



Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Catholic diocese of Stockholm.

The third Sunday of Advent is “Gaudete Sunday”, the Sunday of Joy. ”*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*” (Philippians 4:4) We can open our hearts and learn to receive the joy of God which He gives us through His Son and His Gospel. The third Sunday of Advent is also Respect for Life Sunday. We may rejoice that we have been given the gift of life. This is not something we can take for granted in our wounded world. So many people are denied the right to life because of war, persecution, abortion, the death penalty etc. Reverence for life and the inviolable dignity of the person created in the image of God is not self-evident. It is, therefore, necessary to remind ourselves of the gift of life and do all we can to make sure that this unconditional right to life is respected. Unfortunately, there are many who are unable to perceive this. Every year in our country there are about 1,500 people who choose to take their own lives. We are all called to try and help them to find meaning and joy in their lives. It is extremely important that we listen to and support those who are depressed and dejected. It is the duty of every baptised person to mediate the perfect joy that only Jesus can bestow.

It is a tragedy and a shame that so many children never see the light of day. It is our duty as Christians to be the voice of the voiceless, in season and out of season. At the same time we are called upon to be close to and help those who are seriously considering having an abortion. It is our duty to give them the care and concrete help that they may need so that they can give birth to their children. Unfortunately, it has become taboo to broach the subject of abortion in public. This means that many who have undergone abortion feel doubly traumatised. The prevalent rule in our society is that abortion is a medical procedure that is routinely offered by the health services. But inwardly, many suffer from a sense of guilt and disquiet, that they supposedly ought not to feel. At the same time the Church is accused of shaming those who have had abortions. And yet it is only the Church that can offer forgiveness and healing for this interior pain. The Church is an institution for forgiveness. No state or municipal authority can offer forgiveness.

The joy of being forgiven and freed from one's inner guilt and distress is a deeply liberating gift that everyone ought to experience. It is one of the Church`s main tasks to help people to receive this grace, not least through the sacrament of reconciliation. Time and again we see in the Gospel that Jesus wants to forgive us sinners. All of us who belong to the Church of Christ are sinners in constant need of God`s forgiveness. Recently we have become painfully aware of this truth when we have learnt of all the priests who have abused innocent children. That is why even the Church must undergo a process of purgation and sanctification. We are all called upon to pray for God`s grace and help, especially for the victims. But this affects us all in the Church and we must all strive to live holy lives in faithful imitation of Jesus.



We must daily ask ourselves the same question that was heard three times in today's Gospel: *"What shall we do?"* (Luke 3:10, 12, 14) We are all called to put respect for the holiness of life into action. The destitute and needy that God sends our way, no matter who they are, have the right to find in us a loving and helpful neighbour. Since we believe in the inviolable dignity of life, we are asked to help people to live a dignified life. It is not just the unborn children, probably the most forgotten group in Sweden, whom we must respect and protect; we are called to love and respect even our opponents, those who oppose our stand on abortion. It is only through love, prayer and compassion that we can overcome opposition and hostility.

As Christians, we must dare to use the word chastity which has become a taboo and acquired a negative connotation. What does chastity mean? It means using our sexuality in accordance with God's commandments and the teachings of the Church. Sexual intimacy belongs only in lifelong marriage between a man and a woman. Just saying this can cause an outcry! Nevertheless, it must be said! I recently spoke to someone who wanted to become a Catholic and had been attending mass in a parish for a whole year. This secularised person was saddened that the Church's view of sexuality had never been mentioned in a homily, not once. He himself was a victim of the so-called sexual freedom. Something inside him was broken. This can happen when one is influenced and even encouraged at a young age to live promiscuously. As a Church we must have the courage to challenge this generally accepted norm in our society. At the same time it is a great joy that the Church even in this case can offer forgiveness and mercy, as Jesus did when the repentant sinner sought refuge in him.

"Attend to this, my beloved: also you are the limbs of Christ, also you are the body of Christ", says St. Augustine. Every day we should rejoice that we are so deeply united with Christ that we belong to his body, the Church. Our whole life, even our body is sanctified and changed through our belonging to Him. That is why we must with eagerness mediate this message of joy that is the Gospel. God is born into this world as a little child in order to show his solidarity with every child, born or unborn. In every child, born or unborn, we can recognize the Child Jesus and revere Him. This is how close God wants to get to us by becoming man for the sake of our salvation. Let us ask for God's help so that we can recognize His only begotten Son in every person that we meet, especially in those who need us the most.

With my blessings and prayers,

Stockholm, the Solemnity of Christ the King, 25th November 2018

Cardinal Anders Arborelius OCD
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm