

## Homily Advent IIC: 9 Dec 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

The past several years I've been occupied w/ a church building project, a task for which I was completely unprepared prior to this assignment. As it turns out, the community that was supposed to undertake this project with me was also completely unprepared, so I guess my superiors figured that this parish-pastor combination made a good match, given that we were so much alike! One of the big surprises in this endeavor has been the enormous cost. It's probably going to run to about \$3.5 million when all the expenses are accounted for. And of that total, approximately a \$1 million has gone towards a collection of jobs categorized as "site development." You see, before you can put any sort of building on a site, you have to do some initial groundwork: the land must be graded to accommodate driveways and parking lots; the footprint of the building must be excavated prior to laying the foundation; trenches must be dug and lines installed to carry water, electricity, and gas; channels and detention basins must be dug to control storm water runoff. And since this particular building is going to house over 400 people, and it is being built on a totally undeveloped tract of land, the amount of site work is very extensive. This process of preliminary preparation takes a lot of money, to say nothing of time: it required 3 solid months of construction in favorable weather before the superstructure of our church began to rise from ground. It tests one's patience as all this time passes and all this money literally goes into the ground, but there is no other way to build the church right. Short cuts ineluctably lead to dead ends. To borrow a Scriptural metaphor, circumventing site development would be like building one's house on weak and shifting sand--watch out when the rains come and winds blow and all is washed away!

At the risk of being accused of projecting my issues onto the Sacred Page, the readings this Sunday speak of site development, of all things: prepare the way of the Lord, make the paths straight, fill the valleys, lower the hills, straighten the winding roads, smooth the rough ways, and so forth. This sort of language describes the ministry of John the Baptist. He is a kind of earthmover for the Lord. His baptism of repentance clears the path for the Lord to come to his people. His message and his methods might seem a bit harsh--he's sort of a human bulldozer--but it's the only way to get the job done!

During this Advent season, one lesson is that much of the work of religion is an exercise in spiritual site development, as it were. We're taught that God wants to come and visit his people. But the problem is that we the people have put a lot of obstacles between ourselves and our Redeemer. People fall into sinful patterns of behavior--so to fix that our Church supplies the sacraments, most especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist. By the way, this truth exposes the fundamental fallacy underlying the whole idea of being "spiritual, not religious." An increasing number like to categorize themselves in this manner, because they think that some sort of non-religious "spirituality" can put them in touch the divine, that they can enjoy those sweet emotions associated w/ mystical consolation w/o the hassle of liturgical rigmarole and the constricting

constraints of repressive ethical codes. The flaw in this approach is that genuine union w/ the sacred just doesn't come that easily. There is a huge rough patch of debris created by human sinfulness that obstructs the path between the all holy God and the inmost depths of the human heart. If the way to union w/ God were as clear and easy as these spirituality aficionados make it out to be, there wouldn't be so much injustice, poverty, war, and other assorted miseries that make life on earth so vexing. But the fact of the matter is that we sinful creatures need a lot of help to find our way to salvation. Hence the need for John's ministry of baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, hence the need for Christian Baptism and the whole sacramental economy of the Church. The sacraments and rituals of the Catholic religion have been instituted by Jesus Christ to help clear the way; these observances of our faith develop the site within us so that God can build a house where he may dwell deep within our souls. During this Advent season, let's pray w/ greater fervor that the Lord may build a path directly to our hearts and prepare them for his presence, that we may enjoy the blessed company of Emmanuel, God with us, this Christmas.