

Third Sunday of Advent
Gospel: Matthew 11:2-11

Religious Retirement Appeal -- December 12, 2004

Homily by S. Mary Catherine Antczak

It was almost the end of the very first Advent--the Advent that spanned four thousand years. They were cousins--Jesus and John the Baptist. In an extraordinary moment their mothers met one another, each pregnant and carrying a son. Joy filled their voices and their hearts. Elizabeth, the mother of John, felt the child in her womb leap for joy, while Mary, the mother of Jesus, broke into a song of praise to God that he had chosen her to be mother of His son.

In today's gospel the cousins are in communication again. This time John is in prison, and Jesus is teaching a crowd. John's disciples find Jesus. They bring Jesus a strange question from John, "Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?" Jesus does not answer his cousin directly. Instead, Jesus responds by telling the disciples to go back to John and to tell him what they hear and see: the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the poor hear the Good News preached to them.

Even Jesus' cousin, a great prophet, was surprised to find that Jesus was a very different sort of Messiah from what he had expected. People looked at Jesus but did not see a pompous man exercising power. People listened to Jesus but did not hear an arrogant man exerting authority. Rather, when they looked they saw the carpenter's son curing the sick and forgiving sinners. When they listened they heard a man who had no place to lay his head proclaiming a Kingdom where the last would be first and the poor would be blessed.

Jesus asks us to recognize him in acts of service and love that we can hear and see. From the moment Jesus responded to John until today, Jesus wants us to recognize Him and to recognize his presence in others through what we hear and see.

This Sunday in parishes across the United States, we are recognizing thousands of women and men who made a vowed commitment to follow Christ more closely as religious sisters, brothers and priests. Countless people and children have heard their voices and seen their works, and through them they have come to recognize the person of Jesus. A history of this country is incomplete without reference to the great apostolic undertakings of women and men religious who have taught, healed, and comforted others by establishing hundreds of schools, universities, hospitals, and orphanages. But history must also record that since the mid 1960s the number of young women and men entering religious orders has steadily declined. Religious congregations expected young members to care for aging members; but today there are almost 40,000 Catholic sisters, brothers and religious order priests who are past age 70, and most communities have more members who need care than members who earn wages. To meet the crisis religious orders have sold property and assets. Even though religious institutes began Social Security payments for their members in the early 1970s, they were based on low stipends compatible with a vow of poverty; the result is that Social Security benefits to individual

religious women and men are less than one third what other Americans receive. To address this serious situation, the US Bishops launched the Retirement Fund for Religious in 1988 as an act of gratitude and justice for the ministry of religious. Through an annual appeal funds are collected and distributed to religious institutes.

As a Dominican Sister my vocation to the religious life was nurtured as I saw and heard the sisters who taught me. The example of the sisters I knew inspired me to want to follow Christ by sharing their life and ministry. Today my vocation is sustained as I see and hear the sisters I live with at Flintridge Sacred Heart. Let me tell you about a few of them. I see Sister Catherine Marie, my second grade teacher, go to work everyday at Twin Towers to minister as a chaplain to the women inmates. I see Sister Mary Hilary, the prioress of my community and the founding principal of St. Bede School, participate in the administration of FSHA and find time to visit and console the sick. I rejoice to live with Sister Jean Marie, an alumna of Flintridge and my novice director, whose words, example and encouragement guided many of us during the turbulent years following Vatican II, and whose support today continues to strengthen our hearts. I hear Sister Benilda, who teaches Scripture in this parish, preach the Gospel, and my heart is moved as I feel the power of God's Spirit alive in her. In my Dominican religious community at Flintridge Sacred Heart, I am blessed to experience a microcosm of the kinds of service given by thousands of women and men religious across the United States.

Now many sisters and brothers who proclaimed the Gospel through long years of active ministry are in frail health and need special care. Thousands of religious in this country are in the Advent days of their lives. They are waiting for Jesus to come to them, to take them home.

Today I invite you to thank and support them by making a generous contribution to the Retirement Fund for Religious.

Today I ask you to pray for the religious you know, whose voices you have heard, whose deeds you have seen, those who have wanted only to make known Jesus to whom they have given their lives.

Today we rejoice that God has strengthened our faith and blessed our Church by letting us see and hear through the lives of many aged religious the person of Jesus, the One who is to come.