



## ***Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls***

*Office of the Bishop*

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### **That Your Joy May Be Complete** Reflections on 25 years as a Roman Catholic

To the Clergy, Consecrated and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Sioux Falls,

#### The Convert

After one moment when I bowed my head  
And the whole world turned over and came upright,  
And I came out where the old road shone white,  
I walked the ways and heard what all men said,  
Forests of tongues, like autumn leaves unshed,  
Being not unlovable but strange and light;  
Old riddles and new creeds, not in despite  
But softly, as men smile about the dead.

The sages have a hundred maps to give  
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,  
They rattle reason out through many a sieve  
That stores the sand and lets the gold go free:  
And all these things are less than dust to me  
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.

-G. K. Chesterton

Twenty-five years ago, on March 31, I stood before the sacred altar in Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Madison, Wisconsin and professed faith in the Roman Catholic Church. That humbling Holy Thursday I was also confirmed, offered my first confession and received my first Holy Communion. It was the turning point in an unpredictable journey that has been filled with great blessings and humble lessons, with pride challenged and mercy granted. It was a day of joy. Like the author of the poem above, a fellow convert, my world turned over and came upright, and I live. *Deo gratias.*

“I tell you this that my joy may be yours and that your joy may be complete,” Jesus prayerfully told the Apostles (cf. Jn. 15:11). It is my prayer for each of you. Our Lord Jesus Christ not only wished and wishes you joy, but He offers it. On my own faith journey I sought that joy in ways that did not fulfill. Thankfully, God is persistent in offering His love to us. When we own up to our distractions and seek His mercy, His love can transform us. He allowed me to exercise my freedom to stumble but also allowed me to recognize where true peace is found, in Christ alive in His Church. It has resulted in the joy that I experience as a priest and your bishop, appointed by His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, who himself is a source of joy.

In this Pastoral Letter, which is in truth a personal letter, I share with you several sources of joy I have discovered in the Roman Catholic Church. Through the Catholic Church, we can discover joy, because it is precisely in and through the Church that we encounter Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ, and therefore, if we wish to find Christ and the joy that He brings, we must look to the Church. This letter, then, is addressed to you the faithful active in your parish, and it is addressed to you who are struggling in faith or in your personal life from fear, from wonderment, from doubt or from confusion. It is especially addressed to you who are seeking purpose and meaning in your lives in the secular world, as did I. And it is addressed to any who have “fallen away” from the Faith yet remain searching. I pray for you and wish for you to return home. As one who has “fallen in”—in love with Christ and His Church—the joy I have found I wish for you all.

The joy I speak about is not an empty happiness that protects us from the realities of life. Such vacuous happiness is soft and fleeting; joy in Christ touches our souls and sustains. It is a joy that offers perspective in times of challenge and hope in times of trial. We all yearn for that peace that comes with resting in God. We all need encouragement to continue our journey of faith in a world full of division, violence, loneliness and mystery. We all seek the strength to be open to God’s will and God’s way every day, but especially when it is hard. The Church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, instituted by Christ, offers us that strength and encouragement. Through the Catholic Church we can know Christ and experience lasting joy.

Below are discussed seven sources of joy I have experienced and continue to experience in the Church. They are offered for your reflection and prayer that your joy may be complete.

### 1. Joy in the Holy Eucharist

The familiar words of St. Augustine reflect my journey and my need: “Our hearts are restless until they reside in Thee.” I am often asked what led me to become Catholic. As I look back there are many influences along the way. There are beautiful people I encountered living the Faith daily in worldly quiet but spiritually powerful ways, such as a family I met during the Vietnam War. There are public personalities such as the Servant of God Pope John Paul II who raised our sights by calling us beyond our fears to become better than we are, to become who God created us to be. There are the saints who with great faith and sacrifice reach out to those in need such as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and the missionaries abroad and at home who respect life in its fullest sense.

