

## HOMILETICS

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January 1

### *SOLEMNITY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD*

As a general rule, there will be a close connection between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel selection at each Mass — they will treat of the same theme. This is not the case today. Maybe the reason is because January 1st, the Solemnity of the Mother of God, is also New Year's Day.

The first reading, from the Book of Numbers, gives a formula for a priestly blessing that I would like to make my New Year's greeting to you. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace." Num. 6.24-26. Allow me to extend to you this 3-fold blessing from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit — in the form of God's loving protection and security against all misfortunes. I trust and pray that 1970 be truly a happy New Year for all of you.

Centuries ago, Jan. 1, New Year's Day, was the Solemnity of the Mother of God. That happy celebration has been reintroduced, and a better way of beginning the New Year can hardly be imagined. Maybe no past age needed a rediscovery of Mary more than ours.

To see Mary out of context, out of her relationship to God, would cause great glee in hell. Mary has nothing good that does not come from God, and everything good about her is infinitely more so in God. But surely an equal glee would come about in hell if we thought we would please God by ignoring Mary, if we disassociated ourselves from her divinely inspired prophecy: "From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

We must see Mary in context, and the context is her relationship with the Church. Besides being the first Christian and the most perfect Christian, she is the perfect ideal of the Church. Like the Church, she is the spiritual Mother of all men. The Council makes this clear. L.G., ch. 8. "As through Mary, by the action of the Holy Spirit, the body of Jesus was formed, so is He, through the Church, to be born and grow in the hearts of the faithful."

She became the Mother of Christ at the Incarnation. When her body became the first tabernacle, and throughout the nine months she carried

God-made-man under her heart, *we* were there too. He was our Representative, our Substitute — "we were all in that Man". S. Aug.

At the foot of the Cross, as the parting legacy of her dying Son, she was given to us all as our Mother, and there her role as Mother of the whole Christ was proclaimed. And now, assumed into glory, She is the model of what the whole Church will one day be, totally united to Christ forever.

She is the model of the whole Church, specially in her trusting faith and perfect union with Christ. In her lifetime, she searched out and did the will of God in all things, and for this her Son praised her, far more than for the privilege of being His Mother. After all, special functions do not automatically guarantee a life of holiness, and this is true even of the Divine Maternity. Mary is God's greatest Saint, simply because she did His will most perfectly, and with flawless love.

Today's Gospel tells us how the very first who sought Jesus — the shepherds — found the Child with His Mother Lk. 2.16, and with no thought of keeping their incredible discovery to themselves, spread the good news far and wide, v. 17.

Let no one think that we will ever be led from Christ if we truly love His Mother. They are completely united in glory, you can't find the one without finding the other. She never was the kind of Mother who would steal the bread of her Child. She was and is the perfect type of self-effacing Mother who only wants her Child to be in centre-stage, the centre of all attraction and attention.

If we have a genuine longing to know Christ, who could better introduce us to this extraordinary Person, our Brother and our Savior, and at the same time our God, than Mary who was and is the closest to Him of all mankind? This 1970 and always, be like the shepherds — seek and find the Child with His Mother.

January 4

### EPIPHANY

#### *CHRIST, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD*

A little girl was overheard during her night prayer: "Dear Daddy — God, make all bad people good and all good people nice." With the clear perception of children, she saw there was something lacking in the lives of some of the so-called devout. Not so much straight-out insincerity or full-fledged hypocrisy as a certain complacency, a smugness, a self-satisfied feeling that they're better than others because they carefully observe a routine of piety and avoid doing anything wrong. That this is negative and unattractive was apparent to our little girl, even though she couldn't put it into those words. That it is insufficient for salvation is the lesson of today's feast.

In the reading from Isaias (a poetic masterpiece, by the way) we have a prophecy of the coming of Christ, when God's people will be

enlightened by the resplendent glory of God. Is. 60,1. This prophecy was made at a time of national disaster, when it was felt that the glory had departed from God's people.

The prophecy concerns us and not just the Jewish people. We gentiles are described as dwelling in darkness, thick darkness, v. 2, and coming to the light that appeared in Christ, v. 3. How often God describes Himself as the Eternal, Infinite Light: "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all — this is the message we have heard from Him and proclaim to you." 1Jo. 1.5. But, just as we cannot gaze directly at the sun because of its very brilliance, even more so "No man ever can see or has seen God, Who dwells in unapproachable light." 1Tim. 6.16.

