

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT¹

A SERMON

BY

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Of how Christ, by his coming to us, produces the fear of God, goodwill, poverty, chastity, humility, purity of intention and the grace of contemplation.

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing; that you may abound in hope and in the power of the Holy Ghost.—Romans 15.



UMBERLESS, my beloved children, are the tokens of love and of the infinite goodness of God in our regard. Wherever we turn we see in all directions signs of his protection and his tenderness; so much so that, 'No one can hide himself from his heat' (*Ps.* 18). This immense goodness, in which no evil can have part, and which is not something added to God but his very nature and essence, this goodness, I say, what else can it desire but to love, to give Itself, to manifest Itself, to communicate and transmit Itself? All this It does as far as It can, without respite, with no respect of persons, with perfect justice. And so, there is no moment, or point of time however short, in which God does not will with all his strength to fill every reasonable soul with all good things, with all grace, all his gifts and all riches. There is no instant in which he does not desire to make his dwelling within her, to abide in her trustfully and with delight, to purify her and preserve her from all evil, to adorn her with virtues as with so many precious stones. Please God that we may be, I do not say worthy of such great benefits, poor worms as we are, but at least ready and open to receive them.

God offers himself whole-heartedly, and alas! hardly anyone deigns to notice it. He stands knocking at the door of the soul; to whomsoever will open to him, he promises to come in and to eat with him. What is this repast of Christ with the soul, except his desire to re-establish that soul as a sharer in his blessed and unutterable divinity and all the benefits flowing therefrom? He wants to rekindle that poor soul, to cradle it on his heart, to plunge it into the sleep of sweet contemplation. But alas! nearly everyone

¹ Translated by Sister M. Imelda, O.P.

repulses him. Christ invites us, by incessant inspirations, by interior and most loving warnings, but most men, deaf of heart, are not even aware of it. We must cast aside all vain anxieties of this world, all useless and secondary occupations; we must recollect our senses and powers interiorly; we must give up all love for exterior and perishable things so as to refer all to God, to attend to nothing but him, to be united only to him, to hear nothing but his voice in our hearts.

This is what Christ wants. He endeavours with tireless eagerness to draw us away from the things of this world, so as to bring us back to those of the heart and mind. But the more he constrains us to interior recollection, the more readily we diffuse ourselves outwardly. We despise God to attach ourselves with all our heart's love and all our mental energy to perishable things. Love of creatures reduces us to a wretched slavery, it fetters us, it completely blinds us, so that divine things leave us, I will not say merely indifferent, but altogether strangers and in absolute ignorance.

What is the reason for this? Why are there today so few spiritual and perfect men? It is because the Church has very few contemplatives. How could they, in fact, experience the things of the spirit and all that pertains to the spiritual life and to interior contemplation, they who will not, at any price, detach themselves from the pleasures of the senses and turn their hearts to God?

You have heard in the very text of this sermon how desirous the Apostle is that we should be filled by God 'with all joy and all peace in believing' (*in credendo*), so that we shall abound in hope and in the strength of the Holy Spirit. But how could we deserve such great gifts if we continue to seek and love creatures who bring us nothing but bitterness, trouble, vexation and the loss of all virtue? How could we be worthy of the power and joy of the Holy Ghost, we who remain captivated by exterior things, never entering within ourselves? True joy and true peace are to be found in God alone.

Now, God dwells in the intimate depths of our soul. Consequently there follows one of two things: either we must suffer the loss of joy and peace, or we must be interiorly recollected. There alone we shall experience the coming of Christ with the ever new gifts of his grace; there, he will strengthen us with a firm hope, steady confidence, with the very power of the spirit. This coming of Christ is never cut off, at least unless we ourselves put an obstacle in the way. And we do put an obstacle in the way every time that we voluntarily harbour in our hearts something that is contrary to his

will; we thus forfeit his grace. And though it is chiefly mortal sins that exclude grace, it is no less true that if we do not strive to avoid venial sins and attachments to sin, the coming of Christ in us will be retarded and the progress of grace greatly diminished.

Well, all that can impede our progress in grace should affect us and appear to us infinitely more harmful than the greatest evils that can befall us from exterior happenings.

For your instruction, I will now tell you in a few words what Jesus Christ usually does for man at his coming.

He comes for two reasons: firstly for his own immense Goodness which causes him to desire our well-being and secondly because of our extreme poverty and need. This is so great that we must inevitably perish were we not constantly upheld by the liberality and beneficence of God. Let us think attentively of that and we shall not be so tempted to pride; persuaded that if there is any good at all in us, we hold it entirely from him who is the source of all good and that if God withdrew his part we should be left in utter destitution.

