

10

The following is the text of a homily given by Bishop Patrick V. Ahern, Episcopal Vicar of The Bronx and Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of New York, at the Fordham University Church, on Sunday, October 6, 1974.

THE BRONX! CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF THAT PLACE?

I would like to say, first of all, a word of appreciation for your kindness in inviting me to come here to Fordham to celebrate this Mass today, and I'd like to say a word by way of introduction of myself especially in view of the topic I shall be discussing. I am in no way an urbanologist, a sociologist, or anything fancy like that. I have no degrees in anything. I spent a large portion of my priesthood preaching parish missions. By some sort of fluke, I was assigned to teach homiletics at the Seminary and I ended up then for ten years as Cardinal Spellman's secretary. And shortly before he died, that good man made me a pastor in the Bronx -- for which I shall be eternally grateful to him. A few years later, his successor gave Pope Paul a very bad steer and convinced him to make me a Bishop, after which I was appointed Episcopal Vicar of the Bronx. And none of the foregoing I assure you, qualifies me in any way to engage in the care and hospitalization of ailing urban centers. However....

I've lived in the Bronx for the better part of ten years and I think that gives me call to say something. The title of this homily is a little bit playful -- it is called, "The Bronx! Can Anything Good Come Out of That Place?" -- and it is a take-off from John's Gospel 1:46. The title is the adaptation of a question you are all familiar with, which Nathanael asked of his friend Philip, when Philip announced that he had discovered the long-awaited Messiah, and who was it but Jesus, of NAZARETH. Nazareth had a reputation as a rough and tumble, culturally deprived place with little to recommend it, and Nathanael, sophisticated man from Cana that he was, could have been expected to make the remark that he made: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" His friend Philip, who had been called shortly before but Jesus, calmly replied, "Come and see." And we know what Nathanael ultimately saw. Unbelieving until the resurrection of Jesus, he came eventually to see the redemption of mankind.

The rest of this homily deals with the invitation, "COME AND SEE". Come and see what is happening in the Bronx, with the people of the Bronx, with the Catholic parishes of the Northwest Bronx, where the forces of evil are eroding the accomplishments of decades, mocking the family motto of Jonas Bronck, who used to farm this area: NE CEDE MALIS -- Do not give way to evil. A number of us are trying to make that motto come alive.

Right on this campus, the first parish liturgy in the Northwest Bronx was celebrated. That was 135 years ago, and a lot of change has taken place in the Bronx since then. It has grown from farmlands to a City of a million and a half people, a quarter of whom are over sixty years of age, another quarter of whom are on welfare. Walk from this campus six blocks directly south along Third Avenue, and you will be standing right in the middle of what newspapers and politicians call, in a theoretical sort of way, the "urban crisis."

The "urban crisis" has many causes and many symptoms. And the common denominator of it is decay, decay that leads to death. The CAUSE is sin, and the symptoms are more sin, and more decay and more death. The physical decay which you will see at 132nd Street and Clinton Avenue, or 183rd and Washington, or 198th and Marion: this doesn't happen overnight. It began with spiritual decay: greed, laziness, not caring, minding my own business, letting good old George do it, and

a strange kind of blindness which puts my life with God in a different place than the neighborhood I live in. As long as this spiritual decay continues, and is not excised, no government, no clean-up programs, and no enforcement of laws, even by battalions of policemen, is going to solve the urban crisis. And if the urban crisis is not solved, then the Bronx is going to D I E, and if the Bronx dies, then the hopes of those million and a half people for justice and a decent life, here and now, will die with it. We're trying to stop that from happening.

Habakkuk is dealing with the same kind of situation in his prophecy, and it's very real to him. Listen to it again:

How long, O Lord? I cry for help
 but you do not listen!
 I cry out to you, "VIOLENCE!"
 but you do not intervene.
 Why do you let me see ruin;
 why must I look at misery?
 Destruction and violence are before me;
 there is strife, and clamorous discord.
 And so law loses its hold,
 and justice never shows itself,
 Yes, the wicked man gets the better of the upright,
 and justice is seen to be distorted.

Thus Habakkuk.

Now, what do you do in a situation like that? What do we do in our situation? It hardly helps to damn the politicians, or the government, or this or that ethnic group. We hear this repeated practically every time we gather in a conversation about what is going on in our neighborhoods -- someone else is to blame.

This is what Habakkuk did: he blamed the Chaldeans and he asked God when their destruction was going to end, and God's answer was what it always is: NEVER MIND ABOUT THEM -- YOU be faithful; YOU keep the vision.

Write down the vision ... clearly, (said the Lord)
 For the vision still has its time,
 Presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint.

"YOU keep the vision." That is always God's answer.

The Holy Father has declared 1975 a Year of Reconciliation and Renewal. The Universal Church will be concerned with these themes. In the Church, the local Church of the Northwest Bronx, we're going to try something very concrete and practical, action-oriented; something that seems secular but which really is a religious vision calling for moral uprightness and prayer. And so far as we know, what we're undertaking for 1975 in the Northwest Bronx is unique in the American Church, both for its scope -- and for its challenge -- to every Catholic, and indeed to every person who lives or works or studies in our area.

