

Rejoice in the Lord!

Third Sunday of Advent - Is 61:1-2A, 10-11 / Lk 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54

1 Thes 5:16-24 / Jn 1:6-8, 19-28

Ave Maria Catholic Church, December 17, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

The liturgy for the third Sunday of Advent, also called “*Gaudete* – Rejoice” Sunday, invites us to intensify our expectations. Jesus, the source of our joy, is coming, and He is near!

This is what St John the Baptist announces in the passage of the gospel we read today: “*There is one among you whom you do not recognize . . . whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie,*” (John 1: 26-27). There is one among us! That means He is already with us! Perhaps we do not recognize Him yet as we should. We know that our advent is still incomplete, and the source of our joy is nearer!

We are invited to rejoice! However, we must ask: what is the source of our joy? We must ask this question honestly, knowing that sometimes, we look for fulfillment and joy in the wrong place.

In his Encyclical Letter, “*Gaudete in Domino – On Christian Joy,*” written in 1975, Pope St. Paul VI explained: “*Technological society has succeeded in multiplying the opportunities for pleasure, but it has great difficulty in generating joy. For joy comes from another source. It is spiritual. Money, comfort, hygiene, and material security are often not lacking; and yet boredom, depression, and sadness unhappily remain the lot of many.*”

Almost fifty years later, technology, money, comfort, hygiene, and material security have increased, and we still do not realize that they are not the true source of our joy. We may have all the pleasures of the world, all the comforts of the world, all the material securities of the world, and all the financial resources of the world and still be unhappy and frustrated.

There is a fundamental reason for that unhappiness and frustration. Our hearts were not made for them. As St. Augustine declares in his book of Confessions, our hearts were created to rejoice in the Lord, and they will be restless until they find their rest in Him!

To rejoice in the Lord, our hearts must be educated! They must be formed! With patience and humility, but at the same time with courage and determination, our hearts must learn to love what is truly fulfilling and joyful!

This education and preparation of the hearts must be done first on a natural level. We must learn to enjoy what is good, true, and beautiful. We must rejoice in what is authentically human according to God’s plan of creation.

Pope St. Paul VI indicated that we need a patient effort to teach people “*How to savor in a simple way the many human joys that the Creator places in our path: the elating joy of*

existence and of life; the joy of chaste and sanctified love; the peaceful joy of nature and silence; the sometimes austere joy of work well done; the joy and satisfaction of duty performed; the transparent joy of purity, service and sharing; the demanding joy of sacrifice . . . Christian joy presupposes a person capable of natural joy. These natural joys were often used by Christ as a starting point when He proclaimed the kingdom of God."

We must educate our hearts to rejoice in what is good, true, and beautiful. Our Christian joy builds on it. We must learn to rejoice in what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, and worthy of praise, (Phil 4:8). Then, Christ will lift our natural joys to a much higher level.

Christ is the joy of our hearts, announced by the prophets. In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed: *"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,"* (Isaiah 61:10).

Christ is the joy of our hearts, praised by the Blessed Virgin Mary at his coming. As we sang today in the responsorial canticle: *"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, . . . For he has remembered his promise of mercy,"* (Lk 1:46-54).

Christ comes to fulfill the desire of our hearts: complete and everlasting happiness! That is to live in God's kingdom. The blessed will rejoice in God's kingdom for all eternity.

Now, the joy of living in God's love begins here below. The joy of God's kingdom can be tasted here on earth. Jesus comes to proclaim, establish, and share God's kingdom with us. However, to accept God's kingdom, our hearts must be purified.

In today's second reading, St. Paul teaches: *"Rejoice always . . . Do not quench the Spirit . . . Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil,"* (1 Thes 5:16-23). Our hearts must learn that there is no joy in doing what is evil. There might be excitement, but definitely, there is no joy.

Christian joy demands retaining what is good and refraining from every kind of evil. But Christian joy goes even further. Are not the *Beatitudes* the maxims of God's kingdom? In the *Beatitudes*, Jesus defines the life of the blessed here on earth. Those who belong to God's kingdom are blessed or truly happy, from the Greek *makarios*, from the Latin *beati*. Who are the blessed? Jesus declares:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven," (Mt 5:3-12).

The unmistakable characteristic of Christian joy is that it goes hand in hand with sacrifice and is entirely based on love. Joy is the result of our communion with God. And because we love Him, we are truly blessed, even when we suffer for it. The Christian joy is present even amid trials and sacrifices.

Let us rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near! Our joy should be known to all. Amen.