



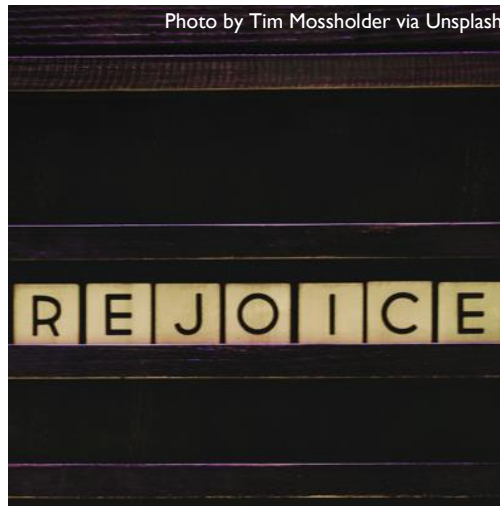
Choose joy

Chester Yacub SJ

If you find it hard to align with the Church's emphasis on rejoicing on the third Sunday of Advent, you are hardly alone, says Chester Yacub SJ. Even amid doubt and turmoil, though, there is joy to be found and shared – now and always.

On the third Sunday of Advent, the Church commemorates 'Gaudete Sunday', where 'Gaudete', as we hear in the entrance antiphon taken from Paul's [Letter to the Philippians](#), translates to 'Rejoice'. In our second reading, we are also exhorted by Paul to 'rejoice' – and not just for now, mind you, but always!

However, on Gaudete Sunday it is crucial to recognise that the jubilant atmosphere within the Church may not resonate with everyone. The burdens of the past year, laden with trials and tribulations, may cast a shadow over the impending Christmas festivities. The sorrow of familial loss, anxiety about personal health, strained relationships, papers to submit or projects to complete right after the new year, can overshadow the joyous occasion for some. Across the fraught global landscape, conflicts entangled in historical, political, economic, socio-cultural and environmental complexities inflict profound human suffering. In more developed countries, societies grapple with a migration crisis, intertwining human lives seeking safety with the delicate balance of national interests, security concerns and humanitarian imperatives. In light of the recent Synod, disparities in the Church may lead to divisions, requiring careful discernment of diverse perspectives. In the face of these challenges and more, a valid, grounded and honest question emerges: is there reason to rejoice in prevailing adversities?



Contemplating the challenge of rejoicing amid world and personal disorder is already daunting, but consider the Herculean task of inspiring others to find joy in such circumstances. Rejoicing, in this sense, is not just an inward action to gladden our hearts, but an outward deed directed towards another person to encourage and inspire them to experience great delight.

A poignant illustration of this struggle is found in the narrative of John the Baptist, whose journey exemplifies the difficulty of encouraging rejoicing, especially when confronted with personal existential dilemmas. Entrusted with the profound responsibility of bearing witness to the light, John could have grappled with the unique challenge of not being the light himself. Imagine the internal conflict he must have faced, relegated to the role of number two – [he's just John, anywhere else, he'd be number one](#) – an experience that undoubtedly tested his ego and sense of significance. Yet, John embraced his calling as a witness, tasked with vocalising the message of the light rather than embodying it. His humility in accepting the role of a herald, not the luminary, speaks volumes about his character.

While the Gospel of John does not explicitly delve into John the Baptist's doubts, [other gospel accounts](#) reveal a moment of uncertainty. In years A and C, our gospel reading for

the third Sunday of Advent comes from one of the synoptics, where John found himself incarcerated for his bold accusation against King Herod, who had married his brother's wife. In the confinement of prison, John questioned the validity of his entire ministry, pondering whether his efforts to proclaim the kingdom of God and herald the Messiah were futile. Desperate for affirmation, John sent his disciples to pose his own valid, grounded and honest question to Jesus: '[Are you the one?](#)' This inquiry encapsulated a quest for reassurance regarding Jesus's identity, and sought confirmation of the purpose and meaning of John's ministry.

In reflecting on John's struggles, we are reminded that even the [stalwarts of faith](#) faced moments of uncertainty and yearning for validation. Yet, within this narrative, there lies a profound lesson – that embracing one's role, even when not in the spotlight, can contribute to a greater narrative of joy and purpose. Amid doubts and darkness, the call to rejoice, and the call to call others to rejoice, remain.

As Christians, our call extends beyond merely experiencing joy ourselves; it beckons us to become heralds of joy, inviting and inspiring those around us to partake in the celebration of life. Whether you find yourself in the role of a parent or guardian or caregiver, a teacher shaping young minds, a community leader guiding your neighbours or, like some of my fellow Jesuits, assigned to further apostolic training to be a competent shepherd of God's flock – the essence of our shared calling remains consistent. In the face of personal struggles, our duty is to be companions, encouragers and beacons of faith for those navigating their challenges.

Congregating in fellowship, engaging in collective prayer and extending mutual support creates a nurturing environment where believers can find solace and strength. In the face of a fractured world, the power of communal bonds becomes a light guiding individuals through adversity.

The call to rejoice then takes on a nuanced meaning. It invites us not to dismiss the challenges but to find resilience and hope. Rejoicing, in this context, becomes an act of defiance against despair, a commitment to enduring joy that transcends circumstances. It is a testament to the human spirit's capacity to find light in the darkest moments and to work collectively towards a world where joy is not an elusive concept but a shared reality.

'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.'

Chester Yacub SJ is currently doing his tertianship, the last stage of Jesuit formation, in Manila. Having recently completed his doctoral studies in the UK, he originally delivered this article as homily during a gathering of overseas Jesuits in formation.