It was through the Incarnation that this inaccessible light became visible to those who chose to see it. Christ's humanity is described as a curtain, through which, if we care to, we find access to the Father of light, Heb. 10.20, the Eternal Light, Wis. 7, 26. The Creed describes the Incarnate God as Light of Light, and the Christmas Preface as "the new Light showing us the brightness of God." His Incarnation brought God within our reach, and the veil of His Humanity prevents the dazzling splendour of His Divinity from blinding us. "He is visible Image of the invisible God." "He who sees Me," He said, "sees the Father also."

The glory of God, manifested in the pillar of fire and the radiant cloud, again became visible in Christ, the true Light that enlightens every man. "And we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from His Father." Jo. 1.14. "In Him was life and the life was the light of men." How often Jesus associated the Divine Life He came to give and the light which He was. "I am the light of the world, he who follows walks not in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jo. 8.12.

Walking in the light involves much more than going through the outward motions of religion. Being a "child of the light" means to accept Christ and His plans for us, unquestioningly and whole-heartedly, not just on Sundays or at daily prayer times, but all the time, and in everything. Then we'll not appear to God, as certain superficial would-be Christians do to children, as good people, maybe, but good for nothing, with an entirely negative goodness — fruit-trees producing only leaves.

We have to give our whole heart to Christ, without reserve, otherwise our religion can become stale and sour, repelling the very people whom we are meant to radiate the light of Christ. We must constantly respond to His ever-higher calls, finding our life by losing it in selfless service of others. If we don't do this, if like Ananias and Sapphira we keep something back for ourselves, we'll become mean and narrow, self-righteous and rash-judging, under the empty shell of seemingly pious practices.

The Gospel story of the Epiphany shows Christ inviting us non-Jews, in the person of the Magi, to faith in Himself. The star that called them appears, at least once, in the life of every adult. "God would have all men saved and all come to a knowledge of the truth." 1Tim. 2.4. This light, in one way or another, is given to all. How terrible if we refused the invitation, if through pride, we deliberately blinded ourselves to the light that is Christ. "Today if we hear His voice, harden not our hearts." Ps. 94.7-8.

January 11

*THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD*

In pre-Communist Czechoslovakia, babies were born in hospitals. As a matter of course, they were vaccinated by Doctors, their birth was registered by civil officials, and (if the parents were Catholic) duly baptized by the hospital chaplain. Since the Communists took over, babies are still born in hospitals, they are still vaccinated and their births duly registered as a matter of course. But, in a godless state, there are no hospital chaplains, so the baptism of the children is left to the parents. Sad to say, it is often neglected. People got so accustomed to not having to worry about baptism, that they forget its value and importance.

A similar problem could be at our doors. You remember how during the Japanese occupation there were no fiestas allowed. How many children born at that time were not baptized simply because there was no fiesta! Some of them have not yet got round to being baptized. So, the Solemnity of Our Lord's Baptism is timely indeed.

The most cursory reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus' Baptism was a crucial event in His life. Two of the four accounts make no mention at all of any event that preceded it. They simply begin the account of His life-work with His baptism. It was, in fact, His official acceptance of His role as our Representative, it was His formal taking up of His work as our Redeemer. It was also the occasion of the first public revelation of the Trinity — that God is our loving Father Who sent His Divine Son to be our Brother, and to bring us back to Himself in a family united by the Holy Spirit.

The Prophet Isaias, in the famous Servant Songs, foretells the functions of the Saviour. The reading we have just heard Is. 42. 1-7, the first of the these Songs, tells us of His office of revealing the goodness of God our Father. It is the Father who has chosen Christ, endowed His Humanity with the Holy Spirit, and appointed Him to instruct all mankind, v.1. cf. 11.2. His mission is to be one of meekness and sympathy, v.2. and will ultimately succeed, v. 4. St. John the Baptist quoted verse three: "The bruised reed He will not break, the smoldering flax, He will not quench" to tell how Our Lord would respect our liberty, would force no one to accept Him.

The Father's voice that came from Heaven at Jesus' baptism alludes to this Song that so long before had introduced the concept of Christ the Servant. No doubt this is the chief reason for the selection of this reading today.

