

HOMILETICS

• **D. Tither, C.SsR.**

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (Dec. 7)

THE DAY OF THE LORD

"Already the axe is put to the foot of the tree."—Gospel

There are many things we must be reminded of in our relations with God. In fact, there are so many aspects of Redemption to be considered that, to present as full a picture as possible, the Church has decided on a 3-year cycle of Bible readings at Mass, with 3 readings on Sundays and Holidays like tomorrow. But there will still be 4 weeks of every year taken up with recalling the Day of the Lord.

These four weeks of Advent turn our attention to Christ's first coming, His Incarnation and birth, a day of the Lord long awaited. Even more so, our notice is called to His final dramatic coming to judge mankind, the final breathtaking day of the Lord to which we eagerly look forward. 2 Tim. 4.8. But, most of all, we are to consider His present comings to us now—in the Mass, in His words, in opportunities for removing injustice and misery.

Jesus is with us all days, to comfort and strengthen us, yes, but also to call us to account. The Day of the Lord is always upon us—every day is a Judgment Day, a day of decision as to whether we accept or reject Christ, whether we lock ourselves up in selfish isolation or work for the spread of His love in the world. With Christ judgement came into the world Jo. 12.48, and it is going on now. We are judging ourselves right now. Our personal loyalty to Christ, and our active concern for His interests—it is on these that we will be judged at His Second Coming, it is on these that we judge ourselves here and now.

The Old Testament reading today, from the Prophet Isaias, looks forward to the first coming of Christ. It was written during a sad period in the history of God's first people. By their sins they had broken their covenant with God, and the armies of Babylon had devastated their land; the ravages recall the wanton smashings of destructive loggers in a forest. Is. 10.33-34.

But, one sapling will spring up from the stump of king David's family. Is. 11.1. The Spirit of God will be on Him. v.2. And He will come to execute justice, giving redress to the oppressed poor and destroying the wicked and selfish. vv 3-5. His coming will ultimately restore the harmony and tranquility of Paradise, giving unshakeable security vv. 6-11.

The second reading (Rom. 15.4-9) is leading up to a quotation from the first Rom. 15.12. Reminding us that the Scriptures were written precisely to give us the confidence and courage we need now to persevere. v.4. St. Paul prays that our encouragement may come from our unity with one another according to the manner of Christ, v.5 and that our having one heart and one mouth in glorifying God is to be the manifestation of this unity. v.6.

Need it be stressed again that wholehearted participation in Mass (one heart and one mouth) will result in that mutual charity v.7. on which alone we will be judged on the Day of the Lord, and judge ourselves everyday? Two things are called for, and they are equally necessary. Striving to help others without calling on God is futile: "Without Me you can do nothing." But Mass that does not result in real striving for unity is barren and empty, meaningless even. The words of Jesus are most appropriate here: "These things you ought have done, and not left undone." Make the most of every opportunity to worship God, and then live out what our worship implies.

The Gospel reading Mt. 3.1-12 puts before us the last of the Prophets, St. John Baptist, telling us of the importance of repentance, a complete change of heart while still there is time v.8. It is a continued repentance that is called for, and called for with great urgency: "Already the axe has been put to the foot of the trees;" v.10 Our life is to be a daily renewed decision to be open to Christ, and show the good fruit of concern for others.

St. John makes it clear that his baptism was only an expression of repentance, a stimulus to it. Christ's baptism, however, is a plunging into the Holy Spirit, a thoroughly purifying fire. v.11. We, thanks to the pure goodness of God, and from no merits of our own, have been baptized with this baptism. Let every action of our lives be a response to the continued coming of Our Lord, a decision to live up to our baptismal pledge to love God and our neighbour with all our mind, all our heart, all our strength.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION (Dec. 8)

"HAIL, FULL OF GRACE." — Gospel

Today's celebration takes us right back to the dawn of human history. The first people were offered a share in the Divine Life — they were to be God's children, sharing His life and love. But, sad to say, they were not satisfied with being children of God. They wanted to be His equals. And, by that preference of themselves rather than God, they cut themselves off from His love and life, and from any right to even share it again.

But, did God abandon them, did He leave them in their helplessness? No! Right there, He promised a Redeemer Who would be born of a very special woman, the Immaculate Mother we honour today. "I will put enmities between thee and the woman," God told the devil, "between thy seed and her seed, she is to crush thy head, while thou dost wail in ambush for her heels." Gen. 3.15. Mary, through her Son, Christ, would undo the damage done by Eve.

Has it ever occurred to us that we were included in that prophecy? We were not mentioned by name, but we were each and all in the mind of God, we were included in Christ. When He said, just before His Passion: "We will go up to Jerusalem," He included us. God's amazing plan was that His own Son should become a man, the scapegoat for all mankind. "He chose us out," as St. Paul has just reminded us, "to be His adopted children through Jesus Christ." Eph. 1.4-5. His Son became a man so that men might become divine. In a lesser degree than Christ, but none the less truly, each of us is to manifest His glory v.12. Chief among us in this was Mary, His Immaculate Mother and ours also, whom He preserved immaculate and created brim-full of the Divine Life.

