

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Advent — A Triple Reminder

Advent is meant to remind us of three things — Christ has come; He comes even now; and He will come. Nearly twenty



centuries ago a man like nobody before or since made his appearance. His public career was short. He appeared as a religious teacher, but differing sharply from all others. He dared to speak in His own name as completely one with the transcendent God. He had no use for expediency or compromise. He antagonized the rich, the powerful, the established and the secure. He sought out the sinners, the poor, the suffering and the outcasts. He demanded belief in what by all natural standards was incredible and a manner of living beyond natural powers. He was forsaken by His friends, deserted by His intimates, done to death by His enemies.

This would have been just another sad episode in the long history of man's inhumanity to man except for one thing. He rose from the dead. People who knew Him intimately, who saw Him die, attested to His living reappearance. They were so sure of it and what it implied that they were willing to die for their belief.

Within 300 years, thousands of followers of the crucified and risen Christ laid down their lives because of their belief in Him, and a world once pagan became Christian. This was the first Advent, the first coming of Christ. God Himself, in the Person of His Son, entered our human history at the central point around which all past and future events revolve. Jesus isn't just God, for that would remove His identification with us humans. But He isn't just man, either. If only man, His atonement has only human value and can't compensate for the infinite enormity of sin.

He is the God-Man, the eternal Son of the Father, taking to Himself in intimate and eternal union the fullness of our nature without ever ceasing to be God. Understand we cannot. Believe we must, if we are to believe anything at all.

And Jesus comes today, to you and to me, on this first Sunday of the Church's year, the first Sunday of Advent, November 30, 1975. His coming is a silent, gradual, generally imperceptible process. Of course, there are landmarks. We become members of God's household in Baptism, witnesses to Him when confirmed, grateful recipients of His healing power in the Sacrament of Penance, one with Him in the Eucharist. The way we allow these outward signs to work their effect in the silent center of our being is what makes all the difference. When we start putting Christ where He belongs, in our life, His present coming or Advent is really taking place. What does this mean practically? Well, suppose you start looking beyond present selfish consideration to God's interests rather than your own convenience or profit or pleasure. Perhaps a suggestion or two may help. Suppose we enlarge our prayer life to include at the start five or ten minutes of Bible reading each morning or evening. Keep at it, so that instead of a routine thing it becomes a truly precious interval of strength and peace. Or you devise a program of visiting or at least telephoning the sick and shut-ins of your acquaintance. Or you start getting down to business on what you know is a real fault in your character, the big one that most displeases others. Make an act of reparation every time it occurs.

And Jesus will come — in power and glory and majesty at the end of the world, the close of history. His ways to mankind and to each one of us will be so dazzlingly revealed that every one — saint and sinner — will be compelled to admit His wisdom, His justice and His mercy. The ultimate un-

tangling of all the puzzling events of history will take place. This has to be; because it is right and because Jesus said it would take place. If life is to make any sense, there has to be a final settlement of accounts, where irreformable selfishness will meet its just comeuppance, when the patient down-trodden will at last be given recognition. Each one must be given what he has been asking for all his life. For no one will be dragged screaming and kicking into eternal life. Nor will anyone be condemned to everlasting banishment from everything good, unless he has been busy rejecting good all his life and has persisted in that rejection until death has forever fixed that determination.

Perhaps we ought not to speculate on when this last act in human history will take place. The end of the world will be for each one of us our own death. A great many react to this individual coming of Christ at the close of life, as did the people of Noah's day, watching him build the ark. At first they laughed and said the flood would never come; then as time passed they said, "It's a long way off and we have plenty of time to get ready when it starts to rain." If we have even a little faith, we will admit that God is not going to wait on our convenience. Jesus said, "At an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." If we had two lives to live, two souls to save, we might be excused for playing fast and loose with our eternal destiny. But we haven't, we have only one. Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?"

During this season, think deeply on the words of Jesus: "Behold I stand at the door and knock." How long can we afford to keep Him standing outside? Such is the challenge of the Advent that is now.

To the Sick: 'God Will Wipe Away Every Tear'

The following excerpts, edited by Father Cletus Healy, SJ, are taken from an address by Pope Paul VI at the Jubilee Mass for the ill on Oct. 5.

