

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

SERMON PREACHED AT ST. PAUL SEMINARY ON THE FEAST OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION BY REV. OLIVER DOLPHIN OF ANOKA

"This law is not made for thee but for all others." (Esther, xv. 13.) Assurers, deceived by the craft plots of the proud and cruel Aman, had issued a decree of proscription and death against the children of Israel; and according to the ancient law of the Assyrians, no one was permitted to appear before the monarch to implore his mercy, unless authorized by the invitation of the king himself. The rash man who should dare to break this inviolable law would at once pay with his life for his audacious temerity. And yet, in spite of the awful authority of the law, a young maiden of Juda resolved to risk her life for the salvation of her people. Pale and trembling, Esther made her way through the palace guards, and fell fainting at the feet of Assuerus, not knowing whether she should receive a sentence of pardon or draw down upon her head a new decree of death. But the haughty monarch, touched rather than surprised by the courage and devotion of the maiden, gently lifted her up and seating her beside him on the throne, said to her "This law was not made for thee but for all others." "Non pro te: sed pro omnibus haec lex constituta est."

My brethren, does it not seem to you that something of like nature must have taken place in the councils of eternity, when God, anticipating the march of ages, selected Mary to be the restorer of humanity? A daughter of Adam, the offspring of a corrupted race, how could she act as mediator between guilty man and his thrice-holy God, if she were not holy and spotless herself? God, therefore, casting a glance of love ineffable upon the woman whom He wished to bless beyond all other women revoked in her favor, the decrees of universal malediction. "No, my beloved, this law was not made for thee, but for all others!" "Non pro te, sed pro omnibus haec lex constituta est." Then did she advance with confidence, the Virgin promised to the world, for the enemy of God and men could never boast of a victory over her. "In hoc cognovi quoniam voluisti me, quoniam non gaudebit inimicus super me." Already the countenance of the Virgin shone radiant across the ages with that immortal aureole that no stain should ever sully, no spot should ever obscure. Ah, my brethren, now that the crown of the Virgin proclaimed immaculate by a decree of Catholic faith shines with a splendor more brilliant than ever before, let us for a moment meditate upon her glorious privilege, and let us learn to love, to honor ever more and more her whom God Himself has delighted to honor and to love.

THE PRESENCE OF EVIL

We are all, my brethren, born children of wrath, by virtue of that original stain which is transmitted from generation to generation with the blood of a guilty father. This world, stained with so many vices, covered with so many ruins, strewn with so many sorrows, preserves everywhere the imprint of a primitive degradation whose traces the coursing centuries have not been able to efface. And this world, and man himself, becomes in his own eyes an insoluble problem, unless he goes back for the solution to that first fall, the fatal cause of all other catastrophes, to that first desolation, the lamentable source of all other desolations. For man, as a matter of fact, presents such a strange mixture of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of villainy and grandeur, that we could never recognize in such a strange combination, the work of God preserved in its primitive perfection. We find indeed, in the noble countenance, in the brow lifted up to heaven, in the intellect where reason has established its empire in the heart where burn the ardors of a fire divine, in the soul whence spring so many sublime emotions and celestial aspirations, we find in all these precious gifts certain traces of the image of God, certain living vibrations of the breath of the Almighty. But also, when we see that forehead bowed beneath the destroying yoke of vice, when we place our hand on the heart that is filled with a thousand perverse inclinations, when we search the depths of the intellect which is oftentimes only an abyss of darkness, or the recesses of the conscience, the horrible abode of all crimes and all remorse, who could recognize in this the work of God, and who could say: "Behold man such as God conceived him, behold man such as he issued from the bountiful and omnipotent hand of the Creator!" The world, then, is no longer such as God created it, nor is man such as the hand of God fashioned him. But, surrounded on all sides by the signs of the wrath of God, we hear upon our persons the scars of His avenging blows, and all of us, unhappy children of Adam, all included in a common malediction, must lament, on our arrival in this world, the lost treasure of our original justice and our primitive happiness.

Once only was this decree of ineffaceable anathema suspended. And it was to Mary that the honor of this privilege was reserved; an unexampled exception to the iron law under which all the generations of

humanity groan. Yes, Mary was conceived without original sin. There we have a canticle of praise which all the voices of the universe repeat to her glory; the voices of the prophets of the Old Law, the voice of the tradition within the Catholic Church, the very voice of reason itself, tell the story to all who accord our august mysteries the honor of an instant of serious reflection:

VOICE OF THE PROPHETS

I.—In the first place, the voice of the prophets of ancient times. The world was hardly issued from the abyss of nothingness, it spread out before the eyes of the satisfied Creator all the marvels of His work, when already the genius of evil came to disturb the peace and harmony of this young and blooming creation. Satan, the tyrant of the abyss, had just gained a great victory; he had just infected with his own poison that happy and virgin earth; he had just wounded unto death the man and the woman, the eldest son and daughter of God, the two most beautiful works of his hand, the two wonders amongst all the wonders of the universe. In a transport of wrath and indignation, the Eternal confronted the audacious seducer, laid his curse upon him, and demanded an account of his sacrilegious act: "Thou, perfidious and cruel serpent, that hast triumphed over the weakness and credulity of the woman, know that thou shalt not forever boast of thy victory. For one day I shall put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed. Thou shalt exhaust against her all the ingenuity of thine implacable hatred; but, immune to the poison of thy sting, she shall laugh at thy impotent efforts, and with her victorious heel she shall crush thy head." "Et ipsa conteret caput tuum."

