

Fr Thomas Williams on the New Springtime of Hope

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An article in *First Things* reflects on what the new springtime really means.

April 2, 2009. New York, NY. In a time when dark news prevails in the media, a bit of hope is always welcome. The latest issue of [First Things](#), a journal on religion, culture, and public life, published an article by Fr Thomas Williams, LC, on what the springtime of John Paul II really means. Article reprinted with permission.

The Springtime of John Paul II

By Thomas D. Williams

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In his celebrated Christian allegory *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis represents evil's hold on the world with the image of an enduring winter—Narnia under the power of the White Witch, who makes it “always winter and never Christmas.” According to prophecies, the coming of Aslan the Lion—Lewis' Christ-figure—is to be marked by the end of winter and the appearance of springtime. At one point the human visitors to Narnia are quoted a proverbial refrain obviously well known to the good local folk:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

Throughout his twenty-seven-year papacy John Paul II often employed the image of spring in a similar vein. In his 1990 *Redemptoris Missio*, he wrote: “As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs.” In his 1995 address to the United Nations, he added, “the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit.” And in his 1998 remarks to pilgrims gathered in Rome for Pentecost, he spoke of the Holy Spirit's bringing “a new springtime in the Church.”

Some have suggested that this unflagging confidence in the coming of spring says more about John Paul than about the contemporary reality of the Church and society—his naively sunny optimism that, after a century of bloodshed and human suffering, things must get better. Those who read the pope this way typically contrast his outlook with that of his close friend and papal successor, Joseph Ratzinger, who balanced, they suggest, John Paul's positive mindset with a more realistic (perhaps pessimistic) approach.

The interpretation is not entirely baseless. With *Memory and Identity*, his last published work, John Paul shocked many by his hopeful reading of even the darkest chapters of the twentieth century. Reflecting on the Nazi occupation of Europe and the communist domination that followed, John Paul made some disconcerting assertions.

“There was a sense,” he wrote, “that this evil was in some way necessary for the world and mankind. . . . It can happen, in fact, that in certain concrete circumstances, evil is revealed as somehow useful, inasmuch as it creates opportunities for good.” Such a sanguine assessment of what were among the most heinous instances of evil in all of human history confirmed suspicions that John Paul was infected with a hope that bordered on the pathological.

But, if this was so, it was a discernibly Christian pathology. Nowhere in his life or writings does one discover the roly-poly optimism of shallow souls. When John Paul wrote “I have had personal experience of ideologies of evil,” he was closer to understatement than hyperbole. His contact with totalitarianisms both Nazi and Marxist, and his pastoral familiarity with the usual gamut of sin, all combined to leave little room for a buoyant naivete. “It is hard to forget the evil that has been personally experienced,” he noted. “One can only forgive.”

To write off John Paul's announcement of spring as the product of a positive outlook on life ignores the depth of his spirit. When he spoke of spring, was he reading empirical signs of springtime, or simply encouraging believers to keep their collective chin up? And if he did intend to offer an objective diagnosis, is there any reason to believe he may have been right? Now—four years after his death on April 2, 2005—is a good moment to engage these questions.

We might start by noting that there is a difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is a matter of optics,

the way we view life and reality in general. Optimism is characterized by an enthusiasm that minimizes defeats and is often linked to a healthy personality.

Hope, on the other hand, is a theological virtue—a desire for heaven as one's greatest good, and a confidence in Jesus' promises and God's grace for attaining it. "Hope is not empty optimism springing from a naive confidence that the future will necessarily be better than the past," John Paul told the UN. "Hope and trust are the premise of responsible activity and are nurtured in that inner sanctuary of conscience where 'man is alone with God' and he thus perceives that he is not alone amid the enigmas of existence, for he is surrounded by the love of the Creator!"

Christian hope necessarily fosters a certain kind of optimism—not the optimism that concerns the outcome of a contingent predicament but the optimism for life in general. Christians are not, so to speak, watching the scoreboard to see who wins. We already know, for the final victory has been achieved in Christ's death and resurrection. Christians who cultivate the theological virtue of hope naturally become more optimistic in their interpretation of events around them, knowing that God is able to weave even the worst of situations into his plan for our good. A firm belief in providence—based on the assurance that, as St. Paul says, "for them that love God all things work together unto good"—leads to a more positive outlook even of externally negative happenings. To a 1979 youth congress, John Paul explained, "Without certain hope in Christ's victory in you and in the world that surrounds you, there can be no optimism, and without optimism that serene gaiety without which the characteristic of the youth cannot exist."

John Paul's talk of a new springtime did not derive directly from the theological virtue of hope, since hope transcends all circumstances, favorable or unfavorable. It is significant that the first pope, Saint Peter, told Christians, you must be prepared to give "reasons for your hope" (1 Peter 13:15). Yet these reasons are founded in God's goodness and faithfulness, not in "the signs of the times," and theological hope concerns eternal life rather than temporal well-being. "Signs of spring" may of course make it easier to hope, since the signs themselves bolster our confidence in God's activity and commitment to the world. Yet true hope does not wax and wane with the times—good or bad. Hope shines most truly, indeed, when the times are darkest. Hope is the stuff of gulags and cancer wards, not of cruise ships and cotillions. In other words, a time of hope is not the same as a trial of hope. Even the most fervent and hope-filled Christian must distinguish between signs of hope and signs that put hope to the test—and John Paul's references to springtime clearly suggest the former. If we are to call the present moment a springtime, it must be verifiably different from other times.

