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## FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU  
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault  
(Fontgombault, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2023)

*Should it have been given to me to believe in God, and should He have suddenly beckoned to me, knocking on my window on an evening of loneliness and inaction, I think that, without the slightest hesitation, I would forthwith have left the nets of my daily obligations, which intolerably grip and smother me, to follow Him and rely on Him with a blind trust.*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
My dearly beloved Sons,

**T**HESE LINES were written by Dominique Bernard, a teacher savagely murdered in front of his school last October in Arras. They might surprise as an epigraph to this homily for the first Sunday in Advent. Yet, it seems to me that they are fitting.

As the liturgical year is renewing its course, the Church, who invites us to conversion at all times, specially insists on it today. The value of the adoration depends on the value of the adorer. We know only too well that the nets of daily obligations that intolerably grip and smother were not reserved for this school teacher only. Don't we too often fall prey to them?

The Vatican II Constitution on sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, teaches:

Holy Mother Church [...] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from the incarnation and birth until the ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the coming of the Lord.

Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time, and the faithful are enabled to lay hold upon them and become filled with saving grace.<sup>a</sup>

a. n. 102.

If the Church, faithful to the Lord's command, "Do this in memory of Me,"<sup>b</sup> wishes to dispense the sacraments of God's love, the fruits of Redemption, on all men, what of the response of men?

b. Lk 22:19.

Believing in God, having faith, is a gift. Yet, should we wait for God suddenly to beckon to us in order to answer His call? Is it mandatory that God should wait for an evening of loneliness and inaction to knock on the doors of our hearts? Does it behove God to wait for us, or us to wait for God?

Madeleine Delbrêl proposes this *Short Prayer to be Recited From Time to Time*, "My God, if Thou art everywhere, how can it be that I am so often somewhere else?"<sup>1</sup>

Wouldn't our souls be more akin to weathercocks endlessly moved by the winds, than to the magnetized needle of a compass, invariably oriented towards the North?

Christ is our North Pole, and it behoves us to choose Him at all times and in all places. Such is the watchword given by the introit antiphon, taken from Psalm 24:

To Thee, O Lord, have I lifted up my soul. In Thee, O my God, I put my trust; let me not be ashamed.<sup>c</sup>

c. Ps 24 [25], 1-2.

This is not a new entreaty. Each Sunday before the Preface, the priest invites the faithful: "Lift up your hearts." And you answer: "We lift them up to the Lord."

Madeleine Delbrêl also wrote:

A life of faith cannot do without prayer. Now, in a secular life, prayer is seemingly both indispensable and difficult. Lives that belong to God are lives that pray, whatever they may be, wherever they may be. Their prayer is both a gift from God,

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1. *Alcide et le petit moine [Alcide and the Little Monk]*, vol. IV of the *Œuvres complètes [Complete Works]* (Nouvelle Cité, 2006), Alcide, p. 67.

and a conquest. A secular life that doesn't pray doesn't belong to God.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the paths of our lives may be, the encounter with the Lord will come one day or another, as it did unexpectedly for Dominique Bernard.

The Church evokes in today's gospel the end of time, the moment when men, frightened to death as the powers of heaven will be shaken, will "see the Son of man coming in a cloud, with great power and majesty."<sup>a</sup> We find again the introit antiphon:

a. *Lk 21:27.*

But when these things begin to come to pass, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand.<sup>b</sup>

b. *Ibid.*, v. 28.

Shall we have to await the hour of our death or the end of time to lift up our heads? It behoves us to choose the time of the encounter. On this first Sunday in Advent, we might make a resolution: to flee from the temptation which consists in considering that the present moment is never the right moment to pray, and that we shall doubtless find better conditions to devote ourselves to prayer at another time... which means later... which too often means never.

If our hearts, if circumstances egg us on to prayer, to thanksgiving, it means that the Lord is knocking on our door. Will a voice be heard?

The imminent perils from which in this morning's collect we ask to be rescued by the protection of God are not necessarily crimes, but they could be summed up as a quiet indifference, a comfortable lack of concern making up our daily routine, and reluctantly granting to the Lord a small place, or no place at all, both in our lives and in the society.

"It is now the hour for us to rise from sleep."<sup>c</sup> The world's situation bears an eloquent witness to the consequences of ignoring God. Whereas this first Sunday in Advent opens the time of preparation for Christmas, shall we know how to encounter the Child in the crib, shall we know how to receive His mercy? Shall we know how to discern Christ in our neighbour, as Christ Himself is asking us to show mercy on this neighbour?

c. *Rm 13:11.*

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2. *Notre vie [Our Life]*, vol. XV of the *Œuvres complètes [Complete Works]* (Nouvelle Cité, 2017), p. 133.

The strains of the *Rorate* we shall be singing this evening are hovering over this time, and they strengthen our hope that the Lord is present for all those who wish to encounter Him:

Be comforted, be comforted, my people;  
thy salvation shall speedily come:  
why wilt thou waste away in sadness?  
why hath sorrow seized thee?  
I will save thee; fear not:  
for I am the Lord thy God,  
the Holy One of Israel, thy Redeemer. <sup>a</sup>

a. *Rorate cæli*,  
stanza 4.

Amen.