The Gospel account of the Incarnation is meant just as much for us as for those whom it was first revealed by God through St. Luke. With our ears, we listen to words of God, His message to the chosen Mother of His Son. "Hail, full of grace." We hear His praise of her: "Blessed art thou among women," and His plan that she become the Mother of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit. And we hear her response, as if it were being said now: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word."

What are we most to imitate here? Surely the faith of Mary, her acceptance of God's plan, her readiness that God's will be done in her. God also wants to be born in us, to live in us, to use our powers for His purposes, to have us fully conscious of the christian responsibilities of our lives. We have the assurance of Christ Himself that Mary was more blessed from this point of view accepting and furthering God's plan, than she was privileged in being His Mother. Luke 11. 28.

May her example and prayers help us to see clearly, and carry out fully, God's plan for each one of us.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (Dec. 14)

CHRIST'S COMING, REASON FOR JOYFUL HOPE

The Council, enumerating the events recalled in the Church year, seems to put Advent last. "During the year the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ." The enumeration begins with the Incarnation and ends with "the

expectation of blessed hope and the final coming of the Lord." Advent places the Church in the attitude of expectation of the Lord who comes now in the events of our lives, and will finally come at the end of the world. The splendour of His return in glory must not distract us from His comings now.

The early Christians looked forward to Christ's ultimate victory with longing joy and courageous endurance. Many modern Christians never think of it, and as a result, know little of the hope, joy and patient strength it produces. Surely we should prepare for Him, *not when* the universe as we know it is crumbling and dissolving, but *now when* He comes, in Mass, in intensifying our decision to belong wholly to Him, in opportunities to see and serve Him in others.

Isaias in prophecy foretells the Church, the long-promised Kingdom in which we have Christ, born 1969 years ago, living and acting now until His Second Coming. The opening words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me" Is. 61.1 were used by Jesus to begin His first sermon in His home town. He declared that this prophecy was fulfilled in Himself. The intense joy expressed in the last lines: "Well may I rejoice in the Lord, my heart triumph in my God." v.11. is shared by all who see the Divine Presence in the events of their daily lives, and achieve happiness by furthering God's plan in the world.

Just what this plan is we've heard from St. Paul (1 Thess. 16-24). We are to be sanctified entirely to greet the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ without reproach." v.23. We are reminded of God's goodness in calling us, and of the fact that He keeps faith, that He will not fail us. v.24. The only question is: Will we fail Him? If we are rejecting all that has an appearance of evil about it v.22, if we are constant in praying v.16, then joy will be with us always, and His final triumph will be ours also.

Again the Gospel presents St. John the Baptist, telling us how to prepare for any and every coming of Christ. This message is timeless — first addressed to men of 2000 years ago, today they are addressed to us with no less urgency. It is a long time since John the Baptist preached, but his voice carries over the centuries urging us to remove the road blocks, destroy the obstacles in our hearts — selfishness, pride, complacency.

The improving of roads when important visitors are coming still goes on, but more than that is meant here. A radical change of heart is called for. In our days, the Church has turned the altar around. But the Council was not nearly so anxious to change the position of the celebrant as to effect a turning around or renewal of our attitude to God and one another.

How terrible it would be if the words of John the Baptist could be applied to us. "There has stood One in the midst of you whom you do not know." Let's see Him where He is — here at Mass now, and in our contacts and

dealings with others, especially in our less fortunate brothers and sisters. If we've never seen Him there, we've never really seen him at all. We'll never see Him in eternity if we don't learn to see Him in others, that's for sure. He Himself said so: "As often as you refused it (genuine heartfelt concern) to one of these my least brethren, you refused it to Me." Mt. 25.40.

The Aguinaldo Masses begin on Tuesday. God grant that all who attend really come to know Christ, offering Himself to us, offering Himself, along with us to the Father. And then, going from Mass, may we see Him in those around us. Then we will have joy, a foretaste of the joy which will be ours forever.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT (Dec. 21)

CHRIST, CENTRE OF HISTORY

God's preparation for the Incarnation — the first coming of Christ, was careful and detailed. Today we saw King David, secure in his rule, planning to build a temple. That project was reserved in God's plan for David's son, King Solomon, but God rewarded David's pious desire by sending the Prophet Nathan to assure him that his royal family would endure forever. 2 Sam. 7.16. We know that the culminating figure of David's dynasty, as indeed of all history is Christ.

You may ask: Did David realize all that was meant? As regards a descendant of his becoming the Messiah, yes; but that the Messiah would be God as well as man, surely not. In fact, St. Paul has just told us so. We've heard him call the Incarnation a mystery, hidden through countless ages and now made plain, only now clearly revealed. Rom. 16. 25-29.

