

- One of my favorite things about our parish is that we have so many pregnant women around here! As a pastor, I love seeing the hope and joyful anticipation on the faces of our expectant mothers. And really, is there anything better than a newborn baby?
- So, at the outset of this homily I want to thank all of you families for being so open to life, for being so generous with your fertility and the obligations of parenting. Thank you for bringing so much joy to St. Ann's – although the joy is a little loud sometimes!
- I bring this up because the particular joy that mothers feel when they're about to give birth is akin to the joy Holy Mother Church is expressing in today's Mass!
- Today is Laetare Sunday – *Laetare* being a Latin word that means "rejoice." We rejoice today because we've passed the midway point of Lent now and are coming close to Easter!
- In fact, today's celebration is meant to be a foretaste of the Easter joy that we will experience in just 3 short weeks!
- Yet we cannot fully understand the Church's joy on this day outside of our catechumens – those preparing to enter the Church at the Easter Vigil.
- Remember, the Church is a mother, and She is rejoicing today at the thought of giving birth to so many new members come Easter – just as you pregnant mothers look forward to giving birth to the children in your wombs.
- And just as mothers spend time preparing for the birth of the children in their wombs, Holy Mother Church does the same thing, which is why we will celebrate the 2<sup>nd</sup> scrutiny today for our catechumens at the 10:30 a.m. Mass.
- Interestingly, in the earliest days of the Church in Rome, Lenten fasting did not begin until the Monday of the third week preceding Easter. So, in the earliest days of the Church this particular Sunday functioned as a kind of Mardi Gras.
- And when Lent was extended to 40 days to mirror the number of days Jesus spent in the desert, the number of days Noah and his family were in the ark, the number of days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai, the number of years the Israelites wandered in the desert – and incidentally the number of weeks of human gestations – this Sunday became sort of a mid-Lent reprieve.
- There's also a Eucharistic character to Laetare Sunday, which we find in our first reading, which speaks of the manna – the bread from Heaven they ate upon in the desert – and foretells of the Eucharist as the Israelites celebrate the Passover.
- So, for all these reasons, we find a unique richness in today's celebration, and we enjoy a relaxation today of our Lenten penances, even donning a most festive rose color instead of the penitential violet in our liturgy.
- We do this to celebrate our Catholic faith, and the redemption gifted to us by Christ's suffering and death.
- The festive nature of Laetare Sunday begins with our introit: "Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast."
- The sense of these words is that our Lenten mourning, i.e., our fasting and penance, will soon be at an end.

- What's more: new children will be born among us through baptism, who will be nourished at the breast of Holy Mother Church through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Yet we are not only *fed* through the sacraments. We are also *liberated* by them.
- For those of you who came to the parish mission this past week, Fr. Cole talked about this very thing, of how we are freed from the bondage of sin through those sacraments that impart forgiveness, most especially confession.
- When we go to the confessional with true sorrow and contrition, our sins are not only forgiven, but we are strengthened with a grace that helps us avoid those sins in the future. This is part of what our second reading is getting at.
- Here St. Paul is impressing upon his Gentile readers how blessed they are now to be Catholic. By being reconciled with God through the Sacraments, they are new creations.
- Through Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, God the Father reconciles us to Himself, not counting our trespasses against us.
- Prodigal sons though we are by our sinfulness, our loving Father wants us back, and He wants to gift us with His many graces so that we know we are loved and are true heirs of His fortune of mercy.
- So, as we celebrate this marvelous Sunday in all richness, as we look forward to the redemption our Lord will win for us upon Calvary and anticipate the Easter glory that is to soon be upon us, let us rejoice with deep gratitude to God.
- Laetare Sunday proclaims to us that we have been made free by Christ: free to live as sons and daughters of the Eternal Father.
- Yet, let us remember that the freedom we enjoy as Christians is a precious gift that requires both discipline and vigilance. Indeed, let us never presume upon God's mercy; rather, let us strive to live lives of genuine holiness through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- There is still a lot of Lent left for us. So, let's make the best use of the next three weeks that we can, especially if we've been lax with our Lenten practices up to now.
- And if we find ourselves in sin, especially serious sin, let us be quick in returning to the confessional where we will find the salve for the wounds of our sins. Indeed, if you haven't yet been to confession this Lent, now is the time to go!
- May we fast heroically, pray diligently, and give generously. May we repent whole-heartedly of our sins and seek the freedom of the children of God.
- And may Easter Sunday find us well prepared for our salvation as good sons and daughters of Holy Mother Church.