



**We bless your name, O Lord,
for sending your own incarnate Son,
to become part of a family,
so that, as he lived its life,
he would experience its worries and its joys.**

**We ask you, Lord,
to protect and watch over this family,
so that in the strength of your grace
its members may enjoy prosperity,
possess the priceless gift of your peace,
and, as the Church alive in the home,
bear witness in this world to your glory.**

**We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Evangelium Gaudium. (The joy of the Gospel)

1. The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come.

A joy ever new, a joy which is shared

2. The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ.
3. I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord".[1] The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: "Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace". How good it feels to come back to him whenever we are lost! Let me say this once more: God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones who tire of seeking his mercy. Christ, who told us to forgive one another "seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22) has given us his example: he has forgiven us seventy times seven. Time and time again he bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable

of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus, let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!

4. The books of the Old Testament predicted that the joy of salvation would abound in messianic times. The prophet Isaiah exultantly salutes the awaited Messiah: “You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy” (9:3). He exhorts those who dwell on Zion to go forth to meet him with song: “Shout aloud and sing for joy!” (12:6). The prophet tells those who have already seen him from afar to bring the message to others: “Get you up to a high mountain, O herald of good tidings to Zion; lift up your voice with strength, O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem” (40:9). All creation shares in the joy of salvation: “Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth! Break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones” (49:13).

Zechariah, looking to the day of the Lord, invites the people to acclaim the king who comes “humble and riding on a donkey”: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he” (9:9).

Perhaps the most exciting invitation is that of the prophet Zephaniah, who presents God with his people in the midst of a celebration overflowing with the joy of salvation. I find it thrilling to reread this text: “The Lord, your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives you the victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival” (3:17).

This is the joy which we experience daily, amid the little things of life, as a response to the loving invitation of God our Father: “My child, treat yourself well, according to your means... Do not deprive yourself of the day’s enjoyment” (Sir 14:11, 14). What tender paternal love echoes in these words!

5. The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ’s cross, constantly invites us to rejoice. A few examples will suffice. “Rejoice!” is the angel’s greeting to Mary (Lk 1:28). Mary’s visit to Elizabeth makes John leap for joy in his mother’s womb (cf. Lk 1:41). In her song of praise, Mary proclaims: “My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” (Lk 1:47). When Jesus begins his ministry, John cries out: “For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled” (Jn 3:29). Jesus himself “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” (Lk 10:21). His message brings us joy: “I have said these things to you,

so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). Our Christian joy drinks of the wellspring of his brimming heart. He promises his disciples: “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy” (Jn 16:20). He then goes on to say: “But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (Jn 16:22). The disciples “rejoiced” (Jn 20:20) at the sight of the risen Christ. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that the first Christians “ate their food with glad and generous hearts” (2:46). Wherever the disciples went, “there was great joy” (8:8); even amid persecution they continued to be “filled with joy” (13:52). The newly baptized eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” (8:39), while Paul’s jailer “and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God” (16:34). Why should we not also enter into this great stream of joy?

6. There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter. I realize of course that joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith slowly revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress: “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is... But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness... It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:17, 21-23, 26).
7. Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met. To some extent this is because our “technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy”.^[2] I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to. I also think of the real joy shown by others who, even amid pressing professional obligations, were able to preserve, in detachment and simplicity, a heart full of faith. In their own way, all these instances of joy flow from the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. I never tire of repeating those words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical

choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”.[3]

8. Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being. Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?

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66. The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. As the French bishops have taught, it is not born “of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life”.[60]

67. The individualism of our postmodern and globalized era favours a lifestyle which weakens the development and stability of personal relationships and distorts family bonds. Pastoral activity needs to bring out more clearly the fact that our relationship with the Father demands and encourages a communion which heals, promotes and reinforces interpersonal bonds. In our world, especially in some countries, different forms of war and conflict are re-emerging, yet we Christians remain steadfast in our intention to respect others, to heal wounds, to build bridges, to strengthen relationships and to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal 6:2). Today too, various associations for the defence of rights and the pursuit of noble goals are being founded. This is a sign of the desire of many people to contribute to social and cultural progress.

