

Be Messengers of Advent Joy and Light All Year Long

While walking on the Camino, I met a pilgrim from Germany who handed me a wristband that reads, "messenger of joy." For some reason he told me that he thought I should have it, so I have worn it ever since.

Being a messenger of joy is at the heart of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ and the one person who exudes *joy* is none other than Pope Francis. He is consistently in the news and was just made *Time Magazine* Person of the Year. And last week the Pope issued his first Apostolic letter titled, "The Gospel of Joy," in which he is calling on all Catholics to be evangelizers, to be "missionary disciples" of the Gospel — to paraphrase Pope Francis: Be "rooted" in joy and light; don't be a "sourpuss."

This call to bring the joy of the gospel, however, must be grounded in an encounter with Christ, a personal experience of Christ's presence deep within our hearts. Pope Francis is clearly refocusing and redirecting the Church to become more open to the outsider, the alienated, and especially the poor, making the Church a "hospital of mercy" rather than an off-putting place of judgment, filled with "sourpusses."

Nothing heals and attracts more than a person filled with joy, a joy rooted a fundamental encounter with Christ. Joy is not so much an emotion as happiness is, but a deep intuition that we are created in love by a God of love. Joy roots us in dignity and purpose, for we are created by God to participate in His *great plan* to restore the world to its original beauty and goodness. Within our desert hearts will bloom the flowers of kindness, patience, humility and joy. Yes, joy!!



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Isaiah's vision in the first reading of the desert blooming and eyes being opened to new vision and ears to the sound of God's voice and the lame walking freely, begins in the human heart.

John the Baptist was in prison wondering just who this Jesus really was. Perhaps he was expecting a stronger response from Jesus, a Messiah who would bring judgment and freedom quickly and definitively. But Jesus never answers John's question about his identity directly but tells the disciples to simply tell John what they see: "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk and lepers are cleansed..."

When John was told of Jesus' response, he had to have been filled with joy, realizing that God's plan of restoration would be accomplished

through self-giving love and not force or violence. After all, it was John who "leaped for joy" in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth, when Mary visited her cousin. John was witnessing to the joy of the gospel while still in his mother's womb!! John, the greatest of all the prophets, would surrender to a new way of seeing the Messiah. And so must we surrender.

Pope Francis is inviting all of us to a fundamental change of heart that is rooted in a personal encounter with Christ. The Pope is wisely following in the footsteps of his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, who reformed the Church by reforming himself; St. Francis was not one to point finger at anyone else except himself.

Pope Francis is asking us to draw others to Christ by our own witness and actions; he is calling us all, including himself, to a deeper conversion to Christ. Instead of focusing on what teachings need to be changed, perhaps we need to look within and see how we, ourselves, need to change.

The color of Advent joy is not pink but rose, which is deeper, more majestic and beautiful. As the candle is lighted, may the Light of Christ fill our hearts with joy. A Light to be kept burning all year long.

— Fr. Frank, Homily, 3rd Sunday in Advent (12-15-2013)