

Holiday grumbles

I was lingering in a church after a funeral Mass one recent Saturday afternoon. An older woman, a generous volunteer, I suspect, was clearly stressed. At some point while she was ironing linens on the altar, a man came attending to odd jobs, ultimately vacuuming.

“This is just crazy,” I overheard her tell him. “This is just out of control. How many more funerals are there going to be? They’ve been nonstop. There better not be another one next Saturday. There is too much work to do.”

Now obviously, the Mass – and a Christian burial – is one of the most important things we can and should do.

Within hours, as it happened, the Church would be celebrating Gaudete Sunday, the day during the penitential season of Advent that is all about joy. Joy is the point of the Christmas season, with the Savior of the world, taking human flesh and all. My prayer for that woman was that she could have an encounter with joy before the weekend was through.

I don’t think the woman meant much of anything by her expression of frustration other than that. Christmas does come with a lot of preparation. But we can get distracted by the material preparation – even in a Church – and miss the much-needed penance and renewal and, yes, joy.

Earlier on, I had overheard some others talking about how the death at this particular Mass was for the best. The man who had died had endured many years of suffering. Again, I don’t think they meant anything by it other than trying to make the best out of a sad event – and that final event that we all have some fear facing.

But the funeral Mass was for a 50-year-old who left behind a mother and a father and a sister and a brother. They were

devastated, and their grieving in many ways had only just begun. I'm glad that I heard the venting and the chatter and not them.

Most of all, though, listening to that first ironing woman was a gift. I could hear myself saying and doing much worse: not giving people time, being impatient with my situation – things she wasn't even doing and yet prodding an examination of conscience in me.

Just miles away the night before in an unfamiliar city, I discovered a perpetual adoration chapel. This one is open to all, 24 hours a day.

Those are such tremendous blessings. And even better, not only was Jesus there, but there were people choosing to spend time with him, right there despite the demands of the world in the crazy month of December.

There's no preparation like prayerful preparation. There's no road to heaven without a true encounter with the God of the Incarnation. There's no love without truly loving him with the kind of joy that manifests a knowledge of him and his ways.

Christmas isn't a day, but a season. I understand that the run-up to it is a busy season for police and hospitals and crisis hotlines. Liquor stores do good business not only because of festive celebrations. Have you noticed lately the uptick of articles on loneliness? Whatever it is you do to try to live out your Christian mission, leave room for joy and pray that it is contagious.

I am grateful to the people in the church that day because they reminded me of quite a few things I needed to be reminded of.

We need to ask ourselves: Can people see joy in us? Is it how we live and breathe?

We're a culture of identity crises. You and I could help so much by being who we say we are: people of hope and thus joy. That's what the Incarnation should increase in us and thus the world.

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