The actual revelation is described in the Gospel. We've often listened to it, lets try and imagine we are hearing it for the first time. A messenger, Gabriel, has been sent by God to a little town called Nazareth, to a young girl, 15 or 16 years old. She and her betrothed husband are descendants of king David. You can almost detect the reverence he felt in the presence of this young girl, and the wonder in his voice as he said: "Hail, full of grace."

Words like these had never been truthfully addressed to any creature until this moment. The angels were not created full of grace. They had their trial. But Mary, from the instant of her conception was full to repletion with the Divine Life. We repeat these words so often, maybe sometimes without much reflection, it's possible we miss their full impact. There was never any pure creature as full of the Divine Life as Mary. "Blessed are you among women," said God's messenger.

And now God's secret plan is revealed. She is to conceive and bear a Son whom she will name Jesus or Saviour. He will be great, men will

come to honour Him as the Son of the Most High, the promise to His ancestor David will be fulfilled in Him — of His Kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word." Luke 1. 26-38.

At this moment, the Incarnation takes place. God becomes one of us, our Representative, our Substitute. At the moment Mary became the Mother of all of us too ("We were all in that man"). When her body became a tabernacle and for the nine months she carried Him under her heart, we were there, too.

More than this, when she consented to the Incarnation, she included in her "Yes" everyone who would consent to receive Christ. God proposed His plan on behalf of all of us, and all of us were involved in her response.

It was later, at the foot of the Cross, that she was officially declared our Mother. But it actually began when she agreed to give the flesh to God the Son, and make our Redemption possible. What a wide heart she had to include us all! Mary had a social sense, a love for all redeemed mankind so great that it can never be equalled. This is what we are to imitate in her.

We know that the time of Advent stresses rather the comings of Christ—our encounters with Him in others, rather than just recalling His birthday or looking forward to His last magnificent triumph. The moment we meet others in need is the very moment of our judgement, the moment when we seal our eternal judgement.

There is a lot of vague shallow goodwill at Christmas, much of it mere sentimentality without real roots, not likely to last long. Unless our concern is founded on the identity of the unfortunate with the God Who emptied Himself to become one of us, born in a cave, dying on a cross, it will not please God, and it will have a very brief existence. Our starting point must be a realization that it is Him we are serving, or rather that we can make it possible for Him living in us to serve Himself in others.

CHRISTMAS DAY

This year, we have at each Mass a reading from the Prophet Isaias. At midnight we hear foretold the wonderful events of which Galilee will be the scene. Is. 9.1. The people who have gone about in darkness see a great light v.2. They have lived in the shadow of death, but now light has dawned. v.3. The joy at Christ's coming is compared to that of farmers after a good harvest, or of soldiers after a victory. v.3. Slavery is over, v.4. and all its instruments thrown into a bonfire v.5. "For our sakes, a child is born, to us a son is given, and He will reign. What will be His name? "The mighty God." What will His role be? One of peace. He will be the "Prince of peace."

Even though we today no longer look forward to the joy of His coming, ours is a much greater joy, because He has come, and is still coming. "The grace of God has dawned on all men alike." Tit. 1.10. We have no reason to envy the shepherds or the Magi — what we celebrate today is His birth in the hearts of those ready to receive Him. We do indeed look forward with joy to His second coming: "We look forward, blessed in our hope, to the day when there will be a new dawn of glory." v.13. Meanwhile, we are to live lives of order, justice and holiness v.12, as God's own people, ambitious of noble deeds." v.14.

This revelation that we are God's own people is the theme of the prophecy read at the second Mass. "Look where your Deliverer comes, look how they come with Him, the reward of His labour, the achievement of His task. A holy people they will be called, of the Lord's ransoming." Is. 62. 11-12.

And at the last Mass a veritable tumult of excited joy is described. "All is well! Good news! God has claimed His throne ... They are crying out all at once ... Rejoice all at once, echo with rejoicing ... comfort from the Lord for the Lord's people." Is.52. 7-9.

For whom is this joy? -Who are the Lord's people? Those who realize the true meaning of Christmas — that the joy of Christmas means to think of others, to give of ourselves, like the God Who left His heaven to become one of us. While its His birthday anniversary, we do not think of Him as being a baby now, otherwise we might think He only needs what a baby needs—affection and attention.

He became a baby 1969 years ago — that can't happen again. We can look at the baby-pictures of our adult friends, and think of all that happened to them. But, we don't want them to *become* babies again — to say the least, we would be quite upset if they did. So, tell your children today is Jesus' birthday, but don't say the Baby Jesus comes today. It's the grown-up Christ Whom they want for their "Kuya," don't confuse them!

And don't be confused ourselves. The important day in any man's life is the day of his death, the day when he is truly born to a new and eternal life. That is especially true of Our Lord. It is the risen and glorified Christ who is with us now, and He wants much more than baby attention. He wants us to share His life and happiness, and we do this by sharing in His plans and work — there is no other way.

