

1.

CHOOSE JOY

Begin WITH Prayer

Therefore my heart is glad,
and my soul rejoices;
my body also rests secure.

You show me the path of life.
In your presence there is fullness of
joy;
In your right hand are pleasures
forevermore.

—Psalm 16:9, 11

Choose

First we must choose joy. We are invited to witness to the truth of what we just prayed in Psalm 16, a song of trust. We find comfort that in God's presence there is "fullness of joy." If God's presence is full joy, then when we radiate joy, we radiate God. It's simple—joy attracts, while gloom nearly always repels.

One of my favorite remarks by Pope Francis is, "Don't be a sourpuss!" Obviously, the pope has encountered more than a few Christian sourpusses in his day. His colorful and spontaneous language immediately caught the world's attention, and he included the term "sourpuss" in *The Joy of the Gospel*, where he writes: "One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, 'sourpusses'" (85). When Francis originally used that expression, he said it in Spanish—*cara de vinagre*, which literally means "face of vinegar." So *sourpuss* basically describes the same thing: a disgusted face. Francis continues, "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing" (10). So you see, it is simple: if you want to be a witness to Christ, choose joy, and don't be a sourpuss!

Throughout my school years, I did not excel academically, but I certainly excelled socially. Upon high school graduation, my classmates voted me “most popular” and “most rowdy.” My parents were not impressed. During my first years of college, I remained much the same. But in my last year, I had a very real and powerful encounter with Christ. In my newfound fervor, I took myself and religious rules a bit too seriously—no more fun for this newly committed disciple. One day, after I ranted to my mom about what other so-called Christians should be doing, my mom, a devoted Catholic, said to me, “Where is my fun-loving daughter? I don’t think God is asking you to give up your joy.” Her words really shook me back to reality, and I realized my arrogance. God didn’t need another sourpuss disciple. God instead invited me to follow with a new freedom—to become my best self and not turn into a plaster statue of someone else. I firmly believe joy, laughter, and compassion offer a much more compelling case for Christ than do rigidity and judgment. We are to witness with joy and through joy.

THE *Witness* OF Scripture

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

—Romans 12:12

When I think about joy, my two-year-old grandnephew, Braden, comes to mind. Braden's mom and dad, Courtney and Dan, ran with me in a 5K "Nun Run" sponsored by my Dominican congregation. As I was finishing the race, I spotted Braden jumping in and out of a puddle and laughing with glee. He was near the finish line, oblivious to the gasping runners as we approached our final goal. The steady drizzle, wet sneakers, and smudges of mud on his face did nothing to dampen his spirit or his enthusiasm for puddle jumping. Just watching him made me smile, and I couldn't help laughing along with him.

Many of the spectators, including some of my Dominican sisters, watched Braden, enjoying his playfulness. Even his mom enjoyed the moment, resisting the urge to clean him up and dress him in dry clothes. That day, Braden's playing in the puddle outside our convent chapel under the shadow of a huge statue of St. Dominic was a God-moment for me—a reminder that God's presence is revealed in the simple joys we all experience from time to time, if not each and every day. God is everywhere, and where God is, there is fullness of joy. Maybe a way to choose joy is to revive our desire to jump into puddles and resist the inner sourpuss that restrains us from letting go, playing, and delighting in life.

Joy is a gift from God, released in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It does not depend on events, but on a deep belief that in God all will be well. We don't inherit

joy, nor is it dependent entirely upon circumstances. Joy is woven into the life of the one who trusts and hopes in God. It remains accessible to us as a deep reserve of comfort and source of inspiration when life brings struggles or we lose our way. For followers of Christ, every action, event, and relationship in service of God and neighbor shares a joyful quality. The ongoing call to serve God and neighbor joyfully is the principle aim of our Christian life.

Even when times are rough, the Bible urges us to be joyful in hope. The verb *rejoice* appears seventy-four times, and the noun *joy*, fifty-nine times in the Christian scriptures. The psalms are full of references to joy. The psalmist leads the assembly in rejoicing in the truth that God is Creator and Redeemer of all. Because of God's covenant of unconditional love, the psalmist urges the assembly to "make a joyful noise to the LORD" (Ps 98:4).