Similarly, John Paul's springtime cannot have been merely an expression of his optimism. Both the optimist and the pessimist are objective enough to distinguish between springtime and winter. The pessimist will harp on winter's bitter cold and lifeless landscape, while the optimist may praise the beauty of the driven snow, chilly sleigh rides, and hot cocoa. They are clearly at odds, but not on the fact that winter is upon them. The optimist in winter will not look around and say: "Beautiful day! Let's hit the beach!"

In at least some of his allusions to springtime, John Paul II intended to make an objective statement about the world. In his comment before the UN—"We will see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new spring of the human spirit"—John Paul referred not simply to his unwavering theological hope, nor to a supposed optimism, but to contingent historical events that would encourage a more hopeful reading of humanity's proximate future. Similarly, when he claimed that "God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs" he evidently had something concrete in mind.

So what did he discern? The first significant sign of spring does not involve twittering birds and pink buds. What we see first is slush and mud: The world in spring gets uglier before it gets prettier. That, after all, is why T.S. Eliot called April the cruelest month: Winter kept us warm, covering earth in forgetful snow.

In the slush and mud of his own day, John Paul II saw something emerging: a meltdown of formerly frozen ideologies and consolidated problems. People's disillusionment with the therapeutic promises of Freud, the voluntarism of Nietzsche and the utopianism of Marx may not lead to a sudden embrace of Christian faith, but it does prepare the way, just as the Prodigal Son's hunger brought him back to his father's house. We can witness an opening to and hunger for spiritual realities, located in a generalized dissatisfaction with what the world offers.

Joseph Ratzinger, too, saw that melting ideologies offer a new chance for the Christian message. Delivering the 1988 Fisher Lecture at Cambridge, Ratzinger emphasized "an intense, new desire for moral values like freedom, justice, and peace." "Ideologies have been cast aside," he said, "and so one can directly recognize what is good once more. In point of fact, this may be welcomed as an element of hope: God's profound message can be smothered and distorted in man. Nonetheless, it is constantly bursting forth anew, working a

way out for itself.”

In *Salt of the Earth*, Ratzinger similarly described the opportunities opened by melting ideologies: The internal dead-ends and contradictions, as well as the internal falsity of such theories [Marxism, Freudian psycho-analysis, the ethics of the sociologists] will emerge. And that is, in fact, already happening to a large extent. We are experiencing the demythologization of many ideologies. For example, the economic explanation of the world that Marx attempted and that at first seemed so logical and so compelling and therefore could exercise such fascination, especially because it was associated with a moral ethics, simply doesn't correspond to reality. Man is not comprehensively described in these terms. It has become plain that religion is a primordial reality in man. And the same holds in relation to all these other things.

This first sign of spring—winter's loss of power and influence—does not guarantee future flourishing, but it does make spring possible. Springtime is not a period of reward but a time of labor. Unworked land will produce acres of weeds rather than rows of wheat. No harvest can be expected if no seed is sown. In the Christian life as well as in business there is such a thing as a missed opportunity. Springtime offers a temporal window in which to invest one's efforts for future gains. It is a call to earnest effort, not a promise of guaranteed success.

John Paul's vision of spring was not, therefore, a simple invitation to passively observe a fleeting season, but a call for engagement. His many references to springtime, in fact, make growth contingent on personal commitment. In *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, the pope stated this “new springtime of Christian life will be revealed by the Great Jubilee if Christians are docile to the action of the Holy Spirit.”

Similarly, in 1998 he argued to U.S. bishops: “The new evangelization that can make the twenty-first century a springtime of the gospel is a task for the entire People of God, but will depend in a decisive way on the lay faithful being fully aware of their baptismal vocation and their responsibility for bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to their culture and society.” John Paul understood the springtime of our age to be a particularly apt moment for intense evangelizing work.

This contingency of effort is evident in Ratzinger's writings as well, and once more the two seem to complement rather than oppose one another. Ratzinger wrote: “The mere failure of preceding ideologies doesn't necessarily lead to a rebirth of Christianity or issue on great, vital, positive movements. Disappointment settles in and can lead to further collapse, but can also lead to an openness so that people may be touched by the power of Christianity and regeneration can occur. But it doesn't happen, as I said, with the necessity of a sort of natural law.”

Along with the meltdown of ideologies, John Paul also noted the appearance of new life and renewal as further evidence that the world was experiencing a change of seasons. In another passage in *Redemptoris Missio*, he checked off a whole series of items indicating renewal, which he credits to God's work in the world.

