

Third Sunday Of Advent 2018

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice. The Lord is near.

Dearly Beloved,

Today, we celebrate the third Sunday of Advent, named “Gaudete” from the first word of the Introit, itself taken from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which served as the Epistle. Gaudete is the Latin plural imperative for rejoice; hence the Church tells us today to do just that: to rejoice. In the midst of our spiritual preparation for the birth of Christ and for his second coming, we are reminded that joy must be part of that preparation. We are faced, then, with the question of what joy is and what role it has in the life of a Christian.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks of joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, following upon charity. Thus, when we receive charity in baptism, a natural growth of that charity, the love of God, is joy. Joy is the fulfillment of desire, a desire which stems from love. Thus, if we love someone, we desire their presence, and when they are present, we rejoice. In its essence, the concept of joy is simple. But because our relationship with God is not simple, due to our current state and our fractured being, the way we experience joy is not as we would wish.

First of all, God is both present to us and absent. He is present in grace, in the Blessed Sacrament, in Holy Scripture, in priests and holy friends and in all who live for God. He is absent in that we do not infallibly sense His presence—our emotions do not know what our mind knows, and so we waver. We are beings that are made for intellect and emotions to function together, and as a rule, when we live by faith, they do not do so. The mind and will must continually tell the emotions that what they know is more true than what the emotions sense, and this is a hard reality to live with, but it accompanies most of our human experience.

Thus, it is helpful to know that St. Thomas Aquinas, common doctor of the Church, teaches that joy is not a virtue; it flows from the virtue of charity, but is not itself a virtue. So when Paul commands us to rejoice, he is not commanding us to be charismatic in the contemporary sense; it is not a matter of emotion but a matter of the mind. We are not called to unfailingly stir up happy emotions to feed our spiritual life, for that is a false way of being.

But since joy flows from the virtue of charity, joy does have the quality of virtue in two ways: we can work to grow in the love of God, and we can choose to set aside sorrow so joy can flourish. In regard to the first, there are ways in which we can encourage in ourselves a more profound love of God. We do this by doing the things we would do if we wanted to fall in love with a human being: spend time with Him, read His letters, ponder His good qualities, converse with Him. We ought to do these things as much as we can, for that is our part in loving God. His part is that He can increase His love in us according to our desire and our prayer. Thus, we should pray, ‘I love you, Lord; heal my lack of love for you.’ When our share in charity increases, then joy will also increase, according to the measure that we possess God and can rest in Him.

In this vein, Aquinas adds that although in the abstract joy follows upon charity, it is also true that practically speaking sorrow can decrease joy. He mentions three types of sorrow that take away from our enjoyment of God: past sins, current evils and the delay of beatitude. Though we possess God now if we are in a state of grace, yet we know that could lose Him, as could others whom we love. Therefore, we grieve over this possibility; we grieve over our own sins, which could keep us from salvation; we grieve over other’s sins, especially when they choose ways of life that separate them from God; and we grieve over the length of this life, since we would rather be dissolved and be with Christ and thus be freed from anxieties regarding definitive union with God.

These types of sorrow are normal and even healthy in the life of a Christian; although union with God through grace should be sufficient to give us considerable joy, our fears over the state of our souls and those of others causes us grief. In a way, if we did not have such sorrow, we could question whether we had any charity in us.

The saints suffered and wept over the sins of others and also were concerned about their own salvation, despite their sanctity. Greater charity causes greater grief, for once one knows how beautiful God is, the loss of Him strikes us as all the more painful to consider.

But there is a sorrow that is not good, that often invades our lives, a sorrow we must fight against, a sorrow that both Augustine and Aquinas say is the cause of all sin: inordinate love of self. We love ourselves and our will so much that we would rather be sorrowful than be joyful; we choose to let grief reign in us because our lives are not what we wish they were. Augustine writes in the *City of God* that “two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self.” Inordinate love of self, in which we consider all things in the world according to our own whims, eventually leads to contempt of God. We choose to ignore Paul’s admonition to rejoice because things are not going our way; life is hard; we are misunderstood and unappreciated. These things are true: life is hard and it is getting harder; we are misunderstood and unappreciated. But “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!” He has rescued us from the power of darkness and has called us into His kingdom. We should rejoice, then.

What does this mean or what does this look like? I am going to do what I never do—tell a story. When Dom John and I were studying theology in Rome, we lived with the Norbertines, a medieval order of Augustinian canons. Once or twice a year their abbot would come and take the seminarians away on a trip, and one year we were permitted to go with them to Venice. It was February, and Mardi Gras season, and everyone was in costume. We stayed there for about four days. One afternoon, as we were walking through the city, as we crossed a bridge, a young woman, wearing a characteristic Venetian costume, moved close to me and said, “*Laudetur Jesus Christus.*” That is joy—I was very unhappy in Rome, and not much happier in Venice, we were surrounded by crowds of worldly people doing worldly things, who seemed to care little for God, and yet there was someone who loved Him enough to share it with me. I smiled and laughed happily and I have never forgotten her.

This, then, is how we choose joy. The world is going to hell, but the Kingdom of God is growing in number and in holiness. Every time we get a glimpse of it, however small, we should rejoice, for the glory of God increases with each movement of love towards Him. We love Him, and so we rejoice when He is loved by others. That is our privilege when we come together each Sunday and holyday for Mass: we see the kingdom of God, we see others striving for holiness, for all who come here come by choice; there is an urgency to the faith of all who pass through these doors. And so when we see one another, we should rejoice: God’s kingdom is coming to pass on earth as it is in heaven.

Even when we leave this place, we should also be open to joy: anywhere we see the love of God manifest, anyone whom we meet who loves Christ and strives to serve Him, people moving towards virtue and away from vice, the various beauties of nature which lead us to their Creator—we should allow these things to make an impression on us, to break through in us and let the virtue of charity spill over into joy. It is like someone saying “*Laudetur Jesus Christus.*” in a crowd; it is learning that whereas you thought you were like Elijah, the only one left to worship the true God, there are others like you, living for the Lord Jesus in the midst of a world that has rejected Him.

A final point: as Catholics, our joy is grounded in the Blessed Sacrament; it is God dwelling among us. What is more, every time we receive the Eucharist, we also receive an increase in charity, and thus in joy. Today let us make an effort to rejoice over this sacrament and the intimacy with Christ that it gives. And then may that joy work its way into all the darkness that we face each day, giving light to our souls and others whom we meet. May it also grow into the joy that we shall know in heaven, when we shall no longer fear the loss of God, where we shall experience the fullness of His love, in the world to come, in the New Jerusalem.