

## PASTORAL SECTION

### HOMILETICS

First Sunday of Advent (Nov. 29)

Lk 21, 25-28. 34-36: The Coming of the Son of Man

#### *Championship Round*

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In a basketball game, as in contests in general, confidence plays a very important role. A demoralized, jittery team, almost always goes down in defeat. The team must have good morale. That is why it is important to have a persistent cheering squad, and a coach who knows how to infuse confidence into his players.

But it is not always the most confident team that wins. In fact, many a crucial game has been lost due to overconfidence. Sometimes, a very powerful team pitted against the underdog, loses its chance to enter the championship round because it under-estimates the ability of its low-graded opponent.

Extremes should be avoided. When fighting, we should neither be disheartened nor overconfident. We should be watchful. This is the message of the gospel reading today: Watch yourselves . . . stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man."

We are engaged in a contest against the forces of evil. This contest has reached its final round, the championship round. Every fight counts. Every victory is an anticipation of that final victory that will surely come after the great final fight that will be led by Our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, we liturgically inaugurate the championship round of our contest with evil. Our team, in the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, has already won the first round, through his

life, passion, death and resurrection. As we start the crucial second round, Our Lord is not visibly with us. But he comes in a mysterious way in the liturgy. Let us prepare for his coming, let us watch and pray. Let us be ready when he comes to score a powerful victory on Christmas. Most of all, let us live such a life that, when he comes on the last day for the final fight, we shall be ready to join him and be champions with him.

**Second Sunday of Advent (Dec. 6)**

**Lk. 3, 1-6 (Prepare a way for the Lord)**

### *Infrastructure*

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To become a great nation, we must first have infrastructure: we must have good roads. This is an oversimplification. Certainly, to cure the present ills of our country, we need more than just kilometers and kilometers of concrete roads. But there is wisdom in paying attention to the construction of roads in order to boost progress. How did the Romans become great empire builders? To a large extent, it was due to their ability to lay good roads.

In spite of modern mass media, in spite of giant air transportation provided by jumbo jets, roads still play a very vital role in communication. And communication is essential to progress, whether economic or spiritual. It is not surprising that the liturgy, desiring to establish better communication between us and our Saviour, chooses a gospel reading that exhorts us to "prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight." In other words, we must look after our spiritual infrastructure.

Humility is not a very popular virtue nowadays. Indeed, has it ever been truly popular? But it is necessary for salvation. God did not choose to save mankind with a smile. Instead, "he emptied himself, to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross" (Philippians 2, 7-8). Similarly, in order to be saved, we must possess the virtue of humility.

Perhaps one reason why people are afraid of humility is the fact that they identify it with humiliation. Actually, humility and humiliation are very different. Humiliation is an insult to our personality, a devaluation of what we are. God does not want this. In fact, it is the exact opposite of what he wants. After all, if there is something valuable in ourselves, it was given to us by God. God's goodness to us consists in giving us valuable things. God does not want any person to be insulted. He wants us to be humble. The humility pleasing to God consists in obedience to him, confidence in his salvific power. Humility is that child-likeness by which we turn to God as to our Father. Far from devaluing our personality, it makes us children of God.

Christmas is less than twenty days away. Do we really want it to be a day of joy? Let us prepare the way for the Lord. Let us make sure of our infrastructure. Let us become little children through the practice of humility.

**Feast of the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8)**

**First Reading: Gen. 3, 9-15 (Protoevangelium)**

### *Is it He or She?*

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Is it "he" or is it "she"? Or, as some think, is it "it"? I am referring to the reading of Genesis chapter 3 verse 15. Until recent times, Catholic English Bibles have followed the Latin Vulgate, according to which, "she", the Women, will crush the head of the serpent. Interpreters then say that Genesis prophetically spoke of Mary, who, through her Immaculate Conception, crushed the head of the serpent.

However, other interpreters point out that the Bible was not written in English nor in Latin, but in Hebrew. The original Hebrew text says that "he", the seed or son of the woman, shall crush the head of the serpent. Then they proceed to explain that "he" refers to Christ, the Saviour who was victorious over the devil.

Still other interpreters say that Hebrew "he" does not refer to an individual, but to a collectivity, to mankind, which is the posterity of

the woman. Hence the translation should be "it". Mankind will be victorious over the devil.

A conciliation is possible among these different interpretations. The Hebrew text says that the woman's posterity, mankind, "it", shall be victorious over evil. But mankind is either something abstract, or the sum total of each and every individual man. Mankind as something abstract cannot be victorious over the concrete evil found in human life. Furthermore, we know that not each and every man has been or will be victorious over evil. Hence, mankind can be victorious over evil only in the person of its rightful head. This rightful head of mankind is none other than Jesus Christ: he was the one who crushed the head of the serpent. He was the one who took away original sin.

