

FIVE MINUTE SERMON

BY THE REV. F. P. HICKEY, O. S. B.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

THE REDEEMER

Your redemption is at hand. (Luke xxi, 28)

Solemn and sublime thoughts should lift up our hearts at the beginning of this holy time of Advent. The anniversary of the coming of our Redeemer is at hand; and gratitude for that blessed coming bids us raise up the eyes of our soul, and reverently peer into the mystery of God's goodness in decreeing that a Saviour should be born to save His people from their sins. From all eternity the Almighty had determined to create mankind. From all eternity He knew of the fall of man's sinfulness and rebellion against Him, so that it would come to pass, as the Scripture says, "It repented Him that He had made man" (Gen. vi. 6.) His justice was outraged; His mercy despaired. And poor fallen man, what could become of him? He could not retrieve the past. He could not atone for his own misdeeds. Was there no salvation for the human race?

A God was needed to make reparation and atonement for the outrages against a God! for the outrages of unbelief, of blasphemy, of hatred, of the impurities, and of all the evils that spring up from the depraved hearts of sinners. Then was the mystery of love decreed that astounded heaven; that caused countless angels to rebel; for poor fallen man was to be more honoured than themselves. The second Person of the Blessed Trinity willingly offered Himself to come to the rescue of mankind. As God, He could not suffer, but a body and a soul united to a divine Person, and behold Emmanuel—God with us, our Redeemer! "Behold I come," He said. A Man to suffer; a God to offer! The justice of the Almighty to be placated; His mercy to be thanked; His love to be requited! And the gates of heaven to be opened to repentant man. This is the tidings of great joy that Advent brings to the faithful.

But how little did the world understand of the divine mercy that was to come! True, God's chosen people knew that a Messiah, a Saviour, had been promised. The prophets had spoken of Him. Devout men had longed for His coming and prayed that they might live to see it. But as time went on these holy aspirations faded, and in a very different and earthly way the children of Israel looked for their deliverer. A leader, a ruler to establish an earthly kingdom, a prince of peace was their expectation. Vague was their knowledge, and their yearnings were for something infinitely lower than what was to come. Not an earthly kingdom but a heavenly one was their Saviour to establish, not transient glory that would shortly perish, but immortality amidst indescribable splendour and happiness. He was to come not to rule merely, but to love mankind. He was to come, not to be inaccessible and unobtainable, but to be with them, one of them, whose delight was to be with the children of men.

Oh! how blessed are we, who know so well this Saviour, "this most high God and our Redeemer" (Ps. lxxv. 25.) He that had been promised, came not only for the people of Israel, but for all mankind. He came to "save His people from their sins" (Matt. i. 21.) Let us realize it more intimately. He came not simply to proclaim a universal pardon for all the multitude of the children of men. He came for me! To pardon me, to win my love, my loyalty; to recognize me as His child for whom He had opened the gates of heaven. And is this all? What could hope expect more than this? If He had brought us redemption once, would not this have been an infinitely beautiful mercy?

Let us bow down in humble confusion as we think of this! Forgiveness once; restored to our heavenly Father's favor once! An eternity of thankfulness would not suffice to pay for such a mercy. But what is the reality? Oh! the times and times that He has poured out upon our souls His "copious redemption." Our very sins bring out His mercy more and more. We are the children of the merciful goodness of God! Let us recall with grateful hearts the times without number that our redemption—our forgiveness—has been renewed. It is as if at hand indeed. An act of sorrow; a humble owning of our sins; and He that came to redeem His people from their sins ratifies the words of absolution, and our sins are forgiven us once again. And our relapses, what do they mean? Do we not believe in our forgiveness? Do we despise it? Are we not trespassing on the Almighty's patience, tempting Him to repent that He made us?

Let us resolve that this rejection of God's pardon shall never occur again. But as this blessed anniversary of the coming of our Saviour approaches, let us prepare our hearts to receive Him and bid Him welcome. No wonder good people rejoice at holy Christmas-time! It is not a mere memory of the redemption that came, but it is an actual redemption that comes again to the souls of men. How many anniversaries of His coming have we celebrated, and yet we are no better than we are! To so many in the world the message of Advent finds no admittance to their hearts.

But to us it must not be so. We must prepare a home for Him, lest the first coming should be repeated: "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (John i. 11.)

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GENERAL INTENTION FOR DECEMBER

RECOMMENDED AND BLESSED BY HIS HOLINESS POPE PIUS XI.

LAY APOSTLES

When Jesus Christ preached the sermon on the Mount, He spoke not to those alone who were destined later on to continue officially His mission on earth by teaching, ruling, sanctifying His Church, but also to the multitudes who in every generation would make up the Christian fold. When He said to those gathered about Him on the hillside, "You are the light of the world. A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but upon a candlestick, that it may shine to all that are in the house" (Matt. v. 14-15). He meant that His Church as a whole should be a beacon shedding the brightness of truth and the splendour of virtue upon the earth for the salvation of mankind. Not only His ordained apostles, but each and every member of Christ's mystic body, according to the opportunities of his or her state of life, must contribute something to that brilliancy. "So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. v. 16.) St. Peter, in his first epistle is careful to remind the early Christians of this obligation, "Having your conversation good among the Gentiles: that whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may, by the good works which they shall behold in you, glorify God in the day of the visitation." (1 Pet. ii, 12.)

