

Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2018
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 3:10-18

In a few minutes, David Donnelly will be baptized. On Friday, his godmother and I were in the sacristy and Jessica asked me, “What does this color mean?” She was referring, of course, to the rose vestments she was using to veil the chalice in preparation for this morning’s Mass, and I gave her a brief explanation. This morning I’ll give a somewhat longer one.

Both Lent and Advent are in their own ways penitential seasons; and in the middle of each season, we take a one-day break from our sorrow over our sins in order to rejoice. We heard in our Epistle, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, ‘Rejoice’.” But the Sunday takes its name, “Gaudete Sunday,” from the Introit, in which this same lesson from St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is quoted, and which our choir just chanted so beautifully.

This color, therefore, represents penitence shot through with joy, for it is on this Sunday that we recall both the trials and the simultaneous rejoicing of our Lord Jesus Christ, a reality prefigured in St. John the Baptist and reflected in the life of St. Paul, the Apostle. Jesus rejoiced in His triumph over death, foretelling His resurrection from the dead, even as He forewarned His disciples that He would be crucified. We see a similar pattern in the lives of St. John and Paul.

In the sermon St. John the Baptist preached in our Gospel this morning, he promises the redemption of the just, even as he predicts the damnation of the unjust. This reckoning is good news, for it speaks of a future in which all people will receive their due, a condition that cannot be attained in a world of sin. He knew of what he spoke, since he was able to give this hopeful message while preparing for his untimely end, to be murdered because he had rebuked an unjust ruler, Herod the King of Judea.

St. Paul, we know, wrote to the Philippians from prison, from whence he would eventually be taken during the Neronian persecution and then beheaded outside the walls of the city of Rome. Still, the letter to the Philippians is St. Paul’s most joyful, his powerful testament to his faith in the resurrection from the dead. He had nothing to fear, for, he said, “To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Were he to lose this life, he asserted, he would gain eternal life in heaven with Jesus, face to face. So his trials were as nothing compared to the glory yet to be revealed.

This pattern that we see in the lives of the prophet, John the Baptist, our Savior Jesus Christ, and St. Paul the Apostle, is to be our pattern, as well. We pray what we believe, and on Gaudete Sunday I wear what we believe. I see that others in the congregation have attired themselves in this same spirit. Even as we face our various trials caused by sin, our own and those of others, we rejoice, because we can look forward to a day when sin will be no more.

But there is another reason we rejoice. We rejoice even in a penitential season, this season of expectation, because we cannot forget all that we have already received. Whatever tribulation we experience cannot take away what Jesus has given us in the baptism that St. John the Baptist promised.

We have received forgiveness and been infused with the gifts of faith, hope, and charity, intangible realities that are expressed daily in concrete ways. All of the martyrs, including our own patron, St. Thomas More, witness to the Truth that even death cannot take away love. Our love persists in the face of death and it continues after we've died, because the communion of saints is real. All this is ours because we have received the Holy Spirit, who gives us wisdom and courage, knowledge and peace, enabling us to persist, whatever the challenge may be.

Yes, we need to see violet to remind us of our need for forgiveness, the necessity of repentance. But the longest the Church will ever have us see it is three weeks in a row. Then we get a break, and rose appears, reminding us that the victory is already won and our sacrifices are united to the Man who rose from the dead. We are not permitted to wallow in our misery, however miserable we might be, for life is stronger than death, and the pull towards righteousness more powerful than the temptation to sin. So even though I've never baptized anybody while wearing rose before today, it's entirely fitting that the Donnellys have given us the opportunity.