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True AND CATHOLIC CHRONICLE Witness

Vol. LV., No. 24 MONTREAL, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 1905. PRICE FIVE CENTS

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS DAY

By THE VERY REV. THOMAS J. SHAHAN, S. T. D.,
Professor of Church History in the Catholic University of America.

The season of Advent has drawn once more to its close, and the mystic exaltation of soul which the Christian religion annually nourishes in its adherents finds its fulfillment and reward in the birth of that infant for whose coming Time and Humanity were so long consumed with hope and expectation. In these weeks the Holy Church has been putting before us day by day the most sublime thoughts, the longings of the Prophets, the acknowledgments of sin, the echoes of despair, the lessons of history, the admissions of experience. All the paths of life have been converging upon that little crib at Bethlehem; all that poet or philosopher or critic ever imagined of true or beautiful or desirable, seems now to take being and shape on the threshold of that poor manger. With an infinite skill the Offices of the Church bring out the hopelessness in the average heart, the blindness in the average mind, the moral stagnation in the average society at the time of the birth of Christ. There is nothing in the tragedy of Sophocles or Shakespeare so grandiose, so sternly true and solemn, so heart-gripping as the daily phases by which during these weeks the Church unfolds the meaning of the Old Testament from the Creation to the Nativity. Like the Greek choragus she accompanies the prophets and the singers with her own interpretation and comment. It is all infinitely noble, infinitely deep and significant, yet infinitely simple, for it is the first time that history was so expounded that the old man at once and the little child could grasp its sense.

DRAMATIC NOTE IN ADVENT SERVICES.

As the splendid drama approaches its solution, its many currents merge into ever fewer and deeper and broader. The follies, the passions, the extravagances of men, all the immemorial wrong and injustice of the world, all the stonyheartedness and stiff-neckedness, the ingratitude and the treachery, the vanity and the waywardness, fall away from the stage, and in their place moves out the central figure of Humanity—its Teacher and its Lawgiver, its Liberator, its Reconciler.

Out of the thousand conflicting elements of the human story, there stand out three things,—the Internal Strife within the soul of man, the External Strife within the bound of Creation, and the Great Reconciliation or Appointment that was worked by Jesus Christ. Here is a trilogy worthy of Euripides, nay, worthy of some glorious Sophocles, who alone could put in fitting language the mighty thoughts that underlie the story of our Redemption.

A DIVINE TEACHER AND LAW-GIVER.

It is as a Teacher and a Lawgiver that Jesus Christ is sent to us by the Eternal Father. He cometh not of Himself; He is sent, as He so often tells us. No teacher chooses himself, but is called by one greater than he. The Father saw, as he now sees, that the key of human misery was our own disordered will and darkened mind. Humanity had lost the way of righteousness, the sense and the spirit of holiness, the high moral transforming purpose of religion, were greatly weakened, not to say destroyed. And so the Eternal Wisdom came upon the earth, in order to rekindle in human minds the Lamp of truth and in human hearts the power and the courage to embrace the truth. Before Him there had come into the world many a teacher, and for not a few, we may believe, that their hearts were straitened by sorrow at the sight of boundless evil. Men of the West like Pythagoras and Plato, men of the East like Confucius and Buddha, men of theory like Aristotle, and men of practice like Solon and Xuma—all had attempted in some way to better mankind by their teaching or their laws. But the Holy

Church tells us that no one like He taught the whole cycle of truth, gathered all men into His fold, laid before them clearly the necessary and attainable scope of their being, and did all this with ineffable suavity and irresistible power.

"O Wisdom that goest forth from the mouth of the Most High, reachest from end unto end, and disposes all things with strength and sweetness, come and teach us the way of prudence! O Orient, thou splendor of light eternal and sun of justice, come and shed thy rays upon those who are seated in darkness, even in the shadow of death, O Adonai, and Leader of the House of Israel, who didst appear unto Moses in the Burning Bush, come and redeem us in the strength of thy arm."

In the fulness of time He came, in a divine and incomprehensible way. He filled the world with His teaching. First and only one of mankind, He was Himself as perfect as His teaching. And He gave to His new and perfect law its firmest support in the commentary of His own life and death. In His law there is nothing imperfect, confused, false, sensual and narrow as in the law of Mahomet; nothing fundamentally immoral as in the law of Buddha; nothing of the low rationalism of the law of Confucius. It is no law of men, for it is nothing less than the original Voice of God heard by Adam in the Creation, made known by Moses from Mount Sinai, reiterated by the prophets, made plain and certain for all by Jesus Christ. All other laws are like sign-posts, directive; the holy Law saves us, and makes us what it indicates.—"O Emmanuel, our King and our Lawgiver, the desired of Nations, thy Saviour, come and save us, O Lord our God!"

COMMUNION WITH MANKIND.

The true teacher must feel with and for disciples. And so, when Christ would be born to teach all mankind to rise above itself, and to be again like the image of God once impressed on Adam and Eve, He entered into the most intimate relations with Humanity. Most men are poor, unhappy, pitiable; it is only the few who are otherwise, nor is their lot a certain one. So Jesus was born in a wretched manger and bore every pang and whip of poverty and sorrow. He was weak and lowly and dependent, that He might teach us to look on all these things, might leave to the most helpless of our race the strong supporting philosophy of a Divine Example, might glorify and sanctify these usual conditions of our birth and training. Then again, in all men there is a spring or source of rebellion against law and order that make for the things above. Hence sin and its consequences. In vain had the Father imposed the stern ceremonial, repressive Law of the Old Testament. The one people to whom He gave it, dowered with promises and prophecies and miracles, again and again shook off its yoke as something unbearable. But the little Infant in the Crib brings a new Law, the Law of Love.—Himself, the very source of Goodness. From His Person through countless ages there flows an unspeakable charm that warms life like a fire and draws like a magnet, and sweeps us upward to Him like a mighty wind. Now, we have not only the Divine Example, that touchstone of right and wrong, of good and bad, but in the heart of every man of good will there is planted the conscious tendency to observe the new law, with the power to do so.

