

*“Brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: Rejoice!”* Today we celebrate “Gaudete” Sunday, which marks a turning point in Advent. During the first two weeks, on Sundays and even more during the daily masses, we have focused on the end times, not in a morbid way but in a thoughtful, pensive way, remembering the purpose for which we live and the end to which we strive. Having prepared our hearts by reflection, we now turn to contemplate the coming of the Lord, not simply in his nativity at Bethlehem, but more particularly his coming into the stables of our hearts to begin their transformation.

The word Gaudete comes from the Latin meaning “Rejoice.” We see this call to joy in Luke’s parables about God’s forgiveness and mercy – the shepherd who finds a lost sheep, the woman who finds a lost coin and the father who finds a lost son – in all three cases what we hear is ‘Rejoice with me because what was lost has now been found’. The Gospel is calling us to a very particular kind of rejoicing, not simply happiness but the true joy of a heart that has found God. This is the joy and happiness that every human heart seeks, the joy it was created for and the joy it lost through its sin, the joy that comes again when we have found Christ in our hearts. Christianity is a joyful religion, but it is not a soft religion, for Christianity is not about feeling good about ourselves, Christianity is about knowing truth. This means that Christianity is also concerned about knowing the truth about the disorder that is caused in our souls by our sins. We must know this truth about the disorder of sin before we can possess the true joy of being forgiven for our sins. The greatest darkness of human ignorance and oppression of the human heart prevails precisely where the commandments of God are not known, are not allowed to be taught and therefore cannot bring about true healing. It is the forgiveness of our sins, not the denying of them, that brings true healing, and therefore true joy. This is why Christ came, to give us this joy through the

forgiveness of our sins and the healing of our broken and wounded hearts. This is the joy we turn to on this Gaudete Sunday.

St Augustine once said “our hearts are restless until they rest in you, Oh Lord” and no truer words were ever spoken. No person, no situation, no trial or tribulation can ever replace that particular joy that comes from the possession of Christ. But if we seek our happiness in created things or in persons or in human institutions, we are doomed to a life of unhappiness and misery. The joy that the human heart craves is the joy that can only be filled by Christ. The reason that so many people find this time of year stressing or melancholy is that they have placed their trust in created things that can never bring true fulfillment. The season of Christmas is meant to be a genuinely joyful encounter with Christ, an encounter that is so full of promise and richness that the world seeks to crush our joy by overwhelming us with emotional and material baggage. This is a time when the evil one attacks us more severely than normal because he knows the joy that Christ wants to pour into each and every human heart, and the evil one knows that if we were to allow ourselves to truly experience the joy of Christ, we would never, ever turn back to the tawdry things of this world. The people of Israel were filled with expectation and were asking in their hearts if John the Baptist could be the Christ because the new the time of the messiah was near. We too are filled with expectation because we know our messiah is near so let us also be filled with joy and rejoice because our salvation is near and may Mary, Mother of Truth, Mother of Joy, guide us on our journey into the deeper mysteries of Advent and Christmas. As she silently and faithfully awaited the fulfillment of the divine promise, let her now teach us how to faithfully welcome into our hearts the Prince of Peace and source of all joy, Jesus the Christ, our messiah, our savior.