For believers in Christ, the pains and sorrows of this life are signs of grace, and not of misfortune. They are proofs of the infinite



benevolence of God who develops that loving plan, according to which, as Jesus says, "Every branch that bears fruit he (My Father) prunes that it may bear more fruit" (Jn. 15: 2).

This does not mean, of course, an irrational invitation to accept illness passively and renounce the treatment necessary in order to recover. We can never thank the Lord enough for having stored in nature the energies capable of restoring health and vigor to sick organisms, and for having granted men the faculty of discovering certain secrets, to be used for the relief of suffering brothers.

We know, in fact, that precisely by virtue of the Redemption, all the defects inherent in human nature, or derived from the wounds of sin, and left for the present in man as occasions of ascetic exercise and conformation with the Crucified Christ (cf. St. Thomas, Summa Th. III, q. 69, a. 3), will one day be canceled, when God "will wipe away every tear and there will be no more death, or mourning, or cries of distress . . ."

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which we administer to some of you today, was set up and transmitted as an effective sign of the redeeming love of Christ, Who wishes to cure man mainly in the spirit, without, however, neglecting his body. Conferring it, the Church certainly does not claim to take the place of medicine, and is far from pseudo-religious conceptions or

practices which have affinities with any form of superstition. The Church — you know — moves on another plane: the supernatural plane of the Sacraments, which are effective signs of the intervention of Christ, the Divine Savior and Doctor.

In this Sacrament, of course, the Church looks mainly to the soul, to the remission of sins and the increase of divine grace. . . . On the basis of the Lord's words transmitted by the Apostles, and moved by their sentiments of charity, we have recently promoted the reform of the rite of the Anointing of the Sick, in order that its complete purpose may appear more clearly and that its administration may be facilitated and extended — within rightful limits — also outside of cases of mortal illness.

We wish to tell you that nothing so much as suffering, and, therefore, illness lived in a Christian way (we prefer to say lived, and not just borne) gives believers a place in the stream of spirituality which the Holy Year has re-opened in the world. . . . Nothing makes them more fit to receive the ineffable gifts of grace, forgiveness and purification, which are among the many fruits of the Jubilee.

Allow us to say that your presence gives us a certainty which we can almost feel that the forces of good, consecrated by immolation with the Crucified Christ, are acting in the world to bring it to salvation. Let us add that we are relying on you, on your prayers, on the offering and the value of your sufferings, and on this fervid celebration itself, to hope that there will take place in the deep tissue of humanity that interior healing, which means serenity and peace of soul, without which physical health, prosperity and every other earthly satisfaction would be worth nothing.

If at certain moments you feel all the human weakness that accompanies illness and, perhaps, the melancholy of loneliness, the inadequacy of assistance, or other troubles and humiliations, remember then the wonderful experience of St. Paul. Af-

flicted by his "thorn in the flesh", he heard the Lord tell him: "My grace is enough for thee; my strength finds its full scope in thy weakness" (2 Cor. 12:8-9).

Yes, the whole Church — and with her the whole of mankind — receives a great deal from your sorrow, transformed by the mystery of the Cross, and having become, therefore, a kind of leaven in the Communion of the Saints. . . . Now, therefore, you are helping, you are building up the Church! What a marvelous reality this is in the light of the Gospel! What an opening onto the mystery of pain! The feast we are celebrating at this moment, with all the Sick in the Catholic world, is a feast of Ecclesial communion!

For this reason, both to you, present here, and to you, sick persons who are far away physically, but united with us in the mysterious wave of the Communion of Saints, to all of you who are associated, in an exemplary way, with the ministry of the Church for the redemption of the world, on behalf also of our Brothers in the episcopate and in the priesthood, we say: Thank you! Yes, the Church is grateful to you, because she receives a great deal of fruit from your sufferings united with those of Christ.

Finally we must add a word for the Pilgrims present here with the special qualification of Devotees of the Holy Rosary, the beautiful and well-known prayer of the Catholic Church, faithful to a tradition that goes back to St. Dominic. . . . May the practice of this pious and privileged religious exercise nourish faith and piety in the individual souls eager to communicate with Christ by means of this filial and simple conversation with His Mother and the Mother of the Church.

May the Blessed Virgin protect you all, Sons and Daughters, giving yourselves "up to prayer, together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:1).