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The Third Sunday of Advent (C)

Today Holy Mother Church says to us: *gaudete in Domino semper*, "rejoice in the Lord always" (*Introit*; Philippians 4:4)! Today we put aside the violet vestments symbolizing our desire and need for sincere repentance and we take up the rose vestments of quiet rejoicing because "the Lord is near" (*Introit*; Philippians 4:5).

We know that the Lord is coming; his advent is near indeed. We have been - or at least we should have been - preparing ourselves these past two weeks to welcome him with great joy. From whence does this joy come? It comes from a life and faith lived in "festive seriousness." We are to be festive, to be joyful, because, as Zephaniah reminds us, "The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior" (Zephaniah 3:).

But how can we be festive if we know that, as John the Baptist warns us, the Lord holds his winnowing fan in his hand? How can we be festive if we know that the Lord is coming to separate the wheat from the weeds (cf. Matthew 13:24-30) and the sheep from the goats (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). How can we be festive knowing that not all of our fruit is good (cf. Matthew 7:16)?

We can rejoice in the Lord always, we can live in this festivity, if we have worthily prepared for his coming. If we have made the most of these days and truly examined our lives, comparing them to the teachings of Christ, if we have sought his mercy through the Sacrament of Penance, of Reconciliation, then we have prepared for his coming and we "have no further misfortune to fear."

For this reason the prophet tells us: "Fear not, O Zion, be not discouraged! [The Lord himself] will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, he will sing joyfully because of you, as one sings at festivals" (Zephaniah 3:16-17).

The Lord will rejoice over us in the same way that the widow rejoiced over the coin she lost and then found again (cf. Luke 15:9). He will rejoice over us in the same way that the shepherd rejoiced over the lost sheep he found (cf. Matthew 18:13). The Good Shepherd will place us upon his shoulders and take us home. This we know; this is the cause of our rejoicing, of our rejoicing. At the same time, however, we know that we do stray from the shepherd, that we do get lost.

To those who have not used these weeks to properly prepare for the Lord's return John the Baptist tells us what to do in order to be found:

Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise... Stop collecting more than what is prescribed... Do not practice

extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages (Luke 3:11-14).

Whoever follows the instructions of the Baptizer - of Elijah who is come - lives in justice and in righteousness. Whoever follows the words of John follows also the words of Christ: "Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

In that crowd of common people who came to John the Baptist asking him, "What should we do?," we hear the question of every person who has ever lived and who will live (Luke 3:10).

Do we not all ask the Lord, "Teacher, what should we do (Luke 3:12)?" We ask this question because we know that "one mightier than [John] is coming" (Luke 3:16). We know, too, that "his winnowing fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:17). When he comes on the last day to judge the living and the dead we want to be prepared and ready to enter the heavenly kingdom with him. We want our fruit to be good, not bad; we want him to carry us home and so we must prepare.

To those who have used this holy season well, the Prophet Zephaniah exclaims:

Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel! Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has removed the judgment against you; he has turned away your enemies; the King of Israel, the

LORD, is in your midst, you have no further misfortune to fear (Zephaniah 3:14-15).

What greater cause of rejoicing can there be?

By his grace and call we know and hear the voice of the Shepherd (cf. John 10:14) calling us to himself, saying, "I will come back again and take you to myself" (John 14:3). Because we hear his voice we know that he is near and we can listen well to the advice of Saint Paul: "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God" (Philippians 4:6). We have no anxiety at all when we live our lives with festive seriousness, rejoicing always in the merciful love of Jesus Christ and conscious always of our duty to faithfully follow after him.

If we follow faithfully after him we will abide in him and our hearts will know peace, then our hearts will know the true and lasting joy of Christ Jesus, rather than the fleeting happiness of this world.

By his mercy we have one more week to prepare for his coming, to uproot evil and tear down pride, to confess our sins and seek his forgiveness and love. Then we will be at peace with him who made us. Only then we can live in festive seriousness, eagerly awaiting his return in glory.

Let us, then, heed the words of Saint Paul: *gaudete in Domino semper!* Rejoice in the Lord always! Amen!