So when Christ enters into a soul, he does such great works in him that to try to enumerate them would be impossible. We shall content ourselves with noticing a few.

(1) First of all whilst a man is actually given up to vice, when Christ comes to him and desires to visit him and purify him by his grace he begins by diffusing into his heart a great fear. He puts before his eyes the terrible judgments of God. He shows him his sins and iniquities and the eternal and terrible sufferings that he has deserved. He threatens to cast him far from his Face into exterior darkness, into the company of devils, unless he humbly repents of his faults. He draws his attention to the base ingratitude with which he has responded by an evil life to God's great benefits.

And so the whole man is seized with terror which he cannot escape except by amending his life; unless he means to persevere obstinately in wickedness. He fears indeed that the vengeance of God will suddenly come down upon his crimes and that he will not be given time to repent if he puts off his conversion. He is afraid, should God abandon him, he may become completely blinded so as no longer to be able to see the danger that his soul incurs.

(2) He has come then to goodwill. This goodwill that God excites and brings to life in him makes him resolve to submit himself freely and immediately to the Divine Majesty, to obey God's wisdom, to conform and unite himself to God's goodness, finally to bear himself respectfully and humbly before God, as all his other creatures, to carry out his will everywhere and at all times.

This goodwill is as it were the foundation of all virtue. He who has it not, cannot be good. On the contrary, he who possesses it, has also that peace with which the Apostle desires to see all of us filled; that peace of which the angels sang when they said: 'Peace to men of goodwill' (Luke 21). Indeed, whoever is endowed with this goodwill is at peace with God, with himself and with all creatures. But this goodwill is diametrically opposed to self-will: the one comes from grace, the other takes its rise in our fallen nature. The one only desires what is pleasing to God, the other objects to any authority, being unwilling to obey in anything that is not to its own taste.

Goodwill, united to the grace of God, triumphs over all malice and over all the powers of hell. And although in the struggle against the passions and the attacks of demons it will have to make efforts and suffer, yet, aided as it is by divine assistance, it takes care not to waver or fall. Then if at times it is overtaken by a fault, it is not content to lie down in the midst of vice but rises immediately, has recourse to penance as to a healing medicine and is filled again with strength and courage.

(3) When Christ by his coming has roused goodwill in the soul, before drawing it on to higher virtues, he disposes the mind to a contempt for all passing things and impels it to embrace voluntary poverty. Why is this? Because it is very difficult to enter into the way of perfection weighed down with earthly goods: Truth himself has said: 'Everyone of you that doth not renounce all that he possesseth cannot be my disciple.' (Luke 14). Earthly goods have a sort of birdlime which hinders and paralyses the mind that is not entirely dead to the world. We must therefore shake ourselves free of all these things and leave them behind.

This is what was done by the first followers of Christ; this is what innumerable Saints have done after them. Without it, it is almost impossible to attain to perfection. So this is why, as we have said, Christ entering into a soul, draws it to contempt of riches so that it can walk unencumbered in his divine footsteps. However, he forces no one. This true poverty is a counsel, not a precept. But always, those who feel themselves called by God should conform themselves and heartily follow after their extremely poor Master in the calm and gentle ways of blessed poverty; so that by despising present things they will purchase eternal goods: instead of a few contemptible realities they will receive unimaginable treasures that no thief can steal and no decay can corrupt.

No one who has not experienced it can tell the value of this contempt of such things; Christ himself has promised the hundred-fold to those who leave all for him; that means that he will reserve for them the greatest gifts of his grace and virtues and finally eternal life. But how is it that the Christian does not willingly, for the love of Christ, leave the things that he must lose eventually whether he will or no? Even so he that cannot bear to leave all should use his riches with moderation and reserve, give to the poor and take care not to hoard avariciously to his own destruction what God has made for the common use of all.

(4) After Christ has brought forth in the soul a love of poverty, he invites it to practise chastity of mind and body. Christ, Son of a Virgin and Lamb without spot, loves pure bodies and spotless souls and although we must not find fault with chaste marriages, these nevertheless distract the mind and hinder it from giving all its attention to God. Is it not a duty to seek to please the spouse and take care of temporal affairs? And so Christ, knowing all these impediments to spiritual progress and desiring that those that he calls to himself shall be free, invites them to practise chastity so that they can be entirely at the service of God, without being obliged to employ themselves with the concerns of this world but solely with the concerns of God.

Now, he who sets out to obtain and to keep chastity and integrity of body and soul is obliged to reject and repudiate all inordinate love of himself, his family, his friends, and all creatures so as to give his heart entirely and solely to Christ.