Who is this woman, whom God thus indicates in the dim distance of the ages as fated to rob Satan of his prey, if not Mary? And if this august Virgin had ever felt the least ataint of sin, if the devil had infected her also with his mortal poison, how could have been accomplished the oracle of doom which said that she was to crush the head of the infernal serpent? Would not Satan, instead of suffering the punishment for his first attack, have had reason to boast of a new conquest? The second Eve, then, must have been forever exempt from the weaknesses and stains which had afflicted the first woman; and while the unhappy mother of all men gave death to all her children before giving them life, Mary was to heal them, all without contracting aught of the hideous leprosy or the mortal ailment that had come upon them. This was the thought that gave joy to the heart of God during those long ages when the world sank lower and lower in the abyss of frightful corruption. When the crimes of earth piled up even to the heavens, God contemplated Mary advancing from afar, beautiful as the dawn, pure and radiant as the sun after the horrors of a dark and stormy night; He contemplated her across the devastating torrents that submerged the world, He beheld her in that ark of salvation which floated so peacefully over the raging waters of the deluge; for Mary, the new ark of the covenant, was to escape the yawning gulfs of iniquity where all others had suffered shipwreck; He beheld her in the white dove that brought back to Noah the olive branch as a sign of hope and salvation, for Mary also, the messenger of mercy, was to announce the peace of heaven with earth; He beheld her in the sweet radiance of the rainbow, His sign of alliance with the sons of men, for Mary, too, the sign of happy omen, comes to announce to the world the calm that follows the tempest. And then the countenance of God, beaming with tranquility once again, fell full upon the earth a ray of His eternal serenity, and the sword fell from His relenting hand, and malediction ceased to descend upon the earth, and the thunders ceased to rumble in the skies.

The mysterious and prophetic language which symbolized the Virgin full of grace, and whose first echoes go back to the very cradle of the world, became more and more precise as the time drew nearer when heaven was to give to Virgin to an astonished and enraptured earth. From age to age a thousand voices arose singing the glory and the celestial beauty of her in whom all the nations of the earth were to be blessed; and God Himself, smitten with the ravishing charms of the immaculate Virgin, seemed anxious to hasten her advent, and urged her to come and receive the jewels of that spotless crown which He destined for her brow. "Veni, formosa mea, coronaberis." Yes, thou art all beautiful, and mine eye, which finds defects even in the angels themselves, finds no spot in thee. "Tota pulchra es, et macula non est in te." As the lily lifts its snowy head amongst the thorns, so, O my beloved, dost thou appear to me amongst all the daughters of earth. "Sicut inter liliis. All the rest are born daughters of darkness and of wrath and thou, O Mary, thou art a daughter of light and of love; thou hast surpassed them all, and they have called thee blessed. "Tu supergressa es universas." O thou, thou art no more the desolate garden where crawls the hideous reptile, thou art no more the muddy brook, which the infernal serpent infected with his poison; but thou, whom I love as a spouse and a sister, thou art that enclosed garden into which the hand and the foot of the stranger

shall never penetrate to slich its delicious fruits. Thou art that fountain on which the seal has been placed, and none may disturb the limpid clearness of its waters. "Hortus conclusus, sorsor mea, sponsa, hortus conclusus, fons signatus." Thou art that closed door that shall never open before the foot of man. The Lord God of Israel alone shall enter by it, the Prince of heaven alone shall fix there His seat and His abode. "Hanc porta clausa erit, vir non intrabit par eam, Princeps ipse sedebit in ea."

TRADITION OF THE AGES

II.—Thus, then, the oracles of old show her all beautiful and spotless, that blessed Virgin who has to repair the wounds and the iniquities of the world. And if you search the tradition of the ages of Catholicity, you will find that they have but one voice to tell of her ineffable privilege, and to sing the glory of the august Mother of God. From the first ages of Christianity, this has been the opinion of the greatest intellects of the Church, and it would be entirely unfair for a false dialectic to take advantage of the silence of the first centuries. This trivial and entirely negative objection falls to the ground, it seems to me, before this single observation, that in the ages of faith and poetry, the belief that Mary was free, exempt from every stain, either of original sin, or of actual sin, was so universally received and infused into all hearts, that there was no need to teach it explicitly, or to defend it from attack, since at that time no one ever thought of denying or even questioning it. As to the following ages, the voices and the testimonies are not lacking in favor of the cause we here argue for the glory of Mary.