Christmas is not a time of a vague sort of goodwill and sentimental feelings — it's a reminder of what we should be every day of the year — other Christs, men and women for others. Happy Christmas! See you all next Sunday at Mass.

HOLY FAMILY

The last Sunday of the year will, from now on, be the Feast of the Holy Family. God's word goes right to the point — straight talking, yes, but it is God Who talks. God demands that children honor their parents—in fact it is His strict ordinance. Sir. 3.3. Pardon for sin, a successful and life-long answer to prayer are promised to dutiful children, v.4. even temporal prosperity v.5, and the joy of corresponding respect from one's own children later on. v.6. The promise of God in Deuteronomy, a long life for those who love and honour their parents, as repeated here. v.7.

The fourth Commandment is the only one with such a promise of a reward even in this life attached to it. So, it is in our best self-interest not to be contaminated by wild ideas abroad about home virtues being out of date. Don't be misled by those who would contradict God—the way to happiness, in this world and the world to come is to be helpful, considerate, and Christ-like to our parents, to accept their arrangement as long as we live under their roof. This loving care extends especially to old age. v.14, and even feeble-mindedness v.15, and God assures us that He will not be outdone in generosity v.16 — what we show to our parents in their old age is shown to Himself. Mt. 25. Parents, after all, take the place of God. We in our turn will be rewarded in our affliction and old age with the treatment we give our parents v.17.

A terrible story comes to mind, of a son so forgetful of the respect he owed his father as to drag him round the floor of their home by the hair of his head. At a certain point the father cried out: "Stop." Stop! I never dragged my father further than this!"

St. Paul puts family life into its correct context. He has been speaking of charity, the virtue by which we love God and one another for God's sake.

He has described it as the hand that makes us perfect. Col. 3.14. And he goes on to say that it will assure the reign of the peace of Christ in our hearts, provided only we remember our oneness with Christ "the very condition of your calling as members of a single Body." v.15. If only brothers and sisters realized that they are even more closely related to one another in Christ than in their blood-relationship to one another, then we would have peace in our homes, in the world.

The union of husband and wife is a reflection, a reminder of the love of God for His people. "This sacrament reminds us of your constant love." Nuptial Preface II. "In this union of husband and wife, you give us a true symbol of your love." Nuptial Preface III. If only this mutual love and self-sacrifice were always there, if only marriage were always and everywhere "the enduring bond of love and peace" (Nuptial Preface I) that God intended, we would have no broken homes, no delinquent children, life on earth would be a foretaste of heaven.

All of this calls for constant self-sacrifice, but we have the example of the Holy Family. The Gospel, in a few deft sentences, Lk 2. 39-40, describes Joseph and Mary taking Jesus to Nazareth in Galilee and caring for him as He grew up. Whether we serve our family by earning for their daily needs, as Joseph did, later to be helped by Jesus, or by directly serving Christ in them, as Mary did, it is very much a religious act we do — a true service of Christ: "Whoever receives a little child in My name, receives Me." Let's not think of our administering to our family as separate from our religious life, as though we left our religion locked up somewhere while we went off to work or to manage our household. These Christian responsibilities are as much our religion as our prayers, our Mass, our encounters with Christ in His sacraments.

May to-day's feast help all of us, parents or children, realise that family life, if it is what it should be, sanctifies us as much as our prayer — that in fact the two go hand-in-hand.

AGUILNALDO MASSES

Dec. 16

BAPTISM

ENTRANCE INTO THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The recent Vatican Council called for a revision of the ceremonies of Mass. We have seen the changes that have taken place during the past few years and we are delighted because they have made the Mass so much more meaningful for us. There has been a similar updating in the ceremonies of Baptism. This new rite will officially begin next Lent. So, we will consider some aspects of it during this novena of Masses. And this is most appropriate because the Gospel reading, each day, is about John the Baptist who baptized Christ. That Baptism was the official beginning of Christ's life-work.

With equal truth, we can say the same of our baptism. It was the beginning of our Life-work. Thank God, more and more people are beginning to realize that the most important event in their lives is their Baptism when they became children of God and brothers and sisters of Christ. Yet, I wonder, do we tend to think of Baptism as a great favour granted to us as individuals, independent of other people. It was not that way at all. We were received and welcomed into a community, the Christian Community. We received the Divine Life, not in isolation, but by becoming a branch of the Vine which is Christ, a living member of His Body, a sharer in the life and love of the whole Church. This Sacrament of Baptism is the only means of entry into the Church and initiation into the Christian Community.

It is sad that the Christian community is usually so poorly represented at that glorious moment, the occasion of a person's baptism. How different it is on the occasion of a marriage or a funeral; the church is filled. How different it is for the graduation of a Cursillista. Brother and sister Cursillistas will make a long journey to be there and to welcome the new member into their ranks. Surely a much greater event takes place at a baptism when a new member, a newly redeemed soul, a new child of God is added to our Christian family.