But what moved me most deeply was the discovery of Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist. Once I accepted the mysterious reality of the Real Presence of Our Lord, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, I could not stay away. As many converts put it, I had to come home. To some of my friends it made no sense, but I had discovered that when we open our hearts to the incredible gift of the Holy Eucharist, we yearn for Him even more. When His words seemed too much for some and they wandered away, Peter responded for us all, “To whom shall we go, Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.” (Jn 7:68). He is the Word and He is among us.

The power of His presence in the Holy Eucharist was brought home to me several years ago. St. Raphael Cathedral in the Diocese of Madison was set on fire while I was in the attached rectory. On that somber morning as I observed from the street, the fire at first seemed contained to the back of the church. I wondered whether I could enter the front of the church and retrieve the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle. Suddenly huge orange flames rushed down the high roof engulfing the entire structure in the fire's destructive course. My heart sank in sadness at the loss of the building and in emptiness that I could not retrieve the Blessed Sacrament. Some hours later with the fire mostly out though still smoldering I asked one of the firefighters whether we could see if the tabernacle had been saved. He gave me a look that suggested "are you crazy, it's dangerous in there." But another firefighter overheard, obviously Catholic and understanding the immensity of the concern, volunteered to do so - as did others. I went with him. Fallen debris blocked the view. I pointed the way and left to rejoin the mourning. A short time later three firefighters came walking toward us, in full regalia darkened from their courageous duty. One carried the ciborium which contained the Blessed Sacrament consecrated at the last Mass the evening before. It glowed so golden that it took my breath away. Another carried the Luna which contained the Blessed Sacrament before which we had bowed in worship at Adoration several days before. It too glowed with an intensity that seemed otherworldly. Earlier I had been tearing at the loss of the building. At that moment I wept at the presence of Our Lord. In the midst of smoke and ashes, loss and anxiety, He was with us. He is with us in the Blessed Sacrament. Joy comes in the Holy Eucharist.

## 2. Joy in Prayer

Among the beautiful treasures of the Church are the many forms of prayer available to us. Whether they are timeless prayers of the saints, special devotions, memorized prayers or spontaneous ones; whether offered in need, in thanksgiving, for oneself or for others, prayer lifts our sights from the world and reminds us of our need for God and the assurance of His comforting presence. How wonderful it has been to discover this treasure which Pope Benedict XVI calls a school of hope.

Not all forms of prayer speak to each of us in the same way, and what does may change over time or circumstance. For me, sometimes touching the beads of the rosary and being reminded of the mysteries of salvation history seem right. Other times ancient or spontaneous prayer before the Blessed Sacrament soothes and reassures. At still other times silent prostration offers solace and hope. The diversity in spirituality providentially is moderated by the norms of the Church which affirm that they are Christ centered and spiritually healthy. We must always be alert to assure that prayer is not hijacked by personal or secular or theological agendas. Prayer which divides is not prayer at all.

Some years ago while I was in seminary a storm resulted in the loss of power. We used candles to light the darkened hallways and residence rooms. Suddenly the power was restored and the electric lights came on once again. As I went to bed for the night I turned the lights off. Still burning was the candle that had earlier been my only light. It was offering light all that time, but was unnoticed among the worldly light source. In a way, that is the power of prayer. In the midst of hectic schedules, constant movement, and noise from all directions, the

presence of God, though always there, can go unnoticed. We need prayer to light up our day and our lives. The lights of the world eventually go out; the Light of the World can always light our way, if we notice him. We do so when we pray whatever our form of prayer may be. Joy comes through prayer.

### 3. Joy in the Sacred Liturgy

Certainly the most life-giving prayer is the Sacred Liturgy, the source and summit of our faith (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10). The meaningful and moving signs and symbols, the words and actions, the silence and song praise God and lift our spirits. The Sacred Liturgy, whether celebrated in the ordinary or extraordinary form, is a gift of the Holy Spirit revealed through the ages and assured of authenticity by appropriate ecclesial authority. Unknown to me until I became a Catholic yet centuries old, this treasure must be respected and prayed well and reverently. How careful we must be to preserve its beauty and its power.

