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St. Pius X Church
Middletown, Connecticut

Joy in a Time of Crisis

Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast. (Isaiah 66:10-11)

Today, the fourth Sunday of Lent, is Laetare Sunday, which takes its name from the first word of the traditional antiphon for the Mass: *Laetare, Jerusalem; et omnes qui diligitis eam, gaudete cum laetitia, qui in tristitia fuistis!* / *Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning!* In a spirit of joy, today is the day when priests get to wear rose, or so-called “pink,” vestments as the entire Church takes a little break from the discipline of Lent, remembering that our penances and sacrifices and works of mercy are all directing us to the great feast of Our Lord’s glorious Resurrection at Easter, which is the source and foundation of our faith, hope, and joy. But in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when our lives and our world have been turned topsy-turvy, we might well wonder what exactly there is to rejoice over. Over being forced to stay at home, whether it be all alone by yourself, or cooped up with your kids or your parents or your brothers and sisters? Over not being able to visit a sick or elderly relative in the hospital or nursing home? Over being out of work and possibly losing your job altogether? Over watching your savings account slowly drain away or the bottom of the stock market fall out? Over the likelihood of missing out on your high school or college graduation? And of course, there’s always the chance of testing positive for the coronavirus or knowing someone who has. The list could go on and on, but the long and the short of it is that there’s more than enough uncertainty and other stuff out there to make us antsy and distressed, to say the least, so that joy is the furthest thing from our mind. This does not and cannot, however, change the fact that as Christians, we are always called to rejoice and to be joyful, no matter what’s going on in the world around us.

But before we can give ourselves over to joy, we must first know what it is and what it isn’t. Joy is not merely another word for happiness; being *joyful* and being *happy* are not the same thing. The op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* David Brooks, in the introduction to his excellent book *The Second Mountain*, explains the difference between happiness and joy as follows: “Happiness can be tasted alone. But permanent joy comes out of an enmeshed and embedded life. Happiness happens when a personal desire is fulfilled. Permanent joy seems to emerge when desire is turned outward for others” (pp. xxxi-xxxii). “Happiness,” he goes on to say a little later, “tends to be individual... Joy tends to be self-transcending. Happiness is something you pursue; joy is something that rises up unexpectedly and sweeps over you. Happiness comes from accomplishments; joy comes from offering gifts. Happiness fades; we get used to the things that used to make us happy. Joy doesn’t fade. To live with joy is to live with wonder, gratitude, and hope” (p. xxxiii). So while it is probably difficult if not altogether impossible to be *happy* when we find ourselves in the midst of a crisis, we can choose to do those things that *enmesh* and *embed* us in the lives of others, that pull us out of ourselves and *turn our desire outward for others*, that instill in us a sense of *wonder, gratitude, and hope*. Once we are in the practice of responding to crises in this way, then joy as a permanent state of being – as opposed to happiness as a fickle and fleeting emotion – begins to take root and bud and blossom and bear fruit in our lives.

In Greek, the word κρίσις (*krisis*) comes from the verb κρίνειν (*krinein*), meaning to separate, to divide, to choose, to judge, to decide, to examine – and so a κρίσις (*krisis*), or crisis as we say in English, is a separating, a choosing, a discerning, an examination, a decision, a judgment; it is a time when we have to make clear distinctions so that we can see what our real options are in order to make a

final choice or decision. A crisis requires us to separate the necessary from the unnecessary, the essential from the non-essential, and then to choose what we consider to be the most necessary and the most essential. A crisis does not allow us to keep our options open – it always demands a decisive commitment to one option or the other.

So in the midst of our current crisis, we would well to ask ourselves if, after taking the reasonable precautionary measures, we place more trust in God than we do in politicians, public health officials, and scientists, who at the end of the day are ordinary human beings just like us. Is our first thought to panic or to pray? Are we just as concerned, if not more so, about our spiritual health as we are about our physical health? (Just think how different our lives and our world would be if we tried to avoid sin as much as we're trying to avoid COVID-19! When we pray the Act of Contrition before receiving absolution, we say that we firmly resolve to amend our lives and *to avoid the near occasions of sin*, which – by the way – is the spiritual equivalent of social distancing and self-imposed quarantine!) And are we so focused on this life that we give little, if any, thought to the life to come? While we're at it, it's also worth considering the possibility that our gracious and merciful Lord just might be giving us this time of crisis – this time of discerning and examining, of deciding and choosing – so that we can judge for ourselves what is important and essential in our own lives and in the life of our nation and of our Church before we stand alone in His holy presence to be judged by Him once and for all.

By God's providential design, the rich spiritual tradition of our Catholic faith gives us all the tools we need in order to cultivate joy even in a time of real crisis. These tools are the familiar ones of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, which is what the holy season of Lent is all about. Lent is the time Mother Church sets aside for practicing more intently those things that will get us through the crises and crosses that life will inevitably throw our way. If we can get into the habit of praying more and harder, and denying ourselves and putting the needs of others before our own – voluntarily and under more or less normal circumstance – then it's a whole lot easier to do these things out of necessity when crisis strikes and so move toward that true and abiding joy even as we find ourselves deprived of momentary happiness. The key to finding joy in any crisis is the Cross of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – because His Cross reminds us that on the other side of the crisis there is resurrection and eternal life.

With the cancellation of Masses throughout most, if not all, of the country, it is becoming ever more challenging to stay connected with the Church and with our faith. But let us never forget that Jesus Himself promised to remain with us until the end of time. He is with us still, each and every step of this difficult way. One of the most powerful prayers that the Church has given us, after the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, is the Rosary of Our Lady. This is a simple and beautiful way of entering more deeply into the mysteries of the life of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and of uniting ourselves more closely to Our Blessed Mother. And we can be sure that the more tightly we cling to her as her fretful and anxious little children, then the more closely she presses us to her Immaculate Heart like the loving and devoted mother that she is and always will be. If we stay close to Mary, then we will stay close to Jesus her Son as well because she is always right there by His side. This is all the more crucial at a time when the faithful are being asked to fast from the Eucharist and when most people are choosing – understandably – not to avail themselves of the Sacrament of Confession out of fear of the coronavirus. Without a doubt, Satan and his demonic minions will be working around the clock to take advantage of this perfect spiritual storm. So in confidence and humility let us turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Our Lady of the Rosary, to her most chaste spouse St. Joseph, the Terror of Demons, and to St. Michael the Archangel. Through their intercession and with the help of God's grace, we will make it through this crisis – and even discover real joy in the process!