

Rejoice When I'm Sad?

On Saturday, I made a visit to our Holy Cross cemetery and mausoleum. The occasion was the annual mass I celebrate with families of loved ones who have died. It is a poignant moment. Especially if the family member or friend has died within the last year, making this the first Christmas celebration without them, the pain and grief can be very intense. It is important that we be together not only in shared pain but also in common faith. It helps.



I was reflecting upon the people I met and with whom I spoke at Holy Cross as I read the summons of St. Paul in the second reading for Sunday's mass (*Philippians 4:4-7*). It begins: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice." Always? How would this teaching land in the hearts of people who are suffering with deep grief? For that matter, what about people who have just been laid off from work, women and children fleeing domestic violence, refugees not welcome at a border, and so on? The summons to joy in these and similar situations understandably might seem strange and difficult to receive.



The key is the reason Paul gives for rejoicing: "The Lord is near." We are not alone; we are never alone. Jesus, our Risen Lord, remains always with us in the full power of his love. This leads Paul to counsel further: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." What we have here is a summons to trust in the love of God for us. Whatever the issue, give it to Jesus, in whom God's love is both manifest and active. He knows what to do; he knows where he is leading us; he knows how to take whatever befalls us and to turn it to our good in accord with the will of the Father. This is the faith that removes fear. This is the faith that gives rise to a joy that takes deep root in the heart and persists, even in moments of sadness and pain.



Here, then, is a grace for which to pray in the immediate lead-up to Christmas: the grace of authentic joy in the Lord. As we contemplate the mystery of Jesus as God-with-us, *Emmanuel*, may this wondrous truth of our God who draws near take hold of our minds and hearts. In this way they will be filled, as St. Paul promises, with the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.

Gaudete!