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December 16, 2018

Last week St. Nicholas came to visit us at two of our Masses to hand out candy canes to the children. You should have seen their joy. Everyone is able to be full of joy when Santa comes. However, when Saint Paul tells us to “rejoice always,” sometimes we don’t want to. The world can be filled with darkness like sickness and death, or smaller things like we are stressed about finals or college applications. Maybe we are just tired because it is Sunday and we want to be in bed at 8 AM instead of at Mass. How do we rejoice then?

Well, the great author G.K. Chesterton once remarked that God lets Saint Nicholas come each year on Christmas to teach us about God.

“As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good – far from it.

“And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me...What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing...

“Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking; now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void.

“Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dolls and crackers. Now, I thank him for stars and street faces, and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous present of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill.”

If we keep in mind that God is good and loves us, and like Santa brings us gifts every day we do not deserve, it becomes easy to remember that the world is full of wonder, that God is near, that we are to rejoice always. In fact, Advent celebrates three comings of Christ. It looks back to the day Christ was born. It looks ahead to day he comes again. It is present in the now. Christ says, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him.” This third coming, the one now, is invisible. It is a coming full of daily blessings for which we must thank God.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola encouraged the Jesuits to make a daily prayer known as the examen. He said it was so important that they should never omit it. The purpose of it is to help us see how close God is to us. Father Michael Gaitley, whom many of you know from his books we often used in retreat programs here or his massively successful retreat we hosted here last year,

prompts the examen. He uses the acronym BAKER to help us remember how to pray it. It begins by calling to mind the blessings of the day, the way that God each and every day has given us gifts we do not deserve. Father Gaitley says it could be as simple as a great conversation at lunch, that God in his divine providence has blessed me with this friendship. We call these blessings to mind and then thank God for them. A in Baker he says stands for Ask. In this moment, we ask God to send us the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and hearts to know our sins because in K, Kill, we reflect on our sins, those things that sent Jesus to the cross. St. Paul reminds us that, "Your kindness should be known to all." Have we always shown love and kindness? Have we done as St. John the Baptist calls us, when he says, "Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none."

Then we must let God Embrace us with his mercy and love, since God wants us to run to him with our sins, not away from him, and lastly, we Resolve, with the help of God's grace, to be more Christ-like in the future.

I said the first week of Advent that my homilies were to be a back to basics, which is why I am focusing on this basic prayer. Christmas day is one of joy, but the True Gift Giver comes every day which is why Saint Paul can tell us to rejoice in the Lord always. May God bless you.