

HOMILY SUNDAY ADVENT 4-A (Homily 02)

“Called to Be Prophetic Saints”

(Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24)

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In the month of October, 2010, a humble lay brother and member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, André Bissette, was canonized a saint by Pope Benedict XVI. It was a memorable day for Canada and in particular, for Quebec and Montreal. A sickly child from birth and orphaned as a youth, André was barely able to hold down a job. However, his deep faith in Jesus Christ, his strong devotion to St. Joseph and his profound prayer life led him to be accepted by the Holy Cross community, with the encouragement of the local bishop who told them he was sending them a saint.

His ministry as a lay brother was the humble role of porter. He performed a variety of menial tasks such as barber and delivering the mail. Soon, however, people were attracted by his deep spirituality and started turning to him in their distress and need. He would ask St. Joseph to intercede; would rub the sick with blessed oil; give them medals and thousands experienced healing at his hands. His stance was simply to say that it was not him who healed but Jesus through the intercession of St. Joseph, and that God was good. Eventually, his faith led to the construction of the huge Basilica of St. Joseph that towers over Montreal on Mount Royal.

The celebration in the Olympic Stadium on October 31 to celebrate his canonization gathered together 65 bishops with at least 55,000 ribbon waving faithful. A humble lay brother filled a stadium that usually only sports teams or rock stars would fill. Saint Brother André stands as a model for us all, for according to St. Paul, we are all called to be saints.

The readings this fourth Sunday of Advent place this call to be saints within the context of prophecy; prophecy fulfilled and prophecy lived out.

Like Saint Brother André, we are invited to believe in Jesus as Emmanuel, Son of David and Risen Lord, and live out that faith like St. Paul through boundless hope and sincere love. In short, to be prophetic saints of faith, hope and love.

The first reading presents us with the powerful prophecy by Isaiah. According to the New Interpreter’s Bible, this prophecy of a woman to give birth to a child is an expression of a royal messianism already outlined by Nathan and developed by Ezekiel. By means of a king and heir of David, God will give salvation to his

people, lying in the hope of the permanence of the Davidic dynasty. Though Isaiah probably had the son of Ahaz in mind, the solemnity of the prophetic saying and the emphatic meaning of the symbolic name given to the child suggest that Isaiah saw more in this royal birth than immediate circumstances, namely a decisive intervention by God towards the final establishment of the messianic kingdom. Thus the prophecy of Isaiah goes beyond its immediate realization, and the evangelists, as well as the whole Christian tradition, have understood it as a prophecy of the birth of Christ, as well as the virginal conception of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Here we have prophecy at its best.

The Gospel presents us with the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. The Holy Spirit operates within the ordinariness of Mary, within the darkness of her womb, to conceive the Christ Child who would save us from our sins. What a marvellous way for the centuries old prophecy of Isaiah to be fulfilled. Joseph steps in as a righteous, compassionate and prayerful man, open to the prompting of the Spirit, to ensure that that prophecy will stand. Here we have prophecy fulfilled at its best.

In the second reading, we see prophecy lived out. St. Paul sees himself as an apostle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He presents Jesus as the Son of David and the Risen Lord. Paul, who experienced the love and forgiveness of the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, cannot separate the Son of David born in Bethlehem from the crucified and Risen Lord of Jerusalem. Nor should we separate the two in our own lives of prophetic faith.

The grace, the spiritual power, the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, is given to us to be saints, to be freed from our sins, to let Jesus be our Lord and Saviour, to live out salvation as he did. Faith must make a difference in our lives. In St. Paul, we have prophecy lived out at its best.

The psalm for today takes up the prophetic refrain to live out our faith in hope and love. We are invited to have clean hands and pure hearts, to live in the truth. Since Jesus as Emmanuel and Saviour came to take away our sins, Advent becomes a privileged time to do a sincere examination of our lives, to celebrate reconciliation, and in that way to receive the forgiveness and healing power of the Holy Spirit.

It is no accident that the healing Steps 4-9 of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous begin with a searching and fearless moral inventory (Step 4) followed by an admission of our wrongs to God, ourselves and one other person (Step 5). A good, sincere confession of who we are at this moment of our lives is probably the best way to fulfil the intent of the liturgy today – that we become saints and

prophetic messengers of faith, hope and love.

Archbishop Emeritus John Quinn of San Francisco gave the Western Canadian bishops' retreat a few years ago. He shared the story of one of his priests who left the priesthood to marry. He was a good priest and had been in charge of personnel. One day he came to see Quinn, cried and revealed that he had put himself outside the discipline of the Church by getting married. Quinn tried to help him reconsider his decision and suggested that he take a retreat, pray over this and not to contact the woman in any way. The priest did take some retreat time but disobeyed, contacted the woman and of course, it was over. Then the priest changed dramatically. He became very bitter and vocal about it to justify himself. For months he attacked the Church on the media and defended his course of action, causing a public scandal. Out of concern for his mother, Archbishop Quinn went to visit her. The old lady was surprisingly calm and serene. As he was leaving she gave him a small porcelain statue with flowers at its base, just to remind him not to forget that the church has always had a covenant with springtime. That is prophetic sainthood of faith, hope and love.

The Eucharist we celebrate now is an act of faith that fills us with hope and propels us out as prophetic saints to share that hope-filled love with the world with clean hands and pure hearts.

So let us remember that we are called to be prophetic saints, to have faith in Jesus who is God with us and live out that faith through lives of hope-filled love.