

# Joy in the Liturgy<sup>1</sup>

## The Society of St. Gregory

Paul Turner

The ninetieth anniversary of the Society of St. Gregory is a cause of jubilee. The members rejoice in the vision of the society's founders, whose legacy continues to breathe new life into those who foster good liturgical music.

Both the bible and the liturgy explore the theme of such anniversaries. A survey of those sources will show how and why milestone anniversaries give reason to celebrate.

When the keen-eyed liturgist thinks of the confluence of biblical and liturgical themes of jubilee, thoughts may naturally turn to two Sundays of the liturgical year known for their outbursts of joy: the Third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday; and the Fourth Sunday of Lent, *Lætare* Sunday. Each of them received its title from a biblical passage expressing joy, passages used as the introit for the day's mass. However, both bible and liturgy urge us to rejoice on other occasions as well.

Under the papacy of Pope Francis, Christians throughout the world have heard a summons to joy. In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis says this of those who encounter Jesus in the gospel: "Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness."<sup>2</sup> This joy permeates those who follow Christ and gives us all reason to share the good news with a happy heart.

### Jubilee in the Bible

The word "jubilee" appears in two passages in the Old Testament. Leviticus 25:8-13 describes the jubilee year: a fiftieth year that follows a seventh set of seven years. Leviticus calls it seven weeks of years. The superfluity of one makes the fiftieth the year of jubilee. During that year, each could return to one's proper ancestral home and clan. People did not perform the usual labor in the fields, but ate what the fields produced on their own. It provided liberation not just for the people, but for the land as well.

Deuteronomy 15:1-11 declares a similar practice. Every seventh year the people are to forgive the debts of their neighbors. Those who are poor should receive charity from others. The sharing of goods also demands an accompanying cheerful attitude. Rather than look down upon the poor, one should rejoice in giving.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a presentation at the Society's 2019 Summer School.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* 1.

## Joy in the Liturgy - The Society of St. Gregory

As foundational as these passages are for the concept of jubilee, they are surprisingly rarely used in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. The passage from Leviticus is proclaimed at a daily mass on Saturday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time in Year I. It is part of a series of readings detailing the long history of Israel. The Liturgy of the Hours makes an oblique reference to the same passage: The Latin hymn for morning prayer on Pentecost Sunday recalls the number 50 as the mystical number of years offering remission under the law, and the mystical number of days after the resurrection of Jesus when the coming of the Holy Spirit affirmed the new law.

Part of the passage from Deuteronomy may also be found in the Liturgy of the Hours as the reading for Daytime Prayer at Midday on Tuesday of the third week of the psalter. The rarity of these key passages for jubilee does not remove the underlying principle: Joy should rule anniversaries, kinship, the environment, and the heart that performs actions of charity.

One would expect to find a message of jubilee in the missal's recommended prayers and readings for anniversary years. The most obvious occasion is a fiftieth wedding anniversary. The collect, however, acknowledges the couple's good works and long life together, and asks God to bless their fruitful old age. The prayer over the offerings expresses thanksgiving for the couple who have faithfully lived as one for many years, and who ask for the blessings of unity and peace to come. In the Prayer after Communion, the priest asks God to keep the couple "safe and holy in the years ahead." These are all lovely and appropriate sentiments, yet none of them builds directly on the concept of the fifty years of jubilee from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Neither do the lectionary readings proposed for such anniversaries include these passages among the options.

### *Gaudete and Lætare*

The joy of the liturgy is well expressed in the Sundays that mark midpoints of two traditional penitential seasons, Advent and Lent. The titles for these days derive from a tradition that named certain masses after their entrance antiphons. The *Requiem* mass is a famous exemplar, named for the first word of the Introit petitioning for the eternal rest of the faithful departed.

In the case of Advent, the introit comes from Paul's Letter to the Philippians 4:4-5, wherein he calls upon his readers to rejoice because the Lord is near. The double meaning within the liturgy binds the reality that *Christmas* is coming soon with the belief that *Christ* is coming soon. Those who have been passing these days in anticipation of the feast take heart with a joyful message that the goal is within sight. Accompanying the spirit of this prayer, ministers may wear rose-colored vestments in place of the usual violet ones. Those observing the tradition of lighting the candles of an Advent wreath similarly set the pink candle alight on the same day.

