

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

# Christ, Our Savior: The Invitation To Abide In Love

To speak of Christ as our Savior — as the Holy One through whom the Father has willed to gather us in His love — is to speak at once of the most profound meaning of our Christian faith and of the central element of our Christian hope. The season of Advent and the feast of Christmas can and will mean nothing to us as Christians if there is not some sense in which we can and do believe and appreciate that we are "saved." So during these last days before Christmas, we owe it to ourselves and to the Father and Christ Jesus to reflect daily on the reality of this mystery of our salvation — by looking into the faces of our brothers and sisters in this world and seeing there the saving presence of Christ.



The great danger for Christians is that words like "Savior" and "Salvation" will remain very abstract, theoretical terms for us, merely theological language which we acknowledge and use because someone else with more ecclesiastical authority or academic learning, says that these are the right words to use to describe our situation as human beings.

But God, our Father, and Jesus Christ His Son, have not chosen to be related to the human community, to each one of us human persons, through some theoretical manner of speaking, or by some method of intellectual explanation. The reality of the living, active, merciful love of God is precisely that He has chosen to be related to us existentially, historically — that is, in the very shape and texture of our human existence, in our very concrete history, in the very reality of our lives as we live and experience them: in our flesh. So the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and in their flesh all mankind shall see God, their Savior.

Some scripture scholars have said that the fullest Old Testament account of what God intends as the process of our "salvation" is expressed in Psalm 91, the great song of the covenant of intimate love between the Most High and His beloved people, a song steeped in human trust and divine tenderness:

"If you live in the shelter of the Most High and make your home in the shadow of the Almighty, you can say to Yahweh: 'My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!' It is he who will free you from the snare of the fowler who seeks to destroy you; he will conceal you with his pinions and under his wings you will find refuge."

for this Most High God says to you:  
 "I rescue all who cling to me,  
 I protect whoever knows my name,  
 I answer everyone who invokes me,  
 I am with them when they are in trouble;

I bring them safety and honor.  
 I give them life, long and full,  
 and show them how I can save."

Here we can see and hear how God, Himself, chooses to speak to us of "Salvation": He chooses to use one of the tenderest images in human experience: He tells us that to be "saved" means that mankind is held, sheltered, protected, concealed, loved — as in the rescuing, safeguarding hollow of a wing, or an arm — in the encompassing, clasping embrace of God's own effective and enduring concern for us.

Christ Jesus, his Son and our elder Brother, was the first of all our needy humanity to be so gathered with such merciful love into the glorious saving embrace of God, our Father, and in Him and because of Him we, his brothers and sisters — "I call you friends" — are also gathered in the sheltering love of the Most High and are brought finally home in the shadow of His Almighty Compassion.

This "Salvation" does not occur completely for us in a single action or event in our lives or in our human history, but beginning long before our birth and baptism — continues in a long, slow but finally fulfilled promise and process of God's outstretched arm, reaching for us, grasping us in the power of Christ's resurrection, drawing us, slowly enfolding each of us more and more lovingly and safely in the redeeming clasp of His personal love for us.

We know that, literally, in terms of the bodily meaning of those words, He whom we call "God" does not have "arms," "wings," or "pinions." He, too, knows the poor inadequacy of our human language. Even Christ, Himself, who is the most revealing and the most perfect Word the Father has ever spoken to us is but a sign, a sacrament, of the full reality of the Saving Love of God that we will come to know more thoroughly at the end of time. But, for now, we see and speak as in a dark mirror, through signs and images, and God, Himself, risks that kind of incarnate language, probing our human experience, with its needs and desires, to find the words, gestures, and events that will best express His saving love in ways that we can somewhat comprehend.

When we say that Psalm 91 contains a revelation of God's saving love in our behalf, we mean that through the instrumentality of this divine-human language God has willed to make known to us the fullness of love, the "safety and honor . . . life, long and full," which He has planned to give us and is even now giving us through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

So God's salvation of us is not an abstraction or a theory: it is a history of incarnated love. It is love given and received in human flesh. This reality which we find hard to fathom is the reality which advent and the Nativity of Jesus Christ recall emphatically to our minds and hearts. And Christ, Himself, has testified that it involves a second reality which is like the first: the continued presence of God's saving love in our

world is still incarnated in human flesh, in the living human community which Jesus Christ has identified with Himself: for "God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him" and, therefore, "what you do to the least of these my brothers you do unto me."

Because Christ is our Savior and in him we find our salvation, not only is God OUR dwelling place, but we are HIS dwelling place. Not only are we saved and sheltered under the shadow of His love, but we are commanded to save and shelter our brothers and sisters in this world under the shadow of our own love — which is Christ's love in us and in them.