In the future, Baptism will be much more a public and community affair. Both the father and the mother of the child will have to be present. They will take a really active part in the ceremony. The ceremony begins by

their announcing the name they have chosen for their child. They accept publicly their new responsibility; the responsibility of raising the child in the Faith, of teaching it to love God and neighbour as Christ commanded. They will sign the child's forehead with the sign of redemption — the cross. They will renew their own baptismal promises, proclaiming again their faith in Christ and their rejection of sin.

When the saving water is poured on the child (or the child may be immersed in the water) it will be the parents, not the god-parents, who will hold the child. An acclamation of welcome, we are told, is most appropriate, here, at the climax of the ceremony.

To make sure that as many as possible are present at this ceremony, the baptism of adults will take place during a special Mass. Their first Communion, the climax of their Christian initiation, will be during that Mass.

This revised rite of baptism will have far-reaching results. The problem of children being baptized into families which have very little faith and no appreciation of what Baptism really is, has become most acute. Surely it is clear to us how important is the faith of the family. It is in the family that the child will get to know its faith and will see it lived. Please God, with the introduction of this new form of Baptism which demands the presence of the parents and brings out quite sharply both their role and their obligations we will see the beginning of the end of that sad situation in which Baptism was scarcely valued at all, or only for the most frivolous of reasons. The reason we are baptized is that we might become one with Christ through our incorporation into the Christian community where alone we can contact Him.

At our Baptism, our god-parents made certain promises in our name. For the rest of our life, we have to renew these baptismal promises and become increasingly aware that, as members of the Christian community, as members of God's family, we must grow in love for God and for one another. This is what our Baptism should mean for us. Thank God we have been baptized.

Dec. 17.

BAPTISM — GOD'S CALL

Yesterday, I told you about the new rite of Baptism. It will come into operation next Lent. We were born little pagans with only a natural life, and in no way pleasing to God. "Enemies of God, we were reconciled to Him through His Son's death." (Rm. 5, 10.) His saving death and life-giving resurrection were applied to us when we were baptized. In addition to the natural life we had, we were given a share in His own risen life.

But God did not call us to a kind of private friendship with Himself. He called us into His Church, His Family. Many times during our baptism we were reminded of this, and the formal call was dramatically acted out. God's representative placed his stole on us and called us by name: "Pedro, enter into the Church of God, so as to become a sharer with Christ in everlasting life."

It is in the Church that we live the divine life, because it is in the Church that we contact Christ. The new life we received in Baptism is lived in the unselfish carrying out of the full Christian life of love for God and our brothers. We get and we keep this precious life by being like Christ, dying to selfishness, and rising to whole-hearted, generous services of our brothers in the family of God.

John the Baptist, of whom we are hearing every day in the Gospel, summed it up. Speaking of Christ, He said: "He must increase, I must decrease." And the Saviour put it this way: "Unless the grain of wheat falling to the ground dies, itself remains alone. But, if it dies, it produces much fruit." Selfishness and forgetfulness of others is a refusal to answer the call of Baptism, a repudiation of our Baptism.

Perhaps, there is someone listening to me now who has never been baptized. Let us hope that, before Christmas, he or she arranges to become a child of God, to enter the Church, the community of God's children.

An adult who is being baptized understands God's call and answers it in his own heart and will. But most of us were baptized as babies and were not conscious of any call. We realize now that God called us to a new life in His Church. We realize now that our god-parents accepted that call for us. Now that we are able to do so, God wants us to answer that call ourselves.

The actual baptismal ceremony may have taken only half an hour. But don't think of Baptism as an isolated event in our lives, something that happened, once and for all, a long time ago. It is something that continues on. It calls for a continued response. Day by day, we have to try to live as Children of God, as Christ our Elder Brother did, as men-for-others.

Recall how you were baptized. When you asked for faith and the eternal life that comes from faith, you were told: "If it is life you would have, keep the Commandments. Love God and your neighbour." That call remains as real and as urgent now as then. God is awaiting our constant, ever-intensifying response. Don't disappoint Him.

Dec. 18.

BAPTISM — ITS PASCHAL SYMBOLISM

One of the first things you will notice about the new rite of Baptism will be the reminders of Easter. In the Easter Vigil, light is used as a symbol of the Risen Christ. He called Himself the light of the world. He also said that we were to be the light of the world. We can be the light of the world, only if we are united with Christ. Any light we have must come from Christ, just as, at the Easter Vigil, all the candles are lit from the one Paschal candle. We received our light from Christ on the day of our Baptism which is called in the Bible an 'illumination.'

In future, the Paschal candle is to be kept in the place of Baptism. At the end of the ceremony, the lighted candle which is handed to the newly baptized will take its flame from the Paschal candle, the symbol of the Risen Christ.

St. John tells us about a blind man who approached Jesus. He was sent to the pool of Siloe to bathe his eyes. He went, he walked and he returned seeing. We also, until our baptism, were blind. But, after we were bathed with the waters of baptism, we see, or we ought to see, by the light of faith, God and the things of God in the world around us.

