

GAUDETE SUNDAY
13th December 2015

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice.”

– *Philippians 4:4.*



Even if you were not here at the retreat yesterday to hear Canon Tanner’s explanation of the liturgy of Advent, you do not need to be an expert in matters liturgical to notice that something is different about today. The sombre purple of penance has lightened to a festival rose; flowers have returned to the altar; the dulcet tones of the organ make themselves heard once again. And so you can easily understand that the Church takes seriously the injunction of St. Paul from today’s Epistle: “Rejoice in the Lord always!” In effect, this third Sunday of Advent brings with it the unmistakable note of joy.

Therefore, having now passed the midway point of Advent, it would be a good time for us to pause to consider what Christian joy really is – and also what can threaten it. At the Last Supper, the Lord said to his disciplines, “your heart shall rejoice; and your joy no man shall take from you” (John 16:22). This shows us that true Christian joy has deep roots in our souls, but it also suggests that the enemy of our souls might try to take this joy from us, or else to substitute a counterfeit joy, since a few verses earlier the Lord said, “you shall lament and weep, but the world shall rejoice” (v. 20). True Christian joy, therefore, cannot be confused with worldly happiness or, as they might say today, “self-fulfilment.”

Christian joy is a fruit of charity. St. Paul tells us that joy is a fruit of the Holy Ghost (*cf.* Galatians 5:22) and he goes on to explain that “the charity of God is poured forth in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost, who is given to us” (Romans 5:5). As long as we are in the state of grace, charity – or love of God above all things – dwells in our soul. But here is the amazing thing about the love of God: “In this is charity: not as though we had loved God, but because *he hath first loved us*, and sent his Son” (I John 4:10). Of course during Advent we are trying to prepare ourselves for this sending of God’s Son; the Incarnation is the greatest sign of God’s love, and so you can see why this is a time of joy.

You might know that many of the ancient pagan philosophers – Plato and Aristotle, for example – went very far on the strength of reason in learning certain natural truths about God. But this notion of a God who loved us enough to come among us was beyond anything they could conceive. Aristotle indeed says explicitly: “when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 7). And yet, by divine charity God does indeed become our friend – or rather, he invites us to

become *his* friend, and by his grace he bridges that infinite gap that separates us.

Although there is nothing familiar or irreverent about this friendship – God is not just our “mate” – nonetheless I wish to insist that Christian charity really is a form of friendship. “You are my friends, if you do the things that I command you. ... I have called you friends: because all things whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you” (John 15:14-15). The love of friendship contains three aspects: first, it is a benevolent love and not a self-interested love; in authentic friendship we seek the good of the one we love and do not simply think about what we can get out of it; secondly, friendship is a *mutual* love; it is not enough for only one party to admire the other; as the spouse in the Canticle says, “I to my beloved, and my beloved to me” (6:2); finally, the friends share something in common.

The mystery of God’s grace – realised most exquisitely in the Incarnation of Christ, when God himself takes on human flesh and says to us, “my delights were to be with the children of men” (Proverbs 8:31) – makes friendship with God possible. It is the third aspect of friendship that helps us to understand: what is the special good that we share in common with our divine friend – or, rather, which he offers to us? At first glance, we might seem to have nothing in common with God. As the Lord asked Job: “Where wast thou when I laid up the foundations of the earth? tell me if thou hast understanding” (38:4). The answer is that God offers to share with us that beatitude – that perfect happiness that comes from possessing the perfect, eternal good – which he himself enjoys. And so St. John says, “we are now the sons of God ... we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2). By nature, this blessed joy belongs to Christ: “now glorify thou me, O Father, with thyself, with the glory which I had, before the world was, with thee” (John 17:5), but by the Incarnation God allows us to join in this joy that belongs to God alone: “as many as received him, he gave them power to be made the sons of God” (John 1:12). You can now understand why St. Peter says that grace makes us “partakers of the divine nature” (II Peter 1:4).

What then does God our friend share with us? “We shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is.” This joy that resounds eternally within the bosom of the Trinity is the joy that God wants to share with us: seeing him and loving him as he sees and loves himself. This is why no created thing can ever bring us joy: they may bring us temporary satisfaction or distraction; they are good when we use them as God intended, but they are only means to an end. Ultimately, each of us must come to experience for ourselves the truth that St. Augustine experienced: “I asked the whole frame of the world about my God; and it answered me, ‘I am not He, but He made me’” (*Confessions*, Book X). Our joy will be full only in heaven when we participate directly in

this vision of God; in this life our joy is in its beginning stage through faith, through grace, through prayer, through the sacraments. That is why Saint Paul tells us that in this life we must be “in carefulness not slothful, in spirit fervent, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope” (Romans 12:11-12).

Before concluding therefore I must warn you about the threat to joy. The word *sloth*, which appears in the list of seven capital vices, is really too insipid to get across the idea here. The Fathers of the Church used a word which is unfamiliar to us but which sums up the combination of laziness, sadness, and disgust which I am trying to explain. This is a vice called *acedia*. It is the vice opposed to the joy that comes from charity and it is one of the subtlest enemies to our spiritual life. Just as joy is the pleasure we take when what we love is present, so sadness is our reaction when something we perceive as evil is present. The problem of *acedia* is that we are saddened by something that is actually good: we feel threatened by God’s invitation; we are repelled by the prospect of the effort needed to grow closer to him. *Acedia* makes us sad about what ought to be our greatest Good: not that we could ever be directly sad about God himself, but we are sometimes sad about the concrete earthly goods we need to renounce in order to love God, who, though he is the supreme Good, seems distant and unattainable. Without using the word, Francis Thompson describes *acedia* very well in his famous poem *The Hound of Heaven* when he says, “though I knew His love Who followèd, Yet was I sore adread/Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside.”

Advent, by reminding us that God is faithful to his promises, gives us the antidote to *acedia*. On the First Sunday of Advent the Church tells us, “it is now the hour for us to rise from sleep. For now our salvation is nearer than when we believed” (Romans 13:11), and at the Midnight Mass of Christmas she will tell us to “live soberly, and justly, and godly in this world, looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:12-13). This is the antidote to *acedia*: God is not an impossible, distant deity, he comes to us not only in the flesh at Bethlehem but daily in the Blessed Sacrament. Never let us give up the fight when the world seems more alluring; do not let the world steal from you your joy, which it is not capable of replacing!