

### Third Sunday of Advent C2024

My friends, today's Sunday has something of special. Look at the candle we have lit; it is rose, different from the color purple we usually associate with Advent. Look at the ornament I wear; it is rose. When the Mass was said in Latin, the third Sunday of Advent was called 'Gaudete Sunday', that is, the Sunday of joy, following the opening words of today's second reading of Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians (4:4): 'Rejoice in the Lord always; I shall say it again: rejoice! Even in the readings of the day, the word joy or rejoice is used six times. Why such a joy?

Remember what I told you on the first Sunday. We are waiting one who has already come and who has to come again. At the same time, he is one who is already present in our midst not only in the Sacraments of the Church, especially in the Eucharist, in the word and in the poor, but also in our hearts. The Lord is now near us more than before. Every day that passes, every year that comes, brings us closer to the second coming of the Lord more than ever. The more we advance in age and get older, the more we move closer to the encounter with the Lord.

For that reason, we have to rejoice and be glad. Our joy is not human, but spiritual. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It has God as its foundation. The godlike joy can be found even in pain and suffering, loss and sorrow. Because God is the source of such a joy, it is unshakable and unchangeable. The existence of such a joy exceeds mere human conditions; its expectation transcends what our mind can imagine; in its fulfillment lays a surprise whose secret of realization is in God alone.

That is the joy we will have when we see the Lord face to face. In today's Gospel, people of John listeners ask: "*What should we to do*" to be ready for the Messiah who is coming? John proposed a couple of things for them to do. It is the same with us as we prepare for our Lord's coming. As we were told last week, there are mountains to be levelled and valleys to be filled in; there are winding ways to be straightened and rough roads to be smoothed over.

But much more important than all these, we have to prepare ourselves for the fire of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. That means that we have to open our hearts to the purifying fire of God's special love for us. We have to believe that God is indeed our Father and that he delights in us. Without this awareness we will neither care to clean up our lives nor have the energy to do so. And this is what Advent is all about: making peace with God and our fellow human beings. Here, Advent takes a practical dimension. How?

Look at what John told his compatriots. First, it is striking to see that in this Gospel John the Baptist does not propose them some spiritual exercises to do, but rather very concrete acts without which their conversion toward the Lord would have no sense at all. By focusing on such concrete acts like sharing, justice and peace, John wants to tell us that Christian faith has a practical dimension that should not be dissociated from a spiritual one. Our Lord renders it in a very simple way when he says that the greatest of the commandments is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves, and these two are just one.

What are, then, the points of conversion the Baptist proposes? "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person none": Sharing. In our culture, sharing is problematic. What counts is only "my problems, my concerns, my desires, my joy, my

family, my children". Is there anything we can do to share in this Christmas feast with others, especially the needy and the poor? How can we live our joy only in the solitude of our own home? Let us free our joy so that it becomes contagious; let us share it with those who are in sorrow and needs.

To the tax collectors who came to him John said: "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed". The problem here is about justice and honesty. Who among us has never taken advantage of the poor, the needy, the weak, the ignorant and the unprotected? How much are we severe towards the mistakes and sins of others than for ourselves? What about the immigrant who do not have the same rights than we do? Can we do something this Advent Season?

To the soldiers, John said: "Do not practice extortion, do not accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages". Here, it is all about truthfulness, sincerity and envy. Who among us has never told a lie, even if it is a white or small lie? How often are we content with what we have? I suspect that Christmas will leave a hole in some wallets or bank accounts. Can we do something?

Now, let me make an observation, before asking a question. If you have paid attention, you would have realized that, as different groups of people came to John looking for counseling, he did not propose to them to quit their job or their state of life in order to look for holiness. On the contrary, he wanted them to work out their salvation by doing what is right within their job and state of life. Consequently, our daily business, our undertaking, our family ... are the place of our sanctification and holiness. We cannot serve God better than where we are, in our daily life. It is an illusion to believe that it is only in convent or monastery that someone can become a saint or holy.

Now let me come to the question I wanted to raise: Why is John the Baptist so preoccupied with the practical way of life? John the Baptist wants to draw our attention to the fact that Christian faith has not only a spiritual dimension, but also a material dimension. These two cannot be separated without undermining the integrity of our faith. That is why anytime we neglect to care for fellow human beings in need, we miss the opportunity to live up to the integrity of our faith.

Finally, although John the Baptist was important for the people, he did not give himself undue worth than what he had. He affirmed clearly that he was not the Christ, that is, the Messiah. He was humble. By doing so, he teaches us humility and the recognition of our merits and limits. Today more than ever, we need people who are humble, especially among those who have various ministries inside the Church. This is an important point, because there is a tendency of boasting a lot because of our gifts, talents and skills. John the Baptist challenges us so that we do not appropriate unduly the merits and the glory of our Lord Jesus as though they are ours.

**Zephaniah 3: 14-18a; Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 10-18**



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