

Are You a Joyful Person?

Over the years, I've met many a Catholic who is on the one hand very devout or active in a parish. They might go to daily Mass or pray daily; they might volunteer or be a hard worker. But at the same time, I've also met many a Catholic who may be caught up in the ritual or the teachings of the faith, but be one of the most joyless people you've ever met. Sometimes they can be judgmental, or upset about any change in their parish; other times they can be quick to point out all that is wrong in the local parish or universal Church; and other times be good at given "the look" to those who don't belong in "their" pew or who have a fussy child at Mass.

Now lest you think I'm talking about anyone here at Saint Joe's, I can assure you that's not the case. Rather I'm talking about my life as a Catholic from my earliest memories of being at Mass to today in my priesthood over the last nearly 15 years.

The flip side though is while every one of us and most every priest can tell you about "parishioner X" who is seemingly never happy, I've experienced a lot more people in my priesthood and life who are quite joyful about their faith. Just look around Saint Joe's and see how people smile, how they meet up after Mass and have conversations, and get involved.

Though I never met him, I suspect the saint we honored last Thursday, Martin de Porres, would fit this bill quite well.

If you look up his picture, you'll probably see that of a man dressed in clerical garb, holding a seemingly strange object: a broom. But it makes sense, for it was an object he held for much of his life.

He was a man of legendary kindness, and lived as a Dominican brother who had a heart full of compassion to the poor. So strong was his love for the poor that it would, from time to time, get him in trouble. As a child, for instance, he lived with his mother and sister in a tiny cottage with dirt floors. His mom would send him to market to purchase what little food they could afford, and at times Martin, seeing a poor man in the street, would give the food to him. His mother was less than enthusiastic.

A few years down the road, his big heart would get him in trouble again. His superior in the Dominican house told him not to bring any more people into the hospice, as it was full. But, that afternoon, out on his missions of mercy, he came upon an elderly man in a ditch who was quite ill. And so, Martin picked him up, placed him on his back, and put him in his own bed, and Martin slept on the floor. When the superior got on him for going against what he was told, he replied "I always thought charity was more important than obedience." (Perhaps he was a actually Minnesotan - doesn't that seem like a classic Minnesota passive aggressive line?). And for Martin, even having a bed to sleep on in that Dominican house proved a challenge, as he had to convince the order that he should be let in. Martin was black, and all of the men there were white Spanish friars, with no blacks in the monastery. Finally able to convince them that they should take him in as a lay brother, they did. But, he was given the lowest tasks of the house – scrubbing floors, cleaning rooms, and acting as the doorkeeper. You might think he would have held some grudges for how he was treated, but that wasn't his way. In fact, he did all of these

things with love and cheerfulness, even work that wasn't assigned to him. Thankfully though, his gifts began to be discovered. Over time, he was given permission to go outside the house to help the poor, who embraced him. They'd see him everywhere, and sometimes he'd just show up at someone's cot without even being called. His ministry to the sick also included helping the elderly priests at the house he lived at – some of whom, to put it mildly were curmudgeons. When one priest was brought to him, he was warned ahead of time that this particular priest had a bad temper. And, sure enough, one of the first things this priest said to Martin was "Don't come near me. Go out and sweep the floors where you belong." Martin, though, would have none of this. He knew that beneath that seemingly mean exterior was a reason for his moodiness, and so Martin stayed. And finally, the elderly priest said "I have been told they are going to cut off my leg." Having a little bit of training in medicine, Martin got the priest to reluctantly let him look at his leg. Martin washed it, and applied a salve. Sure enough, the next day the elderly priest was walking.

Martin seemingly was not the kind of guy who would rise to prominence in the Church. He didn't have numerous diplomas; he wasn't known for his outstanding preaching, and certainly had the deck stacked against him as a poor peasant and a person of color. But while he may not have spoken eloquent speeches, he let his actions do the talking.

I share his story because Martin's life gets at the heart of what our Third Sunday of Advent is about, that of joy. We hear in our first reading "Shout for joy, O Daughter Zion!" Our second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians says "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" So how are we doing in this regard?

For one, we don't contain our joy. That might sound obvious, but this can be a stressful time of year, and for some of us, we can't see past the stress; from Covid worries to doing all the shopping and getting the cards out. We need to let go, and let God.

The source of this joy for us is, of course, Christ. In the Christmas event we celebrate how much our God loves us that He freely chooses to become one of us. I think we can lose sight of how significant that is, and reduce Jesus to the little infant in the manger some 2000 years ago. How does that apply to us here today? A false joy tries to cover these things up, or pretend they don't exist. You and I though can't go down that road. We can't say "cheer up, have the Spirit of Christmas, for things will get better" or "next year's another year, don't worry." Such lines might be well-intended, but they really aren't all that helpful. Rather, we celebrate with joy because God saw our situation, and He did something about it. The Christmas event doesn't celebrate a God who was, but a God who is. A God who knows a thing or two about suffering and pain, because He suffered as one of us. That's our God – a God right there in the trenches with us, and that should fill us with joy. But it can't be a joy that is contained – rather it's a joy that has to be shared.

We share it by taking a page from Martin, and bringing the love of God into the world through the testament of our lives, speaking the language of love as he did. Its so many little things we do – bringing a spouse flowers on an ordinary day; helping a son or daughter with homework; or spending time together as a family, that in and of themselves might seem so insignificant, but over a lifetime, those little moments can do so much to foster faith.

Finally, while those gifts of kindness and love need to apply to those we know in our families, they also need to apply to the people that sometimes can get forgotten: the modern-day Martins if you will. It's so easy to take for granted what people do, and to see them just for their function first, rather than their humanity. And while we do not have to be everyone's best friend, I think more and more in a society that gets less personal, it's so easy to become blind that we are to see everyone as Christ sees them, and must treat one another with love. Think again of Martin with that cranky priest who he finally reached and opened up to him. From the clerks, to the people who irk us based on politics, to people in our families who may need some more care, it's worth asking ourselves who needs a bit of love and kindness as Christmas nears.

In so many little things we do, we gradually can help one another to see to light of God's love. Doing so is tough, and often, like Martin, we won't see results right away or get the gratitude we deserve. No one will probably build a statue of us for a kind word to a coworker or for helping someone with homework, but God will see these actions. And, we might just be surprised by what our actions do over a lifetime when we see these many people we meet again down the road, in the heavenly kingdom – a place they were able to reach in part because of what you and I did to help them find the way there. We certainly should know the content of the faith; and be unafraid to explain it and talk about it. But let us never forget the faith is also done through actions, preaching the Gospel and if necessary using words as Saint Francis of Assisi would say. May we strive to be like Saint Martin de Porres, a people of joy, reaching out to one another with actions of mercy and in doing so reveal who God is to one another in a world that needs to see God more than ever.

Have a joyful week,

Fr. Paul