THE PROPHETIC SOUL OF HUMANITY.

This day, nineteen hundred years ago, they were killing fat heaves about the altars of the Temple, and repeating the solemn promises of the Lord that He would read the heavens and rain down the Just One. Something, too, was stirring the hearts of men at Rome and in the Greek lands. A Virgil sings his mystic lines, that even yet seem the

FAILURE OF PHILOSOPHY AND SUPERSTITION.

In this double conflict with the forces within and without himself, man was being ground as wheat between the upper and the nether millstones. He did not understand the terms of the struggle, and his best efforts, both in the Law and outside of the Law, went for naught. From many a heart in those days went up the cry of the Apostle, "Unhappy me, who shall free me from the body of this death?" Philosophy had vainly tried to furnish some men with an anchor in the sea of doubt and opinion. The face of Superstition had changed again and again, but its painted lips were powerless to reveal a secret they did not possess. Ambition had stalked over the wide world in the persons of Greek and Roman and Carthaginian generals, but only to leave behind the stillness and solitude and the peace of universal ruin. For a time a semblance of happiness was set up,—the peace of Rome, made up of all the crushed hearts and hopeless sorrows of the world, and therefore carrying in itself the response of death. Already Epicurus could exclaim: "O Caesar, in thy peace, what woes I suffer!" Was it not high time that the Prince of Peace should at last appear and reveal the secret of the divine dealings of God with man? No wonder that as the hour of the Nativity approaches, Holy Church cries out in maternal anguish.

ARE WE YET OF THE KINGDOM?

Is this truth fading from our social consciousness? Are we dealing now with one another as men who recognize the Christian dignity in one another, that dignity which Leo the Great could appeal to as a warning not to fall back upon the former villainy of our state? In our incredible passion for wealth, in our reckless crushing of the poor man's equal right to life and its comforts, in the expansion of our commerce and industry, in our legislation, in our public opinion, in the estimate we set upon the goods of life, in the ways we find for our activities, in the ideals we follow or encourage others to follow, do we keep in mind that we are all brethren of Jesus Christ and children of a new life, a new state, the Kingdom of Heaven? Or has the idea of the Kingdom of

HEAVEN PERISHED FROM AMONG US?

And is it true, as the critics of our country so often tell us, that we are the least Christian of peoples, that we are sunk to the lowest plane of naturalism, and that we bound man, life, the spirit, God, and the things of the soul by the circumference of a yellow coin?

JESUS CHRIST IS STILL OUR KING.

No! In spite of all that appears upon the surface we are still, and we know ourselves for the brethren of that little Infant, who this day was born for the welfare of mankind. And if we have, perchance, allowed this thought to slumber: if we have not translated it into our dealings with one another, with the world about us, with the false, the empty, and the insufficient ideals of existence, we shall, God willing, do so henceforth. None of us will again say with Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" But we will remember that this little Babe, grown to manhood, left to the world the parable of the Good Samaritan; that He went about doing good; that He healed and consoled and blessed and encouraged all sorts and conditions of men and women; that His whole activity went out into the social betterment of the world about Him, that He is the author of the Golden Rule, and that He transformed a degenerate world not with praise or promise, but by deed and example. What wonder that the Angels, weary of the endless round of human wrong and misery, broke out into that chorus of joyful praise, as they contemplated the changes which the birth of Christ was sure to inaugurate! What wonder that the poet's fancy was touched with inspiration as the glories of Christ's reign on earth opened before his anointed eyes!

Once bless our human ears,

If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Arise in melodious time,
And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow;
And with your ninefold harmony,
Make up full concert to the angelia symphony.
For, if such holy song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back and fetch the age of gold;
And speckled vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,
And hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.
Yea, truth and justice then
Will down return to men,
Or'd in a rainbow; and, like glories wearing,
Mercy will sit between
Throned in celestial sheen.
With radiant feet and tissued clouds down steering;
And heaven, as at some festival,
Will open wide the gates of her high palace hall."

ABBE MARECHAL DEAD.

The Rev. J. N. Marechal, canon and parish priest of St. Jacques de l'Achigan, died on Monday night from syncope of the heart, after an illness of a fortnight. The deceased clergyman was born in 1834, and was educated at the Montreal College. He was ordained in 1857, and was appointed vicar of the parish of St. Lin, from which he was transferred to that of St. Jacques de l'Achigan. He afterwards became parish priest of Notre Dame de Grace, where he remained for thirty-three years. In 1900 he succeeded his brother as parish priest of St. Jacques de l'Achigan, a position which he held till the time of his death. The funeral service will take place tomorrow morning on the arrival of the Montreal train, Bishop Archambault, of Joliette, officiating.

If the fruits of industry and genius are to serve their appointed purpose in the economy of life, if God's temporal gifts are to assist us in the attainment of eternal felicity, then man must be mindful of his Creator and respect and reverence his rights.—Abb. Christie.

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"UNTIL US THIS DAY A CHILD IS BORN."