A further resemblance between Easter and Baptism is evident in the sign of death and resurrection. By Baptism, we become one with Christ in His death and resurrection. In His death, because in Baptism we die to sinfulness. "We have died, once for all, to sin." (Rom. 6, 2.) In His resurrection, because He rose to a new and glorious life which He shares with us, the baptized. Our risen life, therefore, has actually begun already.

As St. Paul put it: "We were crucified with Christ at Baptism, buried with Him, and rose again to a new life with Him." (Rom. 6, 1-11.) Wherever the old style of baptismal font is restored, this sign of death and resurrection is clearly symbolised. Those to be baptized go down into the place of baptism and they are plunged, (buried) under the water and then come out to a new life. We are buried with Christ and then come up to a completely new life with Him at our Baptism. "Risen, then, with Christ... you must be heavenly minded, not earthly minded... Christ is your life." (Col. 3, 1-6). The new baptismal rite expresses it this way: "Lord, send the power of your Holy Spirit into this water so that Baptism will be a kind of death and burial with Christ, and a resurrection with Him to a new life."

What happened when John the Baptist baptized Jesus is a sign of what Christian Baptism did to us. Jesus was baptized for His death. His baptism

set Him aside for sacrifice, submission and obedience unto death. Twice, He referred to His death as a baptism. (Mk. 10,38) (Lk. 12,50). His death was the climax of a life-time of pleasing God. It was His real baptism.

We Christians, baptized into Christ, accept a life of service and patience, and finally death. Our death is the climax of our baptism, our truest baptism. Jesus has indeed redeemed us. But that does not mean that life is to be free from trials and testing. We must join Him in redeeming ourselves and others, in His way. He asked His first disciples: "Are you ready to be baptized with the baptism with which I am to be baptized?" (Mt. 10, 38.) He asks the same of us.

This is not a gloomy thought. On the contrary, it takes the real sting out of death. A Christian's death is not meaningless or absurd. Like that of Jesus, it is to be a fruitful passage to resurrection, to the full flowering of the everlasting life that began at our baptism. That is why the perfect time for baptism has always been the happy night of Easter.

For the Christian, the moment of death is a going home to God, a passing from this life into eternal life, a stepping through a doorway to our true home. Our real death is the daily dying to our selfishness. This is what we were baptized for.

Dec. 19.

BAPTISM — LIFE THROUGH WATER

Perhaps, if we were asked, "What is the first thing that comes to your mind about Baptism?", we would answer: "It takes away original sin, it cleanses us, washes away even the actual personal sins of an adult being baptized." Of course, that is true, but maybe it is too negative a view of this great Sacrament. Our Christian life is not just the absence of sin. It is the presence of Life, the presence of the adorable Trinity, the Three Divine Persons living their life of love right inside us; "If anyone love me, My Father will love him and We will come to him and make Our abode in him."

The Jews, God's first people, did not look on water simply as an element that could kill or destroy as in a flood or typhoon, as in a shipwreck or drowning. Nor did they just think of it as something that washes and cleanses. Because the Promised Land was also a parched land, the first thing a Hebrew thought of when he saw water was *life*. He looked on water as an element that refreshes and nourishes the soil, an element that preserves the life of the thirsty traveller.

The Bible often mentions water. It tells us how the first people as a sign of their friendship with God, were put into Eden which had a fountain

and four rivers. In their pride, they decided to do without God. As a result, they were expelled from Eden and its plentiful supply of life-giving water.

Even before man was created, 'the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters'. All life began in the water. All living things are largely composed of water. Where water fails, natural life ceases.

God's people knew that God brings life out of water. They were vividly aware that He also saves by water. The waters of the flood saved Noe, allowing him to begin the human race again. This saving nature of water is portrayed clearly in the Exodus, the central event in the history of God's first people. They escaped from slavery through the waters of the Red Sea. A similar miracle took them over the Jordan into the Promised Land.

When Moses' rod sweetened the bitter waters of Miriam, this was a figure of Baptism. When the people thirsted in the desert, Moses struck the rock and life-giving water flowed out. This was also a figure of Baptism. The new rite tells us all of this, and more, about water.

At every baptism, except during Easter-time, the water will be blessed there and then. Listen to these words from the blessing: "Father, when the world was first created, Your Spirit hovered over the waters so that even then water might have power to produce life. You made the Flood an image of rebirth so that it might stand for an end of sin and a beginning of holiness. You led the children of Abraham through the Red Sea on dry land to free Your people from the slavery of sin and make them a figure of the power of Baptism. In the waters of the Jordan, Your Only Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit."

The amazing fact is that, since Jesus descended into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized, the waters flowing over the earth are no longer an ordinary part of creation. They are capable, when joined to the invocation of the Holy Trinity, of giving eternal life, that life which Christ came to give: "I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly."

