SOLSTICE REJOICING IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

3rd Sunday in Advent December 14, 2008 Chapel of St. Ignatius Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

We are approaching the Winter Solstice. We can see it both as the darkest day of the year and as the day when the season turns and every day grows brighter. The season of Advent is much the same: both a time of darkness, of lying fallow, of turning in reflection to our dark inner selves and also the time when all of reality turns toward the light in the birth of Jesus that increasingly fills our dark hearts with growing hope.

At this point in Advent we are given a Sunday of joy and rejoicing. I tried to count the number of times they are proclaimed:

- rejoice in the Lord always;
- again I say rejoice;
- the earth rejoices in hope of the Savior's coming;
- remove what hinders our joy and hope;
- I rejoice heartily in the Lord;
- in my God is the joy of my soul;
- my soul rejoices in my God;
- my spirit rejoices in God;
- rejoice always.

All of these are joys and rejoicing that come from faith. They ask us the question: "What kind of joy are we offered by God flowing from our faith in Jesus"?

It seems to me the joys of our faith differ greatly depending on our age. Unlike last Advent I am now a fully-accredited senior citizen, aged 65. I realized recently that the joys I had when I was a young adult were like my children and that now I am called to have joys that are more like my grandchildren. I was telling this to a friend and she said, "Yes, those joys you had grew up and long ago moved out of the house!" I used to take great joy in playing tennis and imagining myself at Wimbledon; I loved to spend long evenings with other young Jesuits at Jilly's East on 23rd, (five pitchers of beer at \$1.25 a pitcher for five Jesuits talking over their lives). I took joy in being a young teacher and having my own class; I rejoiced in songs by Karen Carpenter and John Denver; I rejoiced in the gradually growing light of Jesuit freedom and study and travel. Those joys were my children. What were yours?

Appropriate to my age I had great joys flowing from faith. They were mostly the joys of imitation. I wanted to be like Saint Edmund Campion, the English Jesuit martyr. The only book I took into the novitiate which I was allowed to keep was <u>The Imitation of Christ</u> by Thomas A Kempis. I rejoiced in the road ahead of becoming like Jesus,

walking along with him and my Jesuit companions. I rejoiced in what the Society of Jesus would call me to do and to become. My companions and I rejoiced in an article by Andrew Greeley in <u>America</u> magazine in 1965 saying there was a "New Breed" growing up in the Catholic Church. We were sure we were that new, post-Vatican II breed and we rejoiced in it. When I look back now, I see that almost all of my joys that flowed from faith were joys of looking to the future, about accomplishing, becoming; they were brightly burning campfires lighting our companionship, flashlights lighting up the road ahead. These were the joys of faith of my young adult age. I can see joys like that in many of our students today. On this Sunday of rejoicing in Advent ask yourself, "What were your joys of faith when you were younger?"

These joys of our faith were our children. But they grew up and moved out of the house of our faith. What are the joys of our faith now that we are older, joys that are our grandchildren? What is the grace of rejoicing that God offers us now in this Advent and in this Christmas? What kind of joy is likely now offered by faith in Jesus once we let the children—our former Advent and Christmas joys—move out, joys of faith more like grandchildren?

It seems to me that our faith-joy now is much quieter, tamer, less ambitious, deeper, more settled, more in the present, warmer, more our own rather than imitating of another, not shooting off flames, much more interior and penetrating all of us, illuminating all of us, glowing in darkness. The former flashlight of faith shining on the joyful path ahead has now become like a candle illuminating a papier maché globe from within, or shining through cupped hands, gently lighting up all that we are from within, glowing in the face of age, darkness, illness, death, and new generations.

The poet, Denise Levertov, who became a Catholic here in the Northwest evokes this beautifully in a poem about the old Simeon who welcomed the newborn Jesus in the temple.

With certitude
Simeon opened
ancient arms
to infant light.
Decades
before the cross, the tomb
and the new life,
he knew
new life.
What depth
of faith he drew on,
turning illumined
towards deep night.

With the "certitude" or knowing that only comes from a long life of faith, we are called to open our "ancient arms to infant light" in looking anew to the birth of Jesus and to know "new life" in him, now, life that is new for us. We too can now draw on, as he did "what depth of faith", and we now in joy, the joy from faith in this time of life, "turning illumined towards deep night", can face quietly, joyfully, humbly, whatever "deep night" might be for us. This is still the joy of faith, the rejoicing this Sunday in Advent evokes in us, but it is the kind of joy that a lifetime of welcoming Jesus now calls forth from us and makes possible in us because of how much by grace we have become like the one we have always tried to welcome.

As our gospel says, all of the glowing coals of our lived faith is for the sake of testifying to the light, testifying in the world to the light who has come among us, is among us, is the light, but is not recognized: Jesus the rising sun, the ever brightening light, the beyond-solstice Son of God. Our rejoicing in faith—in that kind of faith of a lifetime which illumines from within—is much like a grandparent's joy, witnessing to what a life of faith can make of you, which young parents, rightfully striding forth on the road of life, can't testify to with their own children. Our joy from faith has a unique place in testifying to the light. We are called to allow and accept this kind of joy from Jesus and this kind of testifying to him. It is the grace of who he has become in us over many Advents and many Christmases.

The Poet Laureate of the state of Washington is Sam Green. He is also the Poet-in-Residence of Seattle University. He came to Catholic faith through the witness of his fellow poet Denise Levertov, whose poem about Simeon we heard. Sam Green and his wife lived in a cabin without electricity on a small island in the San Juan Islands. When they heard of Denise Levertov's death it happened to be the winter solstice and Sam Green wrote the following poem:

Winter Solstice, 1997

for Denise Levertov

My wife takes every candle in the cabin, puts them on top the piano, the desk, in all the corners, the counter in the kitchen, lights every lamp we own & turns the wicks up high.

The Christmas tree shines with burning wax, the stove is undamped, its fireproof glass door a fixed & brilliant eye.

On this, the day of longest dark, she celebrates the turn, the growing strength of light to come.

We step out on the porch & gaze back through the window which blazes in brilliant glory from dozens of flames.

We didn't know she was one day gone, that poet whose life was spent "doing to things / what light does to them." Not to dazzle, as with lesser poets, but to cast out shadows as demons, to *illumine* in the old sense.

How do we subtract her from the world & keep the sum of ourselves?
Light links us to light.
We move into the winter of mourning, to days lengthening with grief & only the bright rooms of her books to sustain us, those sparks struck from the vast dark flint that catches in us as tinder till we, too, glow & glow, as the sender.

May someone, someday write a poem, sing a song, or tell a story about us and how we by a life of faith and joy did to others what light does to them, not dazzling, but illumining. May they experience how their light of faith links to our light of faith, and may the bright rooms of our faith help to sustain them, the spark struck in us from the dark flint of the cross, so that they too—as we now do—glow and glow in the light of Jesus and testify to him as we testify to them in faith and rejoicing.