

All are called to celebrating the birth of joy this Christmas

His name is John.

When I first saw him in his usual corner in Washington, D.C.'s Union Station, I assumed he was just one of the thousands of homeless people in the city, and that he had adopted this prime spot for seeking handouts from the Metro commuters who streamed past him each morning. He wore dark glasses and carried a white cane that signaled blindness, but he had no difficulty making his presence known.

Each day, as I stepped off my train, I'd hear his voice echoing through the station, rising above the dull roar of the morning rush: "Good morning! Good morning, and God bless you." He tossed his greeting out into the crowd to be caught as it might.

I first approached him one morning when I had time to spare and an extra \$10 in my pocket. I figured I could at least buy him breakfast. To my surprise, while he gladly accepted breakfast, he also wanted to talk. He took my hand and began to ask me questions about myself, smiling and nodding and occasionally interrupting me to thank me for stopping to say hello.

I don't remember the details of that conversation, but I remember his frank, cheerful presence, his humble gratitude and the way he took a genuine interest in me and my work. After that first visit, I began to make it a point to stop and say good morning to John often. And over time, I realized I was not alone.

Blessed and exalted

Many people went out of their way to shake John's hand, to stop and give him a hug or just to call out, "Good morning, John!" as they followed the crowd down the escalator to the waiting trains. His response was unfailingly cheerful – even joyful. I began to look forward to seeing him and hearing his standard greeting. When you asked him, "How are you, John?" he would always respond, "I am blessed and highly exalted."

As we got to know each other, I began to piece together some of his story. He had lost his sight in a terrible accident while he was a city bus driver – the battery of a bus had exploded in his face, bringing his career to an abrupt end. He lived in an apartment in the city and got by on disability. He didn't have much in the way of family, and the few relatives he did have lived in different cities. So he made it a point to get up each morning and make his way to Union Station, where he could spend a few hours with people rather than staying cooped up at home.

And through it all, his constant refrain was, "I am so blessed." We never spoke for long, but I always walked away from my conversations with John feeling more at peace, more grateful and somehow more assured of God's presence.

Embracing poverty

It has been almost 10 years since I last saw him, but I still think of John often, especially during the Christmas season. John taught me more than I can ever express about what it means to embrace our own poverty (however poverty may manifest in our lives, whether it be monetary or not) and weakness, and in that simple act of surrender, to make ourselves a gift for others. And I think John's example gave me at least a small insight into the incredible reality of God's gift to us in the Incarnation. On Christmas, we celebrate God choosing to become poor and weak in order to meet us where we are; to give us the

gift of his very self, and in that gift, to draw us into the joy of sharing in his life.

It seems easy enough to hear this message while the Christmas tree is still up, the lights are still on and the whole world remains wrapped in that lovely Christmas glow. There's something about the Christmas season that always makes joy seem so possible. It is perhaps this very fact of Christmas that makes it such a difficult time for those who are grieving or caught in the throes of suffering.

But the post-Epiphany slump inevitably comes. The decorations get taken down and put back in their boxes, and the world returns to normal, while the promise of joy gets quietly forgotten. It's not that we don't want to live out this joy all through the year – to the contrary, most of us would love to be able to do that. We know in our deepest selves that joy isn't just a nice thing in its own right, it's actually our vocation as Christians.

Joy in ordinary life

As Pope Francis expresses it in *Gaudete et Exsultate*: “The Christian life is ‘joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom 14:17). ... If we allow the Lord to draw us out of our shell and change our lives, then we can do as St. Paul tells us: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again, rejoice!’ (Phil 4:4).”

As I ponder this reality in my own life, my thoughts continually return to John. It was in John that I first caught a glimpse of what joy looks like in an ordinary life. It wasn't glitzy or affected or even particularly noticeable. John simply made the choice each day to go out from the comfort of his home and make a gift of himself to others.

In fact, though he himself probably didn't realize it, John lived out the model of Christmas every day, and I think this was the secret of his joy and the secret that's available to

all of us; because Christmas, in fact, is not just a finite season of joy, but the place where unending joy becomes possible for all of us.

At Christmas, joy is meant to be planted in us as a seed that can take root and grow and bear fruit. Rather than being just a few weeks each year when we feel joyful, Christmas can – and should – be a fresh beginning, a yearly opportunity to enter more deeply into the joy that is our Christian birthright and duty.

Birth of joy

When the Son of God took up his dwelling among us, he brought joy with him. When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, this weary, sorrowing world witnessed the birth of joy. At last, joy was possible for us again, because we could once again dwell with God as his friends.

And Jesus' birth was an invitation to every human soul to step out of the relative comfort of its own woundedness, poverty and sorrow and to accept the gift of joy. The angels spoke this invitation first to the shepherds, and the same invitation ripples down to every age and extends to every single person in every time and every place.

We have the choice to respond, to step into joy long after the Christmas decorations have returned to the attic for the year. Christ himself, Love Incarnate, gives us the model: Go out of yourself and encounter the other. Make a gift of yourself, and, at the same time, be ready to receive the gift of the other.

Lessons from John

What I learned from John is that joy is a choice. It has nothing to do with external circumstances, or with one's situation in life, or with possessions, or with health, or

with other people or even with feelings. Real Christian joy is a daily choice to put yourself in the pathway of joy: to go out of yourself and your quiet miseries and put yourself in the place of encounter, knowing that you are held, loved and blessed. Like John did every morning in the Metro station. Like the shepherds did upon hearing the angels' announcement, when they left their flocks in the hills and raced to the manger to see the Lord.

This year, I pray that all of us who bear the beautiful name of Christian will step more bravely into joy, knowing that we can do so precisely because Christ has come.

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