

**Homily for the Closing Mass for Simbang Gabi/Filipino-American Novena
Third Sunday of Advent - *Gaudete Sunday* - Year B
December 17, 2023**

**Saint Joseph Church
Springfield, Illinois**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brother priests, beloved consecrated religious, and my lay brothers and sisters in Christ: it is *good* to be here to continue our preparations for Christmas with this final evening of our Simbang Gabi Novena. Simbang Gabi means “Night Mass” in Tagalog, the language of the Filipino people. This novena is a nine-day series of Masses intended to prepare for Christmas and to honor the Blessed Mother.

This year, with Christmas Eve coming one week from today on the evening of the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we have the shortest possible Advent, which also means that this Third Sunday of Advent today already brings us to December 17th, the traditional date when the Church definitively turns her gaze from anticipating Jesus’ second coming, to preparing our hearts to remember His first coming in Bethlehem. Today is also known as *Gaudete Sunday*, Latin for the word, *Rejoice*, taken from the Entrance Antiphon for today’s Mass: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice”

(Phil 4: 4-5). Our rose-colored vestments today are liturgical expressions of this rejoicing as Christmas approaches.

It is providential that we celebrate this final Simbang Gabi Mass today because there is no one better able to carry us through these final days of Advent than our Mother Mary whom we reverence in a special way in our liturgy this evening.

In this regard, our Responsorial Psalm is not actually taken from the Psalms today, but is instead Mary's *Magnificat*. This is the great hymn of praise that burst forth from her heart after the Annunciation and Visitation. In some ways our Advent so far has been a walk with Mary between those two events as well. We began Advent hoping for Christ, waiting for Him, knowing He is with us, but just as Mary could not immediately see Jesus when He was conceived in her womb at the Annunciation, Jesus remains hidden from our sight as well. For her, he was a tiny baby in her womb, for us, He is hidden in the Sacraments, only visible with eyes of faith.

We also identify with Mary as she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Some parts of these past weeks have been wearisome and arduous, some parts beautiful and joyous. As we have cared for friends and family – cleaning and cooking, baking and buying, doing odd jobs around the house,

and in countless ways trying to be hospitable and helpful to those around us – in all those ways we have also stood alongside of Mary as she cared for Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist.

Now today we are ready, with Mary, to burst into our own song of praise. *“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed.”*

Notice that Mary immediately grounds her joy in God. We must begin here too. How easy it is, even at this time of year, to look for our joy in all sorts of other places. In the midst of the food and festivities and time with family and friends, how often we want to find happiness in all those places, and *we do find it there momentarily*, but then it fades. These earthly sources of joy do not last. Mary knew that: she found joy in visiting her cousin, in the little pleasures of each day, in the blessings that God gave to her, *but she did not forget from Whom those blessings came, or towards Whom they pointed.*

What is the antidote to grasping for the eternal joy we want in passing things? Gratitude and praise *of God*, from Whom they come. All the fun and feasting of these days is from Him. With Mary, we do not forget that.

So her song, and ours, continues: *“the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name. He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.”*

Our Lady continues to praise God for His greatest gifts: the Incarnation of Our Lord, the holiness and power of God in Himself, and His mercy given to all of us in such abundance. Do we spend time in our own prayer to give thanks not just for the joys of our lives, but the gifts of grace and mercy that God has offered to us again and again? Have we *been open* to those gifts by fervently going to Confession, by preparing before Mass in order to receive Holy Communion well? St. Paul challenges the Thessalonians, and us, to *“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks”* - and do we not all desperately want that kind of faith? Well, God wants that for us too: *“for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”* What must we do to live like that? We simply have to receive Jesus into our hearts, as Mary did, as we get to do at every Mass. We are given the same Gift as Mary, the only difference is in the degree of our openness to this great Gift.

Mary continues, *“He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has come to the help of his servant Israel for he has remembered his promise of mercy.”* At first, this seems to simply continue her prayer of thanks to God, but then we notice that phrase, *“He has come...”*

When we look back to our first reading, we see Isaiah hoping for the one who will *“bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives ... to announce a year of favor from the Lord.”* What Isaiah desired, Mary proclaims! *It has happened! He has come! He is with us!*

It is one thing to thank God for His gifts, and also important to prepare ourselves to receive His gifts, but here we recognize that there are things about us that get in the way of His coming - things that hold us captive, impoverished, broken - what do we do with all of that? Do we have to “get ourselves together” and be perfectly prepared before Christ will come, before we can receive Him, before His joy can break into our lives? NO! Jesus comes into the poverty of Nazareth and the brokenness of Bethlehem, and *He will not hesitate to enter our imperfect lives either.* Today, with Mary, we also open our hearts to Christ, and simply pray with her, and with all the Church, *Come, Lord Jesus!*

*O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.*

Refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.*

*O come, O Wisdom from on high,
who ordered all things mightily;
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in its ways to go.*

Refrain:

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.¹*

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/o_come_o_come_emmanuel_and_ransom