It is clear then that the Christian who would look upon his religion as a purely personal affair, so hidden away in the recesses of his soul that it should have no influence upon the lives of the fellow-creatures with whom he comes in contact, has a very inadequate idea of the high vocation to which by baptism he has been called. For every Christian is an apostle of Christ: he has no right to bury the treasure of the Faith. The great law of Christian charity is twofold: it commands us to love God, it commands us to love our neighbor. Now if real love consists in a communication, a sharing with the loved one of all the good things we possess, and if, as our catechism tells us, every man is our neighbor, are we not bound each one to share with our neighbor that priceless gift which he perhaps has not received or, having received, has lost through carelessness. All earthly gifts will pass away; there is but one gift that will endure forever. It is the prayer, the encouraging words, the good example, the act of mercy that wins a soul to Christ.

Yet we hear people say, "It is all very well to talk about lay apostles, but that sort of thing is not in my line. I have neither the time nor the talent for lecturing, nor preaching, nor writing books. I'm not a theologian, and anyway that is the business of priests and bishops." Such an attitude might be pardoned if these were the only ways of being an apostle of Christ. It is quite true that no layman has the right to assume the role of priest or of bishop; but it is equally true that the layman can often do what neither priest nor bishop can accomplish. He has access to people whom the priest could never reach directly; he has opportunities of putting in a timely word in conversations which would never be carried on in presence of a clergyman; he can preach day after day by his example—a preaching which is often far more effective than the logic of the pulpit, and to which no one can refuse to listen; he can make the light of Christian charity burn more brightly in the sphere of his daily activity by performing the works of mercy, both corporal and spiritual, both great and small. Whether he be a doctor, or a lawyer, or a merchant, or a mechanic, whatever be his profession or occupation, be he rich or poor, in health or in sickness, not a day will pass in which not only can he pray: "Thy kingdom come," but can hasten the coming of God's kingdom in the hearts of his fellowmen, by some word or deed that will reveal the depth and the beauty of the faith that is in him.

There is no more interesting study to man than man. A man is naturally intrigued and fascinated by the sayings and doings of those about him. However blind a man may be to his own qualities, good or bad, he has always a shrewd eye in observing and a fairly good judgment in summing up the moral

worth of his neighbor. You are known to be a Catholic, and many of the people with whom you are daily associated have only a very vague, if not altogether distorted, idea of what the Catholic faith really is. Consciously or unconsciously, every man is interested in the question of religion, and upon you it will depend how that vague idea of Catholicity is going to develop in the minds of your associates or how that distorted idea is going to be corrected. You may be the instrument destined by Divine Providence to lead one or more of those souls to the light of truth. If they see in you a sterling honesty, a staunch loyalty, a holy reverence for the name of God, a steadfast courage in living up to your religious convictions, they will naturally grow curious to know what secret force is guiding your life. If they see you day by day rising above the self-indulgence and the self-seeking which is practiced about you on all sides, they will begin to realize that the religion which produces such results must be worth enquiring into; and the seed you have sown the grace of God may bring to maturity.

Here is an apostolate obligatory for every Catholic man and woman, yet eminently simple and practical. It is free from the noise of controversy, it needs not the books of learning nor the gift of oratory. It is within the reach of all. It is the most convincing, the most persuasive, the most appealing of all arguments. It is the solid, uncontrovertible proof of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

How often we hear non-Catholics remark, "There is so-and-so. He is a Catholic." And what follows? It may be, "See how he is making his money! Look at his family life! God help his wife and children! If that is Catholicity, none of it for me!" Or it may be, "There is a man you can depend on! There is something in his life that means more to him than money! And what a home he has, the happiest and most cheerful place you could imagine! I wonder how he does it? If that is the result of his faith, I would be a Catholic tomorrow. We can't get away from the influence of example, good or bad.

Besides a consistent Christian life and the faithful performance of religious duties, there is a wide field open to the lay apostle in every parish. To carry on the various parochial works, the parish priest had need of the active cooperation of all his parishioners. Too often our people are inclined to sit back and allow a few—always the same few—carry the burden of organization and execution in every parish society and in every Church work. It may be mere apathy—unworthy of a Christian in Christ's cause; it may, at times, be petty jealousy and envy—more unworthy still of the Christian name. Whatever be the cause, the apostle of Christ cannot in conscience hold aloof from Catholic interests, no more than the hand or the foot can disclaim all interest in the welfare of the body, "for in one spirit," says St. Paul, "were we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. xii, 13) . . . and the eye cannot say to the hand: I need not thy help; nor again the head to the feet: I have no need of you." (Ibid. 21.) Disunion spells disaster.

Lastly, a man or a woman can hardly be an effective lay apostle if he or she does not fully realize the obligations of Catholics in the world today, and is not fired with a true zeal for the honor and glory of God. To get the proper point of view in this all-important matter there is no better means than that afforded by the Lay-Retreat Movement, which year by year is gaining strength and popularity in various Canadian centers. In these retreats men, or women, following the same pursuits or profession are grouped together, and during a few days of quiet seclusion from worldly cares come face to face with the great realities of life, and examine in the sight of God how best they may fulfill the various duties of their calling to the greater glory of God and to the salvation of their own and their neighbor's soul. Thus is being formed gradually an élite of Catholic men and women, true apostles of Jesus Christ in every walk of life. We hope to see this movement spread rapidly to every city in Canada in order that we may have an army of efficient and willing workers to gather in for Christ the ripening harvest. In the growing disintegration of religious thought outside the Catholic fold, the fields are almost waste. Are you going to stand idle?

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O Lord, Thou art the one true, good, Lord of Thy Vineyard, my heart.—St. Teresa.

If we are cheerful and contented, all nature smiles at us; the air is balmy, the sky is clearer; the

flowers have a richer fragrance; the birds sing more sweetly, and the whole world is more beautiful.



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