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Personal encounter with the saving love of Jesus

264. The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him. What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the beloved, to point him out, to make him known? If we do not feel an intense desire to share this love, we need to pray insistently that he will once more touch our hearts. We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence. Standing before him with open hearts, letting him look at us, we see that gaze of love which Nathaniel glimpsed on the day when Jesus said to him: "I saw you under the fig tree" (Jn 1:48). How good it is to stand before a crucifix, or on our knees before the Blessed Sacrament, and simply to be in his presence! How much good it does us when he once more touches our lives and impels us to share his new life! What then happens is that "we speak of what we have seen and heard" (1 Jn 1:3). The best incentive for sharing the Gospel comes from contemplating it with love, lingering over its pages and reading it with the heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty will amaze and constantly excite us. But if this is to come about, we need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others.
265. Jesus' whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of his divine life. Whenever we encounter this anew, we become convinced that it is exactly what others need, even though they may not recognize it: "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Sometimes we lose our enthusiasm for mission because we forget that the Gospel responds to our deepest needs, since we were created for what the Gospel offers us: friendship with Jesus and love of our brothers and sisters. If we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people's hearts: "The missionary is convinced that, through the working of the Spirit, there already exists in individuals and peoples an expectation, even if an unconscious one, of knowing the truth about God, about man, and about how we are to be set free from sin and death. The missionary's enthusiasm in proclaiming Christ comes from the con-

viction that he is responding to that expectation”. [208] Enthusiasm for evangelization is based on this conviction. We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach. Our infinite sadness can only be cured by an infinite love.

266. But this conviction has to be sustained by our own constantly renewed experience of savouring Christ’s friendship and his message. It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize. A true missionary, who never ceases to be a disciple, knows that Jesus walks with him, speaks to him, breathes with him, works with him. He senses Jesus alive with him in the midst of the missionary enterprise. Unless we see him present at the heart of our missionary commitment, our enthusiasm soon wanes and we are no longer sure of what it is that we are handing on; we lack vigour and passion. A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody.
267. In union with Jesus, we seek what he seeks and we love what he loves. In the end, what we are seeking is the glory of the Father; we live and act “for the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph 1:6). If we wish to commit ourselves fully and perseveringly, we need to leave behind every other motivation. This is our definitive, deepest and greatest motivation, the ultimate reason and meaning behind all we do: the glory of the Father which Jesus sought at every moment of his life. As the Son, he rejoices eternally to be “close to the Father’s heart” (Jn 1:18). If we are missionaries, it is primarily because Jesus told us that “by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (Jn 15:8). Beyond all our own preferences and interests, our knowledge and motivations, we evangelize for the greater glory of the Father who loves us.

Taking things further...

Prayer is THE way to deepen our relationship with Jesus.

There are many ways of prayer – we may have our set Morning or Evening Prayers, maybe that we have said since childhood; there is the Rosary, which many people value.

However what seems most important if our relationship with Jesus is to deepen, develop and mature is that the prayer should be ‘open-textured’ have space for our personal expression and space for the Lord to speak to us.

Transformative prayer is prayer that is personal and that allows us to express ourselves to the Lord, and allows him to speak to our hearts and minds. Heart speaks to heart: life connects with life; and we find we are in truth living in communion with the Lord.

Two ways of prayer especially commend themselves.

1. Prayer with the Scriptures

Take a passage of Scripture, for example, one of the Sunday readings. Read it through, see what connects with you and ponder on it. Chew it over. Speak to the Lord about it, about your feelings, about where it encourages or challenges you. Listen with your heart for his response.

Often people find it helpful to return to a passage over several days, because we do not necessarily hear what the Lord is saying to us immediately.

2. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament

This form of prayer can be combined with the prayer with Scriptures or most any other form of prayer. It has the advantage of having us being in the very presence of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Sometimes people find it enough simply to sit there and be quiet with him, but of course he welcomes us opening our hearts and thoughts to him too!

Prayer is about relationship. It has its ups and downs and ultimately it is sharing the gift of love and friendship. Sometimes things happen quickly; more often they develop slowly as we get used to each other, and trust each other more and more.