



**Third Sunday of Advent  
December 16, 2012 C**

♪ GAUDETE SUNDAY ♪  
**Reflections on What Helps and Hinders Us  
from Living Life Joyfully**

The third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete Sunday*. *Gaudete* is the Latin word for "Let us rejoice." Today's first and second readings have a clear spirit of joy in them. In the first reading, the prophet Zephaniah tells the downcast Israelites to "*shout for joy*" and "*be glad and exult with all your heart.*" Why? Because the Lord God is in their midst and will help them overcome their difficulties. In the second reading, Paul is writing from prison to a community also experiencing difficulties, yet he exhorts the Philippians to "*rejoice in the Lord always.*"

Despite these exhortations, all too many people do not experience joy. I read somewhere that one of the purposes of purgatory is to prepare us to *enjoy* heaven. Most of us seem to have a limited capacity for joy. So when we die, we need to be cleansed of whatever hinders us from attaining the everlasting joys of heaven.

The great Medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, once said: "*No one can live without joy. That is why one deprived of spiritual joys must turn to carnal joys.*"

The mystic Julian of Norwich once wrote: "*The greatest joy we can give Almighty God is to live life joyfully.*" The late Fr. Bernard Haring wrote: "*The spirit of joy is an infallible sign that one is a Christian.*" The worst advertisement for Christianity is a gloomy, pessimistic face. The philosopher Nietzsche once said: "*If you Christians want me to believe in your redeemer, you will have to look more redeemed.*" Someone else has said: "*If you are happy, you ought to notify your face.*"

Patricia Sanchez writes: "*True joy cannot be found in a beautifully wrapped gift, however extravagant it might be, or in a Christmas bonus, however generous, or at a Christmas party, however festive, or in the myriad of twinkling lights and decorations that festoon our homes, shops and places of business. On the contrary, the true joy that comes solely from the experience of God's presence cannot be simulated by any other source.*"

As followers of Christ, our joy must be rooted in the belief and, hopefully, in the *felt experience* that God loves us unconditionally, and that Christ through his

Resurrection has defeated suffering, evil and death. (I say "hopefully, the felt experience of God" but this may not be present. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta had no such experience for 40 years. Yet she believed in the darkness of faith that God loved her.) We will experience suffering, evil and death in this life but these do not have the last word. In the end, if we are connected to Christ, we will defeat all the enemies of life and enter into the joy of the Lord.

***Joy killers—What steals your joy?***

What steals our joy? This is a great question and one worth reflecting on. The following are some possible joy killers.

- *Self-pity.* If we indulge a lot in "poor me" parties, we will not be joyful.
- *Envy.* If we are always looking over our shoulders to see what others have, we will not be joyful.
- *Negative attitude.* If we have a tendency to always look at the glass as half empty, we will not be joyful.
- *Cynicism.* It has been said that one of the temptations of aging is cynicism. Why is this? Perhaps because many of our dreams have not materialized, especially dreams for material and relational success.
- *Unforgiving heart.* If we *deliberately* carry vengeful thoughts and refuse to even pray for the grace to let go of life's hurts, we will never be happy. What else steals your joy?

***What facilitates joyful living?***

Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We can always ask the Holy Spirit to bless us with the gift of joy.

- *Believing in the depths of our heart that God loves us unconditionally.* We may believe this foundational truth in our heads but if we don't believe it in our *hearts*, Christian joy will elude us.
- *Accepting our current reality.* While we should try to change what *needs* to be changed and *can* be changed in our lives—be it work, relationships, health, faith, etc.—some things cannot be changed, e.g., certain physical disabilities, our past, our losses, the aging process, etc. Each day, we have the *choice* to either accept our present reality or to constantly reject or deny it. For example, we can accept and live with the fact that our childhood was unhappy; that some people took advantage of us and betrayed us; that we had an accident that left us physically

disabled, etc.—or we can daily hate our reality. We do not have to love the painful things that happened to us, but we need to come to terms with them or we will never experience joy. Rather, we will forever be miserable.

