

Bishop Edward C. Malesic
Third Sunday of Advent (Dec. 16-17, 2017)

Be joyful, prayerful and thankful

The Baltimore Catechism told many of us the truths of our faith in simple terms. So, the question went: “Why did God make us?” The answer followed: “God made us to know him, to love him and to serve him in this world; and to be happy with him in the next.”

For those of us who remember way back when, I can give you another familiar example from the Baltimore Catechism. The question: “What is a sacrament?” The answer: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ in order to give grace.”

If St. Paul were to write a catechism perhaps he would write something like this: Question: “What is God’s will for us?” He answered the question in our second reading, where he writes: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, this is God’s will for you . . .”

On this Third Sunday of Advent, St. Paul picks us up a bit. He makes us smile with his positive words. We call this Sunday “Gaudete Sunday” — the Sunday of rejoicing.

And so we read Paul’s little catechism where he tells us that God first wants us to “Rejoice always.” We are meant to have a spirit of happiness, a spirit of joy. We are filled with joy once we really believe that God has sent his only Son to be our Savior. That’s what we will celebrate very soon on Christmas. God has come to us in the flesh. He walks with us. We are filled with joy when we know that our sins can be forgiven. When we accept that God wants to forgive our worst sin, we have a weight lifted from us that no one else can lift, except a Savior — and we have one. His name is Jesus. Rejoice always. I say it again, rejoice.

Our religion is not one of doom and gloom. Pope Francis wrote this in his encyclical, the “Gospel of Joy.” “One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into ... sourpusses.” I think that this is the first time the word “sourpuss” was used in an official papal document! The Holy

Father is saying God doesn't want long faces, gloomy dispositions and cloudy outlooks. Yes, we will cry when something bad happens. That is normal. We have reason to be sad and even angry at the injustice around us. We can suffer from depression. But we can rejoice that a better day is always coming — we call it the Kingdom of God. Jesus leads us to it.

Second, St. Paul says that God wants us to pray without ceasing. Jesus said, **“When** you pray say ... Our Father, who art in Heaven.” He did not begin by saying **“If** you pray say ... Our Father, who art in Heaven.” Prayer is presumed to be in the life of every Christian in the same way that two people in love must also communicate with one another.

Yes, this includes saying a morning prayer, an evening prayer, a prayer at mealtime. We need to pray at Mass, not just attend it. We can pray the Rosary or just take walks and pray to God heart-to-heart. But to pray without ceasing is more than saying words and hearing words. To pray without ceasing requires us to become aware that God is always with us — even when we are asleep.

God has given us the blessing of our ability to speak with him. It is his gift to us. We must use it well, use it for ourselves, use it for others. If we fail to pray we are not being good stewards of this great gift — our ability to have God's ear! He is always bending toward us — and so we must bend to Him, because God is with us in this church.

But God is also with us in our work. And for students, God is with you in your classroom. God is with us in our good times and in our bad times. God is with us at the mall, the grocery store and the doctor's office. And he is always available to us — he never leaves us. This is at the heart of what it means to pray without ceasing — to know that God will never abandon us, but neither should we ever abandon him. God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. He lives within us. We have constant access to God.

And third, God wants us to give thanks in all circumstances. When someone refills your water glass — “Thank you.” When someone holds the door for you — “Thank you.” When someone pays you the slightest compliment — “Thank you.” And as we

develop grateful hearts, we begin to notice all the good that God has done for us. He gave me life — “Thank you, God.” He forgives my sins — “Thank you, God.” He knows my name — “Thank you, God.” He walks with me always — “Thank you, God.” I can pray without ceasing — “Thank you, God.”

A person who is thankful recognizes that this day is a blessing. This Mass is a blessing. Our faith is a blessing. That is why we return to church week after week. We come to offer our thanks to God in the Eucharist, a word which means “Thanksgiving.” Blessed are you Lord God of all creation for you have given us the bread and wine that we can offer back to you, and you will give us the Eucharist of Christ’s Body and Blood. Thank you. God is so good to us.

And what about times of adversity? Can we thank God for the hard times too? I think we must if they help us remember that God is always with us.

All of this means that we must test our attitude from time to time. Are we rejoicing, praying and thanking enough? Are we being lifted up high enough? Are we focusing on things above rather than being held down by the things below? Are we letting the light of Christ shine in our darkness? Are we able to say with today’s psalm: “My soul rejoices in my God!”

Sometimes we do become like sourpusses — we stop talking to God, we complain too much. These are symptoms of a spiritual sickness. If we have these symptoms (and most of us do from time to time), then we need to ask God to come back into our lives. We need to open our hearts so that he can enter into our lives. And God will come to us when we ask him. For when the world needed a Savior, one was given to us. And when we need him and ask him, he will come to us too. Jesus always wants to be born again in us, so that we can be born anew in him.

So rejoice always, pray without ceasing and give thanks in every circumstance because one mightier than all of us combined is among us — Jesus, Our Savior, Our Lord. And that is why next week’s birthday celebration of Christmas is so special to us. He is with us.