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The Gospel for Masses celebrated on Christmas Eve is Luke's familiar story of the birth of Jesus: a census, a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no room in the inn, and birth in a stable. Then the angel of the Lord proclaims to the shepherds in the Bethlehem region the good news of great joy that a savior, who is Christ the Lord, has been born. That theme of great joy is also prominent in the first reading from Isaiah who tells us that God has blessed the people who walked in darkness in the land of gloom with "abundant joy and great rejoicing," for a child is born who has dominion and illumines the darkness. These readings highlight the joyful character of the Christmas liturgy with its innate power to gladden our hearts.

Individuals experience the joy of the Christmas liturgy in diverse ways. A lifetime Catholic who goes to Mass almost every Sunday says he feels a greater sense of inner peace at the Christmas liturgy than any other time. A man who calls himself a traditional Catholic does not generally join in the singing at Mass, but really enjoys singing the familiar Christmas hymns during the Christmas season. A woman who goes to Mass only a few times a year never misses Christmas because it brings back happy childhood memories. A collegian loves the Christmas liturgy because it gives her a feeling that her life as a student has meaning. Catholic parents of a non-practicing son are especially happy on Christmas because he voluntarily joins them to celebrate the birth of Christ. A family rejoices on Christmas because they arrive at Church on time, nicely dressed and in a good mood. A recent widow, who was reluctant to attend Christmas Mass without her husband, was glad she did because it gave her new motivation to get on with her life. A grandmother finds that the Christmas liturgy means more to her because afterward she can enjoy sharing a meal with her grandchildren and watch them open their presents. A woman finds that she looks forward to receiving Christ in communion at Christmas more than any other time. A well- educated Catholic knows that Easter is a more important feast than Christmas, but finds greater emotional satisfaction in celebrating the birth of Jesus. A social activist feels affirmed by the Christmas liturgy because he recognizes the essential connection between the Incarnation and the works of justice.

These diverse experiences prompt further reflection on the joyful character of Christmas. Throughout the Bible, joy is a common characteristic of authentic believers. In the Hebrew Scriptures the Israelites rejoice over the blessings received from Yahweh, including a long life, good marriages, and the great acts of divine deliverance, the Exodus and the return from the Babylonian exile. The Gospels associate joy with the presence of God's kingdom, with care for the poor, and with participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. For Paul, joy is a fruit of the Spirit that prompts his admonition to rejoice always and his conviction that nothing can deprive us of that gift.

Important theologians have tried to explain the nature of Christian joy. Fundamentally, joy is an abiding total-person response to being in a loving personal relationship with God mediated by Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit. It is a fruit of the Spirit that flows from fellowship with Christ (Augustine). It is not a distinct virtue but is a byproduct of practicing the virtue of charity by loving God and loving neighbor (Aquinas). Christian joy springs from the conviction that God is close to us in all circumstances and that Christ has conquered sin and death, which enables us to face suffering and failure with serenity, confidence, and hope (Joseph Ratzinger). It is important to distinguish joy, which flows from being in tune with the inner dynamics of the world, from pleasure, which brings a momentary sense of satisfaction, and from happiness, which results from favorable circumstances that fulfill our particular desires (Paul Tillich). Joy, even as an abiding disposition, admits of degrees of intensity ranging from a quiet sense of repose and contentment to an ecstatic sense of exhilaration, which is a foretaste of the complete joy of heaven (Jurgen Moltmann). We cannot earn joy and, directly sought, it eludes us. It appears, rather, as a gift from God, a surprise that leads to a sense of gratitude, a mystery that partakes of the beauty and power of the Ultimate Mystery (C. S. Lewis).

While these theological insights are helpful, we probably get a better sense of the concrete character of Christian joy by reflecting on individuals renowned for their joyful spirit, including Francis of Assisi, Pope John XXIII, and Mother Teresa. Today the whole world has a glimpse of Christian joy in the smiling countenance of Pope Francis: an authentic human being who is comfortable with himself; a man who enjoys the good things of this world (nature, sports, art, literature, music, movies); a pastor who delights in people (embracing children, bantering with journalists, praying with Jews and Muslims); a Jesuit who cultivates a fulfilling relationship with the Triune God by daily prayer (Mass, Office, Rosary and Adoration); and a pope who has placed the joy of the Gospel at the center of his preaching and teaching. It may be

hard to define joy precisely, but we can certainly get a good sense of what Christian joy is all about by observing joyful believers.

These reflections on the nature of joy help us to appreciate Christmas as a joyful celebration. Christmas proclaims the best news that the Mystery which attracts us is not remote and distant but near and close, closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine put it. Our God is not a spectator, passively observing the human scene, but a participant in the human drama with all its joys and sorrows. The Word of God has pitched his tent in our midst and walked our hard earth. The Jesus born in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago was properly called Emmanuel, God with us. The Word made flesh bridges the gap between God and the human family. He is the parable of God's love and the paradigm of fulfilled humanity. Christmas is a joyful feast because the God of infinite love shares a remarkable fellowship with us that responds to our deepest longings for communion with the ultimate Mystery. Christ our brother is the living answer to our quest for meaning, purpose, and identity.

This fundamental truth that God is personally present to us grounds other truths that contribute to Christmas joy. Since Christ is our brother, we are all united with one another in a bond of love. Christmas celebrates our common humanity and reminds us of the fundamental law to love one another as Christ loves us. Healthy relationships, which fulfill our desire for intimacy, are a source of joy in everyday life. Interacting with family and friends in a spirit of love during the Christmas season gladdens our hearts, while pointing to the fundamental unity of the love of God and neighbor.

The fundamental message of Christmas also reminds us that there is a proper love of self. We are more likely to be joyful when we are comfortable with ourselves and confident that we are loveable. Christmas tells us that our self-worth is not dependent on merit or accomplishments but on the grace of God who first loves us. Joy is a byproduct of charity, which includes the threefold love of God, neighbor and self.

Christmas, which celebrates the personal presence of God made man, instructs us in the fundamental goodness of this world with its pleasure and pain as well as its happiness and sadness. By sharing completely in our humanity, Christ sanctified all things human. Christmas enables many people to enjoy happy moments and simple pleasures: being with family and loved ones; sharing traditional meals; enjoying the special decorations and familiar music; and sharing carefully selected gifts. Kept in proper balance, these simple pleasures can contribute to the fundamental joy arising from the Lord's presence.

The scriptures suggest, and human experience corroborates, that individuals can be joyful in the midst of suffering and loss. We should not speak glibly of this to people engulfed in pain and grief, but we can listen to those who tell us of their inner peace despite heavy crosses. In this sense, joy, which is always a gift, remains a mystery as does God who is the Source of not only our joy but also our strength.

Finally, we should highlight the great importance of celebrating Christmas as a public event which includes the liturgy in church as well as family customs at home. It is a good thing that so many Catholics attend Mass on Christmas. Participation in the public liturgy draws us into the joyful narrative that God has sent his Son to share our human adventure, the real cause for our joy. Recalling this story for ourselves and the next generation is one way of countering the secular claim that we can achieve happiness by maintaining personal control over our lives and by accumulating more material goods. Our joyful celebration of the Christmas liturgy gives the decisive word to the angel of the Lord who brings glad tidings of great joy: a Savior has been born.