In her book *The Strength Within*, Barbara Hanson talks about how she came to terms with a car accident that left her a paraplegic at the age of nineteen. It is a most inspiring story of how one person came to terms with an event that had long-term consequences. Again and again, Hanson says that while we may not have much control over the circumstances of our lives, we do have control over our *attitude* toward those circumstances. It is our attitude that will make or break us. We often see two people with very similar set of circumstances, e.g., a particular illness, loss of a loved one, abuse in childhood. While one may be filled with bitterness and resentment over his/her adversity, the other may have come to terms with his/her circumstances and is living life with a reasonable amount of joy and peace. So coming to terms with our past misfortunes—failures, hurts, accidents, bad experiences—will most certainly lead us to live life more joyfully, whereas failing to deal with them will, most certainly, hinder us from experiencing the joys of life.

The "acceptance attitude" also comes into play when we are dealing with other frustrations, e.g., the aging process, and our own and other people's limitations. Joy will always elude us if we are constantly trying to *control* and *change* others. Likewise, joy will be lacking if we are *perfectionists* and have little or no acceptance of our own limitations. Surely, we should change what we can and always try to improve our performance, but that goal must be balanced with a basic acceptance of what is imperfect today in ourselves, in others, and in our life situation.

- *Accepting the past as history, the future as mystery, and the present as a gift.* We can't change the past. All we can do is change our *attitude* toward the past. We can't control the future. Our best-made plans may blow up in pieces any moment. But we can place the future in God's hands, trusting all will be well. Preoccupation with the past or future hinders us from enjoying the gift that is today. So we must learn to let go of the past, trust the future, and live today as fully and joyfully as we can.

- *Taking time to go within to reflect and pray.* True happiness and joy are found within and not in other people and the external world. Best-selling author, Fr. John Powell, S.J., says, "*Happiness is an inside job.*" Pope Benedict believes that joy flows from living in harmony with our God, with others and with God's creation.

- *Taking time to count our blessings.*

- *Giving expression to what we feel passionate about.* Each of us, whether we know it or not, has one or more passions in life (cooking, gardening, painting, fishing, woodworking, etc.). We need to honor our passions by giving them expression.

**A cute but meaningful story.** "Life if unbearable," a man complained to his rabbi. "There are nine of us living in one room. What can I do?"

The rabbi responded, "Take the goat into the room with you." Although the man was incredulous, the rabbi was insistent, "Do as you are told and come back to see me in one week."

A week later, the man returned. "We cannot stand it," he cried. "The goat is filthy, and the smell is unbearable."

"Go home," said the rabbi, "and let the goat out. Come back again in a week."

A week later, the returning man was radiant with joy. "Life is beautiful," he told the rabbi. "We are cherishing every moment. No goat, only nine of us!"

Though they had for a while lost sight of the "joyful" factor in their lives, the experience of the goat reminded the man and his family of their blessings. A temporary dose of suffering had helped them to regain perspective.

### ***Practical advice from John the Baptist***

Despite his weird dress and diet, John the Baptist gave very down-to-earth advice to those who sought it. He said that whoever had extra food and clothing should share. He told soldiers not to bully others. If John were around today, what advice might he give us? The following are a few sample questions and answers:

- **"I'm in business; what about me?"** Be responsible both to the job and to the people who work with you. Be fair both to your boss and to the clients. Let your job be a genuine service to others, not just a matter of profit and loss.

- **"I'm working at home; what does God want from me?"** Keep in mind that your work is worthwhile, even if it's not paid and pensionable. And do it cheerfully with love.

- **"I'm unemployed and very down; what do you say to me?"** Keep trying to find a job. Be helpful when you can and to whomever you can. Try to look at the positive side of having so much free time and make the best you can of it.

- **"I'm a retired person; what about me?"** Enjoy your retirement. Relax but also use some of your time to pray more and to serve others in your community who are needy.

Have a blessed week,