When St. Paul speaks of joyful hope during affliction (see Romans 12:12), or urges the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4), or names joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22), the essential characteristics of Christian joy emerge. The joy of which our scriptures speak is focused on relationship with God in Christ. Mary sings of this joy in her Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk 1:46–47). The voice of Mary in the Magnificat (see Luke 1:46–55) is the voice of Christian faith

revealing to those struggling alone that the power of God is with them as it was with her. She too was weak and alone, but when she welcomed the divine within her body, she was able to overcome adversity and sing with joy against the injustices of her day. We too can experience joy even during trials, while suffering, and in the face of demoralizing injustice. Witnessing to our faith and hope with joy, particularly during our own hard times, captures the hearts, minds, and hope of those with whom we share our stories. Followers of Jesus refuse to let happenstance or others' negative attitudes and unjust behaviors rob us of our joy. Instead, we face the truth of our situation and tackle it head on. Like Mary, we welcome the divine within us, giving us more than enough strength to confront the darkness that threatens us and our world.

I thank God for Braden, playing freely and joyfully witnessing to God's presence among us. I still need to be reminded not to take myself too seriously, and not to miss the way God reveals joy in my life every day. Sometimes I become so focused on the tasks I need to complete that I lose sight of the love that surrounds me and the many people and activities that bring me joy.

If our heads are down, and we are charging ahead with daily tasks, we may miss those surprise blessings that come our way—often when we need them most.

Seize the day, and take time to enjoy the people and activities that refresh your spirit. For all we have is now!

However old we are or whatever we are experiencing, St. Paul reminds us to “rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (Rom 12:12). Reach deep into your own joyful memories today to recall things that matter most in your life. Let those memories help you to step back, take a deep breath—or a few deep breaths—and choose joy, befitting a disciple of Christ Jesus.

THE *Everyday Witness* OF
SR. *Mary Carmel McEneaney, O.P.*

Sr. Mary Carmel McEneaney was a member of my Dominican congregation and an everyday witness to joy. In her living, and most powerfully in her dying, she embodied Romans 12:12: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” When Sr. Carmel was diagnosed with terminal cancer at eighty-two years old, she was offered an aggressive treatment that promised a few additional months of life. She chose to transition from life here to life thereafter without treatment, to move peacefully and prayerfully into the arms of her God. Her journey to God was her finest teaching

moment—witnessing to how to approach death with joy. As she embraced her death with prayer, patience, and peace, Sr. Carmel became a powerful witness to many of the sisters who lived with her at our motherhouse.

A few months before she died, I had a powerful visit with Sr. Carmel, just after Christmas. She radiated joy as she shared with me her anticipation of meeting God. I asked if she was afraid, and she just smiled as she told me that her whole life with God prepared her for the coming moment. She laughed as she shared with me about the pile of Christmas gifts she had received from her family. With a twinkle in her eye, she replied, “I will not need these where I am going.” She recounted how she had told her sister, Barbara, also a Dominican sister, to pack up the gifts but to wait to use them or give them away until after Sr. Carmel had gone home to God, because she wanted to be sensitive to the gift givers. She instructed Barbara to leave the tags on the gifts, so people who received them would know the gifts were brand new. We laughed together. I had entered her room a bit anxious and sad, but I departed from her presence with renewed faith and a rediscovered joy. It was not what I expected.

For a quarter century, Sr. Carmel ministered at Dominican College in Orangeburg, New York. Known for her quiet smile and open door, Sr. Carmel inspired many students on their paths for life. She gave her life to others as a teacher, counselor, and administrator. In each

of these ministries, her faith-filled witness and joyful spirit encouraged students to be their best selves.

In his book *Sacred Fire*, Fr. Ron Rolheiser, O.M.I., writes about the path to becoming a mature Christian. He describes midlife as a time of giving our lives away by striving to live for others instead of for ourselves. Sr. Carmel certainly did that. Then in the final stage of life, Rolheiser writes, there is a deeper call to Christ's disciples to give our deaths away. That is exactly what Sr. Carmel did. She gave an extraordinary gift to all those she left behind—she graciously, courageously, and joyfully gave her death away. Sr. Carmel's lifelong witness and joyful death magnified the Lord and inspired many to a renewed encounter with Christ.

Prompts FOR Self-Reflection

What person in your life radiates joy? Reflect on particular ways in which that person shows joy in their everyday life. How does that person bring *you* joy?

Recount a recent experience in which you witnessed joy.

Examine your life, and recall a recent time when you were a sourpuss and robbed another or yourself of joy. Write or offer in silence a brief prayer asking God for forgiveness and the courage to choose joy this and every day.