The baptism of Jesus by John would have passed unnoticed, except for this voice, and the vision of the Holy Spirit as a dove hovering over Jesus. True, John at first refused to baptize His cousin, saying: "I ought to be baptized by You." Mt. 3.14. But Jesus' insistence would not have been noticed, except for the dramatic reminder of who He was and the Redemption to which His baptism committed Him.

Jesus mingled with those awaiting baptism, voluntarily making Himself, personally sinless, one with the sinful race He had come to redeem. He, the Head of sinful humanity, identified Himself with us to the extent of taking on our guilt. Says Isaias in another Servant Song: "All we

like sheep had gone astray ... and the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all." Is. 53.

Make today an occasion for gratefully remembering your own baptism — that day of days when the Holy Spirit made Christ's death and resurrection as truly ours as if we had endured them ourselves. "We were buried with Him in the likeness (symbol) of His death by baptism, so that we may walk in newness of life." Rom. 6.4.

It did not happen to us just as individuals, nor will its marvellous outcome happen to us in isolation, "If we have been planted *together* in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection." Ibid. We are changed, as the Risen Christ was in His restored life — we live with His life, we are His brothers, children in our oneness with Him of God the Father, and inserted into God's family where a new life of love and concern for others is expected of us. Respecting the dignity and rights of others, never "using" other people for our own selfish advantage, trying in ways big and small to bring God's love into others' lives.

Thank God, the new rite of baptism will bring out most forcefully and clearly for all of us that our baptism is the most momentous and decisive happening of our whole lives. Witnessing it will impel us to live as we ought, not for ourselves, but for God and all our relatives in His Family.

"Let us give thanks to God, our Father through His Son in the Holy Spirit, for when we were dead in sin, He made us alive in Christ. Be conscious of our dignity. Remember the Head — and the Body — of which we are members." St. Leo.

January 18th II per annum.

### CALL TO BE WITH CHRIST

"Come and see." — Gospel

We've just heard of God's call to the boy Samuel. 1Sam. 3, 3-10. The Ark of the Covenant was at that time in a tent in silo. In accordance with God's command Ex. 27.20, a lamp was lit before it each evening at dusk and kept burning till daybreak. The lad was sleeping nearby, when He heard a voice repeating his name. Thinking it was Eli the high-priest who called, Samuel want to ask what was required of him. "Lie down again, I did not call you," said the blind old man. This happened a second and a third time, and then Eli realized that it was God who was calling the boy. (Samuel, like every other Israelite, knew who the Lord was, but not yet by any personal revelation v.7.) So, Eli told him to lie down once more, and if he were called again to answer: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

And it did happen in just that way. God called again: "Samuel, Samuel." And this time the boy did what he should have done in the first place, had he known: "Speak, Lord," he said, "your servant is listening." All Scripture is written for our instruction. When we are called, answer promptly and readily.

A New Testament call is recorded by St. John. Jo. 1.35-42. This was a great and memorable day in his young life. It was also the day when the Church began to find its Savior. Years later, John narrates it with all the solemnity it deserves, and so realistically that we can imagine the scene. John Baptist standing with two of his disciples, Andrew and John the Evangelist, and Jesus passing by. With the memory of Jesus' baptism still vivid in his mind, the Baptist repeats the words "Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world."

What follows is simplicity itself. The two disciples follow behind Jesus. The heavenly attraction of which John's Gospel tells so much Jo. 6.44; 12.32 is already showing its mysterious power. Jesus turns and gazes at them: "What is it you seek?" Embarrassed, the disciples respectfully state their desire to spend a while at home with Him. Graciously, Jesus invites them to "come and see" where he was staying. They came, they conversed, and since it was late, in accordance with Jewish hospitality, they spent the night there.

Next morning Andrew hurried off to find his brother Simon. The very first thing Jesus did on meeting Simon had a profound significance for a Jew — he changed Simon's name. To change a person's name means to assign some office or dignity to him. Looking fixedly on the Foundation-Elect of His Church, He said: "So you are Simon the son of Jonas. You shall be called Kepha" (Peter or Rock). v.42.

We have been called to Divine intimacy, as clearly and unmistakably as was Samuel at Silo. It happened at our baptism. Like the Apostles, each of us has been summoned personally and by name, to union with Christ, to live with His life, imperfectly here on earth, but eventually, when raised up with Him in glory, in perfect and everlasting life.

