

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I was reflecting on how we will be beginning this New Year on Tuesday. It made me think about the last few years. In 2015, we celebrated 50 years since the end of the Second Vatican Council. In 2016, we celebrated an extraordinary Year of Mercy. 2017 was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Our Lady's apparitions at Fatima. This year, 2018, we celebrated 50 years from the incredible and prophetic encyclical of Pope St. Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (if you are interested in reading it, go to [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)).

So I started wondering, as we enter 2019, what significant events do we look back to? This is what I found on-line: 100 years ago, **1919**, marked the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, bringing World War I to an end. **1919** also was when Congress passed the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, granting women the right to vote. Hmm... those are both pretty significant! 75 years ago, **1944**, marked the D-Day invasion, which signaled a turning point in World War II. In **1969** – 50 years ago – we saw the historic moment of man walking on the moon for the first time. When looking up **1994** (25 years ago), most of the references I found were pop-culture (*Forrest Gump*, *The Lion King*, PlayStation...). At least one significant event happened in 1994, though much more low-key than anything else mentioned... I graduated from high school!

With all of this, it can make us wonder what will 2019 bring? Another way, and maybe a better way, to look at it is to ask “What can **I** bring to 2019?” I can't promise the significance of major treaties, moon landings, or even great movies in 2019, but what I can promise is that if each of us – you and I – makes a sincere effort to follow God more closely, to become a better-version-of-ourselves in the little things, it will mean we find *eternal significance*! When we stand before Almighty God in judgment, He will not look at you or me and say, “Well, you never walked on the moon, so you can't be that important.” Nor will He condemn us for not making a blockbuster movie (or even a B-movie!). Rather, He will look at our circumstances, our gifts and weaknesses, and ask if we tried our best, if we loved until it hurt, if we struggled to follow Him even when it was difficult. Of course, we can't get to heaven by our own merit – it is all Jesus' work – but we enter heaven by accepting that grace on a day to day basis, by striving to grow greater than ourselves. This happens in the little things.

January 1<sup>st</sup> is the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God. Today (Sunday), we celebrate the Feast of The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Relationship is at the heart of both of these feasts; specifically family relationships. Mary takes an important role, showing us how to relate to God. You see, it is by relationships that we grow most easily. What do I mean by that?

If we see God as distant, a lawmaker who doesn't really understand what it means to live our lives with our struggles, how do we see the moral law? It is a bunch of rules (as one teen said to me once, “stupid rules”) that we are forced to follow if we want to be happy in the end. Because we want the prize (heaven), we will try, and “white-knuckle it” through, but it will be pretty miserable, and we will fall more than we fly.

But, if we see God as a gentle and loving Father, deeply in love with you and me, then we will see that His “rules” are there not as random laws to be followed, but as the loving guidance of One who wants us to flourish and truly be happy. The rules won't be “stupid rules” but the guidance we need to become who we were meant to be. We will also recognize that if we don't understand a rule, our first reaction should be, “God, I don't understand why I have to do this... or why I can't do that... please help me to understand and follow Your love,” instead of, “Just *another* impossible thing He wants me to do!”

When we are focused on relationship, we also notice that the motivation changes. Instead of “following the rules” to be seen as “the good one” or to curry favor, or so we're not punished, we do it because we love the One who made the rules, and we want Him to know we love Him and *trust* His love. It's the difference between a mother answering the “why?” question of an irate child: “Because I'm the mother and I said so,” versus, “Would you do this for me because I love you?” (Of course, like children, *we* don't always respond to that gentle love... that's why the “rules” have to be followed, even if we don't understand, or feel the love.)

Mary helps us to recognize God's great love, and gives us the example and grace to love back. If we ask her, she will help us to love God. That love, then, will be the motivating factor for change in our lives. And that will make 2019 a significant year.