

Advent 3: Mary our Model of Christian Joy!
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In the midst of extensions of Provincial restrictions on our Catholic worship we need an injection of holy JOY!! It seems to me that sickness and death are less of an impairment of our mission as Church than the suppression of Mass in person. I'm hanging on to the promise of the Lord that the gates of Hades will not prevail and the joy of Jesus is crucial at this moment in history! It's Gaudete Sunday.... from the Entrance Antiphon "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice... the Lord is near". The Advent candle is pink not purple today; less penitential and more joyful. C.S. Lewis said "Joy is never in our power, although pleasure is. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted joy, if both were in his power, would exchange it for all the pleasure in the world".

We'll look to Mary the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of God for her vocation and example of JOY based on the Responsorial Canticle we call her Magnificat! Expectant Mary has made a visit to her cousin Elizabeth who is herself expecting her baby that husband Zechariah will reluctantly call John; he'll grow into a man known as the Baptist, and lose his head for love of God. At the sound of Mary's voice, and in the presence of the fetal Jesus, preborn John leaps joyfully in his Mother's womb. Elizabeth expresses these words which become the central prayer of the Rosary: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb". In response Mary exclaims "My Soul Magnifies the Lord and my spirit REJOICES in God my savior." It's the beginning of the Magnificat and is a portion of Scripture that is prayed every evening by the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours.

The first secret of Mary's Joy, and ours, is her knowledge that God loves her.... Just listen to her song "for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.... For the Lord has done great things for me!"

I have real Advent joy at home in the decorations coming out; the Christmas music like Handel's Messiah and James Taylors's Christmas CD, I love the memories my Oxford Xmas coffee mug brings, the candles Advent wreath which we light with a song each evening, and the display of our nativity scene. Last year Pope Francis received a crèche scene called "Let us let Mum rest". "There is Our Lady asleep and Joseph putting the Babe to sleep. How many of you husbands and wives have to take turns during the night because the baby is crying, crying, crying. Let Mum rest is the tenderness of a family, of a marriage." How tender and beautiful are Pope Francis' reflections on that first Christmas.

The second secret of Mary's Joy, and ours, is her knowledge of God's dwelling within us through the gift of sanctifying grace. Oh yes, Mary is FULL of grace, that is true from the moment of her conception, and her womb is uniquely full of the grace of God incarnate. But we too have God with us... Emmanuel... that's the whole Christmas story.

A man in Washington DC was dying of AIDS in a hospice run by St. Mother Teresa's Sisters. By his admission he'd hated religion all his life and even cursed the sisters who

bathed him, cleaned up his bodily waste, and toward the end spoon fed him. He knew nothing of the Catholic faith except what he saw in those sisters and eventually asked to see a Priest. He asked about baptism and the priest, knowing his hostility was taken aback and asked why. The man said because the Sisters have such unshakeable JOY which I've never known and when I ask them why, they say it's "Jesus who lives in them". "Give me baptism that I might have this Jesus too". He received the sacraments of Christian initiation and died Easter morning.

My Joy (not always pleasure) in Vocation Why aren't there more people wanting to give their whole lives to the service of Christ in the Church?

God is calling many, but too few are listening! Why?
Perhaps preoccupied with self-absorption rather than adoration of God!
I wonder if worry about our future replaces abandoned TRUST in God!
Could a factor be fear of commitment rather than FEAR (AWE) of the Lord!
Are we captured by a culture of entitlement rather than living a culture of service!

We must have an openness and joy at seeing a member of our family called to serve Christ as a priest or religious, rather than dubious suspicion and discouragement.

The third secret of Mary's Joy is her trust in Divine Providence. In this Magnificat she quotes the Old Testament book of Samuel and recalls the fidelity of God to his people. Her trust is in God, NOT in a particular experience of God.. a quite modern confusion, an emphasis upon 'experience' that really means trusts in self... "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation". It's not all about me but it is all about God! As St. Teresa of Calcutta would say to her daughters... "Your Life is NOT all about you! Praise the Lord for that!