St. Paul compares the baptism to which we were called to Christ's Resurrection. Christ went down into the grave and rose from it into glorious life. We were called to a similar burial, and rose to the glory of a new and divine life. We live that new life imperfectly here. But, if we remain united to Christ till the end, we will rise to life with Him in the perfect glory of Heaven.

This is what gives sense and meaning to our lives as Christians, the conviction that if, we live with Christ, we will rise to glory with Him. "For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His."

In gratefully remembering our call, don't separate death and resurrection. We are saved, not by His death alone, but by His death and resurrection. He died in order to rise. Death and resurrection were part of the one movement, His passage to His Father. And He passed to His Father precisely to lift us up with Himself so that we might live forever with Him in glory.

This is the cause of intense joy for a Christian. We have a Brother before God who is always pleading our cause. Moreover, He has something to show for His labors on earth — the wounds He sustained in our behalf. Those called to share His life and labor will be lifted up with Him into glorious victory if only they remain united with Him till the end.

There is no room for depression or despair in a Christian's life. The worst natural calamity that can befall a man is death. But the death of a Christian is the last call, the culmination of what began at Baptism: Come, you blessed of my Father, possess the Kingdom prepared for you, because you lived out your Baptism, you saw and served Me in others.

January 25. III per annum

### CALL TO CONVERSION

It is the duty of a priest to comfort the afflicted. But at times he must also afflict the comfortable. In the light of today's liturgy, this seems to be one of those occasions. Distasteful as this duty might be, it cannot be shirked. None of us can afford to be lulled into a complacent sleep, all of us are in constant need of conversion.

The story of Jonas, an unwilling preacher if ever there was one, is well known. Jonas' assignment was to preach the need of conversion to the wicked city of Niniveh. (A modern parallel would be if you were suddenly commanded to go to Red China and preach the imminent destruction of Peking). Jonas tried to escape, but there is no hiding from God. By the time of today's episode Jonas 3.1-5, he had learn this lesson and started out. v-v 1&2.

It would take three days to get through all parts of the city. v.3. But Jonas had only spent one day shouting through the streets. "In forty days time, Niniveh will be destroyed," when the message had passed quickly to all the inhabitants. From the king down they accepted the warning. They somehow knew that God would revoke His sentence if they repented. And "when God saw what they did, how they turned from evil ways, He repented of the evil He had said He would do to them and did not do it." v.10.

The warning is still timely. In fact, Our Lord Jesus Christ said it is even more for us Christians than for the Ninivites. "The men of Niniveh repented because of the preaching of Jonas and behold a greater than Jonas is here."

We have a further example of Our Lord's preaching of repentance in today's Gospel. Mk. 1.14-20. St. Mark has just told us of St. John Baptist's preaching in preparation for Our Lord's public ministry. And the Precursor's only topic was repentance! And Jesus, first recorded preaching also stressed this. "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand, *repent* and believe the Gospel." The time of Redemption has come, and all are exhorted to prepare themselves for it by a change of heart and the acceptance of the good news proclaimed by Jesus. vv. 14 & 15.

Since the redeeming mission was not to end with His own death, He selected as intimate companions a group of disciples who, as duly accredited teachers, would carry on his preaching of penance and proclaiming of salvation to all. vv. 16-20.

In the first sermon at Pentecost, Acts 2, Peter with the other Apostles around him, urged his hearers to repent and be baptised. Real repentance calls for a radical change of life by correction of wrong attitudes.

External faults are symptoms of something much deeper — an inner attitude that is not at all what it should be.

Ask ourselves: Are we living on two levels? Are we only part-time Christians? God has always contacted men through creation — usually through other men. Since the Incarnation especially, Christ is still the way to the Father — the only way, but as *He is now*. It is through the Whole Christ — Head and members, that we go to God. The only Christ that those around us will ever see is *ourselves*. Yes, we can choose whether to let Him be available or not.

We must be Christ all day, every day. There are too many Catholics getting much self-satisfaction from belonging to apostolic organizations, who are hardly Christians the rest of the time. So, no Christian can take time out — in practice it means the same as being a drop-out or a fall-out — a wash-out. I'm serious — if we're going to be part-time Christians, closing up on ourselves in selfish isolation, we're putting ourselves squarely on the lonely road to Hell. Change our ways, be converted — or it would be better for us if we had never been born.

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