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St. Anthony of Padua Church, Effingham, Illinois
14 December 2008

The Third Sunday of Advent (A)

My dear young friends, it is to you, especially, that I wish to direct my words this evening. Please, to quote the great Shakespeare, "lend me your ears;" listen to my words this evening.¹

Pope Benedict XVI, whom you know I greatly admire, once said, "My greatest concern is for young people."² My greatest concern, too, is for young people, for you.

Deep within your souls burns the flame of joy, a flame that too often has grown cold in the souls of adults with the passage of years. Guard this flame; guard this powerful and enthusiastic desire for joy. You have been made by the very hand of God; you have been made for joy and nothing less!

I know that among some of you the flame of joy has already been nearly snuffed. The tragedies of death and of divorce, of falling for the lies of the world and other tragedies besides, have sadly already visited many of you, leaving the flame of joy not brightly burning, but dimly flickering. Guard this flame, my friends! Do not let it be extinguished!

¹ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3/2.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address at the Welcome Ceremony and Meeting with the French Authorities of State, 12 September 2008.

You know that my own life, too, has been marked by tragedies that threatened to steal away my joy. When my father died of alcoholism twenty-two years ago, and when my mother died of a brain cancer twenty years ago, my life was all but shattered, as some of yours have nearly been. Somehow, by the grace of God given me in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments, the flame of joy burned gently and quietly in my soul for many years, at times almost unnoticed.

It was an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ I had in high school that gave me back the joy of my youth (cf. Psalm 51:14). With the prophet Isaiah, I came to say, "I rejoice heartily in the LORD, in my God is the joy of my soul" (Isaiah 61:10).

This joy is not some mere emotion that comes and goes with each passing day; it is not some empty smile or laugh. No, it is something much deeper and more abiding than that. It is the knowledge that the Lord has "remembered his promise of mercy" (Luke 1:54), that "he has looked upon his lowly servant" (Luke 1:47). This joy becomes the foundation of life itself; it is a joy that no one and no thing can take away; despite whatever tragedies may come the joy of God's own love remains.

Christian joy thus springs from this certainty: God is close, he is with me, he is with us, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as a friend and faithful spouse. And this joy endures, even in trials, in suffering itself. It does not remain only on the surface; it dwells in the

depths of the person who entrusts himself to God and trusts in him.³

My friends, so many of your energies are spent in the continual search for joy and happiness. At times you search in the true direction and at others you follow the way of falsehood. You do not need me to tell you that there are many people today telling you where you will find this happiness, though they themselves have never found such a joy. Do not listen to them! Do not give in to their lies!

They tell you to turn to the latest technology, to the current trends in fashion or music, to food, drink, sex, drugs and all of the rest. If they have not found the happiness they tell you you will find, why listen to them? In the end, they tell you to search for joy and happiness within yourself. A noble thought, perhaps, but how could we possibly find happiness in ourselves, in we who so very often do not even know what it is we want? No, we are not the cause of our happiness and joy.

If we consider all of these voices, do they not give us at least some measure of joy and happiness? Yes, they do, but what they offer does not last, it is not authentic and true. Christ calls us to something so much greater than these passing things! He calls us not to a life of mediocrity, but to a life of courageous discipleship through which we will find true and

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Angelus* Address, 16 December 2007.

lasting joy. We know that he was born at Bethlehem so that, as he said, "my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11).

I know that you are not afraid of sacrifice and of hard work, but that you are instead afraid of a life devoid of meaning.⁴ This is the fear of every honest person, young or old.

If you ground your life in Christ, in him who is "among you," I assure you, with the firm conviction of my own experience, your life will be filled with meaning, and because it is filled with meaning, it will be full of joy (John 1:26).

Is this not the life for which we all long, the life of purpose and joy? It is this life that Christ will give us. It is this life that will enable us to follow the words of Saint Paul: "Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus" (I Thessalonians 5:16-18).

If you want this joy, this joy that is lasting and true, you must follow the words of Saint Paul: "Do not quench the Spirit... Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil" (I Thessalonians 5:19, 21-22). This is the path of joy, the path of virtue and grace.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, 13 May 2007.

It is possible for us to extinguish and dim the flame of the joy of the Lord given us in Baptism. For this reason, the Apostle says, "Do not quench the Spirit," the gift of grace. We know that "an impure life extinguishes the gift of grace."⁵ If we toss dust or water over a fire the flames are extinguished. It is the same with the life of the Spirit. If sin and impurity are continually tossed upon the flame of joy, if it is not fanned by virtue and grace, it will be snuffed out.

If you consider those of the world who tell you where happiness lies, how many of them are caught in webs of depression, despair, chemical and substance abuse? They have not found the source of joy.

But if you consider the lives of the Saints you will see them as those shining lights that beckon us onward toward Him who is our joy, to Christ Jesus! In your own lifetime you have the lights of Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II. There are countless others beside them who have also found the source of true joy. We have also to look to Pope Benedict XVI and we must never forget our patron, Saint Anthony of Padua, who experienced so powerfully the joy of holding the Christ-child in his arms. Look to these lights and you will know joy and peace! Follow them, and you will never be led astray!

⁵ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on I Thessalonians* 11. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IX: Colossians, I-II Thessalonians, I-II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 99.

We see from the witness of their lives, that "following Christ always requires the courage to go against the tide. However, it is worth it" this is the way to real personal fulfillment and hence to true happiness."⁶

You, too, can live as they have done, if you ground your life on the solid foundation of Jesus Christ, on him who is the joy of my soul. If you allow him, if you cooperate with the grace he gives you each day, he will "make you perfectly holy" and will preserve you "blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it" (I Thessalonians 5:23-24). Amen!

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 17 May 2008.