As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs. In fact, both in the non-Christian world and in the traditionally Christian world, people are gradually drawing closer to gospel ideals and values, a development which the Church seeks to encourage. Today in fact there is a new consensus among peoples about these values: the rejection of violence and war; respect for the human person and for human rights; the desire for freedom, justice and brotherhood; the surmounting of different forms of racism and nationalism; the affirmation of the dignity and role of women.

The reference to “a new consensus” may be overstated. Violence and war continue—though, as Stephen Pinker recently pointed out, “Violence has been in decline over long stretches of history, and today we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on earth.” Moreover, despite evident signs of greater respect for the dignity of the human person, abuses continue not only on the individual level, but also institutionally and at the state level. One need think only of how the unborn are treated as a matter of course in the western world, or the treatment of women in some Muslim countries, or the suppression of religious liberty across the globe. The signs of spring are mixed, and winter is far from over. In addition, troubling shifts in a reigning ethical mentality, decried by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI as a “dictatorship of relativism,” has actually made further inroads in the last ten years.

John Paul also pointed to more specific ecclesial manifestations of springtime: the appearance and growth of new ecclesial movements. Some 300,000 people, representing more than fifty movements overflowed Saint Peter's Square at a Pentecost 1998 convocation. Addressing the convocation, John Paul pointed out: “After 2,000 years of Christianity, the inexhaustible fruitfulness of the Spirit is always active and evokes a new

springtime in the Church.” The ecclesial movements, as he put it, were not the result of any overarching pastoral plan, but they were a clear witness to the action of the Holy Spirit on the threshold of the third millennium:

Other areas of Church life show similar signs of improvement. The state of Catholic catechesis for both for children and adults, for instance, has notably improved, especially since 1992, the year John Paul published the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This is true not only in the United States, where the bishops carried out a nationwide review of catechetical texts to evaluate their conformity with the new catechism, but throughout the world. Compared to the construction-paper butterfly cutouts, felt banners, and parable dramatizations that I was treated to in my catechism years in the 1970s, catechesis today is an earnest effort in Christian education.

Ecumenism, too, flowered during John Paul’s twenty-seven year pontificate, and has shown continued vigor during Benedict XVI’s reign. John Paul did not believe that division between believers was an option. *Ut Unum Sint* encapsulated his conviction that Christ “cannot remain divided,” but believers “must profess together the same truth about the Cross.” John Paul’s willingness to reconsider even the role of the papacy for the sake of Christian unity met with positive responses from all Christians. His twin overtures to Orthodoxy and Protestantism were especially noteworthy. In the latter instance, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith created the greatest ecumenical rapprochement since the Reformation.

On an intra-ecclesial level, though, the story is hardly uniform. Throughout John Paul’s pontificate, the number of seminarians did increase significantly, rising seventy-five percent from 1978 to 2000. Yet vocations to the priesthood did not begin to approach pre-Vatican II levels and they continue to languish in many countries. The decline of religious life among communities of women shows no signs of abating, and the fallout for Catholic education, healthcare, and missionary activity throughout the world continues to be acutely felt. But when comparing the overall state of the Church in 1978 (John Paul’s first year) with the present situation, the balance sheet tilts positive.

To these two acknowledged signs of spring—the end of winter’s grip and the first signs of burgeoning life—John Paul added a third, bearing a more somber tone: the witness of the martyrs. Just before the year of the Great Jubilee, John Paul wrote that “the Church has become once again a Church of martyrs” (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 37). He was fully convinced by his own theological hope as well as the witness of history that such martyrdom is necessarily fruitful.

On numerous occasions he cited the maxim of the early Christian apologist Tertullian (A.D. 250): *Sanguis martyrum, semen christianorum* (The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians). Just as the Christian Church grew out of her martyrs in the early centuries, John Paul asserted, so was she destined to grow as a result of the twentieth century’s witnesses.

This and similar assertions expressed more than a desire that today’s Christians might find an example set by those who gave their lives for Christ. Rather, he was asserting his theological conviction that it would be so. And so he could write: “For the Church, the martyrs have always been a seed of life,” and once again cited what he called Tertullian’s “famous ‘law,’” which “has proved true in all the trials of history” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*). Here he found a sign of springtime rooted in theological hope and in trust of God’s faithfulness.

These three signs of John Paul II’s springtime faith—the meltdown of paralyzing ideologies, social and church renewal, and the immense witness of twentieth-century Christian martyrdom—may not be empirically conclusive, but they raise serious questions and deserve pondered consideration. Evangelization does not follow seasonal patterns with the regularity of summer, fall, winter, and spring. At the same time, the seasonal analogy is not without merit, and Christians must always read the signs of their times.

Though some may continue to attribute John Paul’s vision of a new springtime to a sunny temperament infected with rootless optimism, his spring nonetheless was based on considerations he believed were objective and accessible to any careful observer.

Just as opportunities can appear, however, they can also disappear. Once spring is past, some windows of opportunity will close. One thing is certain: Much work remains to be done and opportunities now exist that did not a mere generation ago.

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