

'Christmas — jubilee hope in the dark world'

As I lifted off the purple ‘Advent veil,’ yesterday, from the Christmas Crib, to allow it now to be seen in its full glory, I also placed some bright red poinsettias, but I also wanted to add a little *stone* that I’ve had by me for some months at my side-seat where I usually pray: a stone simply polished and inscribed, ‘Hope.’ It’s been a little physical reminder to me, from time to time, this year, that this has been — and still remains — an ordinary Holy Year, *a jubilee year*, whose motto has been for all the Church’s 1.4bn members, *Peregrinates in Spem*, “Pilgrims in(to) Hope.” Here’s the stone — I’ll add it to the Crib scene in a minute. Each and every year, as a Christian, is a ‘year of hope,’ but to have a

jubilee year entitled precisely as a ‘year of hope’ I think has been special.

How has the Holy Year impacted you? Have you travelled to Rome, perhaps? Or have you, at least, travelled to Rome in your heart? The Holy Years are centred on Rome, a chance to be a pilgrim *ad limina apostolorum*, that is, to the tombs of the apostles Peter & Paul, and by all accounts the Holy Year has been managed well, with many weeks and weekends through the year dedicated to gathering pilgrims from across the world in Rome for various different groups of the faithful. There have been some 30 million pilgrims in total, this Holy Year, apparently. I was able to go with some 20+ Newman House students this summer, for the *Giubileo dei Giovani* (Jubilee of Young People) in the heat of late July / early August. Yes, it was hot; yes it was packed; but in fact it worked out well, with a final event shared with 1.1 million young Catholics and Pope Leo. It was a highlight of the year, and, yes, a moment of great hope for me, for us (our group) and, I think, for Pope Leo — his first great WYD-

type gathering.

The election of a new Pope was itself a moment of great hope, as the very evident sufferings of Pope Francis in his latter months were brought to their end, and lifted from his shoulders in a peaceful death, and after the days of mourning the Church entered into prayer with the Cardinals in Conclave to implore the Holy Spirit to give us the right new Pope. Many of us, of course, had hardly heard of Augustinian friar, Robert Prevost OSA, of American and Peruvian nationality, until he came out on to the loggia of St Peter's. You'd have to go back to 1700 to find a Holy Year inaugurated under one Pope but brought to its close by another (Innocent XII & his successor Clement XI) — it doesn't happen very often! But its happening this year, 2025, brought a very special new feel to the Holy Year, and was an especial excitement for the young people at the July Jubilee gathering, to see and celebrate prayer time with the brand new Pope.

I'm going to go back to Rome again this Holy Year — I'm squeezing in a 2nd, personal, quiet visit to Rome for

the Close of the Holy Year on Tuesday 6th January, feast of the Epiphany: to walk through that Holy Door of St Peter's one last time this Jubilee, and to be present, please God, at the closing Mass. I want to engage with that 'year of hope' again, and really to be able to say that I took this Holy Year seriously.

Christmas of this Holy Year is a truly significant occasion, as the Nativity of Christ always stands out as a moment of hope: a hope shared, I think, *beyond* the bounds of Christianity. The whole world enters into Christmas, in some sense — OK, not always with as much religious fervour as we would want, and sometimes only in the externals ... but even those externals do betray the essence of caring for family, gift-giving, generosity, visiting relatives, "good will to all men," charitable giving. Writing this homily reminded me that I hadn't made my customary charity donations, yet, this Advent / Christmastide. So I hurriedly did so, online, last night. One of the charities I chose was in recognition of the fact that — as well as a new Pope — 2025 has given us a new

Archbishop, or, at least, the announcement of one (he won't be installed in Westminster until Feb 14th). Bishop Richard Moth is the lead bishop in our country for matters concerning Prisons. In fact, when he heard from the Nuncio asking him to come and see him (to be told he'd been chosen as our new Archbishop), he was actually in Rome for the 'Jubilee of Prisoners' — because that was the weekend of the 3rd Sunday of Advent (when we had the Sunday Gospel from Mt 11, "*John who was in prison, heard what Christ was doing ...*"). So I thought it was pertinent to give to the Catholic charity for Prisoners, PACT, founded in 1898, and whose President is always the Archbishop of Westminster. But Bishop Richard has already had a long involvement in our Catholic care for Prisoners and Prison welfare. He issued a *Pastoral Letter* to his present diocese on the occasion of that Jubilee of Prisoners; he said:

“Perhaps a Year of Hope is not easy for us all. There may still be some time left of a sentence; there may be anxiety about a coming court appearance; there may be worry about family or concern about what will happen after release.

Within the confines of the cell and the regime in prison, it may not be easy to think about a pilgrimage to Rome. Yet, the fact that Pope Leo and the crowds who will gather with him in Rome this weekend to pray especially for you is a reminder that nobody is ever abandoned by God, who loves each and every one of us. Even when we have gone down the wrong road in life, the love of God is always there for us, just as it is there for our families, our loved ones and those who have been affected by our actions.

Just as the pilgrim to Rome can go through the Holy Door of St. Peter's, so the door of hope is always there for us. The door of the cell may be closed for many hours each day, but Jesus is always with us. Allowing Him to give us the gift of hope changes our lives — and there is no place that Jesus cannot reach if we open the door to Him.”

Bishop Richard reminds us there that, even in the most seemingly desperate of circumstances — in prison, or whenever our freedoms have been curtailed or our expectations dashed — Our Blessed Lord is there. Perhaps it was fitting that one of the final 'Jubilee of ___' gatherings was the 'Jubilee of Prisoners,' so that all of us are taught, prisoners or otherwise, that *invincible* hope comes in Christ, an eternal, unconquerable hope brought

by the Christ child when He is born into the world. The Holy Year's message of hope, then, has rung out across this year, I pray, and in your hearts too, reinforcing your hopes in God's goodness.

Of course we could also list sadnesses and even atrocities in 2025 — even just two Sundays ago, dreadful massacre of Jews on Bondi Beach as they celebrated their own December-time feast of lights, Hannukah — for one Holy Year doesn't take away the whole insatiable repercussions of evil; but the Christian Hope that this Holy Year has proclaimed *does* forever take away the sense of dread, foreboding, or despair, whether at the state of the world, or the state of my life.

We gaze happily this morning at the simple, humble, lowly state of the Saviour's birth-place, expressed in our Christmas Crib: the animal shed for an inn; the feeding trough for the new-born's bed. We can place in it our hope, just as I will place in it this stone with the word "Hope" that has accompanied me through the Holy Year. Christmas, especially in this Holy Year, brings us hope: not

because we have worked it all out by ourselves, or so resolved all the problems of the world to our satisfaction that we allow ourselves a bit of hope; no, but because we know that God *has*: despite this world of sin, "where meek souls will receive Him, still the dear Christ enters in."

Just before I finish, and place my hope in the dwelling place of the Word-made-flesh, might I remind you that you can still complete that pilgrimage for the Holy Year. I'm not asking you to rush to the Ryanair website, or to jump on a plane to Rome. But there are Jubilee Churches in every diocese where you can visit to make the equivalent of a Jubilee pilgrimage to Rome. Nearest here would be the church at Covent Garden (Corpus Christi) or our diocesan Cathedral at Westminster. If you don't feel, yet, that you've made such a pilgrimage of hope this year, then why not do so before the (local) Church's Holy Year closes on Sunday (28th Dec)? I highly suggest that you do, esp. as you're here in London at a holiday time: make that Jubilee pilgrimage with all your heart, and so gain hope.