We have the voice of the sovereign pontiffs who, from the tenth century, established the festival and the office of the Immaculate Conception, welcomed as once, and solemnized with piety throughout the whole Western Empire. We have the voice of the Councils, several of which, before the Council of Trent, had already acknowledged the glorious privilege which is to-day one of the dogmas of our faith. We have the voice of the theologians and the doctors who, from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, maintained in the famous University of Paris theses in favor of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. We have the voice of all lands and every age, and but recently, have we not a most striking proof, when all the churches of Christ, and shortly afterwards represented in Rome in the person of their chief pastors, manifested in the face of the whole world how deeply that belief, so honorable to the Mother of God, was rooted in every Catholic heart? Yes, then it was the voice of the east and of the west, of the north and of the south; all the nations of the earth, came from the furthestmost parts of the world to lay their tributes of respect at the feet of the Virgin Immaculate. And then, when the Vicar of Jesus Christ had spoken, and his all-powerful word had reached to the ends of the earth, you recall what enthusiasm, what gladness, what joy and what happiness electrified the world from one end to the other. And what did this joy and this enthusiasm signify? What was the meaning of these joyous transports, these tumultuous celebrations? What was the meaning of those crowns of flowers and those garlands of light which hung from the humble tower of the obscure village as well as from the pinnacle of the majestic basilica, but that these millions upon millions of voices formed an immense chorus to repeat forever and forever: "Mary, yes, Mary was conceived without sin!"

TRIBUTE OF REASON

III.—But why multiply proofs denied neither by that intimate conviction of your faith, nor the tender love of your piety, nor even by the simple lights of your reason, ever so entirely in harmony with the adorable mysteries of our holy religion? However little, as a matter of fact, one considers the august prerogatives of Mary in their relations to God, to the world, who can have any doubt that her origin was without stain and without spot. And if anyone attempted to deny Mary that honor, I would simply say to him: "Brother, do you believe the fundamental mystery of all Christianity, the incarnation of the Word Who came down from heaven to deliver man and to save the world? If you believe this mystery, you acknowledge Mary, then, selected to bring about this union of the Word with human nature, as the privileged daughter of God, the august Mother of God, the holy and venerable spouse of God? Well then, you who love your daughter, your mother, your wife, if you were free to give to that beloved daughter, that venerated mother, that cherished wife, all possible charms and advantages, would you do it? Would you decree that she should be without reproach and without defect, or would you willingly and deliberately leave her afflicted with some scar or stain? Ah, you have already answered! Well then, what you would do for some one dear to you, why should not God do for the best beloved of all daughters, the most beloved of all mothers, the most amiable and accomplished of all spouses? Tell me, you who venerate in Mary, the daughter, the mother, and the spouse of God, you doubtless see in her a queen, and a great queen! For she is queen in heaven, queen on earth, queen even in the depths of hell by the splendor of her glory and the might of her power. Could Mary be queen in heaven, could she behold

on the brows of the angels crowns without spot or stain, and wear a sullied crown upon her own brow? Could Mary be queen on earth, and, less happy than the first man and woman that appeared in this land of exile, be forced to envy the first Eve the robe of innocence and sanctity in which she appeared for the first time to the eyes of God? Could Mary be queen in hell, and yet permit the devil to boast forever of having gained a victory over her, of having humbled beneath his yoke her who was to be the Mother of the Word, the restorer of the glory of an outraged God, the queen of time and of eternity? No, my brethren, this is too repugnant to your enlightened faith and your tender love for the Mother of God, and you cry out in one accord with all the voices of heaven and earth: "Oh, yes! Mary was conceived without sin!"

A MERITED PRAISE

Dost not thou, moreover, O holy virgin, declare thyself that thou wast conceived without the stain of original sin? Day after day, thou dost behold children and old men, rich and poor, innocent souls and poor sinners, kneeling at thy altar and hailing thee as Mother without stain and Virgin without spot. Thou dost see them imploring a glance of protection from thee, and saying to thee: "Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee!" And to that prayer, thou dost respond by the most signal favors of thy hand and the sweetest smiles of thy love.