God be praised because He has given us the water of Baptism and, with it, the beginning of eternal life. All of us know what happens if we allow water to lie, it stagnates. The very same could happen to that new life we received through the waters of Baptism. We must give it an outlet and keep it fresh. We must keep it flowing and alive. We must live that new life. Our baptism took half an hour, at the most. But, to live it out is a life-long task.

Dec. 20

BAPTISM — A NEW BIRTH

In the nearly 2000 years since Pentecost, it is only now that the Church has drawn up a specific rite for the baptism of babies. Babies have always been baptized. The faith of the Christian community supplied for their inability to make an act of faith of their own. But, until now, the ceremony has been simply a shortened form of the rite used for baptism of adults. Vatican II called for a new rite which would be adapted to the situation that those being baptized are, in fact, infants, and which would stress, rather, the need of faith in the parents — the home is the unit of the Christian community which chiefly will supply the needed faith. This is a sobering thought.

Nicodemus asked Jesus how a person already naturally born could be born again. Jesus told him (and us) that we *must* be born *again*. Unless one be born of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

We were born the natural children of our human parents, with a right to share their life and happiness. And then the greatest thing that ever could happen to us took place. We were born again. We were baptized.

How many of us regard our baptism as the red-letter day in our life? How many of us even know the date of our Baptism? Please raise your hands, those of you who know your baptismal day . . . That makes two (3 or 4) of us.

We keep all sorts of diplomas and certificates on the walls of our homes; reminders of the milestone in our journey through life. How many of us treasure what is surely the most important document that will ever have our name inscribed on it — the certificate of our baptism? Have you ever seen a business man with his baptismal certificate under his glass table cloth? Maybe, he has some family pictures there; some religious ones too; but the most vital, the most significant document ever made out in his name is missing, the document that certifies to his rebirth as a son of God, a brother of Christ and, along with Christ, a joint-heir to Heaven.

It is a pity if we think of our baptismal certificate, if we think of it at all, as a legal document needed for entering school or getting a passport. Our baptismal certificate which registered us as a citizen of our country. Our baptismal certificate is our guarantee that we have been born again, that we are no longer merely members of the human race and citizens of a particular country, but children of God and, therefore, enrolled in a new register.

The baptismal register is truly the Book of Life. Our being enlisted there means that we have right to approach Christ in the other Sacraments (no other sacrament can be validly received unless we are baptized). Because of it, we have the right to take our part in the worship of the Church. We can

join Christ, our Elder Brother, and our other brothers and sisters in offering the Mass.

Never, never take your Baptism for granted. A constant sense of wonder, of amazement, of heartfelt thanksgiving is the attitude we should have towards God, our Father, Who called us out of darkness to the wonderful life of His Son.

Dec. 22.

BAPTISM — IT GAVE US FAITH

In the formula of Baptism in use up to the present, the opening question is: "What do you seek of the Church of God? The answer which our god-parents made for us was: "Faith". It will be the same in the new rite, except that, more realistically, the parents and the god-parents will be the ones addressed. They will be told that, by asking for Baptism for this child, they are accepting the responsibility of raising the child in the faith so that he will love God and neighbour.

At first sight, this seems an unusual meaning of faith. We are more used to considering faith as consenting to certain truths. It is presented here as something much wider. It means giving ourselves completely to God in utter trust and entire readiness for whatever the future may hold.

We see this aspect of faith very clearly in Christian marriage. A man and a woman love one another so much that they give themselves to one another in a complete self-donation, accepting whatever the future (which they cannot know) may bring: "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, (in sickness and in health,) till death." It is a commitment for life, absolute and unchangeable.

Whenever Christ spoke to people, He demanded faith like that. He demanded an absolute acceptance of Himself as God's Son and the visible image of the kind of Father God is. He attributed the miracles He worked to the people's faith. He did not work miracles, nor did he forgive their sins, unless they accepted Him as He was, for what He was.

Baptism is the Sacrament of Faith, in this wider sense. Unbaptized adults, who already believe all the truths taught by Christ, still come asking precisely for faith. "I believe, Lord, help my unbelief." (Mk. 8, 24). Faith, in this sense, is something given. It is not something a person produces himself.

We do not believe God's message in the same way that we believe facts told to us by a reliable human person. When God speaks through His Son,

His Church or His Scripture, it is far more personal and real than our own father speaking to us face-to-face. God entrusts Himself to us but He expects that we, His children, entrust, dedicate and commit ourselves entirely and without reserve to Him.

This is the most important result of Baptism. "Without faith it is impossible to please God". (Heb. 11, 6). "The just man lives by faith." Over and over, we are reminded of this truth in the rite of Baptism. Parents and god-parents are asked to "proclaim again the faith in Christ, for this is the faith of the Church in which these children are to be baptized." "Do you want N... to be baptized in the faith of the Church which we have professed?" Only then will the actual Baptism take place.

