



Praying Advent with Pope Francis'



Part I:

A Joy Ever New, A Joy Which is Shared

Advent can be a great time to reflect upon first part of the message of Pope Francis' exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*. Though the exhortation is long, it is easy to pick up any part of it and find fruit for prayer. This resource offers several quotations from the beginning of the document, to help us begin to taste the blessings of this message for our Advent prayer.

The heart of the what Pope Francis says is contained in the opening sentence of the exhortation:

The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. [1]

The Holy Father continues:

Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come. [1]

Pope Francis is sharing with us the Good News itself and encouraging us to be filled with the joy which can come from believing the Gospel. It is this joy, which will change the way we live and the way we are perceived by others, which will animate our sharing of the Gospel with others.

Pope Francis begins by warning us about how our culture impacts us and robs us of our joy and our compassion: ***The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ. [2]***

Then, Pope Francis offers the remedy for this danger - our personal relationship with Jesus:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord". [Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete in Domino (9 May 1975)] [3]

The Holy Father suggests this prayer: **Now is the time to say to Jesus: “Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace”.** [3]

Pope Francis makes it clear that we can trust that our Lord wants to embrace us:

God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. [3]

The Pope acknowledges that joy is not always easy, but it is the source of our healing and life:

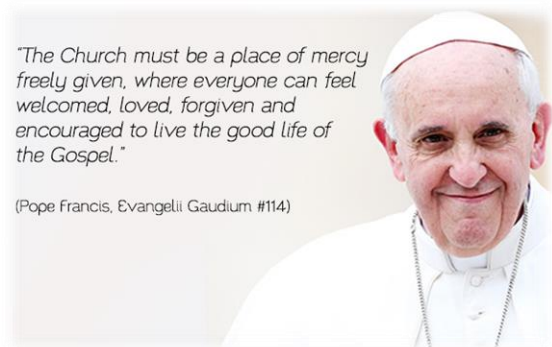
I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress: “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness... It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:17, 21-23, 26).[6]

He says that faith filled joy is not an intellectual conclusion, but the result of a personal encounter with God's love: **Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?**

[8]

So, with this first part of the exhortation, we have much for our reflection at this point of Advent. We can renew our desire for this personal encounter with our God, who is loving and merciful. The joy of that experience of love can begin to soften and warm our hearts again, and it can open the way to loving others differently.

We can let his light, his mercy, his peace into our hearts, into any area of darkness. And, we can experience how we are being invited to shine this light into other areas of our life - especially among those closest to us.



**“The time of Advent ... returns us to the horizon of hope, a hope that does not disappoint because it is founded on the Word of God.
A hope that does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints!
He is faithful!”**