The passage from Philippians enjoys other usages. It is part of the second reading on the Third Sunday of Advent in Year C. One out of every three years of the cycle, then, the introit directly prepares the worshipers to hear a scripture of

## Joy in the Liturgy - The Society of St. Gregory

the day. A reference is probably embedded in the second preface for Advent, composed after the Second Vatican Council for inclusion in the Roman Missal. Referring to the imminent coming of Christmas Day, the priest proclaims, “already we rejoice” by God’s gift. The sentiments of the passage are probably included in the collect for the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, very close to the start of Advent, when it prays for “the constant gladness” of being devoted to God.

In the Liturgy of the Hours, the intercessions at morning prayer on the first and third weeks of Advent pray that the community’s meekness may be known to all, a sentiment included in the next verses from Philippians. Philippians 4:4-5 is also the reading at Evening Prayer II on all the Sundays of Advent, and at evening prayer on December 18.

As Paul told the Philippians in this passage to pray for whatever they need, so a priest chosen to become a bishop is asked at his ordination if he will pray without ceasing for God’s holy people.

Philippians 4 is also the source for one of the readings at the mass for the Reception of Baptized Christians and for the Celebration of Matrimony. In the United States it may be used for the blessing of food on Thanksgiving Day.

The passage also appears as an option to commemorate certain saints of the church, such as John Bosco (January 31) and Philip Neri (May 26), both known for their joyful dispositions; Rita of Cascia (May 22), who peacefully endured her sufferings; and Martin de Porres (November 3), who demonstrated patience while practicing austerities.

During Lent, *Lætare* Sunday breaks the tedium with its message of hope, permitting rose vesture for the ministers and the singing of an introit of great joy. Referencing Isaiah 66:10-11, the antiphon invites Jerusalem and all who love her to rejoice. Those who were in mourning may “be satisfied at her consoling breast.” Jerusalem is like a mother providing nourishment for traumatized children, and God is like Jerusalem, lifting us from the sorrows of our sin to the promised joy of consolation.

A fuller portion of this chapter supplies the second reading on the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C. It precedes the proclamation of Luke 10:1-12, 17-20, where, at the conclusion, Jesus invites his disciples to rejoice that their names are written in heaven.

The lectionary also recommends this passage from Isaiah for such days as Our Lady of Lourdes (February 11), Saint Thérèse (October 1), and as the antiphon for Psalm 122 when celebrating a mass for the Unity of Christians. In the Liturgy of the Hours, it serves as the reading at Morning Prayer for Thursday of the fourth week of the psalter, as the Magnificat antiphon on Thursday of the third week of Advent, and as the reading in the Office of Readings on the Saturday after the Epiphany before the Baptism of the Lord. In all these instances it promises hope for people who had experienced doubt.

For those who celebrate Vigils with the Office of Readings on Sundays, this passage is one of the canticles assigned to the Christmas Season, as well as the

## Joy in the Liturgy - The Society of St. Gregory

feasts of the Presentation of the Lord (February 2) and the Annunciation of the Lord (March 25). Both these have resonances with devotion to Mary, who can be seen as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the consoling mother, Jerusalem.

### Easter Time

Some of the prayers in the current missal brim with the joy of the Second Vatican Council. These can be seen especially in the collects for Easter Time. On the Third Sunday of Easter the priest prays that people may exult in youthfulness of spirit, rejoicing both now and in the day of resurrection. The compilers of the missal stitched this prayer together from sources in the sixth-century Verona Sacramentary and the seventh-century Gelasian Sacramentary, creating a prayer that expresses the joy of Easter and of the council. This same collect appears as one of the options for the Pentecost Vigil.

On the Fourth Sunday of Easter the priest asks God to "lead us to a share in the joys of heaven." The text is based on a prayer from the Gelasian Sacramentary for an Easter evening.

On the Fifth Sunday of Easter he prays that the community may "come to the joys of eternal life" in a prayer composed from sources in the Ambrosian Rite.

Drawing on prayers from the Verona and Gelasian again, the post-Vatican II missal includes a collect on the Sixth Sunday of Easter asking God to help the community "celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy."

These collects, all inserted into the missal after the council, raised the theme of joy to pace a period of fifty days of jubilee. It showed the commitment of the council fathers to the paschal mystery with all its hope and promise.

In these examples, one can look beyond the Sundays called *Gaudete* and *Lætare* to see how the church expresses its joy on occasions that range from commemorating saints to celebrating Easter. They show reasons to spread the good news of the gospel of Christ. They inspire us to perform deeds of charity and justice, and to do them with a joyful heart.

Today these biblical and liturgical sources affirm the Society of St. Gregory that its feelings of accomplishment rightly brim with joy that Christ is risen, he is present in the liturgy, and he inspires those who carry out his gospel from one generation to the next.

*Music and Liturgy* 46:2 (May 2020):10-12.