When we were baptized in infancy, we hadn't a clue of what was going on. Now, we understand the meaning of God's call. And God is still calling us to give ourselves to Him, to live united with His Son in His Church. Answer His call. Give ourselves to Him by living thoroughly Christian lives. A living faith is followed by action. "Faith without works is dead." It is no faith at all.

He won't force us. He respects our liberty too much for that. The next move is over to us. Nothing is so important as our unquestioning, unhesitating response. Say, "Yes" to Him.

Dec. 23.

BAPTISM — IT GIVES US HOPE

Someone has said: "If all the depressed folks will look up, and all the discouraged folks will cheer up, then we will have the world's greatest revival". (Card. Cushing). Perhaps, our greatest need in these days of uncertainty and insecurity is courage and confidence in God. When we reflect on the possibility of another world war that could destroy every living thing on earth, we could be paralyzed with fear. We need hope.

Even in ordinary life, one needs hope. How heartbreaking to meet a person who has, literally, nothing left to live for. It is everyone's experience that such a person will not live long. We all need hope as a spur to action. I ask you, "What steps have any of you taken for a journey to the moon?" The answer is, surely, that you have done nothing. Why? Because you have no hope of ever getting there. Yes, even in this life, we need hope.

Pope Paul VI has declared this year a "Year of Hope". It is a year when we should stir up our trust in the God Who called us to Baptism. Along with Baptism, He gave us the assurance that we are not alone in living the Christian life. We have from Holy Scripture that, at Baptism, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit as a safe-conduct until we get there.

God, says St. Paul, is the Author of our hope. (Rom. 15. 13). He is utterly reliable. He is ready to help us at all times in our struggles, our trials, our temptations; yes, even in our failures. He will not play us false. He called us to Baptism: "You are in Christ Jesus by God's act, and God keeps faith".

He is all-powerful. He can do what He says He will. We can always look to His power with complete confidence. We are assured of that power of the Victorious Christ, the power of His death and resurrection.

God is all-loving. Has He not sent His Son to save us? "God having given us His own Son, what good thing can He refuse us? Has He not, with Him, given us all good things?"

No wonder St. Paul calls Jesus Christ our hope (Tim. 1, 1.) Any doubts that could have existed about the extent of God's loving-kindness are removed by the fact that He sent His own Son. Who could deny that God, our Father, has done everything to let us know how much He loves us, how much He cares about us, what He thinks of us?

The early Christians were aware of this. The New Testament describes how they joyfully realized that they were "surer of salvation than ever". Not even their sins dismayed them. For them, "all things co-operated unto good", even occasional lapses that were, in actual fact, opportunities for a renewed trust in the God Who did so much to save us.

If we, like them, remembered all God has done and is doing for our salvation, we would not stifle the trust in God's merciful love that Baptism makes available to us.

Dec. 24.

BAPTISM — IT GIVES US LOVE

At our Baptism, only one thing was asked of us by God in return for the Divine Life He called us to — to obey the Great Commandment; it actually includes all the rest. "In these two commandments is contained the whole of the Law and the Prophets."

Baptism made us other Christs. That means we are to love our Father like Christ did. It also means that we are to love all our brothers and sisters like He did. This does not mean just feeling emotional affection for God and others. By wanting to love them, we do love them. It is a matter of willing it. We should try to overcome feelings of dislike for those who naturally repel us, and treat all, even our enemies, with kindness.

Needless to say, this is beyond our natural strength. The ability to want to love God and all our brothers, without exception, was given to us as a gift at our Baptism. We have to let it develop. That is the sign that we are Christians. It is precisely in this, and in nothing else, that we will be judged when Christ returns.

The New Testament repudiates any love of neighbour that disregards God. "If you only love those who love you, what more do you do, then, than the heathen?" Love of others without love of God is directly contrary to the Gospel message. In fact, it is impossible, in practice, to love others as our brothers unless we realize that God is our Father.

After all, "God is love". The Scripture tells us so. We can say with equal truth, "Love is God". Only if we believe this can we really love people for God's sake and for no selfish consideration at all. Only if we wholeheartedly believe that God is love will we know that love of others is the only thing that really matters. "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him". "Love is the fulfillment of the law. He who truly loves his brother has done all that the law commands,"

Don't think of God's law as a series of "Do's" and "Don'ts". God is not an Almighty Book-keeper totting up all our sins and faults. God loves us, and we show our appreciation of that by doing everything in our power to make this world a happier place for our passing through it.

We are left with one commandment, the commandment of love. Love of God and love of mankind cannot be separated. There can be no pure love of others without openness towards the living and true God.

But the reverse is also true. There can be no love of God without love of His children — all of His children. "He who does not love his brother whom he sees, how can he love God Whom he does not see? He who says: 'I love God', but hates his brother, is a liar". (Jn. 4, 20). If we wish to check our attitude to God, check our attitude to others.

Tomorrow is Christmas Day. We will see how much God loves us if only we will think of the true meaning of Christmas — the first Christmas. Surely, that will force us, in return, to love God in Himself and in His favourite possession — our brothers and sisters.