiration.

It is no doubt always the individual who gets up and sets out, alone or with others, in order to find, in meetings with other people, a greater openness and deeper freedom. But it is more and more important that this experience of freedom should express itself in freer institutions. The Roman Catholics would do well to think over the meaning of the old Yobel Year in their own Holy Year.

And perhaps we should not quite forget that even in aeroplanes the pious pilgrim sits next to the concerned politician and the worried businessman. Perhaps the conscientious politician or the honest businessman is on a much more adventurous pilgrimage than the man who just flies to Rome. It might therefore not be altogether a bad idea if the contemporary pilgrim were to take the worries of the politician and the businessman along with him on his way to his holy destination.

P. Albert Ziegler.