Therefore he must have no affection for the least temporal thing, but let all these attachments be given up to his Creator who is the essence of beauty and holiness, no love of fellow beings except in God and purely and holily for God. He must be determined to fly, as much as he can and for the sovereign love of God, all the allurements of the flesh, all occasions that could give rise to sensual affections, carnal love or carnal temptations. He must hate, in this world, his own soul (John 12); that is to say, the disorderly and harmful appetites of his soul, let him keep his soul for eternal life; let him have no particular or excessive familiarity with anyone (it is not rare for this to turn to hatred and what begins spiritually often ends carnally); let him not be attracted and allured by anyone under any pretext, neither out of politeness nor in return for services or presents. Let his mind be kept free from everyone and everything. Should someone love you, let him love you; one runs away from you, let him go; let nothing of that kind trouble

you. Let it suffice you to have God for your friend, God whose friendship is sincere, permanent and unshaken.

This friend of God must take care to keep his mind free from all impure and shameful images and should such present themselves, he must drive them off by thinking continually of our Saviour hanging on the cross in such agony. This image of the Crucifix he should bear stamped upon his heart, in his soul, in his flesh, on all his being so that by assiduously contemplating it with fervent prayer, he will develop a horror of anything that could tarnish the purity of his body or soul.

He should also love solitude and silence and avoid much company; let him visit sacred buildings and occupy himself in good works. He should have a horror of idleness, take up penance and although he thinks he is chaste not to fancy himself secure, but avoid occasions of sin, remembering how of old the Precursor of our Lord, in the first years of his youth, fled to the desert not relying on the sanctity of his parents nor on divine oracles.

Finally, he should be temperate and always esteem himself in his own eyes as mere nothingness.

(5) But often a spirit of vanity seizes on one who enters upon a virtuous course. Christ in coming to the soul fills it at the outset with deep humility in such a way that the soul feels itself utterly unworthy of all God's gifts, sincerely judges itself to be more wretched than all others, not daring to esteem itself as anyone's equal, attributing to itself nothing but its own sins, and subjects itself not only to God but to all creatures. This humility is the vital basis of all sanctity. Whoever obtains it is rendered, as far as is possible, capable of receiving God's gifts: God can accomplish in it all his will. Humility makes a soul gentle, kind, obliging, merciful, devoted to all and each directly any services are required. The humble and loving mind can fly anywhere at will, heaven itself is open to it. It always carries its soul in its hands and can apply it to anything. It lives always in Christ; ever bearing the living Christ within it; it follows everywhere in his footsteps, imitating his life gladly in everything. Nothing can trouble or distress the humble man, for however hard and unmerited may be his trials, he thinks himself deserving of far heavier ones.

(6) After all this, the Lord Jesus, taking possession of the soul, brings to it the flower and nosegay of all the virtues, I mean purity of intention in the things of God; that which makes it seek God's glory in and above all. Whoever has not this purity of intention does not know what charity is. Charity indeed never seeks its own interest: it seeks only God and his honour (1 Cor. 13). Intention

alone is what makes a man's life and actions pleasing or displeasing to God.

You see why it is necessary to strive in all things to tend towards God with a pure heart and a desire to praise, honour and please him. Has he not created us himself out of pure love and redeemed us by his death, when through our own fault we were perishing? He has promised us everlasting joy, not indeed for any advantage that it would bring to him, but entirely for our own benefit and our supreme happiness.

This purity of intention is the mark of one who greatly loves. For as the saying is, the eye follows the heart. Also in his coming to us Christ breathes his love into us. The greater this love and the holier our intention, the more perfect will be all the other virtues.

(7) When the soul has been thus adorned with all these virtues, it is raised by Christ to the grace of contemplation.

In two words, this is the preparation needed; the exterior life must be well ordered, always occupied with good works, beautified with good habits. Secondly the interior life must be filled with grace and divine love, without a shadow of falsehood, always straightforward and simple, fixed in God and resplendent with all virtues. The conscience must be pure, life innocent, senses temperate, nature overcome yet without always refusing it what prudence demands. Outwardly man should appear gentle, prompt to render any services expected of him. Finally and above all, he should be interiorly recollected in a holy calm far removed from forms and images. He should abandon all his possessions to the good pleasure of God, gather up all the powers of his soul in unity of spirit, praise God in continual adoration, give him thanks, love him, offer him his fealty, and serve him perseveringly with humility. On the contrary, those are unutterably unworthy of contemplation whose hearts are divided, who busy themselves curiously with the affairs of others, who are inordinately preoccupied with the necessities of life, who are slaves of their senses; those in fine who encumber themselves with all sorts of images of created things.

May the Lord Jesus grant us the grace to conduct ourselves in such a manner that he can work in us at all times and as much as he desires. Amen.