

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice” (Phil 4:4). Last night, I spoke with a man who had been diagnosed with cancer. He truly believed what Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians: “Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God” (Phil 4:6). He worked with his doctor and confidently asked for a cure. Amidst radiation treatments, he asked the Lord to be with him and he was confident the Lord heard and responded to his prayers and petitions. He felt the presence of two guardian angels every step of the way through his treatment. He did not feel he had been singled out for a miracle. God came to save all, especially those who do not know him. He came for the poor and the downtrodden, the lost and the forsaken. Jesus was anointed “to bring glad tidings to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18).

This man also shared some advice he received in prayer. ‘The Lord will give me whatever I want, but I am not to ask for wealth, I am not to use this gift from God selfishly.’ He is by no means free from struggle or pain in his life. He understands that good can come out of his own suffering and shared another story of just how God had used his pain to provide healing for others.

“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice” (Phil 4:4). When Saint Paul expressed this great joy, he was imprisoned and in danger of death. He was under house arrest for preaching Christ, but he was not weighed down by this. Paul rejoiced because he was doing God’s work and that brings an inner peace. Paul encourages us to rejoice in proclaiming Christ for this will result in true deliverance... freedom from sin, freedom from despair, freedom from death, freedom for eternity. Paul is fully committed to Jesus so that whether he lives or dies, Christ will be magnified in his body. “God indeed is my savior; I am confident and unafraid. My strength and my courage is the LORD, and he has been my savior” (Is 12:2).

John the Baptist is a voice in the wilderness preaching repentance. He understands that sin causes much suffering in this world. John knows sin weighs us down and through his baptism of repentance, he wants to do his part to help people rejoice in the Lord always. When we are truly sorry for our sins, when we confess them and make a firm amends to do better with the grace and mercy of God, God is with us every step of the way.

“Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.” Like the man with cancer, we can seek a doctor of the soul, a priest in confession and confidently ask for a cure. Let me share a story from a man who talked about his confession publicly: “After growing distant in his faith, [he], returned to confession after a quarter century. He didn’t go just anywhere for the sacrament: he stopped at the famous Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.” He had a little bit of anxiety but was determined to go to confession. He explained: “I felt the love of Jesus pouring out onto me. There was never a moment that that [anxiety] was founded.” “Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice” (Phil 4:4). In the words of the man rather than Saint Paul, now “when I go to confession, I’ll walk out and I just feel the joy of being given that fresh start, that chance to start anew.”<sup>i</sup>

“Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.” Some people avoid the sacrament of confession lamenting, ‘How can I ask for forgiveness for the same sin over and over again.’ Pope Francis reminds us, the Lord never tires of offering forgiveness, it is we who tire of asking for his mercy. One woman shared her story this way. “I felt a lot of just defeat. Thinking, ‘I have fallen so many times...What’s the point in trying? I’m just going to fall again.’” Today, she recognizes confession as “such a great place of renewal” where she can go to “find peace” and “begin again.”<sup>ii</sup>

“Sin is like a dark veil that covers our face and prevents us from seeing ourselves and the world clearly. The forgiveness of the Lord removes this veil of shadow and darkness and gives us new light.”<sup>iii</sup> Advent is a beautiful time to let the light of Christ in approaching the Lord and asking for his mercy. “Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice” (Phil 4:4).

Mercy does not cease amid the coronavirus. In fact, there is a greater need today than ever. As a worldwide community we have suffered a lot. Tensions and frustrations seem to plague us even more virulently than the virus. How do we restore the balance with God at the center of our lives calling us to forgive those who trespass against us? We pray for an end to the virus, but we need to do more in turning our hearts and minds over to God. “Mercy does not cease ... we all need the closeness and the ‘caress’ of Jesus, which also materializes in a moment of listening and dialogue, capable of opening a perspective of hope and light, in this circumstance of trial.”<sup>iv</sup> For those we have hurt by our own sin, by our anger, by our frustration ... apologize. Say “I am sorry!” Ask the Lord for the grace to be more present in you own heart so you won’t be so easily upset by the imperfections of others.

“The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 5b-7).

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/news/248247/i-felt-the-love-of-jesus-pouring-out-catholics-return-to-confession

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/news/43936/pope-francis-as-humanity-trembles-from-pandemic-let-us-unite-in-prayer

<sup>iv</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/news/44111/vatican-major-penitentiary-mercy-does-not-cease-amid-coronavirus