

Leanness

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 24, 2001](#) issue

For those who date the birth of Jesus from zero, this Christmas season was his 2,000th birthday. Aware of that, my son Joel asked, “Dad, you read all the periodicals and notices? Were you impressed by how little anyone made of that?” I rechecked the periodicals and notices and was indeed impressed. Bethlehem had been closed by the renewed Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the special celebrations were canceled. The figurative 2,000th birthday was indeed greeted rather joylessly.

The Year 2000 was a Jubilee Year for Catholicism, designed to be a joyful time “Urbi et Orbi,” to “the City and the World.” But it will be remembered for the jarring document “Domine Iesus,” a joyless text that evoked joylessness outside the Vatican.

The Year 2000 was supposed to signal the real millennium. Yet, even in the few purist cities that had waited to celebrate it this season, or among Y2K-fearers left over from last year, it was just another New Year’s, marked without much joy. We look back on 2000 and its joyless political primaries, campaigns, recountings and reportings. Surely some past political campaigns have been more joyful than this one was.

If I keep doing this kind of end-of-millennium chronicling, I may commit my first sin at the beginning of the new one: whining. Whining never did anyone any good. Can I move toward being more positive by analyzing?

My analysis of our culture(s) would reflect the title of a long-lost book by an Anglican divine whose name I cannot remember: *He Sent Leanness*. The phrase comes from the King James Version of Psalm 106, which recounted the ways of Israel in the desert. The people had wanted freedom and then material goods, especially on the table. “And God gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.” New translations speak of a “wasting disease.” I prefer leanness—spiritually near-equivalent to joylessness.

We in 2001 have the freedoms. We have the food and the other material goods. What goes wrong for us? Israel had “failed to consider God’s wonderful works.” The

people “did not remember the abundance of [God’s] steadfast love.” “They soon forgot [God’s] works.” “They did not wait for [God’s] counsel.” “They put God to the test.” And God gave them their request; but sent leanness into their souls. Cultural and personal resolves for 2001: Consider. Remember. Wait.