With the coming of Jesus Christ the wonderful, and even surprising and demanding perfection of Psalm 91 was revealed: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another," for "a man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God whom he has never seen. So this is the commandment that he has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother." The Saving God of Psalm 91 now says to us: As you gather your brothers and sisters in the shelter of your wings, I am gathering you and them in the shelter of my wings. My continuing salvation of you and them occurs in and through your love of one another. This way of salvation is what I meant when I willed to save you through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

So, my people, if during these days of Advent we want to know and appreciate what it means to say that Christ is our Savior, that He has come and is coming to save us, we can enter this great mystery of our faith and hope only by letting ourselves be sheltered and clasped in our brother's love and by reaching out ourselves in incarnated love: by extending shelter, by offering refuge, by being a stronghold of assurance and peace, by freeing our brothers and sisters from snares, by concealing the needy of whatever sort under our pinions, by providing comfort under our own wings, by rescuing those who turn to us, by answering those who turn to us, by answering those who call on us, by being with those in trouble, by giving safety and honor to all who abide with us under the shelter of the Most High.

Then we will know the Salvation which Zechariah prophesied and will rejoice with him:

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has VISITED his people, he has come to their RESCUE, and he has raised up for us a POWER OF SALVATION in the House of his servant David, even as he proclaimed, by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient times."

and we will "go before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people KNOWLEDGE OF SALVATION . . . by the TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD."

## To Whom Shall We Go?

Pope Paul VI delivered the following address at the Nov. 23 general audience.

Oh, all of you present at this Audience, which occurs at the threshold of the liturgical period, which we are accustomed to distinguish as particularly significant in the religious course of time, and which we call "Advent", why have you come? What motive has prompted you to come to this meeting? Mere tourist curiosity ("let us go to see this unusual figure of the Pope")? Or was it a motive of ordinary Catholic devotion ("it is always a fine thing to be present at a General Audience of the Pope"); or a spiritual impulse, concluding, as it were, an interior process of spiritual restlessness, which seems to adopt the words of the fisherman St. Peter, after the discourse foreshadowing the eucharistic bread?

This discourse had disconcerted the hearers at Capernaum, still amazed at the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves on the previous day, but incapable of supposing it to be a sign pointing to a more unusual and inconceivable miracle, that of the Eucharist. St. Peter, seeing the incredulous crowd disperse, and moved, as it were, by Christ's words: "Do you also wish to go away?" (Jn 6, 67), exclaims, on behalf of all the colleagues, disciples and apostles present: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have

come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (ib. 69).

Yes, to whom shall we go? You, some of you at least (and we suppose it is the young, in years or in spirit) are here precisely in this spirit. It is they who come to the Pope in the hope that he will have some secret and miraculous word that will answer their intimate "life query". It may be a question that struggles among disappointments and uncertainties, and even more among tensions and anxieties for new certainties, out of an inner hunger for truth, which will really interpret the unsettled world that surrounds them, and teach a sure way, worthy of being traversed by their unsatisfied, but quivering vitality.

There is, we think, an aspiration for many troubled to the point of suffering — towards a solution of life, the need of a choice, the choice of a way that will not vanish in the sands of a desert of unsolved problems, nor be swallowed up in the treacherous quagmire of false and unworthy promises. There is in so many generous but blindfolded spirits the urgency of finding a formula of existence, which will give a full and courageous use of the energies that see the within them, but who are disappointed by the false hopes of ordinary life, or by the fascination of programmes that are illusory or not sufficiently capable of giving a full and noble meaning to those who dedicate their lives to them.

After the upheaval of the recent wars, after the type of life without ideals or sustained by aims of mediocre value, or dazzled by politico-social conceptions that are incomplete and perhaps inhuman and renouncing the ideals of the spirit and of

superior truth, a crisis is taking place in the generation of new, free men, who are anxiously looking for a vocation which will really be worth living with silent, but not fallacious heroism.

Are there perhaps among you, young people, among you men and women who are listening to us, persons, living persons, who are suffering in the search for this model of life, not a strange one, but hidden? Are you perhaps seeking from us the formula of real life, the one that contains the treasure of values that will justify the risk, the gift of the choice that does not admit comparisons?

Well, to you, eager for this supreme answer, the answer about the authentic, wise, really human use of life, we will say two things: the first is our ignorance about the things that form the riches, the strength, the fascination of the exterior world. We are strangers, we are poor in spirit. Do not ask us, do not ask the Church, for what we cannot give you. We no longer know earthly happiness (cf. Jn 16, 20).

But if you ask us the secret of true life, the one founded on truth, on love, on the concomitance of divine grace; the life of strong, austere and joyful men, that of men who live the life, even modest and poor, of modern society, but sustained by real ideas, by a transcendent communion, which makes the spirit happy even in adversities, the life, in a word, of the vocation of baptism, full of interior song, which is not extinguished with death, the good, simple, honest and serene life, Christian life, yes, we can teach you and help you to live it. Do you want to?