

Third Sunday of Advent reflection by Connecticut Chaplain  
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One of my favorite Masses is our annual Parish Mass of Thanksgiving on Tuesday evening before the Thanksgiving holiday. People write on orange slips of paper what they are thankful for the past year. Then, after Communion, our pastor reads a sampling of what parishioners submitted. One, in particular, caught my attention this year. "At Thanksgiving this year, I am especially thankful to God for bacon and water." This one struck close to home because my three-year-old grandson, Harrison, asked my daughter to write this for him. I mentioned this story to a good friend and mentor, who laughed and said, "Wow, that's theologically significant." Unfortunately, he didn't expound on his comment, which left me thinking about the theological implications of bacon and water for the past two weeks.

Today is Gaudete Sunday, a day of rejoicing in thanksgiving. Pope Francis refers to this Sunday as the "Sunday of Joy" and asks us to reflect on all the good things life has given us rather than all the things we need to do before Christmas. The word Gaudete comes from our entrance antiphon, "Gaudete in Domino semper," which means, "Rejoice in the Lord always." At this halfway point in Advent, we take a break from the penitential nature of the season as we prepare ourselves to welcome the coming Savior with "prayers and supplication and thanksgiving."

Rejoicing has two aspects. The first is the bodily emotion of joy when we experience a feeling of delight. My grandson usually has a big smile when he gets bacon or water because these give him joy. He is allergic to almost everything under the sun, so his diet is quite limited. Most of what he can eat are things children don't typically like, such as milk extracted from peas or broccoli. Bacon makes him feel special, and I'm sure he is not alone in his love for bacon. We all experience temporary joy when we obtain an object of our desire.

However, there is a higher level of joy that comes only from divine love. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God pours love into our hearts and souls. God's unmerited generosity causes us to experience joy far beyond the delight we feel from anything in this world. External factors do not cause this divinely inspired experience but rather a conscious act of free will. We choose to love God and our neighbor in response to

God's love for us. This choice places our soul firmly at rest within the grasp of divine charity, the cause of our joy.

But is it possible for us to rejoice when our life or the world around us is a mess? As always, Jesus' life gives us a model to follow. The Letter to the Hebrews states, "For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame." This statement is quite astounding. As Our Lord faced unimaginable suffering, he persevered because of the joy that lay before him. What was that joy, the object of Jesus' desire? His object of desire is our souls. He endured for our salvation and the glory of the Father. An act of will that flowed from divine love.

There is a beautiful spiritual song called "How I Got Over" by Mahalia Jackson. She so beautifully reflects on what it must be like to look back on our lives after passing from this world to heaven. She sings, "Tell me how I made it over, Lord? Had to cry the midnight hour. You know my soul look back and wonder. How I made it over?" She goes on to say, "And then I'm gon' sing somewhere 'round your alter. I'm gonna shout all my troubles over. Lord, I gotta thank You. Thank You for being so good to me." Sometimes joy is hidden, but in hindsight, the real causes for joy throughout our lives are revealed to us in the fullness of time. We can rejoice if we so choose, regardless of life's circumstances.

We rejoice in the face of sorrow, suffering, or despair because our Lord conquers all. In today's Gospel, John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one or should they look for another. Jesus instructs them to tell John all they have heard and seen. "The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them." The first four demonstrate our Lord's power over all physical ailments, followed by his victory over death. And finally, his ability to overcome social injustice. Yes, he is the one: the object of our desire, the cause of our joy.

When we exercise our will to love God and our neighbor in imitation of Christ, we become an instrument of God's grace. As Knights and Dames of Malta, your faithful witness to defend the faith, serve the poor and the sick, and practice the virtue of charity brings the joy of the Gospel to others. I know many in our Order come with troubled

hearts and personal challenges, yet we are called to place our self-interests aside and strive to give glory and praise to God through corporal works of mercy.

So, what is the theological significance of water and bacon? Water is readily apparent. The waters of baptism cleanse our souls of original sin. We become adopted daughters and sons of God, heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. Baptism begins our supernatural life, an extraordinary gift of God's grace through the Holy Spirit. We become a new creation, configured more perfectly to Christ, and commissioned to bring the light of Christ to the world.

Bacon is a little more challenging. Perhaps, you heard the old joke, "In an egg and bacon breakfast, what's the difference between the chicken and the pig?" The chicken is involved, but the pig is committed! There is no question concerning Jesus' commitment to humanity. He entered the human condition with all its prosperity and poverty, triumphs and tribulations, and joys and sorrows. He loved us so much that he gave us his very life so that we would have the hope of eternal life. Jesus' commitment is timeless, without a beginning or end. May we remain forever committed to him through the intercession of the most holy Virgin of Philermo, St. John the Baptist, Blessed Gerard, and all the saints. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near."