What about the Immaculate Conception? If we understand this dogma as we should, there would be no difficulty in applying the text of Genesis to it. The Immaculate Conception means that Mary was conceived without original sin, not because of her own merits, but because of the merits of Jesus Christ. God foresaw the complete victory of Christ over sin, and he applied that victory in an extraordinary way to Mary, so that, from the very first moment of her life, from the moment of conception, she was free from original sin: immaculate. Mary's case, the Immaculate Conception, was Christ's supreme victory over evil. He was victorious not only by taking people away from the clutches of evil, but by preventing evil to touch Mary. It was by obtaining for Mary the privilege of the Immaculate Conception that Christ most completely crushed the serpent's head.

Is it he? Is it she? Is it it? There is no need to make a choice. He, she, and it has crushed the serpent's head, each in a different way.

Today let us remember that we were purified from original sin when the merits of Christ were applied to us at our baptism. But, unlike Mary, we still have the task of cooperating with grace in order to purify ourselves from the effects of original sin. It is like being snatched out of the fire. Once this is done, the fire can no longer kill us. But the burns sustained while in the fire can still cause our death, unless proper medicine and care is applied. Mary was never in the fire. But

she knows how painfully it burns, and how much tenderness and love is necessary to help a victim recover. Christ is the doctor, but Mary is the nurse. Today let us show our gratitude to her for all her tender loving care.

**Third Sunday of Advent (Dec. 13)**

**Lk. 3, 10-18 (The Preaching of John the Baptist)**

### *Peaceful Revolution*

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The greatest revolution that ever happened was not the Communist revolution. Nor was it the industrial revolution, or any happening that goes with the name revolution in history books. Some people think that it is not a revolution at all. But let us see. What is a revolution supposed to do? Change society suddenly. The more extensive, the better and more sudden the change, the greater the revolution.

The most extensive, the best, and the most sudden change that ever occurred on earth happened on Easter day. Not only one social group of one nation but all mankind was transformed from being under the dominion of sin to being under the dominion of grace. All this happened in just one instant. But that instant took ages and ages to prepare. The beginning of the last stage of preparation is what we read about in the gospel today.

John the Baptist preached revolution — a peaceful revolution, an interior revolution. This is the kind that we need even today. Too many of us have become reactionaries to the Christian Revolution. It is about time that we went back to our original spirit.

The Christian Message is very insistent upon the practice of sharing: "KOINONIA" they called it in the early Church. As John the Baptist put it, "if anyone has two tunics he must share with the man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same." Today we must do this not only individually but socially. We must work so that there would be a just sharing of profits in agriculture, industry and business. Farmers, and workers have a right to demand their just share in the profits that fundamentally come from their

labor. On the other hand, landlords, and industrialists have the duty of constantly improving the living standard of farmers and workers, so that there would be a more equitable distribution of wealth.

The dishonesty of government officials was also a target of John the Baptist's preaching for reform. Likewise, today, we must support the movements, groups, and agencies that demand honesty in government service.

Many of our soldiers and law-enforcing officers today are like those corrected by John the Baptist. To them we must also say, "Do not take money from anyone by force or by false charges; be content with your pay."

A peaceful revolution is possible. Our Lord Jesus Christ has demonstrated this. Let us join his demonstration by living the Christian life the way he taught us to live it.

**Fourth Sunday of Advent (Dec. 20)**  
**Lk. 1, 39-45 (The Visitation)**

### *Five Days More*

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Five days more, and it will be Christmas. Five days — five letters in the name JESUS. The best way of spending these five days is to dedicate each of them to each of the five factors that will make Christmas a success. The five factors are indicated by the five letters of the name JESUS. *J* is for Joy, *E* is for Elizabeth, *S* is for the Spirit. *U* is for Unity, and the final *S* is for Sharing.

Joy — Mary's joy. We should dedicate the first day to the imitation of Mary. She was told that she was going to be the Mother of the Messiah, and she believed. She entrusted herself completely to God, saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord". She was rewarded with joy. Similarly, we have to strengthen and deepen our faith in order to have real joy. Only to those who have become little ones through humility and faith, like Mary, is Christmas truly a feast of joy.

Elizabeth was the first one to proclaim the blessedness of Mary. We should imitate her example. Christmas is not only the feast of the birth of the Child Jesus. It is also the feast of the Motherhood of Mary. We should learn to love and honor Mary as our Mother, so that we may better love and honor Jesus as our Big Brother.