In the early days of my conversion journey, I would sit in an out of the way place at Holy Mass hoping no one would take note that I was lost in the missalette. Despite this sense of being an outsider, the song and chant, the postures and responses, the sights and sounds soothed and invited. The presence of God engulfed me. He engulfs me still at every Mass. Wherever one goes in the world, if the norms are followed, the core of the Mass is the same. Everyday and every hour Holy Mass is offered somewhere. In each, the Holy Father, the bishops, clergy and laity are prayed for; you and I are prayed for constantly by our brothers and sisters. What a humbling privilege it is to be part of the universal, i.e. the catholic, Church.

At the first Sunday liturgy I celebrated following ordination as a bishop, I recall sitting in the cathedra, the bishop's chair, in St. Joseph Cathedral in Sioux Falls. Surveying this beautiful structure built with faith, tenacity, vision and patience by those who went before, I could not help but wonder what I, a sinner and frail human being, was doing there. How generous is God's mercy. As I stood waiting for the procession to begin the first Ordination liturgy I would celebrate as bishop, the sense of awesome responsibility came over me and remains. How necessary is God's grace. The Sacred Liturgy reminds me of how much I need God's grace and mercy, and of how deep is His love for us all. That grace, that mercy, that love is present at every Holy Mass. Joy comes in the Sacred Liturgy.

### 4. Joy in the Teaching Office

There is the ancient admonition that we should never talk politics or religion. The reason is that the differences of opinion can become divisive. Sadly history shows this too often has been the case. It is especially true when we argue from ignorance, error or prejudice. When there is the lack of the recognition that there is truth written in the hearts of all people, we tend to depend on ourselves. Where there is no clear authority to which we all turn, there can develop chaotic understandings based on power in its many forms. My thrashing around before my conversion tells me this is true. Pope Benedict has referred to this as seeking hope

in the kingdom of man rather than the kingdom of God (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 30). The kingdom of man ultimately becomes joyless because it cannot fulfill.

This temptation to rely on our finite selves alone is a continuing challenge. We Catholics can be blinded in this way when we selectively follow the teachings of the Church based on what is convenient, personally comfortable, expected by those around us or perceived as our due in the secular culture. We are all influenced in so many ways. We need grounding in an objective and faithful source to guide us and protect us from misleading and therefore dangerous error. The Spirit-governed Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church offer that guidance and protection.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the Magisterium is “the living, teaching office of the church, whose task it is to give us authentic interpretation of the Word of God whether it is in written form (Sacred Scripture) or in the form of Tradition. The Magisterium ensures the fidelity of the Church to the teaching of the Apostles in matters of faith and morals” (CCC, “Magisterium,” p. 887). The writings of the Popes, the documents of the ecumenical councils, officially approved texts such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the *Compendium* and liturgical norms are sources of reassurance and protection.

When I was involved in government and politics, the question that motivated me and others was what is politically possible, what could be done practically and what benefited our cause or me personally. What the teaching office of the Church helps us to do is to see beyond the moment with the wisdom of the past and to see beyond ourselves to the possibilities of the future. It leads us to true freedom. Pope John Paul II reminded us that true freedom is not the liberty to do what we want to do but what we ought to do, what is the right thing to do. The teaching office of the Church helps us exercise our freedom to be who God created us to be. Joy comes in the Teaching Office.

## 5. Joy in the Communion of Saints

As I have traveled our diocese, my appreciation has grown for those who for well over a century built the Church on the prairie through the good times and sunny days and through the droughts and blizzards. The native and the immigrant, the clergy and the consecrated with deep faith, tenacity, vision, patience and courage have left us a rich legacy in parishes, education and health care to be used well for those in need today and to be preserved for those who follow us. They are representative of Christians throughout history wherever the Gospel of love has been preached. We are one with those who went before.

A powerful moment in the ordination rite of a deacon, priest and bishop is the praying of the litany of the saints, the prayer of supplication which calls on the saints to pray for those being ordained and for the church. Outside of the Easter season those present kneel throughout while those being ordained lay prostrate on the floor. While being ordained as I lay on the floor, the rhythm of the prayer and the simplicity of the words struck me as one by one the saints were asked to pray for us. Anxious about where God was leading me, the recognition through chant that we are not alone reassured me, and still does.

