

Third Sunday of Advent/Gaudete Sunday

December 17, 2017 St. Augustine Cathedral 9:30 a.m.

I love this Third Sunday of Advent. It's one of two Sundays in the Year when the Church **orders us** to rejoice! There's this Sunday, that we oftentimes call "Gaudete" Sunday (which is a Latin word in the imperative form which means "rejoice!"), and then there's the Fourth Sunday of Lent which is called "Laetare Sunday", another Latin word, in the imperative form, which also means "rejoice"!

There are a couple different reasons why those Sundays are built into the Advent and Lenten Seasons. Being Penitential in nature (the Season of Lent for sure, and the Season of Advent in a lessen way), the Sunday past the mid-way point is a kind of "hang in there" message to not be discouraged----Lent or Advent is almost over, and then the penitential season will come to an end; whatever sacrifices had been taken on can be set aside. But the more positive way of understanding the Church's mandate to "rejoice" is that the great Feasts for which we have been preparing----whether it's Easter or Christmas--- are almost here. And for us, on this Gaudete Sunday, we rejoice because Christmas is just one week and a matter of hours before Christmas Eve Masses will be taking place.

But there might be another good reason why the Church calls us to focus on "joy" on this Third Sunday of Advent. As we all know, this can be a very stressful time of the year. With all the preparations for the non-liturgical celebrations of Christmas that everyone is facing with last-minute shopping, gift wrapping, cookie baking, Christmas card-sending, and of course the nerve-wracking watching the calendar for when Santa Claus will be arriving, our nerves can be thin, our patience can be short, and our Christmas spirit might be lacking.

And so today, this Gaudete Sunday serves as a good and strong reminder for us to keep everything in its proper perspective---that we keep in mind **Who** and **what** we are celebrating with all the gift-giving and merry-making, and how we are supposed to be feeling. Even in the midst of the weariness of our daily responsibilities, and the worries of our life's burdens, we *can* be **joyful**; in fact, the Church tells us, we **must** rejoice! **Christian joy** is a virtue. Joy is a reflection of the Life of God. Joy is one of the Fruits of the Holy Spirit---the result of living a life of faith in the example of Jesus Himself. And unlike the human emotions of happiness and pleasure, which tend to be by-products or consequences of life experiences, the virtue of joy is more of a conscious choice to be made, or a practice to be pursued.

Today's Scripture Readings are beautiful and profound, and each of them teach us clearly about the virtue of joy.

In our First Reading, Isaiah tells us very clearly: *"I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul, for He has clothed me with a robe of salvation and wrapped me in a mantle of justice...."*

Today's Responsorial Psalm is our Blessed Mother's "Song of Praise" in response to her invitation to become the Mother of Jesus, and the words that we pray over and over are hers: *"My soul rejoices in my God."*

In our Second Reading, St. Paul tells the Thessalonians, and us, to *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in all circumstances give thanks for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus."*

Even the words of John the Baptist in today's Gospel Reading reflect a man who is completely at peace with who he is and what his mission in this life is all about, and that is what brings him joy.

John was asked the most basic question any of us can be asked: "Who are you?" If any one of us is asked by someone in authority "Who are you?", there are a number of ways that we might choose to answer that question; but more than likely, none of us would choose to answer that question by saying that we're *not* the President or the Pope or anyone else. Rather than identifying himself as the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, or as a faithful Jew, John answered the Priests and Levites who were questioning him by saying: *"I am **not** the Christ."*

"The Christ", of course, was another term for "the Anointed One" or "the Messiah". The Jewish people had been longing for the coming of the Messiah for hundreds of years. For some reason, the Priests and Elders decided to keep playing the "who are you not?" game, as they asked if he was Elijah, or the Prophet, to which he kept saying that he was not. When John finally attempted to say who he *was*, his answer defined his mission: *"I am the voice of one crying out in the desert; make straight the way of the Lord, as Isaiah the prophet said"*. Even as he was being grilled by the authorities, John was filled with joy!

I have been very touched this week as I have had the experience of encountering three persons who, in spite of their challenging circumstances, remain persons filled with joy.

On Tuesday of this week, I got a call to tell me that Fr. .Jim O'Leary, pastor of St. Ambrose Parish in Parchment and our oldest, active pastor, had fallen on the ice and suffered a "crack" in one of his hip-area bones. When I saw him in the hospital the next day, in spite of the fact that he was in a good deal of pain and discomfort, when I asked him how he was, he said (in his inestimable gruff voice): "**I have never felt the Presence of God swarming all around me as much as I have these past two days!**" In spite of his pain and fears, he was totally joyful.

On Thursday of this week, I got a call that our dear Bishop Murray had fallen and was taken to the ER at Bronson to be checked out. When I saw him in the ER shortly after that, with all the people bustling around him, checking him out from head to toe, when I asked him: Jim, how are you? His response was: "Oh, **I'm fine, but how are YOU!?**" In the midst of the confusion and the anxiety that he was clearly experiencing, his joyful spirit was making him more concerned for someone else.

And on Friday of this week, I was present here for the Funeral Mass of a long-time parishioner, Dorothy Talanda. At the end of the Mass, her husband, Ed, of 72 years, himself in his early 90's, came right up here to this very ambo to express the joy that was in his heart in these beautiful words: "The older I get, family and friends become more precious as time grows shorter and friends become fewer. Every day is a gift of life to be grateful for. And I'm thankful for the **joy** that my dear wife, children, and grandchildren have given to me." Even in the grief he was feeling in the depths of his soul at the death of his spouse of more than seven decades, he couldn't help but want to share the joy that he was experiencing because of the love for his wife and family.

I couldn't help but ask myself: how can I be more like John the Baptist, or any of those I shared with you in those three brief scenarios? How can we be People filled with joy? I think, first of all, we need to know, like John the Baptist, who we are **not**---We are not "the Christ"! We are *not* God, though sometimes, we might want to think we are. Once we know who we are not, then we need to remember, **and celebrate**, who we *are!* We are not just the name of the person on our driver's license, or our personal ID. We have to remember that we are the person whose name is on our Baptismal Certificate. We are a son or daughter of God, our Father; we are baptized into Christ, our Lord; we are a member of the Body of Christ; we are Temples of the Holy Spirit; and we have been given the Holy Spirit's Gifts and Fruits to help us be faithful and joy-filled witnesses to Jesus in our life mission in the world.

Just like John the Baptist, we too can be a “voice” speaking up for Jesus in the world in which we live which, in some ways, is like “crying out in the desert” as John did. Even if people don’t want to hear what we have to say, we are still called to be faithful to our vocation to grow in holiness, and to help spread the Good News of Jesus, both thru our words and, more importantly, by our actions---our good example to those around us.

As Pope Francis wrote so beautifully in his recent Exhortation on the “Joy of the Gospel”:
“The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, Joy is constantly born anew.” (#1)

Yes, Christmas is just a little more than a week away, and that is when we’ll hear the “glad tidings of great joy” that the Angels proclaimed on Christmas night when they told the world that their Savior, who is Christ and Lord, had been born. And when we live in the spirit of Christmas, not just on Christmas day, but throughout the year, “Joy is constantly born anew” as Pope Francis said.

In the midst of all our other responsibilities, and no matter what other human emotions we might be experiencing, from happiness to sadness, from successes to failures, let us heed the good advice of St. Paul: *“Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances, give thanks for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again: Rejoice!”*

God bless you, now and always!