Spirit is necessary for any successful undertaking. Celebrations, in particular, must have spirit. For the proper celebration of Christmas, it is the Holy Spirit that we need. We must be people like Mary and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit. During these days when merry-making poses a grave danger of robbing Christmas of its spiritual meaning, we should heed the advice of St. Paul we must "behave not as our unspiritual nature but as the spirit dictates. The unspiritual are interested only in what is unspiritual, but the spiritual are interested in spiritual things. It is death to limit oneself to what is unspiritual; life and peace can only come with concern for the spiritual . . . People who are interested only in unspiritual things can never be pleasing to God." (Romans 8, 4-8).

Unity is a must for the celebration of Christmas, which is a festival of peace. Without unity, there can be no peace. Unity with God is obtained principally through the Sacraments. During these few days before Christmas, let us avail ourselves of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist. We must also have unity with our fellowmen. With the help of God's grace, let us forgive those who have offended us, and ask forgiveness from those we have offended.

Sharing goods with others makes Christmas the festivity it is, the festivity of goodwill. Our means permitting, we should share material goods with others. But this should be a sign of a deeper and more important kind of sharing: the sharing of human and spiritual values like love, peace, joy. In a very special way we should share spiritual goods through prayers for the poor, the sick, all those in need.

Five days more . . . five letters . . . five words to live by. If we pay attention to them, we can be sure that Christmas will be five times more meaningful than any birthday we have celebrated.

## Christmas

*Maligayang Pasko*

Germans say *Fröhliche Weihnachten*, Frenchmen say *Joyeuse Noël*, Italians say *Buon Natale*, English and American speaking people say *Merry Christmas*, Spanish speaking people say *Felices Pascuas*, and we say *Maligayang Pasko*. Of all these greetings, *ang atin* — our very own — seems the best. Whereas German, English and American emphasize merriment or gaiety, French and Spanish underline joy, and Italian gives importance to goodness our word, *maligaya*, combines all these. Since we celebrate the birthday of our King, we should have merriment and gaiety — fun. But since our King is also our Saviour, we should feel his saving power in our hearts, we should have joy. Our King and Saviour is the Word Incarnate, the supreme manifestation of infinite goodness. So our celebration should help us participate in his goodness. Our word, *maligaya*, means all this.

Different points of interest are shown by the different greetings we mentioned. The French and Italian focus interest in the Nativity (Noël, Natale). The German and English call attention to the Mass commemorating the event. Spanish and Pilipino try to fix our attention to the meaning of the Mass: it is a passover, a "pascua".

It is here in Church, as we celebrate Mass, that the greeting "Maligayang Pasko" acquires its fullest meaning. I am truly very glad that you have come to Mass. Here at Mass is your *ligaya*; here at Mass is your *Pasko*, Jesus Christ Our Lord. So, my dear friends, I am sure that all of you will have a Maligayang Pasko!

**Holy Family (Dec. 27)**

**Lk. 2, 41-52 (Jesus found in the temple)**

*Our Father's Business*

The feast of the Holy Family was given to the universal Church by Pope Benedict XV, at the time when mankind was engaged in the



first world war. The Holy Father hoped that this feast would strengthen ties weakened by separation, urge people to bear their hardships with christian fortitude, and contribute in the reconstruction of a world expending itself in hatred.

In the Philippines today, our families are not threatened by disruptions caused by war. Yet we still need the feast of the Holy Family. Nowadays, our families are in grave danger. The enemy today is modern life. The racking pace of daily occupations tend to produce the kind of husband and father who comes home in an irritable mood. Modern families rarely eat their meals as a family. Sometimes, brothers and sisters hardly know each other, because they are absorbed in interests that draw them far apart.

We must do something in the face of this modern situation. We cannot let our families disintegrate, for the family is the heart of christian society. What can we do about the problems of the modern family? What can you do? I know of young persons who started or developed a christian spirit in their families by subtle means: organizing family games at Christmas and making it a tradition, reminding their parents of their wedding anniversary and celebrating it with them, celebrating the birthday of each member of the family as a family event, taking interest in the work of father and mother. Certainly, you young people in church today can also do these things for your families.

Parents, of course, have the chief responsibility of building up the family. They should do this principally by teaching obedience to their children — not the kind of obedience enforced by fear, but the obedience that grows from love and respect. If children know by experience that their parents truly love them, truly look after their welfare and trust them, they will obey. If parents can only teach this kind of obedience, they will have rendered invaluable service to society. If there is so many irresponsible student demonstrations, it is due to the failure of parents to teach them true obedience, which is a balance of freedom and responsibility. Let parents learn from Mary and Joseph. They had complete trust in the child Jesus, leaving to him the responsibility of joining the homeward caravan to Nazareth. When he was missing,

they showed truly loving concern. When he was found, they had a dialogue with him, in an effort to understand his actuations. All this effort was rewarded by Jesus' obedience to them: "Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them."

The safeguarding of the christian family is our heavenly Father's business. In it, we have a role to play. Let us, like Jesus, be busy in this role.

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