Among those of our day who also offer the reassurance of faith are those who attend Mass daily. Most have borne the heavy burdens of life with dignity and seek only to be in the presence of God, to receive him in Holy Communion, to rest in His promise of eternal life. They teach and preach by their fidelity and trust. They bring joy.

We are one with the communion of saints, those who went before and those who touch our lives today. In a culture that glorifies the individual and too often suggests that others are commodities to be used or discarded, we are the family of God. That is why we care about the unborn, the vulnerable, the immigrant, the prisoner and the weary. They are saints in the making, brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray for them, and they for us. Joy comes in the communion of saints.

## 6. Joy in the Priesthood

There are so many beautiful ways to live the gift of life which comes only from God, including married life, single life, ordained life, consecrated life. Within each vocation there are many opportunities and ways to express it. A challenge especially for the young is that the secular world invites them to focus their lives in ways that diminish or exclude God. Personal and pastoral experience has taught that when that path is followed it leads to disappointment, sometimes to tragedy and often to sin. One way to tell the difference is whether there is joy in the midst of it all.

Priesthood ought not to be approached as an occupation or a job. When at the age of 40 I entered the seminary, I did so with great anxiety and uncertainty. Could God actually be calling me with my spotty background? I was not sure I could live the life, assume the responsibilities, and be present to others. It took about two years before I was able to let go and turn my life over to God. Yet, I discovered that when we persevere, God offers joy.

God has blessed me by allowing me to earn several college degrees, serve as military intelligence officer, practice law and serve as legal counsel to a state governor. Yet it was not until I said yes to God's call to priesthood that I experienced that sense of peace that comes with doing what He asks. The privilege of celebrating Holy Mass, walking with others through the happy times of birth, marriage, confirmation, the healing times of confession and reconciliation, and the more difficult times of sickness, loss and death cannot adequately be put into words.

One of the great sources of strength and joy is to be part of the presbyterate, a brother priest. The sacrifice and witness of so many dedicated men who willingly and happily live a life counter to the secular culture is inspiring. It is a special privilege to be with them as bishop seeking in my faltering way to be a spiritual father and brother. Joy comes in the priesthood.

## 7. Joy in the Blessed Mother

Most converts would agree that among the challenges of becoming Catholic, one is to understand the role of the Blessed Mother Mary. Before I became Catholic, Mary was a presence at Christmas. Now she is a presence every day. Her humble trust and faithfulness as

the handmaid of the Lord, who allowed it to be done as God wills while pondering it all in her heart, gives good example. Her faithfulness in journeying with her Son wherever He led with the advice “do whatever he tells you” encourages us to persevere. Her sorrowing presence at the foot of the Cross comforts us in our afflictions. Her patience in waiting with the Apostles allows us to await the future with hope.

When we open our hearts to Our Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot help but open our hearts to His mother. She, as Servant of God Pope John Paul II said, makes her Son shine. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter on Hope referred to Mary as the Star of Hope. When the Son shines we have hope and therefore joy.

From little contemplation of her 25 years ago, she has become a vital part of my life; I have consecrated my priesthood to her. The Blessed Mother is my mother, our mother. Every day I thank God for her presence in my life. Joy comes in the Blessed Mother.

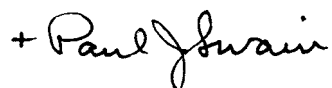
#### Conclusion

The Gospel of John ends: “There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written.” (cf. Jn. 21:25). There are many other special things that the Church offers that bring joy to me and to others. They include the other sacraments, devotions and sacramentals, sacred music, sacred scripture, spiritual writings, and apostolic works in all their various expressions of love. Perhaps you might reflect on how God has touched your life with joy through His Church, and then share these gifts with others.

Ever since that day 25 years ago when “my whole world turned over and came upright,” God has filled my life with joy through His Church. May you also experience Christ in his Church so that your joy may be complete.

Give Praise to the Lord

Given at the Bishop’s Office of the Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota on May 9, 2008 by

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The Most Reverend Paul J. Swain  
Bishop of Sioux Falls