

Looking Back, Looking Forward

by Fr. Ron Bagley, CJM

I offer these reflections at the beginning of the New Year 2021. It is an opportunity to look back on the extraordinary year 2020, marked as it was with the worldwide Covid 19 pandemic. It is also an opportunity to look with hope to the new year that is upon us. Much of this essay was shared in my homily on the Solemnity of Mary Mother of God on January 1, 2021.

Our month January is named after the Roman god Janus who was thought in Roman mythology to govern beginnings and transitions. Janus was depicted as having two faces: one looking back and the other looking forward.



The end of one year and beginning of another invites us to do the same thing. We are given the opportunity to look back at the year just ending. At the same time we are invited to look forward to the year that lies ahead.



When I was a seminarian, there was a famous book that was very popular at that time. It was originally published in 1963 and was simply called *Markings*. It was the journal of **Dag Hammarskjöld** who won the Nobel Peace Prize as Secretary General of the UN. He was killed in a plane crash on September 18, 1961, while on a peacekeeping mission to the newly independent African nation of the Congo. His journal was published posthumously as the book.

One of the prayers that Hammarskjöld includes in his journal contains these simple lines about beginnings and endings: **“For all that has been—Thanks. For all that shall be—Yes.”** I used this simple prayer on the invitations and program for my ordination as a deacon.

I think those words can frame our thoughts and prayers as we make the transition from one year to the next. Looking back on the year gone by, the call for us is to give thanks. We are invited to give thanks to God the year that has now ended. But we are also invited to thank those people whom God has put in our lives during the year gone by. I encourage you to spend some time in prayerful thanks to God.

In the gospel of Luke, the story of the birth of Jesus after the visit of the shepherds to the infant Jesus, we are told that Mary “treasured all these things in her heart.” She reflected on all the marvelous things that had been taking place in her life.



As we look back over this past year 2020, the challenge for us is to find the things that we need to treasure in our hearts, to hold in our memories. For what things are we most grateful? The terrible trap for us would be to only see the difficulties and problems that 2020 brought into our lives.

The tendency among some people seems to be to simply wash their hands of 2020 and write it off as a bad year. As people of faith, can we discern the presence of God – Emmanuel, God-with-us – in the events of 2020? We need to dig a little deeper and discover those things that we can treasure in our hearts and thank God for them.

We can think especially of those people for whom we are thankful, those people God has put into your lives. We need to give thanks to God for them. But it is also important to remember to thank those people as well.

Some years ago, I came across a story about a man named Paolo. He had attended a talk by a popular motivational speaker. During her presentation, the speaker asked her audience to close their eyes and think about a person who has made a difference in their lives.

At the end of the talk Paolo went up to the speaker and told her that he had been thinking about his 8th grade literature teacher. She had a big impact on his life. He told the speaker that he decided he would try to contact her to thank her.

Paolo was able to locate the teacher and wrote her a nice letter. Within a week he received a response from this wonderful teacher. She wrote:

“Dear Paolo,
You will never know how much your letter meant to me. I am 83 years old and living all alone in this one room. My friends are all gone. My family is gone. I taught for over 50 years and yours is the first ‘thank you’ letter I have ever gotten from a student. Sometimes I wonder what I did with my life. I will read and reread your letter until the day I die.”



Paolo was very surprised by her letter. She was everyone’s favorite teacher. She is the one they always talk about at class reunions. But no one had ever told her until she received his letter.

Looking ahead to 2021, the call to each of us is to say “yes.”

For all that has been
THANKS
 For all that will be **YES!**
 DAG • HAMMARSKJOLD

We do not know what the new year will bring. It could be new opportunities. It could be successes. It could include sadness and loss. It will certainly include new challenges. It will include a great deal of uncertainty.

With faith and hope, we say “yes” to all that God has in store for us this new year. In this way, we are like Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of God. She said yes to God’s plan for her. With questions, with uncertainties, not knowing what joys or sorrows the future would bring, she still said “yes” to God.

At the beginning of a new year, that’s what God asks of us. Can we say “yes” to God this year?

That is the meaning of hope. It is confidence that if we trust God, he will remain with us. It does not mean this year will be free of problems. It means we believe God will never abandon us. That was Mary’s prayer. That is our prayer.

I conclude with a prayer written by Pope Benedict XVI for the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God in 2007:

To the Queen of Peace, the Mother of Jesus Christ “our peace,” I entrust my urgent prayer for all humanity at the beginning of the year... to which we look with hearts full of hope, notwithstanding the dangers and difficulties that surround us.

May Mary show us, in her Son, the Way of peace, and enlighten our vision, so that we can recognize Christ's face in the face of every human person, the heart of peace!

