

A Heartfelt Happy New Year!

December 2, 2018
Advent Sunday

On this Advent Sunday I wish you a “Heartfelt Happy New Year!” I wish you are heartfelt New Year because today is the beginning of the New Liturgical Year and our readings for today invite us to examine our hearts. I do not mean the muscle that pumps blood throughout our body. I mean the spiritual centre of our being – also known as the soul - which like our physical heart can be either healthy or unhealthy.

The Catechism writes of the heart:

The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place “to which I withdraw.” The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant¹

We hear described by St. Paul in the Letter to the Thessalonians the characteristics of a healthy heart.

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.²

Just as physical exercise will help to keep our physical heart healthy so too there is the exercise of love that helps to keep our spiritual heart healthy. St. Paul says such health is best attained by increasing and abounding in love. I will return to what he means by this in a few minutes. But for now what I want you to receive from the Apostle Paul is this idea.

To exercise in love will establish our hearts un-blamable in holiness.

When we choose the way of love our hearts will be established – what Paul describes as ***hearts strengthened in holiness that you may be blameless before our God*** Isn’t that an evocative phrase? “In other words a soul that is established and strengthened and therefore healthy will be attaining to the holiness that is the goal and end of our lives.

Now contrast this healthy heart or soul with and unhealthy heart. Jesus vividly describes such a heart in today’s Gospel reading

¹ Catholic Church. (2000). [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#) (2nd Ed., p. 614). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (1 Th 3:12–13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly,”³

What a contrast. Here is a heart that is weighed down with dissipation. What is dissipation? It is an unbridled indulgence in a drinking party. That kind of carousing, intoxication and the resultant ‘drunken headache, hangover’ that are associated with such dissipation. This coupled with the cares of this life result in a soul sick person. Such a heart is unable to attain to the holiness characteristic of a heart that in the language of St. Paul is being established.

So think with me now about these two heart conditions. An established heart and a weighed down heart. In contrasting these conditions I thought of a helium balloon. The plastic of the balloon is heavier than the helium and so in order for the balloon to remain buoyant it has to be infused with helium. Once the helium dissipates the balloon no longer remains taught against the string and it becomes wrinkly and droopy. With time it will collapse under the weight of the plastic.

Our souls are very much like helium balloons. Unless we are attentive to Paul’s exercise regimen of increasing and abounding in love, our souls will become weighed down by the cares of this life that result in all types of unhealthy behaviours that sink us into sin and separation from God. But when we are increasing and abounding in love, it is like helium being infused into the balloon so that we can embody in our lives the quality of holiness that is the result of an established heart.

Therefore how we live now and the attention we give to our heart will ultimately affect and influence how we will respond to Jesus. This is where Advent invites us to prepare to remember the Lord’s First Coming at Christmas while at the same time pointing us to wait expectantly for his Second Coming. Those who keep these two comings before their hearts and minds will in the present live purposefully and lovingly. This is not an easy convenient love. No this is the love manifested by Jesus on the Cross. It is the merciful love that can only be present in the souls of those who are growing in grace. For it is only as we are receptive to the mercy of Jesus in our own lives that in turn we can extend mercy to others. When we choose to live this way our souls will be receiving the helium of grace thus enabling us to be formed into whole and holy people in whom godliness is clearly manifested.

So let me ask you, are you consumed by the love of which Paul speaks? Do you in your life embody love and mercy in how you relate to others? Is yours a heart increasing and abounding in love? Or is yours a heart that is weighed down, and because of this, when others are in your presence they are weighed down too? How do you relate to people with whom you find it difficult to be with? Do you shut them down and out, trying to control them or do you seek to treat them mercifully even if you have been hurt and angered by them? How we respond to the challenges of our every-day relationships and the events of every-day life says a lot about our heart condition.

I want to end by telling you of a young woman who so embodied a heart that increased and abounded in love through the most adverse of circumstances. If anyone could have chosen the

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Lk 21:34). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

way of a heavy heart it was Chiara Corbella Petrillo.⁴ She and her husband Enrico married in 2008 after what had been a courtship fraught with arguments and times of intense estrangement. A month after their marriage Chiara became pregnant with their first child Maria who within hours of her birth died. Then Chiara became pregnant with Davide who never developed kidneys in utero and died within an hour of his birth. Soon after Chiara became pregnant with Francesco, who although a healthy baby, during her pregnancy with him Chiara became sick with cancer. Soon after his birth Chiara's cancer was termed terminal and she died in June 2012 at the age of 28 leaving behind her husband Enrico and young son Francesco. What people said about Chiara was how she radiated the love of Jesus and truly abounded in love.

The priest who presided at Chiara and Enrico's wedding and was present to them during Chiara's terminal illness summarized Chiara this way:

“I have lived this with Enrico and Chiara,” Father Vito explained, “and little by little, as I got to know them, I fell in love with them. To see Chiara, who was being consumed by her illness — but in reality what was consuming her was her love for her son and her husband — it brought to mind my Spouse, who gave His body for love, who was consumed by love.

Chiara was a woman who though her body was being eaten away by cancer chose this to be the opportunity for her soul to become ever more buoyant because she was infused with the love of Jesus and showed this love most especially to Enrico and Francesco. Her life and the way she died is a modern day example of one whose heart was established un-blamable in holiness.⁵

May we this Advent in anticipating Christmas and the Second Coming of Jesus be consumed by his love so that we can in turn increase and abound in love to one another and to all people and say:

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⁴ The book that chronicles her journey from 2006 to her death in 2012 is called Witness to Joy. You can check it out here: http://www.amazon.ca/Chiara-Corbella-Petrillo-Witness-Joy/dp/1622823052/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1449710887&sr=8-1&keywords=Witness+to+Joy

⁵ May I invite you to read this book during Advent. I will send the ordering information when I distribute the homily this week.