Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 11, 2018

This weekend, the fourth Sunday of Lent, is Laetare Sunday. It means 'rejoice'. It marks the half-way point in Lent. There is no going back. It will take us as long to get out of the desert as it took us to get in, and then it will be Easter. The rigors of Lent are on every side. Some of us are in the desert because we want to be. We have realized that prayer, fasting, and penance indeed do bring us new life. There are others who are forced out here by suffering that they do not appreciate or welcome.

I am one of those who loves Lent and all that it is and all that it does to me. Lent is not pretend. It's not make believe. Ultimately what Lent is all about is our own death and resurrection. Lent is a specific time and method to get a hold of ourselves and redirect our scattered and contradictory yearnings. Death has its way of putting everything into perspective.

This word 'rejoice' in the middle of Lent, in the middle of suffering and death, seems to be a bit odd. It doesn't seem to fit. But death and suffering has a way of drawing out of us the deepest joy. Death and suffering affect us and change us as much as life and love changes us.

The problem is that if I talk this way very long I'm afraid I will give the mistaken impression that I am promoting more death and suffering. People might think that if I say that death and suffering changes us more than any other thing, then we should have more of it. This is, of course, not true. We should do all we can to eradicate suffering and death. But the reality is that suffering and death are an integral part of us. It happens one way or the other.

But we still ask, rejoicing in the middle of suffering and death? How does it fit in? The stereotype of a holy person seems to be some sort of recluse, very serious, and maybe somewhat of a sourpuss. The fact is that joy is the most powerful indication of the presence of God. A truly holy person is a truly happy person, filled with life and love.

Lent is not about suffering and death or sacrifice or penance. Rather, it is all about love. It is about the love of God. God so loved the world that he gave His only Son so that we might not perish. God's love is infinite and unqualified. Human love tends to vacillate and waiver. Even when we have the most burning love for another there are times when we get irritated or even irate with the one we love. With God there is nothing fickle or halfhearted with his love for us.

Yes, this is Laetare Sunday. Rejoice, again I say rejoice. The Church says rejoice today and she means it. Some will say that anyone who rejoices at a time like this simply doesn't understand the situation. Others will say, 'what a downer, all this talk of suffering and death. When I come to church I want to be cheered up, strengthened, and given renewed hope to meet the new week. There is enough doom and gloom as it is.

But in talking about death we are strengthened. When we come to grip with the inevitability of our own death, it is then that we begin to truly live. if we think we will live forever on this earth we will waste away and squander our precious life. But when we see that our youth is only for a second, adult years for a minute, we take on an urgency and we are drawn to live each day to the full.

I say to you, just look at the cross and recognize the great love with which God has loved us

and the totally gratuitous nature of our creation and redemption. Whoever believes in Jesus crucified and stays on the road planned for us by God, will have eternal life.

If weakness made you fall along the way
You will know how to open your arms
Then you will be able to dance
To the rhythm of forgiveness.

If suffering made you shed tears of blood
You will have cleansed eyes
Then you will be able to pray
With your brother on the cross.

If sadness has made you doubt
On an evening when you felt abandoned
You will know how to carry your cross
Then you will be able to die
In step with the God-Man.

<div align="center">(J. Akepsimas and M. Scouarnec, Des mots et des notes pour célébrer</div>