At such a prayer as this, yes, thou dost smile on the little child stammering the first word of thy praises at the knees of his pious mother; thou dost smile on the young maiden who comes to ask of thee support for her weakness and innocence, and thou dost extend to her thy protecting hand and dost place upon her brow a flower from thine own crown. Thou dost smile on the pale and frightened sailor who invokes thee in the midst of the tempest, and thou dost close up beneath his feet the yawning gulf of ocean. Thou dost smile upon the young man when, in answer to the vocation implanted by the Almighty within his soul, he places himself under the protection of Mary Immaculate, and hies him to the seminary to prepare himself for the work of the ministry. Thou dost smile upon the anointed of the Lord when, during the long and laborious years of his priesthood, he asks from the Immaculate Mother help to do the work of her divine Son. Thou dost smile on all who salute thee by this name: "Mary, conceived without sin!" If this were a lying praise, O Blessed Virgin, couldst thou then testify that it was pleasant and agreeable to thee? Thou wert so humble, so holy, so modest while thou wert on earth; couldst thou, now that thou art in heaven, love, vanity, couldst thou encourage lying, couldst thou reward it by granting so many prayers, obtaining so many graces, working so many wonders? No, O divine Mary, this is not the idea we have formed of the beauty of thy pure and candid soul. Far from us be any thought that would so displease thy heart and ours. No, on the contrary, we shall ever cherish thoughts of thee that exalt the splendor of thy glory and thy spotless purity. And henceforth, when we think that so holy a mother loves us, that lips so pure intercede with God for us, we shall be doubly eager to throw ourselves into thy maternal arms, uttering those words which thou dost love so well: "Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us, protect us save us, now and forever." Amen!—St. Paul Bulletin.

THE SPIRIT OF ADVENT

We are now in Advent, that spring-time of the ecclesiastical year. And like the spring it is a season of preparation. What that preparation is is very clearly shown in the liturgy of the Church. The very word Advent which means, "to come to" is descriptive of that liturgy. It means that Christ is coming to us. The Church takes us out of ourselves these days. We are no longer in the twentieth century. We are back in the days of the prophets. It is as if Christ had not yet come into the world. We are with the prophets eager for His coming. We send forth our sighs with them. "Send down the dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the Just One; let the earth be opened, and bud forth the Redeemer." So it is through all the liturgy of these days. Why is it, we ask; why does the Church speak as if Christ were still to come to the world?

Advent is not only a historical commemoration. It not only brings us back to the days of expectancy to show us the need the world had of Christ; but like all the liturgy of the Church it has a meaning for every individual. Christ must come to each one of us. Of what avail to us individually the coming of Christ, of what avail His passion and death unless we bring Him into our own lives. What a terrible thought that Christ has come and that His coming has been in vain for us inasmuch as we lose our own soul. Hence we are exhorted at this time to prepare worthily for the celebration of Christmas in order to bring Christ into our hearts in Holy Communion, in grace, and thereby make our souls ready for His coming on the day of judgment.

Christ is coming. Once He came and many to whom He came did not notice Him. They let Him go by their door even while they protested that they were watching for His coming. He lived and died, and they knew Him not. There is the same

possibility with us. To avert that calamity there is but one attitude. It is the attitude of the prophets who figure so prominently in the liturgy today, an attitude of watchfulness, of keeping our souls clean so that on Christmas Christ will really come into our souls with His grace. Advent should be a time of special devotion, of frequent Communion to prepare our souls against the coming on the last day.—Boston Pilot.

A PROTESTANT'S TRIBUTE

There is no doubt that from a Catholic point of view, the border duty has done much to broaden the minds of many toward the church. The Catholic chaplain of a Massachusetts regiment reports the following incident: "While talking recently with a chaplain from Pennsylvania who had occasion to take a furlough of thirty days to straighten out some church matters in his parish, he said to me, 'Father, I have never in my life wished that I was a Catholic priest until now.' I asked why such a statement and he said, 'I feel that the only man who can do any good in the army is the Catholic priest. This morning,' he continued, 'while I only had one hundred at my service, the Catholics were on their knees by the thousand close by, and nothing impressed me more than the piety and devotion manifested.'"

"I had to go home because some few of my parish had criticized me for going with the troops as they thought it unnecessary, but if ever the presence of a minister was needed, it is here among so many men away from the influence of home." "Besides," he said, "it has opened my eyes to the patriotism of the Catholics. I came here narrow, and I must confess, bigoted, but after what I have seen from you Catholics, I have become as broad as the Atlantic ocean, and I take off my hat to you. I am," said he, "a member of all the patriotic organizations in my town, organizations whose members are always preaching Americanism and patriotism, yet out of all these we got only six recruits. I told my congregation two Sundays ago the eight I saw on Sunday in your camp; how thousands of Catholics knelt on the ground at your service bareheaded; I told them about the chapel you had in the camp, and how service was held by a goodly number of the officers and men, and then when I thought of myself and other Protestant chaplains like me who could muster only a few hundred to worship, I feel as if my office as a chaplain amounted to nothing."

"You are blessed," he continued, "because you have a colonel and officers who give the example to the men, but we have no encouragement from our officers." He further stated that "when he went home he would have more respect for the Catholics and that nobody could question their patriotism or loyalty in his presence."—True Voice.

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