

Divine Invasion
December 11, 2005
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr.

Two weeks ago (tonight) (at a different) service, I spoke about God's Advent, his coming into our lives, what one learned Bishop (Stephen Bayne), many years ago, called the ***Divine Invasion***. If we take this image a little further, we sooner or later must come upon God's coming into the Church. This Sunday is often, tongue-in-cheek, called ***Stir-up-Sunday***, because we implore God to ***stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us***. The astonishing thing is that the Church has survived at all. We sometimes may wonder that the Church has any right to exist. When you think of the ignorance and the sins of Church people back through the ages, the times the Church has tried to imprison peoples minds, the times the Church has gotten fat on privilege, the times that the Church has consented to compromise and wrong because it was more comfortable to do so than to speak for the truth, it makes you wonder how the Church has survived at all over the 2,000 years of its life.

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The reason it has survived is part of Advent. It has survived because God did not abandon it. It has survived because he came into the Church, as he still comes, to cleanse it and give it a fresh start, and he does this inside the Church itself more deeply than he does from the outside. This coming of God into the Church is part of that divine invasion we call Advent.

It would be well, I think, if people who stand outside the Church, who are critics of the Church and nothing more, understood the consciences of Church people a little better, not to soften any honest criticism of the Church, we need that, but it would be well so that the critics might thereby come to understand the way God works in the world. He doesn't wait for angels, he uses what he has, *us* in all of our ignorance and failure and he leads us along the way, so that we learn even as we follow. He doesn't start with the finished product, but

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it is through the imperfections, through the pilgrimage that the will of God is done.

Why do some people think that clergy are sanctified simpletons? Many do, you know. The answer is that they think all Christians are, that this is really Christianity, to be blind to the world's faults, to live in a fool's paradise, too dreamy to know what really goes on in the world. I doubt if any layperson, deacon, priest or Bishop has any illusions about the Church. Most of us know how poor servants of God we can be, the agony of humiliation that comes when we presume to stand in a pulpit and preach; how often we come to Church with unclean hands. We're not really fools or blind about ourselves. In actual fact, it is doubtful that there are many self-righteous people in Church on most Sundays. If you want to find the good people, the self-righteous people, they are generally somewhere else. They may be out raking the last leaves of autumn, or still shoveling snow, or bird

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watching, or walking believing that the only place for an honest person to be is out communing with nature, or in someone's living room, by the fire, having a few.

If you go to Church in our day and time, you probably mean business; you will probably say the confession and mean it and I think this is the way with the Church most of the time. It's only in an *off moment* that we flatter ourselves and think we are saints. Most of the time we're under no illusion about this. So, *we're* the ones, above all others, who understand the miracle of God's grace, the miracle of his patience with his Church and his endless, loving, purifying, judging return to it, to cast the money-changers out of the Temple and to give us a new start.

For 20 centuries God has persistently risen up among us and within us to shame us and to cleanse us. He seems never quite willing to let his Church go. God's patience seems not to fail and always this goes on in

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the Church first of all. I don't question the validity of God's judgment on the Church from the outside. We have much to learn from the estimate that society has of the Church and we ought to listen with respect. But we owe more obeisance and more respect to the voice of judgment within the Church; in the readings from the Psalms, the Prophets, the Letters and the Gospel, an intrusion into our small world that our consciences may be disturbed, that God's judgment might be heard.

[Another point of judgment is in the sermon where we should not have a nice little liturgical sociability, but a great deal of honesty; where the preacher includes himself in the sermon, where it is clear that, while he may be talking about others, he is talking about himself first, and then, *sometimes*, the purifying voice of God can be heard.]

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Sometimes the Church comes to moments of greatest collective decisions, as at the Reformation, for example, when the wind of the Spirit seems to blow through the Church and sweep it clean. We need to guard ourselves from idolizing moments like that. There is no one time when God did this, or does it, so that it never needs to be done again. The fact is that God *does* periodically move, not just through individuals alone, but also through the whole body of the Church, through its Councils and its whole corporate life.

We cannot predict these moments of God's coming, but this is the history of the Church.....a long series of zigzags, marred by human failure and foolishness, redirected by God who rises up within his Church to judge it and purify it. When Christians talk about Advent, it is into his Church that we think of his coming. The Church is a community of people who come together because they are *looking* for the coming of God. The very reason we are here is that we

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know that we are not good enough to be here, but that God is Good and that God will continually make right our imperfections and fulfill what we have begun. We are joined together in a pilgrimage and all that we of the Church ask is that the Church be understood for what it really is: that company of people who know only that God is good and who try to make themselves an offering for God to use. If those outside the Church could grasp this understanding of ourselves, it might make some difference in their harsh judgment *of* the Church. It might win those outside the Church to want to make common cause with us, and not just at this particular season, but at all seasons, and *this* is most devoutly to be prayed for.

AMEN.