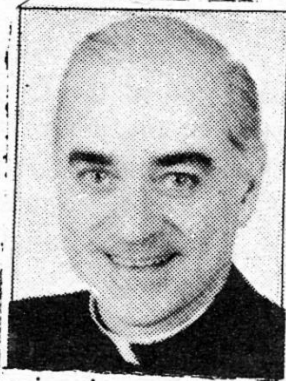


Father John Catoir

A Messenger of Joy

Lent is a time for reflection, a time for pondering the great mystery of Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross. But Lent should not diminish anyone's sense of joy, it should only serve to heighten it. As we begin this Lenten season, I want to bring to your attention one of my favorite quotes from Pope John Paul II.



"Christ came to bring joy: joy to children, joy to parents, joy to families and to friends, joy to workers and to scholars, joy to the sick and joy to the elderly, joy to all humanity. In a true sense, joy is the keynote of the Christian message and the recurring motif of the Gospels ... Be messengers of joy." I love that quote. I only wish more of us had the capacity to understand it fully. Pope John Paul's remarkable insight emphasizes the centrality of joy through all the seasons of the year.

Traditionally, the penitential season has been viewed as a time for sackcloth and ashes, not a time of joyful celebration. And it's true, there will always be a need for repentance, but fasting need not dampen a joyful spirit. We make sacrifices during Lent to express our love of God more perfectly, not to extinguish our joy. The spirit of sacrifice and the spirit of joy go hand-in-hand.

Sacrifice is simply the giving up a legitimate good for a noble cause. Joy follows self-discipline, whereas sadness usually follows sin and selfishness. If you overeat or overdrink, you not only suffer physical dis-

comfort, you damage your self-respect. On the other hand, when you fast or inconvenience yourself in some way in order to help a needy person, you tend to experience feelings of satisfaction and even elation. Acts of generosity and courage inspire the noblest emotions of the human spirit.

But joy is more than good feelings. Joy is the byproduct of a meaningful life, and that is why Lent is truly a joyful season. During Lent we try to make our lives more meaningful and more fruitful. It is a time for growing closer to God, a time for a prayerful union with God's inner life of happiness.

"God so loved the world He gave His only Son, that ... the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:16, 17) Jesus spoke these words to reveal the mystery of God's love. He came to bring joy to the world by uniting us to the Father who possesses the fullness of joy.

Therefore, when Pope John Paul II refers to God's desire to bring joy to children, parents, the sick and the elderly, he opens our eyes not only to the wonder of God's love but also to the primacy of joy.

The saints all knew this secret. After all, a saint is one who knows how to be joyful and grateful in all circumstances. St. John of the Cross expressed this idea eloquently, "The soul of one who loves God always swims in joy, always keeps holiday, and is always in a mood for singing."

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