The scope is to renew the neighborhoods of the Northwest Bronx; to reconcile conflicting interests in the common enterprise of survival; to renew the spiritual bonds between men which make for strong community life, lively and clean politics, responsive government; to build up rather than to tear down.

The challenge is an enormous one. It involves spiritual labor and emotional labor and intellectual labor and physical labor. We're trying to understand; we're trying to move the heavy burden of inertia and to change the way things have always been done -- or left undone! We're trying to persuade people to set aside all their fights and feuds. which consume so much of their energies and distract all of us from the work at hand -- which is, namely and to wit: HOW DO WE SAVE OUR CITY? HOW -- DO WE SAVE OUR SELVES?

Consider, just to give one example, what is happening to housing in New York City and in all the urban areas in the United States. In our City, people live in housing which it costs \$35,000 per small apartment to replace. Yet 40,000 units are being abandoned every year. That means that every year, we are wasting \$1,400,000,000 of natural resources and human labor.

Add to this the steep cost in human misery when people live in filth because there is no superintendent, in fear because the landlord or other tenants are harrasing them, in isolation because they have lost the sense of belonging which was theirs in "the old days" -- whether in Norwood or Belmont or the South Bronx or Highbridge, or that lovely section where my parish is located that people used proudly to call, "the country in the City." This is the kind of thing we trying to turn around, and we are asking you to help us.

Who are "WE"? "We" are the pastors, average age sixty, of the sixteen Catholic parishes in the Northwest Bronx, from Holy Spirit in one corner, to Saint Martin of Tours, to St. Brendan's, to St. Margaret's in Riverdale. "We" are the priests and religious and lay men and women who make up half the population of the Northwest Bronx. "We" have been working for over a year trying to raise money, raise hopes, get neighborhood stabilization off the planners' drawing boards and out of the politicians' mouths and into FACT.

"We" are the twelve organizers, four of them recent Fordham graduates, working twelve and fourteen hours a day, knocking on doors all week long and sometimes on Sunday, getting dog-tired and not even noticing that our take-home pay is barely the minimum wage, because the people of the neighborhoods, black and white and brown, Jewish and Christian and of no particular religion at all, are getting together, are learning what neighborhood and brotherly concern are all about. We have to tell people to wait a few weeks because there aren't enough of us to go around -- to even start doing the job.

"We" are the businesses and banks and the parishes and religious orders who have contributed money to pay the salaries of the organizers.

"We" are the seven steering committees and the more than 200 tenant groups and block associations who are working to solve problems that somehow have never had a solution -- and "we're" beginning to have some major victories.

"we" are the more than 5,000 people who have been to meetings in our parish facilities to pledge ourselves to the future of the Northwest Bronx as a good place to live -- who want to keep it that way -- who are sure that many good things can come out of the Bronx. "we" are the people who think that way and who choose not to yield to evil. That's who "we" are; we ask you to join us.

First of all, we want you to pray with us -- at this Mass, at all your Masses, in the quiet of your room, in the privacy of your heart. We'll say the Holy Year prayer together after the homily is over just to get you started on saying it every day -- you have a copy.

We want you to work with us, as much time as you can, in the way you feel most comfortable. You can do some part-time organizing, or you can make phone calls, or print up and distribute flyers. You can write letters, attend meetings and learn -- about the REAL REASONS behind the problems of the cities, which are not taught in courses or by journalists or politicians. If you feel that you're too young to do it I'm too old -- look at me. And Father Reilly, who read the Gospel, he's too old, and we're all too old. But we're in there trying. And we're learning. Our eyes are being opened and we're beginning to see some of the things that make the Scriptures talk louder and clearer to us.

We're seeing the Church -- COME ALIVE! The resurrection that Nathanael saw: IT'S HAPPENING, here and now. The Gospel is becoming news that isn't like a yellowed newspaper ready to be discarded or like a dream that vanishes as soon as we put our foot outside the door of the Church on Sunday morning -- we're beginning to take our religion home with us, to make it a way of LIFE.

The adversity which our life in the City subjects us to can make us bitter or it can make us better. It can destroy cities, or inspire us to renew them.

I can be guilt-ridden about things which I can't do much about myself, or I can pitch in and help out where my personal action and presence and prayerfulness make a big, BIG difference.

Can I ask you to start to get involved by standing and saying with me the prayer that is in your leaflet:

I BELIEVE IN YOU, GOD.
I BELIEVE THAT YOU MADE ME TO LIVE ...
NOT FOR MYSELF, BUT FOR YOU AND MY NEIGHBORS.
HELP ME PUT THAT BELIEF INTO MY HEART ...
AND INTO PRACTICE.

HELP ME TO BE AWARE AND REALLY CONVINCED
THAT I HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO MY NEIGHBORS
AND MY NEIGHBORHOOD AND ...
THAT WHAT I DO ... OR DON'T DO ...
REALLY MAKES A DIFFERENCE.

LET ME OVERCOME THAT "I don't want to get involved" ATTITUDE
WHEN I AM TEMPTED TO "let the other person do it."

TEACH ME TO LIVE AS YOU WOULD IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